

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

THE WEEKLY HAFTORA
By Rav Yehuda Shaviv

PARASHAT LEKH-LEKHA

"They Who Wait Upon God Shall Renew Their Strength" (Yishayahu
40:27-41:16)

a. Parasha and Haftora

Parashat Lekh-Lekha is the first parasha which begins to recount the story of Avraham Avinu, the nation's first patriarch. It begins with God's command that Avraham cut himself off from his familial and geographical past, and ends with God's command that he permanently mark his flesh with a sign - circumcision -which will differentiate between him and his household and those around him. In between these two commands are many other details and events, some of which bear significance for all future generations, as we are taught: "What happens to the forefathers serves as a sign for their descendants." (See Ramban on Bereishit 12:6.)

Yishayahu's prophecy typically does not elaborate at length concerning the patriarchs, since its focus is the prophet's own generation and those that follow. When the prophets speak of the patriarchs at all it is generally as reinforcement for their current message. Indeed, Yishayahu's prophecy here mentions "the seed of Avraham, My beloved" (41:9) - but is this sufficient reason for this prophecy to have been chosen as the haftora for this week's parasha?

b. Avraham the Beloved, who Walks

We may suggest that the description of Avraham here -
"Avraham, My beloved" - is a true characterization of our

first patriarch. On the basis of his love for God, Avraham abandoned all that was familiar to him and followed the Divine word to an unknown land. [Another prophet mentions the wanderings of Avraham's descendants after God with the words, "I have remembered in your favor the kindness of your youth, your love as a bride, when you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown" (Yirmiyahu 2:2).]

On the basis of this love, Avraham does not rest. He wanders from place to place in order to spread his monotheistic faith and bring the knowledge of God to the world. This continuous wandering is his most outstanding feature as described in our parasha, appropriately named "Lekh-lekha" - a life of constant journeying. Even towards the end of the parasha God's command is couched in terms of movement: "Walk before Me and be perfect" (17:1).

This idea of constant movement and progress is meant to serve as an example and precedent for his descendants: "They who wait upon God shall renew their strength, they shall rise up on wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not become faint" (Yishayahu 40:31).

c. Perpetual Selection

Just as Avraham constantly wanders on, and just as his descendants are called upon to be constantly progressing, so too is God's selection of Avraham ("It is you, God O Lord, Who has chosen Avram" - Nechemia 9:7) continuous. His children are also perpetually chosen, as the prophecy teaches: "But you, Israel, are My servant, Yaakov - whom I have chosen, the seed of Avraham My beloved...I have chosen you and not despised you" (41:8-9).

This prophecy may be declaring to generations to come that the selection of Avraham did not automatically bestow upon all

his descendants a similar status of selection. The continuation of the choosing process was selective; it included Avraham's descendants but not all of them - "YA'AKOV whom I have chosen" - to the exclusion of Yaakov's brother Esav, his uncle Yishmael, and the other children of Avraham's concubines.

d. Avraham the Hebrew - a man of war

However, it would seem that this prophecy was selected as the haftora for this week's parasha mainly owing to the traditional commentary of our Sages on the following verses:

"Who raised one from the east whom righteousness met wherever he set his foot, gave the nations before him, and made him rule over kings; his sword makes them as dust... That he pursued them, and passed on safely, on a path that his feet had not trodden. Who has wrought and done it? He Who calls the generations from the beginning..." (41:2-4)

Whom and what are being described here? Targum Yonatan reveals to us the answer: "Who came and emigrated from the east? Avraham, the choicest of all tzadikim." This idea is expounded at length in the midrashim (see Bereishit Rabba 43) and the commentaries on Yishayahu (see Rashi, Radak and others).

And so this prophecy in fact describes Avraham's original journey from the east. Out of all the events which occurred during his stay in Canaan, the prophecy here addresses only one: his war against the kings ("gave the nations before him and made him rule over kings..."). It appears that this was a pivotal event in Avraham's life which became a central precedent for his descendants, as several different nations participated in this event, thus yielding ramifications for all of humanity.

Moreover, it is in the context of this event that Avraham is characterized as the "ivri" (literally - from the other side): "And one who had escaped came and told Avram the 'ivri'..." (14:13). The implication here is that he stood alone against the whole world: "Rabbi Yehuda said, the whole world was on one side and he was on the other side (me-ever echad)" (Bereishit Rabba 42).

Contrary to the situation as it appears in the parasha, with the world divided into two - the camp of the four kings vs. the camp of the five kings - the expression "Avram the ivri" teaches that in fact all the kings were on one side, and Avraham alone, with his household, was on the other.

Here the break between himself and the nations of the world reaches its climax. For his descendants, this serves as a message of hope, relevant in the face of many different enemies: "They who were furious with you shall be ashamed and confounded... they who wage war against you shall be like nothing and like nought" (41:11-12).

e. That he pursued them and passed on safely

But just as we hear of Avraham's warring encounter with the nations of the world, we similarly learn of the purpose of his encounter: "Who raised (awakened) one from the east... Rabbi Reuven said, The nations of the world were tarrying in accepting monotheism, and who awakened them to belief in God? Avraham..." (Midrash Tehillim 100).

Although Avraham had to resort to the sword in order to free his nephew from the clutches of evil, this episode in no way blurred the true purpose of his life and destiny.

In the generations to come, too, Israel will be given the strength to pursue and destroy their enemies. They will be compared to "a new sharp threshing tool with teeth" (41:15) -

a threshing tool by means of which they shall thresh the grain
in order to extract the good, the edible interior, while
dispersing the chaff into the wind.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)