

## From Lekh Lekha Me-artzekha to Lekh Lekha El Ha-makom

### A Dynasty Born of Faith

By Rav Reuven Taragin

#### I) Lekh Lekha Me-artzekha - Avraham and His Family

After delineating the lineage from Terach to Noach, the Torah focuses on "toldot Terach" (11:27-32). Terach is the first figure since Noach regarding whom the Torah names more than one son (1) in order to highlight the unique relationship between him and Avraham. After the death of one son - Charan - his brother Nachor remains in Ur Kasdim while Avraham accompanies his father en route to Canaan. As the journey ends in Charan where Terach dies (2), we expect Avraham to succeed his father as family patriarch - as scion of the chosen line of Shem.

Parashat Lekh Lekha begins with God's command to Avraham to abandon his homeland for a non-designated destination. Doing so alone after his father's death (3) confers on the journey new significance. Avraham, uninformed that God's goal is Canaan, Terach's intended destination, assumes that he is forsaking his past, "homeland, birthplace, and father's home," for a promised, but unknown, future in an uncharted land. In actuality, Avraham fulfills his father's original intent of reaching Canaan, but does so now not merely as a loyal child accompanying his father, but as a faithful servant of God ready to relinquish all in His service.

By answering God's call, Avraham leaves his two brothers (one alive and one dead) in his family's birthplace as its seeming heirs. God promises Avraham, though, that success will lie with his line who will become a great, blessed nation (12:2-3). This, however, will occur only once Avraham passes twenty-five years of God's testing of his faith. Twenty-five years transpired between Avraham's journey at the age of seventy-five (12:4) and the birth of his son Yitzchak at the age of one hundred (21:5) (4).

After parshiot Lekh Lekha and Vayera describe the tests of these interim years, the Torah, at the end of Vayera, returns to the depiction of Avraham's relatives left behind in his birthplace. This depiction "frames" the stories of Avraham's service of God and prepares us for the reappearance of these relatives in parashat Chayei Sarah.

The reunion of the two family branches in the form of Yitzchak and Rivka in Canaan reaffirms God's promise to Avraham of his line's chosenness. Avraham insists that Yitzchak's wife be from

his family and that she join his Canaan branch because, by doing so, the girl mimics and confirms the journey Avraham made a generation earlier. Her journey, and later that of Rachel and Leah, endorses the status of Avraham's line in Canaan as the successors to Terach.

#### II) Lekh Lekha and Vayera - God Tests and Rewards Avraham

The stories within the framework created by the depiction of Avraham's relatives form two sections that exhibit a chiasmic relationship:

a. 12:1-7 - "Lekh Lekha Me-artzekha" - Avraham leaves his birthplace

b. 12:8-13:4 - Taking of Sarah in Mitzrayim and the separation from Lot (5)

c. 14 - Salvation of Lot Through War

d. 15 - Berit Ben Ha-betarim

e. 16 - The struggle between Sarah and Hagar

d. 17 - Berit Mila

c. 18-19 - Salvation of Lot through prayer

b. 20-21 - Taking of Sarah in Gerar and separation from Yishmael

a. 22 - "Lekh Lekha ..." - the akeida

Despite the parallelism between the sections, each one challenges and rewards Avraham differently. The promises made to Avraham prior to his first journey relate to Avraham's personal future. They introduce a first section which challenges him to assert his identity as God's vassal and rewards him with personal prosperity.

Avraham concludes his journey from Charan to Canaan with the building of two altars which he uses as a catalytic means for glorifying God's name (12:7,9). After his parting with Lot, the seed of Charan's line, who joined the wicked sinners of Sedom (13:14), God reaffirms his promise to Avraham and clarifies that Avraham's own line, not that of his brothers, will be blessed (13:14-17).

Although Avraham partitions the land with Lot, it will eventually belong to him and his children exclusively. God first tells Avraham to symbolically express his ownership by

crisscrossing the land and then fosters its actual realization through Avraham's victory over the four kings. Lot cannot defend his claim to the land; Avraham must come to his defense. Although the land is now rightfully Avraham's (14:21), he confirms God's hand in the conquest by "raising his hand" from the spoils lest one mistake the victory as his own (14:22-3) (6). The Torah further emphasizes this by juxtaposing Avraham's refusal of the Sodomite king's offer to his acceptance of the presents and blessings of God's priest Malki Tzedek who recognizes God's role in the conquest (14:14; 18-20).

Chazal's (7) identification of Malki Tzedek as Shem recognizes that the blessing he gives to Avraham is his endorsement of Avraham as the true successor in his line - the line of Shem. By building altars and attributing his success to God, Avraham mimics his forefather Shem - also one who glorified God's name (10:18-27).

Although the victory over the four kings effectuated the promise of Avraham's inheritance, his infertility casts doubt on that of his line (8). Right now, the only successors seem to be the unrelated lieutenants and servants. God responds by promising Avraham a natural heir, actualizing this promise by comparing the multitude of Avraham's future line to the infinite stars, and consecrating it through the berit ben ha-betarim (9).

These promises conclude the first section and usher in the second within which they will be realized. This realization, though, hinges on the ability of the heir's prospective parents - Avraham and Sarah - to harness their familial love in compliance with God's will. Only a child born of such compliance can father God's chosen nation.

B) Section II (e, d-a) - Suppression of Human Emotion and The Birth of a Heir (10)

In the wake of God's promise of a natural heir (11) and in recognition of her infertility, Sarah makes the supreme sacrifice of suggesting Avraham's union with her handmaid, Hagar, in the hope of actualizing the promise. Sarah shares Avraham's intense commitment to God's word and is willing to forfeit her personal glory in precipitating its fruition.

With this plan's success, Avraham is, presumably, overwhelmed with joyous relief. The birth of his heir signified the promises' complete fruition - the years of waiting had ended. Hashem shatters this misconception by immediately informing him of the absence of the true heir. Sarah's self-sacrificing attitude in service of God has given her the right to bear the father of His chosen nation. In the context of the mitzva of berit mila, Hashem changes Avraham's and Sarah's names to symbolize the heir's descent from the union of the two:

Your name shall no longer be Her name shall not be

called Avram, but Avraham shall called Sarai, but Sara

be your name, for I have made is her name ... and she

you the father of many nations shall become nations,

(17:5) kings of people will

come from her (17:15-16)

Avraham, of course, expresses his concern over the future of his first son - Yishmael (17:18). Hashem promises a bright future for Yishmael as well, but iterates Yitzchak's status as the rightful heir (17:19-21) (12).

The moment of truth for Avraham regarding Yishmael arrives with Yitzchak's coming of age. From the celebration of this milestone, Avraham is thrust into the strain of sibling rivalry. Although the exile of Hagar and Yishmael demanded by Sarah seems harsh to Avraham, he obeys Hashem's command to comply. "Va-yera ha-davar me'od be-einei Avraham al odot beno" (21:11); the Torah stresses Avraham's view of Yishmael as a full-fledged son to emphasize the intense paternal pain Avraham was forced to su(13) in compliance with divine will.

The final test, though, is the akeida. Consideration of Avraham's experiences prior to the akeida sensitizes us to the distress he must have faced in performing it. Avraham's service of God began with his abandonment of his family and birthplace. Although he left with the promise of a bright future - a great, blessed nation, he waited twenty-five years for the birth of his heir.

After being forced to banish his first-born Yishmael for Yitzchak's sake, Avraham is informed that he is to part ways with his heir as well. The Torah highlights the bearing of Yishmael's exile on the akeida by linking the two stories with the phrase - "achar ha-devarim ha-eileh" (22:1) (14). Hashem stresses this thematic connection by describing Yitzchak as Avraham's "sole loved son;" Yishmael, his other son, has already been rejected.

After having being directed numerous times by God to see his life's fulfillment in Yitzchak's future, Avraham is commanded to terminate it. God's first commandment to Avraham was to abandon his past - his birthplace and father's home; his last was to obliterate his future - his heir. The textual parallels (15) between the two commandments reflect their correlation:

12:1 22:2

LEKH LEKHA Kach na et binkha et yechidkha

me-artzekha u-mimoladetkha asher ahavta (16) VE-LEKH

u-mibeit avikha al achat ha-harim ASHER OMAR

el ha-aretz ASHER AR'EKHA EILEKHA

Avraham's first tests challenged him to part with the past or present in light of his future; his last test forced him to part with that future as well. His willingness to complete the task proved him to be one singularly focused on the service of God and the glorification of His name - "ata yadati ki yerei Elokim ata" (22:12).

At this point, Hashem repeats the promises made to Avraham prior to his first journey in relation to his future line. Compare 12:2-3 and 22:17-18.

#### Endnotes

(1) Another parallel is the fact that both, Terach and Noach, had three sons.

(2) The Torah's mention of this fact is striking in light of the fact that the deaths of the other figures mentioned as part of the lineage from Noach to Terach are not mentioned. This is in contrast to the lineage from Adam to Noach, where the Torah concludes its description of each figure by mentioning his death.

(3) The Torah gives the impression that the lekh lekha command was given after the death of Terach. Assuming that Avraham was born to Terach at the age of seventy (11:26), the commentaries concur that Terach died much later. Rashi quotes Bereishit Rabba (39:7) which explains that the Torah mentions Terach's death here to prevent Avraham's journey from being perceived as an insult to his father. If Avraham was actually forced to leave Terach still alive, God's mandate was one all the more difficult to fulfill.

(4) Avraham spent the first seventy-five years of his life with his father (or at least in his father's land) and the last seventy five with his chosen son. The middle twenty-five were those of unrest and uncertainty.

(5) The relationship between these two stories is stressed through the transition pasuk - "And Lot, who was accompanying Avraham, also acquired cattle ..." (13:5).

(6) The raised hand reminds us of that of Moshe during the war with Amalek which similarly aimed to direct the people to God's hand (Mishna Rosh Hashana 29a).

(7) Targum Yonatan (14:18), Talmud Bavli - Nedarim 32b.

(8) The Torah makes a point of abruptly informing us of Sarah's infertility immediately upon our introduction to her (11:30).

(9) In fact, this heir will eventually secure the great wealth Avraham declined (15:14). Note the usage of the term "rekhus" paralleling the term's usage by the Sodomite king in his offer to Avraham (14:21). We are introduced to the term already at the beginning of parashat Lekh Lekha (12:5).

(10) An additional difference between the second section and the first is Avraham's relative stability. Each story in the first round includes a journey - first from Charan to Canaan, then to Mitzrayim, and finally to fight the four kings. In the second round, Avraham experiences similar events, but with less travel. He saves Lot from his own home (the mal'akhim travel to Sedom) and travels only to Gerar and Eretz Ha-moria instead of beyond the borders of Eretz Yisrael. The distinction beyond the two units is reinforced by various pesukim taken from each:

Section One (perakim 12-14) Section Two (perakim 18-22)

"And Avraham travelled - "And Avraham resided in

crisscrossing the Negev (12:9). "the land of the Plishtim

many days (21:33)."

"And he continued on his

journey from the Negev to "And Avraham resided in

Bet El (13:3)." Be'er Sheva (22:19)."

(11) See Radak (16:1).

(12) Hashem reinforces this point by dedicating both the beginning and conclusion of his reply to Yitzchak's unique status. He refers to Yishmael in the one pasuk in between.

(13) Hashem justifies his demand that Avraham comply with Sarah's orders by reminding Avraham of the uniqueness of Yitzchak. As opposed to Avraham who views Yishmael as a second son, Hashem describes him as "na'ar" and "ben ha-ama."

Hashem of course fulfills his promise to Avraham by tending after Yishmael in the desert and assuring his success as a hunter (21:17-20).

(14) Rashi quotes various opinions of Chazal (Sanhedrin 89b) regarding the implication of this phrase. See also Rashbam.

(15) An additional parallel between the two stories is the altar that features in both.

(16) Note also the triple description of the significance of the act about to be taken stressed by God in each pasuk.

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>