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Adapted from

הגות בפרשיות התורה by Rav Yehuda Nachshoni

Lech Lecha: The Making of Avraham Avinu

Part I: Where Did Avraham Come From?

The end of Parshas Noach leaves us with an immediate problem. The Torah says of Haran, *וימת הרן על פני תרה אביו בארץ מולדתו באור כשדים - Haran died in the lifetime of Terach his father, in the land of his birth, in Ur Kasdim* (Bereishis 11:28). A few pesukim later, Terach takes Avraham, Sarah and Lot, *ויצאו אתם מאור כשדים ללכת ארצה כנען - they set out together from Ur Kasdim to go to the land of Canaan* (11:31). Yet only afterward does Hashem tell Avraham, *לך מן הארץ אשר אתה בא - Go from your land, from your*

birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you (12:1). Where, then, was Avraham born? What was his מולדת? And if the family was already traveling toward Canaan, when was Lech Lecha commanded? **The Ibn Ezra: The command came earlier.** The Ibn Ezra understands that Avraham was born in Ur Kasdim and that Lech Lecha had already been commanded there. The events are not in strict chronological order: Avraham was commanded to leave, Terach went with him, and when Terach stopped in Charan, Avraham continued. Thus מארצך וממולדתך is literal. The **Ibn Ezra** also rejects the Midrashic connection between Ur Kasdim and Nimrod's fiery furnace. If such an extraordinary miracle and act of mesiras nefesh had occurred, why would the Torah omit it? He therefore understands Ur Kasdim simply as a place-name.

The Ramban: Charan was Avraham's homeland. The Ramban strongly disagrees. Avraham belonged to the world of Shem and of עבר הנהר - beyond the River. Yehoshua says, *בְּעֵבֶר הַנָּהָר יֹשְׁבוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם - Your forefathers dwelt of old beyond the River*, and ואקח את אביכם את אברהם מעבר הנהר - *I took your father Avraham from beyond the River* (Yehoshua 24:2-3). The Ramban reconstructs the family history accordingly. Terach originally lived in Charan-Aram, where Avraham and Nachor were born, and later moved to Ur Kasdim, where Haran was born. After Haran died, Terach returned toward his ancestral homeland and stopped in Charan. There Avraham received *לך לך*. This explains the Torah's precise description of Haran, בארץ מולדתו באור כשדים: Ur Kasdim was Haran's birthplace, not Avraham's. It also explains why Avraham later tells Eliezer, *כי אל ארצי ואל מולדתי - go to my land and to my birthplace* (Bereishis 24:4), and Eliezer goes to Aram Naharayim. Yet the **Ramban** fully accepts Chazal's tradition that Avraham was persecuted in Ur Kasdim and miraculously rescued. Hashem says, *אני ה' אשר הוצאתיך מאור כשדים - I am Hashem Who brought you out of Ur Kasdim* (15:7). The word הוצאתיך suggests a rescue, like the Exodus from Egypt. The Torah does not recount the miracle, he explains, because that would have required entering into the idolaters' claim that Avraham's survival was sorcery.

The Abarbanel: Hashem had already prepared the way. The **Abarbanel** accepts the Ramban's basic approach but adds that Terach's earlier departure from Ur Kasdim was itself part of Hashem's providence. Had Avraham still been settled there, surrounded by home and family, the command to leave would have been far harder. Instead, the family had already reached Charan. Terach stopped; Avraham was commanded to continue. What appeared to be a family migration had prepared the way for Avraham's mission. The Abarbanel also accepts that Avraham had already rejected the beliefs of Ur Kasdim. Through his own thought he recognized that the heavenly bodies were not independent powers but servants of one Creator. Before Avraham left the land, he had already left its beliefs. **The Maasei Hashem. Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi**, author of the **Maasei Hashem**, suggests that Aram Naharayim may itself have been under Kasdim rule. Avraham could therefore have remained geographically within the world of Shem while living under Kasdim political and religious domination. The details differ, but the larger point is the same: by the time Hashem says Lech Lecha, a deeper journey has already begun.

Part II: Why Does the Torah Tell Us Nothing About Avraham Before Lech Lecha?

There is a deeper question at the beginning of the parsha. With Noach, the Torah first tells us, *Noach - נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו*. *Noach was a righteous and wholehearted man in his generations*. Only afterward does Hashem speak to him. With Avraham, there is nothing. The Torah does not tell us that he discovered Hashem, rejected idolatry or risked his life for his faith. Avraham simply appears, and suddenly *לך אל אברם* *לך*. Yet Chazal tell us much about what came before. Bereishis Rabbah 38:13 describes how Terach made and sold idols and left Avraham in charge. Avraham mocked the idea that a man of fifty or sixty should bow to an idol made only yesterday. When a woman brought an offering, Avraham smashed the idols except the largest and put the stick in its hand. He told Terach that the idols had fought over the offering and the largest had smashed the others. Terach protested that idols cannot speak or act. Avraham answered, *ולא ישמעו אזניך מה שפיך אומר* - *Should your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?* Terach brought him before Nimrod. Nimrod told Avraham to worship fire; Avraham answered that water extinguishes fire. Water, clouds, wind, man - every supposed power led to another question. Nimrod finally abandoned argument and threw Avraham into the furnace, but Avraham emerged alive. Haran, who had waited to see which side would prevail, then declared himself with Avraham. He too was thrown in, but died. The Midrash thus connects *וימת הרן על פני תרה אביו בארץ* with the fire of Kasdim.

The **Rambam** describes Avraham's rise from a different angle. Avraham *השיג דרך האמת והבין קו הצדק מתבוננתו הנכונה* - attained the path of truth and understood the way of righteousness through his own sound reasoning (Hilchos Avodah Zarah 1:3). He recognized one Creator Who made and directs the world, while mankind had confused the servants with the Master. The Moreh Nevuchim likewise records traditions of Avraham's struggle against the Sabians and the suffering he endured for his faith. Yet the Torah tells us almost none of this. The **Ramban** therefore asks: why would Hakadosh Baruch Hu choose Avraham and command him to leave his land without first telling us what made him worthy? **The Ramban: The missing story was already known.** The Ramban answers that the Torah relied upon facts already well known. Avraham's rejection of idolatry and the danger he suffered in Ur Kasdim formed the background to Lech Lecha. He had already begun toward Canaan; Hashem now told him to complete the journey and there call mankind to His service. The blessings answer that earlier experience as well. Avraham had been mocked and cursed; now Hashem promises, *ואברכה מברכך ומקללך אאר* - *I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse* (Bereishis 12:3). The man rejected by his generation would become a source of blessing to the nations.

The Burning Palace - בירה דולקת. The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 39:1) gives another answer: *אמר רבי יצחק משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום וראה בירה אחת דולקת אמר תאמר שהבירה הזו בלא מנהיג הציץ עליו בעל הבירה אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר - שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג הציץ עליו הקדוש ברוך הוא ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם* - *Rabbi Yitzchak compares Avraham to a traveler who sees a palace burning and asks, Can this palace have no master? The owner looks out and says, I am the master of the palace. So too Avraham asked, Can this world be without a Master? Hakadosh Baruch Hu revealed Himself and said, I am the Master of the world.* **Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi** understands the Midrash as filling in the missing

beginning. Avraham was already searching, examining the beliefs of his world and rejecting what could not be true. Revelation did not replace his search; it came at the point to which that search had brought him. **The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh** asks why Hashem speaks to Avraham before first appearing to him. Perhaps Avraham needed no preliminary revelation because he had already discovered Hashem through his own wisdom. Or perhaps Hashem deliberately withheld fuller revelation because Avraham first had to be tested: would he obey without demanding an explanation or a sign? Only afterward would he merit the fuller revelation.

The Maharal: Perhaps nothing is missing. The Maharal takes an entirely different approach. Perhaps the Torah deliberately omits Avraham's merits so that Hashem's choice will not appear dependent upon them. Had the Torah first described a great tzaddik who rejected idolatry and risked his life for Hashem, we might conclude that he was chosen because of those deeds, an *אהבה התלויה בדבר* - *a love dependent upon a particular cause*. Noach was chosen as an individual because of his righteousness. Avraham is told *ואעשך לגוי גדול* - *I will make you into a great nation*. He is being chosen as the beginning of Klal Yisrael. The bechirah of Avraham and his descendants therefore does not rest upon any particular merit. This is connected to *מריה דאברהם* - Master of Avraham. Avraham's greatness began with asking the question everyone else had stopped asking: *Can this world be without a Master?* It challenged the accepted beliefs of an entire civilization.

A G-d Hidden in Concealment. There is a striking pattern in Avraham's story. His past is hidden, the reason for Hashem's choice is hidden, and even his destination is hidden. Hashem says only *אל הארץ אשר אראך* - *to the land that I will show you*. What He does make clear is what Avraham must leave: *מאוצרך* - *from your land*. Chazal explain *אברהם העברי* by saying that the entire world stood on one side and Avraham on the other. Before he could influence the world, he had to stand apart from it. The **HaKsav VeHaKabbalah** notes that the order seems backwards. Physically, one first leaves his father's house, then his surroundings, and finally his country. The Torah reverses the order because it describes an inner departure: easiest is separation from the broad culture of one's country, harder from one's immediate surroundings, and hardest from *בית אביך*, the ideas absorbed at home. Avraham had discovered the truth intellectually. Lech Lecha demanded that he build his life around it.

The First Mitzvah. The Ostrovtzer Rebbe [Rabbi Meir Yechiel Halevi Halstock (1852-1928)] points out that the first explicit command to Avraham is bound up with Eretz Yisrael. Terach had begun toward Canaan but stopped in Charan; Avraham continued. The **Sforno** explains that Canaan was suited for contemplation and the service of Hashem, while the **Ramban** emphasizes that Avraham still did not know the precise destination. Hashem said only *אל הארץ אשר אראך*. The Sforno gives *אשר אראך* a deeper meaning: not merely the land Hashem will show Avraham, but the place where Hashem will reveal Himself to him. Avraham therefore continues until Shechem, where the Torah finally says *וירא ה' אל אברם ויאמר לזרעך אתן* - *Hashem appeared to Avraham and said, To your descendants I will give this land* (Bereishis 12:7). The journey toward Eretz Yisrael becomes a journey toward revelation. **The Blessing That Emerged.** Yet revelation and separation are not the

end. Hashem tells Avraham והיה ברכה - *You shall be a blessing*, and *All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you* (12:2-3). The **Abarbanel** explains that Avraham is not merely to receive blessing but to become its source, spreading recognition of Hashem beyond himself. The man who can stand on one side when the world stands on the other is ultimately charged with bringing blessing back to that world.

Conclusion. Avraham's story begins with what the Torah does not tell us. We are not told clearly where he was born, how he came to recognize Hashem, or why he was chosen. Even his destination remains hidden: אל הארץ אשר אראך - *to the land that I will show you*. But perhaps the concealment is itself part of the message. Avraham had learned to look beyond what everyone else accepted, to ask whether a world could exist without him, and to separate himself from its beliefs. Yet separation was never the goal. Hashem tells him והיה ברכה. Avraham first had to be willing to stand alone; only then could he bring something back to the world. That is the movement of Lech Lecha: from searching to revelation, from separation to mission, and from one man willing to stand alone to a people charged with bringing the knowledge of Hashem and His blessing into the world.

Adapted from

עטרה למלך, based on talks by **Rav Avraham Pam** (1913–2001)
Chesed L'Avraham

The Torah tells the story of Avraham Avinu's hospitality at unusual length because it contains many *fundamental lessons* in *chesed*. One detail is especially striking. When the three wayfarers appeared, Avraham was receiving the Shechinah, which had come to visit him in his illness. At that moment he was far removed from ordinary physical concerns. Yet as soon as he saw strangers in need, he ran to greet them and hurried to satisfy their every bodily want. A man basking in the radiance of the Shechinah turned at once to questions of appetite and taste, taking pains to serve his guests the finest food, down to *three tongues with mustard* (Bava Metzia 86b).

What Chesed Really Requires

The *Mesillas Yesharim* (ch. 15) describes how fleeting the pleasure of eating really is. It lasts only while the food passes through the throat, and a few moments later it is gone as though it had never been. Avraham Avinu certainly lived on that level. Food and physical pleasure meant very little to him. But that was the standard he demanded of himself. It had nothing to do with what he should give someone else. His *perishus* was for himself, not for his guests. Rav Itzele Peterburger describes his rebbe, Rav Yisrael Salanter, in much the same way. Rav Yisrael התבל מכל המודות - *was free of every worldly desire*, yet he understood very well the desires and sensitivities of other people. He wanted no honor for himself, but was careful *to honor people with all the customary courtesies*. This is one of the great lessons of Avraham Avinu. A person can become so absorbed in his own spiritual standards that he begins measuring everyone else by them. Avraham taught the opposite. The higher he rose personally, the more room he had to understand what another person needed.

That is why Avraham could say *I am but dust and ashes* (Vayeira 18:27), while at the same time treating complete strangers with extraordinary honor. The Midrash says that he observed that the travelers were *showing honor to one another*, and recognized that they were *decent and worthy people* (Bereishis Rabbah 48:9). He then stood over them and served them himself. There is no contradiction between humility and showing honor to others. Quite the reverse. The person who needs little honor for himself has more room to give honor to someone else. This gives added meaning to *welcoming guests is greater than receiving the Shechinah* (Shabbos 127a).

Avraham did not turn away from Hashem when he ran toward the guests. Serving Hashem's creatures was itself a way of drawing close to Hashem.

One Love, Not Two

This leads to a deeper question about Avraham. He is the great model of *chesed*, but he is also the father of *emunah*. Chazal explain אמונה - *gaze from the summit of faith* (Shir HaShirim 4:8) as referring to Avraham, of whom the Torah says והאמין בה - *and he believed in Hashem*. Are these simply two different parts of Avraham's greatness, one *bein adam laMakom* and the other *bein adam lachaveiro*? They are not. One who truly loves Hashem wants to do what Hashem desires, and Hashem is *for* *He desires chesed* (Micha 7:18). *for this purpose He created His world, to bestow good upon His creatures*. תורה - *the Torah begins with acts of kindness and ends with acts of kindness* (Sotah 14a). Love of Hashem therefore leads naturally to concern for His creatures.

But it also works in the other direction. Avraham's שם בשם ה' קל עולם - *calling out in the name of Hashem, G-d of the world* (Vayeira 21:33) was itself an *outgrowth of his middah of chesed*. If Avraham knew the greatest good in the world, how could he keep it to himself? *Chesed* could not end with feeding a hungry person. It also meant *to open blind eyes* (Yeshaya 42:7), bringing light to another person so that he too could experience *then you shall delight in Hashem* (Yeshaya 58:14). Thus Avraham's love of Hashem and his love of people were not two separate loves. *love of Hashem and love of chesed, in their fullness, are one, and each completes the other*. *for this is the whole of man*.

Giving Creates Love

But how does an ordinary person reach such love of others? We usually assume that *chesed* begins with love: I care about someone, and therefore I want to help him. Chazal teach that the process also works in reverse. *Maseches Derech Eretz Zuta* (ch. 2) says *if you wish to cleave to the love of your friend, occupy yourself with his welfare*. The *Orchos Tzaddikim*, in *Shaar HaAhavah*, similarly teaches that the way to come to love another person is *to do good for him*. Giving is not merely the result of love. Giving creates love. When a person thinks about another's needs, worries about him and invests himself in his welfare, that person becomes precious to him. The Gemara (Bava Metzia 32b) makes the point sharply. If a friend needs help unloading his animal and an enemy needs help loading his, one should first help the enemy, *in order to subdue his yetzer*. Why specifically through helping the enemy? Because doing good changes the heart. *Chesed* does not merely express what a person already feels. It can change what he feels. Give to the person you resent, concern yourself with his welfare, and slowly the resentment itself begins to weaken.

Making Room for Another Person

There is, however, a price to *chesed*. To make room for someone else, I must surrender some of the space occupied by myself. True *chesed* requires a person to be *to contract his own concerns and make room for another*. Someone needs my time when I had other plans, my attention when my mind is elsewhere, or my patience precisely when patience is inconvenient. *the world is built on chesed* (Tehillim 89:3). Of course there must be limits. There is no fixed measuring stick telling a person how much time he must give or when another person's needs must take precedence over his own responsibilities. But before asking where the limit lies, there is a more basic question: Do I notice the other person at all? Avraham was occupied with something incomparably greater than anything that occupies us. He was receiving the Shechinah. Yet he saw three people walking in the heat and immediately noticed what they needed. The ability to see beyond oneself is the beginning of *chesed*.

The Chesed of Everyday Life

Once a person begins looking, opportunities for *chesed* are everywhere. Sometimes the entire *chesed* is a word. The Rambam (Hilchos Deos 5:7)

writes that a *talmid chacham* מקדים שלום לכל האדם - *greets every person first*. A greeting that costs us nothing may tell someone who is usually overlooked that he matters. Sometimes the *chesed* is not speaking but listening. Shlomo HaMelech says דאגה בלב איש ישחנה - *worry in a person's heart weighs him down* (Mishlei 12:25), and Chazal explain that he should speak it out to another person (Yoma 75a). We are often eager to give advice, but a person in pain does not always need an answer. Sometimes he needs someone willing to hear him. In my childhood in Lithuania a woman whose mind had been broken by suffering and whom people generally avoided. My mother would listen patiently as she poured out her troubles and speak gently to her until she became calm. No problem had been solved, but for those moments a suffering person was no longer alone. That too is *chesed*.

And sometimes nothing need be said. Chazal teach that one who receives another פנים נעים - *with a pleasant countenance*, even if he gives him nothing, is considered טובות שבעולם - *as though he had given him all the good gifts in the world* (Avos d'Rabbi Nosson 13). A warm face tells another person that he is welcome. The *Sefer Yereim* teaches the other side as well: a cold or angry face can itself violate עמיתו - *you shall not wrong one another* (Behar 25:17). *Chesed* is not only what we give with our hands or our money. It can be given, or withheld, by the way we look at another person.

The Soul That Embraces Others

There are ultimately two ways a person can live. יש נשמה שמסוגרת בתוך הגוף - *a soul enclosed within its own body*, whose world is bounded by its own needs and concerns. And there is נשמה עילאה המקיפה נשמות הרבה - *a higher soul that embraces many souls*, whose world has grown large enough to include other people. That was Avraham Avinu. He was above the pleasures of food, yet served his guests delicacies. He called himself dust and ashes, yet gave strangers extraordinary honor. He loved Hashem, and therefore loved Hashem's creatures. He loved people, and therefore wanted to bring them close to Hashem. He needed very little for himself, and precisely because there was so little self filling his world, there was room in it for so many others.

This is the *chesed* of Avraham. It begins not with how much we give, but with whether another person has entered our world. Once he has, we begin to see what he needs: perhaps money, perhaps time, perhaps guidance, perhaps a kind word, perhaps only an ear or a warm face. And as we give, our own world becomes larger. ומתוק האור - *the light is sweet* (Koheles 11:7). The light of a life that has room for others is very sweet indeed.

Adapted from

Rav Asher Weiss on the Parashah

A Sacrifice of Love

The Covenant of the Body

In this week's *parsha*, Hashem commands Avraham Avinu to circumcise himself and the members of his household, and to establish the covenant of *Bris Milah* for all generations:

ואמר אלקים אל אברהם ואתה את בריתי תשמר אתה וזרעך אחריו לדורתם - *And you shall keep My covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations*

זאת בריתי אשר תשמרו ביני וביניכם ובין זרעך אחריו המול לכם כל זכר - *This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your offspring after you, every male shall be circumcised* (Lech Lecha 17:9-10)

The *Torah* then tells us:

ואברהם באברהם בן תשעים ותשע שנה בהמלו בשר ערלתו - *Avraham was ninety-nine years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised* (Lech Lecha 17:24)

The meaning of *Bris Milah* is that our covenant with Hashem is not limited to the soul. The physical body itself is brought into His service. A Jew does not serve Hashem despite having a body. The body itself must

become *aa vessel of service*. For this reason, the Zohar compares a child entering the *bris* to a *korban* brought before Hashem. The Zohar describes the father *as one who brings his son for this offering* and says that it is , *as though he offered all the offerings in the world* (Zohar, Lech Lecha). The covenant is written into the body because the entire person belongs to Hashem.

Why Did Avraham Have to Suffer?

There is a remarkable Midrash concerning Avraham Avinu's *Bris Milah*. The *Torah* says:

On that very day Avraham was circumcised (Lech Lecha 17:26). The Midrash records:

נמול אברהם אמר רבי אבא בר כהנא הרגיש ונצטער כדי שיכפל לו הקדוש ברוך הוא שכרו אמר רבי לוי מל אברהם אין כתיב כאן אלא נמול בדק את עצמו ומצא עצמו מהול אמר רבי ברכיה בהדיא עיתא אקיל רבי אבא בר כהנא לרבי לוי אמר לה שקרנא כזבנא את אלא הרגיש ונצטער כדי שיכפל הקדוש ברוך הוא שכרו

R' Abba bar Kahana understood that Avraham experienced the pain of the *milah*, and that this suffering increased his reward. R' Levi understood the wording differently. The *Torah* does not say that Avraham circumcised himself, but that he was circumcised.

According to R' Levi, Avraham examined himself and discovered that he was already circumcised (Bereishis Rabbah 47:9). The Midrash records that R' Abba reacted with extraordinary sharpness to R' Levi's explanation and accused him of speaking falsely.

Why such a fierce response? This cannot be explained as a personal dispute between two Amoraim. On the contrary, the Yerushalmi relates that R' Abba once heard R' Levi teach *Torah* and was so moved that he kissed him on the head and gave him a heartfelt *berachah* (Yerushalmi Horayos 3:5). Koheles Rabbah likewise records R' Abba kissing R' Levi. Why, then, did this particular interpretation provoke such a reaction?

The answer goes to the heart of what *Bris Milah* represents. R' Abba understood that the covenant established by Avraham Avinu had to involve personal sacrifice. If Avraham simply discovered that he was already circumcised, then the pain, the struggle and the *mesirus nefesh* would be missing. But it was precisely Avraham's willingness to suffer for the covenant that created a bond capable of enduring throughout Jewish history.

From where did generations of Jews living under persecution draw the strength to cling to this covenant? From Avraham Avinu. His act did not remain a private event in his own life. It established the spiritual capacity within his descendants to sacrifice for Hashem even under the harshest conditions of *Galus*. That is why R' Abba regarded this point as essential rather than incidental. The pain was part of the covenant itself.

The Mitzvah Must Be Personal

There is a general principle of *it is preferable to perform a mitzvah oneself rather than through an agent* (Kiddushin 41a). This has particular force with *Bris Milah*. A father who personally performs the *milah* must overcome the most natural compassion a father feels toward his infant son. The very difficulty of the act becomes part of its expression of love and dedication to Hashem.

The Ksav Sofer explains the *Torah's* description of Avraham circumcising Yitzchak:

Avraham ומל אברהם את יצחק בנו בן שמונת ימים כאשר צוה אתו אלקים - *circumcised his son Yitzchak at eight days old, as G-d had commanded him* (Bereishis 21:4)

Why does the *Torah* - *emphasize as G-d commanded him*? Just as Hashem had personally commanded Avraham concerning the *bris*, Avraham personally fulfilled it. He did not delegate the act to someone else.

Sacrifice That Became an Inheritance

The history of *Klal Yisrael* contains extraordinary examples of this devotion. One *mohel* traveled secretly from city to city in Russia, performing *Bris Milah* despite the danger of severe punishment. On one occasion he circumcised a three-month-old child whose *bris* had been delayed because of the circumstances. The moment the *bris* was completed, the mother took the baby from the *sandek* and covered him with hugs and kisses.

She explained that she had been terrified that she might never be able to bring her son into the covenant. To strengthen herself, she had resolved not to kiss or embrace him until he had entered the *bris* of Avraham Avinu. Her joy after the *milah* expressed both the sacrifice and the love bound together in this *mitzvah*.

A second story is told of a clandestine *Bris Milah* in the Kovna Ghetto during the Holocaust. Ten Jews had secretly gathered in a cellar. In the middle of the *bris*, someone rushed in to warn them that the Germans were conducting a raid. The men attempted to erase every sign that a *bris* was taking place, but the mother insisted that the *milah* be completed immediately. If her child was to die, she said, she wanted him to die as a Jew who had entered the covenant of Avraham Avinu.

These stories bring us to a remarkable teaching of Chazal. The Gemara says:

- כל מצוה שמסרו ישראל עצמן עליה למיתה *Every mitzvah for which the Jewish people gave themselves over to death*

- עדיין היא מוחזקת בידם *remains firmly held in their hands*

The Gemara also teaches:

- כל מצוה שקיבלו עליהם בשמחה *Every mitzvah which they accepted with joy*
- עדיין עושין אותה בשמחה *they continue to perform with joy* (Shabbos 130a)

And the example Chazal give is *Bris Milah*.

At first these two ideas seem to point in opposite directions. *Mesirus nefesh* speaks of sacrifice and pain, while *simchah* speaks of joy. Yet *Bris Milah* contains both. Avraham Avinu accepted the covenant through sacrifice, but he accepted it with love. Therefore his descendants inherited not only the willingness to sacrifice for this *mitzvah*, but also the ability to rejoice in that sacrifice.

The Eighth Day

The Gemara elsewhere uses the striking expression *until the soul departs* in its discussion of *milah* (Avodah Zarah 27a). The language points to the deeper character of the covenant. *Bris Milah* represents a Jew's willingness to give himself completely to Hashem. The Maharal explains that seven represents *the natural world*, while eight represents *that which is above nature*. There are seven days of creation. *Bris Milah* is performed on the eighth day.

The father is asked to rise above a natural instinct that tells him to protect his child from every pain. When that natural love itself becomes an instrument for serving Hashem, the act enters the realm of eight, beyond ordinary nature.

The Baal HaTurim finds an allusion to this in the pasuk:

Who will ascend to Heaven for us (Devarim 30:12) מי יעלה לנו השמימה - The first letters of

the Name of *milah* lifts a Jew beyond the limits of the purely physical world and binds him directly to Hashem.

A Midrash takes this idea still further *Look to the covenant: even if Israel has no other good deeds, Hakadosh Baruch Hu redeems them in the merit of milah* (Aggadat Bereishit 17:1). In Egypt, at the Yam Suf, and later at the Jordan, the covenant accompanied them and became a source of redemption. At the Yam Suf, the Midrash says *-when the sea saw the milah, it fled*.

The covenant therefore contains both the beginning and the future of *Klal Yisrael*. Avraham accepted it through pain and through love. His children carried it through exile, persecution and danger, not merely as a mark upon the body, but as an enduring declaration that the entire Jew belongs to Hashem. In that merit, may the covenant that protected our fathers continue to protect us and bring our final redemption.

Rav Yisroel Meir Kagan zt"l

Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshiva Toras Chaim of Denver

This week, the week of Parshas Lech Lecha, Klal Yisroel lost a Rosh Yeshiva whose life echoed the parsha's opening command.

Rav Yisroel Meir Hakohen Kagan zt"l was born into the world of the Chofetz Chaim. His father, Rav Yehuda Leib Hakohen Kagan zt"l, later a Rosh Yeshiva at RJJ, was a talmid of the Chofetz Chaim and was present at his petira in 1933. When his son was born very soon afterwards, he named him Yisroel Meir after his rebbe. Rav Yisroel Meir Kagan's mother, Rebbetzin Devorah, of the Kossowsky family, was a niece of Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski zt"l. His wife Leah a"h was the daughter of the Mattersdorfer Rav.

He became one of the foremost talmidim of Rav Aharon Kotler zt"l at Beth Medrash Govoha. In 1967 he left Lakewood with Rav Yitzchok Wasserman, to bring that mesorah to Denver, a city then far removed from any established Torah center.

For close to sixty years he sat in that quiet place and built a makom Torah. For many years it was the closest yeshiva for bachurim from Seattle, Los Angeles, Vancouver and Mexico, and thousands of talmidim carried his Torah and hashkafa into homes and communities across the world.

His talmidim describe him in different ways. Some speak of the depth and breadth of his shiurim, which were easy to follow yet held a great deal. Others speak of his love for them, how approachable he was, and how freely they could bring him whatever was troubling them. All speak of his hasmadah. He was in the beis medrash before Shacharis and left only after Maariv, to go home and prepare the next day's shiur.

His middos were refined to the point of chumra. He once mentioned to a member of the hanhalah that he had found \$75 and put it into the pushka. When asked why, since al pi halacha the money was his, he answered that \$75 is a significant sum, and the one who lost it was surely distressed. "How can I enjoy something that caused someone else agmas nefesh?"

Above all he fled from kavod. He left few public recordings and almost no published writings, because putting himself forward was not his way.

He was niftar after an illness this past Monday, in his 93rd year. Levayos were held in Denver and in Lakewood, and he was brought to kevarah in Har Hazeisim.

One of Rav Yisroel Meir Kagan's last projects was the republishing and expansion of his father's sefer *Halichos Yehudah*. The following dvar torah from the *Halichos Yehudah* is adapted and translated below.

Adapted from

Halichos Yehudah by Rav Yehudah Leib HaKohen Kagan (1894-1972)

Contentment and the Good Eye

ויאמר מלך סדם אל אברם את כל הנפש והרכש קח לך ויאמר אברם אל מלך סדם הרימתי ידי אל ה' אל עליון קנה שמים וארץ אם מחוט ועד שרוך נעל ואם אקה מכל *The king of Sodom said to Avram: Give me the people and take the possessions for yourself. Avram said to the king of Sodom: I have raised my hand to Hashem, G-d Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth. I will take neither a thread nor a shoelace, nor anything that is yours, so that you cannot say, I made Avram rich, except only what the young men have eaten* (Lech Lecha 14:21-24).

A Thread and a Shoelace

The Torah places before us a remarkable scene. Avraham Avinu has just defeated four powerful kings who had conquered nations and plundered entire countries. ויקחו את כל רכש סדם ועמרה *They took all the possessions of Sodom and Amorah* (Lech Lecha 14:11). Avraham defeated them and recovered everything they had seized. וישב את כל *He brought back all the possessions, and also brought back Lot his kinsman and his possessions, and also the women and the people* (Lech Lecha 14:16).

תן לי הנפש *The king of Sodom, defeated and powerless, tells him* *Give me the people and take the possessions for yourself.* Avraham had every reason to accept. The king himself offered him the property, and Avraham had a valid claim to what he had rescued. Yet he answers *I have raised my hand to Hashem, G-d Most High.* He takes a solemn oath that he will accept nothing, *not even a thread or a shoelace.*

Why was this refusal so significant? Chazal saw extraordinary meaning in those few words. בשכר שאמר אברהם אבינו אם מחוט ועד שרוך *In the merit of Avraham Avinu saying, not a thread nor a shoelace, his children merited two mitzvos, the thread of techeiles and the strap of tefillin* (Sotah 17a). Bereishis Rabbah (43:9) finds within the same words allusions to the Mishkan, korbanos and *aliyah laregel*, מה יפו פעמיו *How beautiful are your footsteps in shoes* (Shir HaShirim 7:2). The Tanchuma adds the Korban Pesach, ונככה תאכלו אותו מתניכם *This is how you shall eat it, your loins girded and your shoes on your feet* (Bo 12:11).

Chazal did not attach so many mitzvos and rewards to an insignificant gesture. חסדא must contain something fundamental.

There was also a halachic act here. והרימתי ידי אל ה' *was an oath.* The Sifrei teaches אדם להשביע את יצרו שכן אתה מוצא בכל מקום שהצדיקים *A person must bind his inclination with an oath, for*

we find that the righteous would bind their inclination with an oath, and cites Avraham as its example (Sifrei Devarim 33). Nedarim 8a likewise teaches that one may swear to strengthen himself in the performance of a mitzvah. Avraham therefore regarded his refusal as important enough to bind himself by an oath.

To understand why, we must go back to the struggle between Avraham and Amraphel.

Avraham and Amraphel

The immediate reason Avraham entered the war was *וישמע אברם כי* *Avram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive and armed his trained men* (Lech Lecha 14:14). Lot had been captured. But behind that immediate cause lay an older struggle.

And it was in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar. Megillah 10b brings this pasuk as an example of *כל מקום* *wherever vayehi appears it denotes distress.* What was the distress? *עשו מלחמה* *they made war.* Chazal describe Amraphel and his allies as opening the world to war, conquest and bloodshed. *The wicked have drawn the sword and bent their bow* (Tehillim 37:14). Their punishment would be *הרבם תבוא בלבם וקשותותם תשברנה* *their sword will enter their own heart and their bows will be broken* (Tehillim 37:15), and Avraham would be the one to carry it out.

The contrast could not be sharper. Amraphel represents conquest, idolatry and the drive to take. Avraham is the first *Ivri*, the man who recognized *יש בעל הבירה* *there is a Master of the palace*, and went from place to place proclaiming Hashem's name. ויבן מזבח לה' ויקרא *He built an altar to Hashem and called in the name of Hashem* (Lech Lecha 12:8).

Nor was this their first encounter. The Gemara identifies Amraphel with Nimrod. חד אמר נמרוד שמו ולמה נקרא שמו אמרפל שאמר והפיל לאברהם *אבינו בתוך כבשן האש וחד אמר אמרפל שמו ולמה נקרא שמו נמרוד שהמריד את כל* *One opinion says his name was Nimrod and he was called Amraphel because he ordered Avraham cast into the fiery furnace; the other says his name was Amraphel and he was called Nimrod because he caused the entire world to rebel against Hashem through his rule* (Eruvin 53a).

That was their first battle. Nimrod sought to destroy Avraham and everything he represented. Avraham entered the furnace for *kiddush Hashem*. Chazal relate that Gavriel offered to save him, but *אני יחיד בעולמי והוא יחיד בעולמו נאה ליחיד* *I am One in My world and he is one in his world; it is fitting for the One to save the one* (Pesachim 118a).

Nimrod could cast Avraham into the furnace, but he could not burn Avraham's Torah, his *emunah*, or the ideals for which he stood. The miracle itself demonstrated Avraham's teaching: fire has no independent power. *כי הוא אמר ויהי* *For He spoke and it came into being* (Tehillim 33:9). The Master of the palace rules the fire as He rules everything else.

That was Avraham's first victory over Nimrod. Years later came the second.

The Second Victory

Avraham went out against Amraphel-Nimrod and his allies and defeated them. *ויחלק עליהם לילה* *He divided himself against them at night* (Lech Lecha 14:15). Chazal see even the night joining Avraham's battle. He struck the kings, pursued them and recovered the captives and their property.

The nations saw a brilliant commander. יוצא מלך סדם לקראתו אחרי שובו. *The king of Sodom went out to meet him after his return from defeating Kedarlaomer and the kings who were with him, to the Valley of Shaveh, which is the King's Valley* (Lech Lecha 14:17).

Bereishis Rabbah (42:5) explains that the nations gathered there and acclaimed Avraham: *You are our king, you are our prince, you are a godlike figure over us.* They saw the victory and attributed it to Avraham.

Avraham corrected them: אל יחסר העולם מלכו ואל יחסר העולם אלוֹקוֹ - *Let the world not be without its King and let the world not be without its G-d.* The strength was not his. The victory belonged to Hashem. Then the king of Sodom made his offer: תן לי הנפש והרכש קח לך.

Avraham could take everything with the king's consent. Instead he swore: אם מחוט ועד שרוך נעל ואם אקח מכל אשר לך. Not a thread. Not a shoelace. Nothing.

The normal victor takes. The conqueror enlarges his wealth.

Avraham had entered battle without becoming a man of battle. He had defeated the taker without becoming a taker himself.

What Is an Ayin Tovah?

The Rambam's commentary to Pirkei Avos opens the meaning of the entire episode. The Mishnah says עין טובה ורוח נמוכה ונפש שפלה - *A good eye, a humble spirit and a modest soul are the characteristics of the talmidim of Avraham Avinu* (Avos 5:19). What is an *ayin tova*?

The Rambam explains עין טובה כבר בארנו פעמים רבות שענין עין טובה היא - *We have explained many times that a good eye means contentment.* And where do we find Avraham praised for it? In his answer to the king of Sodom. He could leave behind great wealth and refuse to benefit from it - *even in the smallest amount.* This, says the Rambam, is תכלית ההסתפקות - *the ultimate expression of contentment.*

Midrash Shmuel explains similarly: עין טובה הכוונה כי תשבע עינו במה - *A good eye means that a person's eye is satisfied with what Hashem has granted him; whether little or much, he rejoices in his portion.* Avraham did not hunger for wealth merely because it was available to him. His eye was satisfied with what Hashem had given him.

This touches something basic in human nature. Man enters the world as a receiver. His existence, his breath and every moment of his life come from Hashem. Precisely because receiving is built so deeply into human existence, the desire to receive can become limitless. אין אדם יוצא מן העולם וחצי תאוותו בידו יש לו מנה רוצה מאתים יש לו מאתים רוצה - *A person does not leave this world with even half his desire fulfilled. If he has one hundred, he wants two hundred; if he has two hundred, he wants four hundred* (Koheles Rabbah 1:13).

The Gra compares the world to salt water: העולם דומה לשוטה מים מלוחים - *The world is like one who drinks salt water; he imagines that he is satisfying his thirst, but he becomes even thirstier.* The more a person trains himself to take, the more he needs to take. Unchecked, that hunger becomes desire for another person's money, theft and conflict. Amraphel is that instinct enlarged onto the stage of history.

But the same hunger can be directed upward.

The Desire for Mitzvos

The ways of Hashem are straight; the righteous walk in them and sinners stumble in them

(Hoshea 14:10). A human drive can become destructive, or it can become a force for *avodas Hashem*.

Chazal apply *One who loves money will not be satisfied with money* (Koheles 5:9) to Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe knew that the three *arei miklat* he designated east of the Yarden could not function until three others were designated in Eretz Canaan.

Nevertheless, *A mitzvah that has come into my hand, I will perform* (Makkos 10a).

The Rambam, in his commentary to Avos 4:2, notes that Moshe would not allow even what he calls a *חצי מצוה* - *half a mitzvah* to escape his hand. The appetite to acquire was transformed into an appetite for Torah and mitzvos.

Avraham's greatness was likewise not that he had ceased to be human. It was that he ruled the human desire to take. When the king of Sodom placed an enormous fortune before him, Avraham knew that this was precisely the moment when the *yetzer* needed to be bound: הרימתי ידי אל ה'.

And there was an even deeper reason. Taking the spoils would have contradicted the entire meaning of his war. Amraphel's world was built upon conquest and the hunger to possess what belongs to another. Avraham had gone to war to defeat that world. He could not emerge from the victory by adopting its values. His answer therefore had to be absolute: אם מחוט ועד שרוך נעל.

Avraham and Bilam

This is why the Mishnah calls the person with an *ayin tova* a talmid of Avraham Avinu. A talmid learns his rebbe's way and follows it. Avraham taught man to be satisfied with what Hashem has given him and not to hunger for what belongs to another.

Avraham himself went much further. He was the great man of *chesed*. But the entranceway to *chesed* is *histapkus*. Before a person can truly become a giver, he must learn not to be a taker. This was the first lesson Avraham could teach the people of Sodom.

And this lesson is not only for Klal Yisrael. The Mishnah speaks of the talmidim of Avraham, *אב המון גוים* - *the father of a multitude of nations* (Lech Lecha 17:5). *Ayin tova* is a necessary *middah* for human society itself.

The opposite is Bilam Harasha. *Even if Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold* (Balak 22:18). Rashi comments *למדנו שנפשו רחבה ומחמד ממון אחרים* - *We learn that his appetite was broad and that he desired the money of others.* Bilam was ruled by the hunger to acquire. Avraham ruled that hunger.

What the Young Men Ate

This also explains the Gemara in Chullin 89a cited earlier. קשה גזל הנאכל שאפילו צדיקים גמורים אינן יכולין להחזירו שנאמר בלעדי רק אשר אכלו - *Consumed stolen property is especially severe, for even completely righteous men cannot return it, as it says: except only what the young men have eaten.*

At first this seems impossible. Are Chazal describing Avraham Avinu as retaining stolen property? The Maharsha explains that they are not. The recovered property could legally have belonged to Avraham, and the king of Sodom expressly told him to take it. Avraham nevertheless treated benefiting from it as though it were *gezel*, because his standard went beyond strict law.

The sefer takes the point one step further. Even the food consumed by Avraham's men was part of the lesson. During war the Torah permits things that would ordinarily be forbidden, to the point that

Chazal speak of כחלי דחזירי - *pork* becoming permitted under the special conditions of warfare (Chullin 17a). Yet Avraham's attitude was that, had what the young men ate still been recoverable, he would have returned that as well.

That is the depth of *histapkus*. Avraham was not merely a wealthy man who declined a gift. He had confronted the first great conqueror, the man who introduced the sword and the hunger to take into the world, and defeated him twice. He defeated Nimrod first by walking into the furnace rather than surrender his *emunah*. He defeated him a second time on the battlefield. But the final victory came after the battle, when all the wealth of Sodom lay before him and he refused to become, even in the smallest measure, what he had fought against. *אם מחוט ועד שרוך נעל - Not a thread and not a shoelace*. That is the *ayin tovah* of Avraham.

Say you are my sister – אמרי נא אחתי את

Collected by **Chaim Ozer Shulman**

Why Avraham Asked Sarah to Say She Was His Sister

A. Two Questions

As Avraham and Sarah approached Egypt, Avraham said to Sarah: והיה כי יראו אתך המצרים ואמרו זאת והרגו אתי ואתך יחיו אמרי נא אחתי – את למען ייטב לי בעבורך וחיתה נפשי בגללך – When the Egyptians see you, they will say, She is his wife, and they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, so that it will go well with me because of you, and my life will be spared because of you (Lech Lecha 12:12-13).

Two questions immediately arise. First, if the Egyptians wanted Sarah and were prepared to take her against her will, why would they have to kill Avraham? What would be gained by saying that he was her brother? Second, although Avraham says – וחיתה נפשי בגללך – my life will be spared because of you, he first says לי בעבורך – so that it will go well with me because of you. What was this טובה, and why is it mentioned before saving his life?

B. The Beis HaLevi: Why Saying "My Sister" Would Protect Avraham

The Beis HaLevi answers the first question. Avraham did not assume that an ordinary Egyptian could simply take Sarah against her will. As long as Sarah was Avraham's wife, a man who desired her would know that she would never agree to marry him while her husband was alive. Avraham was therefore the obstacle. If he were killed, Sarah would become a widow and the man could hope that she might then agree to marry him.

This was the purpose of את אחתי – אמרי נא אחתי – Please say that you are my sister. If Sarah appeared unmarried, killing her supposed brother would accomplish nothing. הגם שהיא פנויה הרי בידה שלא להתרצות להנשא – although she was unmarried, it remained within her power to refuse whoever sought to marry her. The protection therefore came from Sarah herself. Her supposed brother did not stand in the way of the marriage, because whether she married remained her decision.

The Beis HaLevi also explains why the plan failed. Avraham assumed that Sarah would be dealing with an ordinary man who needed her consent. וזה לא עלה בדעתו שהמלך אשר בידו ליקח אותה שלא – מדעתה ירצה בה – It did not occur to him that the king, who had the power to take her without her consent, would desire her. Pharaoh needed no consent. Therefore, ותוקה האשה בית פרעה – the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house (12:15).

But the second question remains. What did Avraham mean by למען ייטב לי בעבורך?

C. What Was the טובה?

The Radak gives the simplest answer. וחיתה – the Radak gives the simplest answer. למען ייטב לי בעבורך פירושו וחיתה. "So that it will go well with me because of you" means that his life would be spared. והטובה שלא יהרגו אותו – the טובה was simply that they would not kill him. Radak therefore adds, חלילה לו – Far be it from him to gain honor through her disgrace, for her disgrace would be his disgrace. The Ramban understands the טובה somewhat more broadly. Avraham had gone to Egypt because of the famine and intended to remain only until it passed. He wanted that כל ימי היותנו גרים בארץ הזאת עד עבור – throughout the period that they were sojourners there until the famine passed, they would be able to survive the famine there and ultimately return to Eretz Canaan. According to both Radak and Ramban, does not refer to material gain.

But Rashi, based on the Midrash Rabbah, gives the familiar explanation: יתנו לי מתנות – they will give me gifts. This reading appears to be supported by what actually occurs: ולאברם היטיב בעבורה – And he treated Avram well because of her, and he had sheep, cattle, donkeys, servants, maidservants, female donkeys and camels (12:16). Avraham says לי בעבורך, and shortly afterward the Torah says ולאברם היטיב בעבורה.

This sharpens the problem. Why would Avraham be thinking about gifts when his life and Sarah's safety were in danger? And if the gifts were secondary, why does למען ייטב לי come before וחיתה נפשי?

D. Sforno: The Gifts Were Part of the Plan

The Sforno answers both questions together. If Sarah were known as Avraham's wife, a man who desired her would know that Avraham would never agree to surrender her. והרגו אתי – they will kill me, because – שלא יקוו שאסכים לתתך להם – they would have no hope that I would agree to give you to them.

But if Sarah said that Avraham was her brother, the situation changed. יקוה כל אחד מהם שאשיאך לו ולא יחשוב שום אחד מהם להרגנו – each man would hope that I would marry you to him, and no one would think of killing us. Instead of killing Avraham, the prospective suitor would try to persuade him. – ייטיב לי במהרה ובמתן – he would treat me well with a dowry and gifts.

The gifts were therefore not the purpose of the plan. They were evidence that the plan was working. A suitor would negotiate, offer gifts and seek Avraham's favor. That would take time. ובין כך חשב – in the meantime, Avraham planned to leave Egypt. Calling Sarah his sister converted Avraham from an obstacle who had to be removed into the person whose agreement the suitor hoped to obtain.

One difficulty nevertheless remains. If the טובה was merely the means of preserving Avraham's life, why does the pasuk mention וחיתה נפשי before למען ייטב לי?

The Haamek Davar responds by distinguishing the two phrases. למען ייטב לי means that Avraham would be in a favorable position, which itself would be for Sarah's benefit, because he would then be able to act to save her. וחיתה נפשי is more than merely טוב, and describes the further chain of events that would ultimately bring Avraham great wealth.

E. The Derishah: Why Comes First ייטב לי

The Derishah preserves Rashi's reading that the **טובה** involved favorable treatment, but explains why it comes before **נפשי**. He asks: **וזהו העיקר והחיה** – Why did Avraham place the secondary matter, that it would go well with him because of her, before the primary matter, that his life would be spared?

His answer is that Avraham expected many important Egyptians to desire Sarah. **שכל השרים והמושלים יחניפו לי בעבורך בסברם שאתן אותך להם** – all the officers and rulers would seek my favor because of you, thinking that I would give you to one of them as a wife. Each would seek Avraham's goodwill because each hoped to be chosen. That competition would itself protect Avraham. **ולא יהיה שום אחד רשאי** – none would dare harm me, because he would fear the other officer who also desired her and would protect my life from the others. **למען ייטב** – therefore comes first because it is the cause of **נפשי**. Precisely because the various noblemen would seek Avraham's favor, each would have an interest in keeping him alive.

F. Where the Plan Failed

Sforno himself points to the moment Avraham's plan broke down. At first, the Egyptians reacted **אברהם חשב אברהם** - as Avraham had expected. A man who wanted Sarah would approach Avraham and try to persuade him. But when Pharaoh's officers saw Sarah, **והם בטלו** - they upset the plan involving the general populace. Instead of first approaching Avraham and trying to win his agreement, they brought Sarah directly to Pharaoh. This was also the point at which the other explanations of Avraham's plan failed. According to the Beis HaLevi, an ordinary suitor needed Sarah's consent; Pharaoh did not. According to Sforno, an ordinary suitor needed Avraham's agreement; Pharaoh did not. According to the Derishah, competing noblemen would restrain one another, but once they all deferred to Pharaoh, there was no longer any competition.

Avraham's plan could therefore work so long as he was dealing with ordinary men. The Beis HaLevi relied on Sarah's ability to refuse, Sforno on the suitor's need to persuade Avraham, and the Derishah on the competition among the noblemen. Pharaoh was different. He needed neither Sarah's consent nor Avraham's agreement, and there was no rival powerful enough to restrain him.

At that point, the plan could go no further. The next pasuk therefore tells us: **וינגע ה' את פרעה בגזרים גדלים ואת ביתו על דבר שרי אשת אברם** - Hashem afflicted Pharaoh and his household with great plagues because of Sarai, the wife of Avram (12:17).

When Avraham's own plan had reached its limit, Hashem Himself intervened and saved them.

G. Summary of the Main Approaches

View	How Does the Plan Protect Avraham?	טיבה Meaning of the	Why Does It Fail with Pharaoh?
Beis HaLevi / Radak	If Sarah appears unmarried, killing her brother accomplishes nothing because she can still refuse the suitor.	According to Radak, the טובה is survival itself.	Pharaoh can take Sarah without her consent.
Sforno	A suitor tries to persuade Sarah's supposed brother rather than kill him.	Gifts are part of negotiations that buy time for Avraham and Sarah to escape	Pharaoh needs neither Avraham's agreement nor negotiations.

View	How Does the Plan Protect Avraham?	טיבה Meaning of the	Why Does It Fail with Pharaoh?
Derishah	Several suitors compete for Avraham's favor and therefore protect him from one another.	Their favorable treatment itself produces נפשי .	The noblemen defer to Pharaoh, so the competition disappears.

Adapted and summarized from the Halachipedia entry Brit Milah

Bris Milah

The Importance of the Mitzvah

The mitzvah of milah is equivalent to all the other mitzvot of the Torah combined, and without it the world would not exist. In its merit Hashem split the sea for the Jewish people, and in its merit Aharon Hakohen entered the Kodesh Hakodashim each year.

The Night Before (Brit Yitzchak)

In Sephardic communities, it is customary on the night before a brit to gather ten men, including Torah scholars, in the home to read special passages from the Zohar to protect the baby. Reading the Zohar has value even if one does not understand it. Ideally this is done in the house where the baby is, but another location is acceptable if necessary. During the gathering, the mother should come to a side room and recite Birkat Hagomel.

Bread is not required at this meal. If bread is served, the meal still is not a seudat mitzvah and does not permit eating meat during the Nine Days.

If the brit is postponed past the eighth day, the learning takes place on the night before the actual brit. If the brit is on Shabbat morning, the learning is done Thursday night, and if possible, ten men should also gather to learn on Friday night.

The Father's Obligation

A father must circumcise his son himself or appoint a G-d-fearing mohel to do it on his behalf. The father should stand near the mohel to show that the mohel is acting as his agent.

When the Brit Takes Place

The brit is performed on the eighth day after birth and may not be done earlier. Poskim disagree about whether a milah done before the eighth day requires hatafat dam brit on the eighth day.

The brit may be done any time during the day after sunrise (netz hachama). Because of *zerizin makdimin lemitzvot*, one should try to perform it early in the morning. If the brit was performed after dawn (alot hashachar) but before sunrise, the obligation is fulfilled. If an early brit would cause family conflict, it may be delayed, but it should still be held as early as possible.

If there is any health concern, the brit is postponed until the baby is healthy. For some illnesses the brit is done as soon as the baby recovers. For others, seven full days must pass after recovery. A rabbi must be consulted.

A baby born during bein hashemashot (twilight) has his brit on the ninth day [the eighth day from after bein hashmashos], since it is unclear whether he was born by day or by night. Determining bein hashemashot in practice is complicated, so a rabbi should be consulted.

The Brachot

Before the milah, the father recites, standing: **ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם אשר קידשנו במצותיו וציונו להכניסו בבריתו של אברהם אבינו**

The mohel recites, standing: ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם אשר קידשנו במצותיו וציונו על המילה. The text is the same whether the mohel or the father is performing the milah.

Sephardim recite Shehecheyanu at a brit. Ashkenazim traditionally do not, except when the baby is a firstborn who requires a pidyon haben. Today the Ashkenazic practice outside Israel is not to say it at all.

After the milah, Borei Pri Hagafen is recited over wine, followed by the bracha אשר קידש ידיד מבטן. The person reciting the brachot should taste the wine before the paragraph אלוהינו ואילוהי אבותינו קיים את הילד הזה, in which the baby is named and a prayer is said for the baby and the mother. Tasting the wine is enough. He does not need to drink a cheekful.

At the words וואמר לך בדמך היי, the mohel dips his finger in the wine and places a drop on the baby's lips.

During אשר קידש ידיד מבטן, the Ashkenazic practice is for the sandak to stand holding the baby. Sephardim have the sandak remain seated. On Shabbat, if the person reciting the brachot has not yet made Kiddush, he should drink a cheekful (melo lugmav) plus an additional revi'it. Sephardim require only a revi'it or a cheekful in total.

The father and mohel do not need to close their eyes or cover the baby when reciting the brachot. However, the baby must be clean of any soiling before a bracha is said.

The Mohel and the Sandak

Sephardim allow a woman to serve as mohel. Ashkenazim hold that a woman should not, unless no man is available.

A G-d-fearing sandak should be chosen. The father places the baby on the sandak's lap. Ashkenazim do not appoint the same person as sandak for more than one of their sons.

The Ceremony

When the baby is brought in, those present say *Baruch Haba* aloud. The father says אשרי תבחר ותקרב ישכון הצריך and those present respond נשבעה בטוב ביתך קדוש היכלך. Everyone stands throughout except the sandak.

After the father's bracha, those present answer Amen and say כשם כשם שהכנסתו לברית כן תכניסוהו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים. Sephardim address the father directly: כשם ששכנסתו לברית כן תכניסוהו לתורה ולחופה למצוות. If the father is not present, they say כשם שכנסתו לברית כן תכניסוהו. If the father is not present, they say כשם שכנסתו לברית כן תכניסוהו.

The mohel places the baby on the Kisei shel Eliyahu and says זה הכסא של אליהו הנביא מלאך הברית. Some light candles in honor of the brit. The custom is to bury the orlah in earth. Some say נחש עפר לחמו while doing so.

Sephardim recite the Thirteen Middot of Rachamim immediately after the father's bracha. The Jerusalem Sephardic custom is to recite ה' שיר המעלות אשרי כל ירא ה' and Kaddish at the end.

Tallit and Tefillin

Ashkenazim keep their tefillin on during the brit, because both milah and tefillin are an *ot*, a sign between Israel and Hashem. Sephardim generally remove them, though those who keep them on have a basis to rely on.

On Rosh Chodesh, if the congregation has already removed their tefillin, the Ashkenazic custom is for the father, mohel and sandak to put them back on. Sephardim do not. The sandak and the father wear a tallit.

A Minyan

Ideally the brit should take place before a minyan, both to publicize the mitzvah of bringing the child into the covenant of Avraham Avinu and to thank Hashem publicly for the birth. Poskim disagree about whether a brit may be delayed in order to have a minyan. It should not be delayed to get a minyan for the seudah.

A person does not need to interrupt his Torah learning to attend a brit or its seudah, unless his presence is needed to complete the minyan.

The Seudah

It is proper to hold a meal on the day of the brit, and it is a seudat mitzvah. It should include bread. The custom is not to formally invite guests, since declining an invitation to a brit seudah is problematic. Ideally the meal should include meat, but chicken or fish fulfills the custom. Those who serve a dairy meal should at least serve wine. The custom is to have a minyan at the seudah, but the seudah remains valid without one.

On Sukkot, the seudah must be held in the sukkah. If not everyone fits, a minyan should eat in the sukkah. If even a minyan cannot fit, some allow eating outside with a minyan, while others hold it is better to eat in the sukkah without a minyan.

A Delayed Milah

A delayed milah does not override Shabbat or Yom Tov. Ashkenazim permit a delayed milah on Thursday or Friday, even though healing complications might then require Shabbat to be violated for pikuach nefesh. Sephardim do not perform a delayed milah on Thursday or Friday. All agree that a baby born during bein hashemashot on Wednesday may have his brit on the following Thursday, since that day was its proper time and the milah is not considered "delayed."

Milah on Shabbat and Yom Tov

Sephardim do not divide the milah and the periah between two mohalim on Shabbat. There is a dispute about whether the same applies on Yom Tov. A father may perform the brit on Shabbat himself even if someone else is available.

If holding the brit on Shabbat will cause relatives to violate Shabbat to attend, many poskim hold it should be postponed to Sunday. Others hold it should still be done on Shabbat. A mohel concerned about witnessing Shabbat violations at a brit should still go and perform the milah.

A baby born during twilight on Friday evening, or delivered by C-section, does not have his brit on Shabbat or Yom Tov. A delayed milah does not override Yom Tov Sheni. Where a C-section baby's eighth day falls on Yom Tov Sheni, or where it is uncertain whether the eighth day is the first or second day of Yom Tov, poskim disagree.

The Procedure

The milah has two required stages. Milah is the cutting of the orlah covering the atarah. Periah is peeling back the thin membrane beneath it until the atarah is uncovered.

The final stage is metzitzah. There is a significant debate about whether it is an integral part of the mitzvah or a medical practice from the time of the Gemara, and whether it may be done with an instrument instead of by mouth. Because of the health risk, many poskim hold it should not be done by mouth. Others continue the practice of metzitzah b'peh where there is no concern of danger.

A mohel may wear gloves.

For the full article with sources and footnotes, see *Halachipedia*, "Brit Milah," https://halachipedia.com/index.php?title=Brit_Milah

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Spending a Lifetime Protecting My Coping Mechanisms, How Do I Hear the Call?

by Rabbi YY Jacobson

G-d Speaks to Every Soul; One Man Heard It -- and the Rest is History

The Question of the Ramban

One of the most important commentaries on the Torah was written by Nachmanides, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (1194–1270), known as the Ramban. He is considered one of the greatest medieval personalities in the Jewish world—an extraordinary scholar, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator. He was raised and lived in Girona, Spain for most of his life. Toward the end of his life, he was forced to leave Spain (after winning a debate in 1263 against Pablo Christiane, a Jew who converted to Christianity) and relocated to Jerusalem. He is also considered to be an important figure in the re-establishment of the Jewish community in Jerusalem following its destruction by the Crusaders in 1099.

The Ramban is from the few commentators who focus on the structure of the Torah. Most commentators focus on the meaning of a verse, a story, or a law; but the Ramban, in addition, focuses on the structure of the Torah.

Nachmanides raises a fascinating question about the opening of this week's portion, Lech Lecha. What happened to the bio?

The Tanach constantly introduces us to new characters assuming different roles, and fulfilling different tasks. Before we begin to hear their story, we are told a few words about their background to give us context, allowing us to understand why they were chosen for the role. Take Noah. The Torah does not begin his story by telling us that G-d told him to build an ark and rescue himself and his family from the Flood. First, the Torah gives us background information. "The earth was corrupt. And Noah founds grace in the eyes of G-d. This is the story of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, wholesome was he in his generation. Noah walked with G-d." Only then does the Torah go on to tell us that G-d spoke to Noah about the flood and instructed him to build an ark. So now we understand why him.

Take Moses. The Torah does not begin his story by telling us that G-d showed up one day in his life and summoned him to redeem the people. First, we learn of his background. He grew up in Pharaoh's palace; then we learn of how he saved a Jew from an Egyptian beating him to death, how he tried to stop two Hebrews from quarreling, and how he saved young women from shepherds harassing them at the Midian well. When Moses is chosen, we already know that here is a man of royal upbringing (who knows the workings of the palace) and of moral courage. We understand why him.

The same is true about Samson, Samuel, David, and Jeremiah. Their story does not emerge from a vacuum.

There is one exception in the entire Tanach, and arguably it is its most important figure: Abraham.

"G-d said to Abram, 'Go to yourself, from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing . . . all the families of the earth will be blessed through you.'"

Why Abraham?

Why was he chosen? What did he do to earn this special call from G-d? The Torah says nothing about Abraham prior to this encounter.

All we are told at the end of Noah is that a man named Terach had three sons, Nachor, Abraham, and Haran; Haran died while his father was alive. Nachor married a woman named Milka; and Abraham married a woman named Sarei, who was barren. That's it. As far as we are concerned, Abraham is a regular guy living in Charan, in present-day Iraq.

And then, suddenly, out of the blue, the Torah tells us how G-d spoke to Abraham, told him to leave his land, and relocate to a new land, Canaan, and promises him that he will change the world! G-d says to him that he will father a great nation and that all nations will become blessed by him; G-d promises him the Land of Canaan as an eternal inheritance and turns him into the father of a new civilization, charged with the mission to change the landscape of the planet. The entire rest of the Torah hinges on this opening commandment to Abraham.

Why him?

To be sure, the Talmud and the Midrashim offer numerous stories about Abraham's youth, his search for truth, his endless inquisitiveness and yearning to discover the origin of existence; his battle with his countrymen and the king; his sacrifices for the truth and for the convictions he espoused. Yet, from the biblical text, it seems like a random selection! Not even a single narrative is told about Abraham's unique virtues to underscore his greatness. There is not even a single verse relating his greatness.

This is the keen question raised by the Ramban.

One Man Heard It

Many answers have been suggested.[1] Today, I will share an insight by the Sefas Emes, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter, the third Gerer Rebbe, based on a teaching of the Zohar. It is short, simple, and profound.[2] The words "Lech Lecha" are always said by G-d to everyone. It was just Abraham who heard the call.

The Torah does not discuss Abraham's background to explain why G-d spoke to him because G-d did not speak (only) to him; G-d spoke it, and speaks it, to every human person. "Go to yourself, from your land, your birthplace, and your father's home, to the land that I will show you" is the Divine call to every soul.

Communication is about two people bonding. If I speak, but you do not listen, or you do not hear, I'm not talking to you. "G-d spoke to Abraham," not because G-d spoke to Abraham, but because Abram listened. He had the emotional, psychological, and spiritual "antenna" that allowed him to internalize the Divine call.

My wife can speak to me, but it does not mean I am capable of hearing what she says. There are truths I heard 20 years ago, but I lacked the openness to hear them at the time.

"This person really speaks to me" is an expression we use. They may be speaking to others as well, but somehow, with his teacher, I know how to listen; I get it. "The bird spoke to me" is an uncommon expression—not because birds do not speak to me; the birds nesting in the trees behind my home talk to me all the time, as do the gazelles, the groundhogs, the turtles, the trees, and even the rocks. They speak, they exude energy, life, messages, songs, chemicals, and odors, but I do not hear what they have to say. I lack the tools to appreciate their music, so they are not speaking to me.

G-d speaks to each of us. And His message is "Lech Lecha." Move

on. Get out of your rut. Step out of your biases, blind spots, fears, insecurities, traumas, and all the voices that limit you, and turn you into a limited and fearful human being. Open yourself up to Divine expansiveness; expand your horizons and become larger than your smaller self. Allow yourself to go on a journey—toward the destination G-d creates for you, even if it means letting go of everything familiar to you.

Go away from your superficial self and open yourself up to the Divine infinite light at the core of your being. Create a paradigm shift from self-centeredness to infinite-centeredness. G-d calls to each of us and says: Step away from your narrow perspective and begin to see things from My perspective, from the vantage point of ultimate truth and infinite oneness. Go out of your narrow, selfish orbit and change the world! And in that, you will arrive at your truest self, at your deepest core.

It is a call to every human heart, but can I even hear it? If I spent my life creating and then managing my coping mechanisms, and I managed to "polish" them to perfection, so they seem sophisticated and logical, how do I even notice the inner still voice resonating in my inner untainted core?

It was Abraham who heard the call—and acted on it. Abraham became the person to whom G-d spoke these fateful words because he heard them!

That's how and why he became the first Jew—and changed history. When we can each open ourselves to that vulnerable call, we become partners with Abraham and Sarah: We begin to change the inner and outer landscape of our lives and radiate it to all those around us.

It begins with awareness, with "hearing" the call. Can you notice the triggers? Hold space for the anxiety? Can you be curious about the dissonance, and observe the mental chaos with compassion? Can you then tune in to the inner voice behind them all, whispering to the beautiful, wholesome, glorious, and Divine core-self: "Lech Lecha."

The Story of Reb Avraham Vetzler

Do you know who heard the call of Lech Lecha? Another man named Avraham—Avraham Vetzler.

A number of years ago, Rabbi Chaim Heber, the Chabad ambassador to Beer Sheva, Israel, received a call.

"Hi, my name is Avraham Vetzler. I am 90. Before G-d takes my soul, I want to learn Torah."

A strange telephone call, to say the least.

"Sure," says the Chabad rabbi. "I will come to your home, and we will study Torah."

"No. You can't eat anything in my home. It is completely non-kosher. I will come to you."

They began to study Torah together. After a few months, Avraham celebrated his bar mitzvah at the age of 90. Sometime later, he began to observe the Shabbos. And then, one day, he called the rabbi and said: "I stopped buying non-kosher meat, come make my kitchen kosher!"

In 2017, Avraham had a Sefer Torah (Torah Scroll) written in the memory of his parents—and the whole community danced as he led the new Torah into the synagogue.

Rabbi Heber turned to him and said: Avraham! You need to explain the mystery to me. What happened suddenly at the age of 90?

He said: I am a Hungarian Jew. I was born in 1927. In 1944, we were deported by the Germans. My parents were murdered. They were Torah observant Jews, holy, pious people. I got so angry at G-d and

at Judaism. When I came out of the death camps, I decided to cast away all of Judaism and Jewish life.

Some time ago, a neighbor invited me for a Friday night dinner. I came to their home, and I saw the hostess, Chana Rechima, light Shabbos candles. I have not seen a woman light Shabbos candles in more than 80 years.

Suddenly, I had a flashback. I am a child, at my home in Hungary, it is Friday evening, and my mother lights the candles, and prays to G-d silently, with tears streaming down her face. It all came back to me at that moment.

The next day I phoned you and asked to start learning Torah.

Imagine: 80 years ago, a Jewish woman lit candles, and asked G-d that her son grow up to be a good and proud Jew. Then she is taken by the Nazis and murdered, her son survives but throws it all away.

The flame of Yiddishkeit, it seems, has been extinguished, at least for this family.

But 80 years later, that boy Avraham, hears the call "Lech Lecha!"

His grandfather, the first Abraham, bequeathed that gift to each of us. If we listen, we too can hear that call.

Reb Akiva began learning the Torah at 40; Avraham Vetzler began learning at 90.

On October 27, 2020, 9 Cheshvan, 5781, Avraham Vetzler from Hungary returned his soul to its maker in Israel. He was 94.

After 75 years, he met his parents again. He died knowing how much he made his mother and father proud. His mother's prayers at the glowing candles were not in vain.

At 90, Avraham heard the call of Lech Lecha.

I hope I, and all of us, can hear my Lech Lecha before I turn 90.

[1] See Ramban *ibid*. Likkutei Suchos vol. 25 Lech. In a sermon some years ago we explored the answer by the Maharal, Netzach Yisroel ch. 11

[2] שפת אמת לך לך: רמב"ן הקשה שנאמר לך לך בלי שנוכח מקודם חיבתו. ובזה"ק נראה כי זה עצמו השבח ששמע זה המאמר לך לך שנאמר מהשי"ת לכל האנשים תמיד כמ"ש וי לאינון דשינתא בחוריהון [=אבוי לאלה שישנים בחוריהם]. ואברהם אבינו עליו השלום שמע וקיבל. וממילא נקרא רק הדיבור אליו כי הלא לא נמצא מיוחד לשמוע רק הוא, אבל בודאי זה השבח בעצמו שהי' מוכן לקבל המאמר