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INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

The Unexpected Fulfillment of God's Pledge

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

With the reading of *Parashat Lekh Lekha*, the Torah's focus suddenly and unexpectedly converges onto Avram and Sarai, the progenitors of the people of Israel. The preceding narratives of *Parashat Bereishit*, read scarcely a fortnight ago, boldly considered the place of humanity in the cosmic scheme of creation; those of *Parashat* *Noach*, more anthropocentric in scope, confined the discussion to the moral failures of the societies that early man had constructed. But *Parashat Lekh Lekha* begins neither with a discussion of the universe at large nor with an account of corrupt civilization gone astray but rather with the personal story of a husband and his wife and the God that they had come to revere.

God said to Avram: Go forth from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you and I will make your name great, and you shall be a source of blessing. I will bless those that bless you and curse the one that curses you, and all of the peoples of the world will be blessed on your account…(Bereishit 12:1-3).

THE TRIALS OF CANAAN

Many are the hurdles to be overcome between the Divine pronouncement and its fulfillment, between God's laden promise and man's realization. Leaving behind their families and their cultural heritage, their native land and their origins, Avram and Sarai journey forth, taking with them from among their extended kin only their orphaned nephew Lot. But having arrived in Canaan and commenced to nomadically wander its rocky and expansive hills, they are soon forced to leave, by one of the periodic famines that visit the more arid southwestern portions of the great arc that has been called by modern scholars the "Fertile Crescent." Going down to Egypt, they encounter the mercurial Pharaoh who seizes beautiful but barren Sarai; if not for the grievous Divine intervention that thwarts his covetous plans, then Avram and Sarai would have perished.

Emerging from Egypt and returning to Canaan, conflict soon breaks out between the shepherds of Avram and those of Lot. Amicably and at Avram's generous invitation, the two part ways, with Avram remaining in the sparsely settled hill country while Lot descends to the verdant but sinful valley of Sodom. There he is incrementally drawn towards and eventually pulled under by the beguiling but violent vortex that is Sodomite society. It is only then, with great pain and disappointment, that Avram and Sarai come to understand that the recurring Divine pledge of offspring and national future, repeatedly vouchsafed to them since the eve of their abrupt departure from Charan, will not be realized through the agency of their adopted son Lot.

Like a fleeting dream, ten years quickly pass after the arrival of Avram and Sarai in their new land of Canaan, but the aging couple, though blessed with great flocks and material wealth, remains bereft of children. Sarai, however, will neither be dismayed nor dissuaded. Hoping to secure her future and the fulfillment of God's word, she agonizingly offers her own handmaiden Hagar to her husband Avram, "so that I might be built up through her" (*Bereishit* 16:2). How difficult it must have been for her to share her life partner's warm embrace with a younger woman, but Sarai is prepared to bear the grief in order to triumph in the end. Once again, however, she is disappointed, for Hagar and her young son Yishma'el show no inclination to continue the spiritual legacy that she and Avram hold so dear. And though Yishma'el is guaranteed by God a bright future of his own, his descendants will not be designated by the Deity for the special role that He had declared would belong to the offspring of Avram and Sarai.

NEARING THE END OF THE PARASHA

So it is that after a further thirteen years elapse and the section of *Lekh Lekha* nears its end, Avram and Sarai still have no child of their own. He is now ninety-nine years old while she, though ten years younger than him, is long past being fertile. Can we not imagine them, with the bulk of their productive lives well behind them and infirmity and death soon beckoning, now engaging wistfully in the occasional reminisce? In their mind's eye, they think back to the momentous events of a quarter century earlier, when they had so optimistically left Charan for fertile Canaan, imagining all the way that adopted Lot would be their future. But that possibility was later negated by Lot's desertion, and so they eventually came to pin their hopes on Yishma'el, the biological son of Avram. How else could they reconcile the recurring Divine promises of fashioning a nation, the precise mechanism of which had never been adequately spelled out by God, with the concrete reality of Sarai's barrenness? But Yishma'el had proven himself unworthy and hostile Hagar unwilling to accept the yoke of God's commands. Now what were they to do, old and barren, tired and despondent?!

Finally, as the *parasha* winds down and the reader's hopes begin to ebb, God appears to Avram. In short order, He presents Avram with a name change to signify a change in his destiny, as well as with the command of the covenantal sign of circumcision. Most shockingly, God indicates – for the first time in the *parasha* - that it will be THROUGH SARAI – henceforth to be known as Sarah – that the new nation will be founded:

When Avram was ninety-nine years old, God appeared to him and said to him: "I am Almighty God, walk before Me and be wholehearted. I will seal My covenant between Me and between you, and I will multiply you exceedingly…your name shall no longer be Avram, but rather Avraham will be your name, for I have designated you as the father of many nations…This is My covenant that you shall observe between Me and you and your descendants after you, to circumcise every male. You shall cut off the flesh of the foreskin as a sign of the covenant between Me and you"…The Lord further said to Avraham: "Sarai your wife shall no longer be called by you Sarai, for Sarah is her name. I shall bless her and I shall give you a son by her, and I shall bless her and she shall become nations, for kings of peoples shall descend from her"…(*Bereishit* 17:1-16).

Though Avraham is skeptical of God's pronouncement concerning Sarah having a child, He is adamant:

Avraham fell down upon his face and laughed. He said to himself: "shall a man who is one hundred years old have a child, and as for Sarah, shall a woman of ninety years give birth?"…The Lord responded: "But Sarah your wife shall have a son and you shall name him Yitzchak. I shall establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant with his descendants after him…" (*Bereishit* 17:17-19).

BRACKETED BY BLESSINGS

The progression of the narratives is therefore this: the *parasha* begins with great promise as God calls upon Avram and Sarai to journey forth from Charan, invoking countless blessings for the nation that they will found: "I will make you into a great nation, and I will BLESS you and I will make your name great, and you shall be a source of BLESSING. I will BLESS those that BLESS you and curse the one that curses you, and all of the peoples of the world will be BLESSED on your account…" But nowhere in that communication or in the multiple later ones does He indicate precisely how that nation will come into being, and as time goes on, the old couple (Sarai's barrenness already acknowledged – see *Bereishit* 11:30) naturally nurture in their minds many different scenarios to explain God's promise.

As the *parasha* concludes, the promise remains unfulfilled, while every one of their feverish hopes has been dashed in the process. But now God announces His true intent, utilizing the very same key words that had announced the journey's commencement some twenty-five years earlier: "The Lord further said to Avraham: "Sarai your wife shall no longer be called by you Sarai, for Sarah is her name. I shall BLESS her and I shall give you a son by her, and I shall BLESS her and she shall become nations, for kings of peoples shall descend from her"…(*Bereishit* 17:1-16). Countless blessings twinned with nationhood, the very linkage spelled out much earlier at the *parasha's* outset, are here associated with Sarah and with the son that she will bear.

THE EXAMPLE OF OUR FOREBEARS

Rightly in our tradition, Avraham and Sarah are regarded as unique and singular paradigms. While they are considered to be the biological progenitors of the people of Israel, they are, more importantly, also our spiritual forebears. Unlike the "founding fathers" of other nations that leave memorable maxims to their descendants and multiple myths of grandiose exploits, Avraham and Sarah bequeath to us nothing more or less than the concrete example of their own lives. Their heroism is expressed through their steadfast faith, and their fearlessness and courage through trust in God. Though they cannot fathom the meaning of His pledge, mistakenly (but not unreasonably) at first assuming that it refers to Lot and then supposing that it relates to Yishma'el, they will not surrender their belief in its fulfillment. Even as the years slip away and God's words remain unfulfilled, they continue to hope. And with each disappointment comes another realization, another deeper insight into the true nature of trust. They trust in God against all odds, even as the reality mocks them and grinds their dreams into the dust. Perhaps, then, the provision to name Sarah's child "Yitzchak" or "laughter" is not only an expression of the great unbounded joy that will accompany his birth but also a pointed refutation of fate's vagaries that laugh uproariously at our own naïve hopes and aspirations!

Is not the strength of spirit that characterizes Avraham and Sarah the very thing that will be required by their descendants, by the nation that will introduce to a skeptical world the saving truth of the One God's instruction? Will not that nation also be confronted throughout their long history with disappointments and reversals, unexpected failures and no shortage of setbacks? How often will we imagine that we have plumbed the depth of God's thoughts and understood His plans, only to painfully discover that "His thoughts are not our thoughts nor are His ways our ways" (*Yeshayahu* 55:8)? It seems, if we are to honestly accept the implications of our *parasha*, that only one thing is certain: the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise. The people of Israel will survive and will complete their mission to "restore the world to the sovereignty of the Almighty." But scarcely can we imagine, anymore than could Avraham and Sarah, the convoluted path of the journey that still lies before us. Nevertheless, we have trust in the realization of the pledge that was made to our ancestors over three thousand years ago: "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you and I will make your name great, and you shall be a source of blessing. I will bless those that bless you and curse the one that curses you, and all of the peoples of the world will be blessed on your account…" (*Bereishit* 12:1-3).

Shabbat Shalom