YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

Lot, Yishmael, and God's Promise

By Rav Michael Hattin

Introduction

"The Lord said to Avram: go forth from your land, your birthplace and your family, to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and magnify your name, and you shall be a source of blessing. I will bless those that bless you and curse the one who curses you, and all of the nations of the world shall be blessed on your account" (Bereishit 12:1-3).

With God's sudden pronouncement, the trajectory of humanity is forever changed. The individual failures of Adam, Chava and their children, the downfall of the generation swept away by the Flood, the ruin of the tower builders with the premature cessation of their soaring enterprise, all of them intoxicated with hubris and numb to God's appeals, is here arrested. With the entry of Avram and Sarai into the arena of human history – a stage already cluttered with idolatry, profligacy, rivalry, tyranny, and warfare – the possibility of a different denouement to the oppressive saga of man's creation is introduced.

"There are ten generations from Adam to Noach. This indicates how compassionate God is, for although all of them caused Him consternation and anger, He withheld the Flood until the end. There are a further ten generations from Noach to Avraham. This indicates how compassionate God is, for although all of them caused Him consternation and anger, He persevered until Avraham came and received the reward due them all" (Mishna, Tractate Avot 5:2).

The schemata of 'ten generations' listed at the conclusions of both Parashat Bereishit and Parashat Noach, are indicative of completions and turning points. It is the Flood that terminates the first era of human history, from Adam to Noach, for its violent but cleansing waters are the only fitting response to its corrupt moral legacy. It is the life of Avraham that concludes the second period, for with God's persuasive plea and Avraham's trusting consent, the revolutionary ideal of ethical monotheism is launched onto a skeptical and jaded world.

Tests of Faith: Exile and Childlessness

Many are the hardships that await Avram and Sarai as they begin their trek westwards from Mesopotamia to Canaan, accompanied by Avram's nephew Lot. Upon reaching the Promised Land, they are almost immediately forced to vacate it, as Canaan is struck with famine. Descending to Egypt where sustenance is to be found, they experience their first of what will amount to numerous confrontations with mercurial and malicious monarchs. By God's grace, however, they emerge unscathed and return safely to Canaan, to resume their semi-nomadic but prosperous lives as shepherds. But trial upon trial await the two. Lot, the beloved nephew whom they had adopted, chooses to leave them, to establish his camp close to Sodom, only to be later taken captive by an alliance of four marauding eastern kings. Avram marshals his household and gives chase, unexpectedly routing the invading force and rescuing his nephew, who resumes his residency in sinful Sodom.

Avram and Sarai thus experience many setbacks in the early stages of their drawn-out journey. But overshadowing them all, and later coloring every milestone in their productive lives with a hue of intense disappointment, is their painful lack of offspring. From the time that they had first been married, while they yet dwelt among their kin along the banks of the life-giving Euphrates, Avram and Sarai have desired children. Their intense longing had more recently only been accentuated by God's repeated promises of progeny and land, nation and place, the two pillars that alone can ensure the survival and success of their values in a hostile world.

The Structure of the Parasha – Two Balanced Halves and their Link

It is, in fact, possible to divide our parasha into two main parts. It is this first half (12:1 – 14:24) that deals with the journey to Canaan, the descent to Egypt, the disagreement with Lot and his relocation, and the war against the four kings and its aftermath. Much of the narratives in this first half involve LOT, where he is sometimes mentioned tangentially, but is at other times a protagonist.

The second half of our parasha (16:1 – 17:27) concerns Avram's marriage to Hagar at Sarai's behest, the conflicts that emerge between Sarai and Hagar after Hagar conceives, the latter's flight to the wilderness where God's angel provides her with the news of her son Yishmael's birth, and God's command to Avram to perform circumcision. This time, much of the material revolves around YISHMAEL, initially quite centrally, but later only incidentally.

Significantly, the link between the two halves (15:1-21) is the so-called 'Brit bein Ha-Betarim' or 'Covenant between the Pieces,' a ceremony in which God and Avram conclude a pact. Here again, we may divide this smaller section into two parts, where the first concerns progeny (15:1-6) and the second speaks of land (15:7-21). Thus, the rite is introduced by a Divine vision of protection and care that comes to Avram in the aftermath of his battle and victory over the foreign kings (15:1). Avram then expresses his fears over lack of a scion to continue his mission: "Behold, it is the administrator of my household, Eliezer of Damascus, who will inherit me!" (15:2-3). In response, God reassures him that his own descendant, the product of 'his loins,' will inherit him, and then shows him the innumerable stars to emphasize the multitude of his offspring (15:4-5). Avram trusts in God and his mind is set at ease (15:6).

Now, Avram expresses reservations about God's promise of the land: "how will I know that I shall inherit it?" (15:7). Avram is bidden to take various animals, divide them in half, and pass between the pieces to symbolize his commitment to God's commands (15:8-11). He experiences an ominous vision of his descendants' future exile and enslavement, but God again reassures him that they will persevere and eventually return to the land of Canaan (15: 12:16). The ritual concludes with a manifestation of God's presence, in the form of a flaming fire that passes through the pieces, thus solidifying God's pledge of the land (15:17-20).

Reassembling the various elements and reading Avram's concerns between the lines, what we have here is a narrative concerning Lot, another narrative concerning Yishmael, and the link of God's covenant in between. Avram's cardinal concerns, progeny and land, are thus addressed by this parasha, but, as we shall see, with surprising results.

The Disappointment of Lot's Departure

Let us return briefly to the aftermath of Lot's parting. There, we find that God's comforting vision comes to Avram:

"God said to Avram after Lot had left him: 'Lift up your eyes and look to the north, south, east and west, for all of the land that you see I shall give to you and to your descendants forever. Your descendants shall be as numerous as the dust of the earth…'" (Bereishit 13:14-15).

Rashi (11th century, France) reads in God's sudden revelation to Avram at this juncture an indication of Lot's corruption, as if the Deity had until this point avoided communicating to Avram as long as he maintained his tight bonds with his errant nephew. But there is a more fundamental dimension to God's appearance as well. With Lot's departure, Avram sees his only concrete prospects of progeny seemingly disappear, for Lot is his nephew, his only blood relative in Canaan, and his erstwhile follower. Who will continue the legacy of the aging Avram and his barren wife Sarai, if not Lot? God, therefore, now reassures the patriarch and indicates to him in no uncertain terms that he will indeed have descendants, as numerous as the grains of the earth under his feet. Lot may leave him, but God's promise of offspring will yet be fulfilled. Of course, Avram, his mind racing with a thousand contradictory thoughts, knows not how! All that he does know with certainty is that Lot will not be the one to perpetuate his legacy and to found the nation that God has promised will be a source of blessing to all humanity.

The Hope of Hagar

Time goes on. It has now been ten years since Avram and Sarai left home and hearth to heed God's word. The adventurous allure of a new land and a new life are behind the two. It has been some time since Lot has reestablished himself near Sodom, drawing ever closer to its licentious attractions. God's oath vouchsafed at the 'Covenant between the Pieces,' where He promised offspring and land, both in great measure, is now only a memory. Her aging body seemingly barren forever, her cruel fate of childlessness now a certainty, Sarai initiates a plan that may yet provide her with progeny: "Sarai said to Avram: 'Behold, God has withheld me from bearing children. Take my maidservant so that I might have children by her,' and Avram listened to Sarai" (Bereishit 16:2). Sarai knows that she cannot conceive, but she hopes to experience motherhood and to achieve perpetuity through the offspring of her maidservant. Sarai proceeds to take Hagar her maidservant and to present to Avram as an additional wife, and Hagar soon conceives. Rather than bringing Sarai joy and hope, however, the new reality only brings her grief: "…when Hagar saw that she had conceived, she was disrespectful to her mistress Sarai."

What is the cause of Hagar's newfound insolence? Rashi (11th century, France) attempts to plumb Hagar's thoughts:

"'This Sarai,' thought Hagar, 'is not really what she presents herself to be. Although she portrays herself as a righteous woman, she is not! After all, she did not merit to have children lo these many years, but I have conceived immediately!'" (commentary to 16:4).

According to Rashi, Hagar displays contempt for Sarai because she believes that her quick and easy pregnancy has exposed Sarai as a fraud. Surely, if Sarai were as righteous as she pretends, God would have already granted her prayers for offspring! More probably, though, Hagar's conduct derives from another source: bearing Avram's child, she is now in a position to usurp Sarai's authority in the household, for Hagar carries the only heir to Avram's estate. God's promise that Avram's descendants would be as numerous as the stars is now seemingly shown to have been directed at his descendants from Hagar! As Rabbi David Kimchi (13th century, Provence) explains:

"Hagar thought that since Avram's offspring would be from her, she would in turn become the principal wife. She therefore felt no obligation to recognize Sarai's authority any longer" (commentary to 16:4).

In other words, it appears that at this stage of the narrative, although Lot's candidacy for the coveted role of nation builder has been disqualified, Hagar's bid to secure the position for her future offspring is within the realm of possibility.

Significantly, however, when Hagar flees Sarai's subsequent mistreatment and is reassured by an angelic vision informing her of God's protection and receptiveness to her cries, the text provides a number of allusions to suggest that Hagar's assumptions are in fact mistaken.

"The angel of God said to her: 'Return to your mistress, and accept subjugation under her authority.' The angel of God further said: 'Behold, you are pregnant and will give birth to a son. You shall call his name Yishmael, for God has heard ('shama') of your oppression. He shall be a wild man of the wilderness, his hand shall be upon all, and the hand of all upon him, and he shall outnumber all of his brethren'" (Bereishit 16:10-12).

Thus, by indicating to Hagar that she must reaccept Sarah's authority, the angel makes it clear that Hagar's hopes for dominion are unfounded. As for her offspring, he will indeed found a mighty nation, but apparently not one with the requisite characteristics to become "a blessing for all humanity" (Bereishit 12:3). The account of Yishmael's birth concludes by noting that Avram was 86 years old at the event.

The Hope of Sarah

A further thirteen years elapse, passed over by the text of the Torah in silence. Sarai is still childless while Yishmael has grown into a sturdy youth. God again appears to the aged Patriarch, but this time with a series of remarkable declarations. Firstly, Avram's name is to be forever changed to Avraham,

"for I have designated you as the father ('av') of a multitude ('hamon') of nations. I shall make you exceedingly numerous and make you a founder of nations, for kings shall descend from you" (Bereishit 17:5-6).

Secondly, Avraham receives a Divine promise that he will father descendants who will enjoy a covenantal relationship with God and who will possess eternal deed to the land of Canaan:

"I shall establish My covenant between Myself and your descendants as an everlasting pledge, to be your God and that of your descendants. I shall give you and your descendants the land of your sojourning, the entire land of Canaan for an eternal inheritance, and I shall be your God… (Bereishit 17:7-8).

Thirdly, Avraham is given a new command, the mitzva of circumcision, to be performed on all of the males of his household as a "sign of the covenant between Me and you" (Bereishit 17:9-14). Fourthly, Sarai is also to undergo a name change, for henceforth she is to be known as 'Sarah' (Bereishit 17:15). Most wondrously, God indicates to Avraham that He "will bless her and will give him a son from her." "I will bless her and make her a nation, kings of nations shall issue from her" (Bereishit 17:16).

Taken together, the above elements constitute a powerful vindication of Sarah's hopes and a further indication of Yishmael's rejection. The respective name changes for the aged couple emphasize a transformation of their fortunes and destinies. As Rashi (11th century, France) colorfully puts it:

"God said to Avraham: 'Abandon your prognostications! Though you saw in your reading of the constellations that 'Avram' will have no offspring, 'Avraham' will. 'Sarai' will not have children, but 'Sarah' will! I will call you by a different name and your fortunes will be altered'" (commentary to 15:5).

The introduction of circumcision at just this juncture suggests that the groundwork is being laid for the founding of the nation of the covenant. The 'sign' associated with the ritual, the physical mark that distinguishes individuals and links them together as an identifiable group, is here given on the eve of Sarah's miraculous conception, for her offspring will be born into the command of circumcision, thus founding the people who will have a covenantal relationship with God. Most tellingly, God twice utilizes the important expression of 'blessing' to describe Sarah's imminent offspring, the very same term that God had utilized some quarter of a century earlier, when He first called upon the couple to sever their connection to their Mesopotamian moorings in order to found the nation that would change the world:

"The Lord said to Avram: go forth from your land, your birthplace and your family, to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will BLESS you and magnify your name, and you shall be a source of BLESSING. I will BLESS those that BLESS you and curse the one who curses you, and all of the nations of the world shall be BLESSED on your account."

Avraham's Joyous Incredulity

When Avraham is apprised of the news, his reaction is twofold. First of all, he expresses surprise and wonder at the prospect of Sarah giving birth. After all, they have been married for many decades, and have never succeeded in having children together. Secondly, Avraham exclaims: "If only Yishmael might live before You!" (Bereishit 17:19). As Rabbi David Kimchi (13th century, Provence) comments:

"Avraham means to say: 'Is it not enough that you have given me Yishmael? Am I not unworthy of the great kindness that You now promise me? That you have given me Yishmael is sufficient. Let him merit to live a life of blessing and plenty, in order to serve You. You have already fulfilled Your promise to give this land to my 'descendants,' for Yishmael is truly my descendant!'" (commentary to 17:18).

Thus, up until this point, Avraham has fully anticipated that the nation that he is to found would be the descendants of Yishmael, his only son.

God's forceful answer is unequivocal:

"But Sarah your wife will give birth to a son, and you shall call his name 'Yitzchak' ('gladness'). I will establish My covenant with him and his descendants for everlasting. Concerning Yishmael, I have accepted your request. I will bless him and give him great increase, for he shall father twelve princes, and become a great nation. But as for My covenant, it will be established with Yitzchak, whom Sarah will bear for you at this time next year…" (Bereishit 17:19-21).

Indeed, Yishmael will found a great nation. His twelve children will, of course, mirror the sons of Yaacov (Yitzchak's son), the future twelve tribes of Israel. Yishmael will be 'blessed' with an important role in world history, but he will NOT be the recipient of God's special covenant. That privilege, and its attendant responsibility, will devolve instead upon the descendants of Yitzchak.

Thus, our parasha traces the convoluted steps of God's providence. At first Avram and Sarai had thought that Lot their beloved nephew, might be the legitimate heir to their mission and legacy. But Lot chose the wiles of Sodom, and in so doing disqualified himself and authored his ignominious downfall. Avraham continued to think that Yishmael might be the one whom God had chosen. But again, he was mistaken, for although Yishmael was granted an important role in human history, he was not designated to be God's own. The progression of course, is quite pronounced. The hopes that Avram and Sarai pin on Lot their kin, who is not their direct descendant at all, are subsequently transferred by Avram to HIS son by Hagar. But again, those hopes are found to be misguided. The nation that must be founded to bring blessing to all humanity must be the product of Avraham and Sarah TOGETHER, and that is Yitzchak.

The structure of our parasha is now eminently clear. The first half concerns Lot, and the second half concerns Yishmael. Both of these individuals in turn represent possible heirs, just as the link of the 'Covenant between the Pieces' suggests. But as the narrative unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that neither one of them will fulfill that role. God proclaims that it is Sarah's offspring alone who is designated. Lot and Yishmael will return in next week's parasha of Vayeira, a parasha that is again conveniently divided into two halves that revolve around each of them in turn. This time, however, their respective dismissals will be sealed – Lot by his association with Sodom, and Yishmael by his adoption of Hagar's teachings. Finally, Yitzchak will emerge as the progenitor of the Jewish people, the fulfillment of God's pledge to Avraham AND Sarah.

Shabbat Shalom