YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat LEKH LEKHA**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable *z”l* and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner *z”l*

By Debbie and David Sable

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**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**Two Ways to Understand Avraham**

Adapted by Binyamin Frankel and Elisha Oron

Translated by David Strauss

**The Selection of Avraham**

 How was Avraham chosen to serve as the first link in the chain that developed into the people of Israel? The plain sense of the text does not explain the selection of Avraham, and it is not at all clear to us whether or not it might have been possible to choose somebody else.

 The Ramchal in *Derekh HaShem* (part II, chap. 4) explains that Avraham was chosen after extensive activity on his part, and after a competition that lasted for many generations. After Adam sinned it became clear that it would not be possible for all of mankind to successfully bear the word of God, and therefore only a part of it would become the root, and all the rest would be branches. The search for the root lasted twenty generations, until Avraham was found suitable for the task. The Midrashim as well try to explain the source of Avraham's selection. They describe Avraham's unique religious experiences, his spiritual progress, his extensive religious activity undertaken while focused also on the political plane, his standing up to kings, and his concern about spreading the name of God throughout the world. Avraham wandered from place to place, and occupied himself with drawing people closer to their Creator in Heaven. And he proclaimed to everybody that the world has a leader.

The Maharal, on the other hand, adopts a different approach (*Netzach Yisrael*, chap. 11). According to him, the selection of the people of Israel preceded the creation of the world, and Avraham was chosen to be the first in the chain of the people of Israel, without his selection having been preceded by any particular behavior.

R. Yehuda Halevi adopts the same approach in his *Kuzari*, with his famous argument about the core of a fruit, the one that proceeds from Adam, by way of Shet, and Noach, and Shem, and so on, until Terach and Avraham. Avraham's selection did not stem from his actions, but from some unique quality deep in his personality. It would have been impossible to choose somebody else, for it was precisely Avraham who was connected to this rare lineage.

**The Foundation of Faith**

This disagreement appears to underlie their respective opinions about faith. In his *Kuzari* R. Yehuda Halevi bases faith on the exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai. The plagues in Egypt, the splitting of the sea, and the assembly at Mount Sinai were all miraculous events that took place before the entire people. There were millions of witnesses, and these exceptional events serve as proof for God's providence over the world.

The focus, according to R. Yehuda Halevi, is on the figure of Moshe, the great miracle-worker, who served as God's messenger to bring the plagues in Egypt, to split the sea, and to bring down the Torah to the people of Israel amid lightning and thunder. The *Kuzari* uses the beginning of the book of *Shemot* as a critical religious proof that accompanies the people of Israel and makes God present in His world.

The Rambam, however, disagrees. He opens *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* as follows:

The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a Primary Being who brought into being all existence. All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and what is between them came into existence only from the truth of His being.

Even the first commandment – “I am the Lord your God [who took you out of the land of Egypt],” which, focusing on the exodus from Egypt, seems to reinforce R. Yehuda Halevi's position – is made to accord with the Rambam's approach:

The knowledge of this concept is a positive commandment, as it is stated (*Shemot* 20:2): "I am the Lord, your God."

Anyone who presumes that there is another god transgresses a negative commandment, as it is stated (*Shemot* 20:3): "You shall have no other gods before Me," and denies a fundamental principle [of faith], because this is the great principle [of faith] upon which all depends.

The proof according to the Rambam is precisely from the maintenance of the world as it is, the constant revolving of the heavenly spheres. The Rambam appears to have adopted the position of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, before whom the Roman emperor argued that a proof of God's existence would be if He could cause the sun to rise in the west and set in the east. Rabbi Yehoshua answered him that the proof is precisely the fact that the world continues to operate as needed, and that a change in the state of the sun would serve as a counter-proof.

According to the Rambam, God's presence expresses itself in the continued natural order of the world. The miracles that were performed in Egypt were merely solutions to problems that happened to have cropped up; it was necessary to cross the Sea of Suf, so God split the sea. This is the way that the Rambam presents Avraham's faith. This is also the way that he explains the people of Israel's faith in Moshe:

The Jews did not believe in Moshe, our teacher, because of the wonders that he performed. Whenever anyone's belief is based on wonders, [the commitment of] his heart has shortcomings, because it is possible to perform a wonder through magic or sorcery.

All the wonders performed by Moshe in the desert were not intended to serve as proof [of the legitimacy] of his prophecy, but rather were performed for a purpose. It was necessary to drown the Egyptians, so he split the sea and sank them in it. We needed food, so he provided us with manna. We were thirsty, so he split the rock [providing us with water]. Korach's band mutinied against him, so the earth swallowed them up. The same applies to the other wonders.

What is the source of our belief in him? The [revelation] at Mount Sinai. Our eyes saw, and not a stranger's. Our ears heard, and not another's. There was fire, thunder, and lightning. He entered the thick clouds; the Voice spoke to him and we heard, "Moshe, Moshe, go tell them the following."

Thus, it is stated (*Devarim* 5:4): "Face to face, God spoke to you," and it is stated (*Devarim* 5:3): "God did not make this covenant with our fathers, [but with us, who are all here alive today]." (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 8:1)

The miracles that were performed by Moshe are not mentioned in the Rambam's principles of faith; rather, Moshe is mentioned in connection with his spiritual level which earned him the highest level of prophecy.

It should be noted that to a certain extent this controversy is reflected in the praises that the Chasidim and the Mitnagdim heaped on their rabbis. Very common among the Chasidim are stories about miracles, instances in which the tzaddik succeeded in overcoming nature and subordinating it to his will. The Lithuanians, on the other hand, praised their rabbis' perseverance, their ability to go over the same topic again and again, to continue today what they had studied yesterday, and yesterday what they had studied the day before (not only in study, but even in good deeds and prayer, what is most important is perseverance).

**The Image of Avraham According to the Rambam**

The Rambam continues the approach of the Midrashim, and in the beginning of *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* he says as follows:

During the times of Enosh, mankind made a great mistake, and the wise men of that generation gave thoughtless counsel. Enosh himself was one of those who erred…

Thus, these practices spread throughout the world. People would serve images with strange practices – one more distorted than the other – offer sacrifices to them, and bow down to them. As the years passed, [God's] glorious and awesome name was forgotten by the entire population. [It was no longer part of] their speech or thought, and they no longer knew Him. Thus, all the common people, the women, and the children would know only the image of wood or stone and the temples of stone to which they were trained from their childhood to bow down and serve, and in whose name they swore.

The wise men among them would think that there is no God other than the stars and spheres for whose sake, and in resemblance of which, they had made these images. The Eternal Rock was not recognized or known by anyone in the world, with the exception of a [few] individuals: for example, Chanoch, Metushelach, Noach, Shem, and Ever. The world continued in this fashion until the pillar of the world – the Patriarch Avraham – was born.

The Rambam does not explain that Avraham drew near to his Creator by means of a spiritual core that was implanted within him, but rather by virtue of thought and understanding that could have been found in any person:

After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve.

He had no teacher, nor was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother, and all the people [around him] were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. [However,] his heart was exploring and [gaining] understanding.

Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one God who controlled the sphere, that He created everything, and that there is no other God among all the other entities. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake. What caused them to err was their service of the stars and images, which made them lose awareness of the truth.

Abraham was forty[[1]](#footnote-1) years old when he became aware of his Creator.

The Rambam goes on to describe Avraham's actions. Avraham was not a "righteous man wrapped in fur" who was concerned only with himself, but rather a righteous man who lit a fire for everybody:

When he recognized and knew Him, he began to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them that they were not following a proper path.

He broke their idols and began to teach the people that it is fitting to serve only the God of the world. To Him [alone] is it fitting to bow down, sacrifice, and offer libations, so that the people of future [generations] would recognize Him. [Conversely,] it is fitting to destroy and break all the images, lest all the people err concerning them, like those people who thought that there are no other gods besides these [images].

This was not an easy and pleasant mission. Avraham entered into difficult struggles, and was forced to confront the king himself:

When he overcame them through the strength of his arguments, the king desired to kill him. He was [saved through] a miracle and left for Charan. [There,] he began to call in a loud voice to all people and inform them that there is one God in the entire world and it is proper to serve Him. He would go out and call to the people, gathering them in city after city and country after country, until he came to the land of Canaan – proclaiming [God's existence the entire time] – as it is stated (*Bereishit* 21:33): "And He called there in the name of the Lord, the eternal God."

When the people would gather around him and ask him about his statements, he would explain [them] to each one of them according to their understanding, until they turned to the path of truth. Ultimately, thousands and myriads gathered around him. These are the men of the house of Avraham.

He planted in their hearts this great fundamental principle, composed texts about it, and taught it to Yitzchak, his son.

It is possible that in the background the Rambam saw himself as Avraham's successor, and perhaps this also explains his decision to leave Eretz Israel and return to Egypt, just as Avraham had settled in Charan. In any event, many stories are told about the Rambam, legends that were handed down alongside more reasonable stories. In one legend we hear that he was walking about in Morocco on Sukkot and he met the king. When the king inquired about the strange leaves that he had in his hand, the Rambam responded that it is not he who fulfills his Creator's commandments who is foolish, but rather one who casts stones. When the king consulted his advisors about the meaning of the Rambam's words, they explained that the Rambam was referring to the custom of throwing stones at the Kaaba. The Rambam did not hesitate to criticize Islam, even though Morocco was ruled by the Almohades, a radical Moslem faction.

When he was living in Egypt, before the conquest of Saladin, he did not hesitate to criticize Islam, even when the Jewish people were in a sad and sorrowful state. He calls Mohammed a "madman," and disparages Islam and its principles. The Rambam inherited this stamina from Avraham, who criticized Nimrod to his face.

**Rainfall and Desalination Plants**

Today, the State of Israel is at the forefront of various technological advances, including the progress it has made to deal with the water crisis, from the development of drip irrigation and greenhouse farming to its desalination plants, which are among the most advanced in the world. We know that the rains are an explicit expression of the connection between the people of Israel and God:

And it shall come to pass, if you shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your corn, and your wine, and your oil. And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and be satisfied. Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; and the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain, and the ground shall not yield her fruit; and you perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord gives you. (*Devarim* 11:13-17)

What will happen when we will be able to manage alone, and not need rain because the desalination plants will help us make the deserts bloom using only sea water? This may not happen tomorrow, but it is likely to happen in the not so distant future.

We may still need the rain, to fill the springs and moisten the soil, and for other things that piped-in water cannot provide us. But even beyond that, rain is an expression of the continuity of the world, its cyclical nature. Our ability to desalinate water has not come from nowhere. This is part of the intelligence that God has implanted within us and of our drive to maintain the world in accordance with its natural order. The continued existence of the world with that order in every situation is the clearest proof of the connection between God and the people of Israel, and even when we will be able to desalinate water, the existence of the people of Israel will continue to be an expression of that connection.

Avraham, the man whose daily efforts to spread the word of God in the world brought God to choose him, is the model that must stand before us to spread the word of God in the world. We must be prepared to stand up before kings and princes, before prime ministers and officers, and speak the word of God without hesitation, just like Avraham. To take one step after another to bring the world closer to His service, and thereby continue the initiatives first taken by Avraham.

(This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit on Shabbat parashat Noach [the end of which discusses Avraham), 5776 [2015].)

1. Apparently this should read: forty-eight. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)