**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Midrash on the Parasha**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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**Parashat Lekh Lekha:**

***Chazal’s* Portrait of Avraham Avinu in *Bereishit* *Rabba***

**Introduction**

The classic Midrashic works of the Amoraim in Eretz Israel available to us are *Bereishit Rabba*, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* and *Vayikra Rabba*. These works contain the Midrashic expositions of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel, most of whom were disciples of or disciples of the disciples of Rabbi Yochanan, from the third to the fifth centuries CE. *Bereishit Rabba* and *Vayikra Rabba* are arranged in accordance with the order of the verses in the Torah, whereas *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* is arranged in accordance with the *haftarot* that are read on special Shabbatot and on the festivals over the course of the year.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Any child who receives a basic Jewish education knows that Avraham smashed his father's idols; that he was miraculously saved from the fiery furnace into which he had been cast by the command of Nimrod; and that he found his way to belief in God, Creator of the World, on his own. These things are so deeply implanted in the consciousness of our children that they are often surprised when they learn that these stories are not explicitly written in the Torah. The primary responsibility for this situation falls on Rashi, who includes, in his commentary to the Torah, *Chazal's* Midrashic expositions concerning Avraham Avinu as the first believer. *Bereishit Rabba* and *Midrash Tanchuma* are Rashi's primary sources.

Over the course of this *shiur,* we will trace the manner in which *Chazal* use a psalm in the book of *Tehillim* to shape Avraham's personality in their Midrashic expositions in *Bereishit Rabba.* In this way, we will open a window to the methodology employed by the Sages of the Midrash.

In five places in *Bereishit Rabba* we find expositions of verses in *Tehillim* 45 connecting it to Avraham Avinu. Let us examine the psalm:

For the Leader; upon *shoshanim*; [a psalm] of the sons of Korach; *maskil*, a song of loves.

My heart overflows with a goodly matter; I say: My work is concerning a king, my tongue is the pen of a ready writer.

**You are fairer than the children of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever.**

Gird your sword upon your thigh, O mighty one, your glory and your majesty.

And in your majesty prosper, ride on, on behalf of truth and meekness and righteousness; and let your right hand teach you tremendous things.

Your arrows are sharp — the peoples fall under you — [they sink] into the heart of the king's enemies.

Your throne given of God is forever and ever; a scepter of equity is the scepter of your kingdom.

**You have loved righteousness, and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows.**

Myrrh, and aloes, and cassia are all your garments; out of ivory palaces stringed instruments have made you glad.

**Kings' daughters are among your favorites; at your right hand stands the consort in gold of Ofir.**

**Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear; forget also your own people, and your father's house.**

**So shall the king desire your beauty; for he is your lord; and do homage to him.**

**And, O daughter of Tzor, the richest of the people shall entreat your favor with a gift.**

All glorious is the king's daughter within the palace; her raiment is of checker work inwrought with gold.

She shall be led to the king on richly woven stuff; the virgins her companions in her train being brought to you.

They shall be led with gladness and rejoicing; they shall enter into the king's palace.

Instead of your fathers shall be your sons, whom you shall make princes in all the land.

I will make your name to be remembered in all generations; therefore shall the peoples praise You forever and ever.

The first half of the psalm describes a fair, good, courageous and wealthy king who merits God's blessing. The second half describes the king's wedding from the perspective of his bride who is embarking on her new life with the king in order to jointly establish a royal dynasty, while altogether abandoning her previous life.[[2]](#footnote-2) The verses marked here in bold are the verses expounded in *Bereishit Rabba* regarding Avraham. Let us examine these expositions:

**“Hearken, O Daughter, and Consider, and Incline Your Ear; Forget Also Your Own People, and Your Father’s House.”**

“Now the Lord said to Avram: Go you forth" (*Bereishit* 12:1).

Rabbi Yitzchak opened: "Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear; forget also your own people, and your father's house" (*Tehillim* 45:11).

Rabbi Yitzchak said: This may be compared to one person who was traveling from place to place when he saw one castle aglow.[[3]](#footnote-3)

He said: Is it possible that this castle lacks a person to look after it?

The owner of the building looked out and said: I am the owner of the castle.

Similarly, because Avraham Avinu said: Is it possible that this castle has no guide, no one to look after it?, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: I am the Master of the Universe.

"So shall the king desire your beauty" (*Tehillim* 45:12) — to make you beautiful in the world.

"For he is your lord; and do homage to him" (ibid.) — "Now the Lord said to Avraham: Go you forth." (*Bereishit* *Rabba* 39, 1, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 365)

Rabbi Yitzchak's exposition opens the series of Midrashic expositions for *Parashat Lekh Lekha*. However, the word "opened" does not relate to this phenomenon, but rather to the form of the exposition which he expounds, a *petichta*.[[4]](#footnote-4) A *petichta* is a circular form of Midrashic exposition, which begins and ends with the verse being expounded. This verse is expounded by way of a connection made to a verse found in *Ketuvim*, usually an obscure verse, and an explanation of that verse based on the verse being expounded. The *petichta* illuminates the expounded verse in a new light, while explaining the obscure verse in *Ketuvim*. In the exposition before us, Rabbi Yitzchak expounds the first verse in the *parasha*: "Now the Lord said to Avram: Go you forth from your country, and from your kindred, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you" (*Bereishit* 12:1) by way of the verses: "Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear; forget also your own people, and your father's house. So shall the king desire your beauty; for he is your lord; and do homage to him" (*Tehillim* 45:11-12).[[5]](#footnote-5)

The first verse cited from the psalm is close in substance and in wording to God's command to Avraham in the phrase, "your father's house;" and in the content of the command to detach from past connections; and in the form of the command in the two places. The parable that is offered emphasizes Avraham's independent search for God, as he contemplates the world around him from the position of a passerby who comes from the outside: Avraham is likened "to one person who was traveling from place to place." That is to say, he does not actively involve himself in the castle aglow, but only asks theoretical questions. The formulation "when he saw one castle aglow" raises a question as to what else he has seen in other places. According to this, Avraham in the parable is likened to a detached philosopher who is occupied with the proper understanding of the universe.

The presentation of the world in the parable as “one castle aglow” relates to Avraham's examination of the failed history of mankind up to his generation, which time and again falls into the trap of corrupt desires and ideologies, bringing sorrow to itself and to the entire world.[[6]](#footnote-6) The commentators on the Midrash understand that this situation raises doubts in Avraham's mind about the existence of God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It seems, however, that the very encounter with the castle aglow brings Avraham to search for a unifying solution to the mystery of the universe. Avraham's question: "Is it possible that this castle lacks a person to look after it?," exposes his spiritual development, in the wake of which he merits God's revelation. If so, this Midrash points to the human arena as the site of the flowering of Avraham's faith — from doubt toward certainty.[[8]](#footnote-8) This interpretation is supported by the motif of "one" that repeats itself throughout the parable, from "one person who was traveling from place to place" and sees "one castle aglow" to recognizing and encountering the One God.

The parable of the castle aglow well illustrates the command, "Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear" from two perspectives — as a demand for deliberate action on the part of Avraham in order to forget his former world of ideas, and as a medium. The senses and the rational inquiry based upon them are tools in Avraham's hands to reach faith.[[9]](#footnote-9) This emphasis adds to and illustrates the process of forsaking his known world, which is not explicit in God's command to Avraham in the Book of *Bereishit*. What will happen between the abandonment and the revelation? What is the path taken by Avraham? The Midrashic exposition fills in the vacuum, while emphasizing the existential state of doubt and the intellectual faculties that serve Avraham at this stage, bringing him to the threshold of revelation.[[10]](#footnote-10)

As stated, the first verse cited from *Tehillim* is expounded in relation to Avraham's path to faith in and recognition of the existence of one supreme power.[[11]](#footnote-11) The exposition regarding the second verse cited from *Tehillim* adds God's intense love for Avraham and His demand from him of total commitment and self-effacement. If so, the *petichta* points to progress in the connection between Avraham and God, before the revelation and in its wake.[[12]](#footnote-12) These two situations parallel the difference in the characterization of the woman appealed to in each of the verses: in the first, as a daughter, "Hearken, O daughter, and consider;" and in the second, as a bride entering under the canopy. Here too the exposition of the verse from *Tehillim* adds a dimension of intimacy and love on the part of God for Avraham which is not explicit in the book of *Bereishit*.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Attention should be paid to another layer of meaning in *Chazal's* use of the daughter-bride in the psalm as a reflection of Avraham. Like the bride, he too is on the verge of a new identity and a new era. The context of the wedding on the level of the plain meaning of the psalm illuminates the verse, "Go you forth," in *Bereishit*, while emphasizing the great change that Avraham is undergoing. The phrase "forget your own people" in the first verse in *Tehillim* also sharpens the issue of a new identity, as opposed to the wording of the Torah which relates primarily to the realm of geographical space. Avraham, the son of the surrounding culture, chooses to disengage from it; he changes his personal status and begins a new life as God's beloved, just like a bride entering under the canopy.

The story of Avraham and the owner of the castle is well-known, but it is usually not studied in its full, original context. The study of Rabbi Yitzchak's *petichta* as a whole allows for a comprehensive view of the set of ideas included therein and of the ways that they grow out of the interweaving of these biblical texts. This clarifies the value of studying Midrash from the source, listening deeply to the voices arising from within it, in order to better understand the words of *Chazal.*[[14]](#footnote-14)

**“You Love Righteousness”**

Rabbi Azarya opened in the name of Rabbi Acha:

"You love righteousness and hate wickedness; [therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions]" (*Tehillim* 45:8).

Rabbi Azarya in the name of Rabbi Acha expounded (*patar)* the verse in reference to Avraham Avinu. When Avraham Avinu stood to plead for mercy for the people of Sedom… The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Avraham, "You love righteousness, and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." From Noach until you there were ten generations, and out of all of them I spoke with you alone.

Hence: "The Lord said to Avram: Go you forth." (*Bereishit Rabba* 39, 6, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 368-369)

The second exposition in *Bereishit Rabba* is also a *petichta*, which opens and closes with the verse: "Now the Lord said to Avram: Go you forth," which is expounded by way of the verse: "You love righteousness, and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions" (*Tehillim* 45:8). *Petira* is another Midrashic form found in the Midrash of Eretz Israel.[[15]](#footnote-15) Here the selection of Avraham is explained by Avraham's well-developed sense of justice and righteousness, which later finds expression at Sedom. The exposition is delivered by an Amora living in Eretz Israel, Rabbi Azarya, a disciple of Rabbi Mana, in the name of the fourth generation Tanna Rabbi Acha.

**“Daughter of Tzor”**

"And Malki Tzedek king of Shalem" (*Bereishit* 14:18).

"And, O daughter of Tzor, the richest of the people shall entreat your favor with a gift" (*Tehillim* 45:13).

"And, O daughter of Tzor" — this is Avraham who caused kings distress (*hatzer*), and kings caused him distress (*hatzeru*).

"They shall entreat your favor with a gift."

"And Malki Tzedek king of Shalem brought forth bread and wine." (*Bereishit Rabba* 43, 14, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 420)

This anonymous *petichta* connects the daughter of Tzor in *Tehillim* 45 who brings a gift to the king, to Malki Tzedek, king of Shalem, who greets Avraham with bread and wine upon his return from the war waged against the four kings. The name Tzor (Tyre) is expounded as referring to the battle fought between them.

**“Kings’ Daughters are Among Your Favorites”**

"And she [Sarai] had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar" (*Bereishit* 16:1).

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh.

When Pharaoh saw what happened to Sara in his house, he took his daughter and gave her to her.

He said: It is better that my daughter be a handmaid in this house, and not a matron in another house.

This is what is written: "And she had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar."

He said: Here is your reward.

So too Avimelekh, when he saw the miracles performed for Sara in his house, took his daughter and gave her to her.

This is what is written: "Kings' daughters are among your favorites" (*Tehillim* 45:10) — the daughters of kings.

"At your right hand stands the consort in gold of Ofir" (ibid.) — this is Sarai. (*Bereishit Rabba* 45, 1, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 447-448)

The fourth exposition is a Tannaitic exposition reported in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. The three middle expositions (nos. 2, 3, and 4) focus on the relationship between Avraham and those around him — Avraham's efforts on behalf of Sedom, and the reactions of the local elites who come into contact with him. In the third exposition, Malki Tzedek, king of Shalem, is impressed by Avraham's miraculous victory over the four kings, while in the fourth exposition, Pharaoh and Avimelekh are impressed by God's intervention to save Sara. These reactions portray Avraham as a Messianic figure who has achieved international recognition owing to his moral stature, to his righteousness and to the Divine accompaniment that he merits from two different sides: the male and the female.

**“You are Fairer than the Children of Men”**

"You are fairer than the children of men" (*Tehillim* 45:3).

You have been praised among the angels, as it is stated: "Behold, their valiant ones cry without" (*Yeshayahu* 33:7).

You have been praised among mortals, as it is stated: "You are a mighty prince among us" (*Bereishit* 23:6).

"Therefore God has blessed you" (*Tehillim* 45:3). "And Avraham was old, advanced in age; and the Lord had blessed Avraham in all things" (*Bereishit* 24:1). (*Bereishit Rabba* 59, 4, ed. Theodor Albeck, p. 633)

The fifth exposition in *Bereishit Rabba* relates to the first part of the psalm which opens with praise of the king: "You are fairer than (*yafyafita mei-*)the children of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever" (*Tehillim* 45:3). The phrase “*yafyafita mei”* is understood in the sense of "by way of" (the prefix *mei-* can also mean “from,” yielding “You are fair from…”) and the trait of beauty relates to the recognition and confirmation that Avraham achieves — not only from his human acquaintances, but even from the hosts of heaven. As opposed to the third and fourth expositions, not only kings and priests, but also local communities, such as the Chiti, recognize Avraham's spiritual stature. The exposition skips over the middle part of the verse, "grace is poured upon your lips," drawing a connection between the admiration for Avraham and his attaining God's blessing. The verse from *Bereishit* that is expounded, "And Avraham was old, advanced in age; and the Lord had blessed Avraham in all things," relates to a late stage in Avraham's life, when he sends Eliezer to seek a wife for Yitzchak, and the entire exposition is a summarization of his person.

**Summary**

Across *Bereishit Rabba,* six verses from *Tehillim* 45 are expounded in five different Midrashic expositions, four of them *petichtot.* Here is a summary of the verses and of the ideas learned from them:

1. "Hearken, O daughter… forget also your own people, and your father's house" (v. 11) — Avraham seeks the one God.

2. "So shall the king desire your beauty" (v. 12) — God desires Avraham, Avraham merits Divine revelation.

3. "You love righteousness, and hate wickedness" (v. 8) — Avraham pleads for mercy for Sedom; "Therefore God, your God, anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions" (ibid.) — Avraham merits Divine revelation.

4. "And, O daughter of Tzor" (v. 13) — Avraham causes the four kings distress; "the richest of the people shall entreat your favor with a gift" (ibid.) — Malki Tzedek brings bread, wine and tithe.

5. "Kings' daughters are among your favorites" (v. 10) — Hagar and the daughter of Avimelekh join Avraham's household; "at your right hand stands the consort" (ibid.) — Sarai remains Avraham's chief wife.

6. "You are fair from the children of men" (v. 3) — Avraham is praised among the angels and among mortals;[[16]](#footnote-16) "You therefore God has blessed forever" (ibid.) — God blesses Avraham in all things.

The expositions discussed here refer to a wide variety of events in Avraham's life, from his beginnings when he seeks God and goes to the land of Canaan, through his going down to Egypt, his contending with Avimelekh, his fighting the war against the four kings and its ramifications, his defending Sedom — until his old age.

Our study shows that three of the expositions (nos. 1, 2 and 4) are Tannaitic, in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Rabbi Yitzchak and Rabbi Acha. It may therefore be suggested that already the Tannaim note the correspondence between *Tehillim* 45 and the person of Avraham and draw a connection between them, while the Amoraim of Eretz Israel continue in this direction and expound additional expositions. It is possible that this connection is an expression of an even more ancient tradition.

Over the course of this *shiur,* we have seen how the Sages use *Tehillim* 45 in their expositions regarding Avraham, and we have seen how their readings enrich our perception of his character.

**Epilogue: The Castle Aglow and Us**

In conclusion, let us go back the far-reaching educational significance of Avraham and the castle aglow. The primary message arising from this parable is that a person must seek and toil on the road to faith. In addition, it legitimizes one’s being in a state of uncertainty during the search process, alongside the hope that eventually one will achieve absolute clarity. Beyond this, a Jew may respect his or her adherence to belief in God even in a world without revelation. On the other hand, the parable raises many questions: Is Avraham a role model? Can an ordinary Jew today reenact the path taken by the father of the nation at the beginning? Avraham is characterized by absolute freedom of thought, and perhaps this is what allows him to reach certainty. Can a Jew today, a descendant of Avraham Avinu, allow himself or herself to adopt a similar path?

According to the interpretation offered here, the Midrash may be seen as offering a person direction for the building of faith based on the consideration of human history. The faith model of the Midrash is very close to the approach of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi in his *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*.[[17]](#footnote-17)

We have seen that Avraham's process of clarifying his faith is part of his journey to Eretz Israel. In our time, it seems that paradoxically, progress has been achieved in the opposite order: first we returned to Eretz Israel, and only afterwards have we begun to clarify our faith.

In the opposite direction, sometimes the clarification of faith involves leaving Eretz Israel and heading out. Indeed, we may perhaps see an allusion to this in the words of the prophet Yeshayahu:

Look to Avraham your father, and to Sara that bore you; for when he was but one I called him, and I blessed him, and made him many. For the Lord has comforted Zion; He has comforted all her waste places, and has made her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody. (*Yeshayahu* 52:2-3).

After the consolation of the land, the time comes to re-learn the legacy of Avraham and Sara.

We see that the Jewish people are seeking their way, and we are confident that Israel will once again return to its strength and its faith.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. For more information concerning early Midrash in Eretz Israel and concerning the uniqueness of *Bereishit Rabba* in particular, see Yona Frankel, *Midrash Ve-aggada*, Vol. 3 (Tel Aviv: 1997), pp. 780-799. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For further examination of this psalm, see *Da'at Mikra, Tehillim* (Jerusalem: 1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Hebrew reads *“bira achat doleket,”* and *doleket* is somewhat ambiguous. It can refer to being lit up or being on fire. We will analyze the signifance of this metaphor below. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an expanded discusion of the *petichta*, see Yona Frankel, *Midrash Ve-aggada*, Vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: 1997), pp. 206-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Rashbam, *Pesachim* 114a: "Rabbi Yitzchak, when unspecified in the Aggada, is Rabbi Yitzchak the son of Pinechas." Rabbi Yitzchak the son of Pinechas was among the last Tannaim of the fifth generation. The question may be raised as to whether the Rashbam's assertion applies also to the Midrashic literature of Eretz Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In later versions of this parable, the image of the castle aglow changes, and in its stead we find the image of a house in which clothing of different colors hangs at different times. See *Midrash Ha-gadol*, beginning of *Lekh Lekha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See the commentaries of R. David Luria and the Maharazav, ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Compare *Bereishit Rabba* 38, 13, where we find a debate between Nimrod and Moshe with respect to the world of nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The twofold reference to hearing at different levels ("hearken," "turn your ear") in the verse emphasizes the human effort required of a person who wishes to connect with God in a world without revelation. This is one of the main meanings of the *mitzva* of reciting *Shema* and of the repetition of the phrase, "Hear O Israel," in the book of *Devarim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Thus Avraham passes from human vision to "that I will sho*w* you." [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The parallel of this exposition in the printed *Midrash Tanchuma, Lekh Lekha* 3, blurs this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Compare what is written here to *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* IV, 17, regarding Avraham's spiritual journey:

The Rabbi said: Avraham bore his burden honestly, viz. the life in Ur Kasdim, emigration, circumcision, the removal of Yishmael, and the distress of the sacrifice of Yitzchak, because his share of the Divine Influence had come to him through love, but not through speculation. He observed that not the smallest detail could escape God, that he was quickly rewarded for his piety and guided on the right path to such an extent that he did everything in the order dictated by God. How could he do otherwise than deprecate his former speculation? The Sages explain the verse: “And He brought him forth outside,” as meaning: “Give up your horoscopy!” That is to say, He commanded him to leave off his speculative researches into the stars and other matters, and to follow faithfully the object of his inclination, as it is written: “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (*Tehilim* 34:9).

 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Compare this to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's statement in *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 3:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Yosei, saying to him: Is it possible that you heard from your father what is this crown with which his mother crowned him?

He said to him: Yes.

He said to him: What is it?

He said to him: This may be likened to a king who had an only daughter, of whom he was exceedingly fond, so that [at first] he called her “my daughter.” Not satisfied with that, he called her “my sister.” Still not satisfied, he called her “my mother.” So too the Holy One, blessed be He, loved Israel exceedingly and called them “My daughter,” as it is written: “Hearken, O daughter, and consider.” Not satisfied with that, He called them “My sister,” as it is stated: “Open to me, my sister, my love” (*Shir Ha-shirim* 5:2). Still not satisfied with that, He called them “My mother”…. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The interpretive process is an endless process of creating new and fascinating conceptual connections, thus providing answers for different realities, just as the expositor does in his midrashic expositions. In this way, interpretation serves a clear educational role. Therefore, when the story is removed from its context, part of the original message is lost. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Yona Frankel (above, note 3), pp. 172-173. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kingship is characterized by beauty both in *Tanakh* and in the words of *Chazal*. See *Yerushalmi*, *Sanhedrin* (5:6, 20c): "The king of Israel — one may not ride his horse… nor may one observe him naked, nor while his hair is being cut, nor in the bathhouse, as it is stated: 'Your eyes shall see the king in his beauty' (*Yeshayahu* 33:17)." [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It should be noted that the version of the exposition found in *Midrash Ha-gadol* accords with the approach of the Rambam, who sees contemplation of creation as the recommended path to religious faith. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)