**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**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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**The Beginning of Avraham’s Journey**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

**I. Two *Aggadot***

Now the Lord said unto Avram: Get you out of your country, and from your kindred, and from your father's house, unto the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and be you a blessing. And I will bless them that bless you, and him that curses you will I curse; and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed. (*Bereishit* 12:1-3)

The story of Terach's family, Avraham included, which transplants itself from Ur Kasdim to the land of Canaan, begins at the end of *Parashat Noach;* but the Torah does not explain why God chooses Avraham of all people to establish from Him the nation of God. We are told nothing about his righteousness or his faith.

*Chazal* recount two incidents that give expression to the greatness of Avraham's faith, on account of which he is chosen to establish the nation of God.

1. Rabbi Chiya the grandson of Rav Ada of Yafo said: Terach was an idol-maker. He once went away to a certain place and left Avraham in charge of the store in his place. A man came in and wished to buy an idol. Avraham asked him: “How old are you?”

He said to him: “About fifty or sixty.”

He said to him: “Woe is the man who is sixty years old and must worship a one-day old statue.” The man was embarrassed and left.

Another time a woman came in and brought with her a bowl of fine flour [for an offering]. She said to him: “Take this and offer it before the idols.”

Avraham arose, took a hammer, smashed all the statues, and put the hammer in the hand of the largest among them. When his father came, he said to him: “Who did this?”

Avraham said to him: “A woman came and brought them a bowl of fine flour, and told me to offer it before them. So I offered it before them. This one said: ‘I will eat first;’ and the other one said: ‘I will eat first.’ The largest among them arose, grabbed a hammer and smashed them.”

Terach said to him: “What foolishness; do they know anything?”

Avraham responded: “Do your ears hear what your mouth is saying?”

2. At that point Terach took Avraham and handed him over to Nimrod. He said to him: “Worship fire.”

Avraham said to him: “Let me worship water which extinguishes fire.”

So Nimrod said to him: “Worship water.”

Avraham said to him: “If so, let me worship the clouds which hold the water.”

He said to him: “Worship the clouds.”

Avraham said to him: “If so, let me worship the wind, which scatters the clouds.”

He said to him: “So worship the wind.”

Avraham said to him: “Let us them worship man, who can withstand the wind.”

Nimrod said to him: “You speak much; I bow down only to fire. I will cast you in. Let the God before whom you bow down come and save you from it!”

Haran was standing there. He said: “What difference does it make? If Avraham wins, I will say that I am one of Avraham's men. If Nimrod wins, I will say that I am one of Nimrod's men.”

After Avraham entered the furnace and was saved, they said to Haran. “Of whose men are you?”

He said to them: “I am one of Avraham's men.” They took him and cast him into the furnace. His bowels were parched, and he came out and died before Terach his father. Thus it says: "And Haran died in the presence of his father Terach" (*Bereishit* 11:28). (*Bereishit Rabba* 38:13).

The first incident involves the smashing of idols, which expresses Avraham's rejection of idol worship. The second incident involves Avraham's being cast into a fiery furnace and then being saved from it. This expresses Avraham's love for and devotion to his Creator, along with his miraculous rescue by God.

God's choosing of Avraham to establish God's people from him accords with Avraham's rejection of idolatry and his readiness to give his life for the sanctification of God's name. Nevertheless, the two *aggadot* cited above have no support in the verses themselves. From where then do *Chazal* draw the details of these two incidents?

**II. Avraham and Gidon**

The story of Avraham's smashing his father's idols, as described in *Bereishit Rabba*, is reminiscent of an incident involving the young Gidon in his father's house:

And it came to pass the same night, that the Lord said unto him: “Take your father's bullock, and the second bullock of seven years old, and throw down the altar of Ba'al that your father has, and cut down the Ashera that is by it; and build an altar unto the Lord your God upon the top of this stronghold, in the ordered place, and take the second bullock, and offer a burnt-offering with the wood of the Ashera which you shall cut down.”

Then Gidon took ten men of his servants, and did as the Lord had spoken unto him; and it came to pass, because he feared his father's household and the men of the city, so that he could not do it by day, that he did it by night.

And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Ba'al was broken down, and the Ashera was cut down that was by it, and the second bullock was offered upon the altar that was built. And they said one to another: “Who has done this thing?”

And when they inquired and asked, they said: “Gidon the son of Yoash has done this thing.”

Then the men of the city said unto Yoash: “Bring out your son, that he may die; because he has broken down the altar of Ba'al, and because he has cut down the Ashera that was by it.”

And Yoash said unto all that stood against him: “Will you contend for Ba'al? Or will you save him? He that will contend for him shall be put to death before morning; if he be a god, let him contend for himself, because one has broken down his altar.”

Therefore on that day he was called Yeruba’al, saying: “Let Ba'al contend against him, because he has broken down his altar.” (*Shoftim* 6:25-32)

We have here a story that is similar to the *aggada* told about Avraham: Gidon smashes his father's altar upon which he would worship idols, corresponding to Avraham's smashing of his father's statues. But why do *Chazal* draw a connection between Gidon and Avraham? What is the basis of the comparison between them?

The comparison between Gidon and Avraham might be based on the story of the war fought against the four kings, which shows clear lines of similarity to the story of the war fought by Gidon against Midian.

1. **The number of fighters:** Avraham goes out to battle against four great kings, who command great armies, with only a small number of soldiers:

…He led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued as far as Dan. (*Bereishit* 14:14)

Gidon as well is commanded by God to reduce the number of his soldiers:

And the Lord said unto Gidon: By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you and deliver the Midianites into your hand; and let all the people go every man unto his place. (*Shoftim* 7:7)

Gidon's three hundred fighters face an enormous army of about a hundred and fifty thousand camel riders (see *Shoftim* 7:12; 8:10[[1]](#footnote-1)).

2. **The manner of fighting:** Avraham takes advantage of the element of surprise:

And he divided himself against them by night, he and his servants, and smote them, and pursued them unto Chova, which is on the left hand of Damascus. (*Bereishit* 14:15)

Gidon fights in a similar fashion:

And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put into the hands of all of them horns, and empty pitchers, with torches within the pitchers… And the three companies blew the horns, and broke the pitchers, and held the torches in their left hands, and the horns in their right hands wherewith to blow; and they cried: “The sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” …And the men of Israel were gathered together out of Naftali, and out of Asher, and out of all Menasheh, and pursued after Midian. (*Shoftim* 7:16-23)

Gidon attacks his enemies with three companies, his primary goal being to cause havoc and surprise. The enemy camp is comprised of various armies (Amalek, Midian and the *benei kedem*), and therefore the attack comes as a great surprise, the confusion reaching the point of "every man's sword against his fellow" (v. 22).

Both Avraham and Gidon surprise their enemies, who in the darkness of night lose their way and fight each other, and in the end are scattered in every direction.

3. **The purpose of the war:** The Torah explicitly states why Avraham goes to war:

And Avram heard that his brother was taken captive… (*Bereishit* 14:14)

At the end of Gidon's pursuit of the kings of Midian, it is revealed that the motive for his pursuit is very similar to that of Avraham:

Then said he unto Zevach and Tzalmuna: “Where are the men whom you slew at Tavor?”

And they answered: “As you are, so were they; of one form with the children of a king.”

And he said: “They were my brothers, the sons of my mother; as the Lord lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not slay you…”

Then Zevach and Tzalmuna said: “Rise you, and fall upon us; for as the man is, so is his strength.” And Gideon arose, and slew Zevach and Tzalmuna… (*Shoftim* 8:18-21)

In other words, Gidon pursues the kings of Midian to discover what has become of his brothers at Tavor, just as Avraham pursues the four kings to find out what has happened to Lot.

4. **The commander and his servant:** An additional point of comparison is based on a *midrash*. Even though Scripture itself states that Avraham fought with the help of three hundred and eighteen soldiers, Rashi cites a *midrash* (*Nedarim* 32a) which says:

Our rabbis said: It was Eliezer alone whom he armed, and it (318) is the numerical value of his name. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 14:14)

The *midrash* is puzzling: Is it not enough for *Chazal* that Avraham defeats the four kings with only three hundred and eighteen men? What brings *Chazal* to reduce their number to Eliezer alone?

As *Chazal* say: "A verse does not depart from its plain meaning" (*Shabbat* 63a), and it is hard to deny that the verses explicitly state that Avraham smites the four kings with the help of his servants. Therefore, it seems that *Chazal* mean to say that even though three hundred and eighteen soldiers went out with Avraham, Avraham and Eliezer alone would have been enough to bring victory. The foundation for this approach is found in what is related about Gidon and his servant Pura:

And it came to pass the same night, that the Lord said unto him: “Arise, get you down upon the camp; for I have delivered it into your hand. But if you fear to go down, go you with Pura your servant down to the camp. And you shall hear what they say; and afterward shall your hands be strengthened to go down upon the camp.”

Then went he down with Pura his servant unto the outermost part of the armed men that were in the camp. Now the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like locusts for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand which is upon the seashore for multitude.

And when Gidon was come, behold, there was a man telling a dream unto his fellow, and saying: “Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came unto the tent, and smote it that it fell, and turned it upside down, that the tent lay flat.”

And his fellow answered and said: “This is nothing else save the sword of Gidon the son of Yoash, a man of Israel: into his hand God has delivered Midian, and all the host.”

And it was so, when Gidon heard the telling of the dream, and the interpretation thereof, that he worshipped; and he returned into the camp of Israel, and said: “Arise; for the Lord has delivered into your hand the host of Midian.” (*Shoftim* 7:9-15)

The story of Gidon and Pura also brings to mind the battle of Mikhmas (I *Shemuel* 14), in which Yonatan, the son of Shaul, and his servant succeed in overcoming and scattering an entire camp. When *Chazal* draw a comparison between Gidon's battle and the battle waged by Avraham, it is not surprising that they tell us that Avraham goes down to the camp of the kings as do Gidon and Yonatan in their day, and therefore *Chazal* tell us that Avraham goes down with Eliezer alone.

These parallels are the basis for the comparison between the two figures, Gidon and Avraham. In the wake of this comparison, a *midrash* is created which states that just as Gidon begins his rebellion with the smashing of his father's altar, not being afraid to stand up to all the people and erect an altar to God as an alternative to the altar set up for the Ba'al, so too Avraham destroys his father's idols and establishes an alternative religious position: the worship of God.

**III. The Worship of Chananya, Misha’el and Azarya**

As we explained the story of the smashing of the idols, so too we can explain the story of Avraham's being cast into the fiery furnace. Here, too, it would appear that the *aggada* is based on another biblical passage: the casting of Chananya, Misha’el and Azarya (renamed Shadrakh, Meishakh and Aveid Nego in Babylon) into the fiery furnace. Thus it is related in the Book of *Daniel*:

Nevukhadnetzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits; he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Nevukhadnetzar the king sent to gather together the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which Nevukhadnetzar the king had set up…

And the herald cried aloud: “To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that at what time you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, harp, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music, you fall down and worship the golden image that Nevukhadnetzar the king has set up; and whoso falls not down and worships shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace…”

Therefore at that time, when all the peoples heard the sound of the horn… all the peoples, the nations, and the languages, fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nevukhadnetzar the king had set up. 

Wherefore at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and brought accusation against the Jews… “You, O king, have made a decree, that every man that shall hear the sound of the horn… shall fall down and worship the golden image… There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrakh, Meishakh and Aveid Nego. These men, O king, have not regarded you: they serve not your gods, nor worship the golden image which you have set up…”

Nevukhadnetzar spoke and said unto them: “Is it true, O Shadrakh, Meishakh and Aveid Nego, that you serve not my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? Now if you be ready that at what time you hear the sound of the horn… you fall down and worship the image which I have made [it is well]; but if you worship not, you shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is the god that shall deliver you out of my hands?”

Shadrakh, Meishakh and Aveid Nego, answered and said to the king: “O Nevukhadnetzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us, He will deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image which you have set up.”

Then was Nevukhadnetzar filled with fury, and the form of his visage was changed, against Shadrakh, Meishakh and Aveid Nego; he spoke, and commanded that they should heat the furnace seven times more than it was wont to be heated. And he commanded certain mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrakh, Meishakh and Aveid Nego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace… And these three men, Shadrakh, Meishakh and Aveid Nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace… And the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, and the king's ministers, being gathered together, saw these men, that the fire had no power upon their bodies, nor was the hair of their head singed, neither were their cloaks changed, nor had the smell of fire passed on them…

Nevukhadnetzar spoke and said: “Blessed be the God of Shadrakh, Meishakh and Aveid Nego, who has sent His angel, and delivered His servants that trusted in Him, and have changed the king's word, and have yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God.” (*Daniel* 3:1-28)

The story opens with a huge gold statue, sixty cubits high. It is not a tower that reaches up into the sky, but, as the commentatorsdescribe it, "a monument in his own honor" (Tosafot, *Pesachim* 53b, s.v. *Ma*) It appears to have been a grand image of Nevukhadnetzar himself. His subjects are required to turn to the statue with their heads lifted up and with their hearts directed to "their father in heaven" — the ruler of the state.[[2]](#footnote-2) Though very different, this sight is reminiscent of Moshe, who raises his staff at the top of the hill, as the people of Israel look up to the raised staff and subjugate their hearts to their father in heaven.

Alongside the statue there is an orchestra. All of a sudden many instruments begin to play, and at that very moment, all nations, peoples and tongues kneel and bow and offer thanks. This sight cannot but remind us of what is related in *Parashat Noach*: "And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech" (*Bereishit* 11:1). There is, however, a striking difference between the two stories: In the story of the Tower of Babel, the single language became divided, and in the end there are many languages for the many peoples; whereas in the story of Nevukhadnetzar's statue, an attempt is made to unite the different people, nations and tongues into one.

Nevukhadnetzar reaches a new status. No one before him has achieved total control over so many peoples. A world ruled by a king like Nevukhadnetzar raises a problem for people of faith: Who is the king of the world? The prophet himself says that God delivered the entire world into the hands of Nevukhadnetzar:

I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are upon the face of the earth, by My great power and by My outstretched arm; and I give it unto whom it seems right unto Me. And now have I given all these lands into the hand of Nevukhadnetzar, the king of Babylon, My servant; and the beasts of the field also have I given him to serve him. And all the nations shall serve him, and his son, and his son's son, until the time of his own land come; and then many nations and great kings shall make him their bondman. And it shall come to pass, that the nation and the kingdom which will not serve the same Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, and that will not put their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation will I visit, says the Lord, with the sword, and with the famine, and with the pestilence, until I have consumed them by his hand. (*Yirmeyahu* 27:5-8)

In the Book of *Daniel*, Nevukhadnetzar's objective is explicitly stated: abolition of the kingdom of God.[[3]](#footnote-3) Indeed, had it not been for Chananya, Misha’el and Azarya, he would have succeeded. God's messengers, the representatives of the people of Israel, arise and upset Nevukhadnetzar's plans, to the point that in the end he is forced to concede to them. Then God's victory over the kingdom of Nevukhadnetzar finds expression, and Nevukhadnetzar praises God for that.

Against this background let us now re-examine the story of the Generation of the Dispersion, which includes Avraham. Like Nevukhadnetzar, so too Nimrod rules in Babylon (*Bereishit* 10:10), reigning from there over the entire land. He erects a tower (*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 23), and his objective is to elevate his kingdom to the divine level of an all-powerful ruler. Avraham stands in his way, just as Chananya, Misha’el and Azarya do in the days of Nevukhadnetzar. Avraham proves to Nimrod that he is not omnipotent, thereby making room for faith in the King of the Universe. Nimrod's people divide up into many nations. The dream of a human ruler over all of humanity evaporates, for only one king is worthy of that title: God Himself.

*Chazal* describe Avraham's confrontation with Nimrod against the background of a fiery furnace and a miraculous rescue from it, as happens with Chananya, Misha’el and Azarya in their struggle with Nevukhadnetzar.

Let us close with Rambam's words regarding Avraham:

When he [Avraham] 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 the 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] may 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].

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. (*Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1:3)

Translated by David Strauss

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1. Our estimate regarding the number of soldiers is based on the fact that a hundred and twenty thousand of them died in the first battle, leaving fifteen thousand for the last battle. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A similar phenonemon is found in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea: two statues of the previous two rulers, a father and his son, both of whom have died, the grandson now ruling in their place. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See at length in my book, *Daniel: Galut Ve-hitgalut* (Alon Shevut: 2006), pp. 57-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)