

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

"By What Shall I Know"?

Question and Covenant

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

I.

We tend to think of a divine covenant, a treaty with God, as something good - not just good, but wholly good. It is a gift from God, granted to the forefathers and passed on to future generations. We expect our covenants to include the promise of nationhood, possession of the land of Israel, the promise of divine caring and perhaps some form of religious responsibility. However, we do not expect them to include suffering.

The "covenant between the pieces" ("brit bein ha-betarim") shatters this expectation. In the very first formal covenant granted to Avraham by God, God promises suffering, and much of it.

"And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Avram; and behold a horror of great darkness fell upon him. And He said to Avram, Know surely that your children shall be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years..." (Bereishit 15:12-14)

The covenant between the pieces is primarily a formal guarantee of God's promise of the land of Israel to Avraham's descendants (see 15:18-21), a clearly positive event. Yet as part of the process of contracting this covenant, Avraham is gripped by fear and horror, a premonition and foreshadowing of his children's suffering. As part of the covenant itself, Avraham is promised not just the land, but also exile and suffering. This seems strange and contradictory.

To rephrase this in more analytic terminology, Why does the covenant include the promise of suffering? Why does God choose the moment of the formal treaty, the time of a great gift to Avraham, to inform him of the horrible future? In fact, why does Avraham need to know at all about the future exile in Egypt?

This series of questions leads us to the classic formulation of the problem. Above, I phrased the problem primarily in literary and dramatic terms: a problem of the inclusion of suffering, or the informing of Avraham. But if we shift for a moment to the theological and philosophical plane, we may phrase a crucially different question. What is the cause of the suffering? Why does God decree it?

II.

I have always been convinced that Chapter Fifteen itself provides some crucial clues for resolving these problems. Shortly before the instructions for the gathering of the animals, the splitting of the animals and the arrangement of the animals to be used in the covenant ceremony (15:9-11), God appears to Avraham and declares His intention to grant the land to Avraham as an inheritance (15:7). Avraham's response is immediate and pointed. "And he said, Lord God, by what shall I know (ba-meh eida) that I shall inherit it?" (15:8). A few verses later, after the "ceremony preparation" section mentioned above (15:9-11), we confront the section of "suffering" (15:12-14). Let us look carefully at part of the text again.

"And He said to Avram, Know surely (yadoa teida) that your children shall be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years..." (Bereishit 15:12-14)

In delivering the decree of suffering, God utilizes the key word of Avraham's question. God's statement, "Know surely," a translation of a double usage of the word for "know," echoes Avraham's request for knowledge. Avraham asks for knowledge, and God grants it to him. Apparently, the inclusion of suffering in the covenant between the pieces is somehow related to Avraham's request.

III.

The overarching structure of Chapter Fifteen may well support this point. Let us take a look at the beginning of the chapter.

"After these things, the word of God came to Avram in a vision, saying, Fear not Avram: I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." (15:1)

The preface of the sentence, "After these things," refers to the events of Chapter Fourteen, namely the war (see Rashi 15:1), and clearly signals an organic connection between the war story of Chapter Fourteen and the covenant story of Chapter Fifteen. The linguistic and thematic connection between God as the shield (magen) of Avraham here (15:1) and God as the deliverer (migen) of Avraham's enemies into his hands (14:20) further strengthens this reading.

Finally, on the thematic plane, the last scene of the war story (14:17-24) depicts a meeting between Avraham, the victor in the war, and the King of Sedom, the representative of the coalition of five Canaanite kings defeated by the four Mesopotamian kings and subsequently saved by Avraham. The scene takes place in a location known as the "Valley of the King" (14:17) in the presence of Malki-zedek, a priest of "the most high God." According to the standard way these things work, Avraham, the savior of the Canaanite principalities, should be accepted as ruler by the Canannites, here in the "Valley of the King" in front of the representative of the high God. At the very least, some sort of tribute should be paid to Avraham and something akin to a noble-vassal relationship sealed by a formal treaty should be established. The King of Sedom plays his role perfectly. He offers Avraham all the booty of the war as the first part of a treaty initiative. However, Avraham refuses all reward. Only food for his allies is required. He turns down all reward, all formal relationship with Sedom and its coalition, and any hint of treaty and sovereignty (14:23-24.)

In point of fact, Avraham turns down reward and treaty not just with Sedom, its allies and locality, but implicitly with a far vaster grouping and area. A careful reading of Chapter

Fourteen yields the following conclusion. The four kings, who originate in Mesopotamia, travel across the eastern bank of the Jordan, carrying out numerous battles along the way. Near the southern end of the Dead Sea, they smite the five kings and then continue north towards Damascus through the west bank of the Jordan. They are on their way home. No more battles ensue. Their power and control is unchallenged; they are the rulers of the entire land of Canaan. In a certain sense, Avraham's defeat of the kings and his rescue of the Canaanites constitutes military hegemony over the entire region. It generates the possibility of reward, treaty and control over the entire area.

In the very next verse, "After these things" (15:1), God appears to Avraham and promises him great reward - not reward and treaty received from kings of flesh and blood, but reward and treaty received from the King of Kings, God Himself. The first verse of Chapter Fifteen in fact constitutes a preface to the covenant between the pieces, a story of reward and treaty.

The interpretation of the covenant between the pieces as a reward for "treaty refusal" forces us to take a look at the structure of Chapter Fifteen. At first glance, the structure seems to dictate against this interpretation. The architecture breaks down as follows:

- 15:1 God's promise of reward;
- 15:2-6 Avraham's lament for children and the sign of the stars;
- 15:7 God's statement that He has brought Avraham from Ur Kasdim to give him this land as an inheritance;
- 15:8 Avraham's question, "How will I know?"
- 15:9-11 the ceremony preparations;
- 15:12-16 the promise of suffering;
- 15:17-21 the ceremony, treaty and conditions.

On some accounts (Ibn Ezra), the chapter should be divided into two halves, the first consisting of sections one and two above (the promise of reward, the lament for children and sign of the stars), and the second half consisting of the remainder of the chapter (the story of the covenant between the pieces). If this is correct, it seems hard to interpret the covenant between the pieces as a response to the treaty refusal of Chapter Fourteen.

In fact, I have implicitly argued for a different interpretation of the structure of Chapter Fifteen. The entire chapter constitutes a single unit focused on the covenant between the pieces from the very start (see Ramban). So, the lament for children and the sign of the stars, constitutes a digression, a textual and thematic interruption by Avraham. While God is concerned with granting the treaty, Avraham is concerned by his childlessness. God grants Avraham a sign and quickly returns to the topic at hand, the land and the treaty (section three.)

On this account, the structure of the chapter consists of God's attempt to contract the covenant between the pieces and a series of digressions initiated by Avraham. Theoretically, if Avraham had not spoken in response, the action could have consisted of sections one, three, five, and seven - no sign of the stars, no question of "how will I know" and no promise of suffering. All of this, sections two, four and six, constitutes a series of questions and responses, digressions initiated by Avraham. They are secondary to God's central agenda in Chapter Fifteen.

Once again, this time from a structural-thematic perspective, we arrive at the same conclusion. The promise of suffering connects to Avraham's speech. The knowledge comes to Avraham as a result of his request for knowledge.

IV.

In commenting on Isaiah's accusation that "Your first father sinned" (Isaiah 43:27), Rashi pithily states: "By saying, 'By what shall I know?'" Apparently, in explicating Isaiah, Rashi expresses the opinion that Avraham's statement in Bereishit Chapter Fifteen, "God, by what shall I know that I shall inherit it?" (15:8), constitutes a sin. This does not seem unreasonable. God has already repeatedly promised the land to Avraham and just stated that He brought Avraham from Ur Kasdim to give him the land to inherit. Avraham's response seems to be something along the lines of, "How do I really know that?" Avraham's reply appears brazen and skeptical.

If so, we may be inclined to interpret the "knowledge" of 15:12-14, the promise of suffering and exile, as almost a measure-for-measure punishment for Avraham's query. Avraham expresses skepticism, a lack of trust, and desires immediate knowledge, perhaps even immediate concrete fulfillment of the prior promises. The problem is precisely the long path, the delays and the difficulties. God greets Avraham's demand with a different type of knowledge, the knowing that an even longer path, more difficulty and suffering lie ahead. This is in fact the opinion held by the amora Shemuel (Nedarim 32a): the exile in Egypt constitutes a punishment for Avraham's demand.

Although this reading does explain the connection between Avraham's request (15:8) and the inclusion of the promise of suffering (15:12-14) argued for above, it seems a bit extreme. Does Avraham's crime justify a four-hundred-year punishment of his descendants? For that matter, Avraham's request may not even be a crime. Many Biblical interpreters have read the question as an expression not of mistrust but rather of uncertainty. How does Avraham know that he will not sin in the future? How does he know that his descendants will not sin? How does he know that the current inhabitants will not repent? Avraham's question rises from the depths of his self-doubt, not his mistrust of God. Avraham asks for certainty, not out of impatience but out of confusion and concern. His desire for knowledge and guarantee is reasonable and legitimate (Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Seforno, Abarbanel.)

If so, we have not yet arrived at an understanding of the connection. If we refrain from reading Avraham's request as a brazen expression of mistrust, we cannot interpret the inclusion of suffering as a measure-for-measure punishment. We still do not understand the inclusion of suffering in the covenant between the pieces.

V.

The imagery of affliction and suffering resurfaces in a striking fashion in Chapter Sixteen. The core scene of the chapter is of course familiar. Pregnant with Avraham's child, desperate to escape the suffering and affliction inflicted on her by Sarai, Hagar flees to the wilderness. There, alongside a spring, she is found, informed and instructed by an angel of God.

In describing Sarai's persecution of Hagar, the text (16:6) utilizes the same term for affliction utilized previously in the promise of suffering (15:13). Both "va-te'aneha" (16:6) and "ve-inu" (15:13) are variants of the verb stem ayin, nun, heh, the term for affliction and suffering.

Similarly, the angel tells Hagar to return to her mistress to suffer (ve-hitani) under her rule (16:9), a second usage of the term for affliction. Finally, Hagar is instructed to name her son Yishma'el, meaning "God hears," for God "has heard your affliction/suffering (anyekh)" (16:11).

Interestingly, affliction is not the only linguistic and thematic echo of Chapter Fifteen found in Chapter Sixteen. In between being ordered to return to the clutches of her mistress (16:9) and being instructed to name her child Yishma'el (6:10), Hagar is promised that her "seed" (zarekh) will be "much" multiplied (harbeh arbeh). Her descendants will be uncountable. But this, of course, is the promise and language of first half of Chapter Fifteen. Avraham is promised "much" (harbeh, 15:1), and told in the "sign of the stars" that his descendants will be uncountable (15:5).

Finally, the name Hagar, which appears seven times in the chapter (16:1,3,4,8,15,16), and the title, "Egyptian maidservant" or "maidservant," constitute a linguistic pun and thematic parallel to the status of "ger" (stranger) and "eved" (servant or slave) promised to Avraham's descendants (15:13). Hagar is a stranger in both name and fact. After all, she is from Egypt, a different land. She serves and slaves far from her place. This is exactly the promise made to Avraham. It almost need not be mentioned that she is Egyptian, a slave for residents of Canaan. The descendants of those Canaan residents will of course be strangers and slaves in Egypt.

If we add it up, factoring in the promise of place and future nationhood made to Hagar's descendants at the end of the angel's instructions (16:12), the joint paradigm of both Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen includes four elements: 1) the status of stranger-servant-slave, 2) affliction and suffering, 3) multiplication of seed bordering on the uncountable, and 4) future nationhood. What are we to make of this parallel?

The key to deciphering the meaning of the parallel may lie not in the overlap between the chapters but in a central addition to the paradigm that occurs in the story of "Hagar and the Angel." As pointed out above, in between step three, multiplication of seed, and step four, future nationhood, and as a transition between the two stages, the angel informs Hagar that she is pregnant and will bear a son. He is to be named Yishma'el, "for God has heard your affliction/suffering (anyekh)" (16:11). God hears the suffering of the oppressed. In fact, on both the textual and logical levels, God's sensitivity and response to the suffering of the oppressed constitutes an intermediate stage between the negative and positive parts of the paradigm. God's "hearing" of the downtrodden leads Him to multiply them and give them nationhood and place. The paradigm in fact contains a fifth and key element: God's "hearing".

Our paradigm is in fact the paradigm of "Oppression and Redemption," or perhaps more accurately, Exodus. This is confirmed not just by the parallel to the covenant between the pieces, which obviously anticipates the redemption from Egypt, but also by a quick glance at the book of Shemot. At the beginning of Shemot, we are repeatedly told that the Egyptians enslaved and "afflicted" the children of Israel (Shemot 1:11-14). Nevertheless, "the more they afflicted them (ya'anu), the more they multiplied" (1:12). The connection is obvious. Just as in the story of "Hagar and the Angel," and counter to the expected, the downtrodden grow and multiply.

Similarly, the beginnings of redemption from Egyptian affliction parallel the Hagar-Angel story. As a preface to Moshe's first meeting with God (at the burning bush, 3:1-4:17), the

Torah tells us that the chief Israel groaned and cried from the burden of their work (2:23). God "hears" (2:24) and the redemption begins to unfold.

A careful tracking of the points above should bring us to a relatively counter-intuitive conclusion. The redemption from Egypt is not the first or only time that God has redeemed. It is not the sole example of this paradigm in history. God has also redeemed Hagar-Yishma'el. They too have suffered and been granted by God, in His mercy and justice, multiplication, redemption and nationhood. In fact, this claim is confirmed by the prophet Amos. In comforting and, ironically, simultaneously chastising the Israelites, Amos states:

"Are you not as much to me as the children of the Kushiyyim, O children of Yisra'el? says God. Have I not brought up Yisra'el out of the land of Mizrayim? And the Pelishtim from Kaftor, and Aram from Kir?" (Amos 9:7)

Apparently, Israel is not the only nation to have been redeemed and given place and nationhood. The same has happened to the Pelishtim, Aramim and the Yishmaelim.

The point seems to be that the "Oppression and Redemption" paradigm, involving suffering and God's response, does not necessarily involve any particular merit on the part of the sufferer and redeemed. Neither the Philistines, the Aramites, Hagar, Yishma'el or the Yishma'elites are particularly virtuous characters according to the Bible. The very introduction of the paradigm, the story of "Hagar and the Angel," informs us that Yishma'el, despite his inspired name and origins, will become no more than "a wild ass of a man" (16:12), one whose "hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him" (ibid.). The paradigm is a manifestation of God's normal or natural mode of running the world, what we traditionally term "general providence," rather than the product of any special tampering with God's standard rules for history.

VI.

Let us briefly turn to the conclusion of Chapter Sixteen. At the end of the chapter, the Torah informs us that Avraham named his son Yishma'el (16:15). I have always been bothered by this formulation. How does Avraham know to name the boy Yishma'el? After all, Avraham is conspicuously absent from the core scene of the chapter, "Hagar and the Angel" (16:7-14). The revelation and instructions are delivered to Hagar, not to Avraham. The simple answer is that Hagar reports the events to Avraham upon her return (Ramban). If so, Avraham's acceptance of her bizarre story and the consequent naming of Yishma'el constitute a crucial turning point in Avraham's character and conscience.

On the simplest level, the naming reflects the recognition that it was wrong to abuse Hagar. God now grants His instructions to a wretched maidservant, not to Avraham, the normal address. On a deeper level, believing Hagar and naming the child Yishma'el reflects learning and internalizing the lesson of the paradigm sketched above. God cares for the wretched and oppressed. He multiplies them and gives them nationhood. This is God's way, without condition, and without the requirement of special righteousness on the part of the oppressed.

To close the circle, the story of Chapter Sixteen, the conception and birth of Yishma'el, is also a story about God and Avraham. It is about teaching Avraham the ways of God, the paradigm of "Oppression and Redemption." If so, the "promise of suffering," the inclusion of exile and affliction in the covenant between the pieces, and the events of Chapter Sixteen, the

learning of God's ways, jointly provide an answer to Avraham's confusion and original question of "How do I know"?

Avraham is uncertain, after all; he or his descendants may be undeserving of nationhood. By what virtue will they inherit the land? God's response is two-tiered. First, He reveals to Avraham the fact, perhaps as punishment, perhaps for the eventual benefit of the Children of Israel, or perhaps as part of the normal ebb and flow of history and human free will, that his descendants will suffer and be afflicted in a foreign land. But this is only the first stage. Affliction triggers God's unconditional action. God hears the oppressed, brings them to their own place and grants them nationhood. Hence, God will similarly redeem Avraham's descendants. Even if Avraham sins, even if his descendants sin, God's rules of history, caring and redemption are immutable and unchangeable. God will grant Avraham's descendants nationhood and bring them to their land.

Hence, we have arrived at an alternate explanation of the connection between Avraham's request for knowledge and the inclusion of suffering in the covenant between the pieces. The connection is not necessarily one of sin and punishment. Rather, it is about the ever-evolving relationship between God and Avraham and the learning of God's ways. It is about learning the lesson of the "Oppression and Redemption" paradigm, divine rules of history and divine caring for the oppressed. This lesson began in the covenant between the pieces and is continued, expanded and repeated in Chapter Sixteen.

VII.

In the above, I have attempted to explain the inclusion of "the promise of suffering" in the covenant between the pieces. Why does Avraham need to know? On the assumption that the knowledge he receives stems from his request for knowledge, I have explained the inclusion as either a product of a sin-punishment dynamic or, preferably, part and parcel of Avraham's ongoing education in the ways of God, a response to his uncertainty rather than his sin.

Along the way, I have argued for a particular reading of Chapters 14-16, the core of Parashat Lekh Lekha. On the one hand, Chapter Fifteen, the covenant between the pieces, constitutes a response to Avraham's refusal of reward and treaty in Chapter Fourteen. On the other hand, through the ongoing dialogue between God and Avraham in the chapter, through the process of working through Avraham's desires and anxieties, it introduces a new paradigm, the model of "Oppression and Redemption," repeated and elaborated in the ensuing chapter, the story of Hagar and Yishma'el.

Finally, I have also maintained that the redemption from Egypt, the story of the first part of Shemot, constitutes an occurrence of the "Oppression and Redemption" model. The Children of Israel are strangers in a foreign land, enslaved and afflicted. They multiply, are heard by God, and eventually are brought to their land, to full nationhood. We might be inclined to draw the conclusion that this is all there is to the redemption from Egypt. It is a normal process, driven by God's response to suffering, part of the standard way that God runs the world. But this would be an error. The redemption of the Jewish people involves far more than just mercy and justice for the oppressed.

Let us take a look at the verse that prefaces the encounter at the burning bush, the first stirrings of redemption.

"And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant, and Avraham and Isaac and Jacob ... and God knew." (Shemot 2:23-4)

God not only hears, but also remembers the covenant and the forefathers. The redemption of the Children of Israel is not just about the iron rule of Oppression and Redemption. It is not just about God caring for the pain and hearing the suffering of the afflicted. It is also about the covenantal relationship between God, the forefathers and their descendants. It is not just universal but also particular. It is not just normal but also supra-normal.

In the language of our discussion, it is not just about the link between Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen of Bereishit, the paradigm of Oppression and Redemption. Rather it is also about the link between Chapter Fifteen and Chapter Fourteen of Bereishit. It is a reward for the unique action of Avraham, who, forsaking all material and temporal compensation, received instead a unique relationship with God, a covenant with the divine.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

The debate regarding the cause of the exile in Egypt usually focuses on two possibilities, either: 1) punishment, or 2) refinement of the people. (See Ramban 12:10 and Aba's lengthy discussion.) In the shiur above, I tried to focus on the inclusion of suffering in the covenant and avoided entering the thick of this debate. Nevertheless: Does the shiur above include a third possible explanation of the exile in Egypt? See Seforno 15:13.

Reread Chapter Sixteen. Think about Sarai's treatment of Hagar and the parallels between Chapters Sixteen and Fifteen mentioned above. Can the parallels provide a new version of the punishment interpretation?

Can the parallel between Chapters Sixteen and Fifteen mean that Yishma'el could have been the covenantal son? Could Avraham have thought this? Read 17:15-22 in light of this possibility. What is going on in 17:19-20? But see 16:12.