

## Avraham's Mission

By Rav Shalom Berger

Only rarely does the Torah allow us to be privy to God's thoughts, to understand why He chooses to act one way or another. Just prior to the Torah's account of the destruction of Sedom we are given that privilege, when the Torah explains why Avraham will be informed of the impending destruction.

"And God said: Shall I hide from Avraham the thing that I plan to do, seeing that Avraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all of the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him; for I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of God, to do justice and judgment; that God may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him." ([Bereishit 18:17-19](#))

Even after this explanation, there are still many things left unclear. The Torah does not need to inform us that God plans to discuss Sedom's destruction with Avraham; it could simply record the conversation (which is the way the Torah ordinarily presents us with information). The Torah must see it as essential for our understanding of the story to know WHY God has chosen to have this conversation. But do the passages quoted really help us understand why God feels this need to share with Avraham His plans for the destruction of Sedom? There are several confusing points:

- a) Why is Avraham's future as a great nation important?
- b) What is the connection between Sedom and Avraham's educational plans for his children (especially considering that Yitzchak is yet to be born)?
- c) Which of God's promises to Avraham is being referred to, and why is it important here?

The Rashbam (18:17) comments that, given God's promise that this land will belong to Avraham and his children, any major issues needed to be "approved" by Avraham. (Remember that the area of Sedom was described in last week's parasha as being very fertile prior to its destruction.)

"Shall I hide from Avraham the thing that I plan to do,' i.e. that I plan to destroy Sedom, for I know that [Avraham's] descendants will keep the way of God and will merit receiving

what was promised to Avraham - namely, that I will give them the Land of Canaan - and these cities fall within the inheritance of his descendants."

If we take a step back and look at the context of this episode, perhaps we will get a better picture of the issues involved.

"Our father Avraham [may he rest in peace] was subjected to ten trials (nisyonot), and he withstood them all, indicating how great was the love of Avraham Avinu [for God]." ([Avot 5:3](#))

Avram's first command - what the Mishna in Avot refers to as his first test, his first nisayon - was to move to Israel - "Lekh lekha" (12:1). Included in the promise that accompanied that command are the same elements that we find expressed in God's musings prior to the destruction of Sedom.

"And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, and you will be a blessing; and I will bless them who bless you and curse him who curses you, and in you shall all of the families of the earth be blessed." (12:2-3)

From the first, Avram is informed that in sending him to Israel, God sees a larger purpose. Avram is to become a great nation, through which the rest of the world will receive divine blessings.

Almost immediately upon fulfilling the command to move to "the land that I will show you" (12:1), Avram is informed that his family's destiny is tied to this land:

"God appeared to Avram and said: 'To your seed will I give this land,' and there he built an altar to God who appeared to him." (12:7)

At this early stage in the story, Avram is informed of two basic, intertwined divine promises: 1) he will have descendants; 2) their future is in this land. The first stage of God's fulfilling these promises takes place in the stories of Avram's trials and tribulations in Parshiyot Lekh Lekha and Vayera.

The fulfillment of these promises is, of course, dependent on God's actions, but they are also, apparently, subject to Avram's success in understanding, appreciating and carrying out his mission. The certainty of the above-quoted Mishna in Pirkei Avot notwithstanding, from the time of Chazal and onwards there have been those who find fault with Avram's responses to some of the more difficult aspects of his Aliya. Already in the

Gemara we find that Chazal point to a number of Avram's actions as being the root cause of the Egyptian exile.

"Said Rabbi Abahu in the name of Rabbi Elazar: Why was Avraham Avinu punished so that his descendants were enslaved in Egypt for 210 years? Because he made use of Torah scholars as soldiers [in saving Lot and the people of Sedom from the four kings], as it says, 'He led forth his trained servants, born in his own house' (14:14).

Shemuel says: It is because he questioned the Holy One's intentions [prior to the Brit Bein Ha-betarim], as it says, 'By what shall I know that I will inherit it?' (15:8).

And Rabbi Yochanan says: It is because he restrained [the] people [of Sedom] from entering under the wings of the Shekhina, as it says, 'Give me the souls, and keep the property for yourself' (14:21)." ([Nedarim 32a](#))

The opinions quoted in the Gemara indicate that Avram's descendants are punished either because of Avram's error in judgment with regard to the people of Sedom (he brought his servants in to do battle inappropriately, or he neglected to seize the opportunity to introduce the people of Sedom to belief in God), or because he questioned whether God's promises with regard to his family's future in the land were certain.

The Rishonim, following the lead of this Chazal, point to other examples of deficiencies in Avram's response to adversity. The Ramban, for example, points to Avram's trip to Egypt in the face of famine (12:10) as the root cause of the eventual exile and slavery in Egypt. Similarly, he points to the incident in which Hagar and Yishmael are driven out of Avram's home (16:6) as being a serious sin, one that leads to future suffering at the hands of Yishmael's descendants.

The problematic actions mentioned above are followed in the Torah by a series of britot (covenants). First we find the Brit Bein Ha-betarim (15:9-20), which emphasizes the national return to the Chosen Land. Following that covenant, we find the command and covenant of circumcision, brit mila (17:1-22), in which Avram becomes Avraham (the father of many nations, 17:5) and is promised that his own son, Yitzchak, will inherit the Land.

According to this approach, Parashat Lekh Lekha concludes with a series of covenants whose apparent purpose is to quell Avraham's fear and concern about the promises that have been made. Avraham's actions criticized by the Gemara and Rishonim are understandable from the perspective of the nomad threatened by the realities of his surroundings (doubt, war, local chieftains, famine). Now girded with a covenantal relationship with God, we anticipate that when faced with similar threatening situations in the future, Avraham's responses will be tempered by his understanding of his destiny - a great nation of his descendants in the land promised to him by God.

With the beginning of Parashat Vayera, we have our first opportunity to evaluate Avraham's reactions to the difficulties that face him. In fact, the Torah records that in Parashat Vayera Avraham is faced with situations that precisely parallel those situations that Avraham faced in Parashat Lekh Lekha, where he was found wanting. (This perhaps foreshadows the Rambam's assertion [[Hilkhot Teshuva 2:1](#)], "What is complete repentance? When the penitent is faced with a situation similar to the one which previously led to sin, and he does not commit the sin again.") In Parashat Vayera, Avraham is faced again with decisions regarding the people of Sedom. He is, again, faced with famine. Finally, he is faced again with decisions regarding the future of his family and Yishmael's in it.

The story of the impending destruction of Sedom is the first occasion on which Avraham is tested following the covenants at the end of Parashat Lekh Lekha. Will his attitude towards the land that was promised to him - and the people therein - be the same as before, or has Avram come to understand his role as the leader/director/inheritor of this land? Will Avraham fulfill the promise of Lekh Lekha (12:3), "And in you shall all of the families of the world be blessed?" That, in effect, is the question that God ponders, as the Torah shares His thoughts with us.

"Avraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all of the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him." (18:18)

In order for the covenants to be carried out, there must be a change of attitude on Avraham's part, a realization that these things are promised to him by God, and that Avraham, therefore, must take charge and actively ensure in the welfare of the land.

Avraham's reaction, his defense of Sedom and its inhabitants, is certainly the appropriate response. Perhaps (in response to those opinions of [Nedarim 32a](#) that blame Avram for relinquishing the Sedomites in Parashat Lekh Lekha) in Avraham's arguments on Sedom's behalf is the implicit offer to play an active role in their rehabilitation, should they be saved, thereby guaranteeing a moral, God-fearing force in the land.

Similarly, in contradistinction to his previous trip to Egypt, in this week's parasha Avraham and his family travel only as far as Gerar, thus remaining in Eretz Yisrael and discovering that (much to his surprise) the people of the land are, in fact, God-fearing. The choice of Yitzchak and rejection of Yishmael also follows God's promise that it is Yitzchak that will inherit the land promised to Avraham.

In short, following God's musing, we find a "correction" in Vayera of several problematic episodes in Lekh Lekha:

refuge in Egypt vs. refuge in Gerar

abandoning Sedom's people vs. defending Sedom's people

seeing future in Yishmael vs. seeing future in Yitzchak

Nevertheless, our parasha is not over. Avraham's final nisayon - Akeidat Yitzchak - is yet to come. It is only after Akeidat Yitzchak that the Torah concludes (22:18), "...and in your seed shall all of the nations of the world be blessed," thus completing the promises of 12:3 ("and in you shall all of the families of the earth be blessed") and 18:18 ("and all of the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him").

The Rashbam (22:1) argues that we find yet one more "failure" on the part of Avraham Avinu in Parashat Vayera, even after the covenants of Parashat Lekh Lekha. The covenant that Avraham concludes with Avimelech (21:22-34), promising that "You will not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my grandson, but according to the kindness that I have done to you, you shall do to me, and to the land in which you have sojourned" (21:23), indicates a lack of faith in God's covenant, "for the land of the Pelishtim was promised to Avraham and his descendants" (Rashbam).

Thus, we have an unexpected contrast with Lekh Lekha:

Covenants with God vs. Covenant with Avimelech

The Rashbam argues that this is what brings God to test/punish Avraham with Akeidat Yitzchak.

Following our reading of these parshiyot, this test is necessary in order to clarify one last time that it is God's covenant - and not Avimelech's - that will guarantee the future of Avraham's offspring in the land that has been promised.

This last nisayon brings us the full circle.

12:1 22:1

Go out... Go out...

to the land I will show you to one of the mountains I

will specify to you

And he departed And he arose and departed

Based on the Rashbam's understanding of the Akeida as a punishment for an inappropriate covenant with Avimelech, we can interpret the parallels as indicating that Avraham must realize that it is his failure to properly fulfill the original nisayon and accept the right and responsibility of the land (for him and his descendants) that has led to this nisayon. The "atonement" is the acceptance that it is God who is in charge, and that it is God's promises and covenants that are eternal and are to be relied upon. God's promise of a permanent relationship with Avraham's descendants in the land that He promised can only be realized when Avraham (and his descendants) recognize their responsibility and obligation to His covenants.

This is the concern that we hear expressed in God's thoughts and conversation with Avraham prior to the destruction of Sedom. We can retranslate the passage as follows:

"And God said: Shall I hide from Avraham the thing that I plan to do? If, indeed, Avraham is to become a great and mighty nation, and all of the nations of the earth are to be blessed in him, I must know that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of God, to do justice and judgment; that God may bring upon Avraham that which he has spoken of him." (18:17-19)

The blessings of the nations are dependent on Avraham and his descendants taking their rightful place in the world. Avraham must recognize his place and the place of his family in the land, and he must teach them of the covenants - the personal and national britot with God - through which God can keep His promises to Avraham's descendants; thus, he will offer blessings to all of the nations of the world.

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY:

1. According to the above shiur, Parashat Vayera offers Avraham an opportunity for a "retest" by presenting him with situations similar to those that were difficult for Avram in Parashat Lekh Lekha. The Ramban referred to above (12:10) criticizes Avram's behavior not only for leaving Eretz Yisrael for Egypt, but also for putting Sarai into danger. How does Avraham's dealing with the similar situation in Gerar match with Avram's behavior in Egypt? How can that be understood in light of the explanation suggested in this shiur?

2. As pointed out, Avram/Avraham is promised on at least three occasions that "all of the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him" (12:4, 18:18, 22:18). What does the Torah mean when it offers this promise? See Rashbam (28:14), where the same promise is repeated to Ya'akov, together with the Gemara in [Yevamot 63a](#) that quotes these passages. How does the Rashbam's interpretation differ from the normal usage of the term "berakha"?

3. The test that Avraham must pass will guarantee that his teachings will bring his descendants to "keep the way of God, to do justice and judgment" (18:19). What does the Torah have in mind when using these expressions? See [Yirmiyahu 9:22-23, 22:15-16](#), and compare with [Sanhedrin 57b](#). Do Chazal interpret the passage the same way it is used in Yirmiyahu?

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