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In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag

Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT TOLDOT - shiur #3

WHAT MITZVOT DID THE AVOT KEEP?

There are those who claim that the Avot kept the entire Torah - even the Oral Law and later Rabbinic prohibitions! Yet many students, when hearing this opinion, find it difficult to accept. In the following shiur, we discuss the pasuk that forms the source for this opinion; the debate among the commentators in regard to its interpretation; and an important lesson we can learn from this entire controversy.

INTRODUCTION

Early on in Parshat Toldot, the Torah tells us of a famine in Eretz Canaan that caused Yitzchak to consider moving temporarily to Egypt. However, God intervened – instructing Yitzchak to stay in Eretz Canaan, while re-affirming His promise to Avraham that Yitzchak would be the 'chosen son' (see 26:1-5).

We begin our shiur by taking special note of God's concluding remarks to Yitzchak at that time, as they form the basis of our discussion:

"ekev asher shama Avraham b'koli va'yishmor..."

[because Avraham listened to Me and kept:]]

"MISHMARTI, MITZVOTAI, CHUKOTAI, v'TOROTAI." (see 26:5)

When reading this pasuk, the obvious question arises:

What is the precise meaning of each of these words that describes the variety of ways that Avraham listened to God?

- a) SHAMA B'KOLI
- b) MISHMARTI
- c) MITZVOTAI
- d) CHUKOTAI
- e) TOROTAI

As we should expect, each of the classic commentators contemplates this question, but to our surprise, each commentator presents a very different answer. However, before we begin our study of those commentaries, let's first consider what we should expect to find.

THREE APPROACHES

To identify the meaning of these five words (in the above pasuk), one can take one of three basic approaches to define the meaning of each word:

1) **Look for that same word in the story of Avraham's life** - In other words, we must conduct a 'word search' for each of these phrases in the Torah's account of the life of Avraham (from Parshat Lech L'cha thru Chaya Sarah). If we find the same word, then that must be what this pasuk refers to. [If we don't we'll need to 'improvise'.]

[Rashbam, Chizkuni]

2) **Look for the same word later on in Chumash** - In other words, we must search the entire Torah to find the various categories of laws that each word refers to, and project their definition later on in Chumash to the life of Avraham Avinu in Sefer Breishit.

[Rashi, Ramban (based on Chazal)]

3) **Look for the concept behind that word or phrase** - In other words, based on the meaning of each word in the Hebrew language (and in Chumash), we identify the concept of what each word relates to. Then we search the Torah's story of the life of Avraham Avinu to find an event relating to that concept.

[Ibn Ezra, Ramban (l'fi ha'pshat), Radak, Seforno]

WOULDN'T IT BE NICE...

Ideally, if we found an example of each one of these phrases in the Torah's description of Avraham's life from Parshat Lech L'cha through Chaya Sarah, then the first approach would work best. However, a comprehensive search finds specific examples for only some of these words, causing most of the "parshanim" [commentators] to employ a different approach. We'll discuss their various interpretations and approaches according to the order we suggested in our introduction.

RASHBAM

Rashbam follows our first approach, as he obviously begins by searching for each specific word within the Torah's presentation of the story Avraham Avinu. For the first three words, Rashbam is quite 'successful', as he quotes a precise example for each word:

a) SHAMA B'KOLI - at the Akeyda, as the Torah states:

"...ekev asher shamata b'koli" (see 22:18)

b) MISHMARTI - to perform the mitzvah of brit milah.
quoting from Parshat Lech L'cha:
"v'ata et briti TISHMOR... himol kol zachar" (see 17:9)

c) MITZVOTAI - brit Milah on the EIGHTH day
as it states at the circumcision ceremony for Yitzchak:
"And Avraham circumcised Yitzchak his son when he was eight
days old - ka'asher TZIVAH oto ha'Elokim" (see 21:4)

However, for the last two words - CHUKOTAI & TOROTAI he is less successful, for there is no 'exact match'. Therefore, Rashbam defaults to a more general definition for "CHUKOTAI v"TOROTAI", understanding that they refer to all of the 'ethical' mitzvot that Avraham most certainly have kept. Even though God did not command these mitzvot explicitly, it is quite implicit from Chumash that God expected Avraham (and all mankind) to act in an ethical manner (see Breishit 18:18-19!).

Note how Rashbam defines this as "ikar pshuto shel mikra":

"CHUKOTAI V'TOROTAI: According to IKAR PSHUTO [simple pshat], all of the 'obvious mitzvot' [i.e. ethical laws] like stealing, adultery, coveting, justice, and welcoming guests; these we kept BEFORE Matan Torah, but were renewed and expounded in the covenant [of Matan Torah]." (see Rashbam 26:5)

Even though Rashbam understands "CHUKOTAI v"torotai" as general categories, he does bring several examples of these ethical mitzvot that are found in specific events in Avraham's life that are described in Sefer Breishit:

stealing - "asher GAZLU avdei Avimelech (see 21:25!!);
adultery & coveting / Pharaoh & Avimelech taking Sarah;
justice - w/ Melech Sdom & Shalem, after war of 5 kings;
welcoming guests - the 3 angels & story of Lot & Sdom!

CHIZKUNI - even 'better' than Rashbam

As we noted above, in his attempt to find a specific example for each word, Rashbam is only '3' for '5'. However, Chizkuni doesn't give up so quickly, and attempts to identify '5' for '5'!

After quoting the same first three examples as Rashbam, Chizkuni also finds specific examples for the words CHOK & TORAH as well, but to do so, he must employ some 'textual' assistance from Sefer Tehilim. What Chizkuni does is simply ingenious, as he turns to Sefer Tehillim, to

find references to the life of Avraham Avinu where we find a word similar to "chok" and "torah".

CHUKOTAI - refers once again to BRIT MILAH, but this time for all future generations as well, as it says in Tehilim:

"zachar l'olam brito... asher karat et Avraham... v'yamideha l'Yaakov l'CHOK, l'Yisrael BRIT OLAM..." (see Tehillim 105:8-10 /or "hodu" in Psukei d'zimrah!). Hence, the word "CHUKOTAI" in Breishit 26:5 relates to God's commandment to Avraham a Brit Milah: "v'hayta briti b'vsarchem l'BRIT OLAM" (see 17:13)

Similarly:

TOROTAI - refers to Avraham Avinu's original 'aliya' to Israel for it states in Tehillim: "askilcha v'ORECHA b'derech zu TAYLECH" (see Tehilim 32:8)

Here we find the word "hora'ah" - an instruction in the same pasuk that describes 'walking in the path of God' (similar to God's command to Avraham: of "lech l'cha..." (see 12:1-3)

This attempt by Chizkuni to identify a specific example for each word is beautiful, however he himself admits that it may be 'stretching' pshat a bit too much. Therefore, he concludes his peirush by suggesting that a more simple "pshat" for "Mitzvotai CHUKOTAI v'TOROTAI" would be to include the seven laws given to the children of Noach, which Avraham himself also kept. [How these seven mitzvot break down according to these three categories of "mitzvot", "chukim", and "torot" will be discussed by Radak & Ramban.]

RASHI - a similar, but opposite approach

Rashi employs a different approach (the second approach mentioned in our introduction), claiming that whatever these words refer to later on in Chumash, are precisely what Avraham kept in his own life time. [See Rashi inside.]

Note how Rashi categorizes these different words based on their definition later on in Chumash, and cites an example for each word from the entire spectrum of Halacha, from the Written Law, to the Oral Law, and even to later Rabbinic ordinations.

- a) SHAMA B'KOL - when I tested him (at the Akeyda/ 22:18)
- b) MISHMARTI - Rabbinic laws that protect the Torah laws
- c) MITZVOTAI - the 'logical' and ethical laws of the Torah
- d) CHUKOTAI - the Torah laws that have no apparent reason
- e) TOROTAI - the Oral law, and "halacha l'Moshe m'Sinai

Hence, according to Rashi, Avraham Avinu kept the entire Torah (even though it had not been given yet), or basically speaking, Avraham kept the same mitzvot that Rashi kept!

RAMBAN (according to Chazal)

As usual, Ramban begins his peirush by taking issue with Rashi's interpretation that the Avot kept all of the mitzvot. Ramban begins by questioning this very assumption. After all, if the Avot kept the entire Torah, how did Yaakov marry two sisters, and erect a MATZEYVA, etc.? Ramban attempts to 'patch' Rashi's interpretation, by explaining Chazal's statement that the Avot kept the entire Torah from a different angle. Ramban claims that this refers to the fact that the Avot kept SHABBAT, based on another Midrashic statement that the mitzvah of Shabbat is equal in value to keeping all the mitzvot of the Torah.

Hence, Avraham kept the mitzvah of shabbat as well as the seven mitzvot of Bnei Noach and brit milah. From this 'pool' of mitzvot that Avraham kept, Ramban explains how each word in 26:5 may relate to a specific category within the 7 Noachide laws:

MISHMARTI - extensions of "arayot" /forbidden marriages

MITZVOTAI - not to steal or kill

CHUKOTAI - "eiver min ha'chay" - a limb from a live animal

TOROTAI - "dinim" establishing civil laws & no idol worship

[Afterward, Ramban returns to his original questions on Rashi's Midrashic interpretation [adding a bit of 'zionism'], explaining the Avot's obligation to follow the ('future') laws of the Torah applied ONLY in Eretz Yisrael.]

RAMBAN - al derech ha'pshat

Ramban concludes his commentary by suggesting a totally different interpretation that he introduces as "al derecho ha'pshat" - [following the way of the simple meaning of the text]. In this approach (which will follow the third approach that we discussed in our introduction), Ramban simply follows the simple meaning of each word in Hebrew, and applies those concepts to events in the life of Avraham Avinu.

MISHMARTI

Most interesting is Rabman's understanding of "mishmarti". This word stems from the Hebrew word "li'shmor" - to guard. [A "shomer" is a watchman or body-guard.] Hence, Ramban explains that "vayishmor mishmarti" relates to how Avraham 'guarded' or 'protected' God, and that was by both preaching and teaching monotheism, and by publicly arguing against those who preached belief in other gods.

But where in Chumash does it say that Avraham did so?

Ramban explains that this is precisely the meaning of the phrase "va'yikra b'shem Hashem" in relation to Avraham Avinu (see Breishit 12:8, 13:4 and 21:33). [Note how Ramban's explanation of "va'yishmor mishmarti" reflects in many ways Ramban's own life experiences, as he too 'stood God's guard' by publicly arguing against those he attacked Judiasm!]

MITZVOTAI - according to Ramban, implies a direct commandment, and hence refers to when God commanded Avraham to move to Canaan ("lech l'cha" /see 12:1-3); to offer his son (at the Akeyda/ see 22:1-2) , and to 'listen to his wife' - i.e. to send away Hagar (see 21:12).

CHUKOTAI - Ramban explains, refers to how Avraham 'followed the ways of God' - being merciful & just, and doing acts of "tzedek u'mishpat" (social justice). This interpretation, obviously based on Breishit 18:19, is rather amazing, for most everyone thinks that a "chok" in the Bible defines a law that 'doesn't make sense' (see Rashi on 26:5) - and here Ramban applies it to the laws that make the most sense!

At the conclusion of our shiur, we'll return to explain why.

TOROTAI - Here, Ramban follows the popular understanding of the word "torah" as referring to God's eternal laws, and hence during the time period of Avraham, it must refer to the actual 'mitzvos' that he kept, such as brit milah & the seven Noachide laws.

Note how Ramban's approach is most comprehensive, attempting to tackle pshat, while taking serious consideration of the Midrash, and looking for overall thematic significance - and consistent with his thematic understanding of Sefer Breishit.

IBN EZRA - short and sweet

Ibn Ezra, as we would expect, also follows the third approach, looking for the simple meaning of each word, and applying it to Avraham's own life. Ibn Ezra begins by understanding MISHMERETI as a general category that includes all of the three sub-categories that follow - MITZVOTAI CHUKOTAI v'TOROTAI. [That solves one definition.] Then he suggests examples for what those three words may refer to (based on the meaning of each word in Hebrew):

MITZVOTAI = "lech l'cha..." i.e. Avraham's ALIYA

CHUKOTAI = following God's way of life' ('engraved' in his heart)

TOROTAI = by fulfilling the mitzvah of brit milah.

Note how these last three definitions are essentially identical to Ramban's interpretation "al derech ha'pshat". [The truth is, Ibn Ezra lived before Ramban, and we should have brought his opinion first.]

Note as well how Ibn Ezra makes no attempt to find a 'textual' parallel for each word in this pasuk. Instead, he follows the concept behind the word!

RADAK - 'widening the pool'

Radak's approach is quite similar to Ibn Ezra's, for he also understands each of these words as general categories. However, Ibn Ezra seems to limit his examples to those mitzvot that Avraham himself was commanded, while Radak 'widens the pool' by including ALL of the mitzvot of Bnei Noach (assuming that Avraham was commanded to keep them). Then, within this pool of mitzvot, Radak differentiates between "mitzvot", and "chukim" etc. based on the definition of these categories later on in Chumash (e.g. "Mitzvotai" refers to the "mitzvot sichliyot" [the laws that man can arrive at using his own intellect - like stealing and killing etc.]).

SEFORNO

We conclude with Seforno, as his approach adds an extra dimension to our understanding of the thematic significance of this pasuk. First of all, Seforno, like Ramban & Radak, follows the third approach - and explains how these phrases relate to concepts (or general categories) that include the "seven mitzvot of Bnei Noach". Secondly, Seforno adds an 'extra touch' to Ramban's understanding of "mishmarti", agreeing that it implies to 'watching God's guard', but providing us with a different example of how Avraham accomplished this: "He kept God's 'special guard' which was to do kindness, as the verse in Tehillim states: ' All the ways of God are kindness and truth (25:10); and to teach the proper way for those who had gone astray - and this he did when he 'called out in God's Name', and kept as well Mitzvotai, CHUKOTAI, v'TOROTAI - that God commanded Bnei Noach - and [Avraham] also beautifully taught them and kept them - as a shining example for others to follow [k'mofet l'rabim]" (see Seforno on 26:5).

Note how Seforno, like Ramban, also relates "mishmarti" to how Avraham 'called out in God's Name' - yet suggests a significantly different interpretation. Ramban understood how this was accomplished by what he said ['verbally'] - i.e. by publicly defending God. In contrast, Seforno explains that this was accomplished by what Avraham's did, i.e. by his actions and the example he set for others.

Note how Seforno attempts to thematically connect the very reason for why God chose Avraham Avinu ("or la'goyim" / see Yeshayahu 42:5-6) - to Avraham's own way of life. [Note how Seforno takes into consideration the primary theme of Sefer Breishit, as he attempts to understand each pasuk!]

Finally, Seforno adds an additional dimension, for he continues his commentary by explaining how this statement relates to the events that follow in chapter 26. Note how our pasuk (i.e. 26:5) does not conclude a 'parshia'; rather, it introduces a set of stories in which Yitzchak 'runs into trouble' with the Plishtim and Avimelech (see 26:6-33).

Therefore, Seforno concludes that this pasuk serves as a bit of "musar" [rebuke/ or at least encouragement] to Yitzchak, as God explains to Yitzchak that so far he was chosen because he was Avraham's son. Nonetheless, God now reminds Yitzchak that Avraham was a man of

action, and 'earned' his special status through his deeds - 'hinting' that Yitzchak should also begin to be a bit more pro-active. If Avraham spent his time by preaching and teaching God's laws - calling out in God's Name, and setting a personal example by pursuing "tzedek u'mishpat", God now expects no less from Yitzchak.

In this manner, Seforno explains why Yitzchak suffered so much strife with Avimelech and his servants in the story that follows (i.e. the arguments at "esek" & "sitnah"). However, later in this same 'parshia', we find that Yitzchak himself finally "calls out in God's Name" (see 26:25-29). From that time on, Yitzchak becomes successful, and develops a positive relationship with his neighbors. Ultimately, God is finally with Yitzchak, but only after he fulfills his responsibilities.

CHUKIM THAT MAKE SENSE!

To conclude our study, it is important to note how Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Rashbam all explained the word "CHUKOTAI" - as referring to God's 'way of life' - implying being a just an upright person, and acting with kindness to others.

The reason why is rather simple. The word "chok" in Hebrew implies something set that doesn't change – like statutes (or technically speaking something 'engraved'). In this sense, the laws of nature are referred to as "chukim" - for they don't change (see Yirmiyahu 33:25).

Therefore, when God mentions "CHUKOTAI" - they refer to His [God's] 'way of life' - as His ways are to be kind and to uphold justice. In this manner, Avraham emulated God by acting in His ways - and thus setting an example for others to follow. The fact that so many commentators emphasize this point as a key element in Avraham's own life, reflects their understanding that being kind, just, and upright must be a core value in Judaism. Even though there may be a controversy concerning which specific mitzvot the Avot kept (be it 613 or 7, or 8 or 9 etc.) - everyone agrees that their greatness lied in their 'way of life' - their moral behavior, social justice, and their dedication towards 'making a Name for God', thus setting a model for others to learn from.

Certainly - a model that we ourselves must follow.