

**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

**"Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is
not their own"**

Why the decree of exile?

By Dr. Brachi Elitzur

Midrashei Chazal offer many instances of judgmental evaluations of biblical characters that are different – sometimes even quite contrary – to the impression we receive from a reading of the plain level of the biblical narrative. Often, a *midrash* will judge a person favorably concerning an act that seems, on the literal level, to be a sin; there are also instances in which the *midrash* attributes a sin to a character even where no such act is mentioned in the text, nor is there any sign of any rebuke or punishment.

An example of this phenomenon is the accusation of Avraham, by no less than four different sages, of bearing responsibility for the decree of subjugation that *Bnei Yisrael* will suffer in Egypt for 210 years:

R. Abahu said in the name of R. Elazar: Why was Avraham punished by having his descendants subjugated in Egypt for 210 years? **Because he imposed a labor tax [*angaria*] on Torah scholars [i.e., pressed them into his service]**, as it is written (*Bereishit* 14), "He led forth his disciples, those born in his house..." Shmuel said: **Because he went too far in questioning the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He**, as it is written (*Bereishit* 15), "By what shall I know that I shall inherit [the land]?" R. Yochanan said: **Because he kept people away from entering beneath the wings of the Divine Presence**, as it is written, (*Bereishit* 14), "Give me the people, and take the goods for yourself." (*Nedarim* 32a)

"And Avraham placed the seven sheep..." – The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You gave him seven sheep; by your life, I will withhold joy from your offspring for seven generations." (*Bereishit Rabba* 54)

R. Abahu, citing R. Elazar's question, does not deliberate the question of whether or not Avraham is responsible for the decree of subjugation. The assumption that all four Sages seem to share is that the decree is a punishment for Avraham; the debate concerns only which specific act or acts of Avraham led

to such a harsh decree: R. Elazar locates the problem in Avraham's imposition of a labor tax on his disciples; Shmuel accuses him of doubting God's promise; R. Yochanan maintains that Avraham obstructed the captives of Sedom from joining the ranks of those believing in and serving God; and the author of the *midrash* in *Bereishit Rabba* focuses his criticism on the covenant that Avraham forged with his foreign neighbors.

A plain reading of these *midrashim* raises three difficult questions:

1. There is an enormous, seemingly unbridgeable gap between Avraham's character as depicted in the biblical text, and as reflected in the *midrash*.
2. The *midrash* complicates even further the question of Divine retribution on a nation that has not yet been born, which already pervades the decree of future subjugation.
3. Other *midrashei Chazal* illuminate in a positive light precisely the same areas of Avraham's character in which he stands accused in the *midrash* above.

Let us examine these points in more detail:

1. Avraham's exalted level and his exceptional traits, against the background of the early generations, are reflected in each of the stories about him – starting with his response to God's command, "Go forth..." which uproots him from his homeland and leads him to an unknown future, and reaching a climax in his response to the second directive to "Go forth..." in which he shows himself ready to sacrifice upon the altar, at God's command, the beloved son for whom he had longed for so many years. Each of the stories about Avraham carries the stamp of his calling in God's Name. How, then, can anyone interpret his question of "By what shall I know that I shall interpret it" as doubting God's promise?

Avraham's efforts in drawing idolaters towards monotheistic faith are conspicuous in his adoption of Lot and his education of Pharaoh and Avimelekh to the "fear of God." Avraham spreads the message of faith in God and disseminates the laws of morality in the world. Are the captives of Sedom, who are returned to the king of Sedom as per his demand – thus prompting R. Yochanan's accusation of Avraham – not the same wicked people who are later at the center of the debate between God and Avraham, with Avraham offering his best defense on their behalf? And as for the "*angaria*" – this is nothing more than a temporary appropriation of property or mobilization of civilians for the king's benefit.¹ R. Elazar accuses Avraham of exploiting Torah scholars for his own needs. But if Avraham were to accept R. Elazar's position and abandon Lot to his fate at the hands of his captors so as not to disturb the Torah scholars immersed in their study, wouldn't R. Yochanan's accusation of Avraham concerning his "keeping people away" from God become even stronger? Does the text not emphasize Avraham's meticulous care in supporting his disciples: "... except only

¹ Rashi, *Bava Metziah* 78a.

that which the young men have eaten and the share of the men who went with me – Aner, Eshkol and Mamrei – let them take their share" (*Bereishit* 14:24)? This is a far cry from a "pressing into service," where there is no repayment of contributions of time and assets.

2. The decree of subjugation and affliction for an entire nation, with no explanation of the reason for the decree or its purpose, is one of the central questions of theodicy which have plagued commentators and philosophers throughout the generations. A presentation of Avraham's actions as the cause of this subjugation only intensifies the conceptual difficulty, seemingly strengthening the argument of the elders of Yehuda during the time of the prophet Yechezkel: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge" (*Yechezkel* 18:2).

3. Avraham is depicted in many of *Chazal's* teachings as the ultimate believer, while in others he is described as engaging in "religious outreach," convincing pagans of the existence of One God:

"But a good man shall find satisfaction from himself" – this was Avraham, who recognized the Holy One, blessed be He, on his own. There was no one who taught him how to recognize God; rather, he arrived at this on his own, and he was one of four people who arrived at faith in God on their own. (*Bamidbar Rabba* 14:2)²

"And the souls that they had made in Charan" – Even if all the people in the world were to gather together to create a single gnat and imbue it with a soul, they could not; [surely, then, Avraham and Sarah could not have "made souls" – i.e., people – in Charan]. What this teaches is that Avraham would convert them and bring them under the wings of the Divine Presence." (*Sifri, Devarim* 32)

"And he called there in the Name of the Lord, the everlasting God" – Resh Lakish said: Do not read "*va-yikra*" ("he called"), but rather "*va-yakri*" ("he caused to be called"). This teaches that Avraham caused any passer-by to acknowledge God. How so? After they had eaten and drunk, they would stand up and thank him [before leaving]. He would say to them, "Was it then of my [provisions] that you have eaten? [No,] it was from [the provisions of] the God of the world that you have eaten. Give praise and thanks to He who spoke and the world was created." (*Sota* 10a-b)

Do these *midrashim* not stand in complete contrast to the word of R. Yochanan and Shmuel?

In light of all of the above, it would seem that in their homiletical teachings

² There are many more examples; see: *Shochar Tov* 118:11; *Bereishit Rabba* 38:8; *Sefer Ha-yashar* 58:27.

cited at the outset, the Sages did not mean to elaborate on the plain meaning of the text, nor to challenge Avraham's righteousness. They were not even presuming to give any explanation for God's decisions in the matter of the future subjugation of *Am Yisrael*. The reasons for this future subjugation were not revealed even to Avraham himself, with whom God shared His intention to destroy Sedom specifically because he had been chosen by God to bequeath faith and morality to his descendants.³

How, then, are we to understand these *midrashim*? To what end do these Sages direct such severe accusations at Avraham?

Various philosophers and scholars over the generations have developed ways of studying *midrashim*, seeking to understand their purpose.

Ancient philosophers such as R. Sherira Gaon and the Rambam sought to draw a clear distinction between matters of Halakha, which must be accepted simply and literally, and matters of Midrash and Aggada, concerning which no such obligation applies:

R. Sherira taught: Those things that were learned out from the verses and are called Midrash and Aggada are approximate. There are some that are literally true... and many that are not literally true. And so too the *aggadot* taught by the students of the students, such as R. Tanchuma and R. Oshiya and others. Most are not literally true and we therefore do not rely on words of Aggada. Those that are correct [can be identified because they] are have logical and textual support, and there is no end to possible aggadic interpretation. Know that words of Aggada are not comparable to Halakha. Rather, everyone interprets according to his desire, as [if to say], "It is possible," or, "We can suggest" – not as absolutes. We therefore do not rely upon them. (*Otzar Ha-Geonim, Sanhedrin* 111b, pp. 546-547, and *Chagiga* 14a, p. 60)⁴

Y. Heiniman and M.D. Herr discuss the aims of *midrashim* and their purpose:

³ At that time, God said: "Shall I hide from Avraham the thing which I intend to do, seeing that Avraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all 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 the Lord, to do justice and judgment, that the Lord might bring upon Avraham that of which He had spoken to him" (*Bereishit* 18:17-19).

⁴ Similarly, the Rambam writes in his introduction to *Perek Chelek*: "It is clear... that the words of the Sages contain both an obvious and a hidden meaning. Thus, whenever the Sages spoke of things that seem impossible, they were employing the style of riddle and parable which is the method of truly great thinkers... Why should we have any problem with proposing an understanding of their literal words such that they conform to reason and correspond with truth and with the Holy Writings? After all, the Sages themselves interpreted biblical verses, drawing the inner meaning of the literal text, which they treated as figures of speech."

By expounding in public, the Sages attempted to teach and instruct the public... concerning the foundations of Jewish faith. Homiletic teachings served as opportunities to address current issues, to respond to the views of non-orthodox sects and of heretics; to shed new light on the words of the Torah and to reveal its meaning for "these generations." (Y. Heiniman, *Derashot be-Tzibbu bi-Tekufat ha-Talmud*, p. 7)

The Sages, in these addresses, were not the least interested in the actual historical characters of the *Tanakh*; rather, their focus was the lesson that a well-known character might offer for later generations... It seems that historiography was of no interest to them. They saw no practical purpose in describing events and characters exactly as they lived and happened. (M.D. Herr, *Tefisat ha-Historia Etzel Chazal*, pp. 138-139)

Which, then, were the "current issues" that R. Yochanan and the students of his Tiberias academy were addressing in their teachings? What is the meaning of their debate?

Let us consider the positions of R. Yochanan and R. Elazar against the background of the particular characteristics of the period in which they were active, and thereby attempt to understand the messages and lessons of their teachings, which go beyond interpretation of the verses and represent advice on leadership and on proper conduct.

"Rabbi Yochanan said: Because he kept people away from entering beneath the wings of the Divine Presence."

R. Yochanan, the greatest of the Talmudic Sages of *Eretz Yisrael*, devotes many of his teachings to the defense of biblical sinners, casting them in a more positive light, and embracing biblical characters who were outcast from the community owing to their sins.

"And [David] placed Shevuel son of Gershom son of Menashe as head of the treasuries" – But how did he come to be called "Shevuel," if his name was Yehonatan?! R. Yochanan taught: He returned to God (*shav la-el*) with all his heart. (*Bava Batra* 110a)

R. Yochanan taught: Yishmael repented during his father's lifetime, as it is written, "And Yitzchak and Yishmael, his sons, buried him."

R. Yochanan taught: One who asserts that Menashe has no portion in the World to Come discourages penitents."

R. Yochanan taught in the name of R. Shimon bar Yochai: What is the meaning of the verse, "He prayed to Him and He made an opening for him (*va-yechater lo*)" (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 33:13)? Should the text not read,

"And He acquiesced to him (*va-ye'ater lo*)"?⁵ This teaches that God made a sort of opening (*machtere*) for him in the heaven, so as to accept him once he had repented, on account of the Attribute of Justice [which otherwise would have obstructed his acceptance]. (*Sanhedrin* 103a)

"And he died there with the Ark of God" – R. Yochanan taught: Uzza entered the World to Come, as it is written, "With the Ark of God." Just as the Ark exists forever, so Uzza received eternal life in the World to Come. (*Sota* 35a-b)

Likewise, R. Yochanan displays a conspicuously supportive position concerning converts. This is evident in his rulings concerning their status:

And R. Yochanan replied: This means that converts may be accepted from Tarmod. (*Yevamot* 16b; 77a)

It is also apparent in his teaching in the name of R. Shimon ben Yehotzadak condemning Shaul's attack on the converts from among the Giv'onim:

"And Ritzpa bat Aya took sackcloth and spread it for her upon the rock, from the beginning of the harvest until water was poured upon them from the heaven, and she did not allow the birds of the sky to rest upon them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night" (*Shmuel* II 11:10). But is it not written, "You shall not leave his body overnight upon the tree" (*Devarim* 21)? R. Yochanan taught in the name of R. Shimon ben Yehotzadak: It is proper that a letter be uprooted from the Torah for the sake of sanctifying God's Name in public. For passersby would inquire, "What sort of men are these?" [And they would be told,] "They are royal princes." "And what have they done?" [They would be told,] "They laid their hands upon unwilling converts." They would then say, "There is no nation as worthy as this one to join. For if this is how royal princes are punished, then there is surely punishment for common people [who sin]. And if this is the justice done for unwilling converts, then surely justice is done for Israelites!" Thereupon a hundred and fifty thousand people joined themselves to the Israelite nation, as it is written (*Melakhim* 1:5), "And Shlomo had seventy thousand who bore burdens and eighty thousand who were hewers in the mountain." (*Yevamot* 79a)

In contrast, R. Yochanan criticizes biblical characters who were in a position to prevent the public from sinning but failed to act. Examples include his condemnation of Noach, who was a "righteous man in his generation" – relative to his generation, but who would not be considered righteous in other

⁵ Apparently, the textual version that R. Yochanan had was different from ours, and it featured the word "*va-yechater*," whereas ours reads "*va-ye'ater*". Rashi notes this possibility, treating the discrepancy as an instance of "*keri u-khetiv*, whereby a word is written one way in the text, but traditionally pronounced in a different way.

generations" (*Sanhedrin* 108a), and Avraham, who "prevented people from entering under the wings of the Divine Presence" (*Nedarim* 32a).

R. Yochanan was the spiritual leader of the Jewish community in *Eretz Yisrael* at the beginning of the Talmudic period. This period was characterized by acute economic crisis, prompting mass emigration to Babylon. In addition to economic troubles, Jewish society in *Eretz Yisrael* had to deal with Christian propaganda that was aimed at attracting converts. The missionary efforts exploited the weakness of the destitute Jews, encouraging them to join the ranks of the Church by idealizing their poverty and the poor. The status of the "Christian Jews" who were led astray by the Church's promises but who continued to attend Jewish prayer services and *battei midrash*, was hotly debated between conservative elements, which called for their exclusion from the community, and liberal elements, who hoped to welcome them back.⁶ It seems that R. Yochanan's position with regard to their status was unequivocal: he believed that failure to embrace them would lead to the end of the Jewish community's presence in *Eretz Yisrael*.

In his teaching concerning Avraham, R. Yochanan addresses the first exile imposed on the Jewish People, using this historical precedent to convey his view of the obligation to resist the demand of the theological adversary – "Give me the people" – so as to avoid the punishment of "Your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not their own."

R. Elazar: "Because he imposed a labor tax on Torah scholars"

One of the effects of the economic crisis described above was a blow to the status of the Sages. The scholarly echelon had been granted preferential status and rights by the leadership since the time of R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi, who took care to maintain these special privileges in light of the importance and contribution of those engaged in Torah and matters of the spirit to life in *Eretz Yisrael*. One of the privileges enjoyed by the Sages was an exemption from taxes and the obligation imposed on the townspeople to support them:

A typical instance was that of the crown tax which the inhabitants of Tiberias were called upon to pay. They came to Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] and said to him, "Let the Rabbis give their share with us." He refused. They said to him, "Then we will run away." He replied, "Then go." (*Bava Batra* 8a)

⁶ See the teaching of R. Yochanan's disciple and friend, Resh Lakish: "The fire of Gehennom has no power over the sinners of Israel. We learn this through *kal va-chomer* from the golden altar: If the golden altar, upon which there is only a dinar thickness of gold, is not affected through so many years by the fire, then the same must be true of the sinners of Israel, who are as full of *mitzvot* as a pomegranate [is full of seeds], as it is written: 'Your temples (*rakatekh*) are like a slice of a pomegranate' – read not '*rakatekh*' but rather '*rekenanin she-bakh*' (the worthless ones among you)." (*Chagiga* 27a)

The acute economic crisis in the time of R. Yehuda Nesi'a (grandson of R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi) led this sage to reconsider the exemption and expand the ranks of those obligated to pay communal taxes, as suggested in several sources. For example:

R. Yehuda Nesi'a sought to levy the tax for the [building a protective] wall [around Tiberias] on the Rabbis. Resh Lakish said: The Rabbis do not require the protection [of a wall], as it is written, "If I should count them, they are more numerous than the sand..." (*Tehillim* 139:18)... If the sand, which is a lesser quantity, protects [the land] against the sea, then surely the deeds of the righteous, which are a larger quantity, serve to protect them. When Resh Lakish came before R. Yochanan, the latter said to him: Why did you not derive the lesson from this verse instead: "I am a wall and my breasts are like towers"? "I am a wall" refers to the Torah and "my breasts are like towers" refers to Torah scholars. (*Bava Batra* 7b)

Apparently, despite the opposition to participation in paying the taxes, the widespread collection continued, as we conclude from the continuation of the encounter between Resh Lakish and the Nasi:

When R. Shimon ben Lakish went up to inquire after the health of the Nasi, he said to him: Pray for me, for the [Roman] authorities steal and rob [from me]. Resh Lakish said to him: Stop collecting taxes from the people and the government will stop demanding your money." (*Bereishit Rabba* 78:12)

The place of the "*angaria*" as part of the heavy burden imposed on the people may be deduced from a teaching of R. Yochanan that explains the reason for Yeravam's rebellion and the appearance of the same term in R. Elazar's teaching concerning Avraham:

R. Yochanan said: Why did Yeravam merit sovereignty? Because he reproved Shlomo. And why was he punished? Because he reproved him publicly. As it is written, "And this was the reason why he lifted up his hand against the king: Shlomo built the Millo, and repaired the breaches of the city of David his father." [Yeravam] said to him: Your father David made breaches in the wall so that Israel might come up [to Jerusalem] on the festivals, while you have closed them in order to exact a toll (*angaria*) for the benefit of Pharaoh's daughter." (*Sanhedrin* 101b)

The Sages were concerned that imposition of a tax on the scholarly echelon would bring about the end of Jewish habitation in *Eretz Yisrael*. The destitution of the Sages would force them to go down to Babylon – thus sealing the fate and future of those remaining in *Eretz Yisrael*.

R. Elazar, son of Pedat, was a disciple of R. Yochanan. Does his teaching

concerning the reason for the Divine decree of subjugation in Egypt represent a contradiction of the position of his rabbi and teacher? Does R. Elazar belong to the conservative camp that opposes the acceptance of the "sinners of Israel"?

From the following teaching, we see that R. Elazar is in full agreement with his teacher's aim of welcoming those who have been led astray, but his disagrees with him concerning the essence of Avraham's sin. To his view, Avraham's actions are in fact a model of how to welcome converts:

"And Avram took Sarai his wife, and Lot, his brother's son, and all their substance, [and the souls that they had made]" – R. Elazar taught in the name of R. Yossi ben Zimra: Even if all the nations were to gather together to create a single gnat, they could not imbue it with a soul. How, then, can it be claimed that they "made souls"? This must surely refer to converts. But then the text should read, "[And the souls] that they had converted." Why the term "made"? This teaches that anyone who welcomes a non-Jew is regarded as though he had created him." (*Bereishit Rabba* 39:5)

The *midrash* proposing the reason for Avraham's punishment presents a theological question that traces the factors that may lead to exile. R. Yochanan argues that exile is caused by the unwillingness on the part of the nation and its leaders to welcome souls that have been led astray, while R. Elazar maintains that exile is caused by a situation of economic crisis among the Sages and their mobilization for other purposes that harm their Torah studies. To put the debate in modern terms, we might say that R. Elazar proposes a "Marxist" approach, viewing the economic aspect as being of primary importance in terms of its effect on other elements molding society, such as religion and ideology. R. Elazar's "Marxist" approach may be discerned in many of the teachings attributed to him, in which he emphasizes (more than any other Sage) the importance of the *mitzvah* of *tzedaka* and its specifications, as well as the difficulty of earning a living and the indignity of destitution:

R. Elazar said: Greater is he who performs charity than [he who offers] all the sacrifices... And R. Elazar said: The performance of kindness is greater than charity... And R. Elazar said: The reward for charity depends entirely on the extent of kindness entailed in it... And R. Elazar said: One who performs charity and justice is considered as though he filled the entire world with kindness... (*Sukka* 49b)

R. Elazar said: ... Anyone who marries his daughter to a Torah scholar [thereby committing to help support him], or maintains a trade for Torah scholars, or benefits Torah scholars from his estate, is regarded by the Torah as cleaving to the Divine Presence." (*Ketubot* 111b)

And R. Elazar said: Any man who owns no land is not a [complete] man,

as it is written, "The heavens are God's heavens, but the earth He has given to the children of man." (*Yevamot* 63a)

R. Yochanan and R. Elazar both taught: When a person must rely on his fellow-creatures, his face changes [color] like a *kerum*, as it is said, "As the *kerum* is to be reviled among the sons of men." (*Berakhot* 6b)⁷

This approach is also expressed in R. Elazar's teachings concerning the economic behavior of characters in *Tanakh*:

"To Avraham as a possession in the presence of the children of Chet" (*Bereishit* 23:18) – R. Elazar said: How much ink is spilled, how many quills are broken, in [the trouble taken in] noting "the children of Chet"! Ten times [over the course of this unit] the text mentions "the children of Chet," corresponding to the Ten Commandments – to teach you that anyone who clarifies the transactions of a *tzaddik* is considered as though he observed the Ten Commandments." (*Bereishit Rabba*, *Noach* 18)

"And Yaakov remained alone" – R. Elazar said: He remained on account of some small jars. From here we deduce that for the righteous, their money is more precious to them than their own bodies. And why so? Because they do not stretch out their hands to [engage in] theft. (*Chullin* 91a)

"She took for him an ark made from bulrushes" – Why bulrushes? R. Elazar said: From here we deduce that for the righteous, their money is more dear to them than their own bodies. And why so? Because they do not stretch out their hands to [engage in] theft. (*Sota* 12a)⁸

His approach is expressed most clearly of all in his explanation of the verse describing the punishment meted out to Korach and his company:

"Riches kept by their owner to his disadvantage" – R. Shimon b. Lakish said: This refers to Korach's wealth, [as it is written,] "And all the living substance that followed them [lit., "that was at their feet"]" (*Devarim* 11:6). R. Elazar said: This refers to a man's wealth, which puts him on his feet. [Rashi: "Which puts him on his feet" means "which causes his heart to rejoice".] (*Pesachim* 119a)

R. Elazar ignores the fact that the verse cited in the *gemara* concerning Korach is describing a punishment,⁹ and he disagrees with his colleagues who

⁷ Likewise, *Shabbat* 150a; *Bava Batra* 9a-b; *Sanhedrin* 108b; *Shochar Tov* 106a; *Bereishit Rabba* 20:9.

⁸ Likewise, *Sanhedrin* 19b; *Vayikra Rabba* 34:8; *Menachot* 76b; 86b.

⁹ "And what [God] did to Datan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, son of Reuven – that the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households, and their tents, and all the living

maintain that "Riches kept by their owner [are] to his disadvantage" (*Bereishit Rabba* 50:16-17).

The great importance that R. Elazar attaches to a person's financial situation – going so far as to view it as one of the central foundations upon which the nation's habitation in the land depends – would appear to arise from his own life-story and personal experience. R. Elazar's destitution is mentioned in two accounts in the Babylonian Talmud:

R. Elazar son of Pedat found himself in very great want. Once, after being bled, he had nothing to eat. He took the skin of garlic and put it into his mouth; he became faint and he fell asleep. The Rabbis coming to see him noticed that he was crying and laughing, and that a ray of light was radiating from his forehead. When he awoke they asked him: Why did you cry and laugh? He replied: Because the Holy One, blessed be He, was sitting by my side and I asked Him, "**How long will I suffer in this world?**" And He replied: "Elazar, My son, do you wish for Me to turn back the world to its very beginnings? **Perhaps you might then be born at an hour of sustenance.**" I replied: "[The world would go through] all this [upheaval], and even then only 'perhaps'?" I then asked Him, "Which is the greater life, the one that I have already lived, or the one I am still to live?" He replied [that it was] the one that I have already lived. I then said to Him: "If so, I do not want it." He replied: "As a reward for refusing it, I will grant you in the next world thirteen rivers of balsam oil as clear as the Euphrates and the Tigris, which you will be able to enjoy." I asked, "And nothing more?" He replied: "And what shall I then give to your fellow men?" I said: "Am I then asking the share of one who has nothing? [You, God, can do everything!]." He thereupon tapped my forehead with a finger and exclaimed lovingly: "Elazar, my son, I have shot you with My arrow." [And it was as the result of this Divine touch that the ray of light radiated from his forehead.] (*Ta'anit* 25a)

R. Elazar fell ill and R. Yochanan went in to visit him. He noticed that he was lying in a dark room, and he bared his arm and light radiated from it. Then he noticed that R. Elazar was weeping, and he said to him: "Why do you weep? Is it because you did not study enough Torah? Surely we learnt: One may learn more, while another learns less, so long as the heart is directed to heaven. **Is it perhaps because you are poor? Not everyone is privileged to enjoy two tables [i.e., to enjoy both Torah study and wealth].** Is it perhaps because of [the lack of] children? This is the bone of my tenth son!" He replied to him: "I am weeping on account of your beauty that is going to rot in the earth." He said to him: "That is indeed reason to weep." And they both wept. In the meanwhile, he said to him: "Do you cherish your suffering?" He replied: "[I want] neither it nor its reward." He said to him: "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and

substance that followed them, in the midst of all of Israel" (*Devarim* 11:6).

he raised him. (*Berakhot* 5b)

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R. Abahu's question, "Why was Avraham punished by having his descendants subjugated in Egypt for 210 years?," introduces a general teaching for the public in which the greatest of the Sages reveal their respective approaches, present principles for strengthening the rootedness of the Jewish People upon their land, and warn against actions that undermine this process and lead to exile. The critical issues addressed in their teachings – the status of Jewish souls that have been led astray; the obligation of supporting Torah scholars; and the boundaries of contacts and alliances with non-Jews – represent beacons for future generations of leaders of the nation upon its land.

The model represented by Avraham, as testified by God Himself – "For I know him, that he will command his descendants... to perform righteousness and judgment" – the pioneer of Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel, is invoked by the Sages to inculcate values for the guidance of national and political life for the generations to come.

Translated by Kaeren Fish