

A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

This weekly sheet is brought to you by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman of Northwood United Synagogue in conjunction with Shapell's/Darché Noam

PARSHAT LECH LECHA

DVAR TORAH: INNOVATION, NOT IMITATION

In Avraham's prayer for children he bemoans the reality that, because he is barren, it is likely that his head servant, Eliezer of Damascus, will inherit his household. But Rashi quotes Chazal's drasha on the expression "Eliezer of Damascus – Damesek Eliezer," that Eliezer was doleh umashkeh – he drew (as in drawing water) and gave to drink of his great rav's Torah to others, and thus seems to paint Eliezer in a very positive light.

However, asks the Divrei Yechezkel, why then did Avraham include this line in his prayer? Don't our Sages say (Sanhedrin 19b) that one who teaches his son Torah is as if he gave birth to him? When Avraham goes on to say (in the very next verse), "You have not given me zera – offspring – and, behold, one of my household –ven beiti – is my heir," – referring to Eliezer – doesn't he compromise the effectiveness of his own prayer? Why does he mention that he already seems to have a spiritual heir, Eliezer?

Explains the Divrei Yechezkel: That very description of Eliezer, taking the rov's Torah and distributing it to others, is exactly what bothered Avraham. Avraham was not interested in a spiritual heir who would be just like him, a carbon copy (copy-and-paste) Avraham. And he certainly was not interested in one who would mindlessly imitate his behaviors and movements without capturing the inner essence.

Of course Avraham wanted a disciple who would learn and carry on his teachings about monotheism, chesed, middot, and devotion to Hashem. But that disciple must then get in touch with his unique self – for Hashem creates each of us differently – and express it, forging his own path in avodat Hashem.

Hashem's promise to Avraham was twofold. First, you will have a son, physically born from you and Sarah. But, second, (here the Divrei Yechezkel makes a drashic reading, both by why the standard expression zarecha was not used), "asher yeitzei mimei'echa" – one who goes away (not just comes out) from your insides; meaning, one who takes a different path, one who develops a different middah (character trait), will inherit you.

Sure enough, Yitzchak was born as Avraham's spiritual heir. As opposed to Avraham's chesed, Yitzchak's predominant traits were yirah, gevurah, and pachad (fear and awe of God, and might). Yitzchak was certainly not another Avraham, and the new direction he brought to the family enriched and deepened Klal Yisrael's connection to Hashem. Yitzchak, in turn, gave birth to a Yaakov, who cultivated yet a third type of inner world, and his twelve tribes each refined his own special nature – reflected, perhaps, in the twelve different colors on the Kohen Gadol's breastplate. [The Divrei Yechezkel's drashah on Avraham's prayer and Hashem's answer was also autobiographical. The Divrei Yechezkel, Rav Yechezkel of Shinevah, ztl, revered his great father, the Tzanzer Rebbe, the Divrei Chaim, Hagaon Rav Chaim Halbershtam, ztl, but, took some very different approaches from his father.]

Our rebbeim, teaches the Divrei Yechezkel, are guides and teachers, but our goal should not be to imitate them but to integrate their teachings into our own unique lives.

SOURCE GUIDE: ABOVE THE STARS

God blesses Avraham: Your descendants should be as the stars. The blessing is prefaced in the Chumash with a three word clause, “*Vayotzei oto hachutza*” – literally, “He took him outside,” that is the subject one of Rashi’s longer comments. This source guide digs into the three explanations Rashi offers, the differences between them, and some of the messages that emerge.

The Verse and Its Context

<p>Bereishit 15:3-6</p> <p>3) Avram said: You have not given me offspring, and one of my household will inherit me.</p> <p>4) Behold, the word of God came to him, saying: This one will not inherit you; rather, one who comes from your innards – he will inherit you.</p> <p>5) And He took him outside and said: Please look to the heavens and count the stars – if you are able to count them. And He said to him: Thus will be your offspring.</p> <p>6) He trusted in God and He considered it righteousness.</p>	<p>בראשית טו:ג-ו</p> <p>(ג) וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם הֲלֵי לֹא נָתַתָּה זָרַע וְהִנֵּה בֵּן בֵּיתִי יֹרֵשׁ אֹתִי:</p> <p>(ד) וְהִנֵּה דִבַּר ה' אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר לֹא יִרְשֶׁךָ זֶה כִּי אִם אִשְׁרָךְ יֵצֵא מִמְעֵיךָ הוּא יִרְשֶׁךָ:</p> <p>(ה) וַיֹּצֵא אֹתוֹ הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲבֵט נָא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וּסְפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם תּוּכַל לְסַפֵּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ פֹּה יִהְיֶה זֶרְעֶךָ:</p> <p>(ו) וַהֲאֵמֵן בְּה' וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה:</p>
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After Avraham fought the war against the four kings, God appears to him. In this prophetic vision God tells him not to fear and that there is great reward awaiting him. Avraham’s reply to God is that he is childless, as if to say (see Rashi), what is the consequence of whatever reward he gets? God in turn blesses Avraham with children like the stars. That blessing is preceded, in verse 5, with “He took him outside,” the subject of Rashi’s comment.

Rashi’s First Comment

<p>Rashi Bereishit 15:5</p> <p>He took him outside – According to the straightforward explanation He took him outside of his tent to see the stars.</p>	<p>רש"י על בראשית טו:ה</p> <p>ויצא אתו החוצה - לפי פשוטו הוציאו מאהלו לחוץ לראות הכוכבים:</p>
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Rashi goes on to offer two other explanations, quoting from the Midrash. The rule of thumb Rashi’s commentators follow is that Rashi only veers from the straightforward meaning of the verse, the *peshat*, if he was bothered by some difficulty. What might Rashi have found difficult with this first way of explaining the clause? See the Gur Aryeh who spells it out. [Note that the Radak views this as prophecy still inside his tent!]

Rashi’s Second Comment

<p>Rashi Bereishit 15:5</p> <p>According to its midrashic explanation He said to him, “Leave your astrological prediction, for you saw in the constellations that you will not in the future have a son. Avram has no son, but Avraham does have a son. And Sarai will not give birth, but Sarah will give birth. I will call you another name and the <i>mazal</i>, the astrological prediction, will change.”</p>	<p>רש"י על בראשית טו:ה</p> <p>ולפי מדרשו אמר לו צא מאצטגנינות שלך שראית במזלות שאינך עתיד להעמיד בן אברם אין לו בן אבל אברהם יש לו בן וכן שרי לא תלד אבל שרה תלד אני קורא לכם שם אחר וישתנה המזל:</p>
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This verse precedes the name changes from Avram to Avraham and from Sarai to Sarah that appear at the end of the parshah. How is Rashi now explaining the words “He took him outside”?

[Astrology (sometimes referred to as *mazal*) and its interaction with free will and Divine reward and punishment appears in many places in rabbinic literature, and is the subject of debate both in the Talmud and among Jewish philosophers. For a collection of sources on the topic see Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan’s Handbook of Jewish Thought Volume II, pp. 296-300.]

What does the name change accomplish? Both the Gur Aryeh (a commentary on Rashi written by the great Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehudah Loewe ztl, about 1524-1609) and the Meshech Chochmah (a commentary on the Chumash by Rabbi Meir Simchah of Dvinsk, 1843-1926, also known for his commentary on the Rambam's Mishneh Torah called Or Sameach) address this. In the Gur Aryeh the Maharal references his comments on an aggadic statement in Rosh Hashanah 16b: Rabbi Yitzchak said, "Four things cause a person's decree to be torn up – *tzedakah*, giving charity, *tze'akah*, screaming out in prayer, *shinui hashem*, changing one's name, and *shinui maaseh*, changing one's actions.

<p>Maharal, Chidushei Aggadot Rosh Hashanah 16b The explanation is that a decree can change through these four things because these effect an absolute change, changing from the foundations. When the foundation changes, the thing itself changes ... For something's name indicates its essence, and changing the name involves changing its essence ...</p>	<p>מהר"ל חידושי אגדות ראש השנה טז: פירוש כי הגזר דין יכול להשתנות בדברים אלו מפני כי אלו הם שנוי גמור המשנה את היסודות וכאשר היסוד נשתנה יש כאן שנוי בגוף הדבר ... כי השם הוא שמורה על עצמות הדבר ושנוי שם פירוש שנוי עצמותו...</p>
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The Meshech Chochmah focuses on the specific change from Avram and Sarai to Avraham and Sarah.

<p>Meshech Chochmah Bereishit 15:5 He took him outside – He took him outside of his <i>mazal</i>, his predetermined fortune. Avram will not bear a child, but Avraham will; there is no <i>mazal</i> for Israel (Nedarim 32a). For Israel is not subject to <i>mazal</i>, but the individual is subject to <i>mazal</i>. This is the [meaning of the name Avraham,] the father of many nations, <i>av hamon goyim</i> (Bereishit 17:4) namely, [Avraham is now associated with the] collective ... This is the meaning of "there is no <i>mazal</i> for Israel" – for Israel refers to the entire collective, as is well known.</p>	<p>משך חכמה בראשית טו: ויוצא אותו החוצה - הוציאו חוץ ממזל שלו אברם אינו מוליד אברהם מוליד אין מזל לישראל (נדרים ל"ב). כי ישראל בכלל אינם תחת המזל אבל בפרט מסוככים במזל. וזה הוא אב המון גוים (לקמן יז, ד) ר"ל ענין כללי ... וזה הוא אין מזל לישראל כי ישראל יאמר על הכלל כולו כידוע.</p>
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How do the Maharal and the Meshech Chochmah each explain why the name change to Avraham enables him to transcend his predetermined childless fate?

Rashi's Third Comment

<p>Rashi Bereishit 15:5 Another explanation is that He took him outside of space and lifted him above the stars. This is the expression of <i>habatah</i> – looking, which has the connotation of looking at something from above.</p>	<p>רש"י על בראשית טו: דבר אחר – הוציאו מחללו של עולם והגביהו למעלה מן הכוכבים וזהו לשון הבטה מלמעלה למטה:</p>
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What might have been the necessity for yet a third comment? In what way did the midrashic explanation not solve all the difficulties we had with the clause "He took him outside"? This last comment might allude to the last line of Pirkei Avot 6:1 (the Baraita tacked on to the five chapters of Pirkei Avot).

<p>Avot 6:1 Rabbi Meir said: Anyone involved in Torah for its own sake merits many things. Not only that, but the entire world was worth it for his sake. He is referred to as a companion, beloved, one who loves God, one who loves people ... and it makes him great and elevates him above all creations.</p>	<p>אבות ו:א רבי מאיר אומר כל העוסק בתורה לשמה, זוכה לדברים הרבה, ולא עוד אלא שכל העולם פלו פדאי הוא לו, נקרא רע, אהוב, אהב את המקום, אהב את הבריות ... ומגדלתו ומרוממתו על כל המעשים:</p>
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AVRAHAM'S WAR, BY RABBI GIDON SHOSHAN

In this week's parshah, we have our first glimpse into a normal society. Avraham lives in the land of Canaan surrounded by non-Jews, and society and life seem to function for the locals more or less as we know it. It does not take long for us to hear of political intrigue, civic disputes, and war.

Against this background we meet Avraham Avinu, a paragon of morality and monotheistic belief. Deftly, Avraham Avinu charts a moral and peaceful path in his dealings with both Pharaoh and Lot. But then, war.

What do we learn about Avraham's way of waging war? The Torah says that when the four kings subjugated the five and Lot fell captive; Avraham marshalled his 318 trainees to fight for the liberation of Lot, chased the armies until the Dan region, and there split his troops into two to subdue the enemy.

Rashi offers a seemingly bizarre explanation, that there were not actually 318 soldiers, but, rather, that 318 alludes to Eliezer, whose name is the alpha-numeric equivalent of 318. Furthermore, Rashi says, it was not the battalion that was split into two, but rather it was the night that was split. Rashi says that the first half of the night was the miraculous victory of Avraham's army, and the second half of this miraculous night was left for the night of the Exodus, when once again God would perform miracles with half a night, or, with midnight.

The Kli Yakar offers a very beautiful explanation of these passages in Rashi. He says that one need not understand this verse to convey that there were not 318 soldiers, but Eliezer alone. Rather, perhaps there were indeed 318 soldiers, and even Rashi himself concedes to this, but that Rashi sought to answer the question 'Why?' Why did Avraham choose 318 soldiers? The reason for this is the Gematria equivalent to Eliezer. Eliezer means "My God helps me." Avraham knew that no amount of soldiers would give him the sheer military might to defeat the four kings' armies. So he chose 318, a number that would combine an army with a whole-hearted reliance on God.

Avraham teaches us the lesson that while one must not rely on miracles for survival and success, one must still make his decisions with the firm understanding that it is God who grants success and victory. For this reason it was at Dan that Avraham tired, for the region of Dan would in the future be a sinful place, where God would be forsaken and from where His Divine assistance was removed. And finally, Rashi adds, that this seemingly natural military victory was as miraculous as the Exodus night.

As we go about our normal daily affairs over a long winter, may we remain totally cognizant of God's Providence and our need to rely on Him.

This issue is dedicated in loving memory of
Eliezer ben Asher Yosef, z"l

*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v'Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples' programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at www.darchenoam.org +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

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