

YOU SHALL LIVE BY THEM

by Shlomo Katz

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Lech Lecha

We read in this parashah that Hashem took Avraham outside and showed him the stars. "Just as you cannot count the stars," Hashem told him, "so your descendants will be innumerable." The Torah relates that Avraham believed Hashem and considered His promise to be a kindness to him (Avraham). Hashem then said (15:7), "I am G-d Who took you out of the furnace of the Chaldeans." R' Yehuda Roseannes z"l (author of Mishneh Le'melech) explains the progression of these verses as follows: Unlike the Jews, who have a mitzvah to give their lives to sanctify G-d's Name, Noachides have no such mitzvah. Since Rambam holds that a person may not sacrifice his life when he is not halachically obligated to do so, it follows that a Noachide also may not give his life to sanctify G-d's Name. Was Avraham Jewish? This is the subject of a dispute between Tosfot and Ramban, and even Avraham did not know the answer. Thus, when Avraham allowed himself to be thrown into Nimrod's

furnace, he was unsure of whether he was violating halachah. Even after he was saved from the furnace, he continued to be nagged by lingering doubts as to the propriety of his actions. Chazal explain that when Hashem showed Avraham the stars, He indicated that Avraham was not governed by astrology, but was under Hashem's direct providence. Avraham understood this to mean that he was Jewish; he was thankful for this and considered it to be a special kindness. But Hashem said, "Why are you so thankful all of a sudden? I am the same G-d Who took you out of the furnace." You should have understood then that you were Jewish, for otherwise you would not have been permitted to sacrifice your life and I would not have saved you.

(Parashat Derachim II)

An Astonishing Midrash

"Say you are my sister" (12:13) from here we learn that one may slaughter an animal on Shabbat to give fresh meat to one who is sick. The Torah commands (Vayikra 18:5), "You shall live by them," from which we learn that virtually all Torah laws are preempted when human life is at stake. Thus, for example, a person may transgress a law of Shabbat if his life would otherwise be endangered. How do we know, however, that a person may transgress a Torah law in order to save someone else's life? We learn that from this verse, where Avraham asked Sarah to lie in order to save his life.

(Ketav Sofer)

"The Torah Is Not in Chronological Order"

Chazal (Pesachim 6b) teach that the stories in the Torah are not always told in chronological order. For example, the death of Terach (Avraham's father) is mentioned at the end of last week's parashah when, in reality, Terach was still alive when Avraham left for Eretz Canaan at age 75. Simple arithmetic bears this out. (Rashi 11:32; Ibn Ezra 6:3)

Near the end of this week's parashah, we read of the "berit bein habetarim" / "covenant between the parts," in which Hashem told Avraham that his descendants would be strangers in a foreign land for 400 years. Rashi explains that these 400 years are counted from the birth of Yitzchak until the Exodus; however, the actual number of years that the Jews were in Egypt was only 210.

In Shmot 12:40 we read that the Jews were in Egypt for 430 years. Rashi explains that these years were counted from the time of the berit bein habetarim until the Exodus. One can thus calculate that Avraham was 70 at the berit bein habetarim. This means, in turn, that the berit bein habetarim, which is described near the end of our parashah, occurred before the beginning of our parashah (when Avraham was 75). And, since the berit bein habetarim took place in Eretz Yisrael, this means that Avraham went to the Land before Hashem told him to, and then left there.

Ramban disagrees with Rashi's calculations. He writes, instead, that the exile did last 430 years from the birth of Yitzchak. When Hashem told Avraham that the exile would last 400 years, He rounded off. (Ramban, Shmot 12:40)

Ramban's view is consistent with his general understanding of the principle discussed here (i.e., that the Torah is not in chronological order). He writes that the Torah is in chronological order, except where the verses clearly indicate otherwise. Even then, if we wish to interpret the Torah in non-chronological order, we are obligated to find a compelling reason why the Torah would deviate from the proper order. (Ramban, Bemidbar 16:1)

In contrast, Tosfot (Chullin 95b) appears to be willing to use the principle discussed here much more freely. Thus, to answer the question of why Eliezer gave Rivka gifts before he knew that she was Avraham's relative (see Bereishit 24:22-23), Tosfot says simply that the Torah is not in chronological order. This use of the rule is significant, also, because it assumes that details within a story are not in order, not only that whole stories are out of place. Indeed, Tosfot (Pesachim6b) explains that the rule can be used wherever support can be found in the verses at issue.

Why is the Torah not written in chronological order? One can ask this question only if one views the Torah as a history book. However, if one sees the Torah as a book on law and ethics, one realizes that there is no reason why the Torah should be written in chronological order. Rather, an order that will serve the Torah's purposes is called for.

For example, the gemara often finds halachic significance in the order of the verses (See Sefer Hachinuch No. 413). Also, writes Rav Shmuel Toledano z"l, the Torah is written out of the "proper" order in order to hide part of its meaning and prevent unworthy men from using its awesome mystical power (Mavo Lechochmat Hakabbalah Part II, ch.2)

***"Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace
and from your father's house . . ."(12:1)***

R' Moshe Chafetz z"l (early 18th cent.) writes that a person usually loves his home for one of three reasons: He is used to it, he was born there, or his ancestors have lived there for many generations. Human nature is that it is difficult for a person to leave a place that has all three of these "traits" in order to go to a place that he has never even seen.

This was Avraham's first test, that he had to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's home and go to a land that he did not know. Generally, people love their homes even when they are bad places, as Iyov said (Iyov 17:13-14), "Inasmuch as I crave the nethermost depths as my home, I spread my mattress in the dark. I called to the pit, 'You are my father!', to the worms, 'My mother, my sister!'." Avraham's test was to love Hashem instead of his hometown.

(Melech Machshevet)

R' Yitzchak Shifrin shlita (of Baltimore) lived part of his childhood in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, a town famous for its devastating floods. He used the people of Johnstown to illustrate man's irrational love for his hometown; after each flood, these people come home and rebuild, knowing full well that the next year's floods may drive them out again.

R' Donash ben Tamim z"l **late 9th century**

R' Donash was a philosopher, physician, astronomer and prolific author. He was born in Iraq and died in Kairouan, Tunisia. Only one of R' Donash's works, a commentary on Sefer Yetzirah, survives. In it, R' Donash relates that many early manuscripts of R' Saadiah Gaon (892-942), written while the latter still lived in Egypt (before 928), reached R' Donash's teacher, R' Yitzchak HaYisraeli. R' Yitzchak, in turn, instructed R' Donash which part of those works he agreed with and which he disputed. R' Donash also mentions some of his other books, including a treatise on astrology written in honor of the caliph, and one on astronomy written at the request of R' Chisdai ibn Shaprut.

R' Avraham ibn Ezra quotes R' Donash in some of his works sometimes by the name "R' Adonim ben Tamim Hamizrachi" often disagreeing with him. Nevertheless, ibn Ezra places R' Donash alongside R' Saadiah Gaon and R' Yehuda ben Kuraish among those whom he calls the "Elders of the Holy Tongue." (This R' Donash should not be confused with R' Donash Halevi ben Labrat, the disputant of Menachem ben Saruk who is quoted numerous times by Rashi. That R' Donash lived a century later.) (Sources: The Artscroll Rishonim, p.50; Commentary of Ibn Ezra to Kohelet 12:5)

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