

FREEDOM OF MAN

by Shlomo Katz

**Hamaayan / The Torah Spring
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Lech Lecha

**Volume XIV, Number 3
13 Cheshvan 5760
October 23, 1999**

Today's Learning:

Challah 4:1-2

Orach Chaim 180:4-181:1

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Mo'ed Kattan 16

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Yevamot 81

A well-known midrash relates how Avraham's father Terach left his young son in charge of his (Terach's) idol store one day. When Terach returned, all but one of the idols were smashed to bits; the largest idol, standing in the center of the store, was holding a large ax. Terach was not impressed by young Avraham's explanation that the idols had begun to fight and, not surprisingly, the largest one had won. Rather, Terach had Avraham arrested for this blasphemy.

Hearing this story as children, says R' Moshe Eisemann shlita, we probably laughed at Terach. If he knew that the idols were powerless against each other, why did he believe in them? The key to this story is the difference between Avraham's world-view and that of an idol-worshiper such as Terach. In a word, it is "freedom."

Polytheism recognizes many gods, each bound by nature and limited in potency to the confines of a particular realm. Such a belief does not recognize the omnipotence, the freedom, of a unique G-d, Creator of all. A Terach is not disturbed by the inability of one idol to destroy another, for each is limited to its own province.

If the gods are not free, then certainly man is not. According to this view, man is an impotent midget, powerless against the forces which surround him. Only with this analysis can we understand the full import of Avraham's rebellion: he discovered that not only G-d, but man, has freedom. This means, however, that man has accountability; if man controls his deeds, then he must take responsibility for them. This was a blow to the entire society in which Terach lived. (Lailah Kayom Yair p. 87)

"Go from your land, from your birthplace, and from your family, to the land which I will show you." (12:1)

Why didn't Hashem tell Avraham his destination? R' Yehuda Leib Chasman z"l explains that one who seeks greatness cannot appreciate what he seeks until he attains it. Every person, even if he abstractedly realizes that there is room in his character for self-improvement, usually feels content with his spiritual standing. Only after achieving a higher level can he look back and recognize how great the need for change was.

This makes starker the greatness of Avraham's blindly "following" Hashem to Eretz Canaan. As long as Avraham remained at home, he was relatively content with his situation. However, when Hashem told him, "Go to a place where you will become even greater" (a paraphrase of verses 1-3), Avraham went immediately.

Verse 4 records: "And Avram went as Hashem had commanded him, and Lot went with him." At first glance, Lot's action seems even greater than Avraham's. After all, Avraham had Hashem's promise that he would benefit spiritually and materially from this trip, but Lot did not! Remarkably, however, Lot's trip ended in spiritual downfall, for the Torah tells us that Lot "camped near S'dom" (13:12), the "capital" of spiritual degeneration. How did this happen?

Two people can aspire to similar goals, yet one reaches them and the other does not. The reason is that one works on attaining those goals, and the other doesn't. Rather, he merely aspires and continues to aspire. He makes no effort to examine his present situation, and certainly not to change it. He may be compared to a person who writes on a full sheet of paper, without first erasing what is written there. The more he writes, the more unreadable and confusing the document becomes.

This was Lot's approach to achieving greatness. Without erasing his faults, he tried to add new aspects to his character. The result? A personality that went with Avraham - that appeared to be equal to or greater than that tzaddik - but then failed the test presented by the wealth of S'dom. (Ohr Yahel: Vol. 3, Ma'amar "Sur Mera V'Aseh Tov")

"He cut them in the center and placed each piece opposite its counterpart. The birds, however, he did not cut up." (15:10)

At the "Berit Bein Ha'betarim"/"Covenant Between the Parts," what was the symbolism in the fact that Avraham cut up the heifers, goats and rams, but not the dove? R' Zvi Hirsch Kalischer z"l (see back page) explains as follows:

Hashem's instructions to Avraham symbolized His promise that He would keep the covenant even if Avraham's descendants sin. Even though we sin, Hashem will eventually replace our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. The former is represented by the animals, which symbolize man's earthiness and physical desires. These will be "cut up," leaving only pure intelligence.

However, man's free will cannot be tampered with. The bird, which flies freely wherever it wishes, represents free will. This was not cut up; the fact that Hashem will "replace" our hearts does not mean that He will take away our free will. Rather, from all the miracles which He will show us, everyone will know Him, and man's heart will change of its own accord.

Alternatively, the animals represent the nations that subjugate us. They are cut up to symbolize G-d's promise that we will never suffer extended periods of unbroken oppression. The bird, on the other hand, symbolizes the redemption. It is left uncut to symbolize that once the redemption comes, it will never end. (Sefer Ha'berit)

Naming Children

It is customary among both Ashkenazim and Sephardim that a new-born boy is named at his berit milah. While there is no clear source for this custom, there is a hint in the Book of Shmuel (II:12:18). There, King David's seven-day old boy is referred to as "the child." Since the boy is not referred to by a name, this suggests that boys were not named before the eighth day of their lives. (Heard from R' Yisroel Reisman shlita)

The following are some reasons given for this custom:

- (1) Hashem changed our patriarch's name from "Avram" to "Avraham" at the same time that He commanded him to circumcise himself. Likewise, we give a boy a name at the time of his circumcision.
- (2) A child achieves greater purity at the time of his berit milah. We wait to name the child until he achieves this purity. (This answer is quoted in the name of R' Yaakov Ha'gozer z"l.)
- (3) One of the prayers recited at a berit milah beseeches: "Preserve this boy . . ." We name the child during that prayer as a way of asking that the name we give the child be approved by Hashem. (This relates to Chazal's teaching that a person's name alludes to his mission in life.) (Kuntreis Ziv

Ha'shemot p.32-33)

There are several different customs as to when girls are named. Sephardic girls are named at a ceremony known as a "Zevved Ha'bat"/"The Daughter's Gift." The ceremony begins with reading Shir Ha'shirim 2:14: "My dove . . . your voice is sweet and your countenance is beautiful." For a first daughter, some read Shir Ha'shirim 6:9: "Unique is she, my constant dove, unique is she to her mother . . ." Afterward, a mi she'bairach is recited and the name is given. (Ibid. p.37)

There is no set time for holding a Zevved Ha'bat. (Heard from R' Chaim Arzouan)

Among Ashkenazim, some name a girl on the day she is born. Most wait until a day when the Torah is read. Preferably, this should be done on the first day when the Torah is read rather than waiting until Shabbat. (Kuntreis Ziv Ha'shemot p.37-38)

R' Chaim Elazar Shapiro z"l (the "Munkatcher Rebbe"; died 1937) offers the following reason in the name of his ancestor, the Bnei Yissaschar: A child's name is his/her soul. [As explained above, the name alludes to the person's mission.] Why should we deprive the child of a soul longer than necessary?! (Darchei Chaim Ve'Shalom No. 219)

One should make a festive meal on the day his daughter is named. (Ta'amei Ha'minhagim: Inyanei Milah)

Letters from Our Sages

This week we present an excerpt from a letter by R' Samson R. Hirsch z"l (1808-1888) to R' Zvi Hirsch Kalischer z"l (1795-1875). The former was rabbi of Frankfurt am-Main and the architect of the revival of Orthodox Jewry in that city. The latter was rabbi of Therin and a founder of the Chovevei Zion movement. The letter was written in 1864 and appears in Shemesh Marpeh, p.211.

My wisdom is too small to recognize what good or true [things] your lofty opinion holds will result from your efforts regarding the settlement of Eretz Yisrael. What, to your heart, appears to be a mitzvah and a great obligation, to my weak mind does not appear so. In my humble opinion, since I have no business with secrets [such as when mashiach will come], there is no good [way] except to follow the well-worn path of our fathers and predecessors, their souls are in Eden. They taught us only to concern ourselves with using all our strength to put ourselves on the road of Torah, to remove stumbling blocks from our path, and to anticipate the redemption daily if we will hearken to His voice. They never placed [the responsibility] on our shoulders to pave a way for the redemption by strengthening and fixing the Holy Land, but rather by strengthening and fixing our hearts and our deeds.

My vision is too short to see the dawn of the redemption in the fact that some [Jewish] families are close to royalty [a reference to British Prime Minister Disraeli and French Senator and Justice

Minister Cremieux]. Virtually all of them, except the one and unique lord who lives here [i.e., Baron Willy Rothschild], are far from the ways of the Torah and mitzvot, and they are counted among the new ones who have thrown off the yoke of religion . . . Moreover, what can I do? Everyone who has come from there [i.e., Eretz Yisrael] and all my confidants assure me that it is impossible for any real good to come out of this because of the difficult times and the awful state of the country. Also, my worry cannot rest lest we see another stumbling block on the Holy Land through transgression of the Shabbat and of the agricultural laws that relate to the Land . . . If I am mistaken, may the good G-d forgive. [Nevertheless,] I have never spoken a word of this in public and I do not say, "Accept my opinion." It was never my intention to cast aspersions on your honor and those who follow you and whose lofty opinions agree with yours. However, man only knows what he sees. As long as our intentions are good and our goal is to do the mitzvot of our Creator as we see it, one will act and one will refrain, one will be rewarded for acting and one for holding back, and the good G-d will forgive the one who errs and causes others to err. With these words I have fulfilled my obligation.

The Edeson and Stern families, in honor of the 55th anniversary of Jacob S. Edeson's bar mitzvah

Rabbi and Mrs. Sam Vogel, on the yahrzeits of their fathers Aharon Shimon ben Shemaryah a"h (Arthur Kalkstein) and Aharon Yehuda ben Yisrael a"h (Leon Vogel)

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