

# MY FATHER WAS A WANDERING ARAMEAM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE AVRAHAM NARRATIVES

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This shiur is dedicated to the Elitzur and Samet families on the happy occasion of the wedding of Nili and Shlomi. Hodu Lashem Ki Tov Ki L'olam Hasdo, and many wonderful B'rakhot to Dr. Yoel and Mati Elitzur of Ofra and Rabbi Elimelekh and Bruria Samet of K'far Etzion. May their children, who are indeed, "K'invei haGefen", build a strongworthy house b'Yisra'el.

*This shiur was originally written and completed just as our daughter, Ariella Chana, was born 12 years ago. It is an honor and joy to resend it in honor of the occasion of her reaching the age of Mitzvot.*

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## I

### INTRODUCTION

In two earlier shiurim, I pointed out the tragic heroism of Avraham Avinu, noting that every blessing and/or Divine gift bestowed on him came on the heels of a separation from those near and dear.

Whether it was his first separation, from father and homeland; his parting of the ways from Lot; the multiple isolations from Sarah; the exile of Hagar and Yishma'el or the near-collapse of the future on Mount Moriah; in all of these cases, his greatness and the Divine favor shining on him only increased with each episodes of separation.

Indeed, his entire life seems to have been shaped by the first Divine command given him:

"Hashem said to Avram, Go from your country and your birthplace and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (12:1-3)

In those essays, I promised a more thorough treatment of this quintessential feature of Avraham's life. I hope to fulfill that promise in this analysis.

## II

### AVRAHAM'S LIFE: AN OVERVIEW

Although we are given scant information about Avraham before he was commanded to "make Aliyah", a significant number of episodes which took place between the ages of 75 and 137 are related - some in painstaking detail. Here is a brief outline of the Avrahamic narratives (Chs. 12-23)

#### A. "Lekh L'kha" (12-13)

1. Avraham's Aliyah (12:1-9) leaving father and family
2. Egypt (12:10-20) temporary separation from Sarah #1
3. Parting of ways from Lot (13:1-13)
4. Divine Promise of the Land (13:14-18) Avraham settles in Kiryat Arba (v. 18)

#### B. War of the Kings (14)

captivity of Lot

#### C. B'rit "between the pieces" (15)

future oppression of Avraham's progeny

#### D. Hagar Episode #1 (16)

Temporary exile of Hagar

#### E. B'rit Milah (17)

Promise of Yitzhak - rejection of Yishma'el

#### F. Avraham and S'dom (18-19)

1. Visitors to Avraham's tent (18:1-15)
2. Avraham's plea for S'dom (18:16-33)
3. Destruction of S'dom (19:1-29)
4. Lot and his daughters (19:30-38)

#### G. Avraham in G'rar (20)

Temporary separation from Sarah #2

#### H. Parashiot Yitzhak (21-22)

1. Birth of Yitzhak (21:1-21)  
Permanent exile of Hagar and Yishma'el
2. Pact with Philistines (21:22-34)
3. Akedah (binding of Yitzhak) 22:1-19  
near-death of Yitzhak
4. Announcement of birth of Rivkah (22:20-24)

#### I. Purchase of M'arat haMach'pelah (23)

## Death of Sarah

Each step of Avraham's life which invites God's blessing is accompanied with (or preceded by) an instance of separation from family.

Why are these two emotionally charged experiences so intertwined in Avraham's life? Why must he (if he truly must) introduce another measure of isolation in order to come closer to the realization of God's blessing?

### III

#### WHY IS AVRAHAM THE "WANDERING ARAMEAN"?

I would like to pose three additional questions before beginning our analysis:

2) Throughout the Avraham narratives, the Patriarch is described as a nomad. Even after arriving in the Land, Avraham continually moves (note, inter alia, 12:8-9, 13:3, 20:1); where do we find that God's command to Avraham implied a life of nomadic wandering?

3) As a detail of the previous question, Avraham's behavior immediately after his successful Aliyah is puzzling. God commanded him to go to "the Land that I will show you" and that he will realize all manner of blessings there. As soon as the first hardship presents itself (famine), Avraham abandons the Land of Divine promise for Egypt. Even if this was intended as a temporary trip (see section VI below), it is still hard to reconcile this behavior with Avraham who is "My close friend" (\*Ohavi\* - Yeshayah 41:8).

Ramban, who raises this question, goes so far as to say that Avraham sinned in this regard - and that this sin - going down to Egypt when he should have stayed in the Land and trusted that God would take care of him - was the cause of his children's oppression in that same land.

Can we find some way to explain Avraham's seeming abandoning of the Land and apparent lack of trust in the Ribbono Shel Olam? Can we defend him against Ramban's charge?

4) God commands Avraham to go to "the Land that I will show you"; that there "I will make of you a great nation...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The clear implication is that all of these blessings are not only contingent on Avraham's taking leave of his family toward "the Land that I will show you"; he must also establish himself there in order to be blessed and become a source of universal blessing.

We would expect Avraham, upon his arrival in K'na'an, to purchase (or conquer) some land and establish himself as a permanent citizen and landowner - in order that these blessings have the opportunity to "take hold".

Avraham never makes an attempt to acquire any piece of this land until his beloved Sarah dies and he purchases a catacomb for burial. Why did he wait so long to "take hold" of the Land?

## IV

### LEKH L'KHA AND THE AKEDAH: PARALLEL CHALLENGES

Many commentators, as early as the Midrash (B'resheet Rabbah 39:9) and as recently as the Netziv (R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin - 19th century - in his "Ha'amek Davar" at B'resheet 12:1) have noted that the opening command to Avraham is strikingly similar to the last Divine command given to him:

"Take your son, your only son, whom you love - Yitzhak, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." (22:2)

Compare this with:

"Go from your country and your birthplace and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

The pregnant phrases which describe the painful separation - "your country, your birthplace and your father's house" are a near-perfect parallel to "your son, your only son, whom you love."

The quixotic trek to find "the mountain that I will show you" echoes the first Divinely-directed journey - to "the Land that I will show you" - which marked the beginning of Avraham's way.

There is yet another parallel between these two missions which "bookend" the Avrahamic narratives in the Torah.

God told Avraham that as a result of his leaving kith and kin and journeying forward, he would be blessed, be a source of blessing and, through him, all of the nations of the world would be blessed.

Compare:

"Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed My voice." (22:16-18)

With:

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

The crowning blessing in both cases is that Avraham (and Avraham's progeny) will be a source of blessing for the rest of the world. These are the only two places in the Avrahamic narratives where this blessing is expressed. (The reference in 18:18 is not directed to Avraham; it is presented as Divine "musings" about Avraham.)

There are several ways to understand these obvious and striking parallels. We could understand them as creating a literary "envelope" structure which helps define the entire Avrahamic enterprise.

Alternatively, we could suggest that these two parallel missions help establish the framework for the ten "trials" of Avraham (see Avot 5:3 and Rambam's commentary ad loc.).

I would like to propose that the relationship between the first Lekh L'kha and the final Lekh L'kha is more than a literary device; it is at once integrated and causal.

## V

"THAT I WILL SHOW YOU"

In order to respond to our four questions above and to understand the relationship between the first command given to Avraham and the Akedah, we need to reexamine a pregnant phrase which informs Lekh L'kha while obscuring it.

\*El ha'Aretz Asher Ar'eka\* - "To the Land that I will show you." Avraham was not told where this Land was (although he was already moving in the right direction - see B'resheet 11:31 and Ramban at the end of his comments to 12:1); just that God would show him the Land.

How would Avraham know that he had reached his destination? How would Avraham know when he reached the place where he would achieve all of those grand blessings promised by God?

Two alternatives seem plausible:

a) If God revealed Himself to him - at any point - that might be an indicator that he had already reached the place in question;

b) If outside factors supported his settlement there (what is referred to in the Gemara as \*K'litat ha'Aretz\* - see e.g. BT Ketubot 111a - see also BT Sanhedrin 108b). In other words, if he found the economic, military, political, social etc. conditions in a particular spot conducive to settling there, that might be an indication that God was showing him the place to settle.

Some of the Rishonim grapple with this issue and suggest variations of the first alternative above.

Radak (12:7): "And Hashem appeared to Avram - He appeared to him at Elon Moreh to inform him that this is the land to which He had referred."

Ramban (12:1): "...to the land that I will show you - [Avraham] was wandering from nation to nation and from kingdom to another people until he came to the land of K'na'an and [God] said to him: I will give this land to your seed (12:7); at that point, the land that I will show you was fulfilled."

Ibn Ezra (12:1, second explanation) adopts a similar view, as does S'forno (12:1), who explains: "to the land that I will show you - [meaning] to the place within the land that I will show you by Divine visions. Therefore [Avraham] passed through the land and did not set up his tent until he reached the place where God appeared to him..."

There are, in sum, two variations of this notion: Once God appeared to Avraham, that demonstrated

that he had reached the destination. Alternatively, when God declared "this is the land..." that was the fulfillment. Since both of these happened simultaneously, there isn't a practical difference as to when this verse reached fulfillment - only a theoretical question of which component in that vision represented the realization of that goal - the Divine appearance or His declaration which accompanied said appearance.

There is one problem with all of these approaches: In spite of God's appearing to Avraham - and promising him the land - Avraham does not cease his wanderings. As noted above, Avraham seems to continue his original journey, moving from place to place, never settling down and avoiding land acquisition for many years after the Divine appearance recorded in 12:7.

## VI

### WHAT WAS AVRAHAM SEEKING?

It seems clear then, that Avraham did not sense that he had reached the land that I will show you as a result of the Divine revelation documented in 12:7. What was he looking for?

Our second proposal, above, would explain a number of anomalies in the narrative.

We will review the relevant Avrahamic narratives and note how the \*K'litah\* approach (our second proposal) gives us a broader understanding into Avraham's actions throughout the narrative.

Avraham was looking for an indication that he had reached the place where God intended him to settle - and where all of those blessings could be realized. He continued moving south (12:9), which is a continuation of the direction he had been moving when God gave him his first command. When the famine made Eretz K'na'an unlivable, he moved further south - to Egypt. There is no indication in the text that Avraham saw that "descent" as temporary; although the text states that he went down to sojourn there (\*Lagur Sham\*), indicating that his intention was not necessarily to settle in Egypt, it does not mean that this was not an option if Egypt would turn out to be hospitable for him.

How, then, did Avraham know that Egypt was not "the Land that I will show you"? The hostility which he encountered in his interactions with the Pharaoh - followed by his being "escorted out" of Egypt - were probably a solid indication that this was not "the place".

Although Avraham apparently tried to settle down after his return to Eretz K'na'an, his wanderings continued for many years.

For the first time (that we know of), Avraham is wealthy (13:2) - and we can assume that he is ready to find a spot and settle there. Tragedy strikes again - Lot's shepherds have a dispute with Avraham's shepherds. This shows Avraham that the conditions are not yet ripe for proper settlement - so he proposes the right/left split (13:9). Lot accepts and takes the S'dom valley - leaving Avraham with the hill country of K'na'an. This should be sufficient - and, indeed, the long awaited word \*Vayeshev\*

(and he settled/dwelt) appears at the end of Chapter 13. Subsequent to becoming enriched in Egypt and separating from Lot, Avraham is now ready to settle - which he does, in Elonei Mamre (Kiryat Arba/Hevron).

Just as Avraham is settling in, conditions again conspire to deprive him of the security of stable dwelling. The very next verse introduces us to the "War of the Kings", a war which seems to have affected the entire land of K'na'an (including Hevron). In addition, by virtue of Lot's prisoner-of-war status, Avraham was drawn into the fighting.

At the end of the war, an enigmatic encounter takes place between Avraham, the king of S'dom and Malkizedek, the king of Shalem (which most commentaries associate with Yerushalayim). In the course of that encounter, Malkizedek blesses Avraham - and then blesses the God of Avraham:

"Blessed be Avram by God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" (14:19-20)

At last, the great promise is starting to be realized: "...and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

It was in this place (Yerushalayim), where the Divine promise attached to Avraham's task to go to "the Land that I will show you" began to become actualized.

The next few chapters describe Avraham's increasingly intense relationship with God; the B'rit "between the pieces" (Chapter 15) and the name-change and B'rit Milah (Ch. 17) complete the "B'rit-portion" of the narrative; but at no point in either B'rit is there a mention of Avraham settling down. Indeed, the intervening chapter describes yet more instability, as Hagar's pregnancy and subsequent haughtiness leads to cruel treatment on the part of Sarah (note the Ramban at 16:6). As a result of this, Hagar flees, only to return at the behest of God (via an angel) and to bear Avraham a son, Yishma'el.

The lack of "settledness" continues through the S'dom episode (Ch. 18-19) - note that even after this great destruction (more instability in the land), Avraham wanders southwest to the land of the P'lishtim (Ch. 20). Since (as mentioned before), there was no inherent reason for him to continue wandering, it may be that Avraham was still looking for that place; the lack of suitable conditions for "absorption" to this point indicated that he had not gotten "there" as of yet.

The upsetting incident in G'rar - echoing the near-tragedy in Egypt - is amplified by Avraham's claim that:

"I did it because I thought, there is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife." (20:11)

Not only is this not "the Land that I will show you"; Avraham, in his own defense to Avimelekh, presents himself as someone who is still wandering:

"And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother." (20:13).

Avraham's behavior is consistent with his "wandering-life" - which is not yet finished!

Even the miraculous birth of Yitzhak (21:1-5) is not enough to bring stability to the family; the immediate aftermath of Yitzhak's weaning party is the permanent exile of Hagar and Yishma'el from the household.

Avraham then makes a pact with Avimelekh, the king of the P'lishtim, and conditions finally seem conducive to Avraham's settling down and realizing all of the Divine promises.

Nevertheless, we read, at the end of Ch. 21:

"And Avraham resided as an alien many days in the land of the P'lishtim."

Avraham was still a \*Ger\*, an alien; he still made no move to acquire land and gain permanent status in the Land.

We finally come to the Akedah. Before looking at this powerful mini-saga and its role within Avraham's life, let's remember that, following the thesis suggested earlier, Avraham still hadn't found "the Land that I will show you". He continues to wander, not on account of a nomadic ideology, but because his quest is not finished. His travels to Egypt, throughout the Land (and his unwillingness to acquire land and settle down) are all symptomatic of his lack of "arrival"; he hasn't yet fulfilled the first verse in Lekh L'kha, upon which all of his success and the success of his seed is contingent.

Suddenly, the memory of that first command is powerfully evoked by a hauntingly similar directive:

"Take your son, your only son, whom you love - Yitzhak, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." (22:2)

Avraham's journey is finally at an end - God is going to show him the long-sought-after place, "the Land that I will show you". Although we conventionally understand the Land that I will show you as a reference to all of Eretz Yisra'el (since any location within Eretz Yisra'el wouldn't properly be considered a land; it would usually be called a \*Makom\* [place]), the verse explicitly refers to \*Eretz haMoriah\* - the land of Moriah, which is another name for Yerushalayim (see Divrei HaYamim II 3:1).

Is it any wonder that Avraham arose early in the morning to begin this final journey? God was directing him to go back to the place where he had first found a partial fulfillment of the promise - where Malkizedek had blessed him years before.

After three days, "Avraham cast up his eyes and saw the place from afar".

The rest of the story is well-known and does not directly impact on our theory. Nevertheless, it is prudent to point out that the name of the mountain is Moriah; Avraham later refers to it as "YHVH



Yeira'eh\* - all words associated with "seeing", as in "the place that I will show you."

After these many years of wandering, of trying to finally identify the place that God intended to be the locus benedicti of Avraham (and his children), it has been found, it has been named and it has been sanctified. The same place where Avraham was first blessed (from the mouth of Malkizedek) was now the place where the Avrahamic destiny of being a blessing for all of mankind was reconfirmed and established.

## VII AFTERMATH

We finally hear of Avraham settling down (in B'er Sheva) with no further disruptions. We hear of this, deliberately and pointedly, in the last verse of the Akedah story:

And Avraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to B'er Sheva; and Avraham lived at B'er Sheva. (22:19)

We now understand why Avraham was now ready to settle down (in B'er Sheva) - indeed, the next section describes Avraham (finally) acquiring land in Makhpelah (more on that next week.)

We can now review our questions and respond:

Q: Why does every step of Avraham's life involve separation from family?

A: Since the blessing originally given involved the growth of a great nation, every one of these episodes of Avrahamic isolation was a clear indication that he had not yet reached the place - that he had to continue the process of "Lekh L'kha", for he had not yet reached "the land that I will show you." He had to continue the process of "Go from....father's house" until finding "the Land that I will show you."

Q: Why does Avraham continue to wander, even after reaching the Land?

A: Since he had not yet found "the Land that I will show you", he had to maintain the nomadic lifestyle.

Q: Why did he go down to Egypt (Ramban's question)?

A: Since the conditions in the land were (not yet) propitious for his settling there, he understood that as an indication that this was (not yet) the place for him to be.

Q: Why did he wait until after the Akedah to settle down (in B'er Sheva) and to acquire land (in Hevron)?

A: It was only after the Akedah, when he had found the place and had had the full reconfirmation of his blessings (every one which was repeated at that place), that he was able to "settle down" in the land and begin the process of developing the great nation which he was promised. The birth of Rivkah - the seeds of the following generations - is announced immediately after the Akedah saga.

We can better understand the import of the Torah's description of Avraham immediately after that piece of the Land is acquired:

"Now Avraham was old, well advanced in years; and Hashem had blessed Avraham in all things."  
(24:1)

## VIII

### AND FOR GOOD MEASURE...

Just prior to submitting this shiur, I found the following Midrash in Rav Kasher's Torah Shelema:

...to the land that I will show you: This is Har HaMoriah, as it says: \*Lekh L'kha el Eretz HaMoriah\*  
(Midrash haHefetz)

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