

THE LANDLORD IS STILL HOME

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Lech Lecha

The Landlord Is Still Home

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 830, Standing for a Chosen. Good Shabbos!

Avraham Avinu returns victorious from the battle with the Four Kings and is greeted by the rescued King of Sodom who tells him "Give me the souls and you take the spoils of war." Avraham takes an oath that he will take not even a shoelace from the King of Sodom so that the King would not later be able to say "I made Avraham wealthy." [Bereishis 14:22-23] This booty rightfully belonged to Avraham but he did not want to take it.

The Medrash in Bereishis Rabbah comments on this refusal to take even a shoelace: "For this noble act, Avraham merited that his children receive a mitzvah." What was this mitzvah? The Medrash actually lists several mitzvos that Avraham's children merited because of this act, among them the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel -- coming up to Jerusalem for the Festivals. This is alluded to by the pasuk: "Mah Yafu p'amayich bas nadiv" [Shir HaShirim 7:2]. This pasuk extols the virtues of the footsteps of Klal Yisrael.

The question we need to analyze in light of this Medrash is what is the connection between Avraham Avinu and the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel? More specifically, how does the proclamation of Avraham to the King of Sodom regarding his refusal to take the spoils of war lead to his children meriting the privilege of having the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel?

In order to answer these questions, we need to spend a few moments analyzing the mitzvah. The pasuk says, "Three times during the year, each male from amongst you should be seen before the L-rd your G-d." [Shemos 23:17] The three times a year that Jews have to leave their homes and travel to Jerusalem are the holidays of Pessach, Shavuot, and Succos. When one thinks about it, this obligation could not come at a worse time for the average Jewish household. It is equivalent to saying "in March and April, all accountants have to go up to Jerusalem." [Yearly income tax is due

April 15 in the United States.] It is the middle of tax season, you do not know how you are going to finish all your work, but you have to drop everything and travel up to Jerusalem at the worst possible time.

That is the way it was for the farmer in the agrarian society. We celebrate Pessach during the planting season, in the month of Nissan, I need to leave the farm and travel to Jerusalem. Shavuot occurs during the harvest season. Again, the worst time in the world for a farmer to have to take a forced trip and leave his farm -- together with all the hired help -- right in the middle of the crop harvest! Finally, the real test comes on Succot -- the time of the in-gathering of the crop -- I need to bring the crop into the barns and silos before the winter rains begin. Again I need to drop everything and run to Yerushalayim.

It is no coincidence that at these times it is necessary to go up to the Beis HaMikdash. On these occasions -- especially when a person is busy with the harvest -- it is very easy for a person to fall into the trap of "My strength and the power of my hand made me all this wealth" [Devorim 8:17] -- Boy am I a good farmer! Look at this crop! I am going to make a fortune! Therefore, at this very time, the Almighty tells us, "Go to Jerusalem and go to the Beis HaMikdash and get your priorities straight. Realize that 'my strength and the power of my hand made me all this wealth', is not correct, but rather, 'He who gives you the strength to prosper' [Devorim 8:18]". This is one of the lessons we need to learn when we go up to Jerusalem at the time of the Festivals.

However, there is something even more acute than that. The Torah uses the expression -- Adon [Master] -- by Aliyah L'Regel. "Three times during the year, all your males should be seen before the Master, Hashem." [Shemos 23:17] Hashem is rarely referred to as "Adon" in the Torah. "Adon" is simply not one of the more common names used to refer to Hashem in the Torah. Again, by Aliyah K'Regel in Parshas Ki Sisa, the pasuk says "before the Master, the G-d of Israel." [Shemos 34:23] So by Aliyah L'Regel it is emphasized twice. This teaches a second lesson that we must learn from the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel. The mitzvah reminds us "Who is the Master?" "Who is the 'Baal-Habayis' of the world?" "Who owns everything?" The 'Baal-Habayis' is the Hashem. The nuance of the word 'Adon' means He is the Master, He is the 'Baal-Habayis'.

To wit, the Yalkut Shimoni writes that anytime the Torah uses the expression 'Adon' the connotation is "He can take out the existing tenants and he can put in new tenants". He is the "Baal Ha-bayis". In English, we would say "He is the landlord!" That is why the Torah uses this expression concerning the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel.

Every Jew who owned the smallest piece of land, leaves everything and goes up to Yerushalayim. Is this not a security risk? Is this not an invitation for disaster? Who will be watching the sheep, the cattle, the farm, the house? Everyone left town! The Jewish people rarely if ever lived in entirely tranquil times. What would stop the enemy from coming in and taking over? Imagine what would happen today if everyone left their homes to travel to Jerusalem. It would be an open invitation to

our enemies to invade and take over the country, Heaven forbid.

How can we do that? We can do it because the Ribono Shel Olam says, "the 'Baal haBayis' is still home". The Landlord remains on guard! "I promise you," the Landlord says, that "no man shall covet your land when you go up to see the Presence of the L-rd your G-d three times a year" [Shemos 34:24]. I promise you that no ill will befall you when you perform this mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel. This is the message that is reinforced by this three times a year commandment: Do not ever forget who is in charge.

The Medrash in Shir HaShirim tells the story of two wealthy brothers in Ashkelon who had wicked Gentile neighbors. The neighbors plotted to loot the property of the brothers when they traveled up to Jerusalem. The brothers left on their Aliyah L'Regel journey, and the neighbors scouted out the property -- expecting it to be unoccupied -- but they saw two people still there, going in and out, in and out. They continued checking throughout the holiday and to their amazement, each day the brothers still appeared to be on their land. Lo and behold after the Yom Tov was over, the brothers returned from Jerusalem and they brought their neighbors back souvenirs from the Holy City.

The neighbors questioned the brothers: Where were you? They said, "We were in Jerusalem." The neighbors were incredulous. "What do you mean, we saw you each day. You were here the whole time!" The brothers assured them that they just gotten back from a two week journey to Jerusalem. The Medrash concludes that the Gentile neighbors recognized the miracle and responded, "Blessed be the G-d of Israel who does not abandon them and does not leave them orphaned." It was a miracle. The Almighty made two angels appear who looked like the two brothers. Nothing happened to their house because "No man will covet your land". G-d says, "I am the Landlord and the Landlord is still home."

The Medrash relates a similar incident. The brothers left the door unlocked, a snake came and wrapped himself around the padlock so that the Gentiles could not enter. There are several such incidents in the Medrash. The points are all the same: There is a Ribono shel Olam who is in charge and who is the landlord. He brings tenants in and he kicks tenants out. He is the One who provides sustenance. He can protect us. He will protect us. This is the lesson of Aliyah L'Regel.

When Avraham Avinu came back from battle, the King of Sodom told him: "Give me the souls; you take the booty." What does Avraham Avinu say? "I lift my hand to the G-d on High, who owns Heaven and Earth (koneh shamayim v'aretz)..." This expression "koneh shamayim v'aretz" is an expression we say daily in the Shmoneh Esrei in reference to Hashem. It connotes that he is the Landlord -- he owns everything! Avraham will not accept a shoelace from the King of Sodom because he knows that it is the L-rd who owns Heaven and Earth who has promised to give him wealth. Avraham is confident that it will be He who will give him wealth and does not want to give the King of Sodom the opportunity to say "I made Avraham wealthy."

This was Avraham's signature message to the world: There is One G-d, a personal G-d, an interested

G-d, a G-d who runs the show and who is the Baal HaBirah (the Master of the Metropolis). This is the same Avraham Avinu in whose merit his children received the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel, which for all future generations would teach Avraham's offspring this very same message.

It is no coincidence that the Gemara says, [Brochos 7b] "Rav Yochanan stated in the name of Rav Shimon bar Yochai: "From the day the Holy One Blessed be He created the world, there was no person who called Him 'Adon' until Avraham came and did so." Others recognized the Holy One Blessed be He. Adam recognized Him, Noach recognized Him, Shem recognized Him. But Avraham was the first one to recognize him as the 'Adon', the Landlord, owner of everything that exists and all that happens in the world. Therefore, it was he who merited for his children the commandment of Aliyah L'Regel.

Once before, I mentioned that a person wrote a commentary on the Siddur, the Jewish prayer book, and brought it to the Gaon of Vilna for an approbation. The Vilna Gaon opened it to the first page and saw the first insight of the author -- on the Adon Olam prayer. The author asked, "Why does the morning service begin with the Adon Olam prayer?" The answer is because Avraham Avinu was the first person to call the Almighty by the name Adon and the morning service was enacted corresponding to Avraham's practice to recite the morning prayer. The Gaon commented that for this insight alone, the rest of the commentary was worth buying.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for this Parsha are provided below:

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