

Lech Lecha 5782

BS"D Parashat Lech Lecha 5782

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Insular Nature of the Covenant

A student at the Hebrew University was noticeably affected while reading the Bible. When his professor asked what had so aroused his enthusiasm, the young man replied that it was the story of the parting of the Red Sea. The professor, who was not a Torah-observant person, told the young student to calm down because, according to scientists, the Red Sea at that time was, at most, ten centimeters deep. A few minutes later, the young student became even more enthusiastic as he read further, and again the professor asked for the reason. The student replied, "What a great HaShem we have. He was able to drown the entire Egyptian army in only ten centimeters of water."

I can understand that as a man of reason, the professor would see some of the episodes related in the Torah as outlandishly fantastic. I am sure that the professor was scratching his forehead when he read parashat Lech Lecha, where Avraham and his 318 student-soldiers vanquished the allied forces of four major kings with their highly trained and battle-hardened troops.

But the dilemma regarding this battle begins long before the final victory. There was a military alliance of four powerful kings:

אֲמֵרָפֶל מֶלֶךְ שִׁינְאָר, מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל, מֶלֶךְ עִוִּילִים, מֶלֶךְ כְּנִזְזִים

King Amrafel of Shin'ar, identified as Bavel (Iraq); King

Aryoch of Alasar; King Kadarla'omer of Elam, identified as either Persia or Greece; and King Tidal of Goyim, identified as the head of an alliance of many smaller states.

The entire region was under threat of conquest, because after their stunning victory in Eretz Yisrael it would be logical to assume that the four kings were on their way to further expansionist conquests after defeating the five kings of the Jordan Valley; for nothing succeeds more than success. On this background, it would be safe to assume that the region's nations, such as Egypt and the countries in North Africa and Asia Minor, were sharpening their spears in preparation for defending their own countries.

But nothing of the sort is recorded in the Torah. Quite the opposite! The only force that gathered to make battle with the four kings was Avraham and his 318 student-soldiers.

Our highly respected and learned professor would be justified in casting doubt on the reliability of the biblical account of Avraham's battle against these four powerful kings, except for one undeniable fact! A similar scenario is taking place today in front of our very own eyes.

The civilized world is being threatened by the enemies of humanity and freedom, led by the Islamic-fascist state of Iran. The mad leaders of Iran belong to the Shiite Islam sect that believes that their last Imam, their Mashiach, will appear only on the background of a universal catastrophe. And it is the mission of Iran to bring about that horrific catastrophe that is driving the Iranians to forge ahead with their nuclear program.

On this background, one would expect the Christian nations to band together with the "moderate" Arab nations to pre-empt this threat. The USA, with its vast military capability, and the United Nations with its capacity to organize an

On that day, HaShem “cut” a covenant with Avraham saying: “I have given this land to your descendants from the River of Egypt (the Nile) until the great river Prat (the Euphrates)”

In free translation “karat brit” means “made a covenant”. However, the Hebrew root “krt” (כרת) actually means to sever or cut, which is the converse to making a covenant.

In the staccato cadence of ongoing events in parashat Lech Lecha, one might easily overlook a character who stealthily appears in the background. It is like a seemingly bit-part actor among the stars, while it later becomes apparent that he is, in fact, the dominant character.

The mystery man in Lech Lecha is Lot.

The events in the parasha proceed as follows:

Avraham and his family returned physically and materially unscathed from Egypt. However, when friction erupted between the halachic-guided shepherds of Avraham and the opportunist shepherds of Lot, Avraham decided that, in the name of family tranquility, it would be better if he and Lot would part.

Lot chose to move to the fertile plain of Sodom, and Avraham continued on his trek to familiarize himself with the Land.

Question 1: Why did Lot choose the area where such wickedness reigned?

Question 2: Four kings from the area of today’s Iraq-Iran, led by Amrafel King of Shinar invaded the land and conquered five kings in the area of Sodom, taking Lot and his family hostage. Without hesitation, Avraham, with only 318 men, attacked the four kings and their larger armies. How did Avraham embark on a seemingly suicidal military attack against four nations?

Question 3: The Torah records a conversation between Avraham and the King of Sodom who offered Avraham the spoils of war,

but Avraham refused. Where was Lot at the time of this meeting?

Question 4: HaShem appears to Avraham in the Brit Bain Habetarim (The Covenant of the Divided Animals) with glorious promises for the future. Avraham replied that these promises will have no lasting spiritual benefit since he has no heir, except for the gentile Eliezer of Damascus. HaShem promised that Sarah will bear him a son who will continue Avraham's great spiritual work. Why did Avraham say that his next in line was Eliezer of Damascus when Lot was a living blood relative?

The above four questions are resolved by one statement in Rashi's commentary (14:1), that Amrafel, King of Shinar, one of the four attacking kings was the infamous Nimrod, who had once thrown Avraham into a fiery furnace, from which Avraham miraculously escaped.

This sheds new light on all the seemingly unrelated events in the parasha:

Avraham's deliverance from the fiery furnace caused great personal shame to Nimrod, disgrace to his pagan beliefs, and dishonor to the national pride of Nimrod and his allies. This could not pass unavenged!

Nimrod knew that the God of Avraham would not permit any harm to come to him, as seen by the debacle (from Nimrod's point of view) when Avraham was saved from the furnace. So, Nimrod devised a scheme to destroy Avraham and his teachings by severing the continuation of Avraham's beliefs by destroying his heir Lot.

Amrafel-Nimrod and three other kings attacked the area of Sodom in order to "neutralize" Avraham's only living spiritual heir. Nimrod succeeded in his war against the five kings and took Lot and his family hostage, thereby neutralizing the future monotheistic teachings of Avraham.

Avraham did not have the luxury of analyzing his military options. He had no choice but to free Lot, upon whom rested the future of Am Yisrael. Avraham attacked with 318 men and miraculously defeated the armies of Nimrod and his allies.

Now comes the critical moment of the parsha.

The King of Sodom meets with Avraham to offer his thanks and material benefits for rescuing the Sodomites from the four kings.

At this crucial juncture in the future of Avraham and Lot, Avraham turns to Lot and offers him to return to a life of kedusha. Lot, when he departed from Avraham and chose to live near Sodom, was not yet aware of their evils. But now after knowing the Sodomites, Lot was given a second chance by Avraham to rejoin the family. At this crucial moment, when on one side stood his holy uncle who represented a life of sanctity and morality, and on the other side stood the King of Sodom with the promise of recognition and honor (Lot was appointed chief justice of Sodom), Lot again chose to be with the Sodomites. But this time he was fully aware of who their society was.

At that precise moment, Lot abrogated his spiritual connection with Avraham, surrendering all chance of being his uncle's spiritual heir; leaving Avraham's closest servant Eliezer of Damascus as Avraham's spiritual heir, a fact which Avraham bemoaned before HaShem. However, HaShem promises Avraham that he will have a son, Yitzchak, who will soon be born to him and Sarah; and through Yitzchak and Yitzchak's son Ya'akov, the Jewish people will begin their momentous journey into eternity.

But soon after, Yishmael is born to Avraham and Hagar. Yishmael now has a claim that he is Avraham's heir apparent, both in the spiritual realm as well as the material wealth of his father.

In Parashat Vayera, the inherent evil character of Yishmael comes to the fore. Sarah sees Yishmael for what he is – a “perch adam” – an unbridled wild being and demands that Avraham terminate all connection with Hagar and her son Yishmael. HaShem appears to Avraham and directs him to follow Sarah’s demand.

By doing so, HaShem informs Avraham that Yishmael is neither his spiritual, nor a material heir. The only heir will be Yitzchak, from whom will descend the Jewish nation.

By severing Lot and Yishmael from any halachic connection to Avraham, the way was now clear for HaShem to conclude an eternal covenant with Avraham and his future Jewish descendants, without legitimate claims by Lot or Yishmael.

Now we can understand why the Torah used the verb KRT (karat brit), which means to sever or cut off, to describe the conclusion of the eternal covenant between the Creator and the Jewish people. Because the covenant had to be predicated upon severing all who would interfere with the restricted, parochial and insular nature of the covenant. Lot and Yishmael represented those who would intrude on the exclusive and selective covenant between HaShem and the Jewish nation.

As Moshe Rabbeinu requested from HaShem (Shemot 33:16)

וְכִי אֶפְתָּח אֶת עֵינַי וְרָאִיתִי אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָאֵם אֲנִי וְנִכְחָדְתִּי וְנִכְחָדְתָּ אֶת אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנִכְחָדְתָּ אֶת אֶתְנֵי אֲבוֹתַי וְנִכְחָדְתָּ אֶת אֶתְנֵי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִכְחָדְתָּ אֶת אֶתְנֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי וְנִכְחָדְתָּ אֶת אֶתְנֵי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִכְחָדְתָּ אֶת אֶתְנֵי אֱלֹהֵינוּ

How will it be known that I and Your people have found favor in Your eyes, unless you go with us? Only if You distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth.

Shabbat Shalom

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