

Shiur L'Yom Chamishi¹

[Thursday's Study]

READINGS: ***Torah Lech Lecha:*** Genesis 15:1-21
 Haftarah: Isaiah 41:10-13
 B'rit Chadasha: Romans 4:9-12

S'for [make an account; write the story of] ***the stars –***
if you are able to s'for them!

[Genesis 15:5]

Today's Meditation is Psalm 115:1-11;

This Week's Amidah Prayer Focus is the *Kadosh*, the Prayer of Holiness

Achar ha-devarim ha-eleh hayah d'var-Adonai el-Avram b'machazeh – i.e. after these things, the Word of the Holy One came to Avram in a vision Genesis 15:1.

The Holy One has designed the Ecosystem in which we live to consist of both a *seen realm* and a counterbalancing *unseen realm*. The 'seen' realm consists of the finite, mortal, and corporeal physical forms that are visible to the human eye; the 'unseen' realm consists of infinite, invisible, eternal spiritual realities that operate in secret. Situated between and separating these two realms is a firmament-like buffer that I like to refer to as the '*Finity Barrier*'. As we start today's aliyah, that barrier is about to be tested! The Holy One is not going to speak to Avram from behind the veil as He has done before; He is going to push the envelope. He is actually going to take on form, step out of the unseen/infinite realm into the seen/finite realm, and make an APPEARANCE.

Welcome to the Limelight, Grandfather!

After getting off to a shaky start in his new gig as the Kingdom-of-Heaven's ambassador to the nations, Avram is learning to walk a little more wisely – especially when appearing before earthly kings. As the *mashal* [i.e. proverb] says, ***When you sit down to eat with a ruler of your people, consider carefully what is before you; And put a knife to your throat if you are a man given to appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food.*** Proverbs 23:1-3.

Avram has now proven – to himself as well as the world - that he cannot be moved from his appointed mission on behalf of the Creator by any of the usual *weapons of mass distraction*. He is not enticed in the slightest by offers of material wealth. He does not cower before powerful men. He is not intimidated by armies, arsenals, or oppression. Neither is he swayed from the mission the Creator has assigned him by

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anyone's promises of pleasure, position, or prestige. As Rudyard Kipling said in his beautiful exhortation "If":

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch;
if neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
if all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it.
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!*

Avram is coming along in this regard. He has his moments of modeling a well-lived, God-honoring life for us. Perhaps for this reason, there is now another King who wants an audience with him. This King is unlike any other. This King's glory far eclipses that of Pharaoh, of the Kings of the East, of the King of Sodom, or of any other mortal ruler. ***Who is this king of glory? Who is this King of glory? The Holy One, strong and mighty; the Holy One, mighty in battle.*** Psalm 24:8. The time has come for Avram to stand before the Maker of Heaven and Earth – the King of all Kings – and receive both an *upgrade* and a new *assignment*.

You'll Find Me Waiting ... at the Coloring of Dawn

What is life like for a 'friend of God'? Suffice it to say that Avram's life has changed dramatically since he responded to the Creator's *Lech Lecha* call. Part of the changes he has experienced have been geographical in nature. He has left the land of his birth – and walked away from the only culture he has ever known – to respond to the call of *Eretz Yisrael*. But there is much more involved in being a friend of God than mere geography. In the course of responding to the *Lech Lecha* call, Avram found *new life*. He found *purpose*. He found *hope*. He inner *shalom*. He found *deep, abiding joy*. He found *meaning in He Who and that which is holy* – and as a consequence he has now learned to *find meaning even in he who and that which is mundane*. In the process Avram stumbled into both *cross-cultural and cross-generational relevance*. He is finally living the life for which he was born. He is finally beginning to have the level of impact upon the world he was intended to have. And he accomplished all this without raising a fist, chanting a slogan, or promoting a movement. He has done it without building an institution. He has done it without rewriting history. He has done it without inciting ethnic violence. He has done it without weaponizing theories of pseudo-science, pop psychology, or social justice to further a political or ideological agenda. He has done it without dehumanizing any opponent. He has done it without even protesting against, much less advocating rebellion against, any government. He has done it without even mentioning, much less publicly exposing, anyone's alleged sin. He has done it without destroying anyone else's reputation. He has done it without spending even one minute arguing with anyone about politics, ideology, philosophy, or religion. He has done it simply by walking with the Holy One, and following his

instructions for living in real ways, in real time, in the mundane affairs of real life.

Avram is onto something. He is awash in Divine Passion. He exudes Divine Energy. He radiates Divine Love. As a result, his presence now carries with it both *the quiet gravitas of a sage and the inspiring vision of a Kingdom-Builder*. His joy is infectious; his optimism contagious. His graciousness and gentleness impress everyone he meets. When he speaks, his words bring healing and empowerment. Every syllable that proceeds out of his mouth – indeed every expression of his countenance - now carries *the weight of the Holy One's glory*. Even the slightest smile from his lips changes the entire atmosphere in a gathering. His *shalom* falls like a blanket on every room he enters.

As strange and unlikely as it seems, this old shepherd, with a barren wife, and no throne, no empire, no army, and no institutional influence has become a major player – indeed by far THE MOST INFLUENTIAL PLAYER – on the stage of human history. Somehow, without even trying, he has wrested the spotlight usually commanded by kings, moguls, warriors, and sages. The Creator has him appearing regularly before the most powerful men and nations of the world. For a man whose days once consisted primarily of feeding and watering sheep, he is living a most improbable dream.

How Does A Simple Shepherd Become The Man of the Hour On The Stage of World History?

To see Avram casually going about his business - tending his flocks, and engaging in light-hearted banter with his wife Sarai - one would never guess that he is the *man of the hour on the stage of world history*. To look at the old fellow, and watch him calmly do the mundane things he does on a daily basis, you would never suspect that you were in the presence of the man who just spearheaded the most daring rescue mission the world has ever known. Lot, his wife, and daughters know this man very well – and now so do the five kings of the east, the kings of Sodom and Salem, and hosts of angels in Heaven.

Avram has recently been showered with favor from both the king of Salem [i.e. Melki-Tzedek] and the king of Sodom. As the *mashal* [i.e. proverb] says, ***Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings. Proverbs 22:29. After all, Righteous lips are the delight of kings, and they love him who speaks what is right. Proverbs 16:13.***

Avram took bread and wine from Melki-Tzedek, but would have no part of any bribe or wage offered to him by Sodom's king. He not only turned down a virtual fortune, he gave away the spoil of the battle. Avram is learning that the measure of

a man is not determined by what he acquires, receives, accomplishes, or earns in this life, but by *what he gladly gives away*.

Avram Appears Before the Greatest of All Kings

In today's aliyah Avram will have the fourth of his eight recorded *God encounters*. This encounter – which takes a full chapter of Torah to describe - is going to provide a 'defining moment' in God-man relations. This encounter will set the tone for everything that will follow. It is REALLY important that we 'get' this. The maturation process the Holy One has been engaged in since he called Avram out of Charan is by no means finished, of course, but it has reached a point where *b'rit – the first God/man covenant since the time of Noach* - is now possible. For in the God-encounter about which we read today the Holy One is not going to just *speak* to Avram, nor is He merely going to *appear* to him in some nebulous, nonspecific form like He has done before. This time the Holy One is going to invade the material world of Avram in a tangible, undeniable, exciting, and unforgettable way. This time the Holy One is finally going to cut a b'rit with his friend.

D'var v'machazeh - A Word of Flowing Vision

The opening verse of our aliyah for the day prepares us for a new level of "God-encounter" by telling us up front that the 4th appearance of the Holy One to His Friend Avram unfolded in a significantly different manner than the first three.

Remember that the Holy One did not begin His relationship with Avram with a *b'rit*. The *b'rit* was a culmination of a long series of preparatory steps. Hence, in the passage that describes the *b'rit*, or at least its first phase, Torah makes it clear the *b'rit* encounter took place ***achar ha-d'varim ha-eleh hayah*** [after the happening of all these *d'varim*]. We usually translate the Hebrew word *d'varim*, as used in this passage, as 'things' or 'events'. But the word means *words, speeches, or prophetic declarations*. It is thus referring to:

[a] the Holy One's previous messages to Avram [from the ***Lech lecha*** of Genesis 12 through ***Kum hithalech ha-aretz*** of the latter part of Genesis 13],

[b] Melchizedek's blessing of Avram [***baruch Avram L'El Elyon Koneh shamayim v'aretz***]; and

[c] Avram's refusal of the wealth of Sodom as a spoil of war in favor of the inheritance promised by the Holy One.

The Identification of the Divine Actor

The first rather startling aspect of Avram's fourth 'God-encounter' involves the introduction of a completely different formula for describing the Divine 'actor'

involved. In what ‘name’, and in what manifestation of His multifaceted *echad*² persona will the Holy One appear this time? Heretofore, when Torah began a description of one of Avram’s God encounters, it used a predictable formula, such as ‘*vayomer Adonai el-Avram*’ [And *the Holy One* said to Avram] – Genesis 12:1 – or ‘*vayomer Adonai el-Avram*’ [And *the Holy One* appeared to Avram and said ...] – Genesis 12:7 ‘, or “*v’Adonai amar el-Avram*’ [And *the Holy One* spoke to Avram . .] – Genesis 13:14. This time, we are introduced to the Divine initiator of the encounter not as merely ‘*Adonai*’ [the Holy One] but as ‘*Dvar-Adonai*’— a *Word* of the Holy One. Think about that for a few moments. Does it make you think of verses we encounter in the apostolic writings like ‘*In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ...* [John 1:1], and “*the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us ...*” [John 1:14]?

Hmmm. What is Torah trying to tell us by changing the formula in this way? Could this be what Yeshua was referring to when He declared “*Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing My day; he saw it, and was glad.*” John 8:56. If this is so, the Genesis 15 God encounter takes on a whole new light. It becomes Avram’s meeting with Yeshua – the *defining moment* of his Spiritual life.

Introducing the Phenomenon of Open Prophetic Vision

The second unusual aspect of the Genesis 15 God encounter is that it is specifically stated to be by way of a ‘vision’. The Hebrew word our English Bibles translate as “*vision*” in this passage is *m’chazeh*³. This is the first usage of this word in Scripture, and deserves some attention. *M’chazeh* is a Hebrew noun derived from the verb root *chazah*⁴, meaning to gaze intently, or stare, at something such that one truly and fully sees and comprehends its essence and meaning. The addition of the *mem* prefix to this verb adds a *flowing, progressive*, character to the event [*mem* is a Hebraic picture of flowing water]. *M’chazeh* describes what is sometimes called ‘*open prophetic vision*’. It is not just a glimpse [such as Avram saw in Genesis 12:7], but involves seeing a flowing sequence of events - *from the Holy One’s perspective*.

There is clearly something *visual* and *optical* about this form of revelation. It involves more than “*sensing*” or even “*hearing*”. It is the word used to describe the type of revelation the Holy One gave to *Bila’am* (Balaam).

Bila’am lifted up his eyes and he saw Yisra’el dwelling according to their tribes;

² This Hebrew word is often translated as ‘one’, as in ‘*Hear O Israel ... the Lord is One*’. The essence of the word, however, is not just ‘one’, but relates to a multi-faceted person or thing being a *complete integer*, always internally *consistent*. Perhaps a better translation might be ‘*a perfect unity*’.

³ *M’chazeh* is *mem, chet, zayin, hey*. Strong’s Hebrew word #4236, it is pronounced *makh-az-eh*’.

⁴ *Chazah* is *chet, zayin, hey*. It is Strong’s Hebrew word # 2372.

*and the Spirit of God came on him.
He took up his parable, and said, Bila`am the son of Be'or says,
The man whose eye was closed says; He says, who hears the words of God,
Who sees the vision [m'chazeh] of Shaddai,
Falling down, and having his eyes open:
"How goodly are your tents, Ya`akov, Your tents, Yisra'el!"
[Numbers 24:2-5]*

The use of the word *m'chazeh* makes this encounter qualitatively different than Avram's previous encounters with the Holy One. Does it mark a change in the relationship? We will see.

A Developing Protocol for God Encounters of the Torah Kind

We are learning from Torah that whenever the Holy One steps out of eternity into time He always has in mind - and calls forth from us - a specific response. He does not intend for His Words to return to Him without accomplishing everything He intends them to accomplish. But we have to choose to agree and cooperate with Him. That is His strategy to defeat the principalities and powers.

What exactly is the response He seeks from us? It is simple - He expects us to *sh'ma* His Voice. That means He expects us:

- to stop what we are doing in honor of His appearing;
- to focus intently on what He is saying or has said;
- to meditate on His Words over and over again;
- to speak humbly but enthusiastically to others about what He has said as and when He directs;
- to let what He has said begin to change all our attitudes and thought processes internally; and
- to let what He has said frame and mold all our conduct externally.

That, Dear Reader, is the Divine Protocol - *i.e.* the intended, expected response of a human to Divinely initiated revelation. That is what Adam and Chava did *not* do in *Gan Eden* [the Garden of Eden], because of the interference of the serpent. It is, however, what *Hanoch* [Enoch] did (when he "walked with" the Holy One). And it is exactly what Noach did when he received instruction from the Holy One about the coming judgment. More importantly for the present study it is what Avram is being trained to do, God-encounter by God-encounter, life-experience by life-experience.

Today's aliyah however is going to push the envelope further than ever before. The question is, what is the Divine Protocol – the intended, expected, response of a human – going to be when the Holy One *not only speaks revelation [as He has done many times in the past], but actually appears, and manifests His Presence and Power*

in our lives in a visible, tangible way? What response does He expect to this dramatic a form of self-revelation?

The opening lines the Holy One speaks give us some clues. Immediately upon manifesting Himself physically and visually (in what exact form and to what exact extent we are not told), the Holy One immediately says to Avram:

Al-tirah [*Don't be afraid*] ***Avram***.
Anochi magen⁵ lach [*I am your shield, defense, protection*],
sacharecha ha-r'bah me'od [*your exceedingly great compensation/reward*].

Let's look at each of these three prophetic messages in its turn.

Al-tirah⁶ [*Don't be afraid*]

The first thing the Holy One tells Avram is ***Al-tirah!*** - 'Be not afraid'. This may surprise you, but the Holy One has not said anything like this to Avram in any of the 3 prior God-encounters. *Yirat Adonai* – i.e. the reverent, motivating fear/awe of the Holy One - has been a natural, indeed essential, protective barrier between God and man ever since Genesis 3:10. *Yirat Adonai* entered the realm of God-man interaction when Adam - after ingesting the fruit of the tree of the *yada* [experiential knowledge] of *tov* [that which produces good] and *ra* [self-indulgent behavior that produces harm and ultimately ends in catastrophe] - explained why he hid amongst the trees when He heard the Holy One coming to breathe refreshing life into him. Adam told the Holy One 'I was afraid ...' Paralyzing fear of God is thus a part of the result of the sin in the Garden. And, while *yirat Adonai* [the fear of the Holy One] is absolutely necessary to our relationship with Him, there are times when the Holy One desires to 'break through' the protective barrier *yirat Adonai* erects, and communicate *al-p'nei* [face-to-Face, as a man speaks to a friend].

So the Holy One speaks a word of empowerment over Avram – overcoming, by the sheer power of His Words, for the sake of making *b'rit*, the *yirat Adonai* protective barrier. The Holy One is neither encouraging nor scolding Avram by saying *al-tirah* - He is *prophetically empowering him* to stand in the Holy One's Presence, so he can make *b'rit*.

Anochi magen lach
[*I am your shield, defense, and protection*]

⁵ The Hebrew word our English Bibles translate as 'shield' in this verse is *magen*, *mem*, *gimel*, *nun sofit*, pronounced *maw-gain*'.

⁶ The Hebrew phrase *tirah* is derived from the verb root *yare* – i.e. *yod*, *resh*, *alef*. This verb means to *tremble*. Trembling can come from joy, from terror, from anger, or from other emotions and experiences, but in each case it involves our flesh reacting to, assigning magnitude to, taking seriously, and assigning critical value to something or someone.

The second empowering Hebrew phrase used by the Holy One in the context of this God-encounter is ***Anochi magen lach!*** This phrase is usually translated “*I am your shield*’. But it means much more than that. The Hebrew word our English Bibles translate as ‘shield’ in this verse is *magen*⁷ - a noun form of a Hebrew verb meaning *to surround in order to defend and protect*. The picture is that of *a mother eagle gathering her eaglets under her wings to protect them*. See Isaiah 31:5:

*As birds hovering, so will the Holy One of Hosts protect Y'rushalayim;
he will **nagan** [surround, protect and deliver [it],
he will **pasach** [pass over] and preserve [it].*

The Holy One says He is going to surround and overshadow Avram the way a mother bird spreads her wings over her young. He is thus promising to ‘overshadow’ Avram much in the same way the way He will place His Hand over Moshe in the cleft of the rock in Exodus 34, and much as He will ‘overshadow’ young Miryam [Mary] of Natzret before she becomes pregnant with the child Yeshua. This is so much more than a ‘shield’.

... Sachareicha ha-r'bah me'od
... your exceedingly great compensation/reward

The Holy One followed up His declaration that He was about to surround Avram with His Wings with an explanation that HE was Avram’s ***sachareicha ha-r'bah me'od***, or ‘*exceedingly great compensation/reward*.’ Remember, as you read this, that Avram was very, very rich by now. By no means poor when he left Charan, the Holy One had since cause to be delivered into his hand vast quantities of gold and silver from Pharaoh’s treasuries in Egypt. He had, as a matter of fact, just given away, in his dealings with the King of Sodom, more wealth than the annual Gross National Product of many third world countries.

Avram had just proven, in his dealings with the King of Sodom, that he was no longer moved by material possessions. Material possessions – even riches – fall far short of being an ‘exceedingly great reward’.

Remember as well that Avram had a wife, Sarai, whom he dearly loved. Many men think a soulmate will be their ‘exceedingly great reward’. A wife is a good thing, and a good wife is a treasure – but no human relationship can constitute a man’s ‘exceedingly great reward’. He could not be talking about human relationships. What then was the Holy One doing bringing up an ‘*exceedingly great compensation/reward*’? The Holy One could not have been speaking primarily about worldly possessions – as Avram [a] had more than enough to last a

⁷ *Magen* is *mem, gimel, nun sofit*. It is pronounced *maw-gain*’.

lifetime, and [b] had proven his lack of interest in more of such things. So, to what ‘exceedingly great compensation/reward’ was the Holy One referring? Here it is, Beloved. In response to the words of the Holy One, Avram accepted the Holy One’s awesome, overshadowing Presence with Him as a “shield” [Hebrew, *magen*] - like the garments of skin made by the Holy One for Adam and Chava. And Avram was able, by the power of the Holy One’s words, to look upon the Holy One’s Divine manifestation of His Presence being with him not as a threat to him, but *as his exceedingly great “reward”*. He was able to run *to*, not run away *from*, the Holy One.

Ahh, Beloved - as Avram did, so are we to do. Intimate communion and fellowship with the Holy One are *OUR* exceedingly great reward - just as it was Avram’s. That is the perhaps the single most important revelation we can glean from Torah. But wait! There is another great revelation in the very next passage – and it provides the key to our experiencing the kind of intimacy with the Holy One that Avram knew.

What Does Torah Mean When It Tells Us that Avram ‘Believed’ God?

At this point in Torah we are told that Avram finally *aman*-ed the Holy One.

V’he’emin b’Adonai
[Abram] aman-ed the Holy One,
v’yach’sheveiha lo tzedakah⁸
and He counted it as righteousness.
[Genesis 15:6]

The Hebrew verb *aman*, found first in Torah in this verse, is usually translated into English as ‘believed’. But that is unfortunate. In Hebrew, you see, the verb root *aman*⁹ means much more than just *believe*. *Aman* is not an intellectual experience. It has to do with *supporting, upholding, and nurturing* – the kind of thing done by a *foster/surrogate mother* or wet nurse. It means *to offer oneself as a surrogate or substitute mother – to not only receive and incubate a seed, but then act as a wet nurse for someone else*.

Torah is not saying merely that Avram intellectually assented to, agreed with, or accepted as true the Holy One’s promises. What Torah is telling us is that Avram received the Holy One’s words *in the same sense as Hagar was about to, in*

⁸ The word translated as *righteousness* in Genesis 15:6 is *tzedakah, tzade, dalet, kaf, hey*, pronounced *tze-daw-kah*. It means that which the Holy One considers right or correct in a given situation. It is whatever is necessary or appropriate in God’s sight. That’s what Avram was – the right man for *b’rit* with God, and the appropriate surrogate to carry His *zara* [seed].

⁹ *Aman* is *alef, mem, nun sofit*. It is Strong’s Hebrew word #539.

chapter 16, receive and nurture Avram's zara [seed]. This means that Avram received the *zara* [seed] of the Holy One in both his spirit and body. This is the 'exceedingly great compensation/reward' the Holy One spoke about. Avram would become the vessel through which the *zara* of the Holy One would be introduced into the world.

Let's consider the implications of this. Yitzchak (Isaac), at least, was clearly sired not in the strength of Avram's own flesh, but with the *zara* of the Holy One that Avram had received, incubated, and nurtured for Him beginning in Genesis 15. See for instance Hebrews 11:12, where Avram is called 'as good as dead' by the time Yitzchak was conceived. Oh, you say – but what about Yishma'el? Was the *zara* by which Avram sired Yishma'el his own natural *zara*, or was it the supernatural *zara* of the Holy One? Hold that one until tomorrow Dear Reader. We are getting ahead of ourselves. We have not even as yet cut *b'rit*.

Avram Speaks His Mind/Bares His Heart

In the first three God-encounters of Avram's life the Holy One did all the talking, and Avram merely *listened passively* – probably in stunned silence and awe. But Avram's relationship with the Holy One has been maturing. Avram is coming to understand that the Holy One is his Friend, not his enemy. And so, the last time Avram build an altar [upon his return from Egypt], Avram was said to have brought human speech into the man-God relationship by '*calling upon the name of the Holy One*'. But that had not been in the midst of a God-encounter. That was just in the midst of thanking/blessing the Holy One.

This time when the Holy One makes His promise Avram steps into the world of *God-conversation*. Strengthened in his inner being by the Holy One's prophetic *al-tirah* declaration, Avram's tongue is suddenly loosed, and he speaks for the first time directly to the Holy One:

Adonai Elohim mah-titen-li l'anochi holech ariri

O Lord, God, what will you give me if I remain childless?

u'ven-meshek beyti hu Damesek Eli'ezer

The heir to my household will be Eliezer of Damascus.'

hen li lo natatah zara

'You have given me no children

v'hineh ven-beyti yoresh oti

A member of my household will inherit what is mine.'

Please understand this for what it is. The floor has been opened by the Holy One for *the bartering of the terms of the b'rit* [covenant]. Avram was not *grumbling*, and was not *being sarcastic, sardonic, or disrespectful*. What he was doing was simply

engaging in *bartering* in the classic middle eastern style. He was, in a very roundabout Hebraic manner, describing what he wanted and expected from the *b'rit* - he wanted an *heir* of his own *zara* [seed] as a down payment on the promises the Holy One had made.

With His earlier *al-tirah*, the Holy One had invited - indeed prompted – Avram to barter with Him. But the Holy One was not ready to discuss that kind of a ‘down payment’ just yet. So, the Holy One changed the subject from the heir of his own *zara* Avram wanted to the *eretz* [land] the Holy One wanted to give. The Holy One said to Avram:

Ani Adonai asher hotzeticha m'Ur Kasdim

I am the Holy One, Who took you out of Ur Kasdim

latet lecha et ha-aretz hazot l'rishtah

to give you this land as an inheritance/possession.'

Avram accepted the change of subject. If the Holy One wanted to talk land instead of *zara* [seed], that would have to do¹⁰. It was altogether right that land precede seed. If there is no land to plant the seed in, how will it grow and produce a harvest? But Avram came right back to the subject of ‘down payment’. He replied: ***B'mah eda ki irashenah*** [*i.e. By what can I really know that it will be mine?*']. **Genesis 15:6-7.**

It behooves us to understand what Avram is asking. It is difficult, reading his words, several centuries later, in a foreign language, to catch the nuances of this Hebraic bargaining session. When Avram asks the Holy One ‘*By what can I really eda [know] it [i.e. the land the Holy One wanted to talk about] will be mine?*’ please understand that he is not *expressing doubt of the Holy One*, or *experiencing a crisis of faith*. He is bargaining, bartering, and negotiating the best *b'rit* he can get.

Avram is saying that he is ready for more than just the Holy One’s promises. He is ready to take the relationship that the Holy One has been building with him to *an entirely new level* – to the level of *b'rit* [covenant]. Avram is declaring his readiness to, first of all, acknowledge the Holy One as the ‘stronger partner’ [*i.e. the suzerain*] in the relationship, and to, in consequence, ask for both the Holy One’s protection and His training (including discipline if necessary) in fulfilling the Holy One’s will. Avram is expressing his readiness to acknowledge himself [and his descendants] to be the ‘**weaker vessel**’ [*i.e. the vassal*] in the relationship, and to submit his [and his descendants’] own agenda(s), as well as all his and their resources, to the Holy One.

¹⁰ The Holy One responded to the inquiry about *zera* [seed] by telling Avram to ‘***look toward the Heaven, and count the stars***’. **Genesis 15:5**. Avram did so, and the sages say that this act of gazing up at the stars in wonder and expectation, as an *emunah*-energizing exercise, was thereby programmed into the DNA of Avraham’s progeny.

Avram is saying that he is ready to live a *sh'ma* lifestyle, in the course of which he will let the Holy One's words *form the boundary lines within which he and his descendants will from thenceforth live*, and ready to let those words *dictate what he says and does and does not do say or do and determine where he does and does not go*. Avram knows, you see, that when he cuts *b'rit*, he will receive from the Holy One a down payment – some '*substance of things hoped for*' – some '*evidence of things not seen*' – some '*earnest money*' as it were – on the promises the Holy One has been making. Even if the *ot* [sign, earnest] of the *b'rit* is not going to be a son of his own *zara*, as he requested, he can live with that – but he wants *some sign* – something by which he can know that it [the land of Kena'an] '*will be* [note the future tense] *mine*'.

Note however that the Holy One does not respond to Avram's question directly. Instead He tells Avram to set up a *chuppah* for the *b'rit* ceremony.

Setting Up the Chuppah

The Holy One knows mankind. The Holy One knew Avram's 'frame of reference'. The Holy One knew the ceremonies mankind had initiated to confirm a *b'rit* – cutting animals in half, and meeting and making vows in between the halves, as if to say, '*let it be done to me as it has been done to these animals, if I fail to fulfill this vow I am making*'. While the Holy One had no need for this kind of assurance [His Word was good without oath or ceremony] He knows Avram *does* need that which he understood as legally binding. So the Holy One tells Avram to make ready the '*chuppah*'¹¹ of covenant.

Kecha li eglah meshuleshet v'ez meshuleshet

'Bring for Me a prime heifer¹², a prime she-goat¹³

v'ayl meshulash v'tor v'gozal

a prime ram¹⁴, a dove¹⁵ and a young pigeon¹⁶.'

¹¹ A *chuppah* is an open canopy under the shade of which nomadic peoples have long met to transact covenant business – including, but not limited to, betrothal and wedding ceremonies.

¹² The word translated as 'heifer' is *eglah*, *ayin*, *gimel*, *lamed*, *hey*, Strong's Hebrew word #5697, pronounced *egg-law*'. It is the feminine version of *egel*. The only other place in Torah there is a reference to an *eglah* is in Deuteronomy 21:3-6, where land is to be cleansed of innocent blood through a ceremony including the slaughter of an *eglah*. But consider also Jeremiah 46:20, where Egypt is compared to 'a very fair heifer'.

¹³ The word translated as 'she-goat' is *ez*, *ayin*, *zayin*, Strong's Hebrew word #5795, pronounced *aiz*'. It was the hair/skins of an *ez* that was used to make the innermost set of curtains of the *Mish'kan* [Tabernacle]. See **Exodus 25:4, 26:7, 35:6 and 36:14**.

¹⁴ The word translated as ram is *ayil*, *alef*, *yod*, *lamed*, Strong's Hebrew word #352, pronounced *ah-yeel*'. It was this animal which would be provided supernaturally by The Holy One on Mount Moriyah as a substitute for Yitzchak. **Genesis 22:13**.

V'yikach-lo et-kol-eleh v'yevater otam

[Abram] brought all these for Him.

b'tavech v'yiten ish-bitro likrat re'ehu

He split them in half, and placed one half opposite the other

v'et ha-tzipor lo vatar

The birds, however, he did not split.

Some have taught that Avram was merely a passive participant in the *b'rit* of chapter 15. That is true only up to a point. The reality is that Avram had to do a lot of things to make this *b'rit*. He had to provide, select, and slaughter the 5 species of animals. He had to stand watch over the carcasses, and shoo away *ha-ayit* [the shrieking birds of prey] who came to carry them away. Only after Avram had done all that, and the sun had set, did a 'deep sleep' [Hebrew *tardemah*, trance-like state such as the Holy One had caused to fall upon Adam when the Holy One took from him what he used to form Chava¹⁷] fall upon Avram. Then, with Avram in a *tardemah* [trance-like state] the Holy One gave him the only down payment on the promises He was ready to give in this 1st phase of the *b'rit*-cutting ceremony. What was the 'down payment'? The Holy One showed him 'the future' – in order that he would 'know for sure'.

Yadoa teda ki-ger yihyeh zar'acha b'ereetz lo lahem

'Know for sure that your zara [seed] will be foreigners in a land that is not theirs

v'avadum v'inu otam arba me'ot shanah

They will be enslaved and oppressed 400 years.

v'gam et ha-goy asher ya'avodu dan anochi

Then I will judge the nation that enslaves them,

v'acharei-chen yetz'u b'rechush gadol

and they will then leave with great wealth.

V'atah tavo el-avoteicha b'shalom

You will join your fathers in peace,

tikaver b'seyvah tovah

and you will be buried at a good old age.

V'dor revi'i y'shuvu henah

The fourth generation will return here,

ki lo-shalem avon ha-Emori ad-henah

since the Amorite's sin will not have run its course until then.'

¹⁵ The word translated as dove is *tor, tav, vav, resh*, Strong's Hebrew word # 8449, pronounced like the English word *tore*. Doves and pigeons are permitted surrogates to be presented by a mother and father of a firstborn, on behalf of a cleansed 'leper', or on behalf of a *nazir* [nazarite].

¹⁶ The word translated as pigeon is *gozal, gimel, vav, zayin*, lamed, Strong's Hebrew word #1469, pronounced *go-zawl'*. For an interesting Torah usage of this word, see Deuteronomy 32:11.

¹⁷ Genesis 2:21.

Wow! There's the 'down payment'. The Holy One showed Avram the *zara* he so desperately wanted – along with *four generations worth* of destiny. And please note that the Holy One threw in an assurance of both life to a 'good old age', and a *peaceful death*, to boot.

The B'rit is Memorialized at Last!

And then, so that Avram would never forget the experience, the Holy One descended into the realm of time, manifested His Presence, and memorialized the covenant in the style of men. As you read the description of this covenant memorialization ceremony keep in mind that the *b'rit* the Holy One is going to make with Avram is actually going to consist of two distinct ceremonies, separated by approximately 14 years of Avram's life. The events of chapter 15 describe for us merely the *former days* covenant ceremony, in which the basic terms of the covenant are laid out.

As there is an interlude in time between a covenant of betrothal [a *former-days* ceremony] and the actual marriage that the betrothal foreshadows [a *latter-day* ceremony], so there will be an interlude in time between the former days' ceremony of the covenant with Avram and the latter days ceremony.

We will now have an interlude, which will consist of chapter 16, in which we will read the description of the conception, birth and trials related to Yishma'el. Then, 14 years later¹⁸, will come the *latter days* covenant ceremony, spelled out for us in detail in Genesis chapter 17, and culminating in the giving of the *covenant sign* of circumcision. To the Holy One, the covenant ceremonies are one ceremony, with merely an intermission in between the two phases. With that in mind, let's read what Torah has to say about the 'former day' covenant ceremony:

Vayehi ha-shemesh ba'ah v'alatah hayah

The sun set, and it became very dark.

v'hineh tanur ashan v'lapid esh asher avar beyn ha-gezarim ha-eleh

A smoking furnace and a flaming torch passed between the halves of the animals.

B'yom hahu karat Adonai et-Avram brit l'emor

On that day, the Holy One made a covenant with Avram, saying,

L'zar'acha natati et ha-aretz hazot

'To your zara [seed] I have given this land,

m'nehar Mitzrayim ad ha-nahar ha-gadol nehar-Perat

from the Egyptian River as far as the great river, the Euphrates

Thus completes Act I of the *b'rit* ceremony. The curtain will rise again, and the

¹⁸ According to Genesis 16:16 Avram was 86 years of age when Hagar gave birth to Yishma'el. According to Genesis 17:1 Avram was 99 when the Holy One instituted the next God-encounter.

ceremony will continue, approximately 14 years later, in Genesis 17 – after Avram receives the down payment of a *zara* of his own flesh he had bartered for. Be careful what you ask the Holy One for, Beloved - you just might get it!

Questions For Today's Study

1. The English words “fear”, “shield” and “reward”, as used in verse 1, and “believe” in verse 6, have different connotations and meanings than the Hebrew words used in the text of Torah.

[A] In Strong's and Gesenius look up the Hebrew words translated as “fear”, “shield”, and “reward”, and “believe”, write those words in Hebrew letters, with vowel sounds, and describe the Hebraic word pictures underlying each word.

[B] About what fact or facts did Avram “believe the Holy One” so that it was credited to him as righteousness?

[C] What was the essential truth in which Avram had to put his trust in order to be seen as righteous? [**Note:** Your answer to this question has great implications for your own spiritual life; please think this answer through carefully].

2. Avram demonstrated incredible *chutzpah*¹⁹, boldly asking the Holy One for something tangible to give him a greater assurance of what was being promised.

[A] What five kinds of animals was Avram told to bring?

[B] What do you think each of these animals symbolize?

[C] What did Avram do to try to preserve the animals until the Holy One manifested His Presence?

[D] Was Avram able to keep watch and preserve the animals until the Holy One manifested His Presence?

[E] Something happened at sundown, the beginning of a new day. What day of the week do you think this was?

[F] In what form or appearance did the Holy One manifest His Presence?

[G] List all the prophetic announcements the Holy One made during this manifestation to Avram.

[H] Why did the Holy One say He was not giving Avram possession of Ha-Eretz Yisrael [the land of Israel] immediately?

[I] What did the Holy One covenant to do for Avram on this occasion?

[J] What was the point of the smoking firepot and the blazing torch passing through the pieces of the slaughtered animals?

3. In today's Haftarah reading the prophet Yeshayahu relates the words He is

¹⁹ *Chutzpah* is a Yiddish word meaning something like ‘spunk’. It sometimes refers to a positive trait, but often has negative connotations. Leo Rosten's *The Joys of Yiddish* defines *chutzpah* as a Yiddish idiom meaning “*gall, brazen nerve, effrontery.*” As a United States federal district court in the District of Columbia noted in 1992, *chutzpah* is “*presumption-plus-arrogance such as no other word, and no other language can do justice to.*”

given by the Holy One:

*Don't you be afraid, for I am with you;
don't be dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; yes, I will help you;
yes, I will uphold you with the right hand of my righteousness.*

*Behold, all those who are incensed against you will be disappointed and confounded:
those who strive with you shall be as nothing, and shall perish.*

*You shall seek them, and shall not find them, even those who contend with you:
those who war against you shall be as nothing, and as a thing of nothing.*

*For I, the Holy One your God, will hold your right hand,
saying to you, "Don't be afraid; I will help you".*

[Isaiah 41:10-13]

[A] To whom is the Holy One speaking in verses 10-13? [**Note:** The answer defines who can (and, by implication, who *cannot*) 'claim' the promises made by the Holy One in these verses, so think through your response].

[B] List all the promises the Holy One makes in verses 10-13 to those to whom He is speaking.

[C] What is the Holy One's 'point' in making these promises and assurances to those to whom He is speaking at the time the promises were made?

4. In Shaul's letter to the Romans we read:

Is this blessing then pronounced on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also?

For we say that faith was accounted to Avraham for righteousness.

How then was it counted? When he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision?

Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision.

He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith

which he had while he was in uncircumcision,

that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they be in uncircumcision,

that righteousness might also be accounted to them.

The father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision,

but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Avraham,

which he had in uncircumcision.

For the promise to Avraham and to his seed that he should be heir of the world

wasn't through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

[Romans 4:9-13]

[A] Shaul points out that Avraham's justification [the Holy One's declaration that He was righteous because of his *aman* trusting in 'the essential truth' (see question 1, above) as the Holy One had declared it] came before, and thus was not dependent on, the covenant of circumcision. So what was the covenant of circumcision about? Since it was not necessary for his justification, what purpose did it serve for Avram? Does it still serve the same purpose for Avram's descendants?

[B] Shaul says Avraham is 'father' [remember, his name means "father of many nations, or many peoples"] of two distinct groups of people. What are the two groups of descendants of Avraham identified by Shaul?

- [C] What common characteristic do these distinct groups share?
[D] How should the two technically distinct groups of Avraham's descendants relate to each other? What hindrances do you see to this today?

*May the Holy One be for you, as He was for Avram,
a shield and an exceedingly great reward.*

The Rabbi's son

Meditation for Today's Study

Psalm 115:1-11

*Not to us, O Holy One, not to us, But to your name give glory,
For your lovingkindness, and for your truth's sake.
Why should the nations say, "**Where is their God, now?**"
But our God is in the heavens. He does whatever he pleases.*

*Their idols are silver and gold, The work of men's hands.
They have mouths, but they don't speak;
They have eyes, but they don't see;
They have ears, but they don't hear;
They have noses, but they don't smell;
They have hands, but they don't feel;
They have feet, but they don't walk;
neither do they speak through their throat.
Those who make them will be like them;
Yes, everyone who trusts in them.*

Yisra'el, trust in the Holy One!

He is their help and their shield.

House of Aharon, trust in the Holy One!

He is their help and their shield.

You who fear the Holy One, trust in the Holy One!

He is their help and their shield.