

Shiur L'Yom Sheni¹

[Monday's Study]

READINGS: ***Torah Lech Lecha:*** **Genesis 12:1-20**
 Haftarah: **Isaiah 40:27-31**
 B'rit Chadasha: **Romans 4:1-3**

In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

[Genesis 12:3]

Today's Meditation today is Psalm 107:1-7;

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

Vayomer Adonai el-Avram – And the Holy One said to Avram ... ***Lech lecha*** – go out for/unto yourself ... ***me'artzeicha*** – from your land/geographical region ... ***umimoladeteicha*** – from your native culture ... ***umibeit avicha*** – and from your father's house ... ***el-ha-aretz asher ar'eika*** – to a land that I will show you. **Genesis 12:1.**

The earth is about to experience its most dramatic atmospheric shift since the Flood. This time the medium of transformation will not be inundation; it will be revelation. In a sleepy little village on the backside of nowhere, an aging middle-eastern shepherd is about to have an encounter with the Creator of the Universe. What that old shepherd sees and hears in the course of that encounter will change the world forever. Welcome to the age of the 'Covenantal Counterbalance'. Phase I was 'many nations, and no unified world order'. Phase II will be 'as go the seed of Avraham, so go the nations'.

The Great Adventure Begins: Avram's First God Encounter

Lech Lecha's opening aliyah launches students of Torah into the *patriarchal era*. During this season the Holy One intends to teach us His Ways through telling compelling stories drawn from the lives of the progenitors of the Hebrew bloodline – Avraham, Yitzchak, Ya'akov, Yehudah, and Yosef. These real life parables are both historical and didactic, genealogical and prophetic.

It all starts with calling of 'Avram'². We will meet this man in the sleepy Mesopotamian community of Charan. He will be 75 years of age, married to a kinswoman named Sarai, who is ten years younger than him. Though Avram and Sarai are both getting long in the tooth, as some might say, we wife Sarai – soon to be renamed 'Sarah' – presently has no children or natural prospects of having any,

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² In Hebrew אַבְרָם [alef, beit/veit, resh, mem sofit]. The name is a combination of the noun אָב [the Hebrew word for father] with the adjective רָם meaning lifted up, arisen, lofty, or exalted.

the Holy One has no intention of letting her exit this life barren. Indeed, against all odds, millions – in all future generations – are going to bless their daughters in her name, saying: “*May you be as Sarah ...*” Oh – and as for the sleepy village of Charan ... it will soon disappear in Avram and Sarai’s rear-view mirror. Avram and Sarai are about to be called to another city – a city not made by human hands. Which brings us back to the narrative. It is time for our new friend Avram to have a ‘*God encounter*’. And *oy, what an eye-opening, paradigm-shifting, life-changing, world-shaking encounter this one is going to be!*

The Strategic Initiative – The ‘Asset’ of Covenantal Counterbalance

As the curtain of Lech Lecha opens a lonely shepherd is leading a flock of sheep out to pasturage. He loves his life. He loves his wife. He loves the sheep in his charge. He loves the One Who created, nurtures, and sustains all these things. He delights in the amazing Creation-Ecosystem that his contemporaries in Charan pass off as mere ‘*nature*’. He loves the breathtaking crimson sunsets the Creator paints. He loves the stunning, Milky Way infused starry nights the Creator unveils. He loves the inspiring golden sunrises that start each day. He loves the solitude of the field. He loves the serenity. And, most of all, he loves the silence. On this day, however, the atmosphere was about to shift radically, and the old shepherd’s routine was about to change dramatically. Something world-changing – something truly of Biblical proportions - was about to happen along the ancient pasturage trail along which he led his flock. Seemingly out of nowhere the old man heard a lilting melody – the sweet wind-song sung by the most Beautiful Voice he had ever heard. It seemed as if Creation was calling the old herdsman’s name. He could have sworn that he was without any companion on this trek – but it was becoming obvious to him that he was not, and had perhaps never been, anything of the sort. He raised his head and let his eyes scan the horizon for any sign of another human; he saw only the familiar faces of his own sheep. He shrugged - and went back to his work. Then he heard it again. This time there was no denying a Presence *glorious but without form*, a Persona so majestic and good that no physical body was worthy of it. The pure tone of the Voice and the mesmerizing beauty of the Hebrew words being sung began to resonate with something deep inside the old shepherd’s chest. What could this mean? Who could this be? Where could the Beautiful Voice he was hearing be coming from? The wind-song seemed to come at the old shepherd from all directions at the same time. It seemed to be coming from the Heavens. It seemed to be echoing off of each surrounding hill. It seemed to be coming out of every blade of grass in the pasture, out of the leaf of every tree, out of the rocks in the nearby wadi, and out of every grain of sand or soil. It seemed to be coming from the fields themselves – and from the sheep who were pasturing in them. It even seemed to be coming from somewhere secret, deep within the chest of the old shepherd himself. But wherever it came from, oh *the*

sounds it uttered! Oh the energy it released! And oh the childlike wonder and passionate love it awakened!

Avram trembled. He knew he could not stand in the presence of such majesty. First he fell to his knees – but immediately he realized that bowing in this manner did not make him anywhere close to low enough to show the appropriate level of honor to this Glorious, Unseen Stranger. He threw himself down face-first onto the sand. He offered himself in reverent, whole-hearted surrender. He felt an infusion of holy energy, a divine spark flew – and something that felt like a father’s hand lifted him up to stand on his feet once again. That is when the Words of the wind-song began to register in the old shepherd – and completely rewrite all the stunned fellow’s paradigms and preconceptions about life.

The Lech Lecha Calling – The All Aboard and Bon Voyage Beginning of Every Great Kingdom Journey

Lech Lecha? Avram somewhat understood the words – but he had no way of grasping their impact. He knew he was being called to *go somewhere on foot*. He knew he was being called to walk with the Creator of the Universe, as had his forebears Chanoch [KJV *Enoch*] and Noah [KJV *Noah*]. He knew that the daily shepherding cycle with which he had grown comfortable was to be abandoned in favor of a much greater area of pasturage and influence. But there was no way the old shepherd could know exactly what the *Lech Lecha* calling he had heard would entail – for him; for his beloved but barren wife, Sarai; for his dear friend and faithful servant Eliezer; for his fatherless nephew Lot, for the entire species called ‘mankind’, or, for that matter, for the world. Questions flooded his mind: How complete a disentanglement from the people, places, and ways he knew was he going to need to effectuate? What provisions – and who - should he take with him ... and what – and who - should he leave behind? In which direction was he supposed to ‘go out’? How was any of this going to work – especially considering his and Sarai’s advanced age? How was he supposed to explain any of this to his brother Nachor? And what on earth was he even supposed to tell Sarai? But there was no time for the old shepherd to ask questions. The Voice continued: ***I will make of you a great nation ...***

Awesome! But how exactly was that going to happen, when, and to what end?

I will bless you, and make your name – i.e. your essence, character, attributes, reputation, ‘brand’ - ***great ...*** the Unseen Speaker promised.

Wonderful ... but what exactly would ‘blessing’ and ‘greatness of name’ mean to Avram and his little entourage in real time? What would this ‘blessing’ and this

‘greatness’ consist of? How was he supposed to attain to these things, walk in them, steward them, and do with them?

And you will be a blessing ... the One Who spoke to Avram prophesied.

Avram wanted to be a blessing to others – he really did. But in what way, and to whom, and when, and how could he do that. He was just an old, tired, sterile shepherd from a family of idolators. He had no history with the Creator of the Universe. He had no repository of wisdom, understanding, insight, or counsel within himself. The only life skills he knew were how to keep wayward sheep from hurting themselves or getting eaten by predators, on the one hand, and how to keep a herd of independent-minded goats with bad attitudes fed, happy, and healthy on the other. What kind of blessing could he possibly be, offer to, or bestow upon anyone – much less all families on earth?

I will bless those who bless you, and I will arar him who qalals you ... promised the Divine Visitor.

Really? What exactly would it look like – and feel like - to become the critical lightning rod the Creator of the Universe would use for determining what people to bless and what people to curse? Was that a responsibility Avram even wanted? How could he ever learn to live with such a life-mission? How could anyone?

And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed ... the Beautiful Voice concluded.

Wow! What great things was the Holy One going to use Avram – and his progeny – to do on this planet, to bless every single family on the face of the earth? But ... *HOW!* No answers were forthcoming. No explanations were offered. No specifics were provided. No road map was offered. Just the echoing pulses of the words ***Lech Lecha.***

Thus concluded the most Inspiring Visitation Avram had ever imagined. Thus ended the *most Beautiful Discourse* Avram had ever heard. But thus began the Most Intimate God/Man Relationship since the Garden of Eden.

Come ... Follow Me! An Open Invitation to Walk in the Footsteps of the Great Shepherd Who Speaks But is Not Seen

The Voice fell silent. But the energy of the Speaker was still sending shockwaves through the atmosphere – and through every fiber of Avram’s mind, heart, soul, and spirit. In the wake of the Voice’s departure Avram heard what sounded like Footsteps – *i.e.* The spiritual sonar echoes sent out by the Magnificent One who had spoken to him. The Footstep-like sounds led southward, toward Kena’an – so, after talking with Sarai, packing up the camels, and saying some quick good-byes to his

family members in Charan, southward toward Kena'an is the direction Avram headed. He did not know where he was going - or why. He was just following the Footstep sounds. He was responding to SomeOne far more intriguing, and wonderful, and stimulating than he had ever known before. He was in hot pursuit of the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth. He now wanted – indeed craved - a relationship with the Eternal One more than he wanted anything in the physical world, any parcel of land, any ‘truth’, any ‘knowledge’, or any experience. While he had been told he was going to be shown “a land”, he did not have a clue where that land was located, how to get there, or what that land was supposed to do with it once he found it. He did not know what that land could possibly have to do with him. So be it. If Avram could just stay in the shadow of, and in earshot of, the One Who had just energized him like no one or nothing he had ever known – he had full confidence that whatever that One has in mind would be well worth it. Like his ancestor Noach, you see, Avram had been called to embark upon *a journey of complete trust*. And like Noach, he cast caution and logic to the wind, and jumped into a relationship with the Ultimate Unseen Benefactor with both feet.

The first instruction Avram received was to ***Lech Lecha*** – *i.e.* to go out to find his *true self*. The first assignment was thus purely a matter of identity. If he wasn't who he thought he was – or who his family or the people in his village thought he was – then ... well ... who *was* he? Who was he *born to be*? Who was he designed by the Creator to become? If he wasn't supposed to end his life an old, childless shepherd from Charan, Paddan-Aram, Mesopotamia – then *as what*, and *from where*? What potential did the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth see in him that no one else had ever seen? What was unique about him that resulted in him being called to ‘step up’ and ‘step out’ at such a time as this? Issues of mission and destiny could - would just have to - wait. First Avram had to learn to rely solely upon the Great Shepherd Who was breathing new life into him. This was identity-defining test number one. And Avram was ‘on it’. Avram could not tell you why – but he trusted the One Whose Voice he had heard completely – like a child trusts his father. Wherever the Voice of the Invisible One that had spoken to him bid him go, he was ready to go – and indeed went.

As Avram followed his Invisible Shepherd's footsteps southward, however, something else happened in him. His heart began to develop a great and insatiable longing for ... well, he did not know what exactly. Something ... transcendent. Someone ... trans-generational. Somewhere ... transformative. He could not, of course, express any of this in words. He did not understand either the essence or the implications of what was happening to him. Only later would his progeny be able to characterize that what that the Holy One was cultivating and nurturing in

him – and preparing him to pass on to all his progeny - was a great hunger for a city not built by human hands, whose builder and maker was none other than God.

Avram was not required to make his great pilgrimage of trust alone. As had Noach, Avram traveled with his wife and a few intimate companions. In Avram's case however it was not sons, daughters-in-law, and representative pairs of every species of animals that traveled with him and his beloved wife. In Avram's case the companions on his journey consisted of his nephew Lot, his trusted Syrian manservant Elazar, a few of the other servants Avram had acquired in Mesopotamia according the ways of the times, and an unspecified number of healthy and hardy ewes, nannies, she-asses, heifers of the bovine genus, and cows of the camel species, for milk, for barter, for surrogate approach, and from which he could, if it be the will of the Unseen Shepherd, start great herds and flocks.

Through treacherous terrain and dangerous mountain passes the caravan traveled – all the way from the Paddan Aram of present-day Turkey through Syria, and then through the entirety of modern-day Lebanon to the land that would one day be called '*Eretz Yisrael*' [*i.e. Israel*].

***The Awakening of Divine Romance – More Than Instruction;
More Than Blessing; This is the Inauguration
of the Ultimate Love Affair!***

We discussed the concept and importance of 'God encounters' in connection with our study of Noach. This author pointed out that:

The Holy One is not aloof, and He does not [except when it serves some specific purpose] make a practice of hiding – or concealing Himself - from mankind. The Holy One pursues mankind with passion, and seeks to communicate and interact with mankind in wonderful ways. Much of Torah is, therefore, about 'God-encounters'.

Here is how the first 'God encounter' of Avram's life is described in Torah:

Vayomer Adonai el-Avram

And the Holy One said to Avram

Lech lecha me'ar'tzeicha

Go out/away from your land,

umimoladeteicha umibeyt avicha

and from your birthplace, and from your father's house

El ha-aretz asher ar'eka

to the land that I will be showing you.

Ve'escha l'goy-gadol

I will make you into a great nation.

v'avareicheicha v'agadeilah shemeicha

I will bless you and make you great.

V'heyeh b'rachah

You will be a blessing.

V'avarechah mevaracheicha umekaleleicha a'or

I will bless those who bless you, and he who accurses you, I will accurse.

v'nivreichu vecha kol mishpechot ha-adamah

All the families of the earth will be blessed through you.'

[Genesis 12:1-3]

In these 3 verses the Holy One makes 8 separate promises to Avram – all conditional upon Avram ‘going out’. Here are the 8 promises:

1. I will *show you* the land to which you go;
2. I will make you into a *goy g'dol* [uplifted people group];
3. I will *bless you*;
4. I will *make your name* [i.e. your character, your essence] *great/uplifted*;
5. You will *become a source of blessing*;
6. I will *bless those who bless you*;
7. I will *accurse* [speak derogatorily concerning] *those who accurse* [speak derogatorily concerning] *you*;
8. I will incorporate all families of the nations and ethnicities of the world into My plan of blessing through you.

In Hebrew the number 8 is the symbol of the Messiah. In the eight promises the Holy One made to Avram was encoded the promise of Messiah and of the Messianic Kingdom. What did that mean? It meant that Messiah would be of Avram’s lineage, of course - but it also meant much, much more. In essence, it meant that *Messiah would be in the midst of everything Avram would ever do*. As the Rabbi from Natzret would later declare:

***Your father Avraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing My day;
and he saw it ... and was glad.”***

[John 8:56]

The Substance of the Lech Lecha Calling:

From What – and To What – Was Avraham Called?

The Holy One identified a three-headed matrix of social, psychological, sentimental, and spiritual ‘spheres of influence’ from which Avram was called upon to ‘go out’. Each sphere from which Avram was called to ‘go out’ constituted a powerful component of destiny-dilution. First of all, Avram was called upon to **go out from his land/country** – i.e. the physical location where he lived. The call came at a time when Avram was living in Charan. Avram was called to ‘go out’ from the physical place he lived. This meant more than just that he was physically

to move. It also meant that he was also being called upon to ‘*go out*’ from the underlying approach to and assumptions about life – the philosophies, the value systems, the social structures - and all tenets and doctrines of the religion that held sway amongst the residents of that place. He was called to go back to ‘square one’ in regard to understanding Who God is, what relationship with Him is supposed to be like, and how life on earth should be lived by a human being. So are we all. We are all called to do more than just serve one nation, one culture, or one geographical region. We may be assigned land/territory to steward for the Holy One from time-to-time; but if that land is outside Eretz Yisrael, neither the land itself nor the nation/culture/society in which it sits is to be considered any more than a temporary place of strategic deployment. The Holy One is our dwelling place; and as He is trans-national, trans-cultural, and trans-ethnic, so are we called to be.

Secondly, Avram was to ‘*go out*’ from his birthplace. Avram’s birthplace had been Ur of the Chaldees – the seat of Sumerian civilization. Some would therefore consider Ur – the place of his birth– to be the most logical destination for Avram. He had grown up there. He was familiar with – and to some degree had his worldview shaped by – both its *geography* and its *philosophies*. Ah, but that was then, and this is now. The situs of a past where one had no relationship with the Holy One is just about fleshly sentimentality and ‘pseudo-intellectual nostalgia. So the Holy One made it clear, right up front, that Avram was not to go back to Ur, nor was he to long for or return to the ways of life that he had learned while residing there.

Finally, Avram was to ‘*go out*’ from his father’s [Terach’s] *house*[hold]. Why? Because, though Terach was Avram’s father, and deserved honor, Terach’s ways were not the Holy One’s ways. Neither were the ways of Nachor, Avram’s eldest brother, the Holy One’s ways. Neither had the ways of Charan, Avram’s younger brother, been the Holy One’s ways. Joshua 24:2 tells us clearly that each of these men ‘served other gods’. Avram was therefore called upon not only to physically leave the spheres of influence of all in his father’s house[hold], but was also called to ‘go out’ from each of these men’s ways of thinking and interacting with God, with people, and with Creation.

We can and should respect and honor our parents and kinsmen for the roles they have played in our spiritual development - especially how they have been used by the Holy One in the ‘iron sharpening iron’ process. See **Proverbs 27:17**. We should be thankful for and release blessings over our kinsmen, and should be prepared to implement the kinsman-redemption protocols of Torah on their behalf when called upon to do so. But as our Rabbi Yeshua poignantly taught, once we are grown up and embarked on our life-mission, we are called to serve a far greater family than

just the familiar faces of the household in which we were birthed. See **Matthew 12:47-50**. We must be prepared for goodbyes – and extended episodes of both disorientation and loneliness. Wherever He leads, that is where we are to go; wherever He lodges, that is where we are to lodge; whoever He considers to be His people, those are to be considered our people as well; and whatever hill He deems it worthwhile to die on, that is to be our place of death and burial as well.

Please note that the calling of Avram – the father of our faith - was not a call to ‘join’ anything. His was a call to do the exact opposite - to **DISENTANGLE** from all associations that colored his way of thinking, to **UNLEARN** everything he had ever been taught about God or for that matter about life on planet earth, and to completely ‘start over’ in life with only his relationship with the Creator of the Universe to guide him. Only by disentangling, unlearning, and starting over from scratch could Avram come to know – much less live by - the truth. Alas, perhaps there is a lesson to be learned in this for all who would be Avram’s children.

***So Now We Know What We Called to Leave –
But How Do We Know Where Are We Supposed to Go –
and What Are We Supposed to Do [1] Along the Way,
and [2] When We Get There?***

The **Lech Lecha** calling has two components. The first component focuses on the spheres of influence, affection, and familiarity that we are supposed to leave behind. This part of the call requires us to ‘go out’ from, ‘depart’ from, or ‘separate’ from people, places, things, worldviews, and ways that are less than optimal to our spiritual development. The second, and greater component of the call, however, is to *go to* - in search of – some other place, some other people, and some other growth-and-service-opportunity, that the Holy One has prepared for us as the next phase of our apprenticeship under Him. Specifically, we, like Avram, are called to go **el ha-aretz asher ar'eika** – *i.e. to the land that I will show you*. Take a deep breath, Beloved; this may hurt a little.

Hold on! Wait just a minute! Do you mean to tell me that this is not just about Avram – or his family – or ME or US - being blessed and highly favored? Do you mean to tell me this is about a *land that needs tending*? Do you mean to tell me it is about a *real, specific piece of the terra firma of planet earth*? Do you mean to tell me it is about a *new kind of ‘Eden-in-waiting’*? Do you mean to tell me it is about us – me – learning to walk in a new level of *humble service, fierce focus, persevering faithfulness, sweat-of-the-brow fruitfulness, and long-suffering, self-denying stewardship*? Do you mean to tell me that the *Lech Lecha* calling of the Holy One is ultimately about establishing a *strategic beachhead, building a*

command center, and preparing a staging ground for a Kingdom of Heaven invasion? You mean it is about a special lighthouse city set on a hill? You mean it is about a great broadcast tower from which the Torah, and the word of the Holy One, is destined to go forth into all the earth? Yes, Beloved, that is indeed what I am saying. The Holy One always ties individual, familial, cultural, and national blessings to a corresponding territorial strategy. Blessed people are supposed to result in blessed ecosystems – i.e. blessed parcels of land, blessed mountains, blessed valleys, blessed watersheds, blessed farms and gardens, blessed orchards, blessed vineyards, blessed creatures, blessed villages, blessed marketplaces, blessed cities, blessed regions, and a blessed world. The Creator is always about healing the brokenness and frustration of Creation, and restoring it to the beauty and fruitfulness of its originally intended Edenic potential. Every blessing He bestows is a Strategic, Time-Release, Multi-Dimensional, Trickle-Down Redemption and Restoration Plan.

And what is Avram –and what are we – to do once we take our leave from that which is restricting our potential to bless the world, its places, and its families, and head off toward the land He will show us? The Holy One tells us:

1. We are to become a *goy gadol* – i.e. a ‘great nation/ethnicity’
2. We are to receive, embrace, and steward the Holy One’s *brachot* – i.e. ‘blessings’, or *free-flowing fountain of inspiration, empowerment, and shalom*;
3. We are to develop *agadelah shem* – a great character and corresponding good reputation;
4. We are to freely give what we have freely received, by releasing the *brachot* – i.e. ‘blessings’, or *free-flowing fountain of inspiration, empowerment, and shalom* – we receive from the Holy One into all places we go and sharing them with all people we encounter along the way;
5. We are to function as a ‘litmus test’ for all cultures we encounter; if they choose to respond to our presence in their area by blessing us, they will be blessed by the Holy One; but if they choose to respond to our presence in their area by cursing/demeaning us, the Holy One will curse/demean them proportionately; and
6. We are to ultimately become a fountain of blessing – i.e. *free-flowing fountain of inspiration, empowerment, and shalom* – into every family/bloodline/clan on the earth.

All in time, Beloved. All in time. The Holy One will make all things beautiful, each in its time. Our lives, our words, our behaviors, our family relationships, our lands, our households, our nation, our culture, and our language are the tools He plans to use to re-introduce the blessings He spoke over mankind in Genesis 1:28.

You remember – when He empowered us to *bear much ‘fruit’ of the ‘seed of woman’*; to *ever expand/increase in positive, healing, and healthy influence and impact*; to *bring fullness to the entire earth*; and to *take dominion over all living creatures so as to release the beautiful potential in every facet, every dimension, and every realm of the Universe that our ‘Elohim’ has created.*

May we, like Avram, be captivated by this great vision and calling!

Avram’s Season of Passionate Pursuit Begins

We read in the 11th chapter of Hebrews the following words:

By faith/trust in the Holy One [Hebrew, emunah] Avraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he was to receive for an inheritance, sh’ma-ed, and went out, not knowing whither he went.

[Hebrews 11:8]

At age 75 Avram basically *started life all over*. He packed up Sarai, at least one of his servants, and for some reason, his nephew Lot, and he left his family home in Charan. In so doing, he forsook his natural inheritance as a son of Terach [i.e. his ‘birthright’] and embraced his spiritual inheritance [i.e. his ‘blessing’]. He headed south, apparently not having so much as a clue where he was going. Where he was going was not really the issue. The issue was *Who He was going to be with*.

What Avram was doing was not leaving Charan in search of *a better place to live* or to engage in business or to start the family he had always longed for. What He was doing was *embarking on a passionate pursuit of the One True God*.

Avraham was no ‘soldier of fortune’. He did not leave Charan in search of *wealth*. He was not after *possessions*. He was not even after *land*. He was likewise not after *fame*, or *fortune*, or *glory*, *self-actualization* or even *self-discovery*. He was not even after the long-desired heir that Sarai had proven incapable of giving him. He did not go out in search of material blessings of any kind. What he was after – *all* he was after - was *the One Whose Voice had spoken to him and awakened his sense of destiny*. Avram had, quite unexpectedly, at age 75, been *romanced by the Creator of the Universe*. And he had been *completely swept off of his feet*. He had heard the most beautiful Voice Creation has ever known speaking to him and him alone in such a way that his heart burned inside him and his spirit came wonderfully alive.

Has something like that happened to you, Dear Reader? If not, may it happen this week. And if perchance something like unto what Avram experienced in his 75th year of life has happened to you in some distant season of your life, may this week be a week when you experience another such encounter – only deeper and broader

than the first. For He has begun a good work in you will be faithful to complete it³.

Looking For A City Not Built By Human Hands

The writer of Hebrews tells us that the greatest passion of Avraham's heart was the quest to find *a city*. It was not a city like Babel. It was not a city like Ur. It was not a city like Charan. It was not even a city in Kena'an like Shechem or Hebron or Be'er-sheva or the Jebusite stronghold of Salem [later renamed Jerusalem and called the 'City of the Great King']. The city that captured Avram's passion and which was a city not built by human hands. The city for which Avram's heart longed with an unquenchable longing was *a city which has foundations, a city whose builder and maker is G-d, a city prepared by the Holy One for those of whom it is said 'He is not ashamed to be called their G-d'*. **Hebrews 11:8-17.**

It is a *real city*. It has real walls, and real streets, and real houses. It is the opposite of Babel. It is not about what men can think, do, or achieve; it is about the Holy One, and His Grand Plan for the Redemption of Mankind and the Restoration of Creation.

After all these years, like my father Avraham, my heart still longs for that self-same city. How about you, Dear Reader? Aren't you looking for the city of the Great King, too? And will you ever really be satisfied with anything else?

Avram's Second God Encounter

We are not told by Torah how long it took Avram to travel from Charan southward to *Eretz Yisrael*. We are however told that shortly after arriving in *Eretz Yisrael* Avram had his second 'God encounter'. This one was even deeper, involved more of Avram's senses, and was more meaningful than the first. Remember, the first God-encounter of Avram's life was *auditory only*. He saw nothing – he merely heard and found himself mesmerized by the Divine Voice. This time the Holy One He changes things up on Avram. This time the Holy One gets corporeal. He presents Himself to - and overpowers - Avram's *visual senses* as well as his sense of hearing.

Vayera Adonai el-Avram vayomer

And the Holy One appeared to Abram and He said,

L'zar'acha eten et ha-aretz hazot

'I will give this land to your offspring.'

[Genesis 12:7(a)]

If this text is literally interpreted it appears that this time in addition to *speaking to* Avram the Holy One actually pulled back the curtain of Heaven just a 'smidgeon',

³ Philippians 1:6.

and visibly *showed to Avram a little bit of His glory*. The Holy One had done something similar for *Noach* [Genesis 8:20-22]. And before Torah is concluded we will find that He is going to do something analogous for Moshe as well [Exodus 34:5-7].

Avram's First Altar-Building Project

What aspect(s) of the Holy One do you think He allowed Avram to see at the time of this second God-encounter? It cannot be stated for sure, as Torah does not specifically tell us. But let us look at what happened immediately after Avram received the startling revelation:

vayiven sham mizbe'ach l'Adonai ha-nir'eh elav
[Abram] built an altar there to the Holy One who had appeared to him
[Genesis 12:7(b)]

Torah tells us that immediately after this vision, in the immediate aftermath of the Holy One's initiation of this God encounter, Avram built a ***mizbe'ach*** [altar]. He stopped what he was doing and ... *built an ALTAR?* Why? What was THAT all about? Where did Avram even get the idea? Was that a *sh'ma* response to something the Holy One said - or was it just *Avram being Avram?* Was it the manifestation of some kind of 'religious spirit' that had attached itself to Avram in Ur or Charan - or was it a Divinely inspired act of prophetic intercession?

Avram is not, of course, the first person to build an altar in the immediate aftermath of a God-encounter. His ancestor Noach did the same thing immediately after his third God-encounter, which occurred right after the Holy One brought him and his family safely through the Flood.

Please note that the Holy One did not specifically instruct Avram to do build an altar – any more than the Holy One had instructed Noach to do so. Avram's building of an altar appears to be a pure *heart-response* - a man desiring, in the only way he knows, to acknowledge the Holy One as God, and respond with praise to what he has been privileged to see and know of Him. Note also however that the altar Avram built was not by any means an altar upon which attempts were or would be made to *curry favor* with the Holy One. The altar Avram built was an altar built in appreciation of the fact that *Avram already had the Holy One's favor*. Neither was Avram's altar one built in order to pour out the blood of bulls and goats in a quest for atonement for sin. It was instead an altar which fully recognized that *the Holy One's amazing grace had already provided all Avram needed by way of sin-cleansing*.

So if the altar Avram built was not designed to curry God's favor or somehow provide atonement for Avram or anyone else's sins, well ... why did Avram build

it? What was he thinking?

The Sages Weigh In

We cannot know for sure what moved Avram to build the altar. There is a fascinating disagreement among the sages on the issue. Both *Rashi* and *Ohr HaChaim* speculate that Avram built the altar as *an act of gratitude*. But gratitude for what? Rashi suggests that what Avram was grateful for – to the extent he felt the urge to build an altar and initiate a joyful approach to the Holy One - was the Holy One’s promise of both children and land. Ohr HaChaim⁴ on the other hand suggests that what motivated Avram to build the altar was pure joy over the privilege of being counted worthy of the Presence of the Blessed One. In other words, in Ohr HaChaim’s view Avram was overjoyed at the joy of spending time with the Holy One, while Rashi saw Avram as overwhelmed by the greatness of the promises the Holy One had made to him. Ohr HaChaim saw Avram as loving the Holy One for the Holy One’s own sake, rather than loving Him because he was going to benefit from the relationship.

This disagreement presents to us an interesting dilemma: why do WE love the Holy One? Is it because of His Great and Precious Promises and Gifts? Or do we love Him because HE ALONE is viewed by us as our Exceeding Great Reward?

Yet Another Interesting Possibility

Or is it possible that the reason Avram was moved to respond to this Divine Encounter by building an altar was because what the Holy One showed Avram when He ‘appeared’ to him was nothing less than the image of a lamb [Messiah] slain before the foundation of the world? Later in life – on Mount Moriyah – Avraham would declare: *on the mountain of the Holy One, He will be seen. Genesis 22:14*. At the time of this early God-encounter, however, is it possible Avram wanted to memorialize the image the Holy One had shown him of a slain lamb on a heavenly altar the only way he knew how – in physical form – and that Avram’s ‘altar’ was simply the best Avram could do on short notice, with human hands and physical tools, to reproduce on earth in tangible form the image of what he had seen?

In connection with this God encounter the Holy One told Avram [forgive the paraphrase]: *“This is the land I told you about”*. This was significant. It was a fulfillment of promise #1 – the promise *to show Avram the land*. And it was a down payment – an earnest – regarding the other 7 promises. If the Holy One fulfilled the *first promise*, He would, Avram knew, *fulfill all the others*.

⁴ Rabbi Chaim ben Mosheh ben Atar (1696-1743), originally of Morocco.

The All-Important Promises of Seed and Inheritance

And the Holy One added one more promise to the eight He had made before — He promised *to give the land He showed to Avram to Avram's zera* [seed/offspring]. A closer look reveals that this actually consisted of two mutually dependent promises — first that Avram, who was then childless, would have a ‘seed’; and second, that the ‘seed’ of Avram would inherit the land the Holy One had shown Avram.

Seeing the Beautiful Land

And so it is that in the course of the opening aliyah of the Avraham chronicles both we the reader and the man to whom we are introduced as Avram get a first glimpse of the “stage” on which the Holy One decreed that the most significant occurrences in Scripture would be played out. It is in this aliyah of Torah, you see, that we the reader get introduced, along with Avram, to that very special parcel of real estate which later generations came to know as *Israel!* By the Holy One’s design, this seemingly insignificant parcel of land not much bigger than the American state of Vermont was destined to become, and forever remain, the focal point of all human history. It was then. It still is today. Why *this* parcel of real estate, instead of some other? For one reason, the land we know as Israel was at the center of civilization, on the crossroads of all world commerce. The two primary ancient roads from Mesopotamia [home of the Eastern empires of Sumeria, Assyria, and Babylon, to name a few] to North Africa [home of the Western empire of Egypt, which somehow managed to transcend all the Eastern empires] passed through this land. Anyone who traveled between these competing empires - or traveled from Africa to Asia or Europe - had to pass through this tiny country. It was “center stage” for all the interactions - as well as the decisive battles - of the world empires.

Even more important than the strategic value of this location however there is something irresistible - almost enchanting - about *the land itself*. The Holy One - Who designed it, sculpted it, and cares for it as His “garden enclosed” for His Beloved - has described it as “*a land flowing with milk and honey*”. In the center of this land He has “*placed His Name*”. For this reason, as wonderful as the rest of Creation is, as beautiful as other mountains or as fertile as other valleys may be - Israel is always to be cherished and loved by those who love the Creator.

The Famine in the Land

Some may question the Holy One’s timing in bringing Avram to, and showing him, the land of Kena’an at a time of *famine*. If Avram is expected to ‘take to’ this land, wouldn’t it have been better for the Holy One to bring him to, and show him, the land at a time of plenty, with lush fields, and running streams? Only if the Holy One was trying to appeal to Avram’s flesh. Or if what Avram was after was real estate or material blessing. And that is not what is happening. The Holy One is

not a real estate agent trying to close a sale any more than Avram is a buyer hungry to be talked into the tract of his dreams.

The Holy One is a landlord already at work evicting the previous, holdover tenants [the Kena'ani]. The Holy One therefore does not bring Avram to the land when the Kena'ani were prospering. He brought Avram to the land when He was in the process of making the nest the descendants of Kena'an have made for themselves *as uncomfortable as possible*.

The Holy One wants Avram to see the land at its *worst*, not at its best. And He intends to stir in Avram's heart a love for that land not based upon outward beauty or productivity – but *based upon the connection between the land and the Holy One*. He wants Avram to love the land not because it is beautiful or fruitful [although it is definitely both] – but because the Holy One is present in a unique way there, and has prepared it to be His special place of meeting with all those whom He has made covenant.

Avram builds a couple of altars on which to worship the Holy One Who called him out of the land of the Chaldeans. But then his flesh kicks back in – and he packs his camels again, and heads off southward again. He has a wife and livestock to support. So he seeks relief from the famine in the Nile River valley of Egypt. As Torah tells it: *Avram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land.* Genesis 12:9-10.

Avram and Sarai Sojourn in Egypt

The last part of today's aliyah describes a 'life experience' the Holy One allows Avram to experience – one which will be repeated in subsequent generations. The life experience is Egypt – the household of Pharaoh⁵.

Avram knows – by reputation at least – when he decides to leave Kena'an and head Southward, that while Egypt is a place where one can find food in famine, it is not exactly a pristine vacation destination. What it is, Beloved, is a pit of snakes. And, without discussing it with the Holy One [hey, he's *just learning* – like all of us, right?], Avram makes a plan on how to deal with the snake pit. He decides to use his beautiful wife Sarai as a 'snake charmer'. He will use Sarai's sensuousness to appeal to Pharaoh's exotic tastes. Avram therefore says to Sarai:

⁵*Par'oh* [KJV Pharaoh] is a generic name for Egyptian kings (**Josephus, Antiquities 8:6:2**), coming from the Egyptian *par ao*, the 'Great House.' It is believed that Avram and Sarai's sojourn in Egypt occurred circa 1900 - 1730 B.C.E. Some believe the Par'oh spoken of in this passage was Amenemhet II of the 12th Dynasty, who assumed the title and began to reign in 1900 b.c.e. It is impossible, based upon the information available to date, to say for certain.

hineh-na yadati ki ishah yefat-mar'eh at

Behold, you are a beautiful woman.

Vehayah ki-yir'u otach ha-Mitzrim

When the Egyptians see you,

v'amru ishto zot v'hargu oti v'otach yechayu

they will assume that you are my wife and kill me, allowing you to live.

Imri-na achoti at l'ma'an yitav-li

Say that you are my sister. They will then be good to me for your sake,

v'avurech v'chaytah nafshi big'lalech

and through your efforts, my life will be spared.'

[Genesis 12:11(b)-13]

What Avram did was to have Sarai tell a half-truth, and tell everyone she was his sister. In this way, Avram was able to 'sell' her into Pharaoh's harem, and get enough food for he, Lot, and the rest of his entourage to survive the famine.

I didn't write that dialogue, Dear Reader; I am just reporting it. I'll confess, my flesh does not particularly like it. It looks like a wholesale sell-out of Sarai's virtue. But then again I wasn't there, and I haven't walked in Avram's sandals. Physical beauty has always meant a lot in snake pits like Egypt. The sales price – was then, and is now - riches beyond measure. So whether you or I approve of what Avram and Sarai did is not really the issue. The Holy One proved Himself faithful to Avram even in the snake pit of Egypt, and even in the midst of their slime. The Holy One protected Sarai's virtue when Avram did not [and quite probably could not have, and knew it]. And the Holy One even turned personal disaster into triumph, making Avram [and Lot] wonderfully rich in the process. Discipline would come later, at a later stage of Avram's relationship with the Holy One. Right now, it seems, Avram is in the 'blessing' stage.

He treated Avram well because of her, and [Avram] thus acquired sheep, cattle, donkeys, male and female slaves, she-donkeys, and camels.

[Genesis 12:16]

Clearly presaging what would take place a little over 400 years later, the Holy One struck Pharaoh and his palace with PLAGUES. And, as a consequence, this Pharaoh, as his descendant would do centuries later, ordered the Holy One's people out of his kingdom under armed guard, in a fit of rage. Here is how Torah records it:

Vayetzav alav Par'oh anashim

Pharaoh put men in charge of [Abram],

V'yeshalechu oto v'et-ish'to v'et-kol-asher-lo

and they sent him on his way along with his wife and all that was his.

[Genesis 12:20]

Our aliyah began, as you will recall, with an instruction, from the Holy One, for Avram to ‘go out’. It ends with a similar instruction, this time from a rather irate Pharaoh. In both instances, it was clear that the time had come for Avram to take one last look around the place where he lived, then to pack up to move on. In both cases the destination was to be Kena’an. The Holy One willing, we will speak much more on that subject tomorrow.

Questions for Today’s Study

1. Go back to Genesis 11.

- [A] From which of Noach’s three sons was Avram descended?
- [B] What does the name Avram mean?
- [C] When chapter 12 begins, how old was Avram?

2. In his first recorded encounter with the Holy One [Genesis 12:1-3] Avram merely hears the Holy One speak, saying ***Lech Lecha*** [*go out for yourself ...*]

- [A] What three things was Avram to “go out” from?
- [B] Where was Avram to “go out” to?
- [C] List at least six things the Holy One said He was going to do.
- [D] Who went out with Avram?
- [E] What place in Israel did they go first?
- [F] How was Avram’s encounter with the Holy One at this place (his second encounter) different from the encounter in Haran?
- [G] What did the Holy One promise Avram this time?

3. Where and how did Avram acquire wealth?

4. In today’s haftarah reading, and particularly in Isaiah 40:27-31, the prophet of the Holy One is telling the descendants of Avram not to give up on their destiny and purpose just because things weren’t going the way they thought they should. Here is the passage:

*Why say you, Ya`akov, and speak, Yisra'el, “My way is hid from the Holy One,
and the justice [due] to me is passed away from my God?”*

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

*The everlasting God, the Holy One, the Creator of the ends of the eretz, doesn't faint,
neither is He weary; there is no searching of his understanding.*

He gives power to the faint; and to him who has no might he increases strength.

Even the youths will faint and be weary, and the young men will utterly fall:

but those who wait for the Holy One will renew their strength;

they will mount up with wings as eagles;

they will run, and not be weary; they will walk, and not faint.

- [A] What does the Holy One promise to give to the “faint?”
- [B] What does the Holy One promise to give to those that have “no

might?"

[C] What four (4) things does Isaiah say will happen to those who "wait" upon the Holy One?

5. Today's reading from the Brit Chadasha is Romans 4:1-3, as follows:

*What then will we say that Avraham, our forefather, has found according to the flesh?
For if Avraham was justified by works,
he has something to boast about, but not toward God.*

*For what does the Scripture say? "Avraham believed the Holy One,
and it was accounted to him for righteousness."*

In connection with today's Brit Chadasha reading look up in Strong's the words translated "believed", "credited" (KJV "counted"), and "righteousness". Write the Greek words and their definitions. Then, using a Hebrew lexicon, try to determine what Hebrew words/concepts each of those Greek words relate to. Then, using the words/concepts you have discovered, try to rewrite Romans 4:1-3 Hebraically.

*May you come to know Avram as a father of your faith.
And may the Holy One show you His "garden enclosed" up close and personal.*

The Rabbi's son

Meditation for Today's Study

Psalm 107:1-7

*Give thanks to the Holy One, for He is good,
For his lovingkindness endures forever.
Let the redeemed by the Holy One say so,
Whom he has redeemed from the hand of the adversary,
And gathered out of the lands, from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.*

*They wandered in the wilderness in a desert way. They found no city to live in.
Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried to the Holy One in their trouble,
And he delivered them out of their distresses,*

He led them also by a straight way, that they might go to a city to live in.