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LECH L'CHA

DIVREI TORAH

• The story of Avraham begins with this week's reading as he is center stage for the birth of the Jewish people. Hashem directs Avraham to leave his homeland and LECH L'CHA, "go for your own good" (12:1). Rashi tells us that this command form with the added expression "for yourself" indicates that this will be for Avraham's benefit and for his own good. I have learned that in life that which usually tastes good is not always good for you. Here Hashem is saying to Avraham that "your departure from your home and your homeland will be good for you; you will benefit from it; and you will enjoy it." If this is true, asks the S'fat Emet (Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter of Gerer, 1847-1905), what kind of test was this for Avraham? If Avraham fulfilled that which God commanded him to, he would benefit and enjoy it. This does not seem like much of a test to be included in the list of the ten tests to which Hashem subjected Avraham. The S'fat Emet answers that Avraham fulfilled all that God commanded him only because Hashem said so. He

never did anything that God said for his own benefit. Consequently it was Avraham's attitude and perspective that allowed him to fulfill the test and make it beneficial to him in a spiritual level.

• In 12:5 the Torah indicates that Avraham and Sara had amassed "souls that they made in Charan." Rashi quotes the Midrash that states that Avraham and Sara worked with many people and converted them to their newfound teachings of monotheism, yet nowhere does the Torah mention what happened to these converts. Many commentators suggest that after Avraham died, these converts returned to their former lives. Perhaps it was Avraham's personal charisma and charming personality that attracted these people to begin with. After he died they could not attach themselves to Yitzchak, since Yitzchak had a different personality entirely. In any event, most all the commentators believe that these converts went home afterwards, not to continue in their newfound beliefs and traditions that Avraham and Sara taught them. [Note: The Israeli rabbinate of today certainly would never have approved of Avraham's conversions. He would have been deemed unsuccessful and lacking somehow in the process and methods in his standards of conversion. The truth is that conversion is a complicated situation,

always under scrutiny and suspicion. I personally know rabbis who make it a point to avoid involvement in conversions in their entire careers. They will not do conversions, but will accept conversions done properly by other people. There is also the very famous Syrian Edict of the earlier part of the 20th century that continues today: that the Syrian Jewish community in America does not accept converts and will not permit a member of their community to continue as a member if he is marrying even the most Orthodox and observant convert. This is their standard to place a barrier and signify to their congregation that they do not want anybody dating or showing any interest in a potential non-Jewish spouse.]

- During the famine in Canaan, Avraham takes his family south into Egypt. He was fearful of the attraction that his wife Sara would generate because, as Avraham states in 12:11 - “see now I have known that you are a woman of beautiful appearance.” At this stage Sara has to be at least 65 years old. Many commentators are perplexed by this statement. Is Avraham not aware that his wife is beautiful until now? We do realize that love masks an objective standard of assessing beauty. The Vilna Gaon explains that the Talmud tells us (Megila 13) that Esther was pale and had a greenish tinge of coloring in her face, but because of her tremendous

character of chesed she projected a certain beauty to people who saw her; she just appeared beautiful because of her character. So it is possible that the husband sees his wife as beautiful, but in actuality his perception is blinded by his own love for her, or perhaps by her character traits. Once Avraham reached this stage of his life and the age that they both reached, he realized that Sarah’s beauty was objective and visible, and not a product of her kind character which she possessed as well. The question and the Vilna Gaon’s comments are quite telling and real today in our assessment of a person’s beautiful looks.

- After their return to Canaan from Egypt, Avraham and Lot have acquired much material wealth and possessions, both in portable goods and animals. At this time a quarrel breaks out among their shepherds, and this brings about the ultimate separation of uncle and nephew. The cause of the breakup in the family was clearly the possessions that they both acquired, and how to properly care for these assets. One could easily conclude that money once again causes family friction. This is common in our day, as it was common in ancient times as well. Possession of wealth easily creates friction among family members. In my career I have been called upon to counsel fathers in composing their wills

where they favored one child over another. I counseled them that their desire to do the right thing in their eyes will be construed differently by the children, and the children will fight over the inheritance, and even go to court. There will be a breakup in the family. When one creates a will one has to be very careful as to how to create a plan so that the giving out of the estate will not cause the end of family unity. All of a sudden the construction of the will becomes a much more difficult and complicated project.

- After Avraham's successful rescue of Lot and the battle with the four kings, Avraham returns to central Canaan to a hero's welcome. MalkiTzedek comes out and greets him in verse 14:18. The text tells us that "MalkiTzedek the King of Shalem brought out bread and wine; he was a Kohen of God the Most High." Rashi identifies MalkiTzedek as Sheim, the son of No'ach, who must be at this time extremely elderly. The construction of the verse seems out of whack. It should read that MalkiTzedek the King of Shalem, kohen of God the Most High, brought out bread and wine. Changing the order would give a different emphasis to what is going on here. Who is greater in our perspective as an individual living in that time period? Avraham who has begun to create a new sense of religious belief in the world, or

MalkiTzedek who is the elder statesman and patriarch in the most sacred place in the world? One would believe that MalkiTzedek still ranks higher in the world than Avraham. Therefore the statement in the Torah is really done correctly. MalkiTzedek is honoring the returning warrior. MalkiTzedek, the Kohen of God, is the one who would be receiving Avraham's honor, but instead MalkiTzedek is the one who is going out to honor Avraham. This is the novel statement that the Torah is introducing. It is the fact that not only has Avraham earned his reputation and standing in God's eyes, and in the eyes of the people who live in the area, but even from the most revered and respected individual in the world of that time who was coming to pay homage and give respect and honor to Avraham, his junior of many years.

- When Avraham enters into a dialogue, pressing Hashem for assurance of Avraham's future, they will enter into the Covenant of the Pieces. The Torah states at one point in the discussion between Hashem and Avraham (15:6) "he trusted in Hashem and He reckoned it to him as righteousness (TZ'DAKA)." Some commentators interpret this verse to indicate that with the assurance given to him by Hashem, Avraham considered it an act of righteousness and continued to give tz'daka as he did before as a wealthy individual who

shares his assets with the less fortunate. In actuality we can see a break with the norm. When a person is amassing wealth and has no children, his attention can be focused on being a most giving, charitable individual. This was true in the life of the famous Moses Montefiore who was blessed with longevity and with great wealth, but not with children. Without children one can afford to be a major philanthropist. With children one is hesitant to part with great amounts of assets because one should be concerned with the future financial stability of his growing family. Avraham had just received a verbal assurance from the Almighty that he will be blessed with children and grandchildren. That in and of itself could have altered his charity practices. The Torah is indicating to us that this was not true, even with this assurance which he believed wholeheartedly, Avraham would continue to be as charitable as he was all along because he felt that God's gift to him would include the assets necessary to raise the children in financial security, and still enable him to be the philanthropist he had always been.

- When the name Avram was changed officially to Avraham, the Torah indicates that this was a permanent change. The Talmud (B'rachot 13) indicates that anybody who in the future would refer to Avraham as

Avram has transgressed and sinned in the eyes of God. Whether this is a halachic statement in the Talmud is debatable, but certainly the sentiment of our Sages is strongly articulated. Yet the Torah changed Yaakov's name to Yisrael, and also indicated that his name should no longer be referred to as Yaakov. Nevertheless the Torah itself refers to him sometimes as Yaakov and sometimes as Yisrael. Why is it that Yaakov's name change was not absolute, while Avraham's name change was definitely absolute and for all time?

Ed. note: Some suggest that since it was the then idol worshiping Terach who named Avram, the change by G-d to Avraham is exclusive and permanent. On the other hand, it was Yitzchak Avinu who named Yaakov, so that name stays together with Yisrael.

Questions by RED

From the text

11. How old was Avraham when he went to Canaan? (12:4)
2. Where did Avraham go when there was a famine in Canaan? (12:10)
3. When Avraham and Lot separated, where did Lot settle? (13:12)
4. What did Hashem promise Avraham in the Covenant Between the Pieces? (15:13,18)

5. How old was Avraham when Yishmael was born? (16:16)

From Rashi

6. When Avraham went to Canaan, he took the “souls that they made in Charan” (12:5). What two definitions does Rashi give for these souls?

7. Avraham entered Canaan and went to Shechem. What did he do there? (12:6)

8. What did the shepherds of Lot and Avraham argue over? (13:2)

9. Who was the refugee from the war who told Avraham that his nephew was taken hostage? (14:13)

10. What was the meaning of the name Yitzchak? (17:19)

From the Rabbis

11. By sending Avraham to Canaan, Avraham would be subjected to a foreign population. What did Hashem tell him about this? (Chizkuni)

12. Avraham rejected the gifts from the king of S'dom after the war. Why did he accept Paro's gifts in the beginning of the Parsha? (Abravanel)

13. Why were Avraham's descendants called IVRIM, Hebrews? His other relatives were called Arameans. (Radak)

Midrash

14. In what three cities did 3 Biblical leaders buy land in Eretz Yisrael?

Haftara - Yishayahu

15. What is the only intelligent course in life?

Relationships

a) Hagar - Nevayot

b) Ketura - Midyan

c) Yaakov - Bilha

d) Nachor - Haran

e) Betuel - Lavan

ANSWERS

1. 75 years old.
2. To Egypt.
3. In S'dom.
4. That Avraham's offspring will become slaves and then will return to Canaan. The land of Canaan will become theirs.
5. 86 years old.
6.
 - 1) they were converts that Avraham and Sarah made in Charan.
 - 2) they were slaves that they purchased in Charan.
7. He prayed for the sons of Yaakov who will fight there.
8. Over pasturing their animals in other people's lands. Lot's shepherds claimed that the land is being given to Avraham and Lot is his heir.
9. Og (the eventual king of Bashan)
10.
 - a) Laughter. His birth brought much joy to many people.
 - b) the four letters of the name indicated events in Avraham and Sarah's life.
11. That Hashem will defend him.
12. Had he refused Par'o, he would have aroused Paro's suspicions.
13. Because only Avraham's nuclear family continued to speak Hebrew.

14.

- 1) Avraham bought part of Chevron.
- 2) Yaakov bought part of Shechem.
- 3) King David bought part of Yerushalayim.

15. To serve Hashem.

Relationships

- a) Grandmother & Grandson
- b) Mother & Son
- c) Husband & Wife
- d) Brothers
- e) Father & Son