

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

"The simple meaning of the words, **God took him outside**, are that God took him outside his tent to see the stars. But the midrashic meaning is that God said to him, "Get out of your [belief in] astrology; you *think* that you have read in the stars that you will not have a son. [But the truth is that] Avram will not have a son, but Avraham will have one, and Sarai will not have a son, but Sarah will have one: I call you by a different name [by adding the letter Heh] and your "destiny" is altered!"

Rashi attributes to Avraham a belief common in his own days: that the stars control our fate. That might strike us as unfair: most people today think that astrology is nonsense, whereas the idea that Sarai was past childbearing age was not nonsense, but biology! However, astrology and modern science share something important: they both posit that our fate is determined by impersonal mechanistic forces. Following this logic, God said to Avram, "Transcend your belief in the mechanistic forces of nature and join Me in that dimension of reality where *free will overcomes physics*, there you will share one letter of My name, and together *we will choose to change* your so-called 'destiny'".

Since I believe in science, the modern-day mechanistic belief system that replaced astrology, this message is a challenge. I don't understand how any will, even God's, could make possible that which is biologically impossible. I even believe, in keeping with science as I understand it, that humans are bio-robo-computers wholly determined by the laws of nature like all material things.

And yet, bio-robo-computer that I am, I *choose* to seek life, spirit, love and justice and place my *faith* in serving what I recognize as God. Can we imagine a computer, even one made of flesh, *who chooses* or *has faith*? I cannot: Material things have causes, not ideals. Do you agree? If so, then perhaps God's words to Avram are directed at us! "Transcend your mechanistic belief system and join Me in that dimension where even you – chunks of matter spit out by the big bang, physics and evolution – *can choose life and seek transcendence*; and in the reality of your freedom, spirit and consciousness, you will share one holy letter of My divine name."

TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Lekh Lekha

October 22-28, 2017 | 8 Cheshvan 5778

Genesis 12:1-17:27 (Etz Hayim p. 69-93; Hertz p. 45-60)
Triennial | Genesis 14:1-15:21 (Etz Hayim p. 77-85; Hertz p. 50-56)
Haftarah | Isaiah 40:27-41:16 (Etz Hayim p. 94-98; Hertz p. 60-62)

Dvar Torah

Dr. Shaiya Rothberg, *Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

In this week's portion we read: "After these things the word of the LORD came unto Avram in a vision, saying: 'Fear not, Avram! I am thy shield, thy reward shall be exceedingly great.'...And Avram said: 'O Lord GOD, what wilt Thou give me, seeing I go hence childless...?'" Avram is afraid that he will die without a child from Sarai. This is both a personal loss and perhaps an existential crisis: Avram's life has been about faith in God. God promised him an heir (Genesis 12:7). Was it all just illusion?

In the end, God delivered Yitschak as promised, but to Avraham and Sarah, not Avram and Sarai. First God changed their names, adding one letter of the divine name - the letter Heh – to each of their names. Why?

To answer this question, we need to ask another one: After Avram's complaint, we read, "And God brought him outside, and said: 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if thou be able to count them'; and God said unto him: 'So shall thy seed be.'" (Genesis 15:5). But we were not told before that Avram was *inside* any tent or building, so why does God suddenly bring him *outside*?! *Outside* of what!? Rashi explains:

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

Dvar Haftarah

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Following the Jews' loss of sovereignty and exile to Babylonia, it should come as no surprise that they thought little of their own strength and felt incapable of carrying out their national mission. Thus we see that many of the prophecies in the last part of the book of Isaiah aim to give the exiles the strength and courage to return and rebuild their homeland in Eretz Yisrael.

But with uplift as his goal, it seems quite odd that the prophet would address the exiles in an insulting and demeaning fashion: “Fear not, O **worm** Jacob, O men of Israel, I will help you’, declares the Lord, ‘I, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.’” (41:14).

If this appellation troubles you, it apparently also bothered Targum Yonathan, the Jewish Aramaic translation of the Prophets, which chose to gloss over the word “worm” completely. It translates the verse as ‘Do not fear, tribes of Jacob, seed of the house of Israel’.

But other commentators took up the challenge and offered explanations. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (11th century Spain), the premier pashtan (advocate for the plain meaning of the text), accepts the word’s negative connotation. He writes that the prophet calls them a worm because “Israel was thought of as a worm in the eyes of the Babylonians (their captors).”

Rashi seems to take things further. They don’t just APPEAR weak to the Babylonians, they in fact ARE weak: “The family of Jacob is weak like a worm, which has no strength except in its mouth.”

But Rabbi David Kimche (12th century Provence), however, sees something positive in Rashi’s words: “For they are weak like a worm on account of being in exile. And in the Tanhuma (an 8th century Eretz Yisrael midrash collection): ‘Why is Israel compared to a worm? To say to you: Just as a worm does not strike a cedar tree except with its mouth, and it is soft and strikes something hard, so, Israel, all of its strength is in prayer...’” Thus Kimche turns Rashi’s reading on its head: the prophet is now telling the people that even though they are not physically strong, there are other sources of power they can tap to change their circumstances.

Rabbi Yosef Kaspi (13-14th century Provence), a philosopher and exegete, presents a middle ground between these negative and positive readings: “[The “worm” metaphor] comes to make us aware that we are living creatures and are similar to the lowest of insects, especially if we do not make active use of our wisdom. This metaphor was used to teach us the

necessary qualities of humility and lowliness and in order to awaken us to acquire the wisdom and insight which distinguish us from worms. In my opinion, this is the purpose of the mitzvot written in the Torah...” (adapted)

Like Rashi and Ibn Ezra, and unlike Kimche, being worm-like *is* a negative, but it is a spiritual/intellectual lowliness that they CAN change and not a political/material lowliness that cannot. Kaspi finds a truly uplifting message in the prophet’s words: while you are indeed in a lowly state, through the pursuit of wisdom and the fulfillment of the mitzvot of the Torah the nation has the ability to transform itself to a state of nobility.

Kaspi’s message is a worthy one for our generation as well.

Table Talk

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this Parasha we begin to focus on Avram (Abram). He journeys with his wife Sarai (Sarah) to an unknown land, is forced to leave it due to a famine, receives a promise from God that he will become a great nation, all while desperately longing for a child.

1) Avram is instructed by God to ‘go from your land, your birthplace, and your father’s home’ (12:1). Why do you think that Avraham had to leave his familiar environment? What will be difficult in Avram’s new situation, and will be the potential benefits?

2) Lot, Avram’s nephew that traveled with him, parts ways with Avram because of fighting between his shepherds and those of Avram. Where does he choose to settle? What draws him to that place (13:10-12)? What does he ignore about the place (13:13)?

3) What do these two stories together tell us about what is important when choosing where to settle and where to build a life?

4) How do we properly assess our ability to influence our environment for the good vs. its ability to influence us for the bad?

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.