

JewishTimes

VOL. XVI NO. 2 — NOV. 11, 2016

JewishTimes
ISSUE #500
THE NEXT ISSUE!

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We Gain
Knowledge**

RABBI BERNIE FOX

**Abraham
and Lot**

RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG

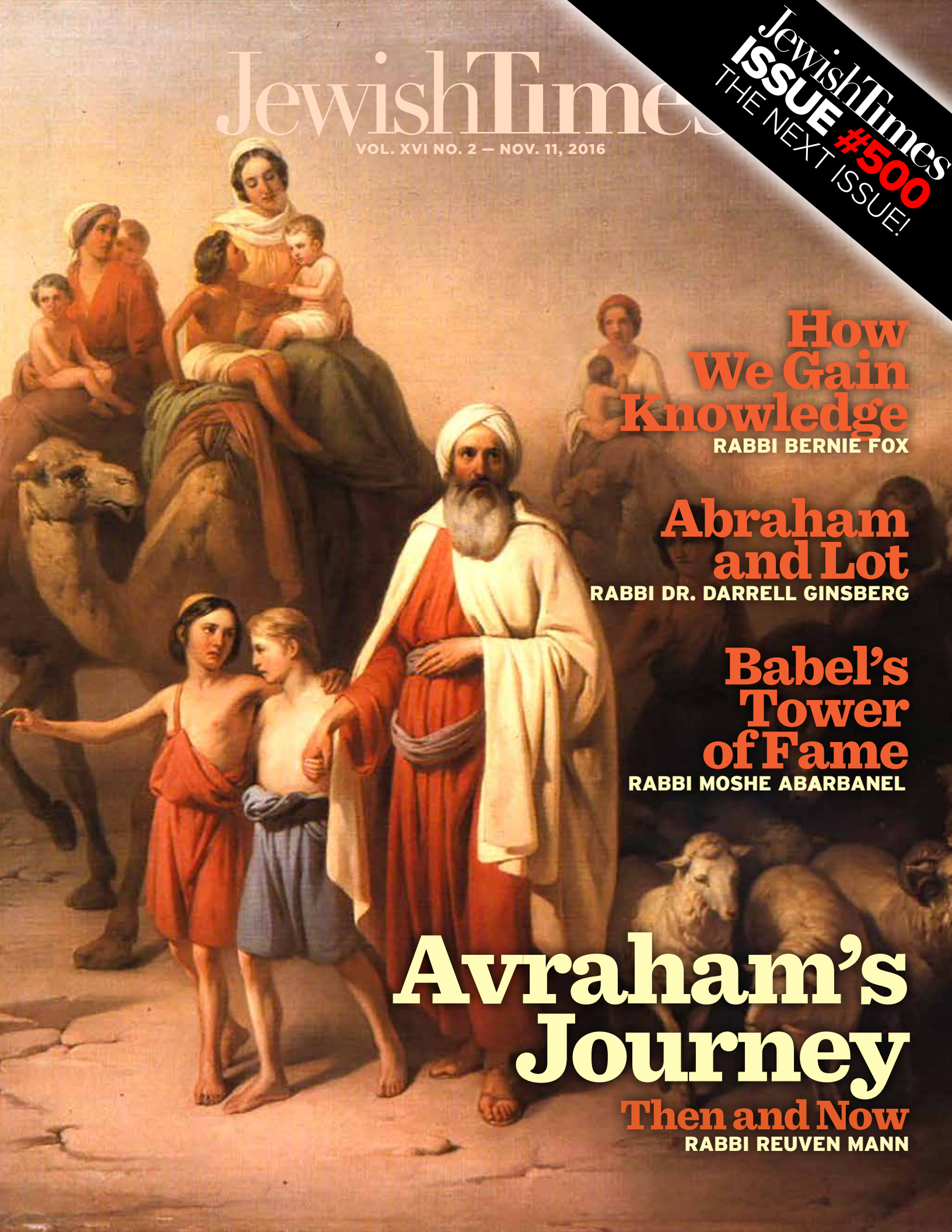
**Babel's
Tower
of Fame**

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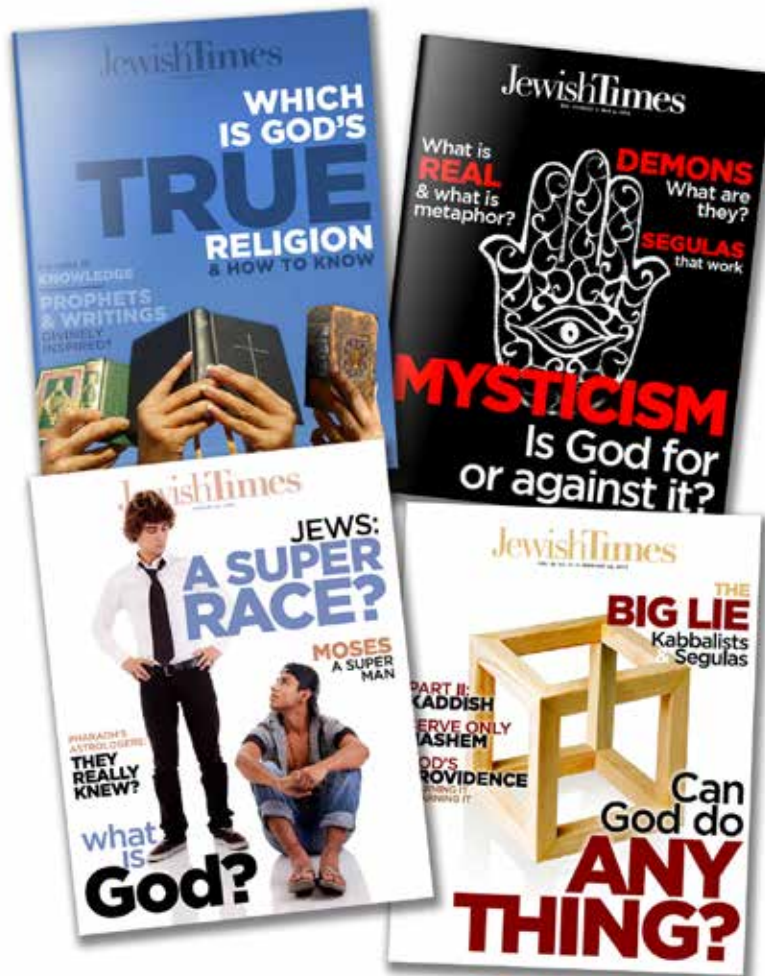


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IN REVIEW

RABBI MOSHE ABARBANEL

Babel's Tower of Fame

Man seeks fame. He desires his name be known by all, for eternity. With technology, today people use things such as YouTube to reach millions of people in an attempt to become famous. Justin Bieber reached a huge audience through

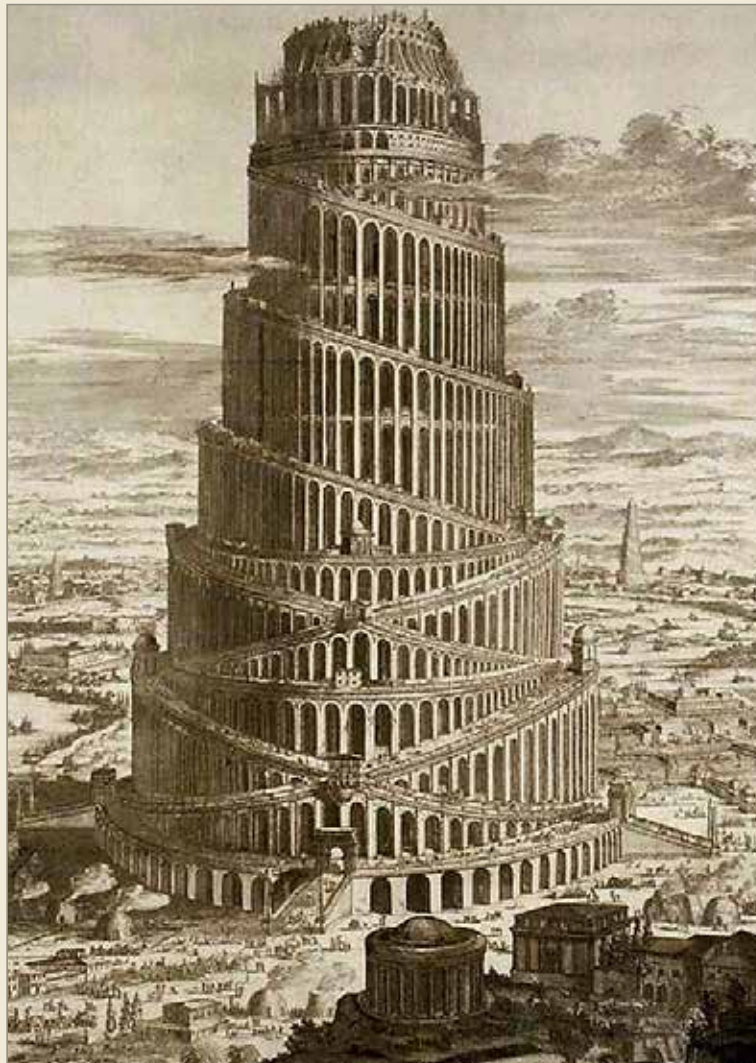
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YouTube and achieved Fame. Men construct buildings to achieve fame, i.e. Rockefeller Center and Trump Tower.

In last weeks parshas Noach in Chapter 11, we find a strange story of the Tower of Babel. Don Issac Abarbanel points out that compared to the story of Adam in the Garden of Eden and the Generation of the Flood, we are not told in this case of that generation who built the Tower, what was their specific transgression. In fact, the people who built the tower possessed great qualities. They spoke one language: "the whole earth was on language (11:1)." They agreed to move and settle a new place, "They migrated east and found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there (11:2)." They created new technology: "Come let us make bricks and burn them in fire (11:3)." Until now, people built with straw, wood or stones. They did not create uniform bricks that would allow for greater quality control in construction. Uneven stones do not allow tall structures like brick and mortar. Now, they took the next step build a tower to the sky: "Let us build a city, and a tower in the heavens."

Rav Samson Rafael Hirsch points out that man, at no time, suggested that we "understand God together, building a society dedicated to the knowing of the creator."

Don Issac Abarbanel points out when the Almighty investigates, He refers to these builders as "Children of Adam (11:5)." Rabbi Abarbanel learns: just like Adam sinned, so did this generation. I believe, just as Adam and Chava got lost from their focus of studying creation to understand God, so too did the Generation of the Tower forget what purpose all their unity, technology and construction should have been used for. It should have been used to understand the King



of Kings. Instead, they took credit for all their accomplishments, they believed it would make them famous. The hint we are given to this transgression is that the Tower would allow us to "Make a name for ourselves (11:4)." Making a name for yourself is a desire for fame.

Man may use his intelligence to work together, to discover technology and to create great structures...but not for his own greatness; but for the Creator's. The Rambam in his Mishnah Torah, (Hilicos Tephila 11:2) requires the Synagogue to

be the highest structure built on the highest spot in the city: "When a Synagogue is built, it should be built at the highest point of the city: 'she cries at the head of the public places' (Proverbs 1:21)." It should be taller than all other buildings in the city: "to lift the house of God (Ezra 9:9)." What would people think if the tallest building in NYC was the Synagogue of Freedom? If man used all his energies towards the Divine?

Have a good shabbos. ■

PARSHA

Avraham's Journey

Then and Now

Rabbi Reuven Mann



This week's parsha, Lech Lecha, recounts the emergence of our first Patriarch and Matriarch, Avraham and Sarah. All told, the Jewish people have three Fathers and four Mothers, a situation unique in the annals of history.

Most religions and political, intellectual, and social movements trace themselves back to a single founder. However, as great as Avraham was, he occupies a position that is shared by others, his sons Yitzchak and Yaakov and their wives.

There are important lessons contained here. Most significantly, it is not good to attribute too much greatness to a human being. Judaism is leery about hero worship,

especially in the spiritual realm. There is a very thin line between legitimate respect and excessive reverence.

Why have so many crossed that line to deify humans who brought great harm to mankind? It is because man's religious instincts often lead him astray. People are not comfortable with an abstract deity who cannot be compared to anything we are familiar with in our own sphere of existence.

They are searching for "Superman," a figure who is like us, but infinitely greater in power and magnitude. One can't help but be amazed at the irony; G-d created us in His image, but we are not at peace with that and seek to recreate Him in our puny image.

Judaism does not establish role models who are exclusively male. Avraham was joined by his wife, Sarah, whose participation in their "movement" was absolutely consequential. The Torah shows how these two figures interacted.

Sarah Imeinu (Our Mother) was an independent thinker who had prophetic insight. It was her bold idea for Avraham to marry the slave girl, Hagar, to bear a child who would perpetuate his religious movement.

Yet, after the birth of Yitzchak, she noticed the jealous disdain of Hagar's son, Yishmael, and decided it was absolutely essential for him to be banished from Avraham's house. She advocated this action, even though it was extremely displeasing to Avraham. These two wise and discerning spouses disputed over this, although neither of them could impose their will on the other.

Hashem decided the outcome by telling Avraham, "Listen to the voice of Sarah in all that she tells you," meaning that, in this department of human behavior, her insight is superior to yours.

This message was communicated to Avraham alone, who accepted the painful reality and sent Hagar and Yishmael on their way. Acknowledging the truth and eschewing ego is a paramount hallmark of the Abrahamic tradition.

The founders of our religion are three generations of men and women who were absolutely committed to its ideals of wisdom, compassion, and truth. We do not believe in people, but only in Hashem. It is not the impulses and "visions" of charismatic characters that we live by, but only by the wisdom of Hashem, which is revealed in His Torah.

Our parsha describes the origin of the Jewish mission to spread G-d's religion throughout the world. Hashem commanded Avraham to "Depart from your land, birthplace, and father's house to the Land I will show you."

Avraham's willingness to abandon his family ties and familiar relationships is considered a great act of courage and faith. We do not necessarily appreciate the full magnitude of this gesture.

To do so, we should ask whether we would be able to make a similar journey. For we find ourselves in an almost identical position as our forefather.

Eretz Yisrael (Israel) is available to us, but we choose to remain in a country that is not our own. The journey today in an airplane, with all amenities provided, would get us there in less than a day, but it is one that

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many are reluctant to make.

We can't pull ourselves away from our birthplace and "father's home." We simply have it too good here. We can't separate from our social attachments and luxuries and immigrate to "the Land I will show you."

Rashi explains that Hashem mentioned "land, birthplace, and father's house" to increase Avraham's reward for each enunciation. However, Hashem immediately says that He will make Avraham into a great nation and magnify his name.

This was quite a promise. So wouldn't it constitute a great incentive and detract from the greatness of his willingness to leave his home? Wouldn't our decision to make aliyah (move to Israel) be much easier if we knew that great rewards awaited us there?

We need to comprehend the nature of Avraham. He harbored no desire for personal glory. He served Hashem purely out of love and a natural desire to make Him known throughout the world.

Hashem's promise that, through Avraham, "all the nations of the world would be blessed," did not appeal to his ego. It meant that Hashem had selected him to be the medium through which the Divine plan would come to fruition on Earth.

This did not imply a life of ease or glory. Soon after arriving in Canaan, there was a severe famine and he was forced to travel to Egypt. There his life was endangered, and he had to pretend that Sarah was his sister.

Hashem places many challenges before those who seek to serve Him. Certainly the rewards are great, but they do not come quickly or easily. Nor are they of the kind that motivate people to wait on long lines to purchase lottery tickets.

Avraham and Sarah and all the other great Torah heroes who have graced our history essentially sacrificed the ordinary satisfactions of life to be partners with Hashem in the great mission of sanctifying His name in the world. This is the essence of Avraham's journey. Whoever is motivated by his spirit can embark on it at any time.

A Postscript

I write these words one day before the Presidential election. I am neither endorsing nor commenting on either candidate. What I find amazing is the fact that they are not youngsters (about 70) and yet have displayed almost superhuman energy in pursuit of the office.

For the past year and a half they have worked around the clock, holding extremely draining meetings, rallies, interviews, and debates. Not to mention the constant stream of crises and dilemmas that are inevitable in all such endeavors. Both display tremendous energy and stamina. What is their secret?

I do not mean this in a bad way, but both candidates are extremely ambitious and ego-driven, with an almost insatiable desire for power. I have no problem with that, as long as the energy generated by these motives is put to positive use to benefit America.

There are enormous differences between these types of leaders and those who have been the shepherds of the Jewish people. The Patriarchs and Matriarchs were modest people who had absolutely no desire for personal adulation.

Moshe Rabbeinu was the most humble of men and pleaded with Hashem to be excused from leading the greatest mission in history. He had to be coerced into becoming the king of the Jews. To this day, Judaism views the desire for power as a serious flaw that should make us suspicious of all who cultivate it.

Shabbat shalom. ■



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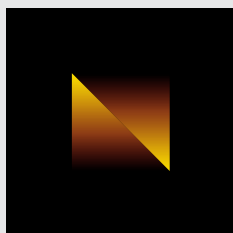
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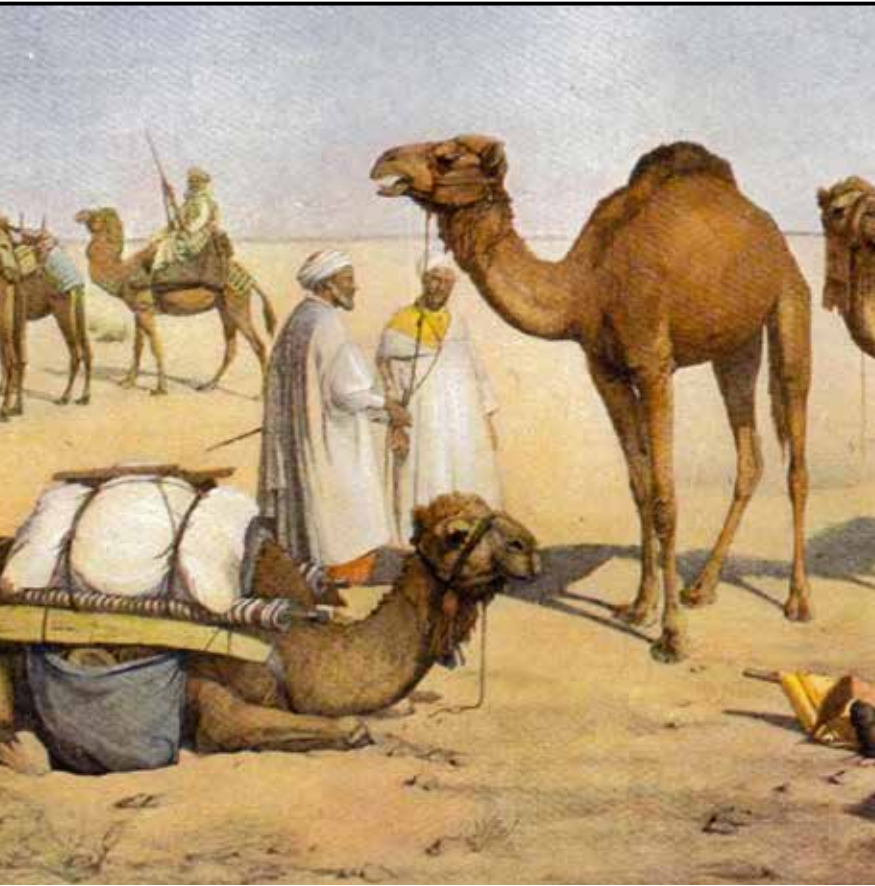


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Lech Licha

A Turbulent Relationship

RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG

Avraham's ties to Lot trace far back in the Torah's historical narrative, as his nephew joined him through the journey from Haran to the Land of Israel. Up until the section of Lech Licha, there is no sense at all of any simmering tensions between them. Yet trouble begins to brew, with outright fighting taking place between the shepherds of Avraham and those of Lot. Avraham, sensing the dissolution of their relationship, suggests to Lot to part ways. Lot surveys the land and chooses to move to Sodom. The Torah explains (Bereishit 13:12-15):

"Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain, and he pitched his tents until Sodom. And the people of Sodom were very evil and sinful against the Lord. And the Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, 'Please raise your eyes and see, from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward. For all the land that you see I will give to you and to your seed to eternity.'"

The above is an extremely quick succession of verses, from the split to the identification of the people of Sodom as sinners to a prophecy. Rashi notes this, observing the sudden prophecy received by Avraham (ibid 14):

"As long as the wicked man was with him (Avraham), the Divine speech withdrew from him..."

What an astonishing commentary by Rashi! Granted, Lot chose to live in Sodom, reflecting poor judgment. However, if indeed he was "wicked", how could Avraham have stuck with

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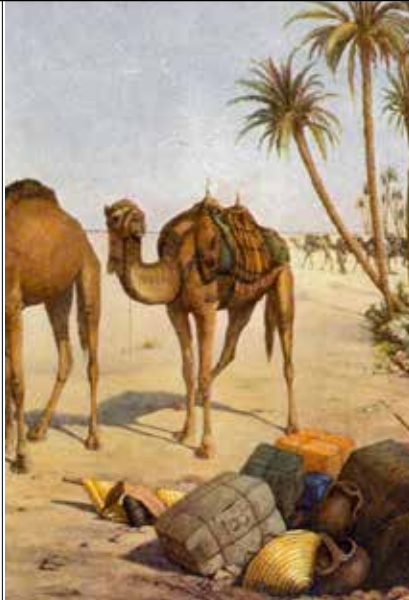
him for such an extensive period of time?

There is a Midrash (Bereishit Rabba 41:8) that takes up this very issue, where a fascinating debate emerges. It appears that God was angry with Avraham concerning Lot. According to the first opinion, this anger was focused on a failure of Avraham to ensure Lot would “cling” to God. Avraham focused on introducing the idea of God to so many new people in the world. Yet, when it came to Lot, he was unable to keep him focused on God. The other opinion is even more derisive of Avraham’s judgment. Avraham maintained a close relationship with Lot as he would be the future inheritor of the Land of Israel. God expresses anger at this assumption by Avraham. Any stranger ultimately could do just as good of a job in inheriting the land as Lot; why would Avraham then consider Lot the appropriate recipient of this promise?

While there is no clear indication in the text of the Torah that Avraham failed in any of these aspects, the Sages seem to indicate a serious breach in judgment on the part of Avraham. What was Avraham’s supposed error here?

A simple supposition here would be that the breakup between Avraham and Lot was more than simply two relatives having a familial spat. Rather, this split was in fact an ideological breakup, as these two important people chose different paths in life. Avraham was committed to his vision of bringing the true idea of God to the world, as well as being the initiator of the Jewish people. Lot chose otherwise, evidenced by his willingness to live amongst the people of Sodom. In essence, Lot’s decision was a rejection of Avraham’s ideology, and it appears Avraham missed the signs, so to speak.

The first criticism leveled against Avraham reveals an intriguing side to his personality. Lot’s decision to follow Avraham, to stick by his side, as he journeyed through the Land of Israel reflected an attachment to his outlook. Avraham’s focus was on those who had no exposure to the



great ideas he developed. Due to his ahavas Hashem, his love of God, he sought to teach as many as possible about the truth of the Creator. He wanted to introduce an ethical norm for mankind. It is possible that with all this, he overestimated Lot. He had every reason to assume that Lot naturally was on board with this ideology. Unfortunately, Lot was not a partner, and Avraham’s outward focus led him to miss the warning signs. Indeed, it would be a normative assumption to make that Lot was on board with what Avraham was teaching. His attachment to Avraham should have meant a natural osmosis of concepts. Avraham therefore assumed Lot was actually on a much higher level than he actually was.

The second option is complex, as the criticism leveled at Avraham is seemingly more severe. The Redak, in commenting on this section, maintains that the prophecy given to Avraham took place while Lot was still with Avraham. God reinforces the concept that Avraham and his children would be the inheritors of the Land of Israel. Avraham was old at this time, and it would be unreasonable to assume he would have any children. He therefore looked to Lot as the person of the future. The prophecy sought to reorient Avraham’s thinking to having a child of his own.

In a similar fashion, this Midrash could be pointing to Avraham’s overlooking of Lot’s weaknesses. According to this opinion, Avraham recognized Lot’s issues. He also concluded that, without a son, the only logical inheritor to the Land of Israel would be Lot. Maybe, then, the necessity of strict adherence to the ideology was something the “land” would not require. The family of Avraham would function as caretakers over the land, and the fluctuations of religious purity would not affect the overall relationship between the two. The Midrash is pointing out the error in Avraham’s consideration. For the Land of Israel to function properly, it requires people living there who reflect the ideology of God. It is a symbiotic relationship, the land (through commandments and the presence of the nation) helping to bring those who live there to a higher plane of perfection. Yet in order for this to emerge, the people living there must already be firmly rooted in the appropriate outlook. Lot, it would appear, did not possess this, leading to God’s anger at Avraham.

This brings us back to Rashi’s assessment of Lot as being “wicked”. It is hard to imagine that Lot was someone objectively evil, as Avraham could never consider such a person to be part of his ideological entourage. With the assistance of the Midrash, we can understand that in fact Lot had some flaws, and those flaws had a detrimental effect on Avraham. Whether it was Avraham’s overestimation of Lot’s character, or his willingness to tolerate his errors for the sake of the promise made by God, someone on the level of Avraham would be negatively affected by someone such as Lot. He was wicked, relative to Avraham’s framework, and this caused a small rift between Avraham and God. We see from this Midrash that Avraham’s relationship with Lot was initially founded on similar ideological outlooks. Ultimately, it was the cause of their parting ways, and for Avraham, this led to a return to his lofty stature before God. ■



Lech Licha

We Know More than We Realize

*A Lesson in
Knowledge*

RABBI BERNIE FOX

“And the Lord said to Avraham: ‘And as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you, and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised’ (Sefer Beresheit 17:9-10).”

Circumcision and Jewish continuity

In Parshat Lech Lecha, Hashem presents Avraham with the commandment of brit milah. Hashem commands Avraham in his own circumcision and to circumcise the male members of his household. He also tells Avraham that his descendants are required to observe this practice.

Brit milah – observance of the covenant of circumcision – is our central and most significant element surrounding the birth of a son. One of the aspects of brit milah is that it communicates a message of the continuity of our people. We are celebrating the addition of this infant to our people and to our religious community. Because of this perspective, the birth of any Jewish child and the accompanying brit milah of a male child are more than a cause for the celebration of parents and grandparents. It is occasion for more than a family celebration. It is an occasion for a celebration by the entire community.

The child's education begins before birth

However, our Sages regard brit milah as the culmination of an initiation process that begins before the infant is even born. The talmudic scholar Ribbi Smalai discusses this en utero process. His comments are astounding and enigmatic. He explains that while the unborn child is in his mother's womb Hashem teaches him the entire Torah. However, the child does not take this knowledge with him into the world outside the womb. As soon as he emerges, an angel strikes him in the mouth and he loses all knowledge of the Torah that he learned from Hashem. What is the meaning of Ribbi Smalai's teaching? Let us consider two interpretations.

The first interpretation is provided by the Rav – Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Zt”l. One of the interesting aspects of the Rav's interpretation is his method. He begins by taking the teaching at face value and asks a simple question. What point is there in Hashem teaching the entire Torah to the unborn infant if this child will be deprived of the knowledge the moment he takes his first breath?

The Rav responds that we should imagine this unborn infant as akin to a sheet of clean parchment. While in the womb the entire Torah is inscribed upon this parchment. When the child emerges into the external world, imagine that the text is erased

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from the parchment. If we now inspect the parchment, we will discover that the text is no longer present. But its impression remains upon the parchment. This impression is more permanent than the text itself. It cannot be removed. It is integrated into the parchment.

The Rav explains that the angel's slap deprives the newborn of his memory of the Torah that he learned. But it does not remove the permanent impression made upon the infant's soul by the Torah he learned from Hashem.

The roots of the individual's Jewish identity

This leads the Rav to his interpretation of Ribbi Smalai's teaching. He suggests that we each carry in our souls the remnant of the Torah we learned from Hashem. The letters were not preserved but the impression made is permanent. As a result of this impression, we are existentially connected and drawn to the Torah. A Jew may abandon observance and chose to turn his back to Hashem. But he cannot erase the vestige of Torah that remains stamped upon his innermost being. He can choose to ignore his inner nature. He cannot change this nature.

The Rav observes that this understanding of our spiritual identity is reflected in a comment of Maimonides in his Laws of Repentance. He comments that we will only be redeemed from our exile and enter into the messianic age through repentance. Furthermore, the Torah assures us that we will eventually repent and be redeemed. How can the Torah make this assurance? How can the Torah confidently assert that we will ultimately return to Hashem?

The Rav explains that this assertion is based upon the teaching of Ribbi Smalai. The individual Jew can turn his back on Hashem and His Torah. He can deny his own spiritual identity. But as a people, we are drawn by forces we neither control nor fully understand to return to Hashem and embrace His Torah.

The first principles of human reasoning

Another beautiful interpretation of Ribbi Smalai's teaching is provided by Rav Yisrael Chait.

The development of a child is amazing. If one takes ten very different toy cars and places them in front of a young child, he or she will easily recognize that all of these objects share a single definition – they are all cars. The child will recognize that different colors, sizes, and even shapes do not detract from their shared aspect, and that shared aspect suffices for them all to be declared members of the genus: toy car.

Where did the child learn to abstract? Who taught the child that specific objects – disparate in many ways – can be viewed as expressions of a single class? In fact, is it even possible to teach such a basic idea? Imagine an infant born without the first principles that we use in reasoning. How would we impart these? What tools could be used to impart the most basic tools?

The answer is that our children are born with these most fundamental elements of reasoning. These building blocks are imprinted in the mind of the infant by Hashem. Only He can transmit knowledge that by its very nature is not teachable. But even more amazing than the young child's innate knowledge of these first principles of reasoning is that he is completely ignorant of his possession of them. The angel has slapped him and he does not know he possesses this wondrous gift. Yet, the tools of reasoning are demonstrated even in the young child. In his entire life he will never acquire another gift as invaluable as these tools. They will be the foundation of everything he will learn and of every achievement. Yet, he does not know he possesses them. Ask the child how he knows that there is a genus: toy car and he will look at you completely dumbfounded. He cannot explain how he knows that objects can be grouped into classes. He cannot defend his view on this issue. But he knows with absolute certainty that this is the case.

The lessons that Hashem taught him are imbedded in his soul. They are the basis of all reasoning. But he does not know them in the conventional sense. He cannot identify them, explain them, or teach them.

The wonders that surround us

Both of these explanations of Ribbi Smalai share a common understanding of his basic objective. Ribbi Smalai observed a phenomenon that seems to be without explanation. According to the Rav, this is the existential spiritual identity of the Jew. How does a Jew who has been alienated from his people and their religion return to his roots? How did the Jews of the FSU (Former Soviet Union) retain their desire to live in the Land of Israel? How was it possible that after decades of Marxist atheist indoctrination there remained among these oppressed Jews a desire to be part of our people and religion? According to the Rav, Rav Smalai responds that this is the expression of the permanent impression that remains from the Torah taught to the infant before birth.

Rav Chait suggests that Rav Smalai sought to explain a different wonder that we observe time and again. The capacity of even a child to employ the principles of reasoning that cannot be taught, but yet, are understood so well by the child. The child uses these principles over and over, but is mute when asked to account for his wondrous knowledge. The child does not know. He cannot recall the experience. He was taught by Hashem. He learned his lessons and uses them constantly.

We are surrounded with wonders. Some are spiritual – like the survival of our nation and religion. Some are natural wonders – like the innate knowledge of the child. These wonders provide us with constant reminders of Hashem's presence and influence in all aspects of our world. ■

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