

*Shiur L'Yom Revi'i*¹

[Wednesday's Study]

READINGS: Torah Lecha: Genesis 13:18 - 14:24
Haftarah: Isaiah 41:5-9
B'rit Chadasha: Romans 4:6-8

Blessed be Avram of God Most High, Creator of Heaven and Earth.
[Genesis 14:19-20]

Today's Meditation is Psalm 107:10-16;
This Week's Amidah Prayer Focus is the *Kadosh*, the Prayer of Holiness

It may be just a matter of my imagination – the Scripture certainly does not talk about it - but I confess that I have come to personally picture a ***quite a buzz going on among the Angelic Hosts of the Holy One*** concerning the plans of the Holy One concerning Avram and Sarai.

What Do The Angels See?

Think about it. The hosts of Heaven saw the Holy One form the prototype for all men carefully from the dust of the *eretz*, then pick Him up tenderly and breathe His own breath into the frail form that He lovingly called “*Adam*”.

They have seen Him provide for this man, from his own side, a helpmeet, one whom He said would become the ‘mother of all living’. They have heard the Ancient Voice they call ‘*the sound of many waters*’ proclaim that from the seed of this woman one will come forth who will ***crush the head of the wily, rebellious Serpent***.

They have watched with great interest and eager expectation all the Ancient One's interactions with mankind since then. They have waited patiently for the promised Head-Crusher to come forth. They have seen the Ancient One interact intimately with Adam's descendant Hanoch [i.e. Enoch], and have seen Him personally counsel Hanoch's descendant Noach through the most fearsome times the earth has ever known.

But something much more exciting than even that is now going on. The eyes of the Holy One always run to and fro over the earth, looking for a man who will *respond to His Voice and follow Him wherever He leads in the Kingdom Dance*.

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And now, at last, it seems that the Holy One's eyes have lit squarely on such a man.

The angels stare in wonder. What is it about 75-year old Avram, son of Terach, descendant of Shem, that moves the heart and fires up the covenant-keeping passion of the Holy One so? Not since the Great Cleansing Flood have the angels seen the Father so deeply involve Himself - and so extravagantly invest the resources of Heaven in - the life of any one human being as He is now doing with the mortal Avram.

It seems the Holy One has *great plans* – plans far, far too marvelous for humans to comprehend - for this particular mortal and his beautiful but aging wife Sarai. This is more than favor. This is *amazing grace*. Something like this could change the world.

Amazing Grace

As discussed previously this week, the Holy One's dealings with Avram our father constitute an amazing outpouring of what we in English might be tempted to call 'grace'. It may come as a shock to some, but 'grace' is not something that started in the series of writings men have come to call the 'New Testament'. NO, not by any means. Grace has always been our Creator's Preferred Way of relating to mankind – and it always will be.

The Hebrew word our English Bibles translate as 'grace' is **chen** [*chet, nun sofit*]². This word is a *covenant word* – a word of *eternal, infinite commitment*. Defining either 'grace' or '**chen**' as *unmerited favor*, as some religions like to do, is a horrible insult to its inestimable richness, its stunning depth, and height, and breadth.

Chen means '*whatever it takes to make the covenant work*'. Sometimes it involves unfathomable mercy; other times it requires chastening. Sometimes it requires protecting a covenant partner from harm or defending him from accusation; other times it requires allowing a covenant partner to suffer some consequences of the operation of the law of sowing and reaping for a redemptive purpose. It is about covenant perpetuation and fullness, not comfort, convenience, or 'happiness'. It is

² This Hebrew word is translated into English as 'grace' in the following representative passages: **Genesis 6:8** [Noah found *grace* (i.e. *chen*) in the eyes of YHVH]; **Exodus 33:17** [YHVH said to Moshe, "***I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace* (i.e. *chen*) *in My sight, and I know you by name.***"]; Psalm 84:11 [***YHVH will give grace* (i.e. *chen*) *and glory; no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly.***]; and **Jeremiah 31:2** [*The people who survived the sword found grace* (i.e. *chen*) *in the wilderness— Israel, when I went to give him rest.*"]

about ‘mission’, ‘purpose’, and ‘destiny’ – not sentimentality or indulgence.

In pouring out *chen* about to Avram and Sarai - His Covenant-Partners-in-Training - the Holy One is doing *whatever it takes* to *nurture* and *prepare* and *bless* and *advance the interest* of this man and woman upon whom He has set His affections and whom He is calling as first fruits to the *chuppah* at which covenant will be cut.

That means that at times the Holy One has purposefully stepped out of Eternity into time and out of infinity into space in order to encounter and interact with Avram. It means that He Who is all the mysteries in Creation has spoken real words of earthly language to this mere mortal, and has revealed to him aspects of His Divine *persona* and Infinite *personality* that even the angels of Heaven do not understand.

And yet about the time Avram gets comfortable with this intimacy the Holy One has followed up a season of up-close-and-personal interactions with this human by suddenly *withdrawing His manifest Presence* - ‘hiding His Face’ as it were. Then at moments totally of His own choosing the Holy One re-emerges from the shadows of time and space and engages and interacts with Avram again. And then He steps back into the shadows and hides His Face again. And then He re-engages and interacts again. And so on, and so forth, it seems to be going.

The pattern the Holy One appears to be establishing with Avram is ‘*God encounter*’, then ‘*life experience*’, then ‘*deeper God encounter*’ then ‘*more dramatic life experience*’ – and so on.

Dance With Me!

If the Holy One’s interactions with His Covenant-Partners-In-Training is beginning to look to you like a *choreographed dance*, there is good reason for that. A choreographed dance is exactly what walking with the Holy One is like. He leads; we follow. He moves; we respond to His movement.

In the course of teaching this dance to these humans the Eternal One has certainly been *patient* with Avram and his wife - and with us. They – and we - keep messing up, and taking missteps, and trying to lead in the dance instead of follow – and He keeps turning their – and our - messes into amazing blessings.

And even though Avram is obviously still very, very human and fallible, he seems to be learning, day by day, encounter by encounter and life-experience by life-experience, to *trust* the Holy One’s tremendous redemptive abilities more and more and more. In the process, this ordinary mortal and his wife seem to be

becoming more and more comfortable with the idea of having a relationship with the Creator of the Universe. Indeed, they seem to be getting more and more responsive to the Holy One's Voice with every passing trial.

What is the End Game?

So what exactly is the Holy One doing with all this 'Hands-on' involvement with this man? What precisely is the Master of the Universe's '*end game*'? Could all this in-depth, earth day-after-earth-day-after-earth-day personal involvement of the glorious King of Creation in the life of these two mortals possibly have something to do with the promise the Master made to Chava in the Garden that one of her 'seed' would one day crush the head of the Serpent? Is it possible that what the Holy One is doing is 'courting' Avram in both a personal and diplomatic sense, presaging what the Holy One will do with his descendants in Egypt . . . and then in the wilderness . . . and then in the land . . . and then at their various places of exile . . . until the final seedtime and harvest He promised to Noach take place?

The Holy One has a plan, it seems, to make a *b'rit* with Avram [and with His descendants] that will forever change the world.

The Holy One is ready to cut this *b'rit* right now; but Avram is not. No, not by any means. Avram must be further matured – advanced in relationship with God to the point that love for and trust³ of the Holy One transcends the experience of any human that has lived before, and actually becomes Avram's most distinguishing characteristic.

Patience, Dear Reader. Amazing grace is a *work in progress*. And a work of this magnitude and world-changing import simply *cannot be rushed*.

A Whirlwind Tour of Today's Action-Packed Aliyah

In the verses we read for today's *shiur* the Holy One will process Avram through another series of 'life experiences' carefully designed to accelerate Avram's march toward his destiny. Avraham will first tour the entire land of promise, then will – quite without the Holy One's counsel - choose for himself and his family a place to settle as a 'stranger in a strange land', at Hebron, amongst the sons of Chet.

He will then presumptuously charge off into an impossible-odds battle against a vastly superior force, and will – by the Holy One's Hidden Hand - not only emerge victorious but the rightful owner, by conquest, of all the wealth of the lush Jordan

³ The trust will continue to mature through Genesis 22 – the Mount Moriyah experience in which Avraham entrusted his own beloved son Yitzchak [Isaac], the child of promise, into the Holy One's Hands to do with him whatever He willed.

River Valley. In a stunning out-of-character move, he will then *refuse that vast wealth*, or any part of it.

And finally he will experience his strangest God-encounter yet – when he comes face-to-face with, submits to and receives a blessing from Melchizedek, a mysterious figure the Bible refers to only as ‘the King of Salem’ and priest of the Most High God.

Meanwhile, with Avram thusly occupied the Holy One will be about the simple business of *re-arranging the entire power structure of the Middle East for Avram’s benefit* – without anyone noticing, of course.

Avraham’s Assigned Sphere of Influence is About to Expand Again

In yesterday’s aliyah, after Avram finally dealt with the co-dependent nature of his relationship with his nephew Lot, the Holy One re-confirmed His covenant to give Avram two very interesting things:

1. the physical land then occupied by the descendants of Kena’an, AND
2. offspring too numerous to count.

The Holy One then ‘signed off’ on the third God-encounter of Avram’s life by giving Avram one more practical life-instruction:

Kum hithalech b’aretz l’orkah ul’roch’bah
“Arise! Walk through the length and breadth of the land,

ki lecha etenenah
for I am giving it to you.”
[Genesis 13:17]

Kum hithalech [arise and walk]? Why did the Holy One give Avram this particular instruction at this time? Perhaps it was, at least in part, to get Avram ‘out of the way’ while the Holy One arranged a little history (He calls it “destiny”). You see, if the Holy One was going to **give** Avram and his descendants the Land of Kena’an as He promised, some tremendous changes of historical consequence would have to take place in the region.

Remember, the Land of Kena’an itself was not exactly “for sale”. It was *occupied* - possessed by the descendants of Cham [Ham] through his son Kena’an. And the descendants of Cham had *no intention whatever of relinquishing their squatters’ rights on that land to Avram or to anyone else*.

In order for Avram to acquire in the natural the rights in this land the Holy One had promised him in the spiritual, therefore, the balance of political, economic, and

military power was going to have to be dramatically changed. There was going to have to be some ‘shaking’ of the economic and political systems in place. And Avram needed to make himself “scarce” while the Holy One put in motion *the great rearranging* of all things political, economic, military, and spiritual which was going to required to redistribute power in *Eretz Yisrael* and the rest of the world.

So, the Holy One chose this critical period in time to tell Avram “*Kum hithalech* . . . [i.e. “*Arise and walk!*”]. Avram was not called to be a conqueror. He was not called to foment or to lead a rebellion. He was not even called to be a reformer. He was called simply to *arise* on cue . . . and to *walk*. Just as Avram had done as instructed back at Charan when the Holy One told him to ‘*Lech Lecha*’ [i.e. *go out unto yourself!*] even so was he faithful to do as instructed when the Holy One told him to “*Kum hithalech* . . . [i.e. “*Arise and walk!*”]. He took up his bed of woundedness and of offense, of barren-ness and homelessness . . . and he *walked*. And he *walked* some more.

Avram walked for *days*. Then the days of walking turned into *weeks*. And in the course of those weeks, Avram earned the title ‘*the wandering Aramean*’ by walking the entire length of the land of Eretz Yisrael - and then turning and walking the entire breadth of it as well.

I see Avram walking across hot, dry, rocky, barren hillsides as well as through lush green pastures. I see him walking alongside violently rushing *wadis* as well as beside pools of still waters. I see him laboring up steep pathways to the summit of rugged heights like Ramon, Meron, Moriyah, Skopos, Olivet, Tzion, Tabor, Megiddo, Carmel and Hermon, and I see him walking carefully down treacherous winding trails through dark valleys where he was surrounded by the shadow of death – places like Achor and Kidron and Hinnom and Y’hoshafat and Ayalon and Refaim and Yizreel.

We are not told how long it took – but it had to have taken a while. For when he finished walking, he had seen every part of the land the Holy One was promising to give to him and to his presently non-existent descendants forever. And after seeing it all, where in this amazing land did he decide to ‘settle’? Let’s read what Torah says about that. Here is how our aliyah today begins:

Vaye'ehal Avram v'yavo
Then Avram removed his tent,

V'yeshev b'Elonei Mamre asher b'Chevron
and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron,

v'yiven-sham mizbe'ach l'Adonai
and built there an altar unto the Holy One.
[Genesis 13:18]

Interestingly, Avram did not choose to settle in the city of Melchizedek, which we now know as Jerusalem. He also did not choose to put down stakes in the rich, fertile valleys of what would later be known as Galilee, or Shomron. He did not choose to make a home for his beautiful wife Sarai on the pristine Mediterranean coastline near present-day Tel Aviv. Nor did he choose to dwell upon the soaring heights of Mt. Hermon or Mt. Carmel, or overlooking the beautiful Sea of Kinneret near present day Tiberius.

What he chose, instead, was a remote outpost at the Northern edge of the desert. He chose a place called (in Hebrew) **Chevron** [*chet, veit, resh, vav, nun sofit*]. Most English speakers know this city by the Anglicized name 'Hebron'.

What do we know about Hebron? We know from the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, who wrote in the 1st Century C.E., that Hebron "*is more ancient than any town in the country - even older than Memphis in Egypt: It is reckoned as 2,300 years old.*" We know that centuries later Y'hoshua [Joshua] is going to assign/allot Hebron [then inhabited by giants no one else wanted to tackle] as an inheritance forever to Kalev [Caleb] at Kalev's request⁴. We know that Kalev will indeed conquer and settle Hebron, and that Hebron will prosper, becoming both a *Levitical city* and a *city of refuge*.

Moreover we know that before Jerusalem is conquered Hebron will serve as the seat of government for the tribe of *Y'hudah*, the most powerful of all the twelve tribes of Israel. In fact, we will find out in the TaNaKh that King David reigned in Hebron for seven and a half years before transferring his capital to Jerusalem in about 1000 B.C.E.

We know as well that Hebron was destined to become, in our time, a city populated primarily by Arabs, ceded to the 'Palestinian Authority', and the hotbed of much terrorist activity against Israelis⁵.

⁴ See Joshua 14.

⁵ Avram's choice of Hebron as his permanent dwelling place in Eretz Yisrael is the subject of an interesting Rabbinical legend. Rabbi Chaim Richman tells us:

According to the rabbinical tradition: "Every day Abraham would go out into the field to pray... [One day] he saw a great light emanating from this cave, and went inside... The Holy One, Blessed be He, spoke to him. He entered inside and saw that Adam and Eve were hidden there. How did he know it was they? Because he saw that within this cave was the location of the entrance to the Garden of Eden.

He saw a great light within, and from this time on, all his desire was towards this cave.

The Hebraic Word Picture Presented by Hebron

The Hebrew word our English Bibles transliterate as *Hebron* is spelled *chet, veit, resh, vav, nun sofit*, Strong's Hebrew word #2275, pronounced *khev-rone'*. Strong says the word means *association*. Some say it means *friendship*. The verb root is *chabar, chet, beit, resh*, Strong's Hebrew word #2267, pronounced *khaw-bawr'*. It presents a Hebraic word picture of *taking a stranger into one's household or tent*. Adding the *vav* and the *nun sofit* to this verb root makes a radical statement – it means taking a stranger into one's household or tent and then *receiving the ultimate heir [nun sofit] through connection with [vav] that stranger*.

In the case of Avram and Hebron, the sons of Chet who lived in the land welcomed Avram into their community, and made association and alliance with him. The alliance between Avram and the sons of Chet will come into play powerfully in today's aliyah – translating even into joint military action [to rescue Lot and his family]. And what did the sons of Chet receive in return? They received *Yitzchak* [Isaac], the child of promise, who was born there. They received *Kalev* [Caleb], Y'hudah's descendant, who settled there. They received *David*, the forerunner of Messiah, who reigned there before he reigned anywhere else. And one day I believe they will receive the ultimate son/heir – the true Messiah, son of David. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers – for in doing so, some have entertained angels unawares.

The Holy One Re-Arranges the Balance of World Power in Preparation for Giving the Land to Avram and His Descendants

Where was the military and economic “power” in the Land at the time God made His promises to Avram? In the richest area of the country - the plain of the Yarden (Jordan).

Who held the ‘bragging rights’ to this power? *Internally*, five mini-kingdoms of the Kena'ani [Canaanites] held sway. *Externally*, **the Eastern empire** - the early Babylonian confederation of Shinar [now Iraq?], Elam [now Syria?], and Ellasar [now Saudi Arabia?], with their tributaries, including various competing Arab sheikdoms [now calling themselves Palestinians?] - vied for influence over Eretz Yisrael's trade routes, and for rights of taxation of Eretz Yisrael's Kena'ani populace, with **the Western empire** - Egypt.

He began to yearn that his own eternal resting place should be in this place, and this remained his desire from this time forward.

When Abraham entered within, he smelled the fragrance of the Garden of Eden... he saw a candle burning and heard the voices of the ministering angels saying: ‘*Adam is buried here, and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are worthy of being buried here.*’”

For now, however, Egypt – the Western Empire - is having its own problems [something to do with some recent ‘plagues’ on Pharaoh’s household, I believe]⁶ - and the two main “power” centers affecting the land of Kena’an [which the Holy One had promised to give Avram and his descendants as a homeland] were, therefore [1] the five mini-kingdoms of the Kena’ani, and [2] the four allied kingdoms of the Eastern Empire centered in Babylon.

These “giants” had to fall. And the Holy One has a well-deserved reputation as a giant-killer. And thus Genesis unveils for us, if we have eyes to see it, a three-phase plan by which the Holy One changed the entire balance of power in the region to allow Avram and his descendants to get into position to assume possession of the land. The Plan involves three things that will become regular visitors upon the stage of human history – and will find their ultimate fulfillment in the days of the Book of Revelation. The three Divine tools of directing human history are:

1. famine;
2. pestilence; and
3. the bloody sword of war.

Phase I: Consolidate Wealth and Power In the Jordan River Valley Through Famine

In Monday’s aliyah the Holy One struck first blood, sending a famine on the land of Kena’an, as phase I in His plan to shake the world enough to make good on His promise to Avram. We are told in Torah that when Avram first arrived in Kena’an:

*There was a famine in the land.
Avram went down into Mitzrayim to live as a foreigner there, for the famine was sore*
[Genesis 12:10]

What an introduction to the land that the Holy One was giving him and his descendants! Why a *famine*, we might ask, just when Avram is arriving in the land that is to be his home? Because a famine in the land would (and did) *consolidate wealth and power* in the only area of the land a famine would not affect - the “well-watered” and fertile Yarden Valley. In times of famine, mass migrations of people occur, and the economies of the river valleys flourish.

Voila! Phase I of the Holy One’s plan was already complete. All the wealth in Kena’an was consolidated in the Jordan River Valley.

⁶ See Genesis 12:17.

Next, quite “behind the scenes” came Phase II of the Holy One’s plan.

Phase II: Neutralize Egypt With Pestilence

The second phase of the Holy One’s plan involved neutralizing the influence of the Western Empire, Egypt. Egypt had to be dealt with appropriately, so that Pharaoh would not (could not) interfere with what the Holy One was doing in the land of Kena’an. The Holy One accomplished this neutralization by turning Avram’s trip to Egypt (something Avram undertook on his own, in apparent lack of faith in God’s ability or willingness to provide for his family) into good.

You will recall that the Holy One supernaturally protected Sarai while she was in Egypt, by afflicting Pharaoh and his people with a first set of plagues. Torah tells us:

*The Holy One plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues
because of Sarai, Avram's wife.*
[Genesis 12:17]

The plagues the Holy One sent on Pharaoh effectively put him and his leaders “out of commission”. Phase II was complete. Egypt was neutralized. That left only the power bases of the Yarden valley - Sodom, Gomorrah, and their tributaries [the five kingdoms] **and** the power base of the Eastern (early Babylonian) Empire [the four kingdoms], to deal with.

Phase III: A Cup of Trembling for the Nations

Phase I was *famine*. Phase II was *plague*. Phase III, we will discover in today’s aliyah, is *the bloody sword of war* – the *first* war recorded in history. In the first are the seeds of all others.

In today’s aliyah the Holy One instigates Phase III of His plan to allow Avram and his descendants to take dominion of the Land *by dealing both the five kingdoms of the Yarden Valley and the four kingdoms of the Eastern Empire a crushing blow*. They will be invaded by a superior military force that threatens their very existence.

But let us digress, a moment, to take note of a very important point. You do realize, do you not, that *none of what had happened thus far had been any of Avram’s idea*. Avram just lived his life, seeking to *sh’ma* the Holy One as well as he knew how (and often failing). But wherever Avram has gone the Holy One has . . . well . . . ***made things happen***.

Avram went to Kena'an, for instance, and immediately a famine broke out (Phase I of the Holy One's plan). Avram then went to Egypt - and immediately *the house of Pharaoh was stricken with plagues* (Phase II of the Holy One's plan). Now Avram has returned back to Kena'an - and the Holy One is *at work again*. As Avram is *sh'ma*-ing the Holy One's instruction to "**walk the length and breadth of the land**" the Holy One is stirring up the four kingdoms of Early-Babylon to make war on - and conquer - the five kingdoms of the Yardin Valley.

Do you see the pattern? A man who *sh'ma*'s the Holy One is *a very dangerous man*, Beloved! Wherever such a man goes, you see, the Holy One *disturbs the balance of political, economic, and spiritual power*. That is the heritage of Avram's descendants. Wherever we go there is bound to be what the natural world considers "trouble". It is not because we wish it to be - we, like Avram our forefather, desire *shalom*. But the Holy One has constituted and empowered us as a "light to the gentiles". And when a light shines in a place that has been dark, those who love darkness do not like it one bit. The first reaction of those who love darkness is to *scurry for cover*. The next step is to set about trying to devise a way they can *douse the light*. And in the outworking of the latter process the Holy One brings judgment - first to his own people, then to the instruments of darkness.

A Hook in Their Jaw

So in the course of our readings today a voice whispers in the ear of the leaders of the Eastern Empire "*look to the West, at Kena'an - all the wealth there is concentrated in one place since the famine! And your archenemy Egypt is busy nursing its wounds. Strike now, and all the wealth will be yours!*" [Rabbi's son paraphrase]. And they, as lovers of darkness always do, the four kings of the East fall for it . . . *hook, line, and sinker*. And the first war recorded in Holy Writ is on. Welcome to *Phase III of the Holy One's Divine plan*.

Introducing the Concept of Wars and Rumors of Wars

Torah describes the first war as follows:

*It happened in the days of Amrafel, king of Shin`ar,
Aryokh, king of Ellasar,
Kedorla`omer, king of `Elam, and Tid`al, king of Goyim,
that they made war with Bera, king of Sodom,
and with Birsha, king of `Amorah,
Shin'av, king of Admah, and Shem'ever, king of Tzevoyim,
and the king of Bela (the same is Tzo`ar).
All these joined together in the valley of Siddim (the same is the Salt Sea).*

Four kings from the East brought their armies to the Jordan River Valley to make war on five city-states of the plain where all the wealth of Kena'an was

accumulated. Those five cities were *Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Tz'voyim, and Tzo'ar*. We will, of course, hear more about those cities later in the Avraham Chronicles.

With the arrival of the armies of the East – the Babylonian Faction - the action picked up quickly. A defensive alliance was quickly adopted by the kings of the five cities of the plain. They muster their forces and prepare to take a stand in the *Valley of Siddim* [i.e. where the Dead Sea is now located].

Things are getting serious now. The pressure is on. Temperatures are flaring. Anxiety is spiking. Rhetoric is increasing. Misinformation is rampant. Factually flawed but emotionally charged opinions are spewing forth from both sides like poisonous ash belches forth from volcanoes about to erupt. Soon there will be death and destruction everywhere. And all kinds of unclean spirits will be loosed and run rampant on the killing fields. There will be orders exceeded. There will be women ravaged. There will be homes and villages and farms ransacked and burned. There will be children trampled. There will be captives taken. There will be wealth plundered. These are just the things that happen when war is in the air.

What Have the Sons of Covenant and Calling To Do With Wars and Rumors of War?

How will Avram - and his descendants - deal with this newest social phenomenon called *war*. This is not a case in which Avram is directly involved. In this particular battle, Avram is not going to be attacked. He will be a distant bystander - but he will definitely be economically affected. Can he believe the rhetoric of either side? Should he? Would involvement in a conflict to which he is not a party be consistent with his new identity? Would it be in furtherance of, or a distraction from, his assigned mission in life? Would it have an impact on his destiny?

Avram has not been personally attacked. His wife, his servants, and his flocks and herds are not at risk – yet, at least. Will he choose sides in such a case? Should he? Is the Holy One – the Unseen Shepherd Avram has committed his life to follow – supporting either side? Does He want Avram to do so?

As it was in the days of Avram, so it is today. When wars and rumors of wars abound, propaganda fills the atmosphere. Truth becomes virtually impossible to find. Emotional manipulation, intimidation, and self-serving press releases flood the airwaves and bombard the ears. Carefully edited quotes and cleverly photo-shopped images are presented as one side or the other's version of 'truth'.

Will Avram side with the *Babylonian faction* (from which he had been “called out” by the Holy One)? Or will he team up with *the Kena’ani confederation* (whose land the Holy One has promised to give him)? The answer, of course, is “neither”. But had Avram not been pre-occupied with God’s new instruction to walk the length and breadth and height of the land, he probably would have been tempted to interfere in the war. After all, Lot was living in S’dom, and despite the crisis of separation we discussed in yesterday’s aliyah Avram still felt responsible for his nephew’s safety. So the Holy One sent Avram away where he *would not even know the war was going on until it was over*.

The War of the Plain

The armies of the four kings of the Eastern Empire saw the entrenched defenders of the Plain and attacked their positions with all the force they could muster. Arrows filled the sky. Stones were thrown. Spears were hurled. Swords flashed. Hand-to-hand combat raged. Sledges and daggers found their targets. Blood was spilled. And when the smoke cleared on the day of battle the defensive forces of the five cities of the plain had been soundly defeated. To the victor belong the spoils.

Within a short period of time after the battle was concluded a compromise was reached. When it came down to it, this war, like most, was primarily about gold and silver. The Kena’ani would be allowed to carry on as they had, as long as they paid a regular tribute to the kings of the Eastern Empire.

For twelve years after the battle of the Plain the Kena’ani gritted their teeth and paid the tribute. They really had no choice. But they envisioned a day when they would throw off the yoke of the kings of the East. And so, even while paying the tribute demanded by their conquerors, the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah and the other cities of the plain regathered their strength. And finally, when they thought themselves strong enough to break of the yoke of tribute, they rebelled. They refused to pay the tribute the Eastern kings demanded, and *war was on again*.

*In the fourteenth year Kedorla’omer came, and the kings who were with him,
and struck the Refa'im in `Asherot-Karnayim, and the Zuzim in Ham,
and the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim,
and the Hori in their Mount Se`ir, to El-Paran, which is by the wilderness.*

*They returned, and came to **En-mishpat** (the same is Kadesh),
and struck all the country of the `Amaleki,
and also the Amori, that lived in Hatzatzon-Tamar.*

*There went out the king of Sodom, and the king of `Amorah,
and the king of Admah, and the king of Tz'voyim,
and the king of Bela (the same is Tzo`ar);*

*and they set the battle in array against them in **the valley of Siddim**;
against Kedorla'omer king of `Elam,
and Tid'al king of Goyim, and Amrafel king of Shinar, and Aryokh king of Ellasar;
four kings against the five.*

This time the Babylonian Faction under Kedorla'omer conquered and took control of virtually all of Kena'an. And when the armies of the kings of Kena'ani went out to stop the incursion, this time the defeat they suffered was even worse. This time there was no compromise. This time the more powerful armies of the Eastern Empire carried away, as the spoils of war, virtually all the wealth of the Kena'ani.

***Vayikchu et-kol-rechush Sodom v'Amorah**
[The victors] seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah,*

***v'et-kol-ochlam v'yelechu**
and all the food, and they departed.
[Genesis 14:11]*

And while they were at it the armies of the Babylonian Faction also carried away among their many captives a foreigner named Lot and his family⁷. That meant Avram had to get involved - whether he liked it or not. And what happened next is *the kind of thing legends are made of*.

A Shepherd Kills a Giant With a Slingshot . . . Right!

Some believe that what happened next is that Avram [a shepherder] and a measly militia of 318 men⁸ – most of whom had no personal stake in the venture - overtook and overpowered the vast mighty military forces of all the kings of the Eastern Empire. I do not see that as what happened at all. Of course, I also do not believe that Moshe beat the waters of the Red Sea apart with his staff, or that Y'hoshua (Joshua) won the battle of Yericho (Jericho) with his shofar/trumpet. Nor do I believe that David's slingshot is what killed Goliath, that a small band of priests turned Maccabees defeated the consolidated Seleucid armies in 165 B.C.E., or that Israel's superior military forces won the *Six-day War*, the *Yom Kippur War*, or the *1948 War of Independence*.

⁷ Talmudic commentator **Sforno** (R. Ovadia ben Yaakov Sforno, c. 1470-c.1550) points out that the four kings probably singled out Lot because of his connection to Avram: they hoped, Sforno opined, to hold Lot and his family for a steep ransom, which they were convinced that Avram, a very wealthy man, would pay.

⁸ The fact that Abram had 318 young men, of fighting age, at his disposal, that had been 'born in his house' as Torah describes them, means that Abram probably had hundreds of servants – and had possessed them since leaving Charan. If these young men of fighting age had been acquired in Mitzrayim [Egypt], they would not have been described as having been 'born in his house'. On the other hand, Talmudic Commentator Rashi says the reference to 318 young men is really a reference to only one man, Elezar, the Hebraic value of whose name = 318.

I personally believe it was *the direct intervention of the Strong Right Hand of the Holy One*, not the human strength and cunning of the men we named, that accomplished all of these things. I do not believe that it makes any sense to think that Avram, the shepherd of Hebron, suddenly became transformed into a great general and fierce warrior who out-strategized or out-fought the vast, well-trained, and war-seasoned armies of Kederla'omer, Amrafel, Arioch, and Tidal. I believe that instead what happened is that our Covenant Partner in Heaven, like a loving Father said, "*Come here, Avram my son, I am about to do something to this vast army, and I want you up front to see it!*" [Rabbi's son paraphrase].

The point is this: *God does not need our help to do His Will on earth*. He didn't need 318 shepherders to wipe out the Eastern Empire - an Empire that He held in the palm of His Hand and could exalt or crush at will. But isn't our Covenant Partner in Heaven good? *It is His good pleasure to let us - the weaker covenant partner in the covenant - participate in what He is doing*. It is God's good pleasure to use us as instruments, however humble, in His miraculous works on the stages of history.

So when God smote the four kings of Kena'an Avram suddenly found himself the custodian of the all the riches of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the cities of the Yardin Valley (so recently plundered by Kederla'omer and his Eastern empire allies).

That was Avram's next 'test'. Would *wealth and fame beyond his wildest imagination* be able to turn his head? Hardly! Avram knew what had happened, and that he hadn't done anything to make it happen. And so he did the unthinkable - he *walked away from it all*. He found it unthinkable to claim any credit or keep any of the spoils. Unlike what happened in Egypt, he didn't keep as much as a farthing.

Why could Avram take Egypt's riches, but not Sodom's? We know - because we have read the rest of the Book - that the wealth of the cities of the Plain was *marked for destruction* - and soon. Avram did not need that kind of temporary, temporal, and soul-polluting wealth - "*not even a thread or the thong of a sandal.*" **Genesis 14:23.**

Enter Melchizedek – Stage Right

Of course, we have not yet spoken of *Melchizedek* - the King of Righteousness, and King of Salem. Some Christian commentators have taught that Melchizedek was "*the pre-incarnate*" Messiah. Perhaps - it is nowhere stated in Scripture to be the case, so it is difficult to be dogmatic about such issues. And it is difficult to reconcile this view with Hebrews 7:3 which indicates Melchizedek was only

“like”, or “like unto” the Son of God – implying he was not the Son of God himself. Nor does it really seem to fit with Psalm 110:4, which portrays Messiah as being a priest “in *the order of Melchizedek*”. Here is what Torah tells us about Avram’s encounter with the mysterious character Melchizedek:

UMalki-Tzedek melech Shalem hotzi lechem v’yayin

Malki-tzedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine.

V’hu chohen l’El Elyon

He was a priest to God, the Most High.

V’yevarechehu vayomar baruch Avram

He blessed [Abram], and said, 'Blessed be Abram

L’El Elyon Koneh shamayim v’aretz

to God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth.

Uv’ruch El Elyon asher-migen tzarecha be’yadecha

And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.'

V'yiten-lo ma'aser mikol
*And he gave him a tenth of everything*⁹.
[Genesis 14:18-20]

Hebrew sages have long taught that Melchizedek was none other than *Shem* (who would have still been alive), the son of Noach who was to receive pre-eminence among his brothers (and thereby among all peoples). Avram, of course, was a descendant of Shem. So was Lot. So, too, by the way, were Amrafel and Kederla'omer, (the two most influential of the four kings of the Eastern Empire we have been talking about in today's aliyah). The blessing Noach spoke over Shem could of course have passed to any of Shem's descendants - or all of them. In today's aliyah we see that it goes to Avram - in confirmation of the Holy One's promises in Genesis 12:1-3, 12:6-7, and 13:14-17.

We will later learn that just as not all but only a specific line of Shem's descendants receive the capacity to be a blessing (the true definition of 'spiritual authority'), so not all but only a specific line of Avram's descendants receive the capacity to be a blessing (true spiritual "authority").

Exit Lot, Stage Left

And what of Lot? Now that he has been rescued, surely he and Avram are restored to fellowship, right? Surely Lot has learned his lesson about the dangers of living in S'dom, right? Surely Lot thanked and praised the Holy One for his marvelous redemption, and changed his ways, right? Surely Lot will now rejoin Avram and live happily ever after, right? Surely he has learned his lesson about the perversion of the cities of the plain, don't you think? I am afraid not, Dear Reader.

Lot has, it seems, fallen head over heels in love with S'dom. Avram, on the other hand, has ***fallen head over heels in love with the Holy One***. The two loves are mutually exclusive . . . and simply *cannot be reconciled*. It was so in the days of Avram Avinu, and it is so today.

Questions For Today's Study

⁹ In the Hebrew it is not clear who gave a *tithe* [*ma'aser*] of what to whom. Did Avram give Melchizedek a *ma'aser* of the spoils he had just captured? Or did Melchizedek give Avram a *ma'aser* of the bread and the wine he had with him? The writer of Hebrews provides at least a partial answer for us – stating that Melchizedek 'collected a tenth from Avraham'. **Hebrews 7:6,9**. Whatever Avram gave Melchizedek, it was not the *ma'aser* [tenth] that would later be called for in the Torah, particularly in Deuteronomy chapter 14. It appears, instead, to have been something like a 'freewill offering' – hence Avram's statement in the next verse, to the king of Sodom, that *'I have lifted my hand to God Most High'*. **Genesis 14:22**.

1. According to verse 18 of Chapter 13, after separating himself from Lot:

- [A] Where did Avram move his tents?
- [B] What did he do when he got there?

2. While Avram was living in this new location he found himself in the middle of a war among neighboring kingdoms.

- [A] List the kings (and their kingdoms) who were allied with Kedorla'omer.
- [B] List the kings (and their kingdoms) who rebelled against Kedorla'omer.
- [C] Where was the battle of these kingdoms fought?
- [D] Which side won the battle of these kingdoms?
- [E] When the losers tried to run away, what happened to them?
- [F] In Strong's and Gesenius look up the word translated "tar" in verse 10. Write the Hebrew word and its definition.
- [G] How did this war affect Avram, and why did he get involved?

3. Concerning Avram's eventual involvement in this war, after Lot was taken:

- [A] Who was allied with Avram?
- [B] Where did Avram engage Kedorla'omer's forces?
- [C] Who besides Lot and his family did Avram rescue?
- [D] Why do you think the king of S'dom came out to meet Avram at his return?
- [E] What name and what three titles does today's Torah give to the other man who came out to greet Avram?
- [F] On which side of the war had this man been?
- [G] What does this man's name mean?
- [H] Where did this meeting take place?
- [I] What two things did this man bring with him to greet Avram?
- [J] What does each of the two things brought by this man symbolize?
- [K] What does this man's "blessing" mean? Why did he give it?
- [L] What does Hebrews 7:3 tell us about this man?
- [M] To whom did Avram give a tenth "of everything"?
- [N] Whose possessions did Avram give away to this man?
- [O] Why does Avram refuse to take what is offered to him by the King of S'dom?

4. In today's Haftarah reading the prophet *Yeshayahu* [Isaiah] speaks the following words of the Holy One to a discouraged nation of Avram's descendants scattered in exile throughout the kingdoms of Babylon and Media-Persia:

The isles have seen, and fear; the ends of the eretz tremble;

*they draw near, and come.
They help everyone his neighbor; and [every one] says to his brother, “Be of good courage.”*

*So the carpenter encourages the goldsmith,
[and] he who smoothes with the hammer him who strikes the anvil,
saying of the soldering, “It is good”;
and he fastens it with nails, that it should not be moved.*

*But you, Yisra'el, my servant, Ya`akov whom I have chosen, the seed of Avraham my friend,
you whom I have taken hold of from the ends of the eretz,
and called from the corners of it, and said to you, “You are my servant,
I have chosen you and not cast you away”*

[A] How would you describe the spirit that governs the conduct of the “religious” people of verses 6-7?

[B] How does that spirit work in religious people today?

[C] In contrast, what fact is to be the guiding principle of the lives of Avraham’s descendant’s (whether by faith or by genealogy)?

5. In today’s reading from the letter of Shaul of Tarsus to the Romans Shaul quotes Psalm 32:1-2, as follows:

*Even as David also pronounces blessing
on the man to whom God counts righteousness apart from works,
“Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man whom the Holy One will by no means charge with sin.”*

[A] What point is Shaul trying to make?

[B] How does the quote from Psalm 32 relate to the point Shaul is making?

[C] In light of today’s aliyah of Torah how would you define “blessedness?”

*May you see S’dom for what it is, and is not.
May you see the Holy One’s hand arranging the events of history
for those who love Him.*

The Rabbi’s son

Meditation for Today's Study

Psalm 107:10-16

*Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death,
Being bound in affliction and iron,
Because they rebelled against the words of God,
And condemned the counsel of Ha-Elyon.
Therefore he brought down their heart with labor.*

They fell down, and there was none to help.

*Then they cried to the Holy One in their trouble,
And he saved them out of their distresses.
He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death,
And broke their bonds in sunder.*

*Let them praise the Holy One for his lovingkindness,
For his wonderful works to the children of men!
For he has broken the gates of brass, and cut through bars of iron.*