

# The Infinite Value of the Individual

Themes of *Sefer Bereshis*

Through the Commentary of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch

ALIT 2021 • Sarah Lipman

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## Malki-Tzedek, Avraham & Yitzchak

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The complete *Commentary* of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (2002 Edition) was translated by Daniel Haberman and published by Feldheim Publishers with Judaica Press.

<https://www.feldheim.com/authors/hirsch-rabbi-samson-raphael/the-hirsch-chumash-complete-set.html>

The 1963 edition of the *Commentary* was translated by Isaac Levy and published by Judaica Press.

The source sheets are *Sheimos* and should be treated with the same respect as a *chumash*.

8 And God scattered them from there over the face of the entire earth, and they stopped building the city.

ח וַיִּפֶץ יְהוָה אֶתְּם מִשָּׁם עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ לְבִנְתַּת הָעִיר:

factors that devised names for things, but not in the uniform manner in which God had defined them. Thus it came about that people no longer understood one another. They called things by different names, in order to spite one another. This is the way of the individual seeking freedom and independence: he sees things and names them however he chooses. Subsequent history, too, reveals that centralization of power divests the language of its diversity.

We see, then, that discord was not precipitated by a proliferation of languages, but on the contrary: discord brought about a divergence of languages. Perhaps at first שפה אחת was preserved, and nevertheless נבלה שם: Even before mankind was scattered and before there were differences in climates, there no longer were דברים אחדים in the שפה אחת. This divergence of opinion then drove people apart, and, finally, climatic differences led to a divergence of languages from an inherent standpoint as well.

חַדַּל is related to חָחַל: to swaddle an infant; חָחַל: a splint that prevents movement (Yechezkel 30:21). The basic meaning of חָחַל, then, is to check and restrain movement. This is also the primary meaning of חָחַל: to refrain from an activity. Thus, וַיַּחְדְּלוּ, they stopped building the city. But their propensity for such building never left them wherever they were scattered. Never again would they build a city and tower for the enslavement of all mankind, but Nimrod's smaller successors would build smaller cities and towers, imagining that their tops reached the skies.

With this dispersion of the nations — already hinted at in God's covenant with Noah (see Commentary above, 9:15; 10:5) — the introduction to the Torah, an introduction that serves as Israel's guide to the history of the development of mankind, comes to its conclusion. From here onward begins the introduction to Jewish history. Indeed, Israel's unique mission is explained by this development of the history of the nations.

he, too, profit, by virtue of the community." This attempt to nullify the individual failed when consciousness of the individual's inherent worth awakened. The individual's self-respect moved him to dissent; the feeling awakened in his heart that every man is endowed with freedom of will, slave and master alike. The individual reacted with obstinacy, subjectivity, and egoism; he would no longer accept or submit to any point of view other than his own, not even to a Divine tradition. This was a perverse path, but God was directing it to good purpose, so as to bring redemption to mankind.

The organized community misused its power. A precious treasure is entrusted to the community — namely, the individual; and the task of the community is to call the individual בְּשֵׁם ה'. But the community called only בְּשֵׁם עַצְמוֹ and sought to subjugate the individual to its rule.

The individual then rose up and declared: "I do not recognize the community; I recognize only myself." It is true that, in making this declaration, he rejected the good together with the bad, and cut himself off from the root through which he was to have absorbed all human wisdom from its Divine source. As a result, he would behave with complete subjectivity, without path or purpose. Nevertheless, given such a community, decentralization is the only way to man's redemption.

This subjectivity, which defines things not as the community wishes them to be defined, but as he, the individual, sees them, was the new element אֲשֶׁר בָּלַל ה', which God awakened in the minds of men when He caused their language to disintegrate. The one would say, "Let us preserve the old order, that one acquires something only if it becomes his by law," while the other would say, "I do not recognize any law and order! Whatever I can seize, whatever I have, is mine." Such subjectivism was awakened as a result of God's יְרִידָה, and at once the language withered away.

Scripture already said above: וַיִּרַד ה'. Here it says: נִרְדָּה — in the form of a wish. Would that there be an awakening of mindfulness, would that the realization penetrate the depths of people's consciousness that there exists a power higher than Nimrod. The implication is that עֵינֵינוּ שְׂכִינָה בַּחַחְחוּנִים: God's Will is that man should not be detached from His rule, and that His Presence should again dwell on earth. The slightest activity toward this end leads to נְבִילַת הַשָּׁפָה, the withering of the language.

From then onward, obstinacy, mood, and even passion were the

10 These are the descendants of Shem: Shem was 100 years old when he begot Arpachshad, two years after the deprivation of life.

י אלה תולדת שם בן-קמת שנה ויולד את-ארפכשד שנתים אחר הפבול:

27 The Torah now takes us to a small, narrow sphere in order to show us God's workings in history. Out of the smallest, most insignificant beginnings, a herald and instrument is to be shaped to help promote mankind's maturing toward its ultimate goal. The chapter concludes with a genealogy beginning with Shem and ending with one, single man. Avram's contemporaries were the first to give expression to the principle of "נעשה לנו שם"; but in diametric opposition to this principle, he dedicated his own life to the principle of "לקרוא בשם ה'", which he handed down to his descendants as the sum and substance of the life of a whole nation. Through this קריאה בשם ה', the fortunes of humanity will be restored, and mankind's long wanderings on earth will be ended. Avraham and his people, by admonition and by personal example, were to preserve this guiding principle as a beacon for mankind, so that it should never be forgotten.

From this genealogy, let us consider first פלג, whose name was already explained above: כי בימיו נפלגה הארץ (10:25). To understand the name "פלג," compare: פלג לשונם (Tehillim 55:10); בפלגות ראובן (Shoftim 5:15). These sources indicate that the root פלג denotes social discord rather than actual separation. This name, too, then, proves that the fundamental cause of the upheaval of the peoples was inner, spiritual discord.

Perhaps this genealogy, too — like those of the Kayinite line and the Sethite line — alludes to spiritual development. The names שלה, עבר, רעו, פלג, עבר seem to suggest this.

Here, too, שלה denotes abandonment of the masses (see Commentary above, 5:21). The elite withdrew and gave up all hope of leading the masses to repentance.

The meaning of עבר accords with ר' יהודה's explanation of אברם העברי: כל העולם כולו מעבר אחד והוא מעבר אחר (Bereshis Rabbah 42:8). That is to say, the name "עבר" signifies complete disapproval of the whole gener-

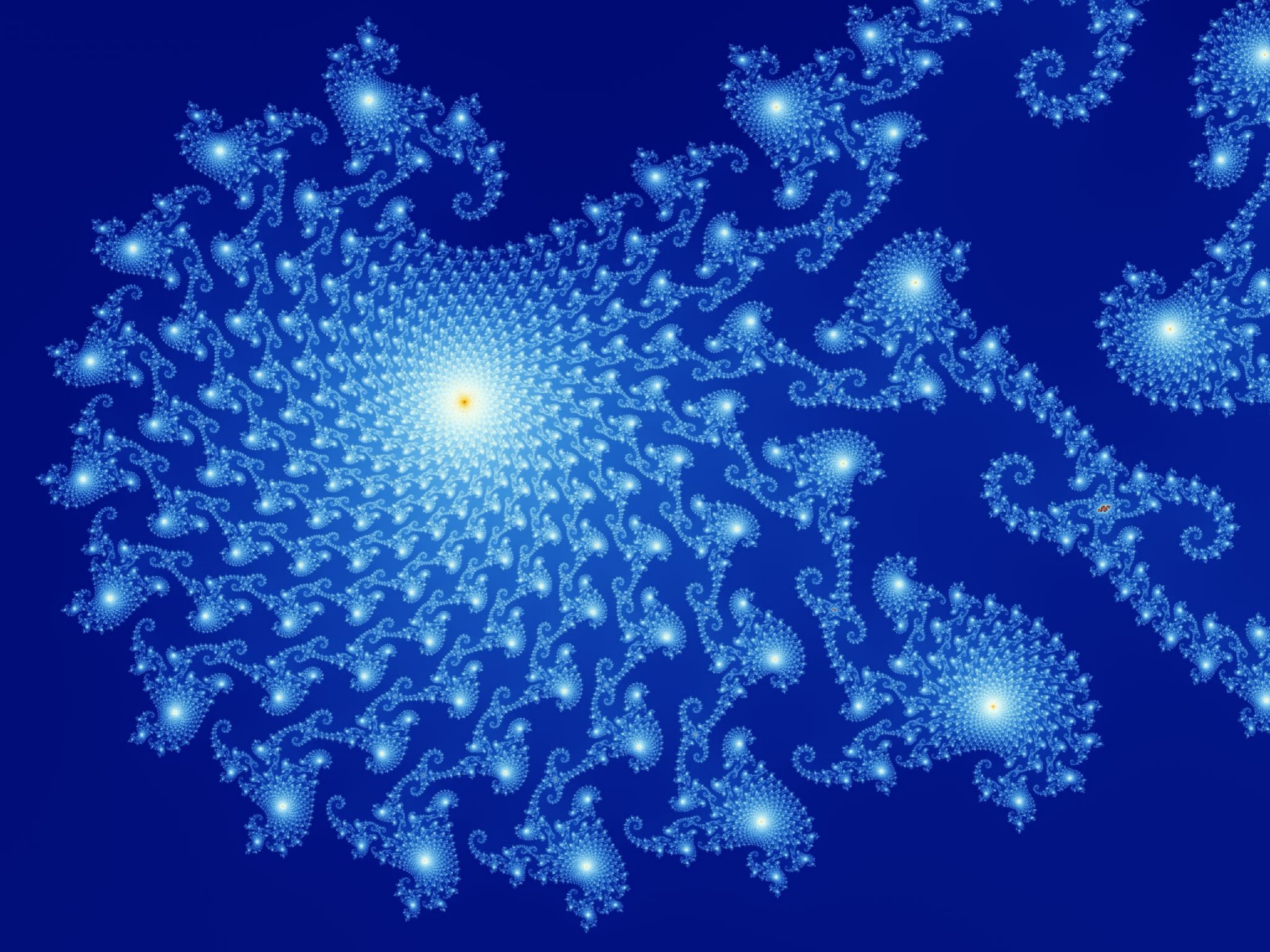
9 Therefore He named it Bavel, for there God confused the language of all the earth, and from there God scattered them over the face of the entire earth.

ט על-כֵּן קרא שמה בכל ביי-שם בלל יהוה שפת כל-הארץ ומשם הפיצם יהוה על-פני כל-הארץ: פ

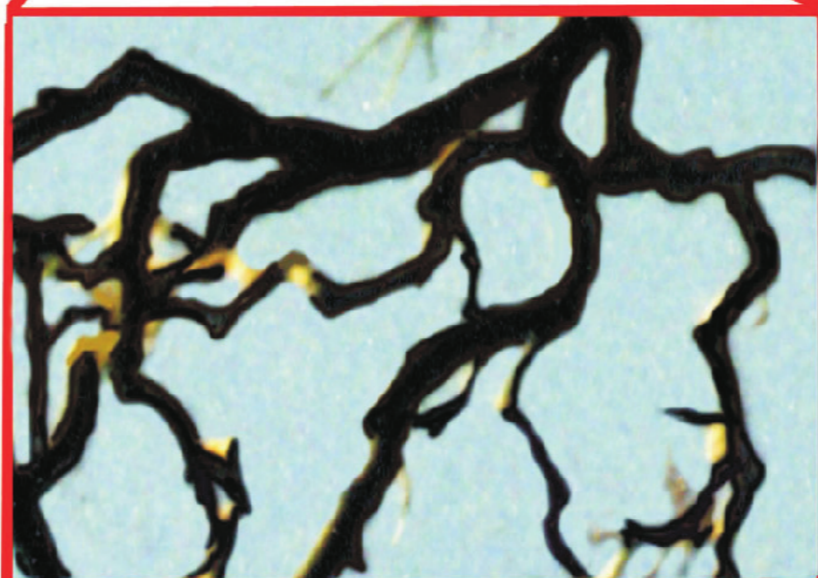
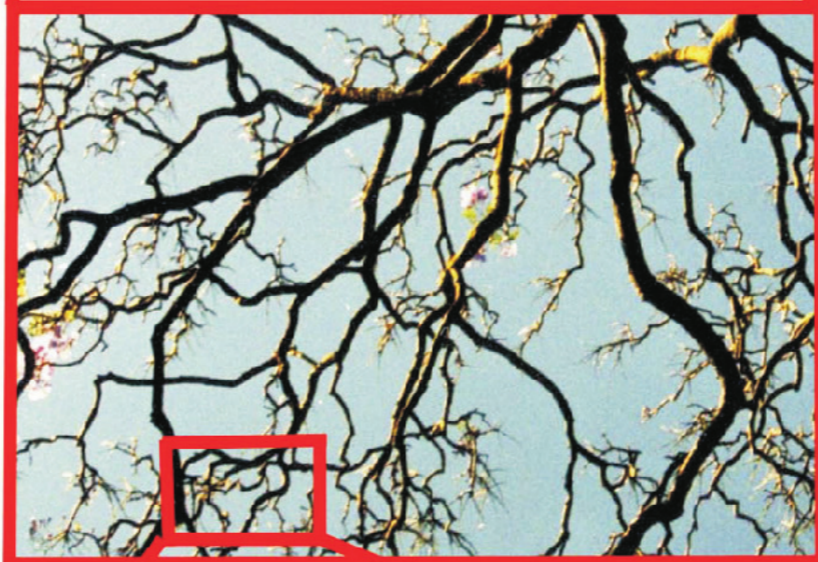
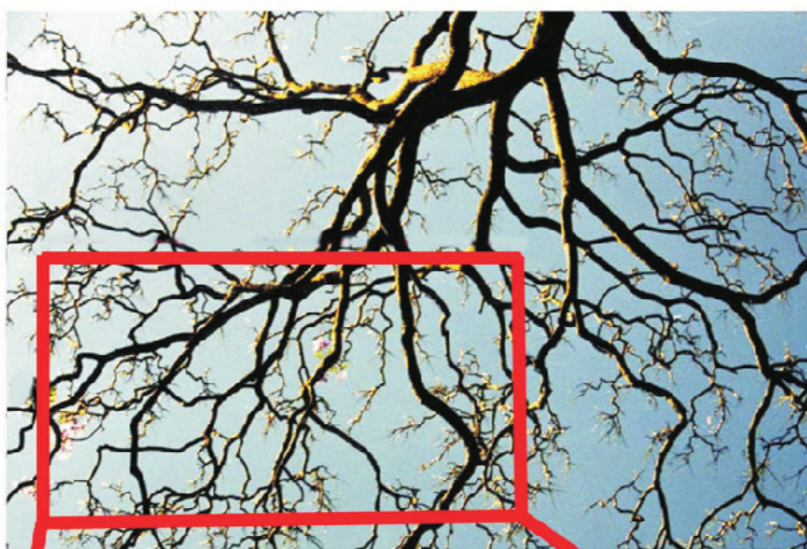
From here onward the Torah does not deal with the history of humanity. Only the eyes of the prophets would be opened to see the culmination of human history: All the glorious buildings, great and small, will fall, one after the other. Thus man will finally realize that only one "Name" is to be glorified, and that man is to glorify this Name with all the energies of the individual and the community, in every phase of private and public life, and that only thus will the individual and the community find peace and happiness on earth.

Regarding that time, the prophet Tzefanyah prophesied: בִּיָּאֵז אֶהְפֹּךְ; "For then I will restore to the peoples a purified language [cf. ויהפוך לו אלקים לב אחר (Shemuel I, 10:9)], so that they all call in the Name of God to serve Him with one shoulder [i.e., with united strength]!" (Tzefanyah 3:9).

This verse in Tzefanyah appears to support our interpretation here; for בורר is the exact opposite of בלל. The בורר separates out a foreign element from the desired material. Thus, history begins with שפה בלולה, an infiltration into the original pure language, and ends with שפה ברורה, a refinement of the language. Only thus is it possible to explain the connection between שפה ברורה and לקרא כלם בשם ה'. If the language of the peoples will be pure, they will call things בשם ה' and not בשם עצמם, i.e., in accordance with their ambition to make a name for themselves. Their temperament and desire, and their ambition to make a name for themselves, will not be the basis for evaluating things and assigning them names. Rather, when they subordinate themselves to the Will of the one God, they will recover objectivity; that is to say, they will regain a worldview that is rooted in God's Will. As a result, they will evaluate and designate things from the perspective of their Divine mission. And when the peoples submit to God's Will, they will regain spiritual and social unity, which they lost upon building the tower.







dition of a pronoun to הלך — as in וילך לו אל ארצו (Shemos 18:27), אֶל-הַגְּדֹלִים (Yirmeyahu 5:5), and the like, and as in קוּמִי לָךְ וְעִנִּי (Shir Ha-Shirim 2:10) and the like — always gives the הליכה a distinctive, individualizing, or isolating tendency.

הלך is related to חלק. The root חלק has two meanings: (a) to be divided, separated; when material is חלק into two, the connection between the two חלקים is severed; (b) to be smooth, to have a surface to which nothing can adhere. Thus also עלג, to stammer broken words, which do not fit together; to stutter.

The very word הלך, then, implies detachment and separation. This detachment can be a means to attaining a goal and a new position, or it can be an end in itself, where the הליכה itself is the goal. The addition here of the pronoun לך to the verb לך stresses this second idea.

לך לך: “Go for yourself, go your own way, isolate yourself!” Thus it says of Yisro: וילך לו (Shemos 18:27). He renounced the advantages that would have been his had he cast his lot with the people of Israel. Similarly, Yehoshua says to the Gadites and the Reubenites: וְעַתָּה פָּנוּ וּלְכוּ לָכֶם לְאַהֲלֵיכֶם (Yehoshua 22:4); “You have done your duty to the community, and now you may go ‘your own way.’” The meaning of our verse, then, is: “Go for yourself, go your own way; go the way that will isolate you from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house — from all your previous connections.” The initial migration from Ur Kasdim was perhaps for safety’s sake. In this command, however, the הליכה is an end in itself.

ארץ, מולדת, and בית are the soil from which the human personality emerges. To elaborate:

ארץ is one’s homeland, where nationality — with all its bodily, mental, and moral influences — is formed. ארץ is our country, to which our whole being is “married” (ארס). ארץ is the cradle (ערש) of our childhood, the kneading-trough (ערס) in which we are molded, a tremendous power (ערץ) whose influence no one can escape. ארץ, the earth, is our “cradle”; spread over it are the שמים representing our “there” (שם), our future. Thus, the ארץ impresses upon the personality the stamp of nationality; through the ארץ, the individual participates in the dignity and power of a nation.

מולדת is one’s birthplace. It grants a person civic status and independence.

בית is the home, the private sphere in which the individual thrives, receives special care, and develops. בית is phonetically related to בגד and פקד.

32 And when Terach's days were 205 years, Terach died in Charan. לב ויהיו ימי-תרח קמ"ט שנים ומאתים שנה וימת תרח בחרן: פכפ

12:1 And God said to Avram: Go alone for yourself, from your country, from your birthplace and from the house of your father, to the land I will show you. יב: ויאמר יהוה אל-אַבְרָם לך-לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל-הארץ אשר אראך:

The story about the migration of Terach’s family, which focuses on Terach (ויקח תרח), apparently reflects the reaction of the people of Aram to this pivotal event. No one knew that God had said to Avram: לך לך. The assumption was: “They emigrated for unpleasant family reasons.”

Terach and the other members of the family changed their minds in mid-course, and did not follow through on their decision to go to the land of Canaan. They got as far as Charan, and settled there. Avram, however, left his father’s home, he alone heeding God’s call. That story is told in the next chapter.

לך לך

CHAPTER 12

1 לך לך. Had Scripture here intended to say merely “Go from Aram to Canaan,” it would not have said “לך לך” but, rather, “לך” or perhaps “צא.” But then it would have been unnecessary to say ומבית אביך, since departure from one’s homeland already includes departure from one’s native city and father’s house. Moreover, the order of the terms would then be contrary to reality, for one first departs from his house, then from his city, and then from his country. What is more, מבית אביך is accentuated with an אתנחתא accent. This indicates that לך לך is an independent command, concluding with the words ומבית אביך. The ad-

לך לך, “go for yourself, go your own way” — this is an even more exalted value. No one may say: “I am as good and as honest as everyone else, as is the fashion here nowadays.” Every individual is directly responsible to God for his personal conduct. If it becomes necessary, if the principle adopted by the majority is untrue — then go it alone and serve God!

This was the attitude demanded of Avraham as the starting point for his own mission and that of the nation that was to descend from him. True, strong ties bind a person to his homeland and to his family. לשון הקודש, the “holy tongue,” alludes to this in the very words “ארץ” and “בית.” Nevertheless, the bond that attaches us to God must be stronger than the bond that attaches us to homeland and family.

How could we have survived, how could we continue to survive, had we not inherited from אברהם אבינו the courage to be a minority?

“Up-to-date Judaism!” The strongest protest against such a notion is conveyed by the first command given to Avraham: לך לך! Was Avraham’s first stand in keeping with the spirit of his times — in the midst of Chaldea, Babylonia, Assyria, Phoenicia, and ancient Egypt? In those lands the doctrine of the day was the worship of power and sensuality. The Asians worshipped pleasure, while the ancient Egyptians deified power and stifled personal freedom. Except for a few faint traces, the God-idea had almost vanished — until Avraham arose and appeared in the world! And when everyone else in the world was seeking to integrate, to establish himself, and win the rights of a citizen, Avraham gave up his homeland and his rights of citizenship; of his own free will he became an outsider and openly denied the gods worshipped by all the nations!

Such conduct demands courage and firm belief in the truth of one’s inner convictions and one’s awareness of God; it demands Jewish awareness, Jewish “stubbornness.” This was the first trial thrust upon אברהם אבינו.

This explains the allusion seen by the נביאים — the Divinely appointed observers, צופים, of the times — in the double כ”ף of לך לך. They identified the final forms of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as signs of special periods of salvation (קצים), including all of Jewish history in the double forms of the letters מנצפ”ך (see *Bemidbar Rabbah* 18:21): the double כ in לך לך in the case of Avraham, the double מ in עצמה ממנו (below, 26:16) in the case of Yitzchak, the double נ in הצילני נא (below, 32:12) in the case of Ya’akov, the double פ in פקד יפקד (below, 50:24) of

בגד is a garment worn close to the body; it presents and protects the person. Similarly, a בית is a “garment” in a wider sense; it is the sphere of the developing and active person, protecting him and supporting his activities. A person has three protective casings: the בשר (viz., the body; בסר: the husk of fruit), the בגד, and the בית.

The meaning of פקד, too, is none other than “to clothe”; for פקד, in its original sense, means “to encompass something in fitting external surroundings.” This applies first and foremost to Divine dictates, to what God ordains. God fashions for every individual the external conditions that are fitting for him; they are his “garments,” his outward appearance. Thus we come to another meaning of פקד: to remember something with all its attributes; to place it in the framework of its attributes. Its social meaning is: to appoint someone to an office. In the Hebrew language, the office invests, “clothes” the man; the mission that devolves upon one who holds an office is the sphere of his activity. Thus also הפקיד: to put something into someone’s care; actually, to find it a place in someone’s house.

We mention all this in order to emphasize the great value assigned in the Hebrew language to homeland and birthplace. Indeed, it was not out of disregard for the value of homeland that detachment from land and people was required when the foundation was laid for the Jewish nation. On the contrary, appreciation of these elements attests to the enormity of the trial. The very isolation imposed on Avraham placed him in sharp contrast with the spirit of the times.

As we have seen, the tendency of that generation — which, under the slogan נעשה לנו שם, began to build a tower to the glorification of man — was not individualism, not the recognition of the worth and significance of the individual, but centralization, which deprived the individual of his personal worth and reduced him to a mere instrument, a mere brick in the structure of what was supposed to be a representation of the community.

This tendency toward centralization gives rise to the false belief in the exclusive authority of the majority. As a result, any value held sacred by the majority is automatically revered and held sacred by every individual.

It is true of course that the community should represent exalted values. On this premise Judaism, too, attaches importance to the community and forbids the individual from detaching himself from the community. Nevertheless, at the outset of Jewish history, Scripture says:



	The Mission <i>(Free-willed moral development)</i>	How the Mission is Fulfilled <i>(Avodah)</i>	Sphere of Activity <i>(Bracha)</i>	Tree	“לך לך” <i>RSRH Commentary on Bereshis 12:1</i>	“אל הארץ אשר אראך” <i>RSRH Commentary on Bereshis 12:2</i>	Self
1	<b>וכבשה</b> and exercise control over it	Acquisition and transformation of property	Earth	Fruits	“מארצך” from your country	“ואעשך לגוי גדול”	גוף Body
2	<b>ומלאו את הארץ</b> and fill the earth	Extending blessing to others	Society	Branches	“וממולדתך” and from your birthplace	“ואברכך”	רגש Emotions
3	<b>ורבו</b> and multiply	Forming and Educating Children	Home	Trunk	“ומבית אביך” and from the house of your father	“ואגדלה שמך”	ראש-שכל Head
4	<b>פרו</b> Be fruitful	Development of self	Marriage	Rootstalk	“לך לך...” "Go for yourself"	“והיה ברכה”	נשמה Soul

26 Terach lived 70 years; then he be-  
got Avram, Nachor and Haran.

כו וַיְחִי-תֵרַח שִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה וַיֹּלֶד  
אֶת-אַבְרָם אֶת-נָחֹר וְאֶת-הָרָן;

27 These are the descendants of  
Terach: Terach begot Avram,  
Nachor and Haran, and Haran  
begot Lot.

כו וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת תֵּרַח תֵּרַח הוֹלִיד  
אֶת-אַבְרָם אֶת-נָחֹר וְאֶת-הָרָן  
והָרָן הוֹלִיד אֶת-לוֹט;

28 Haran died before the counte-  
nance of Terach, his father, in the  
land of his birth, in Ur Kasdim.

כח וַיָּמָת הָרָן עַל-פְּנֵי תֵרַח אָבִיו  
בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹלְדוֹתוֹ בְּאֹר כַּשְׁדִּים;

29 Avram and Nachor took them-  
selves wives. The name of Avram's  
wife was Sarai; the name of  
Nachor's wife was Milkah,  
daughter of Haran, the father of  
Milkah and the father of Yiskah.

כט וַיִּקְחוּ חֲבָרִים וְנָחֹר לָנָשִׁים  
שֵׁם אִשְׁת־אַבְרָם שָׂרַי וְשֵׁם  
אִשְׁת־נָחֹר מִלְכָּה בַת-הָרָן  
אִבִי-מִלְכָּה וְאִבִי יִסְכָּה;

30 Sarai was barren — she had no  
children.

ל וַתְּהִי שָׂרַי עֲקָרָה אֵין לָהּ וְלָד;

30 עקר is related to אגר, חגר. אגר = to gather in; חגר = to gird. In Aramaic, חגר = lame. The basic meaning: to restrain and hold in energy; hence also: to restrain and impede movement. Thus, עקר has two meanings: (a) the point at which the energy of movement is concentrated; its point of origin; thus עקר and, in Aramaic, עקר = root; (b) to stop movement at its point of origin; thus: לעקור את הנטוע (to pull out the root) and לעקר (to make an animal lame). Thus, also, עקר and עקרה. עקרה is an impediment at the source of fertility. Related also are חקר (the root and source of something) and חקר (to reach that root and source).

Conceptually related to the foregoing is the root עכר. Consider the relation of שמה and שוש to צמה and צוץ. When the spirit grows (צמה), there is שמחה; when the spirit blossoms (צוץ), there is ששון. The relation of עקר and עכר is similar: The עוקר prevents the growth of the body; the עוכר inhibits the blossoming of the spirit. Thus, עכר means “to aggrieve.”

lessness of the man and wife who had been chosen as forebears of this future nation argued against the fulfillment of the Divine promise. Only God could *make* of Avraham a great nation. Thus, the very emergence and existence of Israel are Divine manifestations.

But numerous descendants do not yet constitute a nation. Masses of people do not become a *גוי*, a nation, unless there is a common bond that unites them. Every nation unites through a common land: people live together under the same influences and conditions, and the same earth bears them all. Avraham's descendants, too, will become a nation — not through a common land, however, but only through God. Avraham's spirit will live on in his descendants. What a common land is to the other nations, your spirit will be to your descendants. They will inherit from you the uniting element that forms the nation.

Even today, we call God “אלקי אברהם,” the God known to Avraham, the God Who appeared to Avraham and made Himself known through his lot. And we need this designation, not because God limits Himself to Avraham, but, on the contrary, in order to distinguish between *אלקי אברהם* — Who is the God of the entire world, *קונה שמים וארץ* — and any distortion or reduction of the concept of God.

By this common heritage that we have received from Avraham we are a nation still today — without the bond of common soil.

Not only Avraham, but also his son and grandson became bearers of the Shechinah; God's providence was revealed through them, and they became models for the whole House of Israel. We say not only *אלקי אברהם* but also *אלקי יצחק* and *אלקי יעקב*, and our Sages regard this as the primary blessing granted to Avraham (*Pesachim* 117b).

The blessing *ואגדלה שמך* is realized particularly through *אלקי יעקב*. Through the lot of Ya'akov it was revealed to all that Israel's calling does not depend on outward glory and glitter. The fewer possessions a person has, the more his personality shines forth. The blessing that is spread by a person who is without means can be attributed only to his personality. Israel shines also as “יעקב.” For centuries now, Israel has not exhibited its power through the glorious display of heroism on the battlefield. Nevertheless, Israel's name is great among the nations because of its spiritual and moral personality. Indeed, it is *אלקי יעקב* who is the *מגדל שמך*.

Further study reveals that the whole essence of Jewish history is capsulized in these first three verses. In verse 1 — *לך לך מארצך וגו'* —

2 *I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I wish to make your name great; you, become a blessing!* *ב ואעשה לך גדול ואברכהך ואגדלה שמך והיה ברכה:*

3 *I wish to bless those who bless you, and whoever brings a curse upon you I will curse, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.* *ג ואברכה מברכה ומקללה אאר ונברכו בך כל משפחת האדמה:*

*צמח שמו ומתחתיו יצמח צ* in *Zechariah* 6:12) and the double *צ* in *צמח שמו ומתחתיו יצמח צ* in *Zechariah* 6:12) of the future *גאולה*, the command given to Avraham, was the starting point of the *גאולה*. When Avraham heeded God's call and went off on his own in isolation, he tipped the scale in favor of the world's redemption.

2-3 *ואעשה לך גדול*. Even a superficial glance at these verses reveals that Avraham is promised that he will regain all the privileges that he gives up; for everything that he loses, God will recompense him in much greater measure. By detaching himself *מארצו*, Avraham gives up his nationality; but God tells him that, instead of joining another nation, he himself is to become the founder of a new nation. He renounces his birthplace, *מולדתו*, but the source of his prosperity will not fail; rather, *ואברך*: directly from God will he receive the citizen's right to prosper on earth. He leaves *בית אביו* and thus gives up the honor and good name that are the heritage of old, established families; hence, *ואגדלה שמך*: his name will attain great renown.

Our Sages (*Bereshis Rabbah* 39:11) note that it does not say: *אשימך*; God does not merely protect Israel and further its national development in the manner that Divine providence protects the nations and furthers their growth and prosperity. Rather, it says: *ואעשה לך גדול*, “I will *make* of you a great nation.” All the external conditions and natural circumstances will be against the formation of the nation, so it will be plain for all to see that God Himself is the Creator of Israel. Seen in terms of natural conditions, the very age and previous child-

defraud on a grand scale, and those who murder and defraud “in the interest of the state” are decorated and rewarded.

Not like these is the portion of Avraham. The nation of Avraham is to have no national politics and no national economics. The One Who guaranteed its national welfare does not need to allocate funds, form coalitions, or conclude treaties. At His command are rain and sunshine, strength and life, power and victory. אם בחקתי תלכו, then all will go well. In the midst of a world where mankind’s stated aim is נעשה לנו שם, and its ambition is to increase its power and extend its domain no matter what the cost, the nation of Avraham is — in private and public life — to heed only one call: היה ברכה. Its life is to be devoted to the Divine aims of bringing harmony to mankind and to the world and restoring man to his former glory.

Then God will grant this nation His blessing for a life of dynamic action. Its name will become prominent among the nations, so that they, too, should be educated to these same aspirations: ואברכך ואגדלה שמך.

This second stage of Jewish history, the creation of a nation out of Avraham, was to have become a reality in ארץ ישראל. There, Israel would live apart from the nations. Not only would Israel be blessed, but blessing would spring from Israel; Israel would become a source of blessing — וישכן ישראל בטח בדד עין יעקב (Devarim 33:28). Had we been worthy, all the promises to us that are to be fulfilled באחרית הימים would have been fulfilled thousands of years ago, and the whole course of human history would have been radically different.

It appears, though, that this first promise to Avraham (vv. 1-3) alludes to a third stage. We have already noted that the form ואגדלה is expressive of a wish; for the realization of the second stage does not depend on God alone. Verse 3 appears to allude to a third stage in which Avraham’s people — its blessing or curse — are dependent on man, a stage in which man has the power to bless them or to curse them. This is the stage of גלות, which was decreed to befall this people if they would forget their mission and seek — like the other nations — להיות ברוכים instead of להיות ברכה. In the stage of גלות, the people of Israel are subject to the nations and dependent on them, for blessing or curse. Of this stage Avraham is told: ואברכה מברכך. That is to say, those who bless you and help you, who value your principles and submit to the service of your God — those will I bless. This promise, too, is

Avraham appears merely as an individual who is told: “Go your own way, dare to be alone.” In verse 2 — ואעשך לגוי וגוי — the nation already appears, but not yet in the context of interaction with other nations. Then, verse 3 — ואברכה וגוי — shows Israel in its relationship with other nations: The blessing of Avraham is made dependent on others blessing him, and there are also those who dare to curse him.

Avraham’s task was to isolate himself, to walk alone with God. The second stage was the creation of a nation out of this Avraham. It was destined to become apparent that the existence of this nation is a second act of creation by God in history, and toward this end it was necessary that Israel become a nation only by way of גלות (exile) and גרות (homelessness), without a homeland. Had Israel, from the very beginning, dwelled in its own land, its creation would not have appeared as אצבע מעשה ה' or as אלקים.

יצחק גדול: These words cover the period from the days of יציאת מצרים to

ואברכך: “After that, I will plant you in an ארץ זבת חלב ודבש.”

ואגדלה שמך, “And I wish to make your name great.” Scripture does not say: ואגדל שמך, “I will make your name great.” God can bless people and nations, but He can only wish that they will attain moral virtue and that their deeds will be exemplary, for that depends on their faithfulness to the Divine Law (see Commentary below, v. 5, end).

Similarly, Scripture does not say: ותהיה ברכה or והיית ברכה — “And you will be a blessing” — but, rather: והיה ברכה, “Become a blessing.” These two Hebrew words capsule the whole moral mission on whose accomplishment the fulfillment of God’s own wish depends: “I wish to make your name great; therefore, you, become a blessing! I wish to make of you a nation that will be a beacon to the nations, a nation to which the others need only look in order to become aware of their own tasks. And the task that is assigned to you — as distinct from the aspirations of all other nations — is: to become a blessing!”

Everyone aspires, not להיות ברכה, but להיות ברוכים, to be blessed. This is the aspiration of every person and especially of every nation. Honesty, humanity, and love are duties incumbent upon the individual, but are regarded as folly in relations between nations and are viewed as unimportant by statesmen and politicians. Individuals are imprisoned and hanged for the crimes of fraud and murder, but countries murder and

His blessing for a life

by way of גלות (exile) and גרות (homelessness), without a homeland. Had Israel, from the very beginning, dwelled in its own land, its creation would not have appeared as אצבע מעשה ה' or as אלקים.

These words cover the period from the days of יציאת מצרים to

ואגדלה שמך

expressed as a wish: May Israel be deserving of this promise; may they conduct themselves in their dispersion in such a manner that furthering them means furthering the well-being of the nations.

**אור** ומקללך **אור**. Not **אור**, but **אור**. The opposite of **ברכה** is **קלה** and **מארה**. **קל** and **קלה** stem from the root **קלל**. **קלל**, then, means: to reduce or make lighter in material things, to reduce a person's material means. **אר** is related to **חרר** (= to scorch, parch, dry up) and also to **ערר**, the root of **עירי** (childless) and **ערער** (isolated). **אר**, then, means not merely to deprive someone of material means, but also to deplete his strength and to sap his inner vitality. Whereas **קלל** is outwardly directed, **אר** is inwardly directed: to deprive someone of his inner vitality. To be **אור** is to be **ערער** and **עירי**: reduced in vigor and vitality. By contrast, **ברכה** means: to give strength to inner and outer development. Thus, **ברכה** in reference to **דגים** (below, 48:16) denotes external development, whereas **ברכה** in reference to **שבת** (*Shemos* 20:11) denotes inner, spiritual development.

In other words, God tells Avraham: I will go with you into exile. I will bless each nation in accordance with the respect it gives to the Jewish spirit. No nation will be able to deprive your descendants of their inner vitality, but the nations will be able to oppress your descendants, restrict the conditions of their existence, and deprive them of the means for their development. Those nations — not **אקלל** but, rather — **אר**: I will deprive them of the inner vitality necessary for their own self-development.

Thus, the nations **will not flourish if** they stand in your way to hinder you, or do not respect your principles and do not aid your development. It goes without saying, then, that **משפחות האדמה** will be blessed through you. The more respect they give to your principles, the greater the **ברכה** they will receive. But God promises Avraham that ultimately **משפחות האדמה כל** will be blessed through him: “They all will ultimately base their lives on the foundation on which your own life is based.”

**קלל** is related to **גלל** and **ילל**. **גלל**: to roll; a wheel; a circle. A thing rolls if it has no resting-point on its surface, no flat surface parallel to the ground; in other words, if it is completely round. By extension, on the spiritual level we get “**קלל**”; for this precisely is the fate of the **מקולל**: He finds no rest in the circumstances of his life, no ground on which

## What does it mean to be a “bearer of the light of recognition of God”?

- Awareness of God’s Presence in my life — evidenced in my internal thoughts, feelings. = I bear Light within me.
- Awareness of God’s Presence in my life — evidenced in my speech and actions/choices. = Others can see that I carry Light within me; I shine Light beyond myself.
- God’s Providence (השגחה) is evident when you look at us — we are a living miracle. A nation born from slavery, a society that serves Hashem, a people born from barren parents, a land that bears fruit only for righteousness.

animals, who recognize their owners; animals are beholden to their owners and willingly follow them.

Thus, קונה is the most fitting term for the relation of שמים וארץ to א-ל. The Owner is not visible, but there is not a speck of dust that does not follow its one Master. Not only is God the Ruler of the world, but everything yearns for Him and is drawn to Him. Consciously and unconsciously, all things know that they are beholden to God the Master. Hence, the world is ready to do His Will, to obey Him with all the powers of its being.

The attribute קונה שמים וארץ asserts a fact and makes a demand. The fact: everything that has been created in heaven and earth and that lacks free will is subject to God's guidance. The demand: just as the whole world — unconsciously and unwillfully — accepts God as King, so should man, consciously and of his own free will, accept God as King; of his own free will he should devote his life to serving God alone.

Malki Tzedek knew, then, that the kingship of א-ל עליין is not limited to the city of Shalem; rather, all of mankind between heaven and earth is obligated to accept the yoke of His kingship. Man's duty is to actualize Divine צדק and thus become שלם and find שלום.

Until Avraham appeared, the world sneered at this view. Malki Tzedek was ostracized; he established "the cult of the Most High" in a forsaken corner in Shalem. Then Avraham appeared and proclaimed in actual life the kingship of א-ל עליין קונה שמים וארץ. Malki Tzedek called in the Name of the highest God; Avraham called in the Name of the one and only God. Malki Tzedek taught that heaven and earth are owned by God; Avraham realized in practice what Malki Tzedek taught in theory, devoting his share of heaven and earth — i.e., all his spiritual and physical powers — to the service of the one God. Malki Tzedek taught in Shalem that א-ל עליין requires of man a life of צדק, whereas Avraham realized the teachings of צדק in actual practice: צדק יקראהו לרגלו (Yeshayahu 41:2).

וכי יבטלו... צדק וחסד

The one God had commanded Avraham not "be blessed" but "be a blessing," היה ברכה (above, 12:2). He inspired courage in Avraham and in his people and gave them victory over kings who were drunk with victory. This was an act of God, which showed all the peoples that א-ל עליין, Who loves צדק, does not dwell only in Shalem; rather, He is קונה שמים וארץ, and He sets heaven and earth at the feet of His servants: יתן? (ibid.).

19 He blessed him and said: Blessed be Avram to God the Most High, Owner of heaven and earth. *יְיָ בֵרַךְהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּךְ אַבְרָם לְאֵל עֲלִיּוֹן קֹנֵה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:*

God to man's needs; the כהן's task does not square with the modern conception of "meeting the religious needs of man." Rather, the task of the כהן is to prepare man for, and suit him to, God's Will; his duty is to act so that God finds satisfaction in man and in man's deeds.

19 Not ברוך מ- but ברוך ל- wherever it occurs in Scripture — is an expression of gratitude for a great deed or for an act of kindness. Thus Sha'ul says to the Ziphites who promised him that they would deliver David to him: בְּרוּכִים אַתֶּם לְה' (Shemuel I, 23:21). Thus David says to the men of Yavesh-gil'ad, after they buried Sha'ul (ibid. II, 2:5). Thus Naomi says of Boaz, after he treated Ruth kindly (Ruth 2:20), and thus Boaz, in turn, says to Ruth, after she expressed her wish to be married to him despite his age (ibid. 3:10).

The idea implied by this expression is that a blessing given to a tzaddik entails a blessing to God and promotes the realization of His holy Will. For if a tzaddik is blessed with God's bounty, he uses it to bless God — i.e., to realize His Will on earth. The highest honor for a person is if people say of him that he is a tzaddik and that his being blessed is a blessing for God Himself. Thus here too.

Malki Tzedek knew that God is not merely א-ל עליין, but, rather, is קונה שמים וארץ; He is not merely enthroned on high, eternally transcendent; He is not merely an immutable god, who has sole control of all the forces of nature and of history, and yet allows them to go wherever they might go; He is not merely אלהא דאלהא, "who strolls above the heavens"; who once upon a time created the world, but then left it to the control of gods subordinate to him. Rather, the א-ל עליין of Malki Tzedek is קונה שמים וארץ.

קנה denotes the moral aspect of ownership. קנה denotes the legal concept of property, ownership by right, not possession by force. The קונה of an object is its owner, even if the object is not in his possession. Wherever the object may be, it is שלו. Hence, מקנה denotes primarily

## Bereshis 15:1-8 • Translation from Hirsch Chumash, Feldheim-Judaica

(1) After what has been related thus far, God's Word came to Avram in a vision [saying]: Fear not, Avram, I remain a shield to you; **your compensation will be exceedingly great.**"

(2) And Avram said: **O God, my Lord, what would You give me, seeing that I go childless,** and the heir who yearns for my household is the Damasc[ene kin of] Eliezer."

(3) Avram thought: Lo! to me You have given no seed, and lo! the son of my house is my heir.

(4) And lo! God's Word came to him [saying]: This one will not be your heir; rather he who will come forth from your own inner parts will be your heir.

(5) **He led him outside and said: "Look please heavenward and count the stars, if you are able to count them."** And He said to him: **"So shall your seed be."**

(6) **He had put all his trust in God,** and He counted this to him as an act of righteousness.

(7) Thereupon He said to him: I am God, Who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land, to take possession of it.

(8) And he said: **My Lord, God, how will I know that I am to take possession of it?**

אָחַר ׀ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְּבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם (א)  
בְּמַחְזָה לֵאמֹר אֶל־תִּירָא אַבְרָם אָנֹכִי מִגֹּן לָךְ שְׂכָרְךָ  
הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד:

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה מִה־תִּתְּנֶנּוּ לִי וְאָנֹכִי (ב)  
הוֹלֵךְ עֲרִירִי וּבֶן־מֶשֶׁק בֵּיתִי הוּא דִמְשָׁק אֵלַי עֶזְרָה:

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם הֵן לִי לֹא נִתְּתָה זֶרַע וְהִנֵּה בֶן־בֵּיתִי (ג)  
יֹרֵשׁ אֹתִי:

וְהִנֵּה דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר לֹא יִירָשְׁךָ זֶה כִּי־אִם (ד)  
אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִמֶּעֶיךָ הוּא יִירָשְׁךָ:

וַיּוֹצֵא אֹתוֹ הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הַבֶּט־נָא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה (ה)  
וּסְפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם־תּוּכַל לְסַפֵּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה  
יְהִי זְרַעְךָ:

וְהֶאֱמַן בְּיְהוָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה: (ו)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר  
כַּשְׂדִּים לָתֵת לְךָ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה בַּמָּה אֵדַע כִּי אִירָשְׁנָה: (ח)



following: Even when God acts through His attribute of strict justice, mercy is inherent in the justice, as it says: בְּרִצּוֹן רַחֵם תִּזְכּוֹר (Chavakkuk 3:2). His justice is only an instrument of His love. Even when God conducts Himself in His attribute of justice, He lays the foundation for a blessed future. It is the same שם הויה, only that it is pronounced as שם אלקים.

God appears to Avraham “in a vision,” thus awakening in him a sense of foreboding about a troubled future, but at the same time assures him of His continuing favor and protection. Avraham responds and says אדני-יְדוּד, meaning: “You are my Master, and I am Your servant. You take hold of the attribute of justice, yet do not let go of the attribute of mercy. I need not understand; I require no explanations. You are ה' — even when You appear as אלקים.” Thus he expressed his innermost, unconditional devotion.

This, Avraham states first; then he adds: מה חתן לי, “What blessing would You give me? I request nothing for myself. Had I a child who could benefit from my prosperity — then, yes; but I go childless.” God assured Avraham of His continued love and favor, and Avraham initially understood that the assurance related to himself personally. Indeed, toward the end of this section God’s assurance takes on a personal note: ואתה תבוא אל אבתיך בשלום הקבר בשיבה טובה (v. 15).

מִשְׁק stems from the root שקק, just as מְכַס stems from כסס. שקק, a heightened form of שוק, denotes longing, hungering, desiring; to lust for something. The basic meaning: powerful longing movement toward something specific. A שוק is a plaza to which everything streams. שוק is the thigh, the strong muscles of movement. Thus משק: desire and longing.

בן משק ביתי — that is to say, בן תשוקת ביתי, the calculating and eager heir, who is longing to inherit my house. Not Eliezer; he does not await Avraham’s death, for he himself is already an old man. The heirs who lie in wait to inherit me are Eliezer’s relatives, his Damascene kin! These relatives had just recently met Avraham, when he had pursued the defeated kings until Damascus. “Therefore give me nothing; all that You would give me would only fall into the hands of Eliezer’s relatives. Eliezer’s Damascene kin — they are the ones who will inherit me.”

2 And Avram said: O God, my Lord, what would You give me, seeing that I go childless, and the heir who yearns for my household is [the] Damasc[ene kin of] Eliezer.

received his reward in the very act of doing. Only one who thinks he has made a sacrifice demands שכר as compensation. But a man of Israel regards the performance of a mitzvah not as a sacrifice but as a personal gain: שכר מצוה מצוה (ibid. 4:2). The blessing promised to those who fulfill the mitzvos is only a by-product: עקב תשמעון (Devarim 7:12); it comes as a result of the performance, but is not the purpose for which one performs the deed.

Thus, in our verse, God — not Avraham — raises the question of compensation. God regards Avraham’s self-devotion as a sacrifice; hence, He promises to compensate him and to grant him full reward. As Boaz says to Ruth: וְהָיָה מִשְׁכַּרְתְּךָ שְׂלָמָה (Ruth 2:12). Boaz considers the great sacrifice on Ruth’s part: She attached herself to an impoverished, unfortunate family in order to seek refuge השכינה.

2 אדני-יְדוּד. This designation of God, which does not occur often in Scripture, here appears for the first time. In the Torah it is mentioned three more times — once again by Avraham: במה אדע כי אירשנה (below, v. 8), and twice by Moshe: אתה החלות להראות (Devarim 3:24); אל תשחת עמך; ונחלתך (ibid. 9:26).

Avraham was the first person to call God “אדון.” שם אדנות is a Name that is always mentioned by an עבד ה', a נביא. A person who serves God and who is like an instrument in God’s hand calls God “אדון.” And he does not call Him אדני but אדני-י. God is not merely a Master of his, one among others who rule over him; rather, God is “his Masters” — i.e., he is subservient to God alone; hence, he calls him “my Masters.”

יְדוּד. This Name signifies the most profound combination — even according to the simple understanding of the Divine Names, which is the common heritage of our national awareness. It is written as מדה מדה, but is pronounced as מדה הדין. This Name, then, signifies the

faithfulness. (For a detailed discussion of Judaism's attitude toward belief, religion, theology, ritual, etc., see *Collected Writings*, vol. I, p. 183ff.)

Now here it says of Avraham: והאמין בה'. He had entrusted himself completely and unconditionally to God's direct guidance. God "led him outside"; He raised him above the earthly reality of a natural world bound by causality, and showed him a concrete reality that emerged directly from the Will of God. And God said to him: "So shall your seed be." Israel's creation and existence will depend directly on God — without any premises and even against all natural calculations. והאמין בה': Just as his descendants will depend on God alone, so did Avraham precede them with this אמונה and illuminate the way for them.

ויחשבה לו צדקה. There is room to speculate whether the subject in this sentence is Avraham or God. The matter turns on the meaning of the word צדקה. For צדקה apparently has two basically different meanings.

In some cases, one who performs צדקה merely acts in accordance with the strict requirements of the law. Thus: וענתה בי צדקתי (below, 30:33); וצדקת צדיקים קטירו מקונו (Yeshayahu 5:23). By serving Lavan faithfully, Ya'akov would merely be fulfilling his duty as required. If, in return for a bribe, a judge exonerates the guilty party — and thus ignores the צדקה of the other party — he denies justice to those in the right.

On the other hand, צדקה is not identical with משפט; צדקה is always mentioned beside משפט as something different. Only one who does both משפט וצדקה fulfills his duty in life. When God does צדקה, he bestows favor on his creatures out of His grace, not on account of their merit.

משפט stems from the root שפט, which is related to שפח, שפד, שבט, שבת, שוח (see above, 2:2). The basic meaning of all these roots is to put something in its proper place. The primary meaning of שפט, then, is to impose order. A שופט puts things in their proper place, or ensures that they remain there. משפט does not make one rich and does not add to what exists. משפט merely maintains what exists and restores things to their rightful owner. If someone loses money or resources — for my sake or through my fault — then I am obligated to compensate him, to comply with the requirements of משפט.

צדקה — from the root צדק — is something else. As we have already noted (above, 6:9; 7:1), צדק is phonetically related to the Aramaic שדך: to soothe, satisfy, sustain; in other words, to give the other person what he needs, to be good to him, to seek his welfare and well-being. צדק

as a result of the immediately preceding Words of God. However, it says: והאמין בה'. Avraham's whole life had been lived באמונה. Through the very Name יְיָ by which he had addressed God (above, v. 2), he had expressed his complete אמונה. Now (v. 5) he was privileged to hear from God's mouth about the destiny of his people. Thus he was given new opportunity to act and live באמונתו.

אמונה is the essence of Judaism; but to define אמונה as "belief" is to empty the term of its true content. Belief is an act of the mind, sometimes only an opinion. Every believer thinks his beliefs are true, based on the reasoning and assurances of someone else. Nowadays, religion is identified with belief, and belief is thought to be the essence of religion. A religious person believes in principles that cannot be grasped by the intellect. Thus, religion has been divorced from life and converted into a catechism of doctrines, a system of faith-slogans, required for admission to the hereafter.

However, to put one's faith in the words of another is never expressed as והן לא יאמינו לי (Shemos 4:1). והאמין ל- — as in — האמין ב- (Shemos 4:1). אמונה is not merely theoretical faith, the subordination of one's own mind to the mind of another. Rather, האמין בה' means: to rely upon God, in theory and in practice; to take strength in Him and to follow Him. Similarly, the verb אמן in the קל has a primarily practical denotation. Compare מצעשה ידי אמן (Shir Ha-Shirim 7:2); thus the Rabbinic term אומן (craftsman, artisan). An אומן is an educator who shapes the minds of his students. אמן: education. אמן, then, means not simply to be firm, but to make firm, to give shape and form to amorphous matter.

Thus, האמין בה' means to put one's trust in God; to be in God's hand like clay in the potter's hand. אמן casts his burden on God; God is his Fashioner and Educator, Supporter and Guide. In short, אמן entrusts himself entirely to God.

One who replies "אמן" after a ברכה does not merely declare the statement to be true; rather, he devotes himself to this truth, accepts it in his heart, and vows to adopt it as the guide for his conduct. אמן refers not to the content of the statement, but to the person who hears and accepts it. המתברך בארץ יתברך באלקי אמן (Yeshayahu 65:16). Man is destined to bless himself by the God of אמן — i.e., by the God of those who entrust themselves completely to His guidance; those whose lives and fate manifest the destiny of man and the saving guidance of God.

Even אמת is not only theoretical truth, but also truth in practice:

## *God's Covenant with Mankind*

One world had been destroyed, and there was now a new world. The Creator, Judge and Father of the world wished to establish a new covenant with man and all living creatures associated with man on earth. Henceforth there was to be a new order; another way was to be found to overpower the evil that grew rampant from human egotism. Never again was the evil of man to cause the destruction of all living things on earth; never again was it to place a curse on the total development of the earth as the soil of mankind. From that time on, planting and harvesting, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night were to run their course on earth undisturbed. Never again was a flood to come down upon the earth and plunge it into primeval night. This promise and covenant was given to Noah at the threshold of the ark, and he was to hand it down to all future generations. At that moment God directs Noah's attention to the heavens, shows him the rainbow and says to him: "This is the sign of the covenant! My bow, which I have set in the cloud, shall henceforth be a sign of the covenant between Myself and the earth!" (Gen. 9, 13) The rainbow, then, becomes an אור, a symbol.

## *Abraham, Bearer of God's Word*

The history of mankind's development and education continues. Having been given the earth anew, mankind very soon forgets to look to God as the sole mainstay and uniting force of human society. Society seeks support from within its own self, from its own cunning, its own inventiveness and its own power to control the forces of nature and mankind. Men said: We shall make a name not for God but for ourselves—נעשה לנו שם—and create a monument to our own greatness that will reach into the heavens (Gen. 11, 4). But God frustrated their undertaking at its very start and dispersed them over the globe, each to struggle alone against the forces of nature and against each other. God then chose for Himself one man who, in the midst of all this selfishness and thirst for glory, had recognized His Name once more, and He said to him: לך לך, Go your own way! Renounce all other ties and follow Me! While all the others group themselves into nations so that, together, they may unfold their strength, you are to become a

nation through Me and thereby become a monument to My greatness and My almighty power among men who worship their own greatness and might. And so Abraham tore himself free from all his other ties and followed the One God. He walked among men and built altars for this One God of his, and summoned men to rally around the name of God. But he had grown old and had yet to see the initial phase of the future nation that God had promised him: his first son. True, he had walked among men as a living protest against all the enterprises in which men engaged in his day, and God had protected him; indeed, He had made him victorious even over kings flushed with past victories. But of what good had all this been for the salvation of mankind? Abraham walked the earth without offspring. With his death, what had been mankind's guiding light would die out like a bright meteor. "My God and Lord! What can You give me, seeing that I go about childless?" (Gen. 15, 2) Thereupon God led him outside and said to him: "Look upon the sky and count the stars if you are able to count them! Thus shall your seed be." (V. 5) Did not God, then, appoint the stars as symbols for the origin and the future of the nation that God had promised to establish from Abraham's seed? How great is the significance of that one word: "Thus!"

Let us continue: Not only like the stars was this nation to be directly dependent on the Word of God for its existence and its numbers, not only would it be said of this nation some day that "He Who numbers each one of the stars also calls each one by its name," (Psalms 147, 4) but this nation was also to be given a territory on earth. It was to receive the land on which its progenitor had walked as a stranger. But Abraham wanted to know: במה אדע כי אירשנה? (Gen. 15, 8) If we understand this question correctly, Abraham, as the progenitor of the future nation, meant to ask God on behalf of that nation-to-be: How would this nation know when the time had come for it to take possession of the land? What dimensions, what power would his descendants have to attain before they could undertake to conquer this land? Abraham wants an answer, so that the future nation, his descendants, will know how to recognize the time when, in accordance with God's decree, it will be sufficiently strong and mature to embark on such a momentous undertaking. God's answer to Abraham's question במה אדע is ידוע חדע. It will not happen in the near future as you imagine; know that only the fourth generation will find itself in this land again.

Three generations will languish in an alien land, without a home, without freedom, without power to resist their oppressors. They will have to serve as slaves, and they will be tormented for four hundred years. But ultimately I shall judge also the nation whom they will serve; only after that will they go forth into freedom, rich in possessions. Only the fourth generation will return here, because Israel's possession of its land is dependent on whether the nation develops its moral greatness. If the nation loses its moral stature, it will also lose its land. At this point, the iniquity of the original inhabitants of the land is not yet complete.

This was God's answer to the father of the future nation. But this spoken answer is preceded by acts, visions and experiences. These happenings appear to be merely symbolic communications of the great message that is subsequently to be detailed through the word. This is the message destined to form the foundation for the strength and faith of the nation that is to mature in an unparalleled four centuries of suffering. "How am I to recognize when I am ready to take possession?" the forefather had asked. And God's answer was: "Bring me three times a calf, and three times a goat, and three times a ram, and one turtle dove and one pigeon." (V. 9) Abraham brought all these to God, split each of them in the middle, placing each half opposite its corresponding half. But he did not split the birds. Then vultures descended upon the carcasses, but Abraham drove them away. When the sun was about to set, Abraham fell into a deep sleep. And a dark, great fear came upon him. And God said to Abraham: "By this shall you know that your seed will be an alien in a land that is not theirs. They will have to serve them, and they will be tormented for four hundred years. But I shall also judge the nation whom they will serve, and after that they will go forth with great wealth. You will go in peace to your fathers and will be buried at a ripe old age. But they will return here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Emorite is not yet complete." (Gen. 15, 13-16) After the sun had gone down and total darkness had descended, there was a smoking furnace, and a flame of fire passing between the pieces. On that day God made a covenant with Abraham: "To your seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Perath; the Kenite, the Kenizite, and the Kadmonite, the Hittite, the Perizzite and the Rephaim; the Emorite, the Canaanite, the Girgashite and the Jebusite." (V. 18-20)

7 Thereupon He said to him: I am God, Who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land, to take possession of it.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָם יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לְתֶת לְךָ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

calculations ruled out its realization. Through his faith he made his greatest contribution toward building this future.

Avraham's descendants were destined to say: וצדקה תהיה לנו כי נשמר (Devarim 6:25). We fulfill our duty by observing all the mitzvos as we have been commanded. Avraham, however, was not commanded to fulfill מצוות. His task was אמונה: to base his life on God, to entrust himself totally to God's guidance and education. And it was a difficult task; for Avraham was an isolated individual with no previous experience of God's miraculous providence. Yet he accomplished his task in its entirety, and thus laid the foundation for the future that now was about to be revealed to him.

7 The revelation about the exodus from Egypt begins with mention of the exodus from Ur Kasdim. This indicates that the latter was not a natural departure. It must have been an instance of miraculous aid from God, a Divine act of deliverance — like the deliverance in the case of יציאת מצרים. Indeed, our Sages have a tradition that Nimrod attempted to kill Avraham in Ur Kasdim (Bereshis Rabbah 38:13). Only thus can we understand the allusion in our verse: Avraham and his people, by remembering the exodus from Ur Kasdim, can draw the strength and the hope for deliverance that will enable them to endure 400 years of גלות until the exodus from Egypt.

We have a tradition that Avraham was thrown into a fiery furnace. Perhaps the name אור (which means "fire") alludes to this event, so that our verse could be interpreted to mean: ". . . Who brought you out of the fire of Kasdim . . ." Perhaps this is the reason that the servitude in Egypt is compared in our chapter to a תנור עשן ולפיד אש (v. 17). מעשה Avraham was thrown into a fiery furnace; and his descendants, too, would be tested in the crucible of exile, the "burning furnace" that was Egypt. יציאת מצרים is a prototype of יציאת אור כשדים.

rectifies the world and promotes the happiness of the individual and the community. Through the attribute of צדק, every creature will have the benefit of the conditions intended for it by Divine design. צדק is the goal of God's direction of the world. From man's point of view, צדק is the ideal. Any Divine or human act that brings the individual or the community nearer to this goal is צדקה. צדק is required for צדקה, and צדקה leads to צדק.

When God acts with צדקה toward His creatures, He acts benevolently toward them. When man acts with צדקה toward his fellow man, he acts benevolently toward him, but fulfills an obligation to God. For every person is obligated to promote צדק with all his spiritual and material resources. The whole reason he is given these resources is to establish צדק in the world around him. Every contribution to the establishment of צדק is צדקה.

צדקה, then, is a whole life of faithfulness to duty. משפט is only the negative side, "shunning evil," whereas צדקה is the positive realization of the good.

ויחשבה לו צדקה could mean: Avraham put his trust in God, and counted it to Him as benevolence. That is to say, Avraham believed with perfect faith that God, in His grace, had been kind to him. Even his childlessness — although he could not understand it — was considered צדקה in his sight. This interpretation seems sound, since it posits the same subject in both sentences of the verse: ויהאמין and ויחשבה.

Nevertheless, it appears more likely that God is the subject of ויחשבה, and that the object לו refers to Avraham: God counted Avraham's אמונה as צדקה. Through this אמונה Avraham fulfilled his life's mission in complete faithfulness to his duty.

Thus it says of Pinchas: ויַעֲמֵד פִּינְחָס וַיִּפְלֵל וַתַּעֲצֵר הַמַּגֵּפָה. וַתִּחַשֵּׁב לוֹ לְצִדְקָה. "Then Pinchas arose and wrought judgment, and the plague was stayed. This was counted to him as tzedakah, from generation to generation, forever" (Tehillim 106:30-31). Through this one act Pinchas reached the zenith of the fulfillment of his life's mission; it was his greatest contribution toward furthering God's work. This act was counted to him as צדקה, and thereby he won eternal כהונה.

Correspondingly, Avraham reached the zenith of the fulfillment of his life's mission — through his אמונה. He entrusted himself to God completely and unconditionally; he sacrificed himself for a promised future — although he did not see its first blossom, and all human

8 The child grew and was weaned, and Avraham made a great feast on the day on which Yitzchak was weaned.

ח וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּנְמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֵּה גָדוֹל בְּיוֹם הַנְּמֹל אֶת-יִצְחָק:

nents) expresses a complete concept, מלה is a single leaf plucked from the tree of thought, a word, which need not express even one complete concept. Thus מלל means only: to express fractions of thought, to express something only approximately. Hence מלים in *Iyov* occurs primarily in a disparaging sense, i.e., words that do not express something completely or do not express anything at all. Hence also: מי ימלל גבורות ה' "Who can express even approximately God's mighty acts?" (*Tehillim* 106:2).

So, too, in our verse: "Many laughed, but who among them מלל, said a word to Avraham that even comes near to expressing something of the vast significance of this infant I embrace in my arms! Through him I nurture the whole future of a nation, through him I am the mother of all who will descend from him; for he will receive and transmit to future generations the spiritual legacy of Avraham." It is not just one child that mother Sarah is suckling. By nurturing and raising this one child, she nurtures sons, for לוקניו בן לוקניו!

8 ויגמל. The term "גמל" is applied to a tree that has nourished its fruit with the energy of its sap until the fruit is completely ripe and no longer needs the tree: ויצץ ציץ ויגמל שקדים (*Bemidbar* 17:23). "גמל" is applied also to a mother in respect to an infant; thus: גמולי חלב, weaning. Perhaps the גמל (camel) is so called because it can go a long time without drinking.

Thus also גמל: to ripen the fruit of time (the events of the present are fruit ripening on the tree of the past); that is, to guide a person on the way of his destiny. Thus: אָשִׁירָה לְה' כִּי גָמַל עָלַי (*Tehillim* 13:6), כָּל-תִּגְמוּלוֹהִי, (ibid. 116:12) — what happened to me He brought to maturity. In particular, גמל means: to bring the fruits of a person's actions to maturity — i.e., to requite him according to his deserts.

The term "קמל" is applied to a tree that prematurely denies its sap to its fruit (*Yeshayahu* 33:9).

6 Now Sarah said: God has prepared laughter for me; all who will hear of this will laugh at me.

ו וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צְחָק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כָּל-הַשְּׂמֵעַ יִצְחַק-לִי:

7 And she added: Who would have said a word of that to Avraham: Sarah has nursed sons! For I have borne him a son for his old age.

ז וַתֹּאמֶר מִי מִלַּל לְאַבְרָהָם הִינִיקָה בָּנִים שָׂרָה כִּי-יֵלְדֵתִי בֶן לְזַקְנָיו:

6 יצחק looks like a combination of the kal and pi'el. צחק in the kal is natural, spontaneous laughter that is difficult to suppress at the sight of some absurdity. צחק in the pi'el is deliberate, mocking laughter that jeers at the discrepancy between intention and deed, between ambition and accomplishment.

In our verse, the ironic side of laughter may be indicated. For the world knew of the ambitions of Avraham and Sarah, those two rare individuals who dared to swim against the tide of the times. The world knew of their daring hope of ultimately stemming this mighty stream and turning it in another direction. And now yet another absurd ambition: to graft this daring hope onto a late-born tender sapling! One hard blow and all the hopes are buried forever at their very inception! Should it surprise us that our ancestors' contemporaries, when looking at the cradle of the Jewish people, could not repress a mocking smile?

To this very day, people — who in reckoning about historical events and world affairs assign no place to God — jeer and mock at the world-embracing aspirations of the world-historic Jewish people. From the very beginning we, the Jews, have been put in this position. The first Jewish son of Avraham was called "יצחק," and we will continue to be called by this name until the hopes founded on God's providence and promises are fulfilled. אָז יִמְלֵא שְׂחֹק פִּינוּ (*Tehillim* 126:2), then the last laugh will be ours, for the name "יצחק" means "he will laugh"! This laughter will not be צחוק but שחוק, the gentle smile of joy.

7 מלל. This root is rare in Scripture. Its basic meaning is "to pluck off," as in וקטפה מלילה (*Devarim* 23:26). Whereas דבר (related to חפר, טור, תור, דור, all of which denote a uniform joining together of many compo-

14 Avraham named this place "God sees," which today is expressed as follows: On the mountain of God is one seen.

יד וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם  
 הַהוּא יְהוָה | יְרָאָה אֱשֶׁר יֵאָמֵר  
 הַיּוֹם בְּתֵר יְהוָה יֵרָאֶה:

necessary for us to understand His supreme insight. Neither His Law nor His ways of providence stand in judgment before the tribunal of our understanding, and no matter what the conditions of our lives on earth may be, *"ה' יראה"* This is the teaching of the eternal offering from Mount Moriah.

Because words are insufficient to express this, Avraham raised his eyes and looked for an *animal* [in order to express in rich, symbolic terms the challenge of Moriah]. And lo! there stood a ram. *אחר*, after that, after Avraham had seen it, it got caught in the hedge by its horns and could not move. Avraham went and offered up the ram "as an offering in place of his son."

These last few words of our verse constitute a decisive refutation of that foolish view — a product of narrow-mindedness or maliciousness — that denies the symbolic meaning of our offerings, so as to degrade them, arrogantly and scornfully, to the level of a "bloody sacrificial cult."

If our offerings had *no symbolic meaning*, if the offering of this *ram* had not been intended to express, in symbolic terms, a devotion far more exalted and meaningful in life than would have been expressed by the *actual slaying* of Yitzchak — then how blasphemous, how absurd, would it have been to offer up that ram *בנו*! To offer up, instead of the most cherished being, for whom one would gladly have suffered death oneself ten times over, an animal that one happens to encounter in the wilderness, an animal that does not even have the value of being one's personal property! To what may this be compared? Someone generously gives you a million dollars, and you pick up a pin you happen to see on the ground and say: "Please accept this pin in exchange!"

By naming the place "ה' יראה," Avraham bequeathed the *הוראה* that Moriah is to bring to his descendants through the memory of the *עקידה*. *ה' יראה* (reminiscent of *אלקים יראה לו וגו'* [above, v. 8]) — God sees! When *we* and where *we* do not see, God sees. Freely and willingly, we should

13 Avraham looked up and saw that there was a ram, and after that [it was] caught in the hedge by its horns. Avraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as an offering in place of his son.

יג וַיִּשָׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא  
 וְהִנֵּה־אֵיל אַחֵר נֶאֱחָז בְּסִבְבֵּי  
 בְּקַרְנָיו וַיִּלֶךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת־  
 הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֹלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ:

13-14 **וישא**. He looked around. He had been ready *לְעֹקֵד* and *לְהַעֲקֵד*, to offer, of his own free will, his entire being, his whole body and life, upon the altar. Now he felt that it was necessary to transform this *מעשה העקידה*, through a symbolic offering, into the very substance of the whole future life of his son and descendants.

Just as Yitzchak had been ready to offer *himself* upon God's altar and to rise anew from God's altar to life, so are he and his descendants to do, henceforth and forever: They are to *commit* themselves, through their offerings, to this same deep faith and this same self-devotion, and they are to *realize* them in their daily lives. *The life of Yitzchak and the lives of his descendants are to become one everlasting act of עקידה*.

**ויעלהו לעלה תחת בנו**. With these words Scripture sets forth for all time and with great clarity the meaning of the offerings as the *identification of the person with his offering*. In *ותנא דבי אליהו* it says: *אותרו היום שהעלה אבינו*: אברהם את יצחק בנו על גבי המזבח חיקן הקב"ה שני כבשים אחד בשחרית ואחד בין הערבים שנא' את הכבש אחד וגו' וכל כך למה שבשעה שישראל מקריבין תמידין על המזבח וקוראין את המקרא הזה צפונה לפני ה' הקב"ה זוכר עקידת יצחק בן אברהם מעיד אני עלי שמים וארץ בין גוי בין ישראל בין איש בין אשה בין עבד בין שפחה קורא את המקרא הזה צפונה לפני ה' הקב"ה זוכר עקידת יצחק בן אברהם.

The daily offering is taken here to be a duty in which the Jewish nation is bidden to continue the act of the *עקידה* performed by the first forefather. Especially indicative of this is the command *ירך המזבח צפונה* *ירך* שחיטת קדשי קדשים (Vayikra 1:11), from which we learn that *בצפון*, on the north side (*Zevachim* 53b). The north side is the "midnight" side. In the dark midnight of life, when the sun has set into the far reaches of the world and darkness is all around, Israel is to say: "Even if *we* cannot see, nevertheless, *ה' יראה*, God sees. We stand *ה'* לפני ה', before God. Wisdom and insight are His. He sees for us, and it is not

## **Additional Reading—**

### **Avraham: 'קריאה בשם ה'**

- ▶ *Commentary on Bereshis 4:26.* “אז הוחל לקרוא בשם ה'”  
“It is with this requirement for 'לקרא בשם ה' that the history of the Jewish nation is introduced... men in the midst of mankind who are to preserve and awaken the consciousness and knowledge of the true calling of Man... Hence the nation of Israel was born whose mission is none other than 'לקרא בשם ה'.”
- ▶ *Commentary on Bereshis 6:10, "שם".*

### **ה' ק-ל עליון Malki-Tzedek Passes the Torch to Avraham:**

- ▶ *Commentary on Bereshis 6:10, "שם".*

### **Avraham & Yitzchak: אמונה Living Truth**

- ▶ *Commentary on Bereshis 21:22, pp 478-481,*  
“ויטע אשל...ויקרא בשם ה' ק-ל עולם”  
“Suddenly...Abraham publicly proclaims a Name of God that clearly points beyond the horizon of *visible* existence... Avraham saw in this the beginning of the fulfillment of the that *future* that...had merely been promised to him. ...Avraham greeted these traces and marked the occasion by planting one tree, in which — if you will — he invested his perception of the future. His future would sprout like a tree, who beginnings are small, but whose culmination brings blessing to all, both near and far. ...”
- ▶ *Living Legend: Rabbi Grossman of Migdal HaEmek, Artscroll Publishers.* Living to care for the individual can grow a home, a community, a society. <https://www.artscroll.com/Books/leeh.html>