

PARSHAT LECH L'CHA

Almost 'out of the blue', at the beginning of Parshat Lech L'cha, God appears unto Avraham, commanding him to travel to the 'promised land', while blessing him that he will become a great nation. However, contrary to what we would expect, the Torah never tells us WHY he was chosen; nor does it tell us why HE was chosen!

In contrast to Parshat Noach, where the Torah informs us at the outset WHY Noach was chosen [i.e. "for he was a righteous man..."(see 6:9)]; in Parshat Lech L'cha, for some reason, the Torah never informs us concerning why God chose Avraham Avinu.

Did Avraham Avinu simply win a 'Divine lottery'?

In this week's shiur, we discuss the Torah's presentation of God's choice of Avraham Avinu, in an attempt to understand the literary method that the Torah employs to why Avraham was chosen, and its thematic significance.

INTRODUCTION

Our series of shiurim on Chumash is based on the [logical] assumption that each book of the Bible carries a unique theme; and to identify that theme, one must study the progression of its primary topics.

In our shiur on Parshat Noach, we discussed the progression of topics in the first eleven chapters of Sefer Breishit, showing how each successive story discussed a story relating to 'sin & punishment' (i.e. God's reaction to the disappointing behavior of each successive generation). The story of Creation was followed by the stories of man's sin in Gan Eden, followed by Cain killing Hevel, the corruption of the generation of the Flood, and finally the building of the Tower.

That pattern, that we discussed in last week's shiur, will provide the thematic background for our discussion this week of God's choice of Avraham Avinu - that begins in Parshat Lech L'cha - as the focus of Chumash changes from 'universalistic' to 'particularistic'.

As the MIGDAL BAVEL incident (see 11:1-9) was the last story recorded in Sefer Breishit prior to God's choice of Avraham Avinu, our shiur begins with a careful study of that narrative in search of a thematic connection (and/or a textual parallel) between these two stories.

THE SIN OF "DOR HA'PLAGAH"

In our introduction, we assumed that the building of the Tower constituted a sin. However, at first glance, that assumption is not so clear, for it is difficult to find a specific sin the Torah's description of their actions. In contrast to the Torah's introduction of the generation of the Flood, which explicitly brands the population as wicked and corrupt (6:5,10-13), the opening psukim of the Migdal Bavel narrative leave hardly a clue to any specific sin:

"Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they traveled from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another: Come, LET US make bricks and burn them hard. Brick became their stone, and bitumen their mortar. And they said, Come LET US build US a city and a tower with its top in the sky, AND WE WILL MAKE A NAME FOR OURSELVES, lest WE shall be scattered all over the world." (11:1-4)

Not only don't we find a transgression, one may even be tempted to pay tribute to such an accomplished group of people:

- * Is not achieving unity a positive goal? (11:1)
- * Does not the use of human ingenuity to develop man-made

building materials, such as bricks to replace stone, indicate the positive advancement of society? (11:3)

[The very first 'industrial revolution!']

- * What could possibly be wrong with building a city or tower? Is urbanization a crime? (11:4)
- * Is there anything wrong about traveling towards the east or setting up a city within a valley? (see 11:2)

Nevertheless, they are punished. God mixes up their languages, causing them to call off the project (11:5-7). What did they do wrong?

Chazal focus their criticism of this generation on their antagonistic attitude towards God (see Rashi 11:1). The final and critical phrase in the Torah's explanation of the tower (11:4) points to an additional source of guilt:

"v'naase LANU SHEM - WE shall make a NAME for OURSELVES" [See also Sanhedrin 109a]

The use of the first person plural - not only in this pasuk, but also in the ALL of the first four psukim (11:1-4) - reflects the egocentric nature and attitude of this generation. [Note also the repeated use of the Hebrew word "hava" (let US).]

Rather than devoting their endeavors to the glorification of the NAME OF GOD, this generation excludes God from their goals and aspirations, emphasizing instead man's dominion and prowess.

Although this generation is undoubtedly more refined and cultured than the corrupt, depraved generation of the flood, they unite for the unholy purpose of venerating the name of man, rather than that of the Almighty. God had higher expectations for mankind, hoping they would harness their God-given talents and potential towards loftier pursuits. They instituted an anthropocentric society rather than a theocentric one, and devoted their energies towards MAKING A NAME for THEMSELVES.

God could not allow this project to continue. But in contrast to the corrupt generation of the Flood, the builders of the Tower did not deserve destruction, rather 're-direction'. God will now choose Avraham Avinu to serve as a leader to REDIRECT mankind - to channel those very same qualities of unity and creativity towards a more altruistic end.

It is from this setting - that God singles out Avraham Avinu and promises to produce from him a special nation:

"And I will make you a GREAT NATION.... and through you ALL the families of the earth will be blessed." (12:1-3)

Avraham Avinu is CHOSEN FOR A PURPOSE: to direct mankind back in the proper direction. Towards this goal, He is also promised a special land, but NOT AS A REWARD, but rather as a means to fulfill that purpose. God seeks a special nation to represent Him, to educate all other nations and spark their spiritual development. Avraham is at this point but a single individual, but he is destined to become the forefather of this nation. [Its development involves a complex process, which will take some four hundred years (see 15:13-20).]

To become this nation, Avraham's offspring must multiply (ZERA) and then establish their nation in a special land (ARETZ). These two prerequisites not only appear in God's opening statement to Avraham upon his arrival in Eretz Canaan (12:7), but they are repeated each time God speaks to the AVOT of their future (see 13:14-15, 15:18, 17:8, 26:3, 28:13, 35:12, etc.).

BET-EL & SHEM HASHEM

Although this goal can be fully attained only once this special nation is established, it is significant that Avraham himself exerts himself towards this end.

If we trace Avraham's first sojourn through Eretz Canaan as described in the Torah, we find that the town of Bet-El earns a unique place within Avraham's itinerary.

After he arrives in Canaan and builds a MIZBAYACH in Shchem, Avraham continues to Bet-El, the climax of his "aliyah":
"From there he moved up the mountain range to BET-EL..."

and he built a MIZBAYACH there and called out b'SHEM HaSHEM - in God's NAME! (12:8).

Then, in the next chapter, Avraham returns to Eretz Canaan after his stay in Egypt and comes specifically to this very same MIZBAYACH in Bet-El. He once again calls out b'SHEM HaSHEM (13:1-4)!

Wherein lies the significance of Avraham's MIZBAYACH in Bet-El and his calling out in God's Name?

Avraham's calling out in God's NAME in Bet-El signifies a contrasting parallel to the Migdal Bavel fiasco. There, mankind's focus on their own prominence is reflected in their statement of: "v'naaseh LANU SHEM." Now Avraham must correct that cardinal mistake; he calls out in GOD'S NAME - "va'yikra b'SHEM HASHEM"! It is for this very purpose that Avraham was commissioned.

Ramban expresses this understanding in his comments to this pasuk (12:8):

"... and Avraham would call out there in front of the Mizbayach and make known God's existence to all mankind..."

A 'STRATEGIC' LOCATION

This thematic background may help us understand why God chose specifically the land of Israel to become the 'homeland' of this nation. Recall (from your study of world history) that in the time of Avraham Avinu there existed two great centers of ancient civilization - Egypt and Mesopotamia. One could suggest that the land of Israel, located in between these two centers of civilization (and along the main highway that connects them), provides a 'strategic' location for the accomplishment of their national goal.

This idea may be reflected in events that transpire in chapter 12. Note how Avraham is first commanded to leave his own homeland in **Mesopotamia** and travel to Eretz Canaan (see 12:1). At the highlight of that "aliyah", he builds his "mizbayach" in Bet-el and 'calls out in God's Name' (12:7-8). Then, the next story in Chumash informs us how he traveled to **Egypt** and encounters an incident of corruption (see 12:10-20). Upon his return from that center of civilization, once again Avraham goes to Bet-el and builds a mizbayach and calls out in His Name (see 13:1-4). Finally, note as well how Avraham calls out, once again, in God's Name - after he establishes a covenant of mutual trust with Avimelech (see 21:33). [See also Ramban on 12:8 in its entirety (and the TSC shiur on Parshat Va'yetze).]

A BIBLICAL THEME

This concept, that Am Yisrael is chosen to bring God's Name to mankind, emerges as a central theme not only in Sefer Breishit, but throughout Tanach, as well.

In Sefer Devarim, Bnei Yisrael are commanded to establish a national religious center "ba'makom asher yivchar Hashem l'shakeyn SHMO sham" - in the place which God will choose for His NAME to dwell therein (Devarim 12:5,11). As we explained in our shiurim on Sefer Devarim, this phrase, repeated numerous times in the sefer, describes the BET HA'MIKDASH - which is to become the institution through which God's prominence will be recognized by all mankind.

Some four hundred years later, when the MIKDASH is finally built, this same theme is reflected in Shlomo's prayer at its dedication ceremony:

"If a foreigner comes from a distant land for the SAKE OF YOUR NAME, for they shall hear about YOUR GREAT NAME... when he comes to pray at this House... grant him what he asks. Thus ALL THE PEOPLES OF THE EARTH will KNOW YOUR NAME and revere You, as do Bnei Yisrael, and they will recognize that YOUR NAME is attached to this House which I have built." (Melachim I 8:43 /see also Shmuel II 7:22-27)

In fact, Malkat Sheva [the Queen of Sheeba], reaches this very conclusion upon her visit to the Bet Ha'Mikdash, as described in Melachim 10:1-9!

IN MESSIANIC TIMES

The famous messianic prophecy of Yeshayahu (chapter 2) not only reflects this same theme, but also creates an intriguing parallel to the Migdal Bavel narrative:

"In the days to come, the MOUNTAIN of BET HA'SHEM (the Temple Mount) will stand high above the mountains... and ALL THE NATIONS shall gaze on it with joy. Then MANY PEOPLES shall go and say: Come let us go up to the House of God, that He may instruct us in His ways and we may walk in His paths - for TORAH shall come forth from Tzion, and the word of God from Yerushalayim..." (2:1-4)

Note the contrasting parallel between this 'hope' and the events at Migdal Bavel. In both events all mankind unites for a joint purpose. However, in Yeshayahu they gather to a MOUNTAIN top (man looking up) rather than in a VALLEY (man looking down); and to the CITY of Yerushalayim and its TOWER - the Bet HaMikdash, rather than their own city and tower. Mankind has now united to hear the word of God, as transmitted and taught by His people.

In diametric opposition to Migdal Bavel, the Mikdash becomes the symbol of the goals of a theocentric society - the ultimate goal of mankind.

The following table reviews this contrasting parallel:

MIGDAL BAVEL	BET HA'MIKDASH
-----	-----
Unity for man	Unity for God
Valley	Mountain
a city	the city of Jerusalem
a tower	the Temple
Man's prominence	God's prominence ("shem Hashem")

Another parallel to the Migdal Bavel narrative appears in the prophecies of Zefania, in his depiction of the messianic era: "For then I will make the peoples pure of speech - SAFA BRURA - so that they will all call out b'SHEM HASHEM, and worship Him with one accord." (3:9)

Once again, the prophet depicts the unification of mankind for the purpose of calling out in God's Name. An additional parallel to the Migdal Bavel incident is suggested by the use of the word "safa" (=language).

REWARD OR PURPOSE

In light of our discussion, we can now reexamine our original question. We have shown that Avraham Avinu was chosen to fulfill a SPECIFIC MISSION - to become the forefather of a nation that will lead all others to a theocentric existence and refocus mankind's energies in the proper direction.

Thus, Avraham Avinu's distinction came not as a REWARD for any specific deed, but rather for a SPECIFIC PURPOSE. Undoubtedly, as reflected in numerous Midrashim, Avraham must have been a man of extraordinary character and stature who possessed the necessary potential to fulfill this goal. However, the Torah prefers to omit any explicit reference to these qualities, focusing not on his past accomplishments but rather on the mission that lies ahead, thus stressing the primacy of Avraham's designated task.

This same principle applies in all generations. God's choice of Am Yisrael is not a REWARD, but the means by which they can and must fulfill the mission with which He has entrusted them. As this mission is eternal, so too is God's choice of the Jewish Nation.

This Biblical theme stresses our need to focus not on the exclusive PRIVILEGES of being God's special Nation, but rather on its unique RESPONSIBILITIES.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

=====

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. One could suggest that the events at Migdal Bavel represent the natural course of the history of nations. People with a common goal join together for a common purpose and build a society. Sooner or later, splinter groups with other ideals and goals form, often challenging the authority of the first group. Over the course of time, these smaller groups may eventually break off and start their own nation.

When people cannot agree upon a common goal, they are often unable to communicate with each other, even if they do speak the same language. [Israel's "knesset" is classic example.]

One could suggest that when God decides to stop this building project, he does so by sundering the people's unity, by causing them to fight over their goals. Their inability to communicate with each other, to understand each other's language, stems from the breakdown of the unity of mission that had brought them together in the first place.

Based on this suggestion, offer an alternate interpretation of the term "safa" (language) in the Migdal Bavel narrative.

See Ibn Ezra (11:1 - "dvarim achadim") and - if you have time - the Abarbanel on this sugya. Relate their comments to the above discussion.

B. Note that in the entire Migdal Bavel narrative, Hashem's name is exclusively shem "havaya". Relate this to last week's shiur.

C. This connection between Migdal Bavel and the "bechira" of Avraham Avinu is supported by the Midrash's comment (on Breishit 26:5) that Avraham was 48 years old when he recognized God for the first time. By calculating the genealogies in chapters 5 and 11, it can be established that Avraham Avinu reached age 48 on the same year that Peleg died, which, according to Chazal, corresponds to the precise year of Migdal Bavel!