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In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT CHAYEI SARAH - 3 mini shiurim

SHIUR #1 - "HASHEM ELOKEI HA-SHAMAYIM"

How should one describe God?

In Parshat Chayei Sarah, we find that Avraham Avinu appears to contradict himself in this regard. First he describes Hashem as "the God of the Heavens and the God of the Earth" (see 24:3), and then only four psukim later he describes Him as just "the God of the Heavens" (see 24:7).

This apparent contradiction caught the attention of many commentators; in the following shiur, we attempt to understand the underlying reasons for their various conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

To better appreciate the various answers that they provide to the above question, we must first review the context of these two psukim.

In chapter 24, Avraham Avinu is sending his servant to his 'home-town' of Charan in search of a wife for his son Yitzchak.

[Most likely, 'his servant' refers to Eliezer, even though his name is never mentioned (even once) in this entire parshia! In our shiur, we rely on this assumption.]

To guarantee that Eliezer will faithfully fulfill that mission, Avraham makes his servant take an oath in the Name of:
"Hashem, **the God of the Heavens, and the God of the Earth** (see 24:1-4).

However, two psukim later, when Avraham must allay Eliezer's worry that the wife he finds for Yitzchak may prefer to stay in Charan (see 24:5-6) - he promises his servant that:
"Hashem **the God of the Heavens**, who had taken him [Avraham] from his homeland..." will send an 'angel' to assist him (see 24:7).

The classical commentators are troubled by two problems. First of all, Avraham's description of God as "Hashem, the God of the Heavens AND the God of the Earth" (24:3) seems to imply that there may be multiple gods, i.e. one of the heavens AND one of the earth! Why couldn't Avraham simply have stated "Hashem, the God of 'heaven and earth'", just like the first pasuk of Breishit implies.

Secondly, they are bothered by the question mentioned in our introduction, i.e.: Why does Avraham 'shorten' his second description of God to simply "the God of the Heavens", without mentioning 'the earth' at all?

In our shiur, we will discuss how the commentators deal with these two questions.

HEAVENS 'and' EARTH

In relation to the first question, most all of the commentators share one basic approach, i.e. Avraham's peculiar statement of 'the God of the Heavens AND the God of the Earth' - relates directly to his current predicament.

As we will see, each commentator will consider one of the following points:

- [A] Avraham's is talking to his servant;
[who may have a over-simplistic understanding of God]
- [B] He is administering an oath at this time;
- [C] He is searching for a wife for his son; and
- [D] He is sending his servant to his home-town of Charan.

A. RADAK - 'Helping his servant understand'

Radak offers a 'philosophical' explanation of Avraham's statement to Eliezer. He claims that Avraham may be worried that his servant - even though he surely believes in the existence

of 'the God of the heavens' - may not believe that God's Providence extends over mundane matters down on earth as well. Therefore, Avraham emphasizes this point in his opening statement, that he is not only the God overseeing what happens in the Heavens, but He also oversees what happens on earth.

However, when Avraham later explains to Eliezer how God had earlier spoken to him (see 24:7), it is sufficient for Avraham to mention only 'Elokei Ha-shamayim' - the God of the Heavens.

B. SFORNO - 'Scare tactics'

Seforno explains that Avraham must impress upon his servant the severity of this oath. To assure that his servant will keep this oath, he reminds him that God controls not only the matters of the 'earth' - and hence his fate in 'this world' - but also the matters of 'heaven', which implies his fate in the 'world to come' (i.e. after death). By this statement, Avraham warns his servant that should he break this oath, he could expect not only a punishment in this world, but also in the world to come!

C. IBN EZRA - 'Finding one's beshert'

Ibn Ezra relates to the fact the Avraham is sending his servant on a mission to find a wife. Even though finding a spouse may appear to Eliezer as a mundane event taking place on 'earth', Avraham must convince Eliezer that this marriage has been decided upon in the 'heavens'. This commentary may actually be based on the Gemara in Moed Katan 18b ("Amar Shmuel..." - in the middle of the daf), that on each day a 'bat-kol' proclaims that the daughter of 'ploni' will be married to the 'ploni'.

D. RAMBAN - "Eretz Yisrael"

Finally, Ramban offers a very 'zionistic' explanation. Unlike the other commentators who understand 'aretz' as referring to the 'earth', i.e. to events taking place on earth or in this world, Ramban understands 'aretz' as referring to the 'land of Israel'. Because his servant is now leaving Eretz Yisrael (but must bring Yitzchak's future wife back to this land), Avraham adds the phrase 'Elokei ha-aretz' to the standard phrase of 'Elokei ha-shamayim' in his description of God at this time.

ELOKEI HA-SHAMAYIM

Rashi does not deal directly with our first question. However, he does answer our second question (i.e. why Avraham only mentions 'Elokei ha-shamayim' in 24:7); and while doing so, he provides a solution for the first question as well.

Rashi, based on a Midrash of R. Pinchas in Breishit Rabba 59:8, differentiates between Man's perception of God BEFORE Avraham was chosen (as reflected in 24:7), and Man's perception of God now (in 24:3).

When God had first commanded Avraham to leave his homeland (see 24:7), no one on earth recognized God; therefore His Kingdom was only in Heaven. However, once Avraham came to the Land and began to proclaim His Name to the public (see Breishit 12:8 and Ramban on that pasuk), His Kingdom is now known 'on earth' as well. Therefore, when Avraham now sends Eliezer on his mission, God can be referred to as both 'Elokei ha-shamayim' AND 'Elokei ha-aretz'.

Note that Rashi's explanation is definitely not the 'simple pshat' of these psukim. Clearly, the interpretations offered by the other commentators provide a more 'local' explanation for the specific use of this phrase. Nonetheless, this Midrash definitely reflects one of the primary themes of Sefer Breishit (as discussed at length in our shiur on Parshat Lech Lecha), and hence may reflect the 'pshat' of the Sefer, rather than the 'pshat' of the pasuk.

[Here we find a beautiful example of the art of Midrash, taking the opportunity of an apparent problem in the 'pshat' of a pasuk to deliver an important message concerning the entire Sefer.]

In conclusion, it is important to note a common denominator to all the interpretations presented above. We find that - when referring to God - it is not necessary to always refer to Him by the same Name. Instead, we refer to God in the context of our

relationship with Him.

For example, in the Ten Commandments, we speak of God as Hashem, Kel KANA (see Shmot 20:2-4), and when Moshe receives the Second Luchot he speaks of God as "Hashem, Kel RACHUM ve-CHANUN" (see Shmot 34:6-8). In other words, the appellation that we use for God relates to the specific situation we are in.

The best example is from daily tefilla, when we begin by describing God as "Hashem, Elokeinu ve-Elokei avoteinu..."; then in each of the 19 'brachot' that follow, we bless God based on one of various attributes in our relationship with Him. Next time you 'daven', take note!

SHIUR #2 - AVRAHAM AVINU & 'REAL' ESTATE

The beginning of this week's Parsha is well known for its detailed description of the bargaining between Avraham and Efron. Some claim that Efron's intention all along was to attain the highest price (see 23:16), explaining that his generous opening offer (to give Avraham the land gratis - see 23:5-6) was nothing more than a ploy. But if this assumption were correct, why would Sefer Breishit find it necessary to discuss this event in such minute detail?

If, on the other hand, we assume that the stories of Sefer Breishit help develop its theme of 'bechira', then perhaps we should view this narrative from the perspective of that theme. Let's give it a try.

TWO PERCEPTIONS

To better appreciate what's going on, let's examine both sides of the bargaining table - Bnei Chet and Avraham:

1) Bnei Chet's perception:

Efron and his people [Bnei Chet] reign sovereign in Chevron and the surrounding region. As their families had been living in those hills for generations, they have every reason to think that they would continue to do so for future generations as well. In their eyes, Avraham is simply a 'wandering Jew', posing no threat whatsoever to their sovereignty.

Recall as well that Avraham had lived in Mesopotamia until age 75, and, ever since his migration to Cannan he spent much of his time traveling - to and from cities - such as Shechem, Bet-El, Chevron, and Beer Sheva. Having never established permanent residence, Avraham represents no challenge to the sovereign government of the Chittim.

Furthermore, Avraham constantly 'called out in the Name of God' wherever he went. His teaching had earned him such a widespread reputation that Bnei Chet refer to him as "nasi Elokim ata betocheinu" - you are a prince a God in our midst (see 23:6). As his career sent him constantly 'on the road', Bnei Chet had no reason to believe that Avraham's offspring would one day return to attempt to gain sovereignty over their land.

Therefore, there is no need to doubt the sincerity of their original offer to grant Avraham [at no charge] any burial plot he desires (see 23:5-7). Even in our own time, many societies express their appreciation for individuals who preach morality and dedicate their entire life to God by offering various benefits [what we call a 'clergy discount'].

Their generous offer simply reflects their sympathetic understanding of Avraham's difficult situation - a wandering 'man of God' who needs a place to bury his wife. For Bnei Chet, this entire incident was of little significance - Avraham posed no threat to their future or permanent control of the land.

2) Avraham Avinu's perception:

In contrast, Avraham Avinu perceived his situation in an entirely different light. His wife's death and the need for a burial site awakened his realization that aside from a Divine Promise, he had no real 'hold' in the land. For him, the purchase of a family burial plot constituted the first step towards a permanent attachment to the land. He wants to ensure that his children and

grandchildren will return to this site and feel a true connection to the land.

Therefore, Avraham insists on paying the full price, as he has no interest at this time for 'handouts' or presents. He wants it known that this burial plot and its surrounding field belong to his family. Therefore, not only does Avraham insist on paying full price, he also demands that it be purchased in the presence of all the community leaders ("le-chol baei sha'ar iro" / read 23:16-20 carefully). In Avraham Avinu's eyes, this is a momentous occasion - he has now purchased his first 'achuza' [inheritance] in 'Eretz Canaan' (note 23:19-20!).

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FOR FURTHER IYUN:

In the above shiur, we discussed how the purchase of 'ma'arat ha-machpela' may relate to Avraham Avinu's special connection to the land, as promised to him by God. To further appreciate this connection, review 23:16-20 and compare them to 17:7-8. Note especially 'achuza' and 'Eretz Canaan', and relate this to our shiur on 'brit mila'. Note as well 25:9-10, 49:29-30 & 50:13!

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SHIUR #3 "ZERA VA-ARETZ" - A PROMISE, COVENANT, AND OATH

Just prior to sending his servant in search of a wife for his son, Avraham briefly reviews the various stages of his 'bechira': "Hashem Elokei ha-shamayim asher lekachani mi-BEIT AVI u-ME'ERETZ MOLADETI ve-asher DIBER li, ve-asher NISHBA li leimor - le-ZAR'ACHA ETEIN et ha-ARETZ ha-zot..." (24:7)

In the following mini-shiur we attempt to explain the meaning of each phrase in this pasuk.

Recall from Parshat Lech Lecha that Hashem had made three promises (see 12:1-3, 12:7, 13:15) and two covenants (see 15:18, 17:8) concerning the future of Avraham's offspring in the Promised Land. In each of these promises, the key words repeated over and over again were "era" [offspring] and 'aretz' [the Promised Land/ e.g. "le-zar'acha etein et ha-aretz ha-zot"].

In Avraham's opening statement to his servant, we find an obvious parallel to the beginning of Parshat Lech Lecha, as: "Asher lekachani mi-BEIT AVI u-BE'ERETZ MOLADETI" clearly echoes God's opening command of:

"Lech Lecha me-artzecha, u-mMOLADETECHA u-miBEIT AVICHA."

However, the continuation of this statement: "e-asher DIBER li, ve-asher NISHBA li leimor ..." raises a question concerning the precise OATH ('nishba') to which Avraham refers.

This question sparked a controversy among the commentators. Rashi explains that this oath was made at Brit Bein Ha-betarim, while Radak contends that it refers to the Akeida.

The reason for this controversy is quite simple. The term 'shvu'a' - oath - appears only once throughout all of God's promises to Avraham - specifically in God's 'hitgalut' to Avraham after the Akeida:

"bi nishbati ne'um Hashem, ki ..." (see 22:16)

Thus, Radak cites the Akeida as the source for "nishba li." Rashi, however, rejects this contention, presumably because nowhere at the Akeida does God say anything similar to "le-zar'acha etein et ha-aretz ha-zot." Rashi therefore cites as the source of God's oath Brit Bein Ha-betarim, which includes this very promise:

"ba-yom ha-hu karat Hashem [note Shem Havaya, as above in 24:7] et Avram brit leimor: le-zar'acha natati et ha-aretz ha-zot..." (15:18).

Even though the actual word 'shvu'a' is never mentioned at

Brit Bein Ha-Betarim, God's establishment of a covenant with Avraham may itself constitute a guarantee equivalent to a promise accompanied by an oath.

In truth, a closer look at the psukim relating to the Akeida may reveal that BOTH Rashi and Radak are correct: God had stated:

"By myself I SWEAR ["bi nishba'ti"], the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son... I will bestow My blessing upon you ["barech avarechecha"] and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of the heaven ["ke-kochvei ha-shamayim"] ... and your descendants will CONQUER the gates of their enemies ["ve-YIRASH zar'acha et sha'ar oyvav"]...(15:17).

Considering this context - i.e. the aftermath of the Akeida - we can well understand why this oath focuses primarily on Avraham's descendants ("zera"), who will evolve from Yitzchak. Hence, the promise regarding the Land emerges as less dominant a theme in God's vow in contrast to the promise of 'zera'.

Nonetheless, this oath does contain several expressions taken directly from God's earlier promises to Avraham concerning the 'aretz', especially Brit Bein Ha-betarim. The following table highlights the literary parallel between God's promise at the Akeida and previous promises to Avraham:

AKEIDA (22:17)	PREVIOUS PROMISES
ki barech avarechecha	va-avarechecha..ve-heye bracha (First Promise - 12:2)
ve-harbeh arbeh et zar'acha ke-kochvei ha-shamayim	habet na ha-shamayma – u-re'eh et ha-kochavim... ko yhiyeh zar'echa (Brit Bein Ha-Betarim - 15:5)
Ve-yirash zar'acha et sha'ar oyvav	lo yirashcha zeh, ki im asher yetzeh mi-mey'echa,hu yirashecha (Brit Bein Ha-Betarim - 15:4)
Ve-hitbarchu be-zar'acha kol goyei ha-aretz (15:18)	Ve-nivrchu becha kol mishpechot ha-adama (First Promise - 12:3)

This parallel demonstrates that God's oath after the Akeida reaffirms His previous promises and covenants.

Furthermore, Avraham's statement of "ve-asher nishba li leimor le-zar'acha etein et ha-aretz ha-zot," can be understood as his own understanding of God's promise BOTH in Brit Bein Ha-Betarim (shitat Rashi) AND the Akeida (shitat ha-Radak), as one essentially complements the other.

This interpretation also explains the redundancy in Avraham's statement: "asher DIBER li ve-'asher NISHBA li":

- * "asher DIBER li" - most probably refers to Brit Bein Ha-Betarim, which begins with "haya DVAR Hashem el Avram..." (15:1, see also 15:4);
- * while "asher NISHBA li" refers the oath of the Akeida (22:16).

THE OATH

Why is an oath necessary in ADDITION to God's original promise and covenant? Furthermore, why does God make this oath only after the Akeida?

The answer to these questions relates to the nature of the original promise and covenant, as explained in the last three shiurim.

Recall that in reaction to the events of Migdal Bavel (mankind's development into an anthropocentric society), God chose Avraham Avinu IN ORDER THAT his offspring become a special nation that would lead all nations toward a theocentric existence [our shiur on Noach]. Three promises and two covenants guaranteed Avraham Avinu a special Land ('aretz') to

allow his offspring ('zera') to fulfill its destiny [our shiur on Lech Lecha]. This goal is to be achieved by this special nation's embodiment of the values of 'tzedeq u-mishpat' [our shiur on Parshat Vayera].

One could suggest that in recognition of Avraham Avinu's display of complete faith in, and dedication to, God, as reflected specifically in the story of the Akeida, God elevates the status of His original promise from a 'brit' [covenant] to a 'shvu'a' [oath].

But what's the real difference between a covenant and an oath?

A covenantal arrangement is almost by definition bilateral; for it allows for one side to break his agreement should the other party break his. At the Akeida, God takes His obligation one step further for an oath reflects a unilateral commitment, binding regardless of what the other side does.

God now swears that even should Am Yisrael break their side of the covenant, He will never break His original promise. Although His nation may sin and consequently be punished, they will forever remain His people.

Herein may lie the primary significance of the Akeida, as it relates to the developing theme of Sefer Breishit. As the story of Avraham Avinu nears its conclusion, God brings His relationship with Bnei Yisrael to the level where He will never abandon us.

The Akeida, the greatest example of 'mesirut nefesh', symbolizes an indispensable prerequisite for Am Yisrael's development into God's special nation - their willingness to dedicate their entire life to the service of God. The site of the Akeida, Har Ha-Moriya, later becomes the site of the Bet Ha-mikdash (see II Chronicles 3:1), the most prominent symbol of that relationship.

shabbat shalom,
menachem