

What did Abraham know? The Covenant between the Pieces and the Exodus from Egypt

Devar Torah for Rosh Hodesh Nissan, Rachel Adelman ניסן, תשס"ח

In this Devar Torah, I would like to explore the dynamic between divine time and human time in the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham in the Covenant between the Pieces: "You shall surely know that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years...but ...in the end they shall go free with great wealth" (Gen. 15:13-14). I still remember the first original question that I posed at a Seder: "If God had it all planned out – the exile, oppression, slavery and redemption – what role did the people play?" Is the prophecy to Abraham a prediction of what *will* happen, or what God will *make* happen? Where is the line between omniscience and omnipotence? In my audacious adolescent way, I was saying (as do we all): hey, but what about me? Do I have any say about what goes on around here? My father would have loved to have said "No!" But he was a good dad, and a professor of philosophy at that, so we'd discuss the matter.

Today I turn to the opening verses of the Maftir for some guidance: "And the Lord said to Moshe and Aharon in the land of Egypt, "This month is for you, *hahodesh hazeh lakhem*, the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you." (Ex. 12:1-2). For the Israelites, this was not only the first mitzvah they were given as a nation before their Exodus from Egypt, but also their first step into history. Nahum Sarna, in his book *Exploring Exodus*, comments:

A people newly freed must henceforth be sustained by its own native resources if it is to achieve true national independence, if it is no longer to be a passive object of history, subservient to a dominant but alien culture. A liberated people must evolve and stress its own distinctive autonomous culture, devise its own structures of national existence, and forge its own institutions. One of the first desiderata is the establishment of a uniform calendar.¹

When God announces, "*HaHodesh ha'zeh lakhem*, this month is for you, the first month of the year", the people are being given one very important means of extricating themselves out of the cyclical measure of time – the repetitive rhythm of the agricultural

¹ Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, New York: Schocken Books, 1966, p. 81.

calendar. The Israelites would also play critical role in shaping the calendar, with the act of witnessing the *molad*, the new moon, and passing the message from hilltop to hilltop. Though we no longer practice the proclamation of the *molad*, we still recall the empowerment the nation was given then in determining the sanctity of time, with the verse recited at Kiddush on a *Yom Tov*: “These are the festivals of the LORD, holy convocations (*mikra’ei kodesh*), which you shall proclaim (*tikre’u*) in their seasons” (Lev. 23:4). That is, *we* are meant to proclaim them, *likro otam*, whereas Shabbat is independent of the human measure of time, linked rather to Creation, *Ma’aseh Breshit*, as it says: “*al ken berakh Hashem et Yom haShabbat ve’yekadshe’hu* — therefore God blessed the Shabbat and *God* made it holy” (Ex. 20:10).

So if our first step into history begins with empowering the Israelites by establishing a calendar, one must ask: how were they keeping time before this point? I imagine the slaves, working in the mortar and brick, in the caverns of the dead, marking the years, the months, the days in chalk on the brick walls; God, on high, counting by the years on his holy abacus, mumbling to himself: “they shall be enslaved and oppressed 390 more years, 389 more years, 388 more years....” We read in the Haggadah every year: “*Barukh ShomerHavtahtato leYisrael*, Blessed be God, Who keeps His promises to Israel, blessed be He, for God calculated the end of the bondage, *hishev et haketz*, according to what He had said to Abraham at the Covenant of the Pieces: “And He said to Abram, ‘You shall surely know (*yado’a ted’a*) that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth” (Gen. 15:13-14).

God said, “You shall surely know (*yado’a ted’a*)” – but did Abraham really know? Were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob keeping time (that is, with a sense of history) back then? Were the sons of Israel – the twelve brothers and their descendants – marking off the years in chalk on the walls? Let us look again, carefully, at the sequence of events surrounding the prophecy in the Covenant between the Pieces. The first part of the covenant contains the promise of offspring, *zer’a*, to Abraham, which he accepts, nay believes, *he’emin beHaShem*, and it was reckoned to the patriarch as a source of merit, *tzedakah* (Gen. 15:6), but when it came to God’s promise of Land (v. 7), Abraham asked,

“How will I know that I am to inherit it – **בַּמָּה אֲדַע כִּי אִירְשֶׁנָּה**?” And he is not reassured immediately, but asked to take three animals, cut their carcasses in half, and two birds, lay all the pieces across from one another. The sun then sets and “a deep sleep *fell* upon Avram – **וַתִּרְדָּמָה נִפְלְאָה עַל אַבְרָם** – and behold, a dread of great darkness *descending* upon him – **וַהֲנִיחַ אֵימָה חֲשֵׁכָה גְדֹלָה נִפְלְתָה עָלָיו**” (v. 12). God only then tells him the prophecy: “**יָדַע תְּדַע כִּי גַר יִהְיֶה זְרָעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם**” (v. 13).

Abraham is seized with apprehension, perhaps anticipating what he will be told. What is this great, terrible darkness that *is falling*, **נִפְלְתָה**, continually, upon him? Why does God knock him unconscious with a deep sleep, *tardema*? The prophecy, you will note, is not just about the Egyptian exile. After all, no enemy nation is mentioned by name: they “will be strangers in a land not theirs – **לֹא לָהֶם**.” Is it the Egyptian exile? Or the exile that the patriarchs endured in Canaan, living as mere sojourners in the land divinely promised to them? Or is it prescient of *all the exiles* that the Jews would ever endure to the End of Time? *Breshit Rabbah*, in fact, understands the four expression, “**נִפְלְתָה עָלָיו גְדֹלָה חֲשֵׁכָה אֵימָה** -- DREAD, DARKNESS, GREAT and DESCENDING UPON HIM” as a reference to the four kingdoms, the four civilizations that would rule over Israel through history: Babylon, Medea, Greece, and Edom (GenR 44:17). The midrash *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* adds even more salt to the wound by suggesting that Abraham, in a way, “asked for it”. When he said, “**בַּמָּה אֲדַע כִּי אִירְשֶׁנָּה** – how will I know that I am to inherit the land?” God answered him: “The whole world exists contingent on my word, and you ask – how will I know? By your life, you *most definitely* shall know: “**יָדַע תְּדַע כִּי גַר יִהְיֶה זְרָעְךָ**,” you shall surely know that your seed shall be strangers...” (Gen. 15:13) [PRE 48]. The midrash suggests that the very reason why Abraham and his children will not inherit the land, at least not right away, is because he questioned. Yet that kind of vindictive response does not fit my characterization of God. In my mind, God is more like my own father, the philosophy professor, who was amused and challenged by his precocious daughter, and would engage in discussion.

The discussion, however, does not appear in the text of the *Humash*, but in the midrash, *Breshit Rabbah*. What did God do at the conclusion of the promise? He showed him a vision of a smoking furnace and burning torch, “**תָּנוּר עֶשֶׂן וְלֶפֶיד אֵשׁ**”, passing between the pieces (v. 17).

“And it came to pass, when the sun had set and there was a dense darkness [*alata*], behold a smoking furnace and a flaming torch passed between the pieces” (Gen. 15:17). Shimon b. Abba said in R. Yohanan’s name: God showed Abraham four things: Gehenna, that is hell [symbolized by the furnace, תַּנּוּר], the [foreign] kingdoms [*malkhuyot*, the smoke, אָשׁ], the Revelation of Torah [the torch, לַפִּיד] and the Temple [the fire, אֶשׁ]. He said: as long as your children are engaged in the latter two [Torah and *avodah*, worship in the Temple] they will be saved from the former [Gehenna and the subjugation to the foreign kingdoms]. So now choose – how do you want them to “go down” [that is, suffer the consequences of their sins] – Gehenna or the kingdoms? (GenR 44:21)

Abraham’s choice is a kind of ‘Sophie’s choice’. To make a covenant, *likhrot brit*, entails *cutting (karat)* a decision for his children, here symbolized by the terrifying image of the smoking furnace and flaming torch passing between the pieces. The parts of bloody carcasses, lying across from one other, mark a gaunt line – the line signed in fire by the *Shekhinah*. The midrash goes on to cite three opinions. According to the first opinion, Abraham chose *malkhuyot* (the foreign kingdoms); according to the second, the patriarch chose Gehenna and God overrode his decision; according to the third, he vacillated all that day until finally, “On that day the Lord *cut a covenant* with Abraham” (Gen 15: 18) – the decision was made for him. Why was exile and subjugation to the foreign kingdoms the preferred choice? It entails the participation in history; the consequences to sin are felt collectively as a people – though some may be righteous, some less so. Our right to the land is granted conditionally, but, at least, the consequences are not eternal as the fires of hell. Rather there is always a possibility of *Teshuvah*, repentance, or *Tikun ‘Olam*; and if we don’t reap the benefits in this generation, maybe the next one will. The common belief is that Jews are oriented to *living in this world*; they are not focused on the next one, *‘Olam ha’bah*. Perhaps the origin of this belief has to do with what happened at the Covenant between the Pieces. The verdict was exile, “to be strangers in a land not their own”. We face and have faced, through time immemorial, subjugation to foreign kingdoms precisely because we are a people grounded in history, in time, ever yearning for a redemptive end.

The question remains: when Abraham wakes up from his deep sleep, *tardema*, does he remember the prophecy? Perhaps after the great, dark dread fell upon him and he was told of the four hundred years of exile, he woke up to the vision of the smoking furnace and flaming torch, the only impression left of the foreboding oracle. Perhaps he

forgot the terrible dream, the decision he may have ‘cut’ or not. There is no hint in the last two-thirds of the Book of Genesis that the patriarchs knew of the exile or the promise to return. Perhaps Joseph, a dreamer and interpreter of dreams, had inklings of the divine plan. But the myriad of *Bnei Yisrael* in Egypt, while they may have known of God’s promise to grant the Land of Canaan to the seed of Abraham, *eretz* and *zer’a*, they did not seem to know when the end of the exile would be. The truth is God did not condemn the Israelites to four hundred years of oppression and slavery but, according to Hazal, reduced ‘the sentence’ to two hundred and ten based the Gematria of *redu*, רדו (from Jacob’s prompt to his sons to “go down, *redu*, to Egypt” (Gen. 42:2). Yet even Jacob did not know whether the descent to Egypt was part of the divine plan and when it would all end. After all, God had to reassure him (cf. Gen. 46:3).

Just as the patriarchs and their descendants did not know the *ketz* (the End), so we are left wondering what bead on the heavenly abacus God is poised over. I began this Devar Torah about the measure of time, *hahodesh hazeh lakhem*, “This month is *for you*” the first of the months of the year (Ex. 12:2); it is a move into history while the waters of its river have been rushing by for years. But now the people are given a measure, a sense of *towards*, a history marked by hope. In one of Isaiah’s prophecies of comfort there is a paradoxical expression: “I the Lord will hasten it [i.e. the redemption] in its time [*be’itah ahishenah*]” (Isa. 60:22). How can God declare that he will hasten the redemption and, in the same breath, promise that it will come in its own time? Rashi comments: if the Israelites are worthy, God will hasten the End, if not, it will come in its own sweet time. This year, the State of Israel turns sixty. It is the first time in history, since the destruction of the Second Temple, that Israel has had more Jews than any country in the Diaspora. Will we merit the redemption? Is this the time? We don’t know but we have a hand in bringing it closer. Let us not sing “next year”, but rather “this year in a rebuilt Jerusalem – *be’shanah hazot be’Yerushalayim habenuyah!*”