BS”D

Parshas Lech Lecha 5776

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*The Midrash uses Avraham Avinu as a model for our dealing with the world.*

Midrashic Teachings about our Father Avraham

On this week’s Parshah, Lech Lecha, I’d like to quote or paraphrase some Midrash (Breishis Rabba 43) interspersed with some commentaries and some of my thoughts.

After the king of Sodom and his allies were vanquished by Kedorla’omer and his allies, Avraham rose to battle and succeeded in driving off the enemies, saving his nephew Lot, and returning the captives of Sodom and its sister cities.

When Avraham prepared for battle, the Torah tells us (Breishis 14:14), “*Vayarek es chanichov*,” which can be translated as “he mustered his retainers, 318 men.”

The sages loved to play with words and gave the words in the Torah multiple meanings. Vayarek can be translated as “made yellow.” It can be used to describe a person who becomes emotional and whose face becomes yellow or as we would say in English, “turns colors.”

The Midrash says the faces of Avraham’s people turned colors as they argued with Avraham. “How can we possibly fight the four kings. They are so powerful! They vanquished Sodom and its four allies, and you expect us to fight them!”

Others say Avraham’s face turned colors as he argued with his men. He said, “I will go out to war then without you and die for the sake of sanctifying G-d’s name!”

According to this view, Avraham went to battle with no illusions. He was prepared to die but not to sit idly by and fail to attempt to rescue Lot and his fellows.

Another way of translating the word Vayarek is “he emptied out.” Avraham conducted himself as the Torah tells us to do when waging war. Any man who is afraid and weak-hearted may go home and not fight. Avraham too offered this option to his men.

According to the Midrash Tanchuma, all of Avraham’s men opted out, leaving only Avraham’s loyal servant Eliezer.

The Torah tells us that Avraham’s victory over the four kings, he returned Lot, the women, and the rest of the captives to the king of Sodom. The Midrash says he did not return the children of Sodom but kept them. They were still spiritually salvageable, so Avraham taught them the way of G-d and they joined his tribe. Thus they grew up righteous and not wicked like the rest of Sodom.

It’s interesting that the Talmud (Nedarim 32a) criticizes Avraham for returning the captives. He should have kept them and tried to teach them the ways of G-d.

Perhaps the Midrash is aware of this criticism and mitigates it by saying he did indeed keep the children and teach them. In that case, perhaps the Talmud’s criticism is that he should have tried to win over the adults as well.

Clearly, the Midrash is using Avraham as a model for our dealing with the world. As much as possible we should try to teach others—even the children of Sodom—the way of G-d.

When Avraham returned from the battle, Malki Zedek, the king of Shalem, blessed him. He said, “Blessed is Avraham to the most high G-d, Creator (the Hebrew word *koneh* literally means who acquired) of heaven and earth.”

The Midrash says the following to explain the use of the word *koneh*:

Avraham would welcome travelers into his home. He would give them food and drink. Afterwards, he would ask them to bless G-d and say, “Blessed is the G-d of the world who has provided us with food.”

G-d said to Avraham, “My creation did not know me until you made me known to them. Therefore, it is as if you are a partner in the creation of the world.”

Thus, “koneh” can be translated literally as “acquired.” Although G-d created the world, He was not known. G-d acquired the world through Avraham, for he brought knowledge of G-d to mankind.

Avraham is our role model. We, too, should extend kindness to all. We, too, should bring awareness of G-d to the world. Man then becomes not merely a servant of G-d, but a partner with Him in bringing about G-d’s purpose in the creation, a world in which people know G-d and live righteously.

The Midrash says that Avraham merited many blessings by giving a tithe (tenth) of the spoils of war to Malki Tzedek.

There is a passage in the Rambam (Hilchot Melachim 9;1) that raises a question. The Rambam speaks about how the Patriarchs anticipated some of the Mitzvot, beyond the original seven Noahide commandments. Avraham observed circumcision and morning prayers. Yitzchak instituted tithing and afternoon prayers. The Ra’avad criticizes the Rambam and says that the Rambam should have attributed tithing to Avraham since he was the first to tithe as we see in the Parsha.

The Kesef Mishna says that Avraham did not give a tithe of his own possessions. Rather, he gave a tithe from the spoils of war to honor Malki Tzedek. Yitzchak gave a tithe from his own crops and that is the precedent for us to tithe our crops (and income).

Although most commentaries understand the simple meaning of the passage at hand to mean Avraham gave a tenth to Malki Tzedek, some commentaries say that it was Malki Tzedek who gave it to Avraham! The Chizkuni, for example, learns that on this occasion, the priesthood was taken from Malki Tzedek and given to Avraham, and therefore Malki Tzedek gave Avraham the tithe. In addition, the Chizkuni argues since Avraham did not accept the spoils of war, how could he tithe them?

Now this objection was already answered by the Rambam. The spoils of war by right belonged to Avraham. He had an obligation to tithe and give the priest of G-d his due. The rest of the spoils Avraham then chose not to accept, and he gave them to the king of Sodom.

At any rate, the Midrash Rabbah Hamevuar (p. 720) suggests that the Rambam learns that Avraham did not give a tenth at all as the Chizkuni learns.

I find it a bit difficult to say that this interpretation which is so far from the plain meaning of the text is the basis for the Rambam’s view.

In conclusion, the Midrash holds up a moral magnifiying glass to this story (and to all stories in the Torah). It is meant to instruct and inspire us to learn the qualities of Avraham: faith, self-sacrifice, kindness, outreach to teach the ways of G-d. We call Avraham our father. May we be his worthy children.