

Lech Lecha

Oh! The places you'll go!

God instructs Avram, "Lech Lecha," and Avram does precisely that. He leaves Mesopotamia and makes his way to Canaan. However, on his arrival at the designated land, he seems to be in a perpetual state of transit. Avram is constantly moving from place to place. Following through the course of our parasha, we read how Avram arrives in the land and makes his way to Sh'chem (12:6), then Beit El (12:8), then down south¹ (12:9). From there he has a brief visit to Egypt, returning to Beit El (13:4), and then to Hebron (13:14).² We don't know the degree to which this incessant movement³ is initiated by Abraham or directed by God⁴. We do read however, that when Avram was in Beit El, he was instructed:

"Arise and walk in the land, its length and breadth for I will give it to you" (13:17)

So possibly this restlessness is divinely mandated, and yet it would be interesting to probe the places that Avram visits and the impression that he made on each location.

BEIT EL.

Avram's first stop in Eretz Canaan is Sh'chem. It is there that God promises to give him that land. Avram responds by building an altar – one assumes that the sacrifices offered upon it are an expression of thanks⁵.

"He moved from there into the mountains, east of Beit El and pitched his tent with Beit El in the west and the Ai in the east and he built an altar there to God and he called out in the name of God."

Let us examine this passage. Certain questions come to mind. Our first problem relates to the detailed geographical coordinates - "Beit El in the west; the Ai in the east." After all, if he pitched his tent to the east of Beit El, then surely Beit El is in the west! And what is the necessity of the naming of the surrounding cities? We might add that in the next chapter, when he returns to this altar (13:3) it is also precisely oriented as "between Beit El and the Ai." Why is this so important?

¹ I assume that the word "Hanegba" does not refer to what we today call "The Negev" as that region is out of the bounds of Biblical Canaan. See Rashi and Ibn Ezra that it refers to regions in the south of the country. See for example, I Samuel 30:14 where the phrase Negev refers to the southern areas of the Hebron hills. The Ramban suggests that this is precisely the region to which Avram travelled.

² Later (20,1) we find him in Gerar and in Beer Sheva (21:34; 22:19). It would seem that he spends the end of his life in Hebron. It is there that he buries Sarah and there that he is buried.

³ Rashi 12:9

⁴ See the Ramban on 13:17 who raises both options and suggests that God allowed Avram to travel the country but certainly did not instruct him to do so.

⁵ Rashi

But further questions arouse our curiosity, and here I refer to the phrase: "And he called there in the name of God". In many places Avram builds an altar. This is true in Sh'chem (12:7) and Hebron (13:18). But it is specifically here that we hear a new feature: "And he called out in the name of God." What is this calling in God's name? How does it express itself? What does it entail? Let us add that when he returns to this altar after his visit to Egypt, we read yet again how "Avram called out there in the name of God." So this is an act that he repeats the next time he visits Beit El. What is this calling in the name of God?⁶

DETERMINING THE FUTURE

If we may begin with the names of the towns and cities, **Rashi** adopts a Midrashic approach viewing the excessive attention to geographical detail as references (or "links" as we call them in an internet age) to other events in Jewish History:

Sh'chem: To pray for the son's of Jacob who will fight in Sh'chem

Elon Moreh, which is Sh'chem. HE showed him Mt. Eval and Mt. Gerizim where Israel took an oath of acceptance of Torah⁷.

He built an altar (at Ai): He prophesied that his descendents were going to fall in the sin of Achan⁸ and thee he prayed for them.

This approach explains the extensive attention paid to the names of places here in a novel way. From a straightforward narrative perspective these details would appear extraneous, even a distraction to the central plot, to the thrust of the story. But in this reading, we see Avram as a prophet, fully aware and connected to future history, praying for his future descendents. There is a certain intra-Biblical logic too as we consider the fact that references to the town of Ai are found exclusively in the chapters about Avram and then again in Joshua. The Midrash takes this as a connection point, that in some manner the two stories are linked. In an approach that adopts the principle of Maaseh Avot Siman LeBanim (see Ramban on 12:6) Avram acts in order to assist future events that will effect his offspring. As the Talmud (Baba Batra 100a) suggests, avaraham's walking to the "length and breadth" of the country was "in order to ease the way of his children in conquering the land."

But of course with a more rational and textual eye, this awareness on Avram's part seems in opposition to the very storyline of our parasha. After all, in chapter 15 Avram seems to doubt the possibility that he will have any offspring! - Is he so sure about future Jewish History? Moreover, from where might we think that prophets have total awareness of future events? Nothing in Tanach gives us an indication that our

⁶ Avram calls out in God's name a further time at Beer Sheva – see 21:33, so this phenomenon is not limited to Beit El.

⁷ Here the linguistic connection is ELON MOREH with a grammatical root that links to the word TORAH.

⁸ Joshua ch.7-8

forebears had panoramic and absolute clarity as to future events of our nation.

CALLING IN GOD'S NAME

Let us suggest a different thrust to these pesukim. We raised earlier the question of Avram calling in God's name. Ibn Ezra comments:

He called out in the name of God: Prayer. Or it could be a call to people to come and serve God.

The first option of prayer is suggested by the Targum Onkeles, but the second approach is amplified by the school of the Radak and Ramban.

"He called out in God's name, meaning that he invited the local inhabitants ... to come to his altar and he appealed to them that it was worthwhile serving the God to which he had built the altar rather than the gods which they worshipped. He converted many people to his faith, as we see that twice he called out in the name of God at that specific location. Possibly he assessed that the people there were open to change and repentance." (Radak)

Avram was interested in influencing the locals. Discerning a window of opportunity amongst the local tribes, he created a religious centre to spread knowledge of God and invited the local inhabitants to come and learn and hear about monotheism. Possibly this can explain the emphasis of the text that Avram pitched his TENT, and also the location, BETWEEN two cities. Avram was creating a new centre, a magnet for thirsty souls, a place for people to come and learn about monotheism. His tent was the Beit Midrash and he deliberately pitched his tent between towns to appeal to a wider audience and maybe so as not to stir up local animosities.

The Ramban perceives this as a deliberate policy and method of the Avot beyond this lone event of Avraham Avinu.

"He would call out God's name loudly at the site of his altar publicizing God's identity to mankind. In Ur Kasdim he preached but people did not want to listen. But now, in the land that God had promised "those who bless you, I will bless," he decided to teach and to spread the notion of monotheism. The Torah reports the same thing with Isaac when he came to Gerar, and was promised 'Do not be afraid for I am with you' that 'he built an altar there, and called out in the name of God.'(26:25) For he had arrived a new region of a nation who had not heard of God ... and he publicized God's presence amongst those peoples. With Jacob, we do not read of this as he had many sons, who all served God and he had a large

community ... and the belief was spread through them."

The roots of this approach certainly pre-date the medieval commentaries. Already Midrash Rabba sees these pesukim depicting Avram as a local preacher:

"And he called in the name of God": This teaches that Avram caused God's name to be spoken in the mouths of all human beings. "He called": He began to convert people and to bring them under the wings of the Shekhina. (Bereshit Rabba 39:24)

HEBRON and the BRIT AVRAM

In response to God's instruction, "Arise and wander the land, to its length and breadth," Avram moves on from his centre of teaching in Beit El. He moves to Hebron, and it is here that we shall see a new dimension to Avram's influence. In Hebron, otherwise known as "Alonei Mamre," Avram begins by building an altar (13:18). But Mamre is not simply the name of a place. It is the name of a person and in a later episode - the story of the war between the four and five Kings (ch.14) - we read of Anner, Eshkol and Mamre who are participants in "the covenant of Avram."⁹ What is the covenant of Avram? It sounds like a mini-religion, a cult, a spiritual group whose leader is Avraham. How large was this group? Was it just Anner, Eshkol and Mamre, or were there other participants?

In that episode, Avram goes to battle accompanied by three-hundred and eighteen of his "*Khanikhav, Yelidei Beito*." Two phrases are used. First - "*Khanikh*", and second: "*Yelidei Beito*." Who are these people born into Avram's household? Are they slaves? Fellow monotheists? This group partake in Brit Milah:

"The men of his Household, those born in his house ... were circumcised with him." (17:27)

From all this information, it sounds like Avram has a following, joined by covenant, a group of associates or disciples who form a "commune" in Elonei Mamre surrounded by the families of Anner, Eshkol and Mamre and possibly many others. Yet again, Avram has created a religious centre. But it sounds like a step up. Now Avraham has generated a community bound to a covenant.

Later, the townsfolk of Hebron describe Avram as "A prince of God amongst us." We wonder whether this respect, this title may have been influenced by Avram's effect upon this large group, numbering more than three-hundred people who gathered around Avram? The Torah does not afford us a direct glance at this group, and yet we understand that the "covenant of Avram" was real and influential.¹⁰

⁹ 14:13, 24. The Netziv sees this as a religious faith-based pact.

¹⁰ Hebron is also the place where Avraham intervenes twice in the affairs of other nations. First, with Sedom when he goes to war. And then again, when he protests to God about Sedom's destruction. This may be related to sedom's geographical proximity to Sedom, but possibly to a particular wider involvement as a local chieftan, that he develops specifically during these Hebron years.

If we may add a further piece to this mosaic, then we should recall Avram's enthusiastic and expansive hospitality. After all, the story of Avraham welcoming three strangers, travellers, into his tent, took place in Elonei Mamre (18:1). We now understand that Avram's "tent" was not simply a Beit Midrash but also a dining hall that offered food and a rest stop for passers-by. One imagines that this wonderful combination of Torah and hospitality – *Torat Chessed* – greatly enhanced the appeal of Avram's cause.

Possibly Avram kept walking, kept travelling in order to connect to the landscape, cities, trees and valleys in a deeper manner. We, his children, have never lost that connection.

Shabbat Shalom
Alex

MOVIN' SOUTH. GERAR and BEER SHEVA.

Later Avram moves to Gerar¹¹ (20:1-2) where he arouses the animosity of Avimelech, the local ruler. He proceeds to Beer Sheva and eventually makes a pact with Avimelech. There, he plants an Eshel – seemingly, a tree and once again calls out in God's name (21,33). Again, a number of suggestions are raised as to the purpose of this Eshel, and the nature of Avraham's religious acts:

רש"י בראשית פרק כא פסוק לג

(לג) אשל - רב ושמואל, חד אמר פרדס להביא ממנו פירות לאורחים בסעודה, וחד אמר פונדק לאכסניא ובו כל מיני פירות. ומצינו לשון נטיעה באהלים, שנאמר (דניאל יא מה) ויטע אהלי אפדנו:

ויקרא שם וגו' - על ידי אותו אשל נקרא שמו של הקב"ה אלוה ללך העולם. לאחר שאוכלים ושותים אומר להם ברכו למי שאכלתם משלו, סבורים אתם שמשלי אכלתם, משל מי שאמר והיה העולם אכלתם:

רשב"ם

(לג) ויטע אשל - פרדס היה להתפלל שם:

אבן עזרא

(לג) אשל אילן גם ויטע לאות:

If we can summarise and close this approach, we suggest that Avram travelled from place to place in order to spread the word of God. As a travelling preacher he built altars, assessed the openness of the local population and actively publicised the name of God while building alliances and "covenants" and offering hospitality to those who passed by.

MAKING A CONNECTION WITH THE LAND

Maybe we are trying too hard here. The Midrash has a very simple suggestion for Avram's endless journeying:

"They taught: A person that walks in a field whether its length or breadth has acquired the land up to the point which he has walked, this follows the opinion of R. Eliezer from the proof-text "Arise and walk in the land.(13:17)" (Midrash Rabba 41:17)

Anyone who has hiked and travelled around Israel knows that in exploring and experiencing the land, one develops a deep connection, a special love for the land. In some manner they acquire a little portion of Eretz Yisrael.

¹¹ One wonders why Avraham moves from Hebron. Was it a response to the destruction of Sedom, or did another event prompt the move?