Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter III: Lech Lecha (Gen. 12:1-17:27)

Essay 1. The death of Terah

מִדְרָשׁ רַבָּה עַל פָּסוּק "לֶּדּ־לְדּ", מַה כְּתִיב לַמַּעֲלֶה מִן הָעִנָיָן "וַיָּמֶת הֶּרַח בְּחָרָן", אָמֵר ר' יִצְחַק אִם לְעִנְיָן הַחֶּשְׁבּוֹן וְעַד עַּלְשִׁים הְחַמֵּשׁ שָׁנִים. אָלֶא בִּתְחַלֶּה אַהָּה דּוֹרֵשׁ שָׁהָרְשָׁעִים בְּחַיֵּיהֶם קְרוּיִים מֵתִים, לְפִי שֶׁהָיָה אַבְרָהָם אָבִיוּ מְתָבְּקשׁ לוֹ עוֹד שִׁשִׁים וְחָמֵשׁ שָׁנִים. אָלֶא בִּתְחַלֶּה אַהָּה דּוֹרֵשׁ שֶׁהָרְשָׁעִים בְּחַבְּיהָם קְרוּיִים מֵתִים, לְפִי שֶׁהָיָּה אָבְרָהָם אָבִיוּ מְפָחֵד וְאוֹמֵר אֵצֵא וְיִהְיוּ מְחַלְּלִים בִּי שֵׁם שְׁמֵיִם וְיֹאמְרוּ הִנִּים אָבִיו לְעֵת זְקְנָתוֹ וְהָלֵךְ לוֹ. אָמֵר לוֹ הקב"ה לְּךְ אֲנִי פּוֹטֶרְ אַכֵּר מִכְּיבּוּד אַב וָאֵם, וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלֶּא שֶׁאֲנִי מַקְדִּים מִיתָתוֹ לִיצִיאָתְדְּ, בַּתְּחַלָּה "וַיָּמֶת הֶּרַח בְּחָרָן" וְאַחַר כָּךְ "וִיּאמֶר ה' וַיּאֹמֶר" עכ"ל.

Midrash Rabbah on the verse, "The L-rd said to Abram: 'Go forth from your country, and your relatives, and your father's house' ":1

What is written prior to this matter? "Terah died in Haran." Rabbi Yitzchak said: If you follow the calculation [of years] until now, [Terah] still had an additional sixty-five years coming to him.

Initially, [to explain this discrepancy], you expound that the wicked in their lifetimes are called "dead." [Why does the Torah mention Terah at this time, if he was still alive?] Because our forefather Abraham was fearful, and he said: "If I leave, the Name of Heaven will be desecrated because of me, as people will say: 'He abandoned his father and left him in his old age.' "The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: "I exempt you from honoring your father and mother, but I do not exempt anyone else from honoring their father and mother. Moreover, I am advancing [the report of] his death before your departure; first: 'Terah died in Haran' and then: 'the Lord said to Abram, Go forth from your country.'"

- Gen. Rabbah 39:7

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¹ Gen. 12:1.

² Gen. 11:32.

The calculation will be explained later in this essay.

ְּהָוּא תָּמוּהַ דַּהָּלֹא תָּרַח עוֹבֵד עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה הָיָה וּמֵחֲמַת זָה אַבְרָהָם אֵינוֹ חַיָּיב בִּכְבוֹדוֹ. וְלָמָה אָמַר לוֹ לְּךְּ אֲנִי פּוֹטֶרְךְּ וְאֵין אֲנִי פּוֹטֵרְךָ וְאֵין אֲנִי פּוֹטֵרְ אַחֵר מִכִּיבּוּד אַב וָאַם, וַהָּלֹא בֵּר מִינָן כָּל בֵּן שֶׁאָבִיו עוֹבֵד עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה אֵינוֹ חַיָּיב בִּכְבוֹדוֹ. וְעוֹד מַה בָּצַע שֶׁהַכְּתוּב הִקְדִּים מִיתַתוֹ וְהוּא דָּבָר שֶׁהָעִין מַכְחִישׁ, שֶׁהָרֵי תָּרַח כְּשֶׁנּוֹלֵד אַבְרָהָם הָיָה בֶּן שִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה וְחַבֶּשׁ שָׁנִים וְאַבְרָהָם כְּיֹם וְאַבְּרָהָם כְּיִם וְחַמֵּשׁ שָׁנִים וְחָבֵשׁ שְׁנִים וְמָבְעִים וְמָבְשׁ וְשִׁבְעִים, נִמְצֵא לְתָּרָח מֵאָה אַרְבָּעִים וְחַמֵּשׁ שָׁנִים. וְעוֹד מַהוּ בָּתְחַלֵּה אַתָּה דּוֹרֵשׁ וְכוּיֹ.

This is strange, for wasn't Terah a worshipper of idolatry, and because of this Abraham was not obliged to honor him? Why did He say to him, "Go forth, I exempt you from honoring your father and mother, but I do not exempt anyone else from honoring their father and mother," for in any case, any son whose father is a worshipper of idolatry is not obliged to honor him?

Also, what is to be gained by Scripture first mentioning [Terah's] death before recording G-d's order for Abraham to leave? For this is something that the eye disproves, for when Abraham was born, Terah was 70 years old,⁴ and he lived 205 years,⁵ and Abraham when he went out from his father's house was 75 years old,⁶ so it's found that Terah was 145 years old at that time. Thus, Terah lived 60 years after Abraham left.⁷

Also, what is the meaning of "Initially, you expound that the wicked in their lifetimes are called 'dead' "?

ְוָיֵשׁ לוֹמֵר דְּכַנָּונַת הַמִּדְרָשׁ הִיא כָּךָ, שֶׁלְּכְאוֹרָה לְפִי פְּשָׁט הַפְּסוּקִים שֶׁכָּתַב "וַיָּמֶת הֶּרַח בְּחָרָן" הַרְבֵּה שָׁנִים קוֹדֵם מִיתָתוֹ וְעוֹד צָּנָּה לְאַרְרָהָם בְּנוֹ לַעֲזוֹב אֶת אָבִיו כְּאִילּוּ הָיָה כְּבָר מֵת, יֵשׁ לְךּ לוֹמֵר שֶׁהַטַּעַם לְכָל זֶה הוּא מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהָרְשָׁעִים בְּחַיֵּיהֶם קְרוּיִים מֵתִים, אָבָל לְפִי הָאֱמֶת אֵינוֹ כֵּן, שֶׁאַדְרַבָּא הָתְחִיל הֶּרַח לַעֲשׁוֹת הְשׁוּבָה מְעַט מְעַט כְּדְכְתִיב "וַיִּקְּח הֶּרַח אֶת־אַרְרָם בְּנוֹ . . . וַיִּצְאוּ אִהָּם מֵאוּר כַּשְׁדִּים" וְכוּי, וְאַבְרָהָם הָיָה מְפָחֵד לַעֲזוֹב אוֹתוֹ פֶּן יַחְזוֹר לְסוֹרוֹ.

It can be said that the intention of the Midrash is thus, that apparently there is a simple meaning of the verses that write, "And Terah died in Haran"—which was many years before his death—and also the verse that [G-d] commanded his son, Abraham, to leave his father, as if he had already died. It can be said that the reason for all this is because the wicked in their lives are called "dead."

But the truth is that this is not [the reason in this case], for to the contrary, Terah started to repent slowly. As it is written, "Terah took his son Abram; his grandson Lot, the son of Haran; and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there," and Abraham was afraid to leave [Terah], lest he return to deviance.

⁴ Gen. 11:26.

⁵ Gen. 11:32.

⁶ Gen. 12:4.

⁷ There is a discrepancy, as the Midrash states that Terah died 65 years after Abraham's departure.

⁸ Berachot 18b.

⁹ Gen. 11:31.

ְּזָהוּ, לְפִי שֶׁהָיָה אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ מִתְפַּחֵד וְאוֹמֵר אֵצֵא וְיִהִיוּ מְחַלְלִים בִּי שֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, כְּלוֹמֵר עַכְשָׁיו שֶׁהוּא מַתְחִיל לְהִיוֹת מְזוּמָן לְהִיחָרֵט מֵצְוֹנוֹתָיו וְלָשׁוּב בִּתְשׁוּבָה אֲנִי אֶתְרַחֵק מִמֶּנוּ. וְאַרֲבָּא מִן הַדִּין הָיָה לְהָבִיאוֹ עִמִּי לָאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֻׁכְּשׁם שֶׁזְּכוּת אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל תֹּוֹעִיל לוֹ לְהִתְחַרֵט לְגִמְרִי וְלָשׁוּב בִּתְשׁוּבָה שְׁלִימָה. וְאָמֵר לוֹ הקב"ה לְּדְּ אֲנִי פּוֹטֶרְדְּ אֶבֶי פּוֹטֶרְדְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לוֹ לְהִתְחַרֵט לְגִמְרִי וְלָשׁוּב בִּתְשׁוּבָה שְׁלִוֹם", וּפֵרֵשׁ רַשִׁ"י בִּשְׁרוֹ שַּיִצְשָׁה מִכִּיה הָבְטַחָתִּי לְדְּ בְּמַרְאָה בֵּין הַבְּתָרִים "וְאַמָּה הָבוֹא אֶל־אֲבֹתִידְ בְּשָׁלוֹם", וּפַרֵשׁ רַשִּׁ"י בְּשְׂרוֹ שַׁיִצְשָׁה הָּכִר הְבָטַחְתִּי לְדְּ לְבָּלְיץ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא לְהִתְעַכֵּב אָצְלוֹ עַד שֶׁיִּתְחָרֵט לְגַמְרֵי שֶׁבְּוֹדִאי יִתְחָרֵט מֵעַצְמוֹ, אֲבָל הָתְחַרֵט מְצִצְמוֹ, אֲבָל עִד שְׁיִּתְשֹׁר עוֹבִד עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה וְמָתְחִיל לְהִתְחַרֵט אֵין לוֹ רְשׁוּת לְהִתְרַחֵק מְמֵנּוּ לְכִי שֶׁאֵרִין לוֹ הַבְּטַחָה זוֹ.

That is, because our father Abraham was afraid and said I will leave and they will profane the name of Heaven on my account, as if to say, now that he has begun to be ready to repent of his sins and return in repentance, I am distancing myself from him. To the contrary, the right thing to do is to bring him with me to the Land of Israel, for just as the merit of the Land of Israel will benefit me to raise sons, it would similarly benefit him to fully repent and return in complete repentance. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him, "I exempt you from honoring your father and mother, because I have always promised you in the vision Between the Parts, '0 'As for you, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried at a ripe old age,' "11 and Rashi explained, He announced to him that Terah had repented. Thus, there is no need to take him with you to the Land of Israel and to stay with him until he completely repents, for certainly he will repent on his own. But regarding another son whose father worships idolatry and begins to repent, he does not have permission to distance himself from him, because there is no such guarantee.

וְאָם תּאֹמֵר עֲדַיִין לֹא הָיְתָה לוֹ לְאַבְרָהָם הַבְטָחָה זוֹ, שֶׁלֹא נָאֶמְרָה לוֹ אֶלָּא בָּבְרִית בֵּין הַבְּתָרִים, מְשׁוּם הָכִי הוֹסִיף וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָא שֶׁאֲנִי מֵקְדִּים מִיתָתוֹ לִיצִיאָתְּדּ, שֶׁלְּפִי מֵה שֶׁכָּתְבוּ הַתּוֹסְפוֹת בְּפֶּרֶק קַמָּא דְּבְרָכוֹת (דַּף ז') מַעֲשֶׁה בֵּין הַבְּתָרִים הָיָה חַמֵּשׁ שָׁנִה מְוֹדֶם פְּרָשָׁה זוֹ שֶׁל לֶדְ־לְדּ, שֶׁבָּאן הָיָה אַבְרָהָם בֵּן שִׁבְעִים וַחָמֵשׁ שְׁנָה, וּכְדֵי שְׁיָּדְעוּ הַכֹּל שֶׁאֵין מוּקְדָם וּמְאוּחָר בַּתּוֹרָה וְיִאָמִינוּ שֶׁבָּעְשׁה שֶׁל בֵּין הַבְּתָרִים הָיָה קוֹדֵם נְסִיעָתוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם, מְשׁוּם הָכִי הִקְדִּים לוֹמַר "וַיָּמְת הָּרַח בְּחָרָן", שֻׁזָּהוּ מוֹפֵת חוֹתֵך שָׁצֵין מוּקְדָּם וּמְאוּחָר בַּתּוֹרָה.

You may say, Abraham did not yet have this promise, which was only told to him at the Covenant Between the Parts. According to what the Tosafists wrote in the first chapter of Berachot (page 7b), the incident of the Covenant Between the Parts was five years before this parashah, for there Abraham was 75 years old.¹²

Thus, in order to inform everyone that there is no earlier or later in the Torah, i.e., it is not necessarily written in chronological order, and they should know that the incident of the Covenant Between the Parts was prior to the journey of Abraham, because of that, [Scripture] first mentioned "and Terah died in Haran." That is clear and decisive evidence that there is no earlier and later in the Torah.

¹⁰ Gen. 15:7–21.

¹¹ Gen. 15:15.

¹² Gen. 12:4.

ּוְעוֹד יֵשׁ לוֹמֵר עַל הַהִּיא שֶׁאֲנִי מַקְדִּים מִיתָתוֹ לִיצִיאָתְדּ, שֶׁלְפִי הָאֱמֶת הַוְיָא הַכְּחָשָׁה בִּמְצִיאוּת, אֶלָּא הוֹאִיל דְּקְיִמָּא לֵן דְּכֹל מֵאן דְּנָחִית מִדּּרְגָּא קּדְמָאָה דְּהַנָה בֵּיהּ מִקְרֵי מִיתָה, כִּדְאִיתָא בְּזוֹהֵר כָּרָשַׁת נָשֹׁא (דַּף קל"ה ע"ב בְּאַדָּרָא) וְעִיי"ש. אַף כָּאן דְּנָחִית מִדּּרְגָּא קִּדְמָאָה דְּהָנָה בִּיהּ מִקְרֵי מִיתָה, כִּדְאִיתָא בְּזוֹהֵר לָּהָם צְּלָמִים. אֲבָל לְאַחֵּר שֶׁנִּיצוּל אַבְרָהָם מֵאוּר כַּשְׁדִּים מְמְחִלְּה הָּרָה בְּיִבְּל לְאָחֵר שָׁנִיד אֲחַר מַאֲמֶינִים לוֹ וְלֹא לְצְלָמִיו, וּמֵעַתָּה שַׁפִּיר אָמֵר קְרָא שָׁמִיִּד אַחַר מַעֲשֶׂה שֶׁל אוּר בְּשְׁדִּים נִקְרָא שֶׁמֶּל הַּרָח.

Also, it can be said regarding the fact that I advanced the report of his death before your departure, that the truth is that there was a denial of reality, for we understand from the math that Terah hadn't died at this time.

Rather, since we maintain that whenever there is a descent from a higher level to a lower level, it is considered to be like death, as is brought in the Zohar, parashat Nasso (page 135b in the Idara), and see there. But here, initially Terah had support and great profits from the people of his generation, for he would sell them idols. But after Abraham mocked the idols and then was rescued from the fiery furnace of Ur Kasdim, [Terah's] power was weakened and he fell and descended from his greatness, as no longer did he have people believing in him and in his idols. Now, with this understanding, it's fine that Scripture said immediately after the incident of Ur Kasdim that Terah was considered "dead."

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¹³ Zohar, Idra Rabba, Naso 135b.

¹⁴ Rashi on Gen. 11:28.