

Zera Shimshon

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

Essay 14. Abraham chooses between Exile and Gehenna

מדרש ילקוט על פסוק "ואברם כבד מאד במקנה בכסף ובזהב", הדא הוא דכתיב "ויציאם בכסף וזהב ואין בשבטיו פושל" עכ"ל, והוא תמוה, מה ענין זה לזה.

Midrash Yalkut Shimoni on the verse:

“And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold.”¹ This is what is written, “And He brought them out with silver and gold, and there was not among His tribes one who stumbled.”²

- Yalkut Shimoni, Parashat Lekh Lekha, remez 69

This is puzzling—what is the connection between this and that?

וגיש לומר שאמרו במדרש דכמרצה בין הבתרים אמר הקב"ה לאברהם במה אתה רוצה שיירדו בניך, בגיהנם או במלכות, ואברהם בירר לו את המלכות, כדי שלא ירדו לגיהנם. ובפרק קמא דעבודה זרה אמרינו, "מיימתו והיה לכם זה להם ליראה אתי" וכו', לבטל מהם המלאכה המנות אי אפשר שפבר נגזרה גזירה, לבטל מהם מיתה אי אפשר שפבר נקנסה, הא לא קבלו ישראל את התורה אלא על מנת שלא תהא אומה ולשון שולטת בהם וכו'.

One may say that it was stated in the Midrash that in the vision of the [Covenant] between the Parts, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Abraham:

“Through which do you wish your descendants to be punished, through Gehenna or through the Kingdoms?” Abraham chose the Kingdoms, so that they wouldn’t descend to Gehenna.

- Gen. Rabbah 44:21

In the first chapter of Avodah Zarah (5a), there is a dispute over whether the Israelites would have become immortal upon accepting the Torah at Sinai, if they had not erred with the Golden Calf. It is said:

“[Even though Scripture says:] ‘May they always be of such mind, to fear Me and follow all My commandments, that it may go well with them and with their

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¹ Gen. 13:2.

² Ps. 105:37.

children forever,'³ [nevertheless] **it was not possible to nullify [the power of] the Angel of Death over them, as the decree [of death] was already issued [from the time of Creation]. [Rather,] the Jewish people accepted the Torah [not with an expectation of immortality, but] only in order that no nation or tongue would rule over them.**

- Avodah Zarah 5a

וְקוֹשֶׁה דָּאָם יֵשׁ מְלָאָךְ הַמָּוֶת אִם כּוֹן יֵשׁ יֵצֵר הַרַע שְׁהָרִי הוּא יֵצֵר הַרַע הוּא מְלָאָךְ הַמָּוֶת, וְזוֹ אֵינָה טוֹבָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, שְׂכַשְׂלֵא יִהְיֶה גְלוּת יִרְדּוּ לְגַהֲנוֹם וְאֵיהֶּה הַהִבְטָחָה שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ. וְיֵשׁ לִזְמַר דָּאִין הָכִי נָמִי שְׂאָם לֹא הָיוּ עוֹשִׂים הָעֶגְלָה, אַף אִם יִסְטָאוּ אֶתְרָךְ יִהְיוּ הוֹלְכִים בְּגְלוּת וְלֹא בְּגִיּוֹנָם, וְהָאִי דְקָאֵמַר שְׂלֵא תְהֵא אֹמְרָה וְלִשׁוֹן שׁוֹלְטָת בְּהֵם, הָיִינוּ בְּמִוֶּנֶם, מִשׁוּם דְּהֵתָם פְּרִיָךְ לִיהֵ מִדְּכַתִּיב "אָכַן כְּאָדָם תָּמוּתוּן", וּמְסִיק מֵאִי מִיתָה? עֲנִיּוּת, וּפְרַשׁ רַש"י, "מֵאִי מִיתָה? עֲנִיּוּת, שְׂמִשְׁחָטָאוּ שְׂלֵטוּ בְּהֵם הָאוּמוֹת הַמְכַלִּים מְמוֹנָם כֹּל הַיּוֹם בְּ"וְהָיָה לְאָכַל" עַכ"ל.

This is difficult to understand. If there is an Angel of Death, then there is also an evil inclination, for it is the evil inclination that is the Angel of Death. This is not good for Israel, for if there were no exile, they would descend to Gehinnom, so where is the promise to Abraham our father?

One may say that indeed, if they had not made the Golden Calf, even if they sinned afterward, they would go into exile and not into Gehinnom. That which it says, "that no nation or tongue should rule over them," refers to their possessions. For there, in Avodah Zarah 5a, it raises the question from that which is written, "Surely you shall die like men,"⁴ and concludes, "What is death?—poverty."

Rashi explains the Gemara: " 'What is death?—poverty,' that when they sinned, the nations ruled over them, consuming their wealth all day, 'and they shall be devoured.'⁵ "

שְׂמַע מִינֵהּ שְׂעִיקָר הָעוֹנֵשׁ הָיָה עַל הַמָּמוֹן, מִדָּה כְּנֶגֶד מִדָּה הוּאִיל שְׂעֵשׂוּ הָעֶגְלָה מְרוֹב כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב שְׂהָיָה לָהֶם, הָא לֹא הָכִי אַף אִם הָלְכוּ בְּגְלוּת הָיוּ כּוֹלֵם שְׁרִים לְאֹדְנֵיהֶם, וְכִמוֹ שְׂהָיוּ יַעֲקֹב וְיוֹסֵף בְּמִצְרַיִם.

Hear from this that the main punishment concerned their wealth, as measure-for-measure punishment, since they made the Golden Calf out of the abundance of silver and gold they possessed. If not for this, even if they went into exile, they would all have been princes to their masters, just as Jacob and Joseph were in Egypt.

³ Deut. 5:26.

⁴ Ps. 82:7.

⁵ Deut. 31:17.

ונודע שאם היו ישראל משלימים הקץ במצרים היו גומרים התיקון הכללי ולא הנה להם עוד לעולם להשתעבד תחת שום אומה ולשון, מה שאין פן עתה שלא השלימו. יש להם להשלים בארבע גלויות אחרות, כמו שנאריך בזה לקמן על סדר וענין הפרשיות. ואף הרכוש גדול לא הנה להם לזכות בו אלא אחר השלמת הקץ, מה שאין פן עתה שיצאו קודם זמנם, כמו שפיתבו המפרשים וכמו שנאריך גם בזה במקומו בענין יציאת מצרים ועיי"ש. אלא שרצה הקב"ה להודיע לאותו צדיק שאף אם יהיו מוכנים לקחת בגלויות אחרות משום הדילוג של הקץ, עם כל זה רוצה ליתן להם רכוש גדול, לסימן שבגלויות אחרות לא יהיו עוד עניים אלא עשירים כמו שהם עתה, הגם שלפי שלא השלימו הזמן עדיין תורת וחוב העבדות עליהם.

It is known that if Israel had completed the appointed time in Egypt, they would have completed the general rectification, and never again would they have been enslaved under any nation or tongue, which is not the case now that they did not complete the appointed time.

They must complete four other exiles, as we will elaborate later according to the order and matter of the weekly parshas. Even regarding the great wealth they received, they were not worthy to merit it except after the completion of the appointed time; whereas now, since they left before their time, as the commentators wrote, and as we will also elaborate in its place concerning the Exodus from Egypt, and see there.

Rather, the Holy One, Blessed be He, desired to make known to that righteous one that even though they would be destined to go into other exiles because of the shortened time, nonetheless He wished to give them great wealth. This would be a sign that in the other exiles they would no longer be poor but wealthy, as they are now, even though, since they had not completed the time they were to be in Egypt, the law and obligation of servitude was still upon them.

ואברהם הנה פן שבעים שנים כשפרת עמו הברית בין הבתרים כמו שפיתבו התוספות (ברכות דף ז' ע"ב ד"ה לא הנה אדם ושראו אדון נכו' ואז תקף ומיד התחיל גלות מצרים, שנירדו שם למצרים המלאכים הממונים על ישראל והיו שם עד שיצאו, כמו שפיתבו המקובלים, וירידת אברהם למצרים היתה בציווי הקב"ה שאמר לו לה וכבוש הדרך לבניה, כדאיתא בבראשית רבה על "ולאברהם היטיב בעבורה", ואמר הכתוב "ואברהם כבד מאד במקנה", פלומר אף על פי שכבר התחיל הגלות הנה לו עושר רבה, לסימן לבניו שפשיצאו משם קודם הזמן אף על פי שעדיין עול עבדות עליהם יצאו ברכוש גדול, להורות שהגלות שפירר אברהם הוא כמו הגלות שסבלו האבות ויוסף, שהיו מלכים ושרים, ולא שיצטערו בו יותר מדאי.

Abraham was seventy years old when he made the Covenant between the Parts, as Tosafot wrote (Berachot page 7b, text beginning "There was no man who called Him 'Master,'" etc.), and then immediately the exile of Egypt began: for the angels appointed over Israel descended there and remained until they left, as the Kabbalists wrote.⁶ Abraham's descent to Egypt was by command of the Holy One, Blessed be He, who said to him, "Go and subdue the way for your children," as it is brought in Gen. Rabbah (40:8) on the verse, "And it was well with Abram for her sake."⁷ Scripture says, "And Abram was very rich in cattle," as if to say that even though the exile had already begun, he had great wealth, to be a sign to

⁶ R. Menachem ben Meir of Speyer (c.1340–c.1410), *Sefer Tzioni* (1384), Parashat Lech Lecha.

⁷ Gen. 12:16.

his children that when they would go forth from there before their time, even though the yoke of servitude was still upon them, they would go out with great substance, to show that the exile which Abraham chose was like the exile endured by the Patriarchs and by Joseph, who were kings and princes, and would not suffer excessively in it.

וְנָהוּ פְּנוּנֵת הַמִּדְרָשׁ, "וְאַבְרָם כְּבֹד מְאֹד", וְקִשָּׁה וְכִי שָׁבַח הוּא לְאַבְרָהָם לְהִיּוֹת פֶּלֶךְ עֲשִׂיר יוֹתֵר מִפְּדֵי צָרְכּוֹ וּלְהִתְנַאֲוֹת בְּעֲשָׂרוֹ. וְתִירֵץ הֵדָא הוּא דְכְּתִיב "וַיִּצְיָאֵם בְּכֶסֶף וְזָהָב", כְּלוּמַר שֶׁזֶה הָעוֹשֶׁר שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם הָיָה מוֹרָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁהוּא אוֹהֵב אוֹתָם, וְכִשְׁפָּחַר לָהֶם הַגְּלוּת בָּחַר לָהֶם הָעוֹשֶׁר. וְאֵם לֹא הָיוּ חוֹטְאִים בְּעַגְלָה הָיוּ מִתְקַיְּמִים כִּי וְלֹא הִיָּתָה אוֹמְרָה שׁוֹלְטָת בְּמִמוֹנָם. וְאֵם תֵּאמַר זֶה הָעוֹשֶׁר וְהִרְכֹּשׁ שֶׁקִּבְּלוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲדַרְבָּא הָיָה רַע לָהֶם, שֶׁעָשׂוּ הָעַגְלָה בְּזֵה הַזָּהָב שֶׁבָּא מִמִּצְרַיִם מִקוֹם טוֹמְאָה, מִשּׁוּם הֵכִי סִיִּים "וְאִין בְּשִׁבְטֵי כּוֹשֵׁל" שֶׁהָעָרַב רַב הוּא שֶׁעָשָׂאוּהוּ, וְיִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא נִעְנְשׂוּ אֶלָּא לְפִי שִׁטְעוֹ גַּם הֵם אַחֲרָיו בְּאוֹתָם אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם שֶׁהָיוּ תוֹךְ חוֹפְתָם כְּנוֹדָע.

This is the intent of the Midrash: “And Abram was very rich.” This is difficult to understand: was it praise for Abraham to be so exceedingly wealthy, beyond his needs and to boast in his riches? The solution of the Midrash is: “This is what is written, ‘And He brought them out with silver and gold,’ ” as if to say that Abraham’s wealth was a sign for Israel, that He loves them, and when He chose exile for them, He chose wealth for them.

Had they not sinned with the Golden Calf, they would have remained so, and no nation would have ruled over their possessions. Perhaps you will say that this wealth and property which Israel received was, on the contrary, to their detriment, that they made the calf with that very gold that came from Egypt, a place of impurity. Therefore, it concludes, “and there was not among His tribes one who stumbled,” meaning that it was the mixed multitude who made [the Golden Calf], and Israel were punished only because they erred after them during those forty days, which were within their bridal chamber, as is known. I.e., the giving of the Torah is compared to a wedding day.⁸

וּלְפִי זֶה הַפְּסוּק שֶׁל "וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יֵצְאוּ בְּרִכְשׁ גָּדוֹל" יִהְיֶה פִּירוּשׁוֹ כִּי, כְּשֶׁאֲנִי אֶדוֹן בְּעֲשָׂר מִכּוֹת לְאוֹתוֹ הַגּוֹי, שֶׁזֶה יִהְיֶה כְּשֶׁיֵּצְאוּ לְשִׁלְחָם, וְלָמָּה יֵצְאוּ בְּשִׁבִיל שֶׁלֹּא נִשְׁלַם הַקֶּץ. וְאֵם כֵּן הוּא סִימָן לְגְלוּיּוֹת אַחֲרוֹת, עִם פֶּלֶךְ זֶה "וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יֵצְאוּ בְּרִכְשׁ גָּדוֹל", לְרַמּוֹז לָהֶם שֶׁיֵּשׁ לָהֶם לְהִיּוֹת כּוֹלֵם שְׂרִים לְאֲדוֹנֵיהֶם כְּפִי שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר לְעֵיל.

According to this, the verse “and afterward they will go free with great wealth”⁹ may be interpreted thus: “When I will judge that nation with ten plagues, which will happen when it refuses to send them forth; and why will it refuse? Because the appointed time has not yet been completed.”

If so, it is a sign for the other exiles; nevertheless, “and afterward they will go free with great wealth,” to hint that they will all be princes to their masters, as explained above.

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⁸ Mishnah Taanit 4:8; Taanit 26b.
⁹ Gen. 15:14.