

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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

Essay 2. Abraham's commitment to the mitzvot

This essay analyzes a Midrash that connects the first verse of this parasha to verses from the Song of Songs: “*We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister on the day that she will be spoken for? If she is a wall, we will build upon it a silver battlement; if she is a door, we will panel it in cedar. I am a wall, my breasts are like towers. So I became in his eyes as one who finds peace.*”¹

מדרש על פסוק "לך-לך", ר' ברכיה פתח "אחות לנו קטנה" זה אברהם שאיחה את כל בני העולם, שעד שהוא קטן היה מסגל מצוות ומעשים טובים. "ושדים אין לה" לא הניקוהו לא למצוות ולא למעשים טובים. "מה נעשה לאחותנו ביום שידבר-בה" ביום שגזר עליו נמרוד לירד לכבשן האש. "אם-חומה היא נבנה עליה" וכו' אם מעמיד דברים בחומה נבנה עליה. "ואם-דלת היא נצור עליה" אם דל הוא במצוות ומעשים טובים, "נצור עליה לוח ארז", מה הציירה הזו אינה אלא לשעה, כך אין אני מתקנים עליו אלא לשעה. אמר לפניו רבון העולמים, מעמיד אני דברי בחומה, "שני פמגדלות" זה חנניה מישאל ועזריה. "אז הייתי בעיניו כמוצאת שלום" שנבנס בשלום ויצא בשלום עכ"ל.

There is a **Midrash on the verse**, “The L-rd said to Abram, ‘**Go forth** from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’”²

Rabbi Berechya began: “We have a little sister [achot] [אחות]—this is Abraham, who joined together [icha] [איחה] all the people of the world [in the service of G-d], for while he was still little, he amassed mitzvot and good deeds. “And she has no breasts”—he was not suckled with mitzvot and good deeds. “What shall we do for our sister on the day that she will be spoken for?”—on the day that Nimrod decreed upon him to descend to the fiery furnace [for not worshipping idols]. “If she is a wall, we will build upon her”—if he stands firm on his principles, like a wall, “we will build upon her” [i.e., establish a nation from his lineage]. “And if she is a door [delet] [דלת], we will decorate her”—if he is deficient [dal] [דל] in mitzvot and good deeds, “we will decorate her with cedar panels”—just as a decoration is only temporary, so, too, I will support him only temporarily [and a nation won’t be established from him]. He [Abram]

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¹ Song of Songs 8:8–10.

² Gen. 12:1.

said before Him: ‘Master of the universe, “I am a wall”—I stand firm on my principles, like a wall.” “My breasts are like towers”—this refers to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah [who were also ready to sacrifice their lives, rather than worship an idol].³ “So I became in his eyes as one who finds peace”—as he entered [the furnace] in peace and emerged in peace.

- Gen. Rabbah 39:3

לְכַאוֹרָה כָּלוּ מוֹקְשָׁה מְרִישָׁא לְסִיפָא. אֲמַנְם כְּשֶׁנִּדְקְדָק שְׁפִיר דְּבַר הַלְמֵד מִעֲנִינוּ הוּא, שְׁאַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוּ הַחֲזִיר בְּנֵי אָדָם בְּתִשְׁבָּה שְׁעַד שְׁהֵיה קָטָן הָיָה מְסַגֵּל בְּמִצְוֹת וּמַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים. “וְנִשְׁדִּים אֵין לָהּ” שְׁלֹא הִנִּיקוּהוּ לֹא לְמִצְוֹת וְלֹא לְמַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים, כְּלוּמַר שְׁלֹא נִצְטוּנָה בְּשִׁמְרַת הַמִּצְוֹת, הֵגֶם שְׁשֹׁמֵר כָּל הַתּוֹרָה כְּלָה דְּכֵתִיב “עֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַע אֲבְרָהָם בְּקֹלִי” שְׁשֹׁמֵר אֲפִילוּ עִירֻבֵי תַבְשִׁילִין שֶׁהֵם מִצְוֹת דְּרַבָּנָן. עִם כָּל זֶה הָיָה לוֹ הַצָּעַר שְׁלֹא נִצְטוּנָה, וּבְכַפָּרָה קָמָא דְּקִידוּשִׁין (דָּף ל"א) אָמַר ר' חֲנִינָא: גְּדוֹל הַמִּצְוָה וְעוֹשָׂה מִמֶּי שְׁאִינוּ מִצְוָה וְעוֹשָׂה.

At first glance, this appears difficult from beginning to end. However, if we examine it closely, it makes sense based on context. “ ‘We have a little sister’ refers to Abraham, who joined together all the people of the world [in the service of G-d],” **for our forefather Abraham brought people back to repentance; “for while he was still little, he amassed mitzvot and good deeds.”** “ ‘And she has no breasts,’ that he was not suckled with mitzvot and good deeds,” as if to say that he wasn’t commanded in the observance of the mitzvot. Also, he observed the entire Torah, as it is said, “inasmuch as Abraham listened to My voice and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings,”⁴ **that he observed even *eruvei tavshilin*, which are rabbinic mitzvot.**⁵ Nevertheless, he had the pain of not having been commanded, and in the first chapter of tractate Kiddushin (page 31a), “Rabbi Chanina said: One who is commanded and fulfills is greater than one who fulfills without being commanded.”

"מִהַ־נַּעֲשֶׂה לְאַחֲתָנוּ" וְכוּ' בַּיּוֹם שֶׁנִּגְזַר עָלָיו נִמְרוֹד וְכוּ', "אִם־חֹמֶה" וְכוּ', שְׁכַתְּבוּ שֵׁם הַתּוֹסֵפוֹת עַל הַהֵיא דְּגְדוֹל הַמִּצְוָה וְעוֹשָׂה וְזֶה לְשׁוֹנוֹ, נִרְאֶה דִּהְיִינוּ טַעְמָא דְּמִי שֶׁמִּצְוָה וְעוֹשָׂה עֲדִיף לְפִי שְׁדוּאָג וּמַצְטַעַר יוֹתֵר כִּן יַעֲבֹר מִמֶּי שְׁאִינוּ מִצְוָה שֵׁישׁ לוֹ פֶּת בְּסֻלּוֹ שְׁאֵם יִרְצָה יָנִים עכ"ל. וְאֵם כֵּן כְּשֶׁנִּגְזַר עָלָיו נִמְרוֹד לְהַשְׁלִיכוֹ לְכַבְשָׁן הָאֵשׁ הָיָה בֵּית דִּין שֶׁל מַעֲלָה מִתִּירָאִים כֵּן לֹא תִהְיֶה לוֹ כָּל כֹּךְ דְּאֵגַת הַחֲטָא יַעַן לֹא נִצְטוּנָה, וּבְשִׁבְלֵי כֹךְ לֹא יִמְסוֹר עֲצָמוֹ שֶׁהָרִי אִינוּ מִצְוָה וְלֹא יִתְקַדֵּשׁ שֵׁם שְׁמִים חֵס וְשָׁלוֹם, אוֹ דִּילְמָא יִמְסוֹר עֲצָמוֹ אֲבָל לֹא יִמְסוֹר עֲצָמוֹ עַל קְדוּשַׁת הַשֵּׁם, שֶׁהָרִי לֹא נִצְטוּנָה, רַק יִמְסוֹר עֲצָמוֹ מִהַטְעַם שֵׁישׁ כְּמָה בְּנֵי אָדָם שְׁרוּצִים לְחִזָּק דְּבָרֵיהֶם אִף אִם תָּבֵא עֲלֵיהֶם מִיתָה, וְאֵם יַעֲשֶׂה כֹךְ אִינוּ מִן הַרְאִי לְהַצִּילוֹ.

“What shall we do for our sister on the day that she will be spoken for?”—on the day that Nimrod decreed upon him to be cast into the fiery furnace. “If she is a wall, we will build upon her”—that the Tosafot wrote there on this fact that one who is commanded and fulfills is greater than one who fulfills without being commanded, and this is his language:

³ Daniel, chapter 3.

⁴ Gen. 26:5.

⁵ Yoma 28b: “Rav said, and some say Rav Ashi [said]: Abraham our Patriarch fulfilled [the entire Torah], even [the mitzvah] of *Eruvei Tavshilin* [a rabbinic ordinance instituted later].”

It seems that the reason one who is commanded and fulfills is considered greater is because he has more worry and distress lest he transgress the commandments, unlike one who is not commanded, and has “bread in his basket”—if he wishes, he may desist [from fulfilling the commandments].

- Tosafot Kiddushin 31a

If so, when Nimrod decreed to throw [Abraham] into the fiery furnace, the Heavenly court feared that he might not have so much worry of sin because he was not commanded. Because of this, he might not deliver himself to die instead of worshipping the idol, for he had not been commanded, and then G-d’s Heavenly Name would not be sanctified, G-d forbid.

Alternatively, he might indeed deliver himself, but not deliver himself in sanctification of [G-d’s] Name, since he was not commanded. Rather, he would only deliver himself to die for the same reason that there are a number of people who want to strengthen their principles—even if death would come upon them, and if [Abraham] acted in this way, it would not be fitting to save him via a miracle.

ומירץ להם הקב"ה "אם-חומה היא" דהיינו אם מעמיד דבריו בחומה כאלו נצטווה הגם שלא נצטווה, כמו שכתבו התוספות דמי שנצטווה דואג יותר לעבור, אז "נבנה עליה". "ואם-דלת היא" שיהיה דל במצוות שלא יעשה הדבר לשם שמם לגמרי רק לקיים דברו, אז לא יהיה ניצול, ד"בשמאולה עשר וכבוד" איכא שהם חיי שעה אבל אורך ימים ליכא, וזהו איני מתקיים עליו אלא לשעה. "אני חומה" מעמיד אני דברי בחומה הריני מתוידק במצוות כאילו נצטונו, ואף "שני כמגדלות" זה חנניה משאל וצורקה, שלא היתה עבודה זרה ממש ולא היו חייבים למסור עצמם הגם שנצטוו בשמירת המצוות.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, answered them: “If she is a wall,” that is, if [Abraham] holds steadfastly to his principles, as a wall, as if he were commanded, even though he was not actually commanded, then “we will build upon her.”

“And if she is a door,” that he will be deficient in mitzvot, i.e., that he will not do something completely for the sake of Heaven, only to fulfill his principles, then he will not be saved. That is because “In her right hand is length of days, in her left, riches and honor”⁶—there is temporal life, but there is no length of days, and that is the meaning of “I will support him only temporarily.”

“I am a wall”—I am standing by my principles like a wall, engaging in commandments as if I were commanded. “And my breasts are like towers”—this is referring to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who refused to bow to King Nebuchadnezzar’s golden statute, even though they would be thrown into the fiery furnace. Unlike Abraham, they were commanded to obey the mitzvot. But it was not actual idolatry that they were commanded to perform, and thus, like Abraham, they too were not commanded to deliver themselves to be killed. Nevertheless, they stood firm, like a wall, and refused to bow.

⁶ Prov. 3:16.

שְׁהָרִי בְּפֶרֶק ד' דְּפֶסְחִים אָמְרִינוּ מָה רָאוּ חֲנַנְיָה מִשָּׁאֵל וְעִזְרְיָה שֶׁמָּסְרוּ עַצְמָם, וְהִקְשׁוּ שָׁם בְּתוֹסְפוֹת וְהָלֹא בְּעִבּוּדָה זָרָה יִהְיֶה וְאֵל יַעֲבֹר. וְתִירְצוּ דֵּהֲהִיא דְּנְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר לֹא עֲבֹדָה זָרָה מִמֶּלֶךְ הָיָה וּמִשּׁוּם הָכִי קָא בְּעִי מָה רָאוּ. וְאַף הָכָא נִמְי אָמַר אַבְרָהָם אֲנִי מֵעַמִּיד דְּבָרֵי בְּחֻמָּה הָגַם שְׁלֹא נִצְטְוִיתִי, לְכַבֹּד הַקָּב"ה כְּמוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲשׂוּ חֲנַנְיָה מִשָּׁאֵל וְעִזְרְיָה. וְלָכֵן "אֲזַי הָיִיתִי בְּעֵינָיו כְּמוֹצֵאת שְׁלוֹם" שֶׁנִּכְנַס בְּשְׁלוֹם וְנִצָּא בְּשְׁלוֹם. וְעַיִן לְקַמֵּן עַל פֶּסוּק "וַיָּזַד יַעֲקֹב נֹזֵיד" שֶׁאַבְרָהָם נִתְעַצֵּם בְּמַצּוֹת כְּאִילוֹ נִצְטְוֶה וְאַף יֵשׁ לוֹמַר שֶׁנִּצְטְוֶה מִמֶּלֶךְ.

For in the 4th chapter of tractate Pesachim (53b), it is said: “What did Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah see that made them surrender themselves?” Tosafot asks there: For idolatry shouldn’t one be killed rather than transgress? They answer that [the statue of] Nebuchadnezzar was not true idolatry, hence the question of what they saw that led them to act as they did. Likewise, Abraham says, “I establish my principles like a wall”—even though he wasn’t commanded—he stood as firm as a wall for the honor of the Holy One, Blessed be He, similar to what Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah did. “So I became in his eyes as one who finds peace,” that he entered the fiery furnace in peace and left in peace. See further, parashat Toldot, essay 5, on the verse, “Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the open, famished,”⁷ that Abraham engaged in commandments as if he were directly commanded, and some even say he was indeed commanded.

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⁷ Gen. 25:29.