

Zera Shimshon

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

Essay 4. G-d's guarantee of children for Abraham

“The L-rd said to Abram, ‘Go for yourself from your land, and from your birthplace, from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.’” (Gen. 12:1–2).

פִּירֵשׁ רש"י, "לך-לך" להנאתך ולטובתך וכו' וכאן אי אתה זוכה לבנים וכו'. משמע מפירושו שאם היה מתעכב כאן לא יהיו לו בנים כלל.

Rashi explains, “ ‘Go for yourself’ – For your own benefit, for your own good, there I will make of you a great nation, and here you will not merit children. Furthermore, I shall make known your character throughout the world.” The meaning of his explanation is that if he had delayed here, he would not have had children at all.

ואחר כך פירש לפי שהדרך גורמת וכו' ממצטת פריה ורביה ולך הבטיחו וכו' על הבנים וכו', דמשמע שאם היה מתעכב כאן יהיו לו בנים ורק לפי שהדרך גורמת וכו' צריה שביבטיחהו.

But afterwards, on the next verse, Gen. 12:2, [Rashi] explains that, “since travelling causes three things—it decreases being fruitful and multiplying, it reduces one’s wealth and lessens one’s fame, he therefore needed these three blessings: that [G-d] should promise him children, wealth and a great name.”¹ This has the meaning that if he would delay here in Haran, he would have children, and it’s only because travelling causes [a reduction in being fruitful] that he required that [G-d] would promise him that he would have children.

ונמצאו דברי רש"י סתרי אהדדי, כך הקשו המפרשים ז"ל.

These words of Rashi on Gen. 12:1 and then on Gen. 12:2 were found to contradict each other. Thus question the commentators, of blessed memory.

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¹ Rashi’s comment is based on Midrash Gen. Rabbah 39:11, which quotes a teaching by Rabbi Berechya.

ונראה לתרץ במאי דאמרינו בפרק קמא דראש השנה ארבעה דברים מקרעים גזר דינו של אדם וכו'. ויש אומרים אף שינוי מקום שצאמר "לך-לך" וכו' והדר "ואעשה לגוי גדול" וכו', ואיך היה זכותא דארץ ישראל הוא דאחגיגיא ליה עכ"ל. ואף אנו נאמר שלפי האמת אם היה אברהם מתעכב כאן, לא היה לו בנים בזה המקום שהיה עומד עכשיו.

This appears to be solved by what is written in the first chapter of tractate Rosh Hashana:

Rabbi Yitzchak said: **A person's sentence is torn up on [account of] four actions.** These are: [Giving] charity, crying out [in prayer], a change of [one's] name, and a change of [one's] deeds [for the better]. . . .

And some say: Also, a change of [one's] place [of residence], as it is written: "And the L-rd said to Abram: 'Go for yourself from your land,' " **and afterward, "And I will make of you a great nation."** [I.e., they hold that moving anyplace helps.]

And the other [one, i.e., Rabbi Yitzchak, who does not include a change of residence in his list, holds that in the case of Abram], **it was the merit [and sanctity] of the Land of Israel that helped him** [become the father of a great nation]. [I.e., he doesn't hold that moving in general helps, but that the Land of Israel has its own special merit.]

-Rosh Hashana 16b

And we can say that, in truth, if Abraham had lingered here in Haran, he would not have had offspring in this place where he was at the time.

אמנם היה יכול לשנות מקומו במקום הסמוך לו בלי כל כך טורח הדרך כמו ללכת לארץ ישראל שהדרך גורמת וכו'. ולכך צריך להבטיחו על הבנים למאן דאמר דשינוי מקום מועיל.

Indeed, to avoid this fate had he remained in Haran, then according to the second opinion quoted in Rosh Hashana 16b, **he could have simply changed his place to the place adjacent to him,** such as the next city or country, **without so much exertion of travelling** so far as to go to **the Land of Israel,** which is over 500 miles from Haran. For as Rashi explained, **such travelling causes** three things etc., and it makes sense that the greater the distance of travel, the greater the exertion involved, and the greater the impact on fertility, wealth, and fame. **Therefore, it was necessary [for G-d] to promise [Abram] regarding children, according to which it's said that a change of [one's] place is effective.**

אָבֿל מִכָּל מְקוֹם יֵשׁ לֵאמֹר שְׁשִׁנּוּי מְקוֹם אֵינּוּ מוֹעִיל כָּלֵל כִּסְבֵּרַת תַּנָּא קַמָּא. וְלִכֵּן אָמַר לוֹ הַקַּב"ה, אִם תִּשְׁנֶה מְקוֹמְךָ וְתֵלֵךְ לְמְקוֹם אַחֵר אֵין אַתָּה יוֹדֵעַ בְּנֵדָאֵי שְׁשִׁנּוּי מְקוֹם מוֹעִיל לָךְ. אֲלֵא צָרִיךְ זְכוּת הַמְּקוֹם דְּהֵינּוּ שְׁתֵּלֵךְ לְאַרְצֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְזֶה שֶׁכָּתַב רַש"י וְכָאן אֵי אַתָּה זוֹכֶה לְבָנִים, דְּוָקֵא זוֹכֶה.

But in any case, it can be said that a change of place is not effective at all according to the opinion of the first scholar quoted in Rosh Hashana 16b, i.e., Rabbi Yitzchak, who only listed charity, prayer, a change of name, and improving one’s deeds as four ways a person can negate a bad decree against him. **Therefore, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to [Abram], “Even if you will change your place and go to a different place, you don’t know for certain that the change in place will be effective for you. Rather, the merit of the place is required, which is that you should go to the Land of Israel.”**

This is why Rashi wrote, “and here you will not merit children,” specifically using the word “merit,” to include the opinion of Rabbi Yitzchak of Rosh Hashana 16b. That is, simply changing one’s location isn’t one of the four changes that will help a person overcome a bad decree, according to Rabbi Yitzchak. Nevertheless, the Land of Israel has a special merit, so that Abraham’s presence in the Land of Israel would provide the merit needed for him to have children.

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