

Zera Shimshon

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Published Mantua 1778*

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

Essay 5. A foreshadow of a change of name

מדרש רבה "ואעשך לגוי גדול", אותה האומה שכתוב בה "כי מי־גוי גדול", אעמיד ממך. אמר ר' ברכיה ואשתך, אין פתיב פֿאן, אלא "ואעשך", פֿשאני עושה אותך בריה חדשה את פֿרה וְרָבָה עכ"ל. והוא תמוה, דמה הנה קשה על המדרש שהוצרך להביא ר' ברכיה?

There is a **Midrash Rabbah**:

“And 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. 12:2). [Abram] said to Him: **“From Noah haven’t you set up seventy nations?” He said** [to Abram]: **“That nation of which it is written, ‘For what great nation is there** that has a god so close at hand as is the L-rd our G-d whenever we call upon Him?” (Deut. 4:7). **I will raise it up from you.”**

Rabbi Berechya said: “I will give you” or “I will set for you” is not written, rather, “I will make of you.” When I make you into a new man, you will be fruitful and multiply.

- Gen. Rabbah 39:11

This is strange, for what was the difficulty with the first part of the Midrash that Rabbi Berechya needed to bring in his further comment?

ונקדים מה שפתיב הפלי יקר, "ואעשך" וכו' זהו שאומרים וכו', כי אברהם הנה לגוי גדול יותר מכל האבות. כי כל מה שיצא מיצחק ומיעקב מתניח גם כן לאברהם נוסף על יצחק ויעקב, כי יצא ממנו ישמעאל ובני קטורה. ונאבְרָכָה וכו' זהו שאומרים אלהי יצחק, כי הוא נתברך בממון יותר מכולם, שנאמר "ויזרע יצחק" וכו', ונאגְדֵלָה שְׁמָךְ וכו' אלהי יעקב כי הקב"ה קרא ליעקב אל וכו' עכ"ל, ועיין שם.

We will advance what the Kli Yakar¹ wrote [on Gen. 12:2] (about what was brought in the Midrash Rabbah there, Gen. Rabbah 11:4):

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¹ Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (1550-1619), rabbi of Prague and author of Kli Yakar (Lublin 1602).

“And I will make of you,” this is what [they] say [in prayer], “the G-d of Abraham,” that Abraham became a greater nation than the other patriarchs. For all that came out of Isaac and Jacob is also related to Abraham in addition to Isaac and Jacob, [but he is greater than them,] for from him [also] came Ishmael and the sons of Keturah² [nations separate from the Jewish people].

“And I will bless you,” with wealth, as they say [in prayer], “the G-d of Isaac.” For he was blessed with wealth more than all [the other patriarchs], as it says, “Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year; and the L-rd blessed him” (Gen. 26:12).

“I will make your name great.” This is as they say, “the G-d of Jacob,” for the Holy One, Blessed be He, called Jacob “El.”³

- Kli Yakar on Gen. 12:2

ובנה יבואר "ואעשה לגוי גדול" לפי שממנו יצאו בנים יותר מכל שאר האבות. אלא דקשה למה אמר "גדול" דהלשון גדול נאמר באיכות ולא בכמות. והגי ליה למימר? לגוי רב. ובנדאי שרצה לרמוז לאומה ישראלית שכתוב בה "כי מי-גוי גדול", ועדיין קשה שאומה זו לא יצתה מאברהם לבדו רק אף מיצחק ומיעקב שהרי גם הם נקראים אבות. ואם כן לא יתכן לומר אומה שכתוב בה וכו' אני אעמיד ממך דמשמע ממך דנקא.

In this way, the words, “I will make of you a great nation” will be understood, in that from him will come more children than from all the remaining patriarchs.

However, it is difficult why it says “great” [*gadol*] [גדול], for the language *gadol* is said regarding quality and not quantity. What could it have said to represent quantity? “Into a mighty nation,” using the word “*rav*” [רב] to signify “great in number.” It is certain that because G-d used the word *gadol*, with an emphasis on quality over quantity, that He wanted to hint at the Israelite nation, about which it is written, ‘For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand.’”

But it is still difficult to understand, for this nation didn’t come out of Abraham alone, but also from Isaac and from Jacob, for they are also called “patriarchs.” If so, it’s not possible to say, as the Midrash begins, “a nation about which it is written” etc., I will raise it up from you, with the meaning specifically “from you.” That is, if Abraham had fathered the twelve tribes directly, it would make more sense to say “from you.” But as the twelve tribes didn’t come about until they were fathered by Jacob, then how can we say that the nation of Israel came “from Abraham,” without also crediting Isaac and Jacob?

² Keturah and her offspring are discussed at Gen. 25:1–4.

³ Gen. 33:20 is usually translated as, “He [i.e., Jacob] set up an altar there, and he [i.e., Jacob] called it [i.e., the altar] El-elohe-yisrael.” However, in Megilla 18a, Rabbi Acha quotes Rabbi Elazar, as interpreting the verse, “He [i.e., Jacob] set up an altar there, and He [i.e., the G-d of Israel] called him [i.e., Jacob], El, [did] the G-d of Israel.”

משום הכי בא ר' ברכיה ותירץ ואתנה ואשימך וכו' שאם לא הנה משנה שמו לא הנה בא לא יצחק ולא יעקב ולא האומה של ישראל. והכתוב בא להודיענו שעל ידי המעשה אשר יעשה בשמו ובגופו של אברהם יגרום שיבואו ממנו יצחק ויעקב וכל האומה ישראלית ואז הנה פרה ורבה.

Because of this, Rabbi Berechya came and solved this, “ ‘I will give you’ or ‘I will set for you’ is not written, rather, ‘I will make of you.’ When I make you into a new man,” i.e., by changing his name from Abram to Abraham, then “you will be fruitful and multiply.” **For if his name had not changed, Isaac would not have come, nor Jacob, nor the nation of Israel.** Rabbi Berechya is saying that **the Scripture** in Gen. 12:2, “I will make of you a great nation,” **comes to inform us that because of the action that [G-d] will do to the name and to the body of Abraham** as described later in Genesis chapter 17, **it will result in Isaac and Jacob and the entire Israelite nation coming from him, and then he will be fruitful and multiply.**

Genesis chapter 17 discusses the establishment of the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people. G-d changes Abram's name to Abraham [meaning “father of a multitude”], “for I make you the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:5). The Zera Shimshon's reference to “the action that [G-d] will do . . . to the body of Abraham” is either a reference to Gen. 17:6, “I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you,” or it could be a reference to the commandment of circumcision, in Gen. 17:10.

ועוד אפשר שרבי ברכיה הרגיש קושיא דמאן לימא לן דהאי "ואעשה לגוי גדול" רומז על האומה של ישראל דילמא על שמעאל דכתיב ביה נמי "ונתתיו לגוי גדול". משום הכי תירץ רבי ברכיה דהואיל דכתיב "ואעשה" על פרה ורבה שרומז על אומה ישראלית.

It is also possible that Rabbi Berechya felt the difficulty, that who will say to us that this “I will make of you a great nation” hints at the nation of Israel? In other words, the midrash first quotes the verse, “I will make of you a great nation,” and then says that G-d tells Abram that is a reference to “that nation . . . ‘that has a god so close at hand as is the L-rd our G-d,’ ” i.e., the nation of Israel. Rabbi Berechya wonders why “a great nation” necessarily means the nation of Israel, for why couldn't the first part of the midrash instead be talking **about Ishmael, about whom it is also written, “I will make him into a great nation”** (Gen. 17:20)? **Because of this, Rabbi Berechya solved** the difficulty that he had with the beginning part of the midrash, explaining **that since it says, “I will make of you,” it must necessarily hint at the Israelite nation**, by being a reference to G-d changing Abram's name to Abraham. Ishmael had already been born prior to assignment of the name “Abraham.” The change of name to Abraham was closely associated, as we have discussed, with the birth of Isaac, which obviously led to the birth of Jacob and the 12 tribes.

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