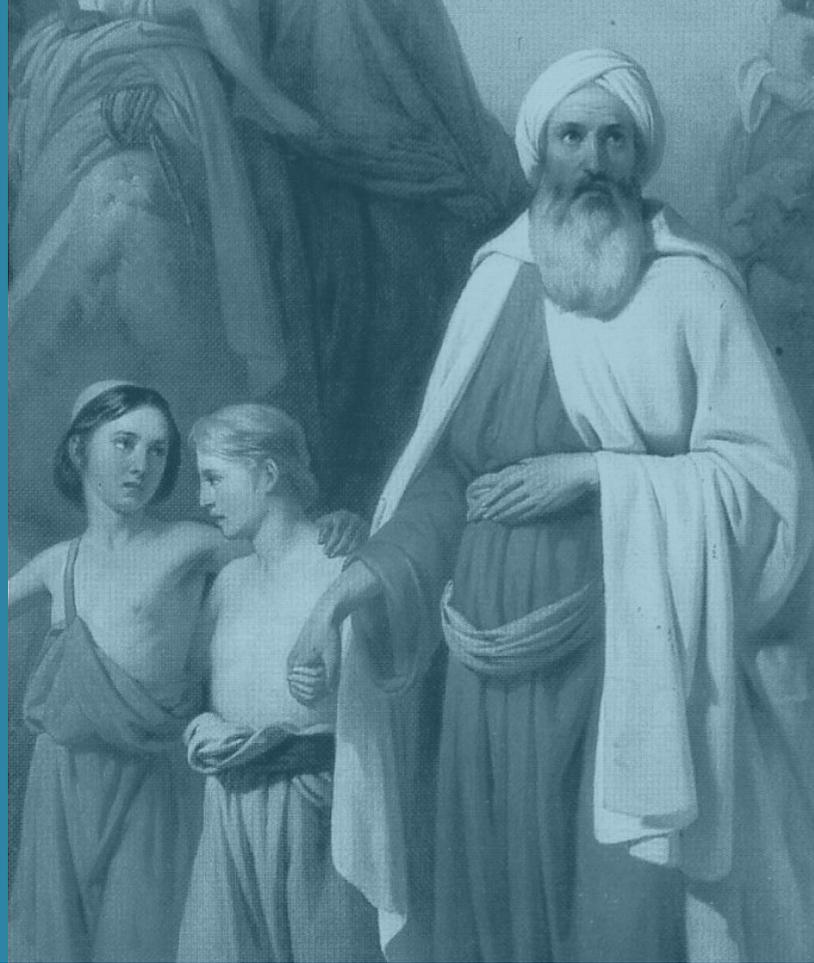


Abraham, the Man of Faith

Torah Portion October 28, 2017



Parashat Lech Lecha

Shabbat Shalom,

In this week's Torah portion we find the famous verse:

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. – Genesis 15:6 [NIV]

Abraham is mentioned several times in the New Testament as a symbol of man's faith, in James 2, Romans 4, Hebrews 11, and elsewhere.

Despite all these descriptions in the New Testament, the following verses show a response from Abraham that raises questions about his faith in God's promise:

He [God] also said to him [Abraham], "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" – Genesis 15:7,8 [NIV]

Abraham's request to receive proof or a sign of God's promise preoccupies the Torah commentators. How could it be that the greatest believer in the world is seeking proof from God?

Did Abraham lack faith?

The commentators disagree on this question: Some say that he was caught in a moment of lack of faith, and in that moment he is punished, his descendants will go into exile in Egypt. These commentators are basing this on the immediate continuation of the conversation between God and Abraham:

Then the Lord said to him, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there." – Genesis 15:13 [NIV]

Before we completely negate this possibility we must remember that Abraham was a human being, like you and me.

Sometimes as believers, we read the Bible with a picture in our heads of these imaginary righteous sages. It's as if they're some special people made from unique material.

It is worth remembering that our father Abraham was made of the same material as we are, and like us, he was afraid. When he went down to Egypt, he was afraid that he would be killed because of his wife Sarah, so he told the Egyptians that she is his sister.

Even the matter of Hagar and her son Ishmael is not an easy subject. It's difficult to explain exactly what went on there.

As you can see, Abraham was made of the same stuff as you and I.

Despite this, it is not for nothing that the Torah and the New Testament position Abraham as the symbol of faith. This tells us that it is unlikely that there was a failing, a lack of faith, and this leads us to look for other possibilities.

Abraham as a concerned parent

And other commentators give another interesting solution to this question. They raise the possibility that Abraham fears that perhaps his descendants over the generations will lose their way. And Abraham's request is to know whether his descendants will be worthy of the promise, and if they will preserve their identity over the years. The same commentators say that Abraham seeks a sign that future generations will meet the conditions required for the fulfillment of the promise and the preservation of identity.

I think that this is the concern of any parent.

This idea corresponds to what was said in the covenant between the parts (the Abrahamic Covenant), which was made immediately after Abraham's words, and it deals mainly with the descendants of Abraham. It emphasizes:

... "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there... In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." – Genesis 15:13,16 [NIV]

The question arises: What is the connection between the promise of the land to the descendants, the enslavement in Egypt, and the sin of the Amorites?

I will begin with the enslavement in Egypt, and continue with the sin of the Amorites.

Abraham is concerned, just like any other parent from any other nation, that his exiled children will become assimilated amongst the other nations. That his children will integrate into the local culture and language. A generation born in another country learns and grows with the local children, becomes like them, and speaks in the local language.

It is very difficult to explain to the child that we have another faith, another religion, another ethnic identity. It's hard to explain to a child that he or she does not belong here.

Indeed, research in this field shows that the percentage of assimilation is high in a place where there is no hatred, or where Jews are not isolated by their religion. For example, there is a high percentage of assimilation in the United States – not only of Jews, but of all the nations that are there.

On the other hand, in a place where Jews are being threatened or suffer from anti-Semitism, they adhere more closely to the Jewish religion and culture. Part of the reason for this is that even if they want to assimilate, that are not given the option to do so.

These commentators explain Abraham's concern: the difficulty of preserving the uniqueness of his descendants in Canaan, which is ruled by the local people.

God gives the solution: Your descendants will go down to another nation, and there God will cause them to be different and separate, in a forced manner – through slavery. This condition of slavery, bondage, and harassment demonstrates to every descendant of Abraham that he or she does not belong to that place and they are different from its inhabitants.

The status of a slave will preserve their uniqueness as a separate people and lead the people of Israel back to the Promised Land.

And I think that on this matter God built a whole system designed to preserve our identity. Perhaps the kosher laws, the feasts, holidays, ceremonies, and customs were all created mainly to preserve our identity for generations.

Note that in all the feasts and holidays the children are at the center of the stage – children's education is the top priority.

“Shema Yisrael” is perhaps the most familiar text for any Jew, and the essence of the Shema is:

“You shall teach them [God's words] thoroughly to your children.”

Yeshua taught us,

“Let the little children come to me... for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” – Matthew 19:14 [NIV]

The main question that arises throughout Passover is: why did God use ten plagues instead of one?

And the answer is – because of the children:

“On that day tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ ...In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.’” – Exodus 13:8,14 [NIV]

We bring the children into booths on Sukkot to teach them about the Exodus from Egypt and about security in God.

We observe the Sabbath as a lesson to our children about the creation of the world, and as a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt, as in the Kabbalat Shabbat prayer:

“...in memory of creation. The shabbat is the first among our holy days, and a remembrance of our exodus from Egypt.”

The kosher laws and the feasts also cause us to be different, and to not forget our ethnic origin. Another example is the period of the inquisition in Spain and Portugal, when Jews who converted to Christianity were forbidden to maintain a Jewish way of life.

Those who stood out, by breaking the rules and in doing so kept their Jewish identity, were the women. This is because they are those who kept the kosher laws, many of which involve food – and the woman is responsible for the home and the education of the children. She is the one who dictates the way of life in the home.

It was the woman who kept the lighting of the Sabbath candles – even if the candles were hidden in the closet, they existed and preserved the family identity. It was the woman who baked the matzo bread for Passover. It was the woman who kept a house clean of chametz (yeast) during Passover.

The New Testament teaches us that one of the roles of the woman is to run the house, and it is the woman who determines how the house looks, and how the family looks.

The connection between morality and the land

Let us return to the question of the connection between the promise of the land to the descendants, the enslavement in Egypt, and the sin of the Amorites.

In my opinion, in addition to the two previous interpretations, there is a warning here for generations, a warning for us even today. God makes the promise to Abraham at midnight, all the stars of the heavens and the earth to all his offspring after him, but God delays the application of the promise for 400 years, because:

“... for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.” – Genesis 15:16 [NIV]

In other words, the inhabitants of the land have a quota of sins, and as soon as they reach that quota, the decree of the Creator of the Universe is applied.

Later on in the Bible, in Deuteronomy 2:20, we are reminded of previous occupiers of the region:

That too was considered a land of the Rephaites, who used to live there; but the Ammonites called them Zamzummites. They were a people strong and numerous, and as tall as the Anakites. The Lord destroyed them from before the Ammonites, who drove them out and settled in their place. – Deuteronomy 2:20,21 [NIV]

Moses says that the Ammonites inherited the land of the Zamzummites, and Israel inherited the land of the Ammonites. And there are other examples like this.

It is worth noting that there is a connection between the moral behavior of a people and the amount of time it has spent on its land.

God actually tells us, “You are not the first occupants ,” “You are warned.” This continues in the Bible with the Babylonian exile, the Philistines, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Aramites, and more. And there is a continuation that is not written in the Bible, but it is known and painful. Our land was taken from us and given to all kinds of conquerors – Greeks, Persians,

Turks, British.

It all depends on the will of the Creator. And the will of the Creator of the world depends on the amount of sins and iniquities committed by the inhabitants of the land. Everything is conditional and everything depends on us. We have been warned.

In conclusion:

What is the connection between the promise of the land to the descendants, the enslavement in Egypt, and the sin of the Amorites?

The promise of the land depends on the moral level of the people, and if they do not preserve morality, they will go into exile. But in any case, the ethnic identity of the people will be preserved, even in exile, be it for 400 years, 70 years in the Babylonian exile, or 2000 years in our time. But God will keep His promise to Abraham and will always give us the opportunity for repentance.

Shabbat Shalom.

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