

פרשת לך לך

OVERVIEW

Avram leaves his homeland and prepares to settle in the land that is destined to witness the successful flourishing development of the nation to be established by his descendants. Famine in Canaan forces him to seek temporary shelter in Egypt. A "cunning maneuver" saves his wife from the advances of Pharaoh.

After his return from Canaan, a quarrel ensues between his shepherds and his nephew Lot. The latter elects to leave his uncle and settle in the fertile area of Sodom. Caught in the war between the local kings, Lot risks being taken prisoner. He is saved through Avram's prompt intervention. In a nocturnal vision, G-d promises him that the multitude of his descendants would be "numberless as the stars in the sky" (15:5). A solemn covenant seals the bond between G-d and His first servant.

Having no realistic hope that his wife could still bear him a child, Avram accepts her suggestion and takes Hagar as a concubine. Avram, now Abraham, at the age of ninety-nine, performs the act of circumcision on himself and on the male members of his household; it in the symbolic representation of his covenant with G-d.

COMMENTARY

Avram's departure

The order to leave the house of his father Terach who worshipped idols brought a radical break with a way of life totally incompatible with the lofty

ideal championed by Abraham: Monotheism, the belief and unhesitating trust in One G-d. He was fully aware of the difficulties and even dangers that would arise from his self-imposed isolation from the world abroad. His withdrawal was not in the form of an aloof seclusion. He had to clear away all heathen debris that contaminated his contemporary civilization; remove every trace of idolatry that traumatized his youth. The concept of One G-d tolerates no compromise. It demands man's total dedication to his ideals and total rejection of any foreign ethos. We learn from Abraham what it means to be strangers in an uncomprehending world and to pursue our own course, charted by the Divine Torah, with unwavering faithfulness.

Journey to Egypt

It appears that this episode in no way fits in the great historical panorama of "the father of nations". It does seem strange that Abaraham decides, once the danger assumed concrete proportions, to leave this land that he knows to be the land promised to his descendants. Why not demonstrate his faith in G-d by remaining at his post despite the threatening danger? Moreover, how can one accept the craftiness with which, in order to save his life, he exposes his wife to a situation which was bound to endanger her moral integrity? One could side with some of the commentators who indeed consider this conduct reprehensible. Even if this were true it would not diminish our admiration for our ancestor. To the contrary, it would merely emphasize the cando r with which the sacred text describes the lives

of our ancestors in their positive as well as negative aspects.

Yet it is not difficult to Justify Abraham's actions. His departure may have been inspired by a strong conviction that he should not rely on miracles nor await stoically an inevitable fate and count on divine intervention at the last moment. The devout Jew knows that blind trust in G-d must never detract from the importance of his own initiative.

Abraham was undoubtedly aware of the danger of his wife's probable abduction by the Egyptians. He also realized that if it became known that he was her husband his own fate would be sealed. Being taken for her brother might gain valuable time. And indeed, the verse in 12: 14 reports that the Egyptians marveled at Sarah's beauty but did not dare to molest her. Abraham's ruse worked, but only temporarily. Pharaoh's nobles happened to see Sarah and praised her beauty before the king. It was this unexpected development that almost brought this episode to a fatal conclusion.

The stars in the sky – the dust of the earth

These are the two metaphysical expressions contained in the divine message to Abraham: "so shall your seed be...". Your descendants will ran the gamut from supreme achievement to ordinary existence. What could be more exalting than the glittering, mystical multitude of heavenly galaxies; what could be more common than the sand under our feet! In this allegory we find a discreet reference to the character of Israel, this stiff-necked nation, obstinate,

rigid, authoritarian. Rarely will Israel experience a domestic, peaceful, even humdrum existence. Subjugated and conquered, it will suffer trials and tribulations as no other nation on earth. But Israel will achieve unprecedented heights and triumph at the end.

There is a deeper meaning in the contemplation of the starry sky to which G-d bids Abraham (15:5). Immutable, the heavenly constellations represent the direct working of the original creation, an act that took place entirely outside the law of nature. In the same vein the divine promise to Abraham - "you will become the father of a people numerous as the sands" - came at a time in Abraham's life when he was exceedingly old and without hope of having an heir. From the outset, the existence of this people was outside the realm of history's fundamental laws, faithful to this people's supernatural origin.

Hagar

Again our text illustrates the principle: do not put your trust solely in miracles. The divine promise of children having been made, Sarah decides to act by giving her maidservant to Abraham as a concubine. Abraham meets her initiative with hesitation but G-d commands him to follow his wife's counsel.

Yishmael, the son of Hagar and Abraham, will share in his father's glorious heritage. While it is certainly true that he will harbor a spark of the Abrahamitic spirit and that this spark will create a natural bond between the Jewish and Arab peoples, it is no less true that Yishmael's mother was not Sarah. He grew up without the single-

minded striving of the Jewish mother to instill in her children the sense of moral purity, the sanctification of mind and body. While it is possible to state that Arab philosophers, drawing from the rich fount of Jewish thought, served at certain times as teachers of Jews, one has to be born of a Jewish mother to comprehend the true meaning of the "serve G-d with all your heart, all your soul and all your resources".

The Bond of Circumcision

Following the Hagar episode, Abraham was told of the Milah, the circumcision, an institution that will henceforth take a prominent place among the fundamental laws of Judaism.

Shortly after his birth, the Jewish male is introduced in this bond by his father or by his father's representative, thus conveying the blessing from generation to generation which G-d bestowed upon Abraham. Certain critics view the act of circumcision as a residue of heathen customs that allegedly lives on in Jewish tradition. Others consider it a purely hygienic measure conditioned by the type of housing and climate in the orient.

Without going into a detailed examination of such interpretation, we can safely state that such claims will have the same fate as those which trace our Jewish festivals to ancient celebrations of the summer solstice, characterize our Sabbaths as the first victory of the proletariat over the

exploiters, or ascribe the ceremonial observance of Yom Kippur do the heathen cult of flagellation and mortification of the flesh.

The character of the Jew who descends from Abraham, is marked by his total subordination to the Will of G-d which must never be interpreted as renunciation or damnation. As we subordinate ourselves to the Will of G-d, every one of our faculties, physical and mental, is assigned a specific task that allows it to deploy its full potential without affecting the equilibrium of the individual. Intellectual curiosity, imagination, social drive, reproductive instinct, family links - unbridled and misguided, such major human impulses can lead to a rootless existence poisoned by debauchery and depravity. Subject to the dictate and guidance of the Divine Will they will bring harmony, peace and steady progress to then human existence. By placing the divine seal on the human body and thus sanctifying and ennobling man's animal instincts and passions, the Milah invites its bearer to join the legion of G-d's servants and become an integral part in the realization of the Divine Will.

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