

GOD'S ELECTION OF ABRAHAM (12:1-13:18)

The first 75 years of Abraham's life are passed over in total silence. He still bears the name Abram when God's call comes. The patriarch's immediate response thrusts him onto the scene of history with astounding suddenness and marks the true beginning of his life.

Note that his wanderings in Canaan were later repeated by his descendants. This led Ramban to comment that Abraham's wanderings foreshadowed those of later generations.

THE DIVINE CALL AND THE PROMISES
(vv. 1-3)

1. The LORD said to Abram The divine voice that first set Creation in motion resounds again after 10 generations of silence. This time it is at Haran, where the intended migration of Terah and his family from Ur to Canaan had come to a halt, for some unexplained reason.

Go forth Take leave of, separate.

CHAPTER 12

God, by giving Adam one command to follow, gave him the opportunity to be a moral, obedient person. The ultimate goal of God's creation was not a static world but a world in which people, having free choice between good and bad, would freely choose good. Adam and his descendants, however, were not up to the challenge. Just 10 generations later, God began again with a single righteous family. Noah had the advantage over Adam of having shown himself to be more righteous than his neighbors, but Noah and his descendants also disappointed God, who now changes the approach. Instead of asking one individual or one family to be good in isolation, God seeks to create a community, a people, descendants of a God-fearing couple, in the hope that the members of that community would sustain and reinforce each other. In that way, ordinary people would be capable of displaying extraordinary behavior.

The new venture begins with Abram and Sarai, later to be known as Abraham and Sarah. We were told that Noah was righteous, at least in comparison with his contemporaries, but we are not told directly why this couple is a worthy choice. The tradition, as usual, seeks to fill the gap, portraying Abraham as the first person to realize that the world is ruled by one God who demands righteous behavior of

humanity. Abraham's descendants have been marked by a willingness to stand apart from conventional thinking.

A *midrash* pictures Abraham coming across a palace with all of its windows illuminated and musing to himself, "Is it possible that there is no lord of this palace?" At that moment, God appears and proclaims, "I am the lord of this palace!" (Gen. R. 39:1).

Another *midrash* portrays Abraham's father Terah as a manufacturer of idols. One night, Abraham smashed all his father's idols. The next morning his father, incensed, demanded to know who had destroyed his property. "They attacked each other," Abraham told him. "That's impossible!" cried Terah. "They are made of stone. There is no soul or spirit in them." "Then why do you worship them?" Abraham challenged him (Gen. R. 38:13).

The insistence that God is one is more than a mathematical statement. It is a prerequisite for a religion that demands righteousness, not merely obedience. It enables us to claim that there are fixed standards of right and wrong. In a world of many gods, the issue is not "what does God demand of me?" but "which god can best reward and protect me in exchange for my loyalty?" The revolutionary claim of monotheism is not only that one God alone exists but that God summons us to freely choose what is good.

1. God's first words to Abraham, translated

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

12:1 the land I will show you This is the first verse of many in the Torah expressing the divine promise to the people of Israel that the land of Israel would be their homeland. It is permissible for Jews to live anywhere, but Jewish tradition prefers "going up" (*aliyah*) to live in Israel (MT Kings 5:7:12).

Such is the lot of the servants of the LORD,
Such their triumph through Me
—declares the LORD.

זאת נחלת עבדי יהוה
ויצקתם מאת
נאם יהוה: ס

55 Ho, all who are thirsty,

Come for water,

Even if you have no money;

Come, buy food and eat:

Buy food without money,

Wine and milk without cost.

²Why do you spend money for what is not bread,

Your earnings for what does not satisfy?

Give heed to Me,

And you shall eat choice food

And enjoy the richest viands.

³Incline your ear and come to Me;

Hearken, and you shall be revived.

And I will make with you an everlasting covenant,

The enduring loyalty promised to David.

⁴As I made him a leader of peoples,

A prince and commander of peoples,

⁵So you shall summon a nation you did not know,

And a nation that did not know you

Shall come running to you—

For the sake of the LORD your God,

The Holy One of Israel who has glorified you.

נה הוי כל-צמא
לכו למים
ואשר אין-לו כסף
לכו שברו ואכלו
ולכו שברו בלוא-כסף
ובלוא מחיר יין וחלב:
למה תשקל-כסף בלוא-לחם
ויגיעכם בלוא לשבעה
שמעו שמוע אלי
ואכל-טוב
ותתענג בדרך נפשכם:
י-הו אונכם ולכו אלי
שמעו ותחי נפשכם
ואכרתה לכם ברית עולם
חסדי דוד הנאמנים:
הן עד לאומים נתתיו
נגיד ומצוה לאמים:
הן גוי לא-תדע תקרא
וגוי לא-ידע
אליך ירצו
למען יהוה אלהיך
ולקדוש ישראל כי פארה: ס

is the vindicator of Israel and thus the one who brings them triumph.

Isaiah 55:1. all who are thirsty The appeal is either to those of Israel who are still far from the Lord or to the nations who follow foreign wisdom (Ibn Ezra). The imagery of hunger and thirst indicates the absence of divine instruction, as in Amos 8:11 (cf. Radak).

3. The enduring loyalty promised to David The royal covenant given to David (2

Sam. 7) is now transferred to the entire people. It employs *hesed* in the sense of covenant faithfulness. The divine pact with David promised unconditional commitment.

4. a leader of peoples The word translated here as "leader" (*ed*) has the literal meaning of "witness." The figure combines images of Israel's mission as a "light of nations" and "witness" to God's power for all (cf. Isa. 42:7, 43:10).

manded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

ABRAM'S RESPONSE (vv. 4-5)

In silent, unwavering obedience to God's will, the patriarch leaves Haran, accepting his new destiny in perfect faith.

4. Lot went with him The mention of Lot prepares the reader for the events to come in chapter 13.

seventy-five years old Abram's age is given here because he is at a crucial moment of his life.

5. his brother's son Lot The kinship description explains his presence in Abram's entourage. The oldest uncle assumed the guardianship of the child of his dead brother, which is clear in 14:12.

they set out The trek would have taken them near or through some of the great urban centers of the day. The narrative is silent about the precise route and the incidents on the journey, probably to avoid diverting our attention from the primary theme: the entry into the land and the first divine revelation that the patriarch experiences there.

have treated the Jews well, from Moslem Spain to the United States, have flourished, owing in large measure to their openness to many peoples and to the specific contributions of their Jewish citizens. Nations that began by persecuting Jews, out of their hatred for the Jewish moral code, too often have gone on to bring destruction on themselves and their surroundings.

5. the persons that they had acquired The literal meaning is, "the persons they had made." The Midrash understands this anachronistically as referring to converts whom they

וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם בְּאֶשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֵלָיו יְהוָה וַיֵּלֶךְ
אִתּוֹ לוֹט וְאֶבְרָם בְּרֵחֶמֶשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים
שָׁנָה בְּצֵאתוֹ מִחָרָן: וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת־
שָׂרִי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת־לוֹט בְּרֵאֲחָיו וְאֶת־כָּל־
רְכוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכָשׁוּ וְאֶת־הַנַּפְשׁ אֲשֶׁר־
עָשׂוּ בַּחָרָן וַיֵּצְאוּ לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶצָה כְּנָעַן
וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶצָה כְּנָעַן: וַיַּעֲבֹר אַבְרָם
בְּאֶרֶץ עַד מְקוֹם שֶׁכֶם עַד אֵלֶּן מוֹרָה
וַיְהִי כִּנְעֲנִי אִזּוֹ בְּאֶרֶץ:

ABRAM IN THE LAND (vv. 6-9)

6. passed through the land Abram does not stop at Hazor, the major military and commercial center in the Upper Galilee, but continues along the central mountain range, avoiding the well-inhabited areas of northern Canaan and the coastal plain.

the site of Shechem The unusual Hebrew phrase for this (*m'kom Sh'chem*) probably refers to a sacred site. Such sites were desirable stopping places for travelers and pastoral nomads because of their proximity to springs and wells.

the terebinth of Moreh Some extraordinary tree. The Hebrew word *moreh* means "teacher, oracle giver." The tree (or a cluster of such trees) was so conspicuous and famous that it served as a landmark. The phenomenon of a sacred tree is well known in many cultures.

The Canaanites were then in the land "Canaanite" here, as often, designates all pre-Israelite inhabitants. The word "then" (*az*) seems to imply that at the time of the narrator, the Canaanites no longer existed—a situation that did

had led to belief in the one true God (Gen. R. 39:14). For that reason, when converts to Judaism are given a Hebrew name they are called son or daughter "of Abraham and Sarah." According to the Sages, "One who brings a person to the Torah is regarded as having given birth to him or her" (BT Sanh. 99a). Although the women of Genesis seem to play a minor role in what are presented as patriarchal narratives, we find the Midrash pointing to the larger role they undoubtedly played. Sarah was every bit the pioneer and "soul-maker" that Abraham was.

from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.

2. 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.

3. I will bless those who bless you

And curse him that curses you;

And all the families of the earth

Shall bless themselves by you."

⁴Abram went forth as the LORD had com-

מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלֶדְתָּהּ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיו אֶל־
הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֵרָאֶךְ:

2 וְאֶעֱשֶׂה לָּךְ גִּדּוֹל
וְאֶבְרַכְךָ

וְאֶגְדֹּלְךָ שֵׁמֶךְ
וְהָיָה בְרִכָּה:

3 וְאֶבְרַכְךָ מִבְּרִכְיָךְ

וּמִקִּלְלֶךָ אֲוֹר

וּבְרַכְּךָ בָּרֶךְ

כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה:

your native land The land of your kinsmen. The reference is to Haran, not Ur.

to the land God's word transforms the trek into a new venture, now with divine guidance and purpose. At this point, Abram may not have known the identity of the Promised Land, continuing the westward migration interrupted by his father (11:31), arriving in Canaan unaware of having reached his goal until so informed by God (12:2). Alternatively, God may have revealed the destination as soon as Abram accepted the call.

2. I will make of you a great nation Great in both number and significance.

I will bless you With material prosperity.

I will make your name great You will ac-

quire fame and be greatly esteemed as a man of superior character. In the ancient Near East, one's name was not merely a practical means of identification. It conveyed the very essence of an individual's being.

you shall be a blessing You will serve as the exemplar by which a blessing is invoked.

3. I will bless those who bless you Those who wish you well and show solidarity with you will enjoy My blessing of well-being.

And curse him that curses you Whoever mistreats you will reap misfortune.

And all the families of the earth / Shall bless themselves by you People will take your good fortune as the desired measure when they invoke a blessing on themselves.

as "Go forth" (*lekh l'kha*), literally mean, "be-take yourself." A midrash interprets this to mean, "Go forth to find your authentic self, to learn who you are meant to be" (*Mei Ha-Shi-lo-ah*).

Physically we leave our home first, then our neighborhood, and finally our country. Emotionally, however, leaving one's geographic country of origin is easier than leaving one's family (Alshekh).

"For the first time, a journey is undertaken, not as an act of exile (Adam, Cain) or a quest for domination (the generation of Babel) but as a response to a divine imperative" (Zornberg).

the land I will show you The Midrash plays on the Hebrew and reads, "the land wherein I will appear to you." God cannot be found as readily in the opulent surroundings of Haran as in the pasture lands of Canaan (Mid. Hagadol).

2. be a blessing Hirsch takes this not as a promise but as a command. To merit the promised reward, you must so live as to be a blessing to the world.

3. I will bless those who bless you / And curse him that curses you Lest Abraham be intimidated by God's summons, God reassures him that his admirers will be many and his detractors few (Ralbag). Why would anyone curse or hate Abraham, who is setting out to serve God and be a blessing to all humanity? There always have been individuals and societies that resent God's strenuous moral demands and direct their resentment toward those who strive to live up to them.

And all the families of the earth / Shall bless themselves by you History has borne out the validity of Hirsch's comment: "I will bless each nation in accordance with the respect it shows the Jewish spirit." Nations and empires that

famine was severe in the land. ¹¹As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹²If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. ¹³Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you."

¹⁴When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was. ¹⁵Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. ¹⁶And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels.

for the famine was severe Only so dire a situation would have driven Abram to leave the land.

THE SEIZURE OF SARAI (vv. 11-20)

Approaching the Egyptian border, Abram begins to fear that Sarai's beauty will lead to his murder and her abduction. Narratives about the kidnapping of the hero's beautiful wife are found in Canaanite and Greek epics, and it is reasonable to assume that similar sagas circulated about the patriarchs of Israel.

^{11. a beautiful woman} Sarai is 65 at the time, 10 years younger than her husband.

^{12. and let you live} Though in shame and dishonor.

^{13. Please say} Although Abram's words are not an order, they convey a sense of urgency (through the Hebrew *na*).

you are my sister The dilemma confronting the patriarch is a very real moral conflict between human life and human dignity. Ramban comments: "Know that our father Abraham inadvertently committed a great sin by placing his virtuous wife in a compromising situation because of his fear of being killed. He should have trusted in God."

^{14. the Egyptians saw} Clearly, Sarai did

^{11. A midrash} suggests that Abraham, after so many years of marriage, took his wife's

לגור שם כִּי־כָבֵד הָרָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ: ¹¹וַיֵּדֹעַ
בְּאֶשֶׁר הִקְרִיב לְבוֹא מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר
אֶל־שָׂרָי אִשְׁתּוֹ הִנֵּה־נָא יֹדְעֵתִי כִּי אִשָּׁה
יִפְתִּי־מִרְאָה אֵת: ¹²וַיְהִי כִּי־רָאוּ אֹתָהּ
הַמִּצְרַיִם וַאֲמָרוּ אִשְׁתּוֹ זֹאת וְהָרַגוּ אֹתִי
וְאֹתָהּ יַחֲיוּ: ¹³אֲמַרְיָנָא אַחֲתִי אֵת לְמַעַן
יִשְׁכַּב־לִי בַּעֲבוּרָהּ וְחַיְתָה נַפְשִׁי בְּגִלְתָּהּ:
¹⁴וַיְהִי כְּבוֹא אַבְרָם מִצְרַיִם וַיִּרְאוּ
הַמִּצְרַיִם אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה כִּי־יָפָה הָיָה מְאֹד:
¹⁵וַיְרָאוּ אֹתָהּ שָׂרָי פְּרַעֲה וַיְהִלְלוּ אֹתָהּ
אֶל־פְּרַעֲה וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה בֵּית פְּרַעֲה:
¹⁶וּלְאַבְרָם הָיִטִּיב בַּעֲבוּרָהּ וַיְהִי־לּוֹ צֹאן
וּבָקָר וְחֲמֹרִים וַעֲבָדִים וּשְׁפָחוֹת וְאֶתְנַת
וְגַמְלִים:

not generally veil her face. See Comments to 24:65 and 38:14-15.

^{15. Pharaoh} This is the first appearance of this title in the Bible. The names of the pharaohs in Genesis and Exodus are not given, thereby making it difficult to fix the chronology of the patriarchal period. The title itself derives from an Egyptian word meaning "the great house" (*per-o*), a designation of the royal palace as early as 2500 B.C.E. In New Kingdom times (from the 16th century B.C.E. on), it came to be used for the king, in the same way as "the White House" can designate the American president or "the Crown," the British monarch.

the woman was taken This incident is illuminated by the ancient Egyptian *Tale of Two Brothers*, in which a beautiful woman comes to the attention of Pharaoh, who has her hunted down and brought to his palace. There he makes love to her, even though he knows she is married.

^{16. she-asses} Possession of many she asses was a sign of great wealth. See Job 1:3 and 42:12.

camels This is an anachronism. The widespread domestication of the camel as a beast of burden did not take place before the 12th century B.C.E., long after the patriarchal period.

beauty for granted until he became aware of how others regarded her (Tanh.).

⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "I will assign this land to your offspring." And he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. ⁸From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built there an altar to the LORD and invoked the LORD by name. ⁹Then Abram journeyed by stages toward the Negeb.

¹⁰There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the

not become a reality until long after Joshua's conquest (see Ibn Ezra).

^{7. The Lord appeared} This is the first divine revelation in the promised land.

^{1. I will assign this land} The identity of the land referred to in verse 1 is now established. This is one of the Torah's seminal texts. Hereafter, the history and destiny of Abram and his descendants, including the Jewish people of today, will be bound up inextricably with the promised land.

He built an altar there In gratitude for the promise of land. Among the patriarchs, acts of worship are always individual, never public. They do not take part in any existing religion, and they always build new altars or reuse those they previously erected.

^{8. From there he moved on} Legal ownership of the land is not the same as actual possession. The nation does not yet exist, and the patriarch remains a wanderer.

Ai The site is identified with a mound known as et-Tell, about 1 mile (1.6 km) southeast of Bethel. It was a flourishing town in the early Bronze Age during the 3rd millennium B.C.E.

he built there an altar Bethel is identified with modern Baytin, which lies about 10.5 miles (17 km) north of Jerusalem. It was the site of a Canaanite sanctuary to the god El.

^{10. Abram went down to Egypt} He lowered himself to the moral level of that society. Even an Abraham is not immune to the influence of his surroundings. In a setting of danger and depravity, he can be vulnerable to fear and tempted to deceive others to save himself.

Clearly, to understand Abraham's motiva-

7 וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר לְאָמְרָה
אֲתָן אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת וּבָנִי שָׂם מִזְבֵּחַ
לַיהוָה הַנִּרְאָה אֵלָיו: ⁸וַיָּעֲתֶק מִשָּׁם
הַהִרָה מִקְדָּם לְבֵית־אֵל וַיֵּט אֹהֶל
בֵּית־אֵל מִיָּם וְהָעִי מִקְדָּם וַיָּבֶן־שָׂם מִזְבֵּחַ
לַיהוָה וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה: ⁹וַיֵּסַע אַבְרָם
הַלּוֹךְ וַיָּסוּעַ הַנֶּגֶב: פ

¹⁰וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ וַיֵּרֶד אַבְרָם מִצְרַיִם

^{9. toward the Negeb} To southern and southeastern Judah around Beer-sheba, below the central hill country and the Shephelah. The name derives from a root meaning "dry, parched," indicating the sparse rainfall in the area and the arid terrain. By now, Abram has covered the length of the country from north to south.

ABRAM IN EGYPT (vv. 10-21)

The divine promises of nationhood and territory are abruptly endangered by famine.

^{10. There was a famine in the land} This resulted from the prolonged failure of the seasonal rains, which was the primary cause of famine in Canaan.

Abram went down The standard phrase for travel from hilly Canaan to low-lying Egypt, just as one "goes up" in the reverse direction.

Egypt This is the first mention of Egypt in Israelite history, foreshadowing the ambiguous nature of their future relationships. On the one hand, it was a place of shelter in time of distress; on the other, a region of mortal danger.

to sojourn there The Hebrew stem meaning "to sojourn" (נָדַר) indicates temporary residence. Everywhere in the ancient Near East, the resident alien (*ger*) was without legal rights and protection, depending entirely on the local community's goodwill.

tion is not to justify it. The Torah continually portrays its leading figures with all of their flaws, perhaps to teach us that we too can be good people without being perfect people. Reading this and similar episodes, we can condemn Abraham's behavior while forgiving him even as Sarah forgives him.

and herds and tents,⁶ so that the land could not support them staying together; for their possessions were so great that they could not remain together.⁷ And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and those of Lot's cattle.—The Canaanites and Perizzites were then dwelling in the land.—⁸Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen.⁹ Is not the whole land before you? Let us separate: if you go north, I will go south; and if you go south, I will go north."¹⁰ Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, all of it—this was before the LORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—all the way to Zoar, like the garden of the LORD, like the

group within the larger clan, its wealth mostly in cattle.

6. the land Ecologic conditions, forcing a limit to the size of the herds, have begun to affect family harmony. Increasingly, there is friction over available pasturage and water.

7. between the herdsmen Abram acts quickly while the discord is still in its early stage and before it can embitter relationships among those involved.

The Canaanites Apparently, the natural resources would have been sufficient for two small pastoral nomadic clans. The area, however, already had a settled agricultural-urban community, which explains why both Abram and Lot have to leave the region.

Perizzites The name of a minor pre-Israelite people. It may mean "inhabitants of rural areas."

8. Let there be no strife Although he is the older man and the uncle, Abram does not insist on priority of rights, but instead selflessly offers

wealth can sometimes be a burden, a challenge to use it wisely and responsibly.

6. Abram and Lot had been able to get along when they had relatively little. Was it prosperity that now caused conflict between them? Or was it Lot's growing recognition that he did not

וּבְקָרָה וְאֶהְיֶה לָּהֶם וְלֹא־נִשְׂאָא אִתָּם הָאָרֶץ לְשִׁבְתָּ יַחְדָּו בִּיהֵיָה רְכוּשָׁם רַב וְלֹא יִכְלוּ לְשִׁבְתָּ יַחְדָּו: 7 וְהִירִיבוּ בֵּין רֹעֵי מִקְנֵה־אֲבָרָם וּבֵין רֹעֵי מִקְנֵה־לוֹט וְהִכְנַעְנִי וְהִפְרֹזִי אֲנִי יֹשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ: 8 וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבָרָם אֶל־לוֹט אֲלֵנָּא תְּהִי מְרִיבָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ וּבֵין רֹעֵי בְּיָנִי וּרְעִיךָ בֵּי־אֲנָשִׁים אֲחֵים אָנַחְנוּ: 9 הֲלֹא כָל־הָאָרֶץ לְפָנֶיךָ הִפְרֹד נָא מֵעַלִי אֶם־הִשְׁמָל וְאִימְנָה וְאֶם־הִימִין וְאֶשְׁמְאִילָה: 10 וַיֵּשְׁאֵל לוֹט אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת־כָּל־כֶּפֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן כִּי כָלָה מִשְׁקָהָ לִפְנֵי: 1 שְׁחַת יְהוָה אֶת־סֹדֶם וְאֶת־עֲמֹרָה בְּנִי־הָהוּרָה כְּאֶרֶץ

his nephew first choice of grazing land and watering places.

9. north . . . south Literally, "left . . . right," from the customary viewpoint of one facing the rising sun.

10. looked about him From Bethel, which is on a hill, he would have had a magnificent view of the Jordan Valley.

well watered Fed by streams and brooks, not depending on seasonal rainfall for its fertility.

this was before A parenthetical note to explain the contrast between this depiction of the verdant land and its rutted barrenness during later Israelite history.

all the way to Zoar This refers back to the first clause: "Lot looked about him." Zoar was at the southern limit of the plain of Jordan (19:20–22).

like the garden of the LORD A perennially watered Eden.

share Abram's values (Pcs. R.)! The text emphasizes Abram's magnanimity, which is even more striking if we take into account what we learn only later (15:2), that Abram was concerned with his posterity. Lot's departure might have felt like losing a surrogate son.

¹⁷But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram. ¹⁸Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?" ¹⁹Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife; take her and begone!" ²⁰And Pharaoh put men in charge of him, and they sent him off with his wife and all that he possessed.

13 From Egypt, Abram went up into the Negeb, with his wife and all that he possessed, together with Lot. ²Now Abram was very rich in cattle, silver, and gold. ³And he proceeded by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been formerly, between Bethel and Ai, ⁴the site of the altar that he had built there at first; and there Abram invoked the LORD by name.

⁵Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks

17. mighty plagues Their nature is not explained.

18. What is this you have done to me Pharaoh, suddenly made suspicious as a result of the affliction, must have interrogated Sarai, who admitted her true status. Abram makes no effort to justify his conduct.

20. put men in charge Ibn Ezra suggests that Pharaoh provided guards to accompany the pair across the border for their protection and as a sign of honor. Saadia maintains that it was to enforce their expulsion from the territory.

RETURN TO THE LAND (13:1–4)

1. went up See Comment to 12:10.

Lot Because he played no role in the events in Egypt, he has not been mentioned. He appears here because of the following episode.

CHAPTER 13

2. Abram was very rich The Hebrew word

translated as "rich" (*kaved*) literally means "heavy, burdened." This has prompted the comment that, for a righteous person, great

17 וַיִּנְגַע יְהוָה אֶת־פְּרַעְיָה נְגִיעִים גְּדֹלִים וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ עַל־דְּבַר שְׂרֵי אִשְׁתֵּי אֲבָרָם: 18 וַיִּקְרָא פְּרַעְיָה לְאֲבָרָם וַיֹּאמֶר מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי לָמָּה לֹא־הִגַּדְתָּ לִּי כִּי אִשְׁתְּךָ הִוא: 19 לָמָּה אִמַּרְתָּ אֶחָתִי הִוא וְאָחַךְ אִתָּה לִּי לֹאֶשְׁהָ וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה אִשְׁתְּךָ קֹחַ וְלֵךְ: 20 וַיִּצְוּ עָלָיו פְּרַעְיָה אֲנָשִׁים וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ:

יג וַיַּעַל אֲבָרָם מִמִּצְרַיִם הִוא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ וְלוֹט עִמּוֹ הַנֶּגֶב: 2 וְאֲבָרָם כְּבֹד מְאֹד בַּמִּקְנָה בַּכֶּסֶף וּבַזָּהָב: 3 וַיֵּלֶךְ לְמִסְעָיו מִנֶּגֶב וְעַד־בֵּית־אֵל עַד־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה שָׁם אֱהֵלָה בְּתַחֲלָה בֵּין בֵּית־אֵל וּבֵין הָעֵי: 4 אֶל־מָקוֹם הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה שָׁם בְּרֹאשֹׁנָה וַיִּקְרָא שָׁם אֲבָרָם בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה: 5 וְגַם־לְלוֹט הָיָה צֹאן

2. Abram was very rich The divine blessing of 12:2 is beginning to be fulfilled.

silver, and gold It would not have been unusual for shepherds and herdsmen in Canaan to possess precious metals. In time of famine, silver and gold were a significant source of security, being media of exchange.

3. by stages He moved from one watering place to another.

4. the site of the altar By returning to worship at the altar he had previously built (12:8), Abram renews his spiritual connection with the land.

THE SEPARATION OF LOT (vv. 5–13)

The affluence of Abram's family becomes a threat to its tranquility.

5. Lot His family is an independent sub-

earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring too can be counted.¹⁷Up, walk about the land, through its length and its breadth, for I give it to you."¹⁸And Abram moved his tent, and came to dwell at the terebinths of Mamre, which are in Hebron; and he built an altar there to the LORD.

14 Now, when King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goiim² made war on King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zebaiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar,³ all the latter joined forces at the Valley of

17. walk about the land Ramban understood this traversing of the length and breadth of the land to be a symbolic act of legal acquisition. Egyptian and Hittite kings periodically would undertake a ceremonial walk around a field or a tour of the realm to symbolize renewal of their sovereignty over the land.

ABRAM'S DEPARTURE FOR HEBRON (v. 18)

18. the terebinths See Comment to 12:6.

ABRAM'S RESCUE OF LOT (14:1–23)

This is the first biblical account of warfare. The narrative reveals a new side to Abram's character: He is a decisive, courageous, and skilled battle commander.

THE INVASION FROM THE EAST (vv. 1–11)

1. Now, when Literally, "in the days of." **Amraphel** Once thought to be King Hamurabi, his identity is unknown.

Shinar This is a Hurrian name. See Comment to 10:10.

Arioch Corresponding to Arriyuk/Attiwuk, this name is mentioned in some ancient Near Eastern archives.

Ellasar Probably the city of Asshur, the mother city of the land of Assyria.

Chedorlaomer This name consists of two Elamite words that mean "the servant of [the

אשר | אסייובל איש למנות את-עפר
הארץ | גס-ורעה ימנה: ¹⁷ קום התהלך
בארץ | לארצה ולרחבה פי לה אתננה:
¹⁸ ויאהל אברהם ויבא וישב באלני
ממרא אשר בהברון ויבדשם מזבח
ליהוה: פ

יד ויהי בימי אמרפל מלך-שנער
אריוך מלך אלסר כדורלעמר מלך עילם
ותדלך מלך גוים: ² עשו מלחמה את-
ברע מלך סדם ואת-ברשע מלך עמרה
שנאב | מלך אדמה ושמאבר מלך צביים
צבויים ומלך בלע היא-צער: ³ כל-אלה

Mamre According to 14:13,24, Mamre was a distinguished personage allied to Abram. In 23:19, Mamre is another name for the city of Hebron.

Hebron A strategically located city in the Judean heartland, about midway between Jerusalem to the north and Beer-sheba to the south. Situated about 3,050 feet (930 m) above sea level, Hebron is surrounded by a fertile countryside.

god] Lagamer." It does not appear among the lists of about 40 known Elamite kings.

Elam See Comment to 10:22.

Tidal A Semitic rendering of the Hittite royal name Tudhalias borne by four kings. The first king lived in the 17th century B.C.E.

Goiim A "king of Goiim" is mentioned in Josh. 12:23. The place-name is otherwise unknown.

2. Zoar Each of the five cities has its own king; an instance of the classic city-state system that prevailed in Canaan before the Israelite conquest.

Bela This seems to be the earlier or alternative name of Zoar. In Gen. 36:32, Bela is the name of a king.

3. joined forces In the face of the common threat, the rebellious cities formed a five-city confederacy.

land of Egypt.¹¹So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they parted from each other;¹²Abram remained in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the Plain, pitching his tents near Sodom.¹³Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against the LORD.

¹⁴And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him, "Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west,¹⁵for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever.¹⁶I will make your offspring as the dust of the

מצרים באבקה צער: ¹¹ ויבחר-לו לוט
את כל-כפר הירדן ויסע לוט מקדם
ויפדו איש מעל אחיו: ¹² אברהם ישב
בארץ-בנען ולוט ישב בערי הכפר
ויאהל עד-סדם: ¹³ ואנשי סדם רעים
וחטאים ליהוה מאד:
¹⁴ ויהוה אמר אל-אברהם אחרי הפדו
לוט מעמו שא גא עיניך וראה מן
המקום אשר-אתה שם צפונה ונגבה
וקדמה ונמה: ¹⁵ כי את-כל-הארץ
אשר-אתה ראה לה אתננה ולזרעה עד
עולם: ¹⁶ ושמתי את-זרעך בעפר הארץ

11. So Lot chose for himself He selects a setting of wealth and comfort, without concern for the nature of the morality of the inhabitants. **eastward** From east of Bethel, where Abram was then encamped, as noted in 12:8 and 13:3.

Thus they parted Abram's swift action ensures that the quarrel is settled without rancor.

12. in the land of Canaan This seems to reflect a tradition that the "cities of the Plain" lay outside the borders of Canaan (see Comment to 10:19). To what period this applies is unknown, but verses 13:14–15 revise this situation.

13. very wicked sinners This brief addition to the narrative offers the reason for the coming destruction, referred to in verse 10. It also carries with it a judgment on Lot's character and prepares the reader for the events of chapter 19.

THE REAFFIRMATION OF THE BLESSINGS (vv. 14–17)

The earlier promise of national territory (12:7) is

now reaffirmed in different terms. This language reflects legal formulas current throughout the ancient Near East from the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C.E.

14. after Lot had parted His departure and Abram's blessing are linked. Abram's last tie with his father's house is now severed and a new phase in his life begins.

15. all the land The future national territory will include the area in which Lot settles.

you and your offspring The blessings are invested solely in the patriarch and his direct lineal descendants. Abram is included, even though he, personally, cannot take possession. The language follows legal formulas used in Near Eastern royal land grant documents.

forever God gives the land to Abram and his descendants without any preconditions and in perpetuity.

16. as the dust of the earth An image of uncommon propagation and diffusion.

11. Lot journeyed eastward The Midrash reads the word for "eastward" (*mi-kedem*) as *mi-kadmono shel olam*, "away from the Ancient One." Lot chose to live closer to Sodom and further from God (Gen. R. 41:7).

13. wicked sinners against the Lord In Jewish tradition, the sin of Sodom referred to here was inhospitality to strangers and the wayfarer. (See Ezek. 16:49, "this was the sin of your sister Sodom. . . she did not support the poor

and the needy.") To mistreat a stranger is to sin against God, the patron and protector of the most vulnerable.

16. as the dust of the earth The biblical promise is of great numbers and abundance. After the *Shoah*—when so many Jews were murdered and their bodies cremated—the Yiddish poet Yaakov Glatstein bitterly noted that God's promise became fulfilled, Abraham's descendants had become like the dust of the earth.

Shaveh, which is the Valley of the King. ¹⁸And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High.

¹⁹He blessed him, saying,

"Blessed be Abram of God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.

²⁰And blessed be God Most High,
Who has delivered your foes into your
hand."

And [Abram] gave him a tenth of every-
thing.

²¹Then the king of Sodom said to Abram,
"Give me the persons, and take the possessions
for yourself." ²²But Abram said to the king of
Sodom, "I swear to the LORD, God Most High,

narrow gorge southeast of Jerusalem where idolatrous Israelites offered their children to Moloch (see 2 Kings 23:10). King Josiah defiled it and converted it into a dung heap, where garbage was burned. At about the same time, Jeremiah prophesied that the corpses of many of Israel's warriors would be left unburied there after they were slain by an invading army (Jer. 7:30-34).

THE MELCHIZEDEK EPISODE (vv. 18-20)

^{18. Salem} Named after the Canaanite god Shalem, it is identified along with Zion (in Ps. 76:3) as the location of the Temple.

^{priest} It is not known whether this fusion of royal and priestly offices was characteristic of Canaanite city-states or was peculiar to Salem. In ancient Israel, the two institutions were separate from the beginning (see 1 Sam. 2:35).

^{God Most High} Hebrew: *el elyon*. In most Semitic languages, *el* means "god" or is a deity's proper name; in the Bible, it refers to the one God. The noun *elyon*, from the root *alah* (ascend), expresses absolute transcendence.

^{18.} It is not clear exactly who Melchizedek is. The name may be taken to mean "righteous king," prompting the Midrash to suggest that living in Salem (Jerusalem) inspired him to be a righteous ruler (Gen. R. 43:6). Soloveitchik sees him as having been impressed not only by Abraham's lofty ideals but by his willingness to fight for them. The commentary *Or Ha-Ḥayyim* sets

הַמֶּלֶךְ: ¹⁸וּמִלְכִּי־צֶדֶק מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם הוֹצִיא
לֶחֶם וַיְהִי וְהוּא כֹהֵן לֵאלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן:

¹⁹וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר

בָּרוּךְ אַבְרָם לֵאלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן

קֹנֵה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

²⁰וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ אֵל עֵלְיוֹן

אֲשֶׁר־מָגֵן צָרָרוֹ בְּיָדוֹ

וַיִּתֵּן־לּוֹ מִעֲשֹׂר מִכָּל:

²¹וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ־סֹדֶם אֶל־אַבְרָם תְּנֵה־נָא

הַפָּסֶשׁ וְהָרֶכֶשׁ קַח־לָךְ: ²²וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם

אֶל־מֶלֶךְ סֹדֶם הֲרִימֹתִי יָדִי אֶל־יְהוָה אֵל

וְהָיָה כִּי־יָשָׁב אֶת־כְּדֹר־לֹאֶמֶר וְהַמֶּלֶךְ

שֹׁהֵה הוּא עִמָּךְ

וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁהֵה הוּא עִמָּךְ

וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁהֵה הוּא עִמָּךְ

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וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁהֵה הוּא עִמָּךְ

וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁהֵה הוּא עִמָּךְ

וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁהֵה הוּא עִמָּךְ

וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁהֵה הוּא עִמָּךְ

וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁהֵה הוּא עִמָּךְ

Aner, these being Abram's allies. ¹⁴When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he mustered his retainers, born into his household, numbering three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. ¹⁵At night, he and his servants deployed against them and defeated them; and he pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. ¹⁶He brought back all the possessions; he also brought back his kinsman Lot and his possessions, and the women and the rest of the people.

¹⁷When he returned from defeating Chedorlaomer and the kings with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of

common feature of the ancient Near East. The treaty entered into by Abram and the three Amorites was one among equals and involved mutual military obligations. The attack on their own kin gave Abram's allies additional incentive to support him.

^{14. When Abram heard} Although Lot had separated himself from his uncle, the ties of kinship remained intact.

^{retainers, born into his household} These were slaves born of slaves, regarded as more reliable than purchased slaves.

^{three hundred and eighteen} It is unclear if this is meant to be taken literally or as a symbolic number. From early correspondence between governors of the city-states of Canaan and Pharaoh, it appears that the number constituted a powerful force.

^{Dan} The city at the northern extremity of the land of Israel (see Judg. 20:1 and 1 Sam. 3:20). It is identified with Tell Dan (Tell el-Qadi), about 4 miles (6.4 km) west of Baniyas, at the foot of Mount Hermon on the international trade route.

^{15. and defeated them} Abram had the ad-

אֲבָרָם: ¹⁴וַיִּשְׁמַע אֲבָרָם כִּי נִשְׁבָּה אָחִיו
וַיִּרְקֶה אֶת־תַּחְנִיכָיו וְלִיָּוִי בֵיתוֹ שִׁמְנֵה
עָשָׂר וּשְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת וּיְרֵדָה עֶרְדָּן:
¹⁵וַיַּחְלֶק עֲלֵיהֶם לַיְלָה הוּא וְעַבְדָּיו
וַיִּבְּסוּ וַיִּרְדָּפּוּ עַד־חֹבָה אֲשֶׁר מִשְׁמָאל
לְדַמְשָׁק: ¹⁶וַיָּשֶׁב אֶת כָּל־הָרֶכֶשׁ וְגַם
אֶת־לוֹט אָחִיו וְכָשָׁל הַשִּׁיב וְגַם אֶת־
הַנָּשִׁים וְאֶת־הָעָם:

¹⁷וַיָּצֵא מֶלֶךְ־סֹדֶם לִקְרָאתוֹ אַחֲרֵי שׁוּבוֹ
מִהַכּוֹת אֶת־כְּדֹר־לֹאֶמֶר וְאֶת־הַמֶּלֶכִּים
אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ אֶל־עִמָּךְ שׁוֹהֵה הוּא עִמָּךְ

vantages of fresh troops and a night engagement against a battle-weary, depleted enemy. By dividing his forces and attacking from two sides, he achieved tactical surprise and neutralized the numerical superiority of his foe.

^{Hobah} An unidentified site north of Damascus.

^{17. the king of Sodom came out} It took several weeks for Abram's troops to reach beyond Damascus and then return. In the meantime, the ruler of Sodom has regained his kingdom and now comes out to meet the victorious patriarch. Although five cities were involved in the alliance, this king alone is mentioned because the rescue of Lot, who lived in Sodom, is the focal point of the narrative and because Sodom was the leader of the alliance and is always listed first (Gen. 14:2; 10:19).

^{the Valley of Shaveh} Also named "the Valley of the King" (see 2 Sam. 18:18). It may be the broad, level valley formed by the junction of the Valley of Ben-hinnom, west and south of Jerusalem, with the Kidron Valley on the east side.

The later notion of Gehenna derives its name from the Valley of Hinnom (*Gei ben Hinnom*), a

^{14.} This verse gives us another view of Abraham, the warrior who is prepared to do battle to redeem his kin. The redemption of captives (*pidyon sh'vuyim*) in later centuries became a prime responsibility taken on by the Jewish community, which ransomed Jews who had been captured by pirates, imprisoned, or en-

slaved. Some authorities were reluctant, fearful that this would encourage the kidnapping of Jews for ransom. Still, the basic practice has continued from earliest times to the efforts on behalf of Russian Jews and Ethiopian Jews in more recent times.

give me, seeing that I shall die childless, and the one in charge of my household is Dammesek Eliezer!"³ Abram said further, "Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir."⁴ The word of the LORD came to him in reply, "That one shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue shall be your heir."⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He added, "So shall your offspring be."⁶ And because he put his trust in the LORD, He reckoned it to his merit.

⁷Then He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to

kadian, too, "alaku" is used as a euphemism for dying.

3. will be my heir In the ancient Near East, a servant who performed filial duties for a childless couple—paying them proper respect, maintaining their household, taking care of their physical needs and comforts in their old age—could become their adopted heir. The patriarch, despairing of having children, had decided to adopt his servant.

5. Look toward heaven The visual experience—a real or dream revelation—reinforces the oral promise.

6. he put his trust in the LORD The encounter with God, which had begun on a note of fear and depression, closes with a firm statement of Abram's faith in the LORD (see Hab. 2:4).

He reckoned it to his merit The subject of the verb is God; "it" refers to Abram's act of

5. count the stars From an earth-bound perspective, a star looks tiny. From the viewpoint of heaven, each star is a world by itself. The descendants of Abraham seem insignificant in terms of numbers and power, but each one is an indispensable part of God's plan (Hayyim of Tzantz). Each individual Jew, each individual human being, is a world by himself or herself.

6. An enigmatic verse. According to Moshe of Kobrin, Abraham felt that God had done him a favor, an act of *tz'dakah*, by giving him the capacity to have faith even when circumstances seemed bleak. Yaakov of Rakov understands the verse to mean instead that God cred-

וְאֵנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ עִירִי וְכֹרֵם שֶׁק בֵּיתִי הוּא דִמְשֶׁק אֵלֵיָּעֶזֶר: וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבָרָם הֵן לִי לֹא נִתְּתָה זֶרַע וְהִנֵּה בְדִבְתִּי יוֹרֵשׁ אֹתִי: וַיְהִי דְבַר יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר לֹא יִירָשְׁךָ זֶה כִּי־אֵם אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִמֶּעֶיךָ הוּא יִירָשֶׁךָ: וַיּוֹצֵא אֹתוֹ הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הִבֵּט־נָא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וּסְפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם־תּוּכֵל לִסְפֹּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה זֶרְעֶךָ: וַיִּהְיֶה אֲמֵן בֵּיהוָה וַיִּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לָתֵת לְךָ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת

faith, which made him worthy of God's reward, about to be secured through a covenant. The Hebrew word *tz'dakah* (righteousness) can also have the sense of "merit."

THE PROMISE OF NATIONAL TERRITORY (vv. 7-21)

7. I am the LORD This first use of the solemn formula of self-identification emphasizes the unimpeachable authority behind the forthcoming declaration. The style "I am so-and-so" is known from Hittite and Akkadian treaties and Canaanite royal proclamations.

Ur of the Chaldeans See Comments to 11:28, 31.

to assign this land God had said nothing to Abram in 12:1-3 about a gift of land, but apparently that was the original intent, unrevealed at the time.

ited Abraham with an act of *tz'dakah*, teaching people that there is a purpose to life, that life can be redeemed from futility. Or we might understand Abraham's putting "his trust in the LORD" to mean that he gave God the benefit of the doubt, believing not only in God's existence but in God's reliability, even when circumstances might have led him to think otherwise. The only thing we can do for God, the only thing for which God depends on us, is to hold on to our faith even when things do not go our way. This is Abraham's (and our) *tz'dakah* (favor) to God.

7. who brought you out from Ur The language anticipates the first pronouncement at

Creator of heaven and earth:²³ I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, 'It is I who made Abram rich.'²⁴ For me, nothing but what my servants have used up; as for the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre—let them take their share."

15 Some time later, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision. He said, "Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."

²But Abram said, "O Lord God, what can You

used to express totality. It means "not even the smallest thing." A similar expression in ancient Aramaic, used in the context of treaties, is "from a straw to a string."

It is I who made Abram rich Abram did not want it to appear that he had acted for mercenary reasons. Because part of the spoil had origin-

עָלִיוֹן קִנְהָ שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ: ²³ אִם־מִחוּט וְעַד שָׁוֶה־נֶּעַל וְאִם־אֶקֶח מִכָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לְךָ וְלֹא תֹאמַר אֲנִי הַעֲשֵׂרְתִּי אֶת־אֲבָרָם: ²⁴ בְּלִעְדִּי כֹךְ אֲשֶׁר אָכְלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וְחֶלֶק הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר הָלְכוּ אִתִּי עִנְרָ אֲשֶׁל וּמִמָּרָא הֵם יִקְחוּ חֶלְקָם: ס

אֲחֵר וְהַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְּבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־אֲבָרָם בְּמַחְזָה לֵאמֹר אֶל־תִּירָא אֲבָרָם אֲנִכִּי מִגֹּן לְךָ שְׂכָרְךָ הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד: וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבָרָם אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה מִהֲתַתִּילִי

ally come from Sodom (Gen. 14:11), he did not want to benefit from tainted possessions.

24. my servants The Hebrew term here (*n'arim*) literally means "youths" and probably is used for "warriors." The word, borrowed from Canaanite, also appears in ancient Egyptian in the sense of "elite corps."

THE COVENANT BETWEEN THE PIECES (15:1-21)

THE PROMISE OF OFFSPRING (vv. 1-6)

1. Some time later The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "after these things." Here it means, very soon after the preceding events.

Fear not The patriarch is deeply concerned about the possibility of revenge by the defeated kings.

I am a shield This poetic phrase means "I am your protection."

Your reward Abram had refused to partake of the spoils of war (14:22ff.). The rejected ma-

terial reward will be vastly exceeded by a compensation of a different kind.

2. Abram said Abram speaks to God for the first time.

O Lord God This Hebrew divine title is read aloud as *Adonai Elohim*. Rarely found in the Torah, it is used in a context of grievance, prayer, or request.

what can You give me No material reward can equal the blessing of having children.

I shall die Literally, "I shall go," from the Hebrew meaning "to walk, go" (הלך). In Ak-

CHAPTER 15

In a mysterious vision, God promises Abraham that, after several generations of adversity, his descendants will return to claim as their own the land through which he had passed as a wayfarer. This promise is cast as a covenant between God and Abraham. A covenant implies

obligations on the part of both parties. God promises a special destiny for Abraham's descendants even as Abraham promises loyalty and obedience to God.

1. I am a shield to you We echo these words in the opening blessing of the Amidah, praising God as *magen Avraham*, "Abraham's shield," or protector.

on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth. ¹⁵As for you,

You shall go to your fathers in peace;

You shall be buried at a ripe old age.

¹⁶And they shall return here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

¹⁷When the sun set and it was very dark, there appeared a smoking oven, and a flaming torch which passed between those pieces.

¹⁸On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates: ¹⁹the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

great wealth This was either restitution for the decades of slave labor or in accordance with the law in Deut. 15:13ff. to the effect that an emancipated slave must be liberally provisioned by the master.

15. You shall go to your fathers A term for dying that is unique within the Hebrew Bible. It originates from the belief that one is reunited with one's ancestors after death.

16. the fourth generation Exod. 6:16-20 presents the same tradition of "four generations" between Levi and Moses. Another tradition, in Gen. 15:13, refers to the bondage as lasting 400 years.

the iniquity of the Amorites The local peoples, here called "Amorites," have violated the universal moral law, thereby dooming themselves by their own corruption. But the limit of God's tolerance of evil—four generations—has not yet been reached, and the Israelites must wait until the time is ripe.

COMPLETING THE COVENANT (vv. 18-21)

God, the principal party to the covenant, passes between the pieces. As in a legal document, the

ואחריכן יצאו ברכש גדול: ¹⁵ ואתה תבוא אל־אבותיך בשלום תקבר בשיבה טובה:

¹⁶ ונורו רביעי ושבו הנה כי לא־שלם עון האמרי עדיהנה:

¹⁷ ויהי השמש באה ועלטה היה והנה תנור עשן ולפיד אש אשר עבר בין הנורים האלה: ¹⁸ ביום ההוא ברת

יהוה את־אברהם ברית לאמר לורעך נתתי את־הארץ הזאת מנהר מצרים עד־הנהר הגדל נהר־פרת: ¹⁹ את־הקניזי

ואת־הקניזי ואת הקדמוני: ²⁰ ואת־החתי ואת־הפרזי ואת־הרפאי: ²¹ ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי

ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי

ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי ואת־הקנזי

הקנזי: ט

nature of the instrument of transfer is defined, its promissory clause is specified as concerning a land grant, and the extent of the territory involved is delineated.

18. a covenant See Comment to 6:18.

the river of Egypt Hebrew: *nahar*. This is not the Nile, called *y'or* in the Bible, but its most easterly arm, which emptied into Lake Sirbonis near Pelusium not far from Port Said. The southwestern border of Canaan is the "Wadi (Hebrew, *nahal*) of Egypt," which is identified with Wadi Al 'Arish and marks the boundary between the settled land and the Sinai desert.

the great river The boundaries given here, which include Tyre-Sidon, Lebanon, and Byblos, are a generalized ideal.

19. Kenites A seminomadic tribe of metal workers in the southern region of the land.

Kenizzites These people had close ties with the Edomites and were later absorbed into the tribe of Judah.

Kadmonites They may be the Kedemites (*b'nei kedem*) or "easterners," a general term for the tribes that roamed the desert from Aram in the north down to the Red Sea. They were famous for their wisdom.

assign this land to you as a possession." ⁸And he said, "O Lord God, how shall I know that I am to possess it?" ⁹He answered, "Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young bird." ¹⁰He brought Him all these and cut them in two, placing each half opposite the other; but he did not cut up the bird. ¹¹Birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. ¹²As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended upon him. ¹³And He said to Abram, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; ¹⁴but I will execute judgment

לרשתה: ⁸ ויאמר אדני יהוה במה אדע כי אינשנה: ⁹ ויאמר אליו קחה לי עולה משלש וטע משלש ואיל משלש ותר וגול: ¹⁰ ויקח לו את־כל־אלה ויבתר אתם בתנך ויתן איש־בתרו לקראת רעהו ואת־הצפר לא בתר: ¹¹ ויירד העש על־הפגרים וישב אתם אברהם: ¹² ויהי השמש לבוא ותדמה נפלה על־אברהם והנה אימה חשכה גדלה נפלת עליו: ¹³ ויאמר לאברהם ידע תדע כי־גדל יהיה ויער בארץ לא להם ועבדם וענו אתם ארבע מאות שנה: ¹⁴ וגם את־הקניזי אשר יעבדו הן אנכי

8. how shall I know Abram, speaking not as an individual but as the personification of the future nation, asks: By what process will that nation take possession of its promised land?

9. He answered In response, God enters into a covenant with the patriarch. The covenant is modeled after the royal land-grant treaty common in the ancient Near East, by which a king bestowed a gift of land on an individual or vassal as a reward for loyal service. But here, for the first time in the history of religions, it is God who initiates the contract.

a three-year-old An animal of three years was considered to be full grown and most preferable for a religious rite.

a young bird Probably a pigeon.

10. cut them in two The cutting of the animals in Mesopotamian sources is a warning that the violator of the covenant treaty would be sliced in half, as criminals were.

the bird A collective noun referring to both birds. The fact that the birds were not cut in two may be due solely to their small size.

11. Birds of prey Carrion-eating falcons (see Isa. 18:6 and Ezek. 39:4).

12. a deep sleep An abnormal stupor is associated with the dread aroused by the awareness of the presence of God (see Job 4:13ff., 33:15ff.).

13. Know well God's response to Abram's query in Gen. 15:8.

a land not theirs That is, a foreign land, other than the land of Israel.

four hundred years This is probably a round number. It does not accord with the "four generations" of verse 16, and it is not identical with the 430-year figure given in Exod. 12:40 as the entire period of time spent in Egypt.

14. I will execute judgment This refers to the plagues (see Exod. 6:6, 7:4, 12:12).

Sinai, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Egypt."

8. Abraham is the first person in the Bible to call God Adonai, "my Lord," the first person to understand that religion asks us not so much to believe in God as to serve God (BT Ber. 7a).

how shall I know that I am to possess it? Does this indicate a lack of faith on Abraham's

part, two verses after he is described as putting his faith in God? Perhaps the earlier verse refers to Abraham's commitment to faith even without proof, and this verse is Abraham's plea: "I believe, can I know that my belief is reasonable and not merely wishful thinking? I believe but, I will continue to question and challenge, out of the context of my belief."

fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The LORD decide between you and me!"⁶ Abram said to Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her.

⁷An angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, ⁸and said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" And she said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai."

⁹And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment." ¹⁰And the angel of the LORD said to her,

"I will greatly increase your offspring,
And they shall be too many to count."

¹¹The angel of the LORD said to her further,

"Behold, you are with child
And shall bear a son;

6. Sarai treated her harshly The Laws of Hammurabi (numbers 146–147) deal with the problem of the female slave-concubine who bears children and claims equality with her mistress. They prescribe that the insolent concubine be reduced to slave status and again bear the slave mark. The Hebrew verb used here (*va-l'anneha*) implies that Sarai subjected Hagar to physical and psychological abuse and carries with it the nuance of a negative judgment of her actions. Ramban states: "The matriarch sinned by such maltreatment, and Abraham too by permitting it."

HAGAR AND THE ANGEL (vv. 7–14)

God appears to the lowly Egyptian maidservant, bringing her a message of hope and comfort. The narrator's sympathies are clearly with Hagar.

behalf (Gen. R. 45:5). When Hagar was rude to me, you did not take my side." Sarah, quite humanly, blames Abraham, although the idea was hers to begin with.

בְּחִילָךְ וְתָרָא בִּי הָרְתָה וְאָקַל בְּעֵינַיִךְ יִשְׁפֹּט יְהוָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ: ⁶וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל־שָׂרַי הִנֵּה שִׁפְחָתְךָ בְּיָדְךָ עֲשִׂי־לָהּ הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְתַעֲנֶנָּה שָׂרַי וְתִבְרַח מִפְּנֶיךָ:

⁷וַיִּמְצְאָהּ מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה עַל־עֵין הַמַּיִם בַּמִּדְבָּר עַל־הָעֵין בְּדֶרֶךְ שׁוּר: ⁸וַיֹּאמֶר הָגָר שִׁפְחַת שָׂרַי אֵימָנָה בָּאת וְאַנָּה תֵּלְכִי וְתֹאמַר מִפְּנֵי שָׂרַי גָּבַרְתִּי אֲנֹכִי בְרַחַת:

⁹וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה שׁוּבִי אֶל־גְּבִרְתְּךָ וְהִתְעַנִּי תַּחַת יְדֶיהָ: ¹⁰וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה

הֲרָגָה אֶרְבָּה אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ וְלֹא יִסְפֹּר מִרְבִּי:

¹¹וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה

הִנֵּנִי הָרָה וְיִלְדֶּת בֶּן:

v. 5. נִקְדָּה עַל־ר בְּתוֹרָה

7. An angel of the LORD This is the first appearance of an angel in biblical literature.

on the road to Shur Hagar fled in the direction of her native land. Shur is elsewhere described as being "close to Egypt" (Gen. 25:18).

8. where have you come from A gentle way of opening a conversation. The angel knows who she is; this encounter with Hagar is deliberate.

10. the angel of the LORD said This is the first of several announcements by a divine messenger predicting the birth and destiny of one who is given a special role in God's design of history (see 25:23; Judg. 13:3).

increase your offspring Ishmael is to become the father of 12 tribes and a great nation. The fulfillment of this promise is recorded in Gen. 25:12–18.

8. Hagar, ... where have you come from, and where are you going! This is the first time in the Torah since the Garden of Eden that God speaks to a woman.

16 Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. ²And Sarai said to Abram, "Look, the LORD has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her." And Abram heeded Sarai's request. ³So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian—after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years—and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine. ⁴He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem. ⁵And Sarai said to Abram, "The wrong done me is your

טז וְשָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲבָרָם לֹא יָלְדָהּ לּוֹ וְלָהּ שִׁפְחָה מִצִּיּוֹן וּשְׁמָהּ הָגָר: ²וְתֹאמַר שָׂרַי אֶל־אַבְרָם הִנֵּה נָא עֲצָרְנִי יְהוָה מִלָּדָת בֶּאֱנָא אֶל־שִׁפְחָתִי אֲנֹכִי אֲבָנָה מִמֶּנָּה וּשְׁמֵעַ אֲבָרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרַי: ³וַתִּשְׁקֶה שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ־אֲבָרָם אֶת־הָהָרָה הַמִּצְרִית שִׁפְחָתָהּ מִקֵּץ עֶשְׂרֵי שָׁנִים לְשִׁבְתּוֹ אֲבָרָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַתֵּתֶן אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָם אִשָּׁה לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה: ⁴וַיִּבְאֵה אֶל־הָגָר וַתְּהַר וְתָרָא בִּי הָרְתָה וְתִקַּל גְּבִרְתָּהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ: ⁵וְתֹאמַר שָׂרַי אֶל־אַבְרָם חֲמִסִּי עָלֶיךָ אֲנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שִׁפְחָתִי

SARAH, HAGAR, AND THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL (16:1–16)

CONCUBINAGE (vv. 1–6)

It has been 10 years since Abram parted from his father in Haran (v. 3). Throughout that decade his wife, Sarai, endured her infertility in silence. Now, to present Abram with a son, she resorts to concubinage.

1. She had Apparently, the maid attended primarily to the personal needs of her mistress and was not the common property of husband and wife.

Hagar The name, related to the Arabic word *hajara*, "to flee," may mean "fugitive." A people called Hagrites, mentioned in Ps. 83:7 and 1 Chron. 5:10,19ff., were pastoralists who roamed the Syro-Arabian desert.

2. kept me from bearing In ancient times

the woman, not the man, was regarded as the source of barrenness, although God was seen as its ultimate cause.

through her In the ancient Near East, it was customary for an infertile wife to provide her husband with a concubine to bear children.

Abram heeded Ramban points out that Abram took Hagar only in response to his wife's urging.

4. her mistress was lowered in her esteem

This is a natural consequence of a situation in which barrenness is regarded as a disgrace and the social position of the wife is diminished.

5. is your fault By giving Hagar to Abram, Sarai has relinquished her exclusive authority over her. It is now Abram's responsibility to control her behavior.

CHAPTER 16

1. In a world with few avenues of fulfillment open to women except as wives and mothers, infertility was an especially cruel and frustrating fate. Even today, in a world of wider possibilities, many women who yearn to be mothers and have difficulty conceiving and bearing children feel the frustration articulated in the Torah

by Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. In the Torah, God responds to their cries by granting them the experience of motherhood. In the modern world, God's response can be found sometimes in the marvels of medical technology and sometimes in the pursuit of other paths to personal fulfillment and the nourishing of others' lives.

5. The wrong done me is your fault "You heard me insulted and did not speak up on my

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16:1–2 borne him no children Jewish law is divided on whether surrogate motherhood is appropriate. The CJLS has approved two responses on surrogate motherhood—one citing this passage in support of surrogacy, the other citing this passage to caution against relying on surrogacy as a response to infertility.

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless. ²I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous."

³Abram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, ⁴"As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall

THE COVENANT IN THE FLESH (17:1-27)

After 13 years, God's promises still remain unfulfilled. The narrator, focusing on events that bear on the destiny of the nation yet to be born, tells us nothing about Abram's activities during that period. Suddenly Abram experiences a series of divine communications.

THE CHANGE OF ABRAM'S NAME (vv. 1-8)

1. the LORD This sole appearance of the name YHWH in this chapter (*Elohim* is used nine times) is intended to link it with the name "El Shaddai" (see Exod. 6:2ff.). The use of the name YHWH also connects it to the covenant of Gen. 15 made by God under that name.

El Shaddai The meaning of this name of God remains unknown.

Walk in My ways Literally, "Walk before Me." The corresponding Akkadian phrase is a technical term for absolute loyalty to a king. In

וַיְהִי אֲבָרָם בְּתִשְׁעִים שָׁנָה וַתֵּשֶׁעַ שָׁנִים וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי אֵל שָׁדַי הַתְּהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי וְהָיָה תָמִים: וְאֶתְנַתְּנָה בְרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וְאֶרְבָּה אוֹתָךְ בְּמֵאד:

וַיִּפֹּל אֲבָרָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ אֱלֹהִים לֵאמֹר: ⁴אֲנִי הֵנָּה בְרִיתִי אִתְּךָ וְהָיִיתָ לְאֵב הַמִּזֶּמֶן גּוֹיִם: ⁵וְלֹא יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת-שִׁמְךָ אֲבָרָם וְהָיָה שִׁמְךָ אֲבְרָהָם כִּי אֶב-

the Bible, to "walk before God" means to condition one's entire range of experience by the awareness of God's presence.

and be blameless This is a near synonym of the preceding clause.

3. threw himself on his face An expression of awe and submission in the presence of the LORD.

4. father of a multitude of nations The Edomites, Ishmaelites, Midianites, and several other peoples descended from Abraham, according to the genealogical lists of chapters 25 and 36. The phrase may also have a more universal meaning in that a segment of humanity much larger than those alluded to regards Abraham as its spiritual father.

5. your name In the Bible a change of name is of major significance. It symbolizes the transformation of character and destiny. See Comment to 1:5.

blameless In the King James translation, the word translated here as "blameless" (*tamim*) is rendered "be perfect," an unrealistic demand. We might understand it to mean "be whole," "come before Me with your whole self: the parts of yourself you are proud of, and the parts you are ashamed of and wish were different." Thus do we come before God on Yom Kippur, not proclaiming our blamelessness but bringing to God our whole selves, our faults with our merits, to be told that we are acceptable in God's sight.

5. father of a multitude of nations May a convert, bringing an offering of first fruits, recite the formula, "the land which You swore to

You shall call him Ishmael,
For the LORD has paid heed to your suffering.
¹²He shall be a wild ass of a man;
His hand against everyone,
And everyone's hand against him;
He shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen."

¹³And she called the LORD who spoke to her, "You Are El-roi," by which she meant, "Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!" ¹⁴Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it is between Kadesh and Bered.—¹⁵Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave the son that Hagar bore him the name Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

וְקָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל
כִּי-שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל-עֲנִיָּךְ:
¹²וְהוּא יִהְיֶה פָרָא אָדָם
יָדוּ כָּל בָּשָׂר
וְיָד כָּל בָּשָׂר
וְעַל-פָּנָיו כָּל-אֲחָיו יִשָּׁבֵן:

¹³וְתִקְרָא שֵׁם-יְהוָה הַדּוֹבֵר אֵלֶיהָ אֶתְּהָ אֵל רֹאֵי כִּי אִמְרָה הִגַּם הַלֵּם רֵאִיתִי אֲחֵרֵי רֹאִי: ¹⁴עַל-כֵּן קָרָא לְבֵּאֵר בְּאֵר לַחֵי רֹאֵי הֵנָּה בֵּין קָדֵשׁ וּבֵין בֶּרֶד: ¹⁵וַתֵּלֶד הָגָר לְאַבְרָם בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֲבָרָם שֵׁם-בְּנוֹ אִשְׁמָעֵאל הָגָר יִשְׁמָעֵאל: ¹⁶וְאַבְרָם בְּן-שְׁמֹנִים וָשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים בָּלְדָתָהּ הָגָר אֶת-יִשְׁמָעֵאל לְאַבְרָם: ס

11. Ishmael The name (literally, "God hears") is here interpreted as "God has paid heed to your suffering."

12. a wild ass of a man Hagar, the slave woman subjected to the cruel discipline of her mistress, will produce a people free and undisciplined. They are to be among people as the wild ass is among beasts: sturdy, fearless, fleet-footed, like the Syrian onager (Hebrew, *pere*), who roams the wilderness and is almost impossible to domesticate.

His hand against everyone A prediction reflecting the unremitting tension between the sedentary and the nomadic populations in the Near East.

alongside of all his kinsmen Better: "in confrontation with his kinsmen."

13. she called the LORD Literally, "she called the name of YHWH." The name—from the Hebrew root meaning "to be"—is inextricably bound up with existence. Hagar gives expres-

sion to her personal discovery by referring to God with a name that recalls the particular aspect of divine providence that she has experienced. Hagar is the only individual in the Bible (male or female) who gives God a name.

El-roi Literally, "God of seeing," that is, the all-seeing God. Also, "God of my seeing," that is, whom I have seen; and "God who sees me." The several meanings are to be apprehended simultaneously.

Have I not gone on seeing Hagar is spiritually stirred by her revelatory experience. She has become conscious of God's concern for the downtrodden.

14. Beer-lahai-roi This is either a newly coined name or the reinterpretation of an old one whose original meaning is unknown.

15. Hagar bore a son The narrative assumes that Hagar returned to Sarai, as bidden. Significantly, it is Abram who named the child, not Hagar, thus implying that he legitimized him.

I am running away from my mistress Hagar can tell the angel only what she is running from. She has no destination in mind, she only wants to escape harsh treatment.

13. El-roi "The God who sees me." God is a God who notices the oppressed, the needy, the marginalized, those of whom human society takes no notice.

CHAPTER 17

1. El Shaddai The Midrash understands this name of God to mean: "the God who says, 'Dai (Enough)!'" The people of the world have gone on long enough acting like children. It is time to demand righteous behavior of them, to proclaim that certain things are permitted and others forbidden (Tanh. B. 25). God's covenant of circumcision marks Abraham as committed to teaching humanity what the God-ordained life can mean.

Walk in My ways Let all your actions be done in the knowledge that you do them in My presence.

¹¹You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹²And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. As for the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring, ¹³they must be circumcised, homeborn, and purchased alike. Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. ¹⁴And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant."

¹⁵And God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. ¹⁶I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of

11. the sign An outward, physical reminder of the covenant, like the rainbow after the Flood.

12. eight days The reinterpretation of the common practice of circumcision from a pubertal or nuptial rite to a covenantal rite is reinforced by the transfer of the time of the operation to the eighth day after birth. The eighth day is especially significant because the seven-day unit of time completed by the newborn corresponds to the process of Creation.

13. marked in your flesh "Flesh" is here a euphemism for "penis," as in Lev. 15:2ff. and Ezek. 16:26, 23:20.

14. his foreskin That is, his own foreskin. When a father fails to fulfill his duty, the responsibility falls on the individual himself when he reaches maturity.

shall be cut off This punishment, known as

15. Sarah is given a new name as well, for she is a partner in the covenant. She merits, and receives, her own blessing. The letter *hei*, representing the name of God, is added both

עַלְתֶּכֶם וְהָיָה לְאוֹת בְּרִית בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם: ¹²וּבְרִישְׁמֹנֶת יָמִים יִמּוֹל לְכֶם כָּל־זָכָר לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם יְלִיד בֵּית וּמִקְנֵת־בֵּטָח מִכָּל בֶּן־זָכָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא מִזְרַעָה הוּא: ¹³הַמּוֹל יִמּוֹל יְלִיד בֵּיתָהּ וּמִקְנֵת כֶּסֶף וְהָיְתָה בְרִיתִי בִּשְׁרֹכְכֶם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם: ¹⁴וְעָרַל יֶזְכָּר אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִמּוֹל אֶת־בָּשָׁר עָרְלָתוֹ וְנִכְרְתָהּ הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מֵעַמִּיהָ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי הַפֶּר: ¹⁵וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם שְׂרָי אִשְׁתְּךָ לֹא־תִקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמָהּ שְׂרָי כִּי שָׂרָה שְׁמָהּ: ¹⁶וּבִרְכֹתֶיהָ אֲתָהּ וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לָךְ בֶּן וּבִרְכֹתֶיהָ וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם

karet (see Lev. 20:1-6), is largely confined to offenses connected to the system of Israelite worship and to deviant sexual behavior. The Torah gives no definition of *karet*, and no analogy to it exists in ancient Near Eastern sources. In rabbinic literature, *karet* means premature death. The general idea is that one who excludes himself from the religious community dooms himself and his line to extinction, because he cannot benefit from the covenantal blessings.

THE CHANGE OF SARAI'S NAME (vv. 15-22)

15. Sarai . . . Sarah Actually, the revised form *sarah* is simply a later modernization of the archaic form *sarai*, the second syllable being an old Semitic female ending. In either case, the literal meaning of the name is "princess."

to her name and to Abram's name, as a reward for their pious behavior. To do good deeds is to link our name with the name of God [Mekh. Yitro].

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17:12 the age of eight days This is the origin of the obligation to circumcise infant boys on the eighth day of their life in a *brit milah* ceremony (see Exod. 4:24-25). This ceremony seals the covenant in the flesh of the male generative organ, to make that covenant permanent for us and for all future generations.

be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. ⁷I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. ⁸I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God."

⁹God further said to Abraham, "As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant. ¹⁰Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised.

Abram . . . Abraham Henceforth the patriarch is referred to only by the expanded form of his name, which carries with it an intimation of his God-given destiny.

6. kings The same promise recurs in verse 16 and in 35:11. Kingship, in the context of the times, is the consummation of the process of national development. The Davidic dynasty is the fulfillment of this promise.

7. to be God to you So again in verse 8. This phrase belongs to the formal language of the covenant and recurs frequently in the Bible. God elects Israel to be His special people, demanding exclusive allegiance in return (see Exod. 19:5-6).

to you and to your offspring to come This legal terminology occurs six times in this chapter. It also appears in Gen. 35:12 and 48:4 in connection with the covenantal promises. The phrase is found in ancient Near Eastern documents relating to the transmission of property on the death of the owner; it ensured that the

הָיוּ לְךָ גוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ: ⁶וְהִפְרֵתִי אֶתְךָ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד וְנִתְּתִיךָ לְגוֹיִם וּמְלָכִים מִמֶּךָ יֵצְאוּ: ⁷וְהִקְמַתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וּבֵין זַרְעֲךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ לְדֹרֹתָם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם: ⁸וְהָיְתָה לָּךְ לְאֱלֹהִים וְלִזְרַעֲךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ: ⁹וְנָתַתִּי לָּךְ וּלִזְרַעֲךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרֶיךָ אֲתָה כָּל־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן כִּנְשֶׁן לְאֶחָיוֹת עוֹלָם וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לְאֱלֹהִים: ¹⁰וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם וְאַתָּה אֶת בְּרִיתִי תִשְׁמֹר אֲתָה וְזַרְעֲךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ לְדֹרֹתָם: ¹¹וְאַתָּה בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמֹרוּ בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם וּבֵין זַרְעֲךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ הַמּוֹל לְכֶם כָּל־זָכָר: ¹²וְנִמְלְתֶם אֶת בָּשָׁר

real estate would be passed from generation to generation without restriction.

8. an everlasting holding National ownership of the land is to be eternal, like the covenant itself.

I will be their God The indissoluble union of the people Israel, the land of Israel, and God is the foundation on which Jewish civilization is built.

THE LAW OF CIRCUMCISION (vv. 9-14)

Circumcision is both a symbol of God's covenant and a mark of the commitment to a life lived in awareness of that covenant. The law of circumcision is the first mitzvah in the Torah addressed to Abraham and his descendants.

9. As for you This is the counterpart of "As for Me" in verse 4.

10. every male Only males, a restriction that excludes female circumcision, practiced in many parts of the world.

our forefathers [Deut. 26:4]?" The Sages rule that the convert may do so, because Abraham is the forefather of all righteous individuals (JT Bikk. 1:4).

10. The covenant (*b'rit*) of the night vision (see 15:18) is re-affirmed through the rite of circumcision. In Hebrew, the formal term for

the covenant of circumcision is *b'rit milah*. But the rite is so highly charged and symbolic that the term *b'rit* (Yiddish: *bris*) by itself has become synonymous with the circumcision ritual. Note that Abraham is given a new name at his circumcision, even as a Jewish male child is given a name at his.

on that very day, as God had spoken to him.

²⁴Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he circumcised the flesh of his foreskin, ²⁵and his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

²⁶Thus Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on that very day; ²⁷and all his household, his homeborn slaves and those that had been bought from outsiders, were circumcised with him.

THE LAW OF CIRCUMCISION
CARRIED OUT (vv. 23-27)

23. that very day Without delay, Abraham fulfills God's command and circumcises the en-

tire male population of his household. Kinship is defined here by the residential unit; this household becomes an inclusive community. Yet heirship to the new covenant with Abraham is to be based only on a matrilineal principle (see. v. 21).

עָרְלָתָם בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר
אֵתוֹ אֱלֹהִים: ²⁴וְאַבְרָהָם בְּנֵי־תִשְׁעִים
וְתִשַׁע שָׁנָה בְּהַמְלֹךְ בָּשָׂר עָרְלָתוֹ:
²⁵וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּנוֹ בֶן־שְׁלֹשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה
בְּהַמְלֹךְ אֶת בָּשָׂר עָרְלָתוֹ: ²⁶בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם
הַזֶּה נִמּוֹל אַבְרָהָם וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּנָיו:
²⁷וְכָל־אֲנָשִׁי בֵּיתוֹ וְלִידֵי בֵּית וּמִקְנֵת־כֶּסֶף
מֵאֵת בְּנִגְרָר נִמְלְוּ אִתּוֹ: פ

מפטר

peoples shall issue from her." ¹⁷Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?" ¹⁸And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live by Your favor!" ¹⁹God said, "Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac; and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come. ²⁰As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation. ²¹But My covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year." ²²And when He was done speaking with him, God was gone from Abraham.

²³Then Abraham took his son Ishmael, and all his homeborn slaves and all those he had bought, every male in Abraham's household, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins

17. and laughed The laughter foretokens the name of the son of destiny that Sarah will bear Abraham (Gen. 17:19).

Can . . . or can The double question describes two conditions that together produce a state of affairs clearly inimical to any possibility of Abraham and Sarah producing a child.

18. by Your favor Abraham fears for the life of Ishmael because God's words appear to exclude the boy from the benefits of the covenant.

19. God said God reassures Abraham, point by point.

Isaac The Hebrew word *yitzhak* means "he laughs." All three biblical traditions relating to

the birth of Isaac (17:19, 18:12, 21:6) mention laughter in connection with doubting God's power. Isaac's birth represents the triumph of God over the limitations of nature.

20. Ishmael . . . heeded Although Ishmael is not to be Abraham's spiritual heir, he receives God's blessing and will pursue his own destiny.

twelve chieftains Corresponding to the 12 tribes of Israel, listed in 25:12-16.

22. God was gone Literally, "went up," implying that God had "come down" to speak with Abraham. The latter verb occurs in a context of divine self-manifestation; thus "to go up" means the termination of divine communication.

20. as for Ishmael Abraham prays that Ishmael will grow up to be a good person. The reply received by Abraham implies that each individual has the responsibility to become a good person. It is not in God's power to make people good. As the Midrash teaches, everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear

of Heaven. God, however, will bless Ishmael with wealth and family, so that neither poverty nor lack of companionship will incline him to unrighteous behavior (Barukh of Goretitz). Ishmael will be blessed with wealth and numbers, but Isaac will, in addition, be blessed with a unique relationship to God (Mid. Ha-Gadol).

מִלְכֵי עַמִּים מִמִּנְהָ יֵהְיוּ: ¹⁷וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם
עַל־פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבִּי הֲלָבֹן מֵאֵהָ
שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד וְאִם־שָׁנָה הִבְתִּיתִשְׁעִים שָׁנָה
תֵּלֵד: ¹⁸וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים לֹא
יִשְׁמָעֵאל יִהְיֶה לְפָנָי: ¹⁹וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים
אֲבָל שָׂרָה אִשְׁתִּי יִלְדָת לְךָ בֶן וְקָרָאתָ
אֶת־שְׁמוֹ יִצְחָק וְהִקְמַתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי
אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לִפְנֵי אֲדָמָי: ²⁰
וְלִישְׁמָעֵאל אֵתוֹ וְהִרְבֵּיתִי הֵנָּה | בְּרַכְתִּי
אֹתוֹ וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֹתוֹ וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֹתוֹ בְּמֵאֹד
לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל: ²¹וְאֶת־בְּרִיתִי נָשִׂיאִם יוֹלִיד וְנִתְּנָיו
יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד לְךָ שָׂרָה לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה
בְּשָׁנָה אַחֲרָת: ²²וַיִּכַּל לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ וַיֵּעַל
אֱלֹהִים מֵעַל אַבְרָהָם:
²³וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּנוֹ וְאֵת
כָּל־לִידֵי בֵּיתוֹ וְאֵת כָּל־מִקְנֵת־כֶּסֶף כָּל־
זָכָר בְּאֲנָשֵׁי בֵּית אַבְרָהָם וַיִּמַּל אֶת־בָּשָׂר

that God will rescue them from Babylon just as he once "brought" Abraham "out from Ur of the Chaldeans" to the promised "land" (Gen. 15:7). At one level, therefore, the nation's restoration from its exile completes God's promises to Abraham. God's ancient assurance, "Fear not" (*al tira*; Gen. 15:1), rings in the people's ears as the prophet proclaims God's new word of trust "Fear not" (*al tira*; Isa. 41:10) to the patriarch's seed.

By this same means, the *haftarah* may also suggest the mystery of divine protection to later generations. The God who rewarded Abraham's

faith with "merit" (*tz'dakah*; Gen. 15:6) speaks now to all the people with the promise of providential care: "I am your God . . . I uphold you with My victorious right hand" (*biymin tzidki*; Isa. 41:10). Here God's gracious might sustains His creatures, not their own merit. Isaiah seeks to awaken his audience to this reality, providing the hope that renews strength. By proclaiming that the impaired spirit may be revived through trust in God's creative vitality (40:28-31), the prophet offers a new theology of divine immanence (presence) and the renewal of creation.

40 ²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob,

Why declare, O Israel,

"My way is hid from the LORD,

My cause is ignored by my God?"

²⁸Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The LORD is God from of old,

Creator of the earth from end to end,

He never grows faint or weary,

His wisdom cannot be fathomed.

²⁹He gives strength to the weary,

Fresh vigor to the spent.

³⁰Youths may grow faint and weary,

And young men stumble and fall;

³¹But they who trust in the LORD shall re-
new their strength

As eagles grow new plumes:

They shall run and not grow weary,

They shall march and not grow faint.

Isaiah 40:27. My way is hid from the LORD
This quote from a communal criticism or lament bemoans the lack of divine knowledge, a knowledge that would lead to divine involvement. Hence the prophet responds that God's "wisdom cannot be fathomed" (v. 28).

28. Do you not know? / Have you not heard? The questions introduce a glorification of God as creator. A subsequent section mocks the making of idols (41:6-7).

מ ²⁷לָמָּה תֹאמַר יַעֲקֹב

וְתִדְבֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל

נִסְתַּתְּרָה דְּרִבִּי מִיְהוָה

וּמֵאֱלֹהֵי מִשְׁפָּטֵי יַעֲקֹב:

²⁸הֲלוֹא יָדַעַתְּ

אִם-לֹא שָׁמַעַתְּ

אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם יְהוָה

בּוֹרֵא קְצוֹת הָאָרֶץ

לֹא יִעָף וְלֹא יִיָּגַע

אֵין חֶקֶר לְתַבּוּנָתוֹ:

²⁹נָתַן לַיָּעֵף כֹּחַ

וְלֶאֱיִן אוֹנִים עֲצָמָה יִרְבֶּה:

³⁰וְיַעֲפּוּ וְנָפְלוּ יְעָנִים

וּבְחֹרִים כְּשׁוֹל יִכְשְׁלוּ:

וְיִקְוִי יְהוָה יִחְלִיפוּ כָח

יַעֲלֻ אֲבָר כְּנָשָׁרִים

יִרְצֻ וְלֹא יִיָּגַעוּ

יִלְכוּ וְלֹא יִעָפּוּ:

הפטרות לך לך

HAFTARAH FOR LEKH L'KHA

ISAIAH 40:27-41:16

This *haftarah* is a call to the people, seed of Abraham, to return from exile to their homeland. It was delivered in Babylon, sometime in the mid-6th century B.C.E. Isaiah emphasizes God's power and providential guidance to alleviate the nation's mood of despair and fear. Through their faithful response, the people would thus renew a redemptive journey begun by their great ancestor more than a millennium earlier.

The several oracles included in this *haftarah* presumably were uttered at different times to the people in exile, presenting diverse themes and using distinct styles. At one level, these divine prophecies were anthologized on the basis of external verbal links. Thus, for example, the language of God's proclamation to the people Israel, calling on them to "renew their strength" through trust in the Lord (40:31), is repeated ironically in the following chapter, where this call for renewal is part of a challenge to the nations (41:1).

Read as part of a liturgical whole (related to public worship), the verbal connections take on thematic substance. One notable example is provided by the repetition of the phrase "the ends of the earth." It is used to describe God as Creator "of the earth from end to end" (40:28), the foreign nations ("ends of earth") who behold God's victory in fear and trembling (41:5), and God's act of liberating Israel from "the ends of the earth" to be His servant (41:9). The repetition of this phrase includes all the themes of the *haftarah*: God as creator, victor over the nations, and redeemer of the people Israel.

As a unified liturgical teaching, the *haftarah* moves progressively from the realism of despair to a near surreal vision of victory. In the process, Israel's speech moves from lament to exhilaration. These two poles are marked by Israel's opening words, "My way is hid from the LORD"

(40:27), and the final divine promise, "But you shall rejoice in the LORD" (41:16). The proof is formulated in between these two statements: God will arouse a victor who will destroy the nations and thereby help prepare the fulfillment of the divine promises. The initial cry of disbelief is countered with reasons for trust.

In an attempt to motivate the people, the prophet alludes to earlier occasions of divine support. Thus in the opening oracle, the promise that the faithful will renew their strength and soar homeward like eagles (40:31) counters the sense of being forgotten in exile. This promise echoes the people's redemption from Egypt, when God first "bore you [the Israelites] on eagles' wings" (Exod. 19:4). "Like an eagle . . . did He spread His wings and take [Israel], / Bear [them] along on His pinions" (Deut. 32:11). An even earlier event of divine guidance is alluded to in the reference to the nation as the "Seed of Abraham My friend" (Isa. 41:8). This patriarch faithfully followed God and was promised the blessing of the land for his "seed" (Gen. 15:5). So may Israel, "the Seed of Abraham," confidently anticipate its own restoration to the homeland. Designating the nation as God's "servant" whom He has "chosen" (Isa. 41:8-9) also underscores the special status of the people Israel.

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

Isaiah's reference to the people Israel as the "Seed (*zera*) of Abraham My friend" (Isa. 41:8) establishes a correlation between a late prophecy of renewal and the Torah narrative in which this patriarch was promised "offspring" (*zera*) as numerous as the stars on high (Gen. 15:5). Indeed, because of this the Judeans in Babylon may hope

⁸But you, Israel, My servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
Seed of Abraham My friend—
⁹You whom I drew from the ends of the
earth
And called from its far corners,
To whom I said: You are My servant;
I chose you, I have not rejected you—
¹⁰Fear not, for I am with you,
Be not frightened, for I am your God;
I strengthen you and I help you,
I uphold you with My victorious right
hand.
¹¹Shamed and chagrined shall be
All who contend with you;
They who strive with you
Shall become as naught and shall perish.
¹²You may seek, but shall not find
Those who struggle with you;
Less than nothing shall be
The men who battle against you.
¹³For I the LORD am your God,
Who grasped your right hand,
Who say to you: Have no fear;
I will be your help.
¹⁴Fear not, O worm Jacob,
O men of Israel:
I will help you

—declares the LORD—

8. Israel, My servant. The "servant" here is understood to be the nation (apparently also in Isa. 42:19, 43:10, 45:4, and 48:20). The prophet transfers to the nation as a whole a designation used in older sources for specific individuals (e.g., Abraham in Gen. 26:24; Moses in Deut. 34:5; David in Ps. 89:4). In this context, the title "My servant" has a strong covenantal aspect.

Seed of Abraham My friend. The Hebrew for "My friend" is *ohavi*; literally, "who loves Me." Ibn Ezra stressed the active force of the verb, distinguishing it sharply from the passive sense ("who is loved by Me").

14. O worm Jacob. A rare designation of abject suffering (see Ps. 22:7). The next phrase refers to "men of Israel" (*m'tei Yisra-el*). The Hebrew vocalization may be an error. The Akkadian noun for "maggot" (*muṣu*) could yield the reading *moti Yisra-el*, leading to the parallelism of worm/maggot. This harsh designation of Israel is turned into a more positive attribute in an old *midrash*: Just as the strength of a worm is in its mouth, so the strength of suffering Israel is in its prayers and repentance (*Tanh. B'shallah* 9).

⁸וְאַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדִּי
יַעֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר אֶבְחַרְתִּיךָ
זֶרַע אֲבֹתְךָ אַהֲבִי:
⁹אֲשֶׁר הִחֲזַקְתִּיךָ מִקְצוֹת הָאָרֶץ
וּמֵאַצִּילוֹת קִרְאתִיךָ
וְאָמַר לְךָ עַבְדִּי אַתָּה
בְּחִרְתִּיךָ וְלֹא מֵאַסְתִּיךָ:
¹⁰אֶל־תִּירָא כִּי עִמָּךְ־אֲנִי
אֶל־תִּשְׁתַּע בִּי־אֲנִי אֱלֹהֶיךָ
אֲמַצְתִּיךָ אֶחָד־עֲזָרְתִּיךָ
אֶחָד־תִּמְכָּתִיךָ בַּיָּמִין צִדְּךָ:
¹¹הֵן יִבְשׁוּ וַיִּכְלְמוּ
כָּל הַנֹּחָדִים בָּךְ
יִהְיוּ כָאֵין וַיֵּאבְדוּ
אֲנָשֵׁי רִיבֶךָ:
¹²תִּבְקָשׁם וְלֹא תִמְצָאֵם
אֲנָשֵׁי מִצְתָךְ
יִהְיוּ כָאֵין וְכֹאֲפֵס
אֲנָשֵׁי מִלְחָמָתְךָ:
¹³כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
מִחֲזִיק יְמִינֶךָ
הָאָמַר לְךָ אֶל־תִּירָא
אֲנִי עֲזָרְתִּיךָ: ס
¹⁴אֶל־תִּירָאִי תוֹלַעַת יַעֲקֹב
מִתִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֲנִי עֲזָרְתִּיךָ
נָאִם יְהוָה

41 Stand silent before Me, coastlands,
And let nations renew their strength.
Let them approach to state their case;
Let us come forward together for argu-
ment.
²Who has roused a victor from the East,
Summoned him to His service?
Has delivered up nations to him,
And trodden sovereigns down?
Has rendered their swords like dust,
Their bows like wind-blown straw?
³He pursues them, he goes on unscathed;
No shackle is placed on his feet.
⁴Who has wrought and achieved this?
He who announced the generations from
the start—
I, the LORD, who was first
And will be with the last as well.

⁵The coastlands look on in fear,
The ends of earth tremble.

They draw near and come;
⁶Each one helps the other,
Saying to his fellow, "Take courage!"
⁷The woodworker encourages the smith;
He who flattens with the hammer
[Encourages] him who pounds the anvil.
He says of the riveting, "It is good!"
And he fixes it with nails,
That it may not topple.

Isaiah 41:2. Who has roused a victor from the East. Ibn Ezra understood this as referring to Cyrus the Mede, who is mentioned explicitly in 45:1.

4. He who announced the generations. God's control of history and foreknowledge of events are crucial elements in Isaiah's theology.

Isaiah's history is living testimony to God's prophetic power (43:9–10).

8–13. An oracle of confidence, similar in language and form to oracles presented elsewhere to motivate leaders (Deut. 31:6–8) and prophets (Jer. 1:8, 17).

מא הִחֲרִישׁוּ אֵלַי אֲנִים
וְלֹא־אֲנִים יִחַלְפוּ כֹחַ
יִגְשׁוּ אוֹ יִדְבְּרוּ
יִחָדּוּ לְמִשְׁפָּט נִקְרָבָה:
²מִי הָעִיר מִמִּזְרַח צֶדֶק
יִקְרָאֶהוּ לְחִגְלוֹ
יִתֵּן לִפְנֵי גוֹיִם
וּמַלְכִּים יִרְדּוּ
יִתֵּן בְּעַפְפֵּר חֲרָבוֹ
כֶּקֶשׁ נִפָּח קִשְׁתּוֹ:
³יִרְדָּפֵם יַעֲבֹר שְׁלוֹם
אֶחָד בְּרִגְלָיו לֹא יָבֹא:
⁴מִי־פָעַל וַעֲשָׂה
קָרָא הַדְּרוֹת מְרָאשׁ
אֲנִי יְהוָה רֹאשׁוֹן
וְאֶת־אַחֲרָיִם אֲנִי־הוּא:
⁵כָּרָאוּ אֲנִים וַיִּירָאוּ
קְצוֹת הָאָרֶץ יִחַרְדּוּ
קָרְבוּ וַיֵּאָחֲזוּ:
⁶אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ יַעֲזֹרוּ
וְלֹא־חָיו יֹאמַר חֲזֹק:
⁷וַיְחַזֵּק חֲרֹשׁ אֶת־צֹרֶף
מַחְלִיק פְּשִׁישׁ
אֶת־הוֹלֵם פָּעַם
אָמַר לְדָבֵק טוֹב הוּא
וַיַּחֲזִקְהוּ בְּמַסְמְרִים
לֹא יִמוּט: ס

/your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.
¹⁵I will make of you a threshing board,
 A new thresher, with many spikes;
 You shall thresh mountains to dust,
 And make hills like chaff.
¹⁶You shall winnow them
 And the wind shall carry them off;
 The whirlwind shall scatter them.
 But you shall rejoice in the LORD,
 And glory in the Holy One of Israel.

וְגֹאֲלְךָ קְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל:
¹⁵דְּהִנֵּה שְׂמִיתֶיךָ לְמוֹרֵג
 חֲרוּץ חֶדֶשׁ בְּעַל פִּיפּוֹת
 תְּדוֹשׁ הָרִים וְתִדָּק
 וּגְבָעוֹת כַּמֶּץ תִּשִּׂים:
¹⁶תִּנְרֶם
 וְרוּחַ תִּשְׁאָם
 וְסַעֲרָה תִפְּיץ אוֹתָם
 וְאַתָּה תִּגְלֵל בְּיהוָה
 בְּקָדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּתְהַלֵּל: פ

VA-YERA

וירא

18 The LORD appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. ²Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As

יֵחַ וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה בְּאַלְנֵי מַמְרֵא
 וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח-הַאֹהֶל בְּחֹם הַיּוֹם:
²וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים

DIVINE VISITORS (18:1-33)

HOSPITALITY TO STRANGERS (vv. 1-8)

1. The LORD appeared to him This revelation, unlike the previous revelations, is unaccompanied by a formal act of worship or the building of an altar.

the terebinths of Mamre These are trees in the area of Hebron. See Comment to 12:6.

the day grew hot Noontime was approaching. The Bible does not divide time into hours,

minutes, and seconds. A specific time of the day may be marked by a cooling breeze, the heat of the sun, or the dawning of light (see Gen. 3:8).

2. Looking up, he saw The wayfarers appear suddenly at a time of the day when people normally would not be traveling.

three men There seems to be nothing unusual about their appearance. Abraham and the people of Sodom (19:5) see them as entirely human.

CHAPTER 18

Even as the opening notes of a symphony often sound a theme that will be developed in various ways throughout the piece, the opening word of this fourth *parashah* of Genesis proclaims the theme: *Va-yera*, "The LORD appeared/was seen." One incident after another involves people seeing or not seeing God. Hagar's eyes are opened to see the miraculous well God has provided for her in 21:19. Abraham sees God atop Mount Moriah (22:4), while the servants who were traveling with him do not. One of the gifts with which spiritually sensitive people are blessed is the ability to see the presence of God in their daily experiences. Others, sharing the same experiences, are blind to the divine presence.

1. By visiting Abraham to distract him from the pain of recovering from his circumcision, God provides us with an example of the *mitzvah* of visiting the sick, *bikkur holim* (BT Sot. 14a). Visiting the sick may not physically alter the course of an illness, but the knowledge that people care may ease the suffering and discomfort of one who is ill or recuperating and dispel any fears that the suffering is deserved because he or she is a bad person. The presence of a caring

friend lessens a sense of suffering. When the Sages envision God visiting Abraham to lessen his discomfort, they may be implying that sometimes all we can give an afflicted person is the gift of our caring presence, and when we do that, we are following God's ways.

By turning away from God to attend to the three strangers, Abraham teaches us that caring for others is a great *mitzvah*. "Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence" [BT Shab. 127a]. Aaron of Karlin taught that when we turn our attention from God to tend to the needs of people, we do God's will. Conversely, God is not pleased when we place such a great focus on God that we ignore needy human beings.

2. Perhaps Abraham, having benefited from God's show of concern, is no longer focused exclusively on his own problems and is moved to help others. A tradition has it that Abraham and Sarah's tent was open on all four sides to facilitate their extending hospitality to wayfarers.

It will become clear (in 19:1) that these travelers are angels in human guise. What is an angel? An agent. The Hebrew for "angel" [*malakh*] is related to the word for "task" [*m'lakhah*]. We can think of an angel as a phys-

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

18:1 The LORD appeared to him The *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick, is motivated by our desire to emulate God's behavior here (BT Sot. 14a), for, as the last verses of the previous chapter indicate, Abraham had just been circumcised.