

Commentary on Lech Lecha

Genesis 12:1 – 17:27

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Our Torah reading this morning is Lech Lecha.

We are in the middle third of the triennial reading cycle. In the part of that we will read today we find that Abram, who has not yet been named Abraham, speaks to God for the first time. Let's take a look at that exchange.

Please turn to page 82. We begin the exchange with God speaking to Abram. We are at chapter 15, verse 1.

It begins, "*Achar had'varim ha'eileh.*" Our translation says "Some time later."

I don't like that translation. The Hebrew means, "After these things." When the Torah says "*achar had'varim ha'eileh*" – "after these things" – it means "immediately after these things."

What things?

The wars described in the previous chapter.

In those wars, four kings, including the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, fought against five kings. The four kings lost. The five kings then seized all the wealth of Sodom and Gomorrah and also took prisoners. One of these was Lot, who was Abram's nephew.

When Abram learned that his nephew had been taken captive, he gathered his own troops and fought against the five kings. Abram won that war and recovered his nephew.

That is the background to the conversation with God. The conversation happens immediately after Abram has won that war and brought Lot back home.

God begins the conversation, chapter 15, verse 1, page 82, by saying, "*Al tirah, Avram, anochi magein lach.*" "Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you."

God needed to reassure Abram because Abram was afraid. This much is clear. What is not clear is why Abram was afraid. After all, he had just won the war. Not only that, he entered into a kind of peace treaty with the king of Sodom after the war. It would seem he had nothing to fear.

Take a look, please, at the notes on page 82. The second note on verse 1 comments on the words "Fear not." The note says, "The patriarch is deeply concerned about the possibility of revenge by the defeated kings."

I suppose that could be true. But a note like that hides from us the much richer commentary that has accumulated over the ages by other commentators who speculate about why Abram was afraid.

In an ancient midrash we find that Rabbi Levi said, “It was because Abram was apprehensive and said, ‘Perhaps there was among the people I killed one righteous or god-fearing man.’”

In that same midrash the same Rabbi Levi also said, “It was because Abram was apprehensive and said, ‘Perhaps the sons of those kings I killed will gather together an army and make war against me.’”

The midrash concludes with still a third suggestion: “It was because Abram was apprehensive and said: ‘I went into the fiery furnace and was saved; I went to do battle with the kings and was saved. Perhaps I have already used up all my reward in this world, and there will be nothing for me in the hereafter.’”

Rashi offers a fourth interpretation. He suggests that Abram was fearful that he would be punished in the afterlife because of all the lives he had taken in the war with the kings, not merely the lives of the righteous but all who had been killed by him, both the righteous and the wicked.

Reading our text and then these commentaries caused me to reflect on the feelings of the soldiers in the IDF who fought in Operation Protective Edge in Gaza, and indeed I thought about all soldiers who fight in wars. When the fighting stops, it is not only physical wounds that affect the soldiers who fought. In addition there are psychological wounds, summarized in the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder.

After Operation Protective Edge, the IDF soldiers must confront the reality that their actions caused suffering and death to many innocents as well as to the Hamas fighters. They can take some comfort in the knowledge that they fought to protect Israel from Hamas rockets and tunnels. They know they did all they could to prevent civilian casualties. But they cannot avoid the knowledge that such casualties nevertheless occurred.

Sadly we do not live in a time when God speaks directly to humanity as depicted in this conversation with Abram. Our IDF soldiers therefore cannot receive comforting reassurance directly from God.

The responsibility therefore falls upon us, as God’s partners, to be clear in our conversations with friends and neighbors, and with any IDF soldier or soldier’s family we may know, that the IDF was performing a necessary task for the protection of Israel just as Abram went to war to rescue his nephew. Deaths and injuries that occurred in that war against the kings, or in Operation Protective Edge in Gaza, were inevitable. They were not Abram’s fault then, because he did not start that war against the kings. And they are not the fault of the IDF soldiers now, because they did not start the war in Gaza and they took all reasonable precautions to avoid civilian casualties.

Our reading begins on page 77 with chapter 14, verse 1.