

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Lech Lecha

When is “After”?

וְה' אָמַר אֶל אַבְרָם אַחֲרֵי הַפָּרֶד לֹט מֵעֲמוֹ שָׂא נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה מִן הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שָׂם... כִּי אֶת כָּל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה רֹאֶה לְךָ אֶתְנַנֶּה וּלְזַרְעֶךָ עַד עוֹלָם.

Hashem said to Avram after Lot had parted from him, “Raise now your eyes and look out from where you are... for all the land that you see, to you I will give it and to your descendants forever.” (13:14-15)

Lot’s Departure

The preceding pesukim in this perek have described how, due to irreconcilable differences, Avram and Lot were forced to part ways. As such, the phrase “after Lot has parted from him (Avram)” in our pasuk appears somewhat redundant, for this is clear from the order of the pesukim themselves! Chazal therefore explain¹ that these words contain an additional message, with two opinions presented as to what that message is:

R’ Yehudah says: [Hashem’s] anger was directed toward Avraham at the time when his nephew, Lot, departed from him. R’ Nechemiah says: Hashem was angry as long as Lot was travelling together with him [Avraham].

According to the Midrash, the repetition of Lot leaving Avraham in our pasuk reflects an appraisal of that act. The nature of that appraisal, however, is subject to dispute. According to R’ Yehudah the idea is that it was wrong for Avraham to let Lot go, while according to R’ Nechemiah, it was wrong for Lot to have stayed with Avraham all this time! The question is, how do these two viewpoints derive from the words of the pasuk, which merely reiterate that Hashem’s words to Avraham came after Lot had left?

¹ Bereishis Rabbah 41:8.

“Achar” and “Acharei”

The Meshech Chochmah explains that the root of this discussion lies in a basic question of parshanut. The Midrash further on² records a dispute regarding the difference in connotation between the two words the Torah uses to mean “after”: “אחר – *achar*” and “אחרי – *acharei*.”

- One opinion states that “*achar*” denotes soon after (“סמוך”) while “*acharei*” denotes a while after (“מופלג”).
- The second opinion holds the reverse, whereby “*achar*” denotes a while after while “*achar*” denotes soon after.

Our pasuk describes Hashem’s words to Avraham as coming “after (אחרי) Lot had departed from him.” The nature of the message within this phrase will thus depend on one’s understanding of the connotation of the word “*acharei*.”

- R’ Yehudah understands that “*acharei*” denotes “a while after”. The pasuk is thus informing us that it was only a while after Lot departed that Hashem spoke to Avraham. This delay was an expression of anger at Avraham – for letting Lot go.
- R’ Nechemiah, on other hand, understands that “*acharei*” denotes “soon after.” Hence, the message is that it was Lot being together with Avraham that was the source of anger. Therefore, as soon as Lot had departed and the objectionable situation was terminated, Hashem spoke with Avraham!

The Unity of Torah: Avraham, Lot and the Ten Plagues

The Meshech Chochmah proceeds to explain how this analysis of the dispute between R’ Yehudah and R’ Nechemiah will shed light on another dispute of theirs, which takes place in a completely different context. As we know, each plague in Mitzrayim took place over the course of a month, with some of that time involving Moshe warning Pharaoh about the impending plague and some of it involving the plague itself. The precise breakdown of these two aspects is the subject of a dispute in the Midrash³ – between R’ Yehudah and R’ Nechemiah:

- One opinion says that the warning took place over twenty four days and the plague itself took place for seven days.

² Ibid. 44:5.

³ Shemos Rabbah 9:12.

- The other opinion says that the warning took place over seven days and the plague itself took place for twenty four days.

The Midrash does not specify which Rabbi holds which opinion. However, says the Meshech Chochmah, based on our discussion, it is possible identify them.

The pasuk which is the focus of the two opinions is stated after the first of the ten plagues:

וַיִּמְלֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים אַחֲרֵי הַכּוֹת ה' אֶת הַיָּאֵר

*Seven days were completed after ("acharei") Hashem struck the Nile.*⁴

Clearly, the question is: do these seven days refer to the duration of the plague itself or to the duration of the warning which took place after the plague. Here, too, the answer lies in the word "*acharei*."

- As we have seen, according to R' Yehudah, the word "*acharei*" denotes "a while after," hence, the seven days mentioned in the pasuk refer to a time a while after the Nile had been struck; i.e., to the the seven days of warning after the plague had occurred.
- Conversely, according to R' Nechemiah, "*acharei*" denotes closely after, hence the seven days refer to the days which immediately followed the hitting of the Nile, i.e. the duration of the plague itself.

And so, through this analysis, we can come to appreciate how although the *topics discussed* in the two Midrashim are not connected to each other, nevertheless, the *root discussion* in both cases is one and the same.

Avraham's Chiddush

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹקִים בְּמָה אֲדַע כִּי אֵיךְ שָׁנָה

⁴ Shemos 7:25.

He [Avraham] said, “My Master, God, whereby shall I know that I will inherit it?” (15:8).

Two statements of Chazal

Commenting on this pasuk, the Gemara⁵ states that from the day the world was created, no one referred to Hashem as “Master (אֲדוֹן)” until Avraham did so. Tosafos⁶ note that although prior to Avraham we find people referring to Hashem with the *Shem Havaya*,⁷ nevertheless, no-one called Him “Adonoy,” which denotes His mastery over the world.

- What is the significance of Avraham being the first to refer Hashem in this way?

Elsewhere, commenting on the pasuk in Bereishis⁸

אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבְרָאָם בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמַיִם.

These are the emanations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, on the day that Hashem God made earth and heaven

The Midrash states:⁹ "בהברהם" אלא "בהבראם" אל תקרי – read not “*be’hibaram* (when they were created),” but rather, “*b’Avraham* (with Avraham).”

- What is the intent behind this alternate reading?

“Cause and Effect” vs. “Cause through Effect”

The Meshech Chochmah explains. The *Shem Havaya* refers to Hashem as Creator of the universe and all that is in it. It was in this context that Adam experienced Hashem, for Hashem communicated with him directly as his Creator. This awareness was passed down to notable individuals in subsequent generations, such as Chanoch, Mesushelach, Noach and Shem. By the time it came to the generation of Avraham, however, knowledge of Hashem through this tradition

⁵ Berachos 7b.

⁶ Ibid. s.v. *lo*.

⁷ I.e., the name of *yud-heh-vav-heh*, see e.g. Bereishis 4: and 9:26.

⁸ 2:4.

⁹ Bereishis Rabbah 12:9.

was lost, and Avraham himself came to recognize Hashem as Creator through an entirely different means – by contemplating His creation. As the Midrash¹⁰ describes, Avraham observed each natural phenomenon and concluded that there must be Someone behind all these forces Who guides them, whereupon Hashem revealed Himself to Avraham as Controller of the world.

The reason the pasuk refers to the heavens and the earth with the passive term “בהבראם – when they were created,” is in order to indicate that it is possible, through observing them, to determine that they were indeed created. In this regard, the Midrash encourages us to detect Avraham’s name within this word, for Avraham embodies the very observation and recognition that this word denotes. Moreover, says the Meshech Chochmah, it is for this reason the beginning of the pasuk mentions “the heavens and the earth” – reflecting the order in which they were created – while the conclusion of the pasuk mentions “earth and heaven” – reflecting the progression of deduction through which one can recognize *that* they were created.

This is what the Gemara means by pointing out that Avraham was the first person to refer to Hashem with the Name “*Adonoy*,” for he was the first one to come to know Hashem by observing the natural running of the world and concluding that it must have a Master.

As the Meshech Chochmah notes, the *chiddush* of Avraham is that he recognized Hashem through nature even though no one had told him beforehand of Hashem’s existence. However, this recognition is of no less value and importance for those who have already been told of Hashem’s existence by their forbears, for it emphasizes Hashem’s connection with and control of the forces and events of this world. In other words, even as we benefit from the relationship with Hashem which we *inherited from* Avraham, we should not neglect to look at the world in the way he did which *initiated* the relationship in the first place.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid. 39:1.

¹¹ Based on Meshech Chochmah to Vayikra 26:4.