

Parashat Lech Lecha 5777, 2016:

*Do Not Be Afraid Avraham!*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka and Leah bat Shifra, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The final five *pasukim* (verses) of chapter 13 in Parashat Lech Lecha are well known, since they contain two promises of the Almighty to Abram, namely, that his offspring will receive the Land of Israel as a permanent inheritance, and that they will become as numerous as the dust of the earth:

And the L-rd said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Please raise your eyes and see, from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward. For all the land that you see I will give to you and to your seed to eternity. And I will make your seed like the dust of the earth, so that if a man will be able to count the dust of the earth, so will your seed be counted. Rise, walk in the land, to its length and to its breadth, for I will give it to you.” And Abram pitched his tents, and he came, and he dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the L-rd. (This and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

At this juncture, we are met in chapter 14 with the narrative of the war of the Four Kings against the Five Kings wherein Abram’s nephew, Lot, is captured during the war and subsequently saved by his uncle. Following these events, chapter 15 begins with the words: “After these incidents, the word of the L-rd came to Abram in a vision (*ba-mahazeh*), saying, ‘Fear not, Abram; I am your Shield; your reward is exceedingly great.’” A careful reading of the first *pasuk* from our section of chapter 13 reveals that it begins with the phrase, “And the L-rd said to Abram.” This represents a dialogical encounter between Hashem and Abram that gives voice to the strength of

their relationship. In stark contrast, the first verse of chapter 15 represents distance and a lack of intimacy between G-d and Abram, as the Almighty does not speak to him in a direct fashion; instead, “the word of the L-rd (*devar Hashem*) came to Abram in a vision” – i.e. a pronouncement, rather than a two-way interaction.

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, noted this difference and analyzed it in a deeply insightful manner:

The introduction, “*hayah devar Hashem el Avram ba-mahazeh*, the word of the L-rd came to Abraham in a vision,” is very interesting...Here the Torah omits the term *va-yomer*, which it had used repeatedly to describe G-d’s encounter with Abraham, and adds the word *ba-mahazeh*. *Va-yomer* means a dialogue, a conversation held face to face. G-d encountered Abraham and addressed Himself to him. *Devar Hashem* connotes communication from a distance; the message got to Abraham, but indirectly. G-d was not present. *Ba-mahazeh* means perspective, vision. *Va-yomer* is a higher medium of prophecy than *devar Hashem*. (*Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, pages 139-140, underlining my own)

For the Rav, *ba-mahazeh* teaches us that “G-d was not present,” and that He was suddenly engaging in an act of *hester panim*, of hiding His face from Avram. The question is why? Why did the Almighty choose “communication from a distance” instead of continued existential encounter? According to Rav Soloveitchik, this profound change was based upon the content and nature of the vision of the *brit habettarim* (Covenant of the Pieces) that He was about to vouchsafe to Abram:

Here G-d was a little distant, because the message G-d delivered to him was one of *galut*, of exile, oppression, humiliation and suffering. When the period of success and realization and fulfillment came to a conclusion, something happened. Before Abraham knew what G-d was going to tell him, he understood that the message would be different. It would be a message in which G-d would demand that Abraham pay the toll of the long road on which we have been traveling since his time, as we move toward the great objective which we all hope and believe will someday be attained and realized. “After these events,” the period of fulfillment and realization of relative peace and success, the period of Abraham the victor, came to an end.” (Page 140)

Based upon the Rav's description of the *galut* that our people would, and have endured, we can readily understand why Hashem needed to reassure Abram about the ultimate future of the Jewish people. Thus the Rav states:

G-d says: "*Al tira Avram*, do not fear" (*Sefer Bereishit* 15:1). Before, G-d spoke to him face to face; now, suddenly, it is *ba-mahazeh*, from a distance. The word reaches him from infinity, from G-d's transcendent abode. Abraham became apprehensive and frightened, because he recognized that the message was not one of blessing. So before delivering the message, G-d told him not to fear. Of course, I am not going to promise you riches and success, fulfillment and glory. But even though the message is different in nature and substance from My previous messages, I will protect you in *galut*, in exile, *Sekharekha*, the final reward, will take hundreds and thousands of years, but the final reward is great. On that day, *ba-yom ha-hu*, everything will be fulfilled, everything will be realized. (Page 140)

The *Beit Hamikdash* was destroyed over 2000 years ago. We have suffered a seemingly endless *galut* of "oppression, humiliation and suffering" that is truly second to none. Indeed, our very existence belies all of the so-called rules of history and incontrovertibly proves that it is Hashem who has protected us in the darkest hours of our bitter exile. Nonetheless, we continue to wait for the final reward that has taken "hundreds and thousand of years." At the same time, we must never forget, "*al tira Avram*," the ultimate *geula* (Redemption) will most surely come, and "on that day, *ba-yom ha-hu*, everything will be fulfilled, everything will be realized." With Hashem's overflowing kindness, may this time come soon and in our days! *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at:  
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.