

Parashat Lech Lecha 5782, 2021:

*Al Tira*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Chana bat Sarah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

We most often think of the *Avot* and *Emahot* as heroic individuals. Nonetheless, there were times when Hashem comforted each of the *Avot* with the expression, “*al tira*” (“do not be afraid”). By way of example, we find in our *parasha*: “After these incidents, the word of the L-rd came to Avram [later to be called Avraham] in a vision, saying, ‘Fear not, Avram; I am your Shield; your reward is exceedingly great.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 15:1, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Hashem repeated the same words, “*al tira*,” to Yitzchak in Parashat Toldot (26:24): “And the L-rd appeared to him on that night and said, ‘I am the G-d of Avraham, your father. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and multiply your seed for the sake of Avraham, My servant.’” (26:24) So, too, in the case of *Ya’akov Avinu* in Parashat Vayigash: “And He said, ‘I am G-d, the G-d of your father. Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up, and Yosef will place his hand on your eyes.’” (46:3-4)

Why were the *Avot* afraid? Based upon a number of *midrashim*, Rashi (1040-1105) suggests that Avram's fear was triggered by his incredible military victory against "Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him:"

After this miracle had been wrought for him, that he slew the kings, he was worried and said, "Perhaps I have [already] received reward for all my righteous deeds." Therefore, the Omnipresent said to him, "Fear not Abram, I am your Shield" from punishment, that you will not be punished for all those souls that you have slain, and as far as your being worried about receiving reward, your reward is exceedingly great.

According to Rashi, Avram's fear was two-fold. He was afraid he would be punished for the lives that he had taken during the military campaign. In addition, since the battle had been so one-sided in his favor, he feared he would receive no further *zechuyot* (rewards). Therefore, Hashem assured Avram that he had nothing to fear; he would not be punished, and he would continue to receive great rewards.

Yitzchak, as well, was haunted by two fears: the fear that G-d might abandon him, and that the Almighty would not bless him and provide him with many children. Hashem, therefore, directly reassured him on both of these accounts: "Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and multiply your seed..." (*Sefer Bereishit* 26:24)

Ya'akov's fears are far more difficult to understand than those of either his grandfather, Avraham, or his father, Yitzchak. The phrase, "do not be afraid," seem strangely out of place. After all, Hashem comforted Ya'akov with the promise "*al tira*" after he learned his long-lost son, Yosef, was alive and the viceroy of Egypt. My *rebbe* and mentor, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known by his students and followers as "the Rav," provides us with a trenchant insight that enables us to understand Yaakov's trepidation. He suggests that two separate and distinct covenants (*britot*) with Hashem have existed within

the history of the Jewish people. The first, and historically more ancient one, is the *Brit Avot* (the covenant of the Patriarchs). The second is the *Brit Klal Yisrael* (the covenant of the entire Jewish people) that was entered into at Mount Sinai. While the *Brit Klal Yisrael* encompasses our entire people and, with the exception of those *mitzvot* that depend upon *Eretz Yisrael*, must be fulfilled wherever one lives, the *Brit Avot* was limited to Ya'akov's immediate and extended family, and was obligatory solely in *Eretz Yisrael*.

The Rav uses this distinction to explain why Ya'akov was terrified of going down to Egypt: Given the geographic limitations of the *Brit Avot*, Ya'akov felt that his family and future descendants were facing an impending spiritual tragedy. In his view, their soon-to-be exile in Egypt would all but sever their connection to Hashem's Torah; as such, he was enveloped by mortal fear. The only antidote to this poisonous dread was Hashem's promise: "Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up...." Once Ya'akov was assured that the Divine Presence (*Shechinah*) would accompany him, he ceased to be afraid. With G-d by his side, the area in which the Jews lived in Egypt would be transformed into an extended portion of *Eretz Yisrael*, the *Brit Avot* would remain in effect, and the spiritual future of Ya'akov's family would be guaranteed. With Hashem's promise to take him down and bring him up from Egypt, Ya'akov had nothing to fear.

Beyond a doubt, we live in challenging times. We, too, yearn for Hashem's reassurance and, like our *Avot* and *Emahot* of old, long to hear, "*al tira.*" *Avinu Malkeinu*, may we hear these words soon and, in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

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* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* 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: [The Rav zatzal](#)