

Parashat Lech Lecha 5783, 2022:

Hanefesh Asher Asu

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, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first three *pasukim* of our *parasha* are famous, as they portray the beginning of the grand historical journey of *Avraham Avinu* and the Jewish people:

And Hashem said to Avram, “Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will aggrandize your name, and [you shall] be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 12:1-3, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach* with my emendations)

Avram fulfilled Hashem’s command with zeal: “And Avram took Sarai, his wife, and Lot, his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had acquired, and the souls they had acquired (*hanefesh asher asu*) in Haran, and they went to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan.” (12:5) The identities of Avram, Sarai and Lot are quite clear, yet, who exactly were *hanefesh asher asu*? As in many exegetical questions of this nature, the *peshat* (direct meaning) and midrashic analysis yield very different answers.

Nearly all *meforshim* (commentators) are in consonance with Rashi’s (1040-1105) *peshat*-level interpretation of *hanefesh asher asu*: “the slaves and maidservants that they had acquired for themselves, as in, ‘He acquired (*asah*) all this wealth’ [an expression of acquisition]; (*Sefer Bereishit* 31:1), ‘and the Jewish people shall triumph (*oseh chayil*),’ an expression of acquiring

and gathering.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 24:18) The classic Torah interpreters are of one opinion, as well, when viewing our phrase on the midrashic-level:

“And the souls that they had made in Haran.” Said Rabbi Elazar ben Zimra: “If every person on earth sought to create even one gnat, they could not place a soul within it [and give it life]. And the text states: “the souls that they had made!” Rather, these were the converts that they converted. If it meant “converted” why did the text say “made?” To teach you that anyone who brings an idol worshipper close [to the Almighty] and converts him, is as if he created him. [Moreover,] why did the Torah say, “that they made,” [plural] rather than, “that he made [singular]?” Rav Huna said: “Avram would convert the men, and Sarai would convert the women.” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 39:21, translation and brackets my own)

What was the driving force behind Avram and Sarai’s proselytizing efforts? My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the “Rav” by his followers and disciples, addresses this question in his posthumous work, *Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*. He notes that Avraham was, “a social being longing for communication...a loving man with sincere affection for people.” As such:

How could he be satisfied with his secluded life, with a hermit-like existence, with loneliness and continual withdrawal, when he was burdened with a great message which he had, willy-nilly, to deliver? He beheld a wonderful vision and was driven by an inner impulse to have others behold it...The creative will in Abraham had to break through the barriers that separated him from society. Now he had to make his inner light visible to his fellow men. (Page 84)

The Rav presents Avraham in the classic guise of the *navi* (prophet) who must deliver his knowledge of Hashem to the entire world, an idea to which he gives clear voice: “...when the message ripened in Abraham, when the new world vision matured in him and the prophecy he had to deliver was pressing for manifestation, he understood that he could not accomplish this task in solitude...” (Page 85) This, then, is precisely why Avram and Sarai worked so tirelessly to bring Hashem’s existence before the entire world:

Abraham therefore tried to create a community of the committed and dedicated, a covenantal community. He returned to the very people whose company he had rejected, whose friendship and concern he had refused to acknowledge, and tried to rediscover them, to communicate his great message to them. “Abraham converted the males, and Sarah the females” (Rashi, Gen. 12:5)

Abraham, the straying wanderer, became a settler and a citizen—not of the old society, but of a new society... (Page 86)

The Rav's presentation of Avraham and Sarah encourages us to view them in a new light—as role models for generations of future prophets. Centuries later, Yeshayahu urged the entire Jewish people to emulate Avraham and Sarah and become “a light unto nations, so that My (the Almighty's) salvation shall be until the end of the earth.” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 49:6) As the text states: “and My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” (Ibid. 56:7) May this time come soon, and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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Please contact me at rdbe718@gmail.com to be added to my weekly email list.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* 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: [The Rav](#)