

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Lech Lecha

The Talmud (Pesachim 117b) says the blessings G-d gives Abraham in the beginning of our Parsha (12:2) allude to the three ways we describe G-d in the first blessing of our standing prayer, the Amidah. “I will make you a great nation” refers to the phrase “G-d of Abraham”. “I will bless you” refers to the phrase “G-d of Isaac,” and “I will make your name great” refers to the phrase “G-d of Jacob.” The final phrase in the verse, “You shall be a blessing,” indicates that the blessing must close by referring to G-d as the ‘Shield of Abraham’ and not by associating G-d with either of the other two Patriarchs. This Midrash begs two questions. What is the connection between the blessings given to Abraham and the wording the rabbis used to describe G-d when they composed the Amidah? Secondly, why is Abraham favored more than the other Patriarchs and given the distinct honor as having the blessing close with his name?

In addressing the first question, R’ Eliyahu Mizrachi (15th Century) explains that in the Torah, generally G-d’s Name is associated with the entire nation, such as “the God of the Hebrews” (Exodus 3:18). If so, if the rabbis would refer to Him as G-d of one of the patriarchs, this would deviate from the norm in the Torah. The rabbis justified the wording “G-d of Abraham” because of the Talmudic interpretation of “I will make you a great nation.” The Talmud means that Abraham himself attains the status of a great nation, so therefore the rabbis do not deviate from the norm of the Torah. The other blessings in the verse, which seem redundant after the first blessing, indicate that the blessing to Abraham will carry over to Isaac and Jacob. In turn, they too achieve the special status of the entire nation of Israel. As fathers of the nation, they avot represent all of the Jewish people.

If each of the Avot represent the entire Jewish people, the second question above stings more. Why do the rabbis favor Abraham by closing the first blessing of the Amidah with him and not with Jacob or Isaac? Maharsha (16th Century) answers the rabbis singled out Abraham because he not only discovered G-d in a world of paganism, but also taught the world about the oneness of G-d. He adds we even see this in the precise wording of the blessing, which starts with the conjugation of Elokim and ends with the four letter Name. The name “Elokim” means the all-powerful G-d, while the four letter Name refers to G-d as not bound by time or space. While we say “Elokai Avraham, Elokai Yitzchak, V’Elokai Yaakov,” we only mention the four letter Name in connection to Abraham in the end of the blessing. Each of the Patriarchs showed the world an all-powerful G-d existed, but Abraham taught the world about the one G-d, not bound by time and space. Therefore, the Rabbis chose to single out Abraham by closing the blessing, “Blessed are you Hashem (the four letter Name), the Shield of Abraham.”



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Abraham triggered a whole movement and started a whole new chapter in the history of the world, a chapter of monotheism and morality, which sets him apart from the other Patriarchs. The Talmud (Avodah Zara 9a) characterizes the first 2000 years of the history of the world as empty (“tohu”), as mankind predominantly consisted of idol worshippers and did not recognize one God. It describes the following 2000 years as years of Torah, even though these 2000 years start with Abraham and not with the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The Talmud says the years of Torah start with Abraham, because he taught people Torah and facilitated many conversions.

We further see the uniqueness of Abraham in the words of Isaiah (Chapter 41) which serve as the Haftarah of our Parsha. The prophet says that G-d calls the Jewish people “the offspring of Abraham, who loved Me.” What does it mean that Abraham loved G-d? Maimonides explains Abraham’s love for G-d expressed itself not just in his quest to discover G-d amidst a world of pagans, but also in his burning desire to teach everyone he met about the one G-d. Maimonides refers to this phrase from the Prophets when he explains the mitzvah incumbent upon every Jew to love G-d. He points out that when a person gets excited about something, he naturally wants to share that feeling with others so they too can learn about the experience and enjoy it. Therefore, says Rambam, it is not enough for one to seek a relationship with G-d and cultivate it between himself and G-d. Like Abraham, every person ought to tell others about G-d and draw them to serve him.

Another nuance in the first blessing of Shemoneh Esrei alludes to the greatness of Abraham as one who taught the world about G-d. In general, the halacha requires every blessing to contain a reference to G-d as King of the world (malchut). Yet, the blessings of the Amidah seem to break this rule, as none of them contain the normal phrase “King of the world” (melech ha’olam). In their commentary to Berachot 40b, the Tosafot (13th Century) explain that Abraham made G-d King over the entire world by publicizing his sovereignty to others. Thus, by calling G-d the “G-d of Abraham” in the beginning of the blessing, we indirectly refer to G-d as King and fulfill the requirement of malchut. Once the first blessing contains malchut, all of the other blessings piggy-back on the first blessing. Again we see Abraham’s greatness lay not only in his finding G-d in a world steeped in idolatry, but also in his taking the initiative to teach that new awareness to others.

Shabbat Shalom!

