חסידות

From the Chassidic Courts

AVRITCH · BAT AYIN, LECH LECHA

Why Avraham needed the Land to perfect kindness

Bat Ayin

Avraham embodied the attribute of chessed (lovingkindness), seeking throughout "Lech Lecha" to attain it in its fullness, which could only be reached in Eretz Yisrael, the dwelling place of the Shechinah (Divine Presence); yet his war to rescue Lot forced him to draw upon gevurah (severity), leaving him somewhat attached to achzariyut (cruelty) through contact with the king of Sodom—until Malki Tzedek's bread and wine restored him to chessed, Avraham's oath refused any benefit from that cruel attribute, and Hashem reassured him (hinted by the Aramaic-toned word "machazeh") that he would remain bound only to the aspect of holiness and chessed. AI SUMMARY

Vayakem va-yirdefem (and he struck them and pursued them), etc. "Vayetzei melech Sedom likrato" (and the king of Sodom went out to meet him), etc. "U-Malki Tzedek melech Shalem hotzi lechem va-yayin" (and Malki Tzedek, king of Shalem, brought out bread and wine), etc. "Vayomer melech Sedom el Avram" (and the king of Sodom said to Avram), etc. (Bereishit 14:15–21).

Now, the author of Sefer Or HaChaim gave a reason for the Torah's interruption of the narrative —inserting the account of Malki Tzedek in the midst of the words spoken between the king of Sodom and Avram—see there. I, too, wish to offer my own portion of explanation, along the way of mussar (ethical instruction), and also to give a reason why Avram did not wish to take the property, even though by law it was his (and there is also proof that he gave ma'aser (a tithe) from it to Malki Tzedek, for a person does not tithe from that which is not his own (Tosefta Terumot ch. 1, section 6)—and moreover, the king of Sodom himself had already agreed that Avram should take it).

To understand all this: it is known that the aspect of Avraham is the aspect of chessed (lovingkindness), for he was a merkavah (chariot/vehicle) for the attribute of chessed, because he constantly contemplated the attribute of chessed of the Creator, may He be blessed—how His mercies are never spent at every time, every hour, and every moment, and how our lives are entrusted into His hand, and He constantly sustains us through His abundant acts of chessed. He constantly contemplated this attribute and yearned to cling to this proper attribute and to make himself resemble his Maker, as our Sages of blessed memory said (see Shabbat 133b, Sotah 14a, see Mechilta, Shirah, chapter 3): "Just as He is merciful, so you be merciful." And he bestowed chessed upon all who come into the world, in order to cling, through the attribute of chessed, to his Creator.

However, since he was in chutz la'aretz (outside the Land), the dwelling place of the kelipot (husks/shells) from the aspect of the gevurot (severities), he could not attain the attribute of chesed (lovingkindness) in completeness. Therefore Hashem was his help and gave him sound counsel, saying to him, "Lech lecha" — meaning, "go to the kaf of resemblance," that is, go to the aspect of resembling your Creator: just as He is merciful, so too you should be merciful (see Shabbat 133b, Sotah

14a, see Mechilta, Shirah, chapter 3), so that you should cleave in completeness to the attribute of chesed.

"Me'artzecha u'mimoladetecha" (from your land and from your birthplace) — meaning that it is impossible to attain this attribute in chutz la'aretz, therefore you must go from that land. "And go to the land that I will show you" — this is Eretz Yisrael, meaning that you yourself will see the greatness of its holiness, that you will attain that aspect in completeness, because in that holy land is set the kavod (glory) of His kingship, which is His Shechinah (Divine Presence), the dwelling place of holiness from the aspect of chesed. For holiness and His Shechinah and His kingship dwell only in a place of chesed, and not in a place of cruelty and gevurot.

Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, caused His Shechinah to rest upon Yisrael, a holy people, for they are merciful (Yevamot 79a) and cleave to the attribute of chesed; and so too in Eretz Yisrael His Shechinah likewise rests, which is the aspect of the kavod of His kingship.

This is what the verse hints at (Bereishis 12:6): "And Avram passed through the land until the place of Shechem" — the initial letters of Shechem spell Sh"am K"evod M"alchuto (there is the glory of His kingship); also, Shechem has the letters of "sham k'" (there, like), meaning the "kaf" of comparison mentioned above. That is to say, he went and traveled toward the south, which is the aspect of elevating upward to Hashem, the aspect of chessed (lovingkindness) — meaning that he sought that very middah (attribute), until he reached the place where "there is the glory of His kingship," and there he attained that middah in its completeness.

When Lot was captured, Avraham had to wage war by means of the attribute of gevurot (severity/might) in order to rescue Lot (and to perform chesed with him, in accordance with his own way and his own middah, which is chesed). But nevertheless, he became somewhat attached to the attribute of achzariyut (cruelty).

For this reason, immediately afterward, "the king of Sodom went out to meet him," etc. And the king of Sodom is known to be the root of the attribute of gevurot and achzariyut, the opposite of the middah of Avraham (for Avraham performed chesed with all who come into the world, while the people of Sodom did the opposite, practicing cruelty toward all who passed through).

This is what the verse means (Bereishit 14:3): "they joined together in the emek" — a reference to the bechinat kelipot (aspect of the kelipot, husks/shells) (see Bereishit Rabbah 1:6). That is to say, because he had become somewhat attached to the aspect of gevurot, "the king of Sodom went out to meet him" — in order to attach himself to Avraham.

But Hashem, in the abundance of His chessed (lovingkindness) and His love for Avraham, sent him immediately and at once a refuah (healing) for the makkah (wound), and Malki Tzedek, king of Shalem, brought forth lechem (bread) and yayin (wine), "v'hu kohen l'Kel Elyon" (and he was a kohen/priest to the Most High God) — meaning that he was in the aspect of a kohen, the aspect of chessed (Zohar I 123b), and "v'hotzi lechem v'yayin" (and he brought forth bread and wine) in gematria (numerical value) equals "pesach," the aspect of chessed (Zohar I 261b). And since Malki Tzedek joined together with the aspect of chessed for Avraham, they overpowered and subdued the aspect of the king of Sedom, the aspect of the gevurot (severities).

When the king of Sodom saw that he had completely submitted himself, he said to Avraham, "At least take the property for yourself," so that he, Avraham, might benefit from that attribute of cruelty, and perhaps become somewhat attached to it. In response to this, Avraham swore, saying, "I have raised my hand to E-l Elyon (God Most High)" — meaning that he raised himself to the level of E-l, the level of chessed (lovingkindness) (Zohar III, 30b) — and therefore, "I will not take anything at all from the property, from a thread to a shoe-strap," etc., so that he should not benefit at all from that attribute.

In any case, Avraham became very fearful because of that attribute, since he had made use of it in that war, until the Omnipresent, blessed be He, reassured him, as the verse states, "The word of Hashem came to Avram in a machazeh (vision),

saying: I am a shield to you," etc. Now, at first glance this is difficult: why is the word machazeh written in the language of Targum (Aramaic), rather than mareh, as it is written [elsewhere], "in a mareh I make Myself known to him" — in the holy tongue (Hebrew)?

According to our approach, it is fitting, for it is known that the language of Targum (Aramaic translation) is not from the aspect of holiness (but rather from that aspect which is adjacent to holiness (see Ta'amei HaMitzvot, parshat Va'etchanan; Me'orei Or, ma'arechet hei, letter nun-vav)).

And because Avram had attached himself somewhat to that aspect of cruelty which is not from holiness (but only adjacent to it, since his intention was to save Lot, which is the aspect of chesed/kindness), this is hinted at in the word "bamachazeh" (in a vision), which has the connotation of Targum. That is to say, Avram was in the aspect of "bemach-zeh" (in the aspect of Targum as mentioned above), and he became afraid, as stated above.

Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, reassured him and said to him, "Fear not, Avram, I am a shield for you" — meaning, "I will help you so that you not attach yourself to any other aspect, but only to the aspect of chesed, the aspect of holiness."

This is as stated in Or HaChaim (Devarim 13:18), that so did the Holy One, blessed be He, promise Yisrael after He had warned them concerning the law of ir hanidachat (the condemned city) to carry out upon them an aspect of cruelty, and Yisrael feared lest that aspect attach itself to them, Heaven forbid. Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, promised them that the aspect of cruelty would not attach itself to them, as the verse states (Devarim 13:18), "So that Hashem may turn back from His burning anger and grant you mercy, etc."

Amen, so may it be His will.

Translation: translated by AI (anthropic/claude-sonnet-5)