YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #29: The *Ivri* (Hebrew), the Adversary, and the Competitor**

Let us continue the discussion of Manitou’s thesis that the narratives of the forefathers describe processes of identity formation, which serves to clarify the logical progression of their life stories. We have already mentioned the processes of transition from Avram to Avraham, as well as the ten tests that gradually mold layer upon layer of his character. In this *shiur*, we will look at another axis in this development, which Manitou discusses under the heading, “The *Ivri,* the Adversary, and the Competitor.” Each of the forefathers has to deal with an adversary who seeks to destroy him, as well as a competitor who is like him in some important respect and who claims to be the proper bearer of his identity (i.e., the competitor attempts to steal his identity).

In order to understand the processes that Manitou describes, let us recall the “fraternity equation” that occupies a prominent place in his teachings: All of Creation progresses towards its moral purpose, and one of the challenges along the way is the repair and resolution of relationships between people, as individuals and as nations. *Am Yisrael*, as we discover in the narratives about the forefathers, encounter two kinds of tests vis-à-vis other nations – dealing with those who oppose them and dealing with those who believe that they are a substitute for them.

**Adversaries**

Avraham’s most prominent opponent is Nimrod. According to *Chazal*, Nimrod was the first in the long chain of those who have tried to destroy Avraham and his descendants. He was also the standard-bearer for the cosmopolitanism discussed in the previous *shiur*.

Both Avraham and Nimrod are unhappy about the fragmented state of humanity. Each tries in his own way to spearhead a project aimed at consolidating and uniting the human race. Nimrod seeks to place at the helm a powerful, totalitarian human force that will rule them from the top of the Tower. He manages to draw many people to join his project (in the same way that many Jews have been drawn to other grandiose social projects throughout history), and he succeeds in his aim of instituting a cosmopolitan dictatorship. Avraham, in contrast, seeks to bring about the unity of all of humanity, a mosaic in which every nation could contribute its unique gifts, with *Am Yisrael* serving as the heart connecting and unifying them. As opposed to Nimrod’s cosmopolitan approach, Avraham’s vision is universalist: “Through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (*Bereishit* 12:3). The “families of the earth” will continue to exist. They will not be erased under the leadership of *Am Yisrael*. Rather, each can fulfill its own special function within the overall framework of humanity.

Nimrod opposes not only Avraham himself, but also the morality in the name of which he operates, since Nimrod aspires to aggrandize himself. He is not willing to put God at the center. He channels his dissatisfaction with reality into rebellion against God. Avraham channels his dissatisfaction into loyal service of God in order to repair humanity. Nimrod’s rebellion against God makes him an enemy and adversary of Israel – meaning, of Avraham and his message – and he tries to kill Avraham in the furnace. This opposition continues for all generations.

The other forefathers likewise faced adversaries. Yitzchak is opposed by Avimelekh concerning *Eretz Yisrael*. Later, Yaakov has to contend with Lavan, who “sought to uproot everything.”

The opponents wage an ongoing battle, using sophisticated strategies. Barefaced annihilation is not the only means employed by adversaries (like Nimrod, and eventually Amalek). There are other strategies. Both Pharaoh and Avimelekh adopt the path of taking Avraham’s wife for themselves – i.e., destroying the masculine aspect of the Hebrew nation and dominating the feminine aspect. The same approach is manifest later in Egypt in Pharaoh’s decree to kill all the baby boys and to leave the girls alive. In the case of Hagar, who is given to Sara by Pharaoh, the situation is reversed; here it is via femininity and the womb that the attempt is made to overpower Avraham’s purpose. (Other examples include Bila’am’s counsel and the marriages of Ruth and Orpa.) If we add to these two strategies the basic, default option for dealing with *Am Yisrael* – i.e., attempts at obliteration – we have the three major familiar threats to *Am Yisrael*: annihilation, assimilation, and mixed marriage.

**Competitors**

Competitors do not try to annihilate *Am Yisrael*, but rather to imitate them with a view to replacing them. The competitors are close and similar to the forefathers, and they presume to take on their identity, but they are eventually rejected and distanced. The competitors of Yitzchak and Yaakov are, of course, Yishmael and Esav; Avraham’s competitor is Lot. It is easy to miss this in a superficial reading of the narrative, but in the background to the stories of Avraham there lurks the question of whether Lot, too, is worthy of fulfilling Avraham’s role. This possibility expresses itself in Avraham’s offer that Lot choose himself a portion of the land – indicating that he views him as a competitor for the land, on an equal footing. We also see it expressed in the description of Lot’s hospitality, which starts off sounding similar to Avraham’s hospitality, but ends with Lot offering his daughters to the mob clamoring outside his door – a shocking and repugnant gesture according to Avraham’s principles. The challenge of competitors becomes increasingly difficult and complex over the course of *Sefer Bereishit*; while Lot is merely a nephew, Yishmael is a half-brother, and Esav is a full-blood brother. In each instance the competitor is eventually pushed out, and it becomes clear who is the genuine figure and who is merely imitating.

Each of the competitors of the forefathers wages a different type of battle. Lot struggles with Avraham over the question of who will establish *Am Yisrael*. Avraham is childless, while Lot, who has a family, seems poised to replace him. Yishmael competes with Yitzchak – to this day – over the inheritance of the land. Esav’s conflict with Yaakov concerns the spiritual world. The nation, the land, and the Torah are at the center of the struggles of *Sefer Bereishit*. And these struggles continue throughout history: *Am Yisrael* contend with Bil’am – a descendant of Lot – and Yishmael and Esav eventually give rise to Islam and Christianity. (One of Esav’s descendants is Amalek, who serves as both opposition and competition.)

Avraham has to deal with Nimrod, who opposes him, seeking to establish a kingdom of his own. There is competition between two human projects that continues throughout history: the “kingdoms project” of the gentiles, and the “generations project” of the Jews. This competition continues until it is ultimately settled by history, on the Day of Judgment, as described in the *gemara* at the beginning of *Massekhet Avoda Zara*.

In addition to Nimrod, Avraham also has to deal with his own nephew, Lot, who competes with him. Two nations emerge from Lot – Amon and Moav – each of which has its own argument as to why it represents the real “Israel.” Ruth, who emerges from Moav, joins *Am Yisrael*, thereby putting an end to her people’s attempt at replacing *Am Yisrael*. There is no parallel development in the case of Amon. And so it continues in every generation. The competitor who presents himself as an alternative to Yitzchak is Yishmael, and ultimately he becomes the father of Islam. The figure who opposes Yitzchak is Avimelekh, and the conflict with him is over *Eretz Yisrael*. (In Avimelekh’s encounter with Avraham he declares, “Behold my land is before you; dwell where it please you” – *Bereishit* 20:15). In the next generation, Yaakov’s competitor is Esav, his brother, and the opposition takes the form of Lavan the Aramean. In the generation of the redemption, the generation that leaves the Egyptian exile, a seventh figure appears – Amalek, who seeks both to destroy *Am Yisrael* and to replace them as the leaders of history. At the time of the Exodus, it was Amalek himself who came to fight against Israel at Refidim. At the time of the Return to Zion, after the Babylonian exile, it was Haman, son of Hamedata the Agagite, who played this role. In our times, for over a century already, we have witnessed repeated attempts to annihilate *Am Yisrael*, while at the same time different people claim to be the bearers of world history and hope. (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot IV*, pp. 75-76)

Manitou notes an interesting difference between the forefathers and their competitors: The competitors have no difficulty establishing families and producing potential nations. He explains that with respect to the command given to Adam – “Be fruitful and multiply” – they fulfill the second part and multiply increasingly, as evidenced in the genealogical lists of Yishmael and Esav. In contrast, the forefathers undergo a lengthy process before they are able to produce offspring, since their great challenge is to “be fruitful” – i.e., to produce new fruit, to give rise to the next essential stage that will move the world towards its perfection. Thus, while the competitor is occupied with “multiplying,” the authentic identity-builder concerns himself with “being fruitful,” which is a much harder and more complicated process, as expressed in the state of barrenness.

**The Adversary, the Competitor, and the Fraternity Equation**

In conclusion, if we recall the issues discussed in previous *shiurim*, we might view the adversary and the competitor as movements that are opposed to the ideal of fraternity, since they set themselves up against the *Ivri* instead of pursuing fraternity with him. We note further that in view of the challenges posed by the adversary and the competitor, the fraternity equation within *Am Yisrael* is gradually enhanced. We find this, for example, in the marital bond between Avraham and Sara in particular (which leads, in step with the completion of the identity of Avraham and Sara, to the birth of Yitzchak) and between the patriarchs and matriarchs in general, as discussed in the *shiur* on the fraternity equation as expressed in their lives.

Translated by Kaeren Fish