YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Lekh-Lekha**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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Dedicated in memory of my recently departed father,
Dr. Lloyd Bayme - ד״ר אליעזר ביים
- Michael Bayme

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and
Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l,
by Debbie and David Sable

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**“And Avraham Went Down to Egypt”**

Summarized by David Oren

Translated by David Strauss

The Ramban at the beginning of our *parasha* discusses Avraham's descent to Egypt and raises two questions regarding his conduct:

Know that Avraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that God would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for God surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the land, concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine God would have redeemed him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children. In the place of justice, there is wickedness and sin. (Ramban, *Bereishit* 12:10)

The Ramban criticizes Avraham for two elements within the same story: for effectively allowing the people of Egypt to take Sara, and for his very descent into Egypt.

We will try to explain Avraham's actions.

The Ramban argues that Abraham was wrong to say that Sara was his sister instead of acknowledging that she was his wife and trusting God to save them. The text indicates that this was not the first time Avraham had told other people that Sara was his sister, as he later testifies about himself that he had asked of Sara: "This is your kindness that you will perform for me. At every place where we shall come, say of me: He is my brother" (*Bereishit* 20:13). It would seem that in the other places, even though Avraham said that Sara was his sister, there were no attempts to take Sara.

To understand this point, let us re-examine the idea of "sister." "Sister," as we see in many places in Scripture, can refer to the daughter of one's brother, i.e., one's niece. In Scripture, there is no special word for "nephew”; a nephew is referred to as a "brother." Thus, when Lot is captured in the War of the Kings, Avraham hears that "his brother," and not "his nephew," was captured (*Bereishit* 14:14). The same applies to a niece. Apparently, a niece who was called "sister"was destined for marriage. Thus, we find in *Shir ha-Shirim* that the lover's betrothed is called "sister." When Avraham was commanded to go to Canaan, Sara's great act of kindness was her very joining him on his journey despite knowing that, as a nomadic couple, Avraham might not always be capable of protecting her. Avraham thought that presenting Sara as his intended wife would suffice to prevent her from being taken. He knew, however, that in some places that this would not suffice; even being married would not help. In such a case, by presenting Sara as his sister, he would at least be able to save his own life.

As for Avraham's descent to Egypt, the Ramban has a formidable disputant: the Midrash. When the Midrash explains the Mishna in *Avot,* which speaks of the ten trials by way of which Avraham was tested, and all of which he passed, it counts going down to Egypt during the period of famine as one of the trials. The Midrash sees the descent as a passing of a test, not as a failure. However, despite the words of the Midrash, it seems to me that the Ramban is correct that Avraham's behavior was inappropriate. Nonetheless, we will try to understand why Avraham acted in that manner. I wish to propose two explanations, and the reader may choose between them.

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The first explanation was suggested by my *chavruta*, Rav Aharon Friedman, Rosh Yeshiva of Kerem be-Yavneh.

In the verse at the beginning of our *parasha*, it is stated that Avraham took with him Sara, Lot, and the souls that they had gotten in Charan. What happened to all those souls?

It may be suggested that the reference is to just a few people, who became swallowed up in Avraham's entourage. The Rambam proposes a much larger number (*Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1:14), thousands and myriads of people who gathered around Avraham. I think that a realistic number would be about four hundred men, approximately the number of "his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen" (*Bereishit* 14:14). If we add women and children, we can envision a community in the vicinity of one thousand to fifteen hundred people. What did all these people do when Avraham went down to Egypt? Did they go down with him?

It is possible that they did, and thus we can explain how the Torah describes in the book of *Shemot* that "the time that the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years" (*Shemot* 12:40). We can also then understand why in the days of Yosef "the Egyptians would not eat bread with the Hebrews" (*Bereishit* 43:32). Where would the Egyptians have encountered Hebrews before Yosef came to Egypt? If we say that those souls from Charan chose to remain in Egypt, we have a possible explanation. It is also possible that these people left Egypt with our forefathers, and that they are those known as the "mixed multitude" (*eirev rav*; *Shemot* 12:38).

When the famine began in Canaan, Avraham found himself with hundreds of people for whom he was responsible, and whom he had to provide with food. To help understand what that was like, consider the account in I *Shmuel* Chapter 25 of when David sent his men to ask Naval the Carmelite for food. Naval refused, and David wanted to kill him. David's reaction seems extreme; a death sentence for failure to deliver food? But David was in the wilderness with hundreds of men, without food and water. We cannot possibly sit in our upholstered chairs and judge his choices (which he did not carry through, thanks to Avigayil's actions).

With regard to Avraham as well, we cannot criticize him for going down to Egypt out of a sense of responsibility for those he had collected in Charan.

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Another explanation for Avraham's descent into Egypt focuses on his relationship with Lot. When Avraham left Charan, he took Lot with him. Why did he do that? Lot was not commanded to go to Canaan.

In my understanding, Avraham brought his nephew out of a sense of duty to Haran. *Chazal* tell us that Avraham was not the only one who entered the fiery furnace. His brother Haran was thrown in as well, after having announced that if Avraham's God is God, he is prepared to enter the furnace for him. Haran was not saved, but I think he did not die immediately in the furnace. Haran emerged from the furnace scorched and full of burns, and in his last moments, he whispered to Avraham: Take care of my children. I entered the fiery furnace for you; you take care of my children for me. Thus, Avraham married Haran's daughter and took his son Lot with him on his journey to Canaan.

When the famine began, it was probably because of a drought. We can deduce this later in the story, when we find a quarrel between the shepherds of Avraham's flocks and those of the flocks of Lot. Is the land of Israel not big enough to feed two herds? Rather, it was a year of drought, and there were quarrels over every moist weed and thorn. The Torah describes how Lot then chose to go down to Sedom, a place that was "like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as you go to Tzo’ar" (*Bereishit* 13:10). It is very possible that before he went down to Sedom, Lot wanted to go down to “the garden of the Lord” in the land of Egypt itself. While Avraham himself did not want to go down to Egypt, owing to the command that he was given to go to Canaan, he was bound by the oath that he had taken to his brother Haran, and so he went down with Lot to Egypt.

After returning from Egypt, Lot chooses to go down to Sedom. This time, Avraham does not join him. To my understanding, what emerges from the text is that the entire famine was brought about in order to separate Avraham from Lot. Then, after Lot was separated from him, God could promise Avraham: "For all the land which you see, to you will I give it, and to your seed forever" (*Bereishit* 13:15).

The Ramban writes that Avraham's sin was unintentional. In light of the explanations that we have proposed, it can be argued that Avraham's sin was not merely inadvertent, but was like an error incurred during the performance of a *mitzva*.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat* *Lekh-Lekha* 5780]