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**

**"And Avram Called Out in the Name of the Lord"**

Summarized by Mordechai Sambol

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction: The difference between Avraham and Noach**

Many commentators and *midrashim* draw comparisons – both substantive and linguistic – between Avraham and Noach. Thus, for example, just as it is stated: "Noach walked with God" (*Bereishit* 6:9), Avraham is commanded: "Walk before Me and be whole-hearted" (*Bereishit* 17:1).

However, it is not only the similarity between Noach and Avraham that is striking, but the contrast between them as well, especially with regard to their concern about their contemporaries. We know that Avraham prayed for other people, such as Pharaoh and Avimelekh, and even for the people of Sodom, whereas regarding Noach we do not find (at least not in a plain reading of the verses) that he prayed for the members of his generation to be saved from the flood. The difference between them is illustrated in a well-known Chasidic parable that differentiates between Noach, who was "a righteous man in a fur coat," and Avraham, who was "a righteous man with a stove." The parable describes a situation in which many people were gathered together in a cold room. In response, one of them got up and put on a fur coat and thus became warm, while everyone else remained cold. After a while, someone else got up and lit a stove – warming up not only himself, but all the occupants of the room. The "righteous man in the fur coat" is Noach, who took care of himself in the face of the flood, while the "righteous man with the stove" is Avraham, who prayed for his contemporaries.

I would like to point out a slightly different distinction between Noach and Avraham. It seems to me that the focus of the difference between them lies not in the degree of their caring about others, but in the degree to which they aspired to spread the messages in which they believed: Noach was righteous and worked on himself, but he refrained from interfering in the lives of others – perhaps out of respect and a belief that everyone should follow their own path and it is not his business which paths other people choose to take.

Avraham, on the other hand, could not hold back his beliefs. He was unable keep his “calling out in the name of God” pent up inside him and not bring it out. As Yirmeyahu states in another context: "And if I say: 'I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name,' then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I weary myself to hold it in, but cannot" (*Yirmeyahu* 20:9). Yirmeyahu had been greatly persecuted by the king and other people because of his prophecies, and therefore he wanted to stop delivering them. He tried to keep his prophecy to himself, to hold it in – but he was unable. The words bubbled up inside him and just came out. The same was true about Avraham: he *had* to broadcast his calling in God’s name to the entire world.

Indeed, Avraham’s great calling out in the name of God achieved success. Although Onkelos translates the words "and he called out in the name of the Lord" (*Bereishit* 12:8) as referring to prayer, Avraham's calling was surely not limited to that, but included spreading the path of God among the masses. The Rambam describes at the beginning of *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* (1:3)how "thousands and myriads gathered around him." The Ramban (*Bereishit* 12:8) also explains that Avraham “called out in the name of the Lord” in the sense of spreading faith in Him among the masses, and even concludes with the words of a *midrash*: "This teaches that Avraham caused the name of the Lord to be called by the mouth of every person" (*Bereishit Rabba* [Vilna] *Lekh Lekha* 39, 16).

**Spreading the Truth**

In the modern age, and even more so in the post-modern age, it is widely maintained that every individual has his own truth, and that everyone should follow that truth and do what it tells him to do. This attitude became very common in the wake of World War II, when many people felt they were no longer interested in being soldiers in someone else's army, or in general, in serving any external "big" objective.

The reluctance to surrender to authority or to a greater goal is understandable, but the attitude that grew out of it led to quite a few problems. One of the biggest is the disintegration of the family system and the loss of connection to tradition: when everyone is trying to build his own "truth," young people no longer listen to the tradition borne by their parents, and thus the most basic framework – the family – is severely damaged.

Against this approach stands the approach of Avraham, the first to call in the name of the Lord in the world. He may have made the effort to spread his belief in God out of a desire to share with others the path of truth that was revealed to him, and thus help them. But it is very possible that his primary motive was not the good that would come to those who walk in the path of God, but simply the desire to spread the truth because it is the truth. In the face of such a tremendous, deep truth, it is impossible to remain silent. He has no choice but to "call out in the name of the Lord."

**Avraham's Faith**

The great innovation in Avraham's calling in the name of God does not end with the fact that that there is one God and not many idols. This, of course, is an important innovation in itself, but it carries a much deeper meaning: God's governing of the world involves no competition. Once there are many gods, there is competition between them. Each of them tries to gain the most, at the expense of the others. The inclination toward competition is the root of many evils in the world, which result from everyone trying to be just a little bit better than the other. On the other hand, when there is only one God, He is a perfect God and there is no one competing with Him. Regarding Him, it is impossible to talk about any "competitive motivation," as it were.

Accordingly, we can understand why the philosophers described God as truly perfect and complete, to the extent that he does not want anything, even for Himself. According to them, the world exists as a sort of by-product of God's thought, not because He has a positive desire for the world's existence. Avraham's calling in God’s name also stands against this conception: Indeed, God does not want anything for Himself, but He does have a will, and it is directed toward others. God created the world in order to bestow goodness, as the Ramchal writes in *Derekh Hashem* (part I, 2, 1). The absence of will characterizes the dead or the inanimate; Avraham spreads the message of a "living God," who is interested in the welfare of mankind and who created the world for that purpose. This is Avraham's great conceptual, ideological innovation, and upon it is based the path of truth that he spread in the world.

**The Path of God**

Avraham's innovation is not only conceptual, but has clear practical implications.

First and foremost, Avraham's concept of the unity of God leads him to instill in his children, and in the other members of his household, the observance of "the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice" (*Bereishit* 18:19). Avraham bequeaths to his children the moral demand "to do righteousness and justice," which he identifies with "the way of the Lord." The one God, for whom there is no jealousy or competition, is a just God, who obligates man to be moral.

Avraham's faith leads to another obligation: circumcision, the physical sign of his covenant with God. The meaning of circumcision is similar to the ancient practice in which masters would mark their slave's servitude with a wound in one of the slave's limbs, such as piercing a hole in the slave's ear[[1]](#footnote-1) or the like.

However, in contrast to piercing a hole in a slave's ear, there is a great innovation in the covenant of circumcision: God does not impose His authority on anyone, and He does not pierce any holes. On the contrary, a person chooses whether to be a servant of God, and it is he who is responsible for performing the circumcision – which, according to the Torah, does not involve the removal of the person's entire member, but only a slight injury. Man enslaves himself to God and accepts His majesty upon himself. The idea of leaving the choice and responsibility for fulfilling the covenant in human hands is a great innovation spread by the patriarch Avraham.

**The Effort in Keeping the “Way of the Lord"**

Now that we understand Avraham's conceptual and moral innovations, through the dissemination of which "thousands and myriads gathered around him" (Rambam, *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1:3), we must address another point: To where did all those "thousands and myriads" of people who gathered around Avraham disappear? If the message that Avraham spread was so convincing to the masses, what happened to them after he died? A parallel question, and more recent, is what causes the great success of Christianity and Islam in contrast to Judaism, which has remained the religion of a small, limited people.

It seems that the answer to these two questions relates to the two innovations introduced by Avraham: Divine morality and circumcision.

The Christian demand from the believer is very simple: all that is required is belief in certain principles, with very few practical requirements. This approach is the very opposite of Avraham’s, as demonstrated clearly by circumcision. The covenant of circumcision shows that man must act on his own, and enslave himself to God of his own free will. Man is required to act in the world as a servant of God, and advance the world and develop it.

Circumcision not only expresses a person's duty to act, but also the demand for absolute dedication. Circumcision is related to the attribute of judgment (*din*), and it is not by chance that it led to the birth of Yitzchak, who also represents the attribute of judgment and the readiness to sacrifice everything on God's altar. Circumcision and Yitzchak's dedication teach us that there are no free lunches, that a person is required to toil and labor as God's servant.

The demand for practical action, and even dedication and sacrifice, is not easy to fulfill. On the other hand, proclaiming belief in certain principles is very easy to implement. It was the demand for practical action that prevented the spread of Judaism in the way that Christianity spread.

While Christianity became widespread partly through the abolition of circumcision and all it implies, Islam became widespread through the blurring of Avraham's first innovation, which concerns Divine morality: Islam emphasizes the might and power of God, who forcefully imposes His rule over man. Emphasizing the conquering power of God leads naturally to the forceful spread of the religion. This is how Islam spread without leaving the conquered populations with very much choice. This approach led to a much wider and faster spread of the religion.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For these reasons, the nation of believers that followed Avraham did not last for very long: Avraham did not utilize coercion in order to advance his faith, and he set an uncompromising standard of demands from believers. The combination of allowing choice and setting high demands that are difficult to fulfill limited the possibility of spreading faith in the God of Israel, and later led to a shrinking of the group of people who believed in Him.

**Conclusion**

It is from Avraham that we learn the great duty to act in the world. We must act in order to spread the true faith and God's path, and to call out in the name of God, and we are obligated to toil for our covenant with God and accept His kingship.

All this, while we remember that "there are no free lunches": The true religion is not just a beautiful and correct idea. The path of God requires effort and much work, and we are not free to abandon it.[[3]](#footnote-3)

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Lekh Lekha* 5782.]

1. See also *Shemot* 1:6, though that describes a specific situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The way certain believers perceive God is alien to our perception of Him as a God of kindness and morality, who does not impose Himself on man, but rather gives him the choice whether or not to be subservient to Him. A perception that eliminates this dimension, and perceives God as having a "competitive" motive, is idolatry. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Avot* 2:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)