YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #23: The Reason for the Egyptian Exile (continued)**

As discussed, the Covenant Between the Parts is a most surprising episode in the progression of Avraham's life story. God had commanded him to leave his birthplace and to go to the land (Eretz Canaan) in which he would become a great nation. This leads us naturally to expect that it will be in this land that the nation will come into existence. At the Covenant Between the Parts, we suddenly discover that this coming into existence will happen somewhere else. If the nation is to be formed in some other land, why could it not have been in Aram, where Avraham had started out? Once Avraham has already moved to Eretz Cana'an at God's command, with the promise that he will become the father of a great nation, what is the purpose of having his descendants move elsewhere?

There are two ways of resolving this mystery. The more common view is that from the outset the Divine plan had been to lead *Bnei Yisrael* to Egypt, but this plan is revealed to us by the text only in the context of the Covenant Between the Parts. However, there is also another view among *Chazal*, as reflected in the *gemara* cited in the previous *shiur*, maintaining that there was in fact a change in the plan.

As we have seen, Manitou discusses the reasons proposed by *Chazal* for the decree of exile in light of Maharal's understanding (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* II, pp. 199-211). Manitou translates the nature of Maharal's explanation into terms of identity. *Chazal* could not have meant that *Am Yisrael* were subjugated in Egypt only because of a sin committed by Avraham, for this would represent a great injustice, whereby his descendants were punished for the sin of their ancestor. Therefore, what *Chazal* must be referring to is not a specific "sin," but rather a deficiency in the Israelite identity that Avraham creates through everything that he says and does. This deficiency develops as *Bnei Yisrael* becomes a nation, requiring some intervention in order to correct it. The qualities and tendencies that appear in the forefathers and mold the identity of the nation that emerges from them shed light on what happens to that nation later on. Manitou emphasizes that the *gemara* is not referring to a specific misdeed committed by a single individual; rather, when we speak of Avraham's "sin," we mean a more general flaw or weakness. Indeed, the discussion in the *gemara* makes no mention of the word "sin.”

This approach sits well with Manitou's general view of the biblical narrative not as a chain of events concerning individuals, but rather as the history of the nation. He states this explicitly in his definition of two exegetical approaches:

There are two main approaches to biblical exegesis. The first is homiletical-ethical in nature, focused on the individual and occupied with the question, What lessons can we learn from the narratives in the Torah with regard to our own everyday lives, so that we can conduct ourselves in a moral manner? This approach is certainly legitimate, and it leads us to consider halakhic questions relating to the *Shulchan Arukh*, *Orach Chaim* and *Yoreh De'ah*, or moral and ethical questions on the individual level. The other option is the historiosophic approach, as my rabbi and teacher, R. Jacob Gordin, referred to it. This approach aims to reveal the wisdom relating to the Israelite identity and all that it undergoes over the course of the history of the Jewish People, so that we can know how to behave as a nation, as a collective. Maharal regards the forefathers as the prototype of the Israelite national identity, rather than as a private family dealing with its particular conflicts and challenges. Maharal wants to avoid at all costs a reading of the biblical narrative according to the first approach. (ibid., p. 136)

During our 2,000-year long exile from *Eretz Yisrael*, we did not have a national existence, and therefore our exegesis focused on the forefathers as individuals, with an attempt to learn from their example how to live moral lives. However, the intention of the Torah in telling their story is not to recount their life stories as individuals, although there is certainly much to be learned from them. Rather, first and foremost, the intent is to recount a national story – the life story of the Jewish People – in the historiosophic sense.

**The Deficiency of an Exclusive Focus on *Chesed***

Thus, in approaching *Chazal’s* teaching about the promise made at the Covenant Between the Parts, we need to understand what deficiencies existed in the Israelite national identity as built by Avraham. Here a clarification is in order: We do not mean, Heaven forfend, that Avraham had some problem in his identity. Avraham himself clearly models a profound and firm identity. What we mean is that the identity built by Avraham, specifically because of its stature and importance, comes at a price and entails certain deficiencies, and it is these that the exile in Egypt comes to repair.

Avraham's attribute is *chesed*. This is the first, most elementary stage in the creation of the nation – which makes perfect sense in view of Manitou's view of Creation as being oriented entirely to making place for the other. One might have suggested that Avraham's attribute of *chesed* was somehow lacking, and exile was needed in order to complete it. But Manitou says the opposite: The problem was, rather, an excess of *chesed* – the exclusivity of this attribute. When *chesed* is manifest in absolute, total form, problems will follow.

Let us examine once again the three opinions that *Chazal* offer concerning Avraham's deficiency:

R. Abahu said in the name of R. Elazar: why was Avraham punished with having his descendants subjugated in Egypt for two hundred and ten years? Because he drafted Torah scholars to fight, as it is written, “He led forth his trained men, born to his house.”

Shmuel said: Because he questioned the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written, “By what shall I know….”

And R. Yochanan said: Because he prevented people from entering under the wings of the Divine Presence, as it is written: “[And the king of Sedom said to Avram,] ‘Give me the souls, and the spoils take for yourself.’” (*Nedarim* 32a)

Manitou expands mainly on the second point – "By what shall I know that I shall inherit it?" – and clarifies the difference between an identity of *chesed* and an identity of pure justice. A person who is characterized by *chesed* will consider everything that he has and that he receives as a gift. A person of strict justice recognizes giving only if it is justified. Avraham, as a man of *chesed*, does not think that he deserves to inherit the land; there is no justification for it. As a result, no firm and profound connection will be formed between Avraham and *Eretz Yisrael*; for him, his right to the land will always have a question mark hovering over it. This is true not for ideological reasons, but simply because he does not experience the concept of a "right.” The question of "deserving" has no relevance in the thinking of someone who is defined by *chesed*. The result is a weakness in the faith that the Divine promise of the land will be fulfilled. Someone who believes with full faith knows that God's promise will be fulfilled. He has no need for any external proof, support, or reason.

Likewise, when Avraham sets off to wage war, he has no certain knowledge that he will be successful, since he is not sure of his merit. Recognition of a right in relation to himself is foreign to a person defined by *chesed*. Avraham therefore needs the help of others – not to help him in the physical, military sense (three hundred and eighteen fighters would still be a very small force in comparison to the armies of the kings), but rather so that their merit will be added to his own. Avraham wants to gather as many merits as he can around him, and for this reason he mobilizes the scholars:

Avraham is “*Klal Yisrael*” in potential. He exercises his discretion and chooses between two alternatives on the basis of his own tendency. God does not tell him what to do – whether to save Lot or to leave him to his fate. As a man of true *chesed*, Avraham decides that he must save Lot, and to this end he decides to mobilize additional merit. This finds expression in his recruiting of the scholars.

Why? Because he decides that he lacks the requisite level of merit, even though God has chosen him. At this point, a deficiency of faith becomes apparent: The Holy One, blessed be He, chose Avraham; He decided that Avraham would receive the promised blessings unconditionally. God never hinted that Avraham would be chosen only with some additional merit, to be expressed in the mobilization of the scholars. God could surely have found some other way to ensure Avraham's victory and the ultimate birth of *Mashiach* via Ruth. This is the opinion of R. Abahu and Maharal, who detect in Avraham's conduct the tendency towards a weakness of faith that might be expressed as the question, "Am I truly Avraham?"

The third possible deficiency is that Avraham prevented the people of Sedom from finding their way to monotheism. He could have converted them after the victory in war, but he passed up the opportunity. Manitou asks the obvious question: How is it that Avraham, the great teacher of monotheism, did not convert the people of Sedom? The answer connects this avoidance with the quality of *chesed* as well. Avraham has complete faith and confidence in God that if the people of Sedom need to be welcomed into the fold, God will make sure that it happens. But if this is the case, why has Avraham spent so much effort up until now in teaching people about God? Perhaps the answer is that until now, the people he has influenced have been those who approached him out of their own free will. He is unwilling to force a belief on people. This is not how he sees his mission. If they do not show and interest and arrive at the conclusion freely and willingly, Avraham leaves the job to God.

The answer may sound paradoxical: Avraham believes that God, in His great mercy, will redeem the other nations. He knows God via the attribute of *chesed* and via this attribute alone, and hence he concludes that God will eventually redeem everyone. Therefore, he makes no effort to convert the people of Sedom. And because of his excess faith and reliance on God's *chesed*, he withholds from them what they truly need.

The next part of our discussion will examine why these deficiencies led to exile and subjugation and how these experiences could bring about repair.

Translated by Kaeren Fish