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בס"ד

Parashat Lekh Lekha Part III On Genesis 17

1. On Content

Genesis 17 opens with, “When Abram was ninety-nine years of age Hashem appeared to Abram.” This verse fast-forwards from the previous verse (16:16), which stated, “Abram was eighty-six years of age when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram” (Gen. 16:16). There is a significant degree of similarity in the general structure of these two verses, including several semi-poetic features. In both, Abram’s name is specified at the beginning and at the end of the verse instead of the usual form whereby the second citation would be with a pronoun; in both, the number of years is cited in two groups, with repetition of the שָׁנָה (year) stem. Both statements are composed of eleven words. This creates a unit of the two verses and highlights the time interval between them, which, as we shall soon see is significant, is a period of thirteen years.

At this point Hashem calls upon Abram to **הִתְהַלֵּךְ לְפָנַי** **וְהָיִיתָ תָּמִים**, “Walk in My presence (before me) and be wholehearted.” One who “walks in G-d’s presence” lives his life in the continuous consciousness of His proximity and conducts himself with full dedication to His will. This is similar to the concept **בְּכָל דְרָבְרֶיךָ דְעָהוּ**, “In all your ways be conscious of Him” (Prov. 3:6). *Tamim* basically means “complete,” thus “wholehearted” with G-d; it rules out multiple loyalties and hypocrisy. These most excellent of qualities were previously attributed to Noah (Gen. 6:9).

It should not be thought that asking Abram to “walk in My presence” indicates that he had not as yet achieved that status. The precise Akkadian cognate for “walk in my presence” was a formula used by Mesopotamian kings on various occasions with loyal subjects, calling upon them to remain fully loyal. Ancient Assyrian documents speak of kings granting land to loyal subjects, to be inherited by their descendants after them, with the understanding that

they “walk in my presence and be wholehearted.” Since in this theophany the land of Canaan is to be officially granted to Abraham and his descendants with a covenant, it is likely that Hashem employed terminology well known in the ancient world to be closely associated with this purpose. In this way, others understand more clearly what was transacted.

In this appearance G-d reaffirms the Covenant He had previously made with Abram (Gen. 15), and adds several significant features. The permanent relationship between Him and the future nation is spelled out. Through a name change He concretizes the pledge that Abram’s progeny will be numerous. Abram (exalted father) shall henceforth be Abraham; the addition of the letter **ה** to his name is to be understood to allude to his becoming **אב הַמֶּלֶךְ** (father of a multitude of nations). G-d’s Covenant is everlasting with Abraham and his descendants, and the land of Canaan is their perpetual possession. Circumcision is introduced as the sign of the Covenant, a procedure to be performed on the eighth day from birth on all male children of his family, as well as on all males born in the household or purchased from foreigners.

Sarai’s name is also changed. Henceforth, she will be called Sarah, substituting a **ה** for the **י** and thus transforming “my princess” to the broader “princess.” Abraham is assured that he will have a son through her and he will be the progenitor of a great nation. This detail symbolizes the supernatural nature of the birth of the new nation and sets the tone for its future.

Abraham has serious doubts that he, who would be one hundred years of age when the promised child would be born, could have a child with ninety-year-old Sarah. He laughs in disbelief at this pronouncement (**וַיִּצְדָּק**) and prays that Ishmael be successful in G-d’s presence. G-d affirms His pledge

concerning Sarah, prescribes the name for the boy (קִשְׁקִישׁ, a play on the word of Abraham's laughter) and adds that He has taken note of the prayer for Ishmael. He, too, is being blessed and will grow into greatness, but of a different order, for it is to Isaac, Sarah's son, that He will grant His Covenant. Following the theophany, Abraham, Ishmael and all male members of the household are circumcised.

It should be noted that circumcision was fairly well known in the ancient world; it was then performed in a number of societies during early adolescence as a rite of initiation into manhood. In some cultures (notably in Egypt) it was restricted to priests or to other elites. In most cases it appears to have been associated with the fear of demonic powers and viewed as a protection against them. In no case other than that of the Torah has it been found to be performed on infants. With Israel, circumcision becomes an initiation rite for every male member into the Covenant with G-d and serves as a permanent sign of it.

As a statement articulating a most fundamental aspect of the G-d-Israel Covenant, Genesis 17 is composed in a most celebratory fashion, simultaneously embodying a number of sophisticated literary, artistic and symbolic devices. We may not have clarity into understanding the deeper meaning of many of the details but they are on the surface, right in front of the reader and they should be acknowledged and appreciated.

2. The Long Chiasmus

Genesis 17 contains a chiasmus comprised of many components that runs through the chapter from beginning to end. (A chiasmus is a reversal in sequence of corresponding items – such as words or phrases – in one of two members of an associated pair, such as AB-B'A', sometimes with a center, AB-X-B'A' (see our study on the Tower of Babel story in Parashat Noah.) Although there is no question that such a pattern is present in our chapter, several of the many components may perhaps be rendered differently than here proposed, given that correspondences come in different forms. What follows is a list of words and phrases that, for the most part at least, were clearly intended to be recognized as comprising two corresponding literary strings

formulated in a chiasmic pattern. We will first point out a correspondence that frames and introduces our chapter as well as highlights an important symbolic detail.

The words immediately preceding our chapter are, “Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram,” while near the end of our chapter, in verse 26, it states, “Abraham and Ishmael his son.” That last verse of the previous chapter states that “Abram was eighty-six years of age when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram,” while the first verse of our chapter gives Abram's age in our episode as ninety-nine years of age, pointing to a thirteen-year period separating the events. In verse 25, near the end of our chapter, after having again given Abraham's age in verse 24 as being ninety-nine, it states that Ishmael was thirteen at the time of his circumcision. This connects the end of our chapter with the last verse of the previous chapter. The following outlines the structure of chapter 17.

1. “Abram was ninety-nine years of age” in verse 1 is parallel to “Abraham was ninety-nine years of age” in verse 24.
2. Further in verse 1, “Hashem appeared to Abram” has a counterpart at the end of verse 22 with “G-d departed from Abraham.”
3. The further statement in verse 1, “and spoke to him” corresponds with the beginning of verse 22: “He concluded speaking to him.”
4. Verse 2 contains the passage's first of thirteen attestations of the key word *berit* (covenant) while verse 21 contains the last.
5. At the end of verse 2, G-d informs Abram **אֶתְּךָ אֲרֹכֶה** (“I will multiply you greatly”), while in verse 20 His blessing for Ishmael includes **אֶתְּךָ אֲרֹכֶה**. (It should be noted that in verse 6, after the name change for Abraham, G-d said to him, **וְהִפְרֵתִי**, while in verse 16, after the name change for Sarah, He said regarding her, **וְהִפְרֵתִי** followed by **וְהִפְרֵתִי** [the verb repetition apparently in place of *bim'od me'od*]. In His verse 20 statement regarding Ishmael, G-d integrated the three benedictory terms of verses 2, 6 and 16 in reverse order, **וְהִפְרֵתִי אֶתְּךָ אֲרֹכֶה**, a chiasmus within the chiasmus.)
6. **וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָם עַל פָּנָיו** (Abram falls on his face) of verse 3 has a parallel in **וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָם עַל פָּנָיו** of verse 17.

7. In verse 4, just before G-d changes Abram's name, He tells him that *וְהָיְתָ לְאַבְרָם הַמֶּזֶן גּוֹיִם*. In verse 16, immediately after Sarai's name is changed, she is blessed *וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם*.
8. Abram's name change in verse 5 corresponds to Sarai's name change in verse 15.
9. *וְהָיְתָ בְּיָמֶי וּבְיָמֶיךָ וּבְיָמֵי זֶרְעֶךָ אֶחָדֶיךָ* in verse 7 corresponds to *וְהָיְתָ בְּיָמֶי וּבְיָמֶיכֶם וּבְיָמֵי זֶרְעֶכֶם אֶחָדֶיכֶם* in verse 10.
10. The word *לְדָרְתָם* in verse 7 corresponds with the same word in verse 9.
11. The final clause of verse 7 – *לְהָיוֹת לְךָ לְאֱלֹקִים* – corresponds to verse 8: *וְהָיְתָ לְךָ לְאֱלֹקִים*. (The correspondence is fuller given that *lahem* refers to *וּלְזֶרְעֶךָ אֶחָדֶיךָ* of the previous verse.)
12. Verse 8 contains within itself two final pair of correspondences. (Of course we exclude the last three words of the verse, which were a part of the previous item's chiasmus pair.) The beginning of the verse, that G-d is giving the land to Abraham and *וּלְזֶרְעֶךָ אֶחָדֶיךָ*, "your descendants after you" is paralleled by *לְאָחֲזָתָ עוֹלָם*, "for an everlasting inheritance," near the end of the verse.
13. Finally, *אֵת כָּל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן* matches *אֵת אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם*. (The final two pair of chiasmi, constituting the central pair of the thirteen pair of chiasmi, comprise thirteen words.)

3. Short Chiasmi in Segments 1, 3 and 4

The whole of Genesis 17 comprises two major interacting sections (separated by a *setumah* break between verses 14 and 15). Each of these sections further divides into two, creating a four-segment chapter. Three of these segments – one, three and four – contain a relatively short chiasmus formulation within its own verses while simultaneously contributing to the larger chiasmus structure described above (a chiasmus within a chiasmus). Whatever the fuller meaning, it is extraordinarily artistic and seems to celebrate the great events being described in the passage. Since an aspect of biblical style is to vary literary techniques, the second segment is formulated in a distinctive and totally different pattern. The three short chiasmi are as follows:

In segment 1, in G-d's first series of promises (vv. 2-7), the following phrases appear in chiasmus sequence: A) *beriti beni ubenekha* B) *ve'arbeh*

otekha bim'od me'od C) *le'ab hamon goyim* D) *shimkha Abram*, and in reverse: D') *shimkha Abraham* C') *ab hamon goyim* B') *vehifreti otekha bim'od me'od* A') *beriti beni ubenekha*.

In segment 3, G-d's response to Abraham's doubts (vv. 19-21) includes the following words in chiasmus form: A) *Sarah* B) *yoledet* C) *Yishaq* D) *vahaqimoti* E) *beriti*, and in reverse: E') *beriti* D') *aqim* C') *Yishaq* B') *teled* A') *Sarah*.

In segment 4, the fulfillment of the command of circumcision (vv. 23-27) is described with the following terms in chiasmus sequence: A) *yelide beto v'et kol miqnat kaspo* B) *b'anshe bet Abraham* C) *vayyamol* D) *b'esem hayom hazeh* E) "v'Abraham ben tish'im vate'sh'a shanah behimolo besar 'orlato" and in reverse: E) "v'Yishma'el beno ben shelosh 'esreh shanah behimolo et besar 'orlato" D) *b'esem hayom hazeh* C) *nimol* B) *anshe beto* A) *yelid bayit umiqnat kesef*.

4. About Segment Two

Particularly between verses 9-14, a significant number of the words of each succeeding verse are repetitions of words from the previous verse(s). The verses proceed unhurriedly, leisurely making their points. From the perspective of transmission of information, most of the repeated words and phrases are redundant or unnecessarily expansive. Although a minor chiasmus can be seen in this segment, most of the repetitions are not so. Clearly, this is a varied literary style that is very celebratory and whose use is indicative of a sublime message.

5. "For an Everlasting Covenant": A Key Phrase

The phrase *לְבְרִית עוֹלָם* appears three times in this passage, in verses 7, 13 and 19. If we count the *לְבְרִית* of the first attestation of this key phrase, that of verse 7, as word #1 and count forward word by word, the *לְבְרִית עוֹלָם* of verse 13 are words #86 and #87. If we count the *לְבְרִית* of the last attestation of this phrase, that of verse 19, as #1 and count back from there, the *לְבְרִית עוֹלָם* of verse 13 are again words #86 and #87. (Although this segment of 172 words spanning thirteen verses is not a stand-alone pronouncement, it has similarity to structures that have been found elsewhere in Scripture that have been shown to have significance.)

6. Parallels*

1) The two sections – *parashiyot qetanot* – that constitute the overall passage are virtually equal in word count. Verses 1-14 comprise 178 words and verses 15-27 comprise 177 words.

2) Word #29 through word #32 of each section are identical except that the first has Abram and the second Abraham: וַיִּפֹּל אֶבְרָהָם עַל פְּנָיו of verse 3 and וַיִּפֹּל אֶבְרָהָם עַל פְּנָיו of verse 17.

7. Some Number Symbolism in Our Chapter

Background and details on the following, as well as many examples, are found in our study, “*On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon.*” (Briefly, eight and its decimal multiples symbolize the covenantal relationship while thirteen – אָדָּן – and its decimal multiples symbolize an association with one G-d or a related concept.)

Our Genesis 17 passage contains a great deal of symbolism associated with eight and thirteen. By mentioning Abram’s age of eighty-six (Gen. 16:16) in the verse immediately before our passage, which begins with the statement that Abram was ninety-nine years of age, especially with no discussion whatsoever in between, the Torah links thirteen with the forthcoming eight. Ishmael’s *berit mila* is at thirteen (years) while Isaac’s will be at eight (days).

There are exactly thirteen attestations of the *berit* stem in our passage – vv. 2, 4, 7, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 13, 14, 19, 19, 21. The eighth *berit* is in the passage’s thirteenth verse and is word #160.

Ronald Benun points out that the combined total attestations of the names of Abram and Sarai from the beginning of the Torah through the last verse of Genesis 16 (just prior to the expanded covenant of our passage that highlights the number eight) is seventy.

At the point that G-d calls her Sarah (17:15), completing both the Abraham and Sarah name changes, the combined total of both names in both forms is eighty. From the next occurrence of Abraham’s name (17:17) until the end of the book of Genesis, Abraham’s name appears one hundred and thirty times. The total number of attestations of Abraham’s name in the Torah (both as Abram and Abraham) is two hundred and ten (130 + 80). Prophetic composition is of a different order than ordinary literature.

Endnote

* As pointed out earlier, the chapter’s two major sections comprise two segments each, reflecting the varied subject matter. The phrase “And G-d said to Abraham” of Gen. 17:9, given that G-d was already speaking to Abraham in the previous verses, is a marker that it begins the second segment. The third segment also begins with “And G-d said to Abraham” (v. 15, following a *setumah* break) and ends at the theophany’s conclusion. The fourth segment narrates the post-theophany happenings. If the conclusion of G-d’s words in verse 21 is the end of segment 3, considering verse 22 – which narrates that the theophany had concluded and G-d ascended from Abraham – as beginning the last segment, there is another striking parallel. The key instructional words וַיִּמַּלְתֶּם אֶת בְּשַׁר עֶרְוַתְכֶם (“and you should circumcise the flesh of your foreskin” [v. 11]) which are words #26-29 of the second segment, would perfectly parallel the location of the words of their fulfillment, words #26-29 of the fourth segment, וַיִּמַּל אֶת בְּשַׁר עֶרְוַתְכֶם (v. 23). However, verse 22 may be the last verse of the third segment, and the fulfillment words parallel the instructional words without being in the identical position. (Based on what appears to be the case in other biblical passages, we do not exclude the possibility that the structure in our case had been intended to be viewed both ways.)

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