



קום התהלך בארץ

Walking the Land With Avraham

■ A Mission, or a Gift?

Saying “thank you” is truly a foundation stone in the ethical world of a Jew – and for King David, *David Melekh Yisrael*, it is practically his entire world. This is clear from the following very moving verse:

...ה' אֱ-לֹהֵי לְעוֹלָם אֲדַבֵּר.

...*Hashem my G-d, I will forever thank you.* (Psalms 30,13)

With David thanking G-d every day of his life, it is quite puzzling that our national forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov appear never to have expressed thanks to Hashem – not even once! The Talmud itself (B'rachot 7b) makes this point:

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon bar Yochai: From the day G-d created His world, no one ever thanked Him, until Leah [Yaakov's first wife] came and thanked Him. As is written [after the birth of her fourth son, Yehuda], “This time I will thank G-d.” (B'reshit 29,35)

This Gemara passage teaches us clearly that our Matriarch Leah was the first person in the history of Creation to say, openly and clearly, “Thank you, Hashem!” Is this not incredible? Did no one ever find anything for which to thank G-d before this? Consider Avraham Avinu, for instance; could it possibly be that this “chosen of G-d,” who received so many gifts and promises from Hashem, had nothing for which to thank Him?!

The answer to this question will give us a deep understanding of how Avraham truly related to G-d's word. We will see how Avraham saw himself as G-d's emissary, loyally fulfilling whatever mission G-d assigns him.

Though he received so much from Hashem, Avraham never saw these gifts in terms of personal acquisitions, but only as tools for his mission as a soldier in G-d's army. As far as Avraham was concerned, he never received

gifts; he was given only missions and objectives. **A soldier who receives an order from his commander does not say, “Thank you;” he says, “Yes, sir!”**

Avraham Avinu set himself a goal: to spread the Name of G-d, the Creator of the Universe, everywhere he went. When he heard that Hashem was giving him Eretz Yisrael, he saw it not as a gift for his own benefit, but as a means by which to carry out his sacred mission and a field of operations in which to fight idol worship.

Similarly, Leah did not express thanks for her first three sons, but rather named them for what she saw as her mission: family harmony. When Levi was born, for instance, she said, *“This time my husband will become attached to me”* (B'reshit 29,34). She knew that Yaakov originally wished to marry her sister Rachel, and viewed her first three sons in terms of her mission to tighten her marital bonds and win her husband's love and appreciation.

Only when her fourth son, Yehuda, was born, did Leah express a different sentiment – that of thanks. For she knew, with prophetic vision, that Yaakov and his four wives would have 12 sons altogether, and that her fair share would be a quarter, or three sons. When she surpassed this quota and received more than her share, she named her new baby Yehuda, from the root meaning “thanks.” Why? Because this was an addition, something beyond her original mission – a true gift from G-d.

■ On Behalf of Avraham

The Talmudic passage quoted above cites other interesting teachings of R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon bar Yochai. One of them is this:

From the day G-d created His world, no one ever called G-d “Lord” – until Avraham, as is written, “My Lord, G-d, how will I know that I will inherit?” (B'reshit 15,8)

The specific word that Avraham used was אֲדֹנָי, *ado-nai*, which we commonly use when referring to G-d. It stems from the root for “master,” *adon*. As the Torah states: *“Three times a year, your males shall be seen before the adon, Hashem...”* (Sh'mot 34,23) The Gemara thus expresses the idea we explained above: Avraham sees himself as a soldier in the army of his “commander,” G-d, Who sends him on various missions.

The next passage in the Talmud can also be explained in this same vein:

Rav said: Daniel's prayers, too, were answered only in the merit of Avraham. Daniel prayed, “Please hear the prayers and pleadings of your servant, and shine Your countenance upon Your desolate Holy

Temple, on behalf of Ado-nai” (Daniel 9,17). Why did he not say on Your behalf, since he is talking directly to Hashem, but rather on behalf of Ado-nai? - This teaches that he was asking for Divine intervention “on behalf of Avraham who called You Adon.”

This means that Daniel’s prayer was answered because he did not ask for gifts, but rather for missions, just like Avraham Avinu. Daniel seeks the Redemption of Jerusalem and of the Holy Temple, in order that great spiritual inspiration and sanctification of G-d’s Name emanate from there to the entire world.

In short, the message is that when Daniel says *on behalf of Ado-nai*, he means “for Your sake, my G-d” – just as he himself said two verses later:

אֲדֹנָי שְׁמַעָה אֲדֹנָי סְלַחְהָ אֲדֹנָי הַקְּשִׁיבָה... לְמַעַנְךָ אֱלֹהֵי כִי שְׁמָה נִקְרָא
עַל עִירָךְ וְעַל עַמֶּךָ.

My G-d, hear; my G-d, forgive; my G-d, pay heed... for Your sake, my G-d, for Your name is proclaimed upon Your city and upon Your people. (verse 19)

We find this quality yet again in Avraham following the great world war, known as the Four Kings Against the Five. After Avraham rescued the people of S’dom and recovered their property, their king proposed that Avraham keep all the property but return the people. Avraham refused to take any goods, vowing: “*I will not take even a thread or a shoelace, or anything of yours...*” (B’reshit 14,23)

Avraham is essentially saying this: “I went to battle in order to save my nephew Lot and his family, and in order to spread the name of G-d, the Master of the Universe. I did not fight for money or for gifts; my purpose in life is not to acquire more for myself, but to do what I can for Hashem.”

■ To Walk in the Land

To better understand how Hashem directs Avraham along his way, let us carefully track the series of Divine appearances to him. The first time Hashem appears to Avraham in Eretz Yisrael is in Elon Moreh, when He makes a general promise to give the Land to Avraham’s lineage in the future:

לְזַרְעָךְ אֶתְּנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת...

I will give this land to your descendants... (12,7)

The second Divine appearance to Avraham came after he and his nephew Lot separated in the wake of their shepherds’ quarrel. Hashem said:

שָׂא נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה ... צַפְנָה וְנִגְבָּה וְקִדְמָה וְיָמָה. כִּי אֶת כָּל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר
אֶתֶּה רֹאֶה, לְךָ אֶתְּנֶנָּה וּלְזֶרְעֶךָ עַד עוֹלָם.

Lift your eyes and see... northward, southward, eastward and westward. For this entire land that you see, to you and to your seed forever I will give it. (13,14-15)

This promise is more detailed than the previous one, and includes three elements that are missing from the first one:

- a. The promised land is defined by **borders**, namely, as far as Avraham can see.
- b. The land will be given not only to his seed, but also to **Avraham himself**.
- c. The land will be given to him and his children – **forever**.

Hashem also adds this: *“Rise, walk the land, through its length and breadth, for I will give it to you”* (verse 17). What is the significance of this command? What does it add to the promise? The answer is: It adds nothing to the promise, but rather augments Avraham’s mission. The command to get up and start walking makes it clear that the Land is not merely a gift. Instead, he has a mission to conquer it, by trekking through its width and breadth. Wherever Avraham goes, he infuses a spirit of faith in G-d and the rejection of the idol worship then so prevalent – and this is the ultimate objective of the conquest of Eretz Yisrael.

For Avraham personally, his very act of walking through it in this manner is his acquisition of the land. This is why the verse states that the land will be given to Avraham, with no mention of his descendants – because this is his personal conquest of Eretz Yisrael. R. Eliezer, in fact, derives from here that one way to acquire a field is simply by walking across its length and breadth. (Bava Batra 100a)

Interestingly enough, we see that Avraham settles down in Elonei Mamre in Hevron (13,18), building there an altar to Hashem. What will be with the command to walk throughout the Land? It occurs in the very next chapter, when G-d brings on the above-mentioned War of the Kings. This forces Avraham and his men to give chase all the way up to northern Israel as they try to rescue his nephew Lot. As is written: *“Avraham divided his forces and attacked them that night, he and his servants, and he smote them, and pursued them to Chovah, left of Damascus.”* (14,15)

By chasing the invaders so far north, Avraham fulfills the Divine command to walk the length of the Land, south to north. And where do we see that he

walked along its breadth? – When he went down to the land of the Plishtim, in the western Negev, aside the G'rar Brook: *“Avraham journeyed from there towards the Land of Canaan, settled in the Negev, dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and he lived in G'rar.”* (20,1)

It was here in this spot that Avraham founded the “Awe of G-d” movement; such a concept had never existed here before. After the Plishtim king kidnapped his wife Sarah, Avraham said, *“I was worried because I felt, ‘There just is no fear of G-d in this place’”* (20,11). But in the end, Avraham's arrival there created a turnabout in the natives' approach, leading them to faith in G-d:

וַיִּשְׂכֶם אַבְרָמֶלֶךְ בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקְרָא לְכָל עֲבָדָיו
וַיִּדְבֵר אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּאַזְנֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים מְאֹד.
*King Avimelekh awoke early in the morning, called all his
servants and told them what had happened,
and they feared greatly.* (20,8)

■ The Dust of the Earth, the Stars of the Heavens

The two main missions with which Avraham was charged correspond with the two descriptions of the multitude of his descendants. Hashem promised that Avraham's seed would be as abundant as both the stars of the heavens, and the dust and sand of the earth and ocean. Where do we read of the “*dust of the earth*”? G-d said to Avraham:

וְשָׂמֵתִי אֶת זְרַעְךָ כְּעֶפְר הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אִם יוּכַל אִישׁ
לְמַנּוֹת אֶת עֶפְר הָאָרֶץ גַּם זְרַעְךָ יִמְנָה.
*I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth;
if a person can count the dust of the earth, then your seed, too,
shall be countable.* (13,16)

This verse appears immediately before the Divine command to Avraham to walk through the Land. The connection between the comparison to dust and the mission of walking the Land is clear: His many descendants will conquer the earth with their legs wherever they go, as is written:

כָּל הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר תִּדְרֹךְ כַּף רַגְלְכֶם בּוֹ לְכֶם יְהִי,
מִן הַמִּדְבָּר וְהַלְּבָנוֹן מִן הַנְּהָר נְהַר פָּרַת וְעַד הַיָּם הָאֲחֵרוֹן יְהִי גְבֻלְכֶם.
*Every place whereon the sole of your feet shall tread, from the
desert to the Lebanon, from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean,
will be your border.* (D'varim 11,24)

And where is mentioned *“the stars of the heavens”*? – Just after Avraham sanctified G-d’s Name by refusing to take property from the King of S’dom, as we saw above. Avraham had just mentioned his vow to the Supreme G-d, telling the king that he had vowed not to take anything of his (B’reshit 14,23). A few verses later, G-d took Avraham outside and said:

הִבֵּט נָא הַשָּׁמַיִמָּה וְסָפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם תּוּכַל לְסָפֹר אֹתָם,
וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ: כֹּה יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ.

“Look at the sky and count the stars, if you can count them.”

And He said: “Thus will be your offspring.” (15,5)

This was an appropriate response to Avraham’s oath. G-d tells him, “You enlightened the entire world with the knowledge of the Supreme Master of the heavens and earth. In this merit, your offspring will shine like stars forever,” as is written:

וְהַמְשַׁכְּלִים יִזְהָרוּ כְּזֹהַר הַרְקִיעַ וּמַצְדִּיקֵי הָרַבִּים כְּכּוֹכָבִים לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.
*The wise will shine like the brightness of the sky, and those
who bring the multitudes to righteousness will be like the stars
forever.* (Daniel 12,3)

“Those who bring the multitudes to righteousness” refers to those who educate people in the paths of justice. Avraham’s exalted and noble act of returning the property to the King of S’dom raised him high above the lusts of the physical world. It rewarded him with descendants who, like the stars, illuminate the earth and its inhabitants with the light of Torah ethics and the way of G-d.

In this vein, let us continue to track these imageries of the dust of the earth and the stars of the heavens as they appear in the Torah. After Avraham so successfully passed the test of Akedat Yitzchak, the Binding of Isaac, he was doubly blessed: The abundance of his descendants was likened to both the stars **and** the sand:

כִּי בָרַךְ אֲבָרְכֶךָ וְהִרְבָּה אֲרַבְּהָ אֶת זְרַעְךָ כְּכּוֹכָבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם
וְכַחֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל שְׂפַת הַיָּם...

*For I will surely bless you and increase your offspring as the stars
of the heavens and as the sand on the seashore...* (B’reshit 22,17)

Why the double comparison? Each aspect corresponds with one of the two phrases of blessing that immediately follow. The second one, *“sand of the seashore,”* corresponds with the next words in the verse:

וַיִּרְשׁ זַרְעָה אֶת שַׁעַר אֹיְבָיו.

May your offspring conquer their enemies' gate.

– which is parallel with Avraham's physical mission of conquering the Land by walking upon it. And the “*stars in the heavens*” imagery parallels the next verse:

וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזַרְעָה כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ עִקֵּב אֲשֶׁר שָׁמְעֶתָ בְּקוֹלִי.

All nations of the earth will be blessed by your seed, for you have hearkened to My voice. (verse 18)

How so? Adhering to Hashem's word brings blessing to the world – and this is the light of supreme Divine ethics, corresponding, as we saw above, with the blessing of “*stars of the heavens.*”

■ As the Stars of the Heavens

Let us further develop the comparison to the imagery of the heavenly stars. Just before his death, Moshe Rabbeinu delivers his parting messages to Israel. He begins by enlightening them regarding the amazing achievement of the fulfillment of G-d's promise to Avraham:

ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הִרְבָּה אֶתְכֶם וְהִנֵּכֶם הַיּוֹם כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם לָרֹב.

Hashem your G-d has multiplied you, and you are now as abundant as the stars. (D'varim 1,10)

“See how Hashem fulfilled His word to make Avraham into a great nation with descendants as numerous as the stars.” Moshe then repeats this imagery when he reminds them of the small numbers with which they started out:

בְּשִׁבְעִים נֶפֶשׁ יָרְדוּ אֲבֹתֶיךָ מִצְרָיִם

וְעַתָּה שָׂמָךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם לָרֹב.

Your forefathers descended to Egypt numbering seventy souls, and now Hashem your G-d has made you as abundant as the stars of the heavens. (10,22)

The following question arises: It is manifestly clear that the comparison cannot be taken literally. The number of Israelites in the previous census was just over 600,000 males over the age of 20, indicating some three million Jews altogether. The stars, on the other hand, number at the very least a hundred thousand million billion – 10^{20} . So what is the point of this comparison? Why does Moshe Rabbeinu emphasize it twice in his parting speech?

It is interesting to note that when Bnei Yisrael were first counted, in the second year after the Exodus, they numbered almost exactly the same as they did nearly 40 years later when they were about to enter Eretz Yisrael. In the first census, they numbered 625,550, and the second time, the total count was 624,760 (including Levites both times) – a difference of only 790, just over a tenth of one percent. This was undoubtedly a tremendous miracle: The entire generation of the desert, those over 20 years of age, had died, yet the total number of Israelites remained the same!

This is precisely the same phenomenon found in the heavenly bodies. We know that the forces of gravity of the various stars interacting with each other are what keep the entire universe stable and balanced. Yes, stars occasionally implode and disappear - but others are formed in their stead. The Master of the Universe ensures that the critical number of stars always remains constant; the precise balance is eternally maintained, so that the tremendous forces of gravity do not cause the stars to crash into each other.

In Moshe's above blessing to Israel, he means to say that Israel reproduced most miraculously, and reached the minimum number required for the connection between Israel and its G-d: 600,000. The declaration "*I am the Lord your G-d*" can only apply to the Israelite nation when it numbers at least 600,000 people – and from then on, G-d's Name will forever be proclaimed upon them. That is, there is no possibility that the nation will ever number fewer than 600,000 people. Just as G-d watches over and maintains the delicate balance of the celestial bodies in all circumstances, so too He supervises the Nation of Israel's numerical balance. As Rashi explains: "They will exist forever like the stars." This is most definitely miraculous Divine Providence.

But Moshe is not satisfied with this number, and adds his own personal blessing:

ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם יִסַּף עֲלֵיכֶם כְּכֶם אֶלֶף פְּעָמִים...

May Hashem the G-d of your fathers add and make you a thousand times as much as you are... (D'varim 1,11)

We note that Moshe refers here to **Hashem the G-d of your fathers**, after saying **Hashem your G-d** in the previous verse. It is because when Hashem promises many descendants to our Patriarchs, He generally reveals Himself

with the name *E-l Shad-dai*, which alludes to Israel's tremendous growth.¹ It is based on the Aramaic word *shadei*, meaning "to throw" – an allusion to "bursting out" and expansion. This is why when Moshe blesses Israel that they should grow and multiply, he uses the term *Hashem the G-d of your fathers*, to whom G-d gave this blessing.

And Moshe's blessing does not end here. Based on the verse "*I will pour down for you blessing that will never be too much*" (Malachi 3,10), Moshe concludes and says:

וַיְבַרֵךְ אֶתְכֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לָכֶם.

He will bless you as He promised you. (D'varim 1,11)



1. see "War for Existence" to Parashat Vay'chi in this work, which brings examples from B'reshit 17,1; 28,3; and 35,11.