



מברית לשבועה

From Covenant to Oath

■ Avraham's Oath to Avimelekh

Parashat Vayera, famous mostly for Avraham's momentous test of the Binding of Isaac, *Akedat Yitzchak*, also tells us of his encounter with Avimelekh, King of the Philistines (Plishtim). The king asks Avraham for an oath for three generations of protection: for himself, his children, and his grandchildren: *"Now swear to me here by G-d, that you will not deceive me, my children, or my grandchildren."* Avraham agrees: *"I will so swear."* (B'reshit 21,23-24)

The two of them then make a treaty at the well that Avimelekh's servants had taken by force, which they appropriately call Be'er Sheva, the Well of the Oath.

The Torah does not tell us clearly whether G-d approved of this oath/treaty made by Avraham. There are some hints, however – such as the proximity right afterwards of *Akedat Yitzchak*, which begins as follows:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֵל־לְהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם...

And it was after these events, and G-d tested Avraham... (22,1)

By telling us that it occurred *after these events*, the Torah is not simply telling us a chronological timeline. Rather, the rule is that when the Torah uses these words, it means to emphasize that the first event actually causes, or leads up to, the second one. This is the basis for the explanation in the Medrash regarding the linkage between the stories of Avraham/Avimelekh and *Akedat Yitzchak*:

The ministering angels said to G-d: "Master of the Universe! Out of all the seventy nations that You created in the world, You blessed only one man – and then he goes and makes a treaty with one of the other nations!?"

Hashem answered: “I gave him an only son, and I will tell him to offer his son as a sacrifice before Me. If he does so, good; if not, it is a sign that you are right.” (Tanna D’vei Eliyahu 7)

The Medrash thus clearly learns, from the juxtaposition of the two incidents, that Avraham made a grave mistake in making an oath-based treaty with Avimelekh. It further tells us that the rectification could come with the binding of Yitzchak.

Two questions now face us: What was Avraham’s great error in making this oath/treaty? And how can *Akedat Yitzchak* correct it?

■ The Fourth Generation

Before we answer these questions, let us show how Avraham’s oath actually delayed the Nation of Israel’s entry into the Holy Land.

In the *Brit Bein HaBetarim* (Covenant Between the Pieces) between G-d and Avraham, in Parashat Lekh Lekha, Avraham receives the following prophecy:

וְדֹר רְבִיעִי יָשׁוּבוּ הֵנָּה, כִּי לֹא שָׁלַם עֵוֹן הָאֱמֹרִי עַד הֵנָּה.

Only the fourth generation [of your descendants] will return here, because the Emorites’ sin will not have run its course until then. (B’reshit 15,16)

Avraham understands that for the first three generations of Canaanite and Philistine presence in the Land (as the Ramban explains), Avraham’s children will not be permitted to inherit the Land from them. Why not? Because the sins of the Gentiles will not have reached their point of “critical mass” before then.

Accordingly, Avraham seems to have done nothing wrong by forging a treaty for three generations – because in any event, Hashem’s promise of the Land to his descendants will not apply until the fourth generation.

However, what happens in the event that the Canaanites use their free will to sin especially gravely, and manage to reach the critical point *before* the fourth generation? Will the Israelites not be permitted to conquer them and enter the Land earlier, simply because four generations have not passed? If we study the above verse differently, we will see that in such a case, Israel will in fact be permitted to fight the Canaanites and enter the Land earlier than planned. How so? Note the all-important word כִּי, *ki*, which we translated above as “because.” Actually, it has four different

meanings, as the Gemara teaches us (Rosh HaShanah 3a):

1. if
2. rather
3. perhaps
4. because

Instead of understanding it here to mean “because,” let us employ the first definition: “if,” or, “in the event that.” The verse is then read as follows: **“Only the fourth generation [of your offspring] will return here, in the event that the Emorites’ sin will not have run its course until then”** – whereas if the Emorites’ sin *will* have reached a critical mass earlier, Israel *will* be permitted to attack them then and inherit the Land.

With this understanding, Avraham’s oath not to attack for three generations could indeed cause Israel great trouble: it closes off the possibility of conquering Eretz Yisrael before the fourth generation! And in fact, the Canaanites’ sins did pile up very fast, and Avraham’s oath truly did cause a delay in Israel’s entry into the Land – a delay with critical ramifications, as we will now see.

■ The Fateful Setback

When Israel was on its way out of Egypt and headed towards the Promised Land, they faced two possible routes. The shorter one was through the land controlled by the Plishtim, known today as Gaza, and the route was through the Sinai Desert. But Hashem chose the longer route:

וְלֹא נָחַם אֱלֹהִים דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים, כִּי קָרוֹב הוּא,
כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים כֹּן יִנַּחֵם הָעָם בְּרֵאתָם מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרַיִמָּה.
*G-d did not lead them through the land of the Plishtim,
for it was close... lest the people see war and return to Egypt.* (Sh'mot 13,17)

Rashi, relying on the plain meaning of the verse, explains that Hashem chose the path that would take them further away from Egypt, so that they would not choose to return to Egypt as soon as they encountered combat.

But this explanation is difficult. For one thing, G-d could have wrought some miracles in order to offset the fears of war, as in the case of the Walls of Jericho and other battles! And secondly, there were other occasions when some of the Israelites wished to return to Egypt, such as when they complained as they were about to cross the Red Sea, **“It is better for us to be slaves to the Egyptians than to die in the desert”** (Sh'mot 14,12). Hashem solved that problem by splitting the sea before them!

Therefore, the Medrash of the Mechilta D'Rebbe Yishmael provides another explanation as to why Hashem chose the longer route:

“For it was close” – Avraham’s oath with Avimelekh was still in effect, because Avimelekh’s grandson, his third generation, was still alive!

That is to say, the word *close* refers not to geography, but to chronology, in that Avraham’s oath of three generations was still in effect. Hashem did not want to bring them into Eretz Yisrael at that time, because it was still too soon – for Avraham had given his oath not to attack until the third generation had died out! Hashem did not want to violate the oath, and therefore led Bnei Yisrael on the long route towards Eretz Yisrael. We thus see that Avraham’s oath/covenant with Avimelekh had far-reaching results, leading, indirectly, even to the Sin of the Golden Calf, and more.

■ From Covenant to Oath

Israel leaves Egypt, sets out for the Holy Land, and after 50 days, stops at Mount Sinai. Hashem forges a national covenant with the people, gives them the Torah from the Heavens, and all looks rosy – until Bnei Yisrael stumble and sin badly by worshipping the Golden Calf. Hashem then threatens to destroy them, telling Moshe: *“Leave me alone and I will destroy them!”* (D'varim 9,14)

Here is where the Divine oath to our Forefathers comes into play. Moshe invokes it in his plea for mercy:

זָכוֹר לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדֶּיךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָהֶם בְּךָ...

*Remember your servants Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov,
to whom You swore and said... I will give your descendants
[this Land], they will inherit it forever.* (Sh'mot 32,13)

Moshe Rabbeinu reminds G-d that His promise of countless descendants for Avraham and their inheritance of the Land is absolute and everlasting, regardless of any sins they might commit. It was this winning claim that carried the day for Moshe, and Hashem immediately accedes:

וַיִּנְחַם ה' עַל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר לַעֲשׂוֹת לְעַמּוֹ.

*G-d refrained from the evil that He had planned
to do to His people.* (verse 14)

When did G-d utter that special oath? Right after the test of *Akedat Yitzchak*: *“I have sworn... that because you have done this thing... that I will surely bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed... and your descendants will inherit the cities of their enemies.”* (B'reshit 22,16-17)

Hashem saw that Avraham was willing to make the supreme sacrifice and willingly give up his beloved son – his entire future – for Hashem. Only such a singularly amazing and irreversible act of self-sacrifice could lead G-d to make His own absolute oath, irreversible and unconditional. In short: *Akedat Yitzchak* was the foundation for this Divine oath that saved Israel.

It is true, as we have seen elsewhere, that G-d had already committed Himself to these promises beforehand, at the *Brit Bein HaBetarim* and the covenant of circumcision (B'reshit 15 and 17). However, this a clear upgrade: In a covenant, each side is obligated only if the other side fulfills his obligation, but now, by swearing, Hashem has obligated Himself unconditionally.

The upgrading of the covenant to a Divine oath is merely the last step in an incremental process defining G-d's relationship and commitments vis-à-vis Israel: First there was a general statement of intent to give his descendants the Land; then a more specific promise, but one which could be nullified if Avraham or his children sin in any way; then a covenant (*brit*), which obligates Hashem unless Avraham specifically does not keep his part – and finally, when Avraham passes the test of the *Akedah*, G-d makes an absolutely unconditional oath.

G-d's commitment to Israel thus increases in quality¹ as follows:

1. Declaration, when Avram first came to the Land (B'reshit 12,7)
2. Promise, after Avram separated from Lot (13,14-17)
3. Covenant (Between the Pieces), after the War of the Kings (15,18)
4. Oath, after *Akedat Yitzchak* (22,16-18)

This last upgrade from “covenant” to “oath” is quite extraordinary: The result of *Akedat Yitzchak*, it actually protected the Nation of Israel after the Sin of the Golden Calf, as we have seen; that sin itself was the indirect result of the extra time spent in the desert after G-d decided to take them the long way around – which, in turn, was the result of Avraham's oath to Avimelekh! Most remarkable!

That is to say, G-d hurried to test Avraham with the *Akedah* right after his problematic oath to Avimelekh – and it proved to be the oath's rectification, as the above Medrash taught us. Avraham's oath had prevented Israel from conquering the Canaanites as soon as their many sins rendered them

1. The Ramban details this process in his commentary to B'reshit 15,18.

“eligible” for expulsion. Instead, Hashem caused Israel to take the long way around to the Land – leading to the Sin of the Golden Calf and Hashem’s declared intention to destroy Israel. When Moshe Rabbeinu prayed for them, he used G-d’s oath to counter Avraham’s pact with Avimelekh – the very same Divine oath that G-d made in appreciation of Avraham’s willingness to sacrifice his beloved son Yitzchak.

And all this is alluded to by the words *“it was after these events”* (22,1), showing the progression from Avraham’s oath to the *Akedah*.

■ Avraham, Avraham

Chazal, our Sages of blessed memory, teach in the Medrash Rabba that wherever we see in the Bible that someone is called by his name twice, it is a form of affection and encouragement. The many examples include Hashem’s calls to Yaakov (B’reshit 46,2), Moshe (Sh’mot 3,4), and Shmuel (Shmuel I 3,10). Here, too, right after Avraham passed the test of *Akedat Yitzchak*, the angel of G-d calls him, *“Avraham, Avraham”* (B’reshit 22,11) - a clear sign of approval. Just several verses earlier, before the test, Hashem had called Avraham by his name only once:

וַיֹּאמֶר-לְהִים נֹסֶה אֶת אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי.

G-d tested Avraham, and said: “Avraham.”

He answered, “I am here.” (22,1)

This is not language of encouragement and affection, but rather something closer to a rebuke to Avraham for his oath to Avimelekh. Proof that this type of address is a form of scolding comes from here:

וַיֵּרֶד ה' בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן וַיַּעֲמֵד פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּקְרָא: אַהֲרֹן וּמִרְיָם! וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם.

G-d descended in a pillar of cloud and called: “Aharon and

Miriam!” And the two of them came out. (Bamidbar 12,5)

G-d was not pleased with Aharon and Miriam for the way they talked about their brother Moshe – and He indicated this by calling their names once each.

Nevertheless, here in *Akedat Yitzchak*, even though Hashem did not use the affectionate double term, He still said: *“Take, please, your son, your only son...”* (B’reshit 22,2) Hashem was asking him to *“please* pass this test, so that I will later be able to later come to your children’s defense and will be able to say: *‘I have sworn by My very essence.’*” (B’reshit 22,16)

