

עץ חיים

ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

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The LORD said to Abram, "Go forth

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם לֵךְ-לְךָ

GOD'S ELECTION OF ABRAHAM (12:1-13:18)

The first 75 years of Abraham's life are passed over in total silence. He still bears the name Abram when God's call comes. The patriarch's immediate response thrusts him onto the scene of history with astounding suddenness and marks the true beginning of his life.

Note that his wanderings in Canaan were later repeated by his descendants. This led Ramban to comment that Abraham's wanderings foreshadowed those of later generations.

THE DIVINE CALL AND THE PROMISES

(vv. 1-3)

1. The LORD said to Abram The divine voice that first set Creation in motion resounds again after 10 generations of silence. This time it is at Haran, where the intended migration of Terah and his family from Ur to Canaan had come to a halt, for some unexplained reason.

Go forth Take leave of, separate.

CHAPTER 12

God, by giving Adam one command to follow, gave him the opportunity to be a moral, obedient person. The ultimate goal of God's creation was not a static world but a world in which people, having free choice between good and bad, would freely choose good. Adam and his descendants, however, were not up to the challenge. Just 10 generations later, God began again with a single righteous family. Noah had the advantage over Adam of having shown himself to be more righteous than his neighbors, but Noah and his descendants also disappointed God, who now changes the approach. Instead of asking one individual or one family to be good in isolation, God seeks to create a community, a people, descendants of a God-fearing couple, in the hope that the members of that community would sustain and reinforce each other. In that way, ordinary people would be capable of displaying extraordinary behavior.

The new venture begins with Abram and Sarai, later to be known as Abraham and Sarah. We were told that Noah was righteous, at least in comparison with his contemporaries, but we are not told directly why this couple is a worthy choice. The tradition, as usual, seeks to fill the gap, portraying Abraham as the first person to realize that the world is ruled by one God who demands righteous behavior of

humanity. Abraham's descendants have been marked by a willingness to stand apart from conventional thinking.

A *midrash* pictures Abraham coming across a palace with all of its windows illuminated and musing to himself, "Is it possible that there is no lord of this palace?" At that moment, God appears and proclaims, "I am the lord of this palace!" (Gen. R. 39:1).

Another *midrash* portrays Abraham's father Terah as a manufacturer of idols. One night, Abraham smashed all his father's idols. The next morning his father, incensed, demanded to know who had destroyed his property. "They attacked each other," Abraham told him. "That's impossible!" cried Terah. "They are made of stone. There is no soul or spirit in them." "Then why do you worship them?" Abraham challenged him (Gen. R. 38:13).

The insistence that God is one is more than a mathematical statement. It is a prerequisite for a religion that demands righteousness, not merely obedience. It enables us to claim that there are fixed standards of right and wrong. In a world of many gods, the issue is not "what does God demand of me?" but "which god can best reward and protect me in exchange for my loyalty?" The revolutionary claim of monotheism is not only that one God alone exists but that God summons us to freely choose what is good.

1. God's first words to Abraham, translated

HALAKHAH L'MA-ASEH

12:1 the land I will show you This is the first verse of many in the Torah expressing the divine promise to the people of Israel that the land of Israel would be their homeland. It is permissible for Jews to live anywhere, but Jewish tradition prefers "going up" (*aliyah*) to live in Israel (MT Kings 5:7,12).

from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.

²I will make of you a great nation,

And I will bless you;

I will make your name great,

And you shall be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you

And curse him that curses you;

And all the families of the earth

Shall bless themselves by you.”

⁴Abram went forth as the LORD had com-

מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמְּוֹלַדְתָּהּ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיו אֶל-

הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶךָ:

²וְאֶעֱשֶׂה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל

וְאֶבְרַכְךָ

וְאֶגְדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ

וְהָיָה בְרָכָה:

³וְאֶבְרַכְהָ מִבְּרַכְיָךְ

וּמִקְלָלְךָ אֶאֱרָ

וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְךָ

כָּל מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה:

your native land The land of your kinsmen. The reference is to Haran, not Ur.

to the land God's word transforms the trek into a new venture, now with divine guidance and purpose. At this point, Abram may not have known the identity of the Promised Land, continuing the westward migration interrupted by his father (11:31), arriving in Canaan unaware of having reached his goal until so informed by God (12:2). Alternatively, God may have revealed the destination as soon as Abram accepted the call.

2. I will make of you a great nation Great in both number and significance.

I will bless you With material prosperity.

I will make your name great You will ac-

quire fame and be greatly esteemed as a man of superior character. In the ancient Near East, one's name was not merely a practical means of identification. It conveyed the very essence of an individual's being.

you shall be a blessing You will serve as the exemplar by which a blessing is invoked.

3. I will bless those who bless you Those who wish you well and show solidarity with you will enjoy My blessing of well-being.

And curse him that curses you Whoever mistreats you will reap misfortune.

And all the families of the earth / Shall bless themselves by you People will take your good fortune as the desired measure when they invoke a blessing on themselves.

as "Go forth" (*lekh l'kha*), literally mean, "be-take yourself." A *midrash* interprets this to mean, "Go forth to find your authentic self, to learn who you are meant to be" (*Mei Ha-Shiloh*).

Physically we leave our home first, then our neighborhood, and finally our country. Emotionally, however, leaving one's geographic country of origin is easier than leaving one's family (Alshekh).

"For the first time, a journey is undertaken, not as an act of exile (Adam, Cain) or a quest for domination (the generation of Babel) but as a response to a divine imperative" (Zornberg).

the land I will show you The Midrash plays on the Hebrew and reads, "the land wherein I will appear to you." God cannot be found as readily in the opulent surroundings of Haran as in the pasture lands of Canaan (Mid. Ha-Gadol).

2. be a blessing Hirsch takes this not as a promise but as a command. To merit the promised reward, you must so live as to be a blessing to the world.

3. I will bless those who bless you / And curse him that curses you Lest Abraham be intimidated by God's summons, God reassures him that his admirers will be many and his detractors few (Ralbag). Why would anyone curse or hate Abraham, who is setting out to serve God and be a blessing to all humanity? There always have been individuals and societies that resent God's strenuous moral demands and direct their resentment toward those who strive to live up to them.

And all the families of the earth / Shall bless themselves by you History has borne out the validity of Hirsch's comment: "I will bless each nation in accordance with the respect it shows the Jewish spirit." Nations and empires that

manded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. ⁵Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם בְּאֶשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה וַיֵּלֶךְ
 אִתּוֹ לוֹט וְאַבְרָם בֶּן-חֲמִשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים
 שָׁנָה בְּצֵאתוֹ מִחָרָן: ⁵וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת-
 שְׂרֵי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת-לוֹט בֶּן-אָחִיו וְאֶת-כָּל-
 רְכוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכְשׁוּ וְאֶת-הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר-
 עָשׂוּ בַחָרָן וַיֵּצְאוּ לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶצָה כְּנַעַן
 וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶצָה כְּנַעַן: ⁶וַיַּעֲבֹר אַבְרָם
 בְּאֶרֶץ עַד מְקוֹם שְׁכֵם עַד אֵלּוֹן מוֹרָה
 וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי אָז בְּאֶרֶץ:

ABRAM'S RESPONSE (vv. 4–5)

In silent, unwavering obedience to God's will, the patriarch leaves Haran, accepting his new destiny in perfect faith.

4. Lot went with him The mention of Lot prepares the reader for the events to come in chapter 13.

seventy-five years old Abram's age is given here because he is at a crucial moment of his life.

5. his brother's son Lot The kinship description explains his presence in Abram's entourage. The oldest uncle assumed the guardianship of the child of his dead brother, which is clear in 14:12.

they set out The trek would have taken them near or through some of the great urban centers of the day. The narrative is silent about the precise route and the incidents on the journey, probably to avoid diverting our attention from the primary theme: the entry into the land and the first divine revelation that the patriarch experiences there.

ABRAM IN THE LAND (vv. 6–9)

6. passed through the land Abram does not stop at Hazor, the major military and commercial center in the Upper Galilee, but continues along the central mountain range, avoiding the well-inhabited areas of northern Canaan and the coastal plain.

the site of Shechem The unusual Hebrew phrase for this (*m'kom Sh'chem*) probably refers to a sacred site. Such sites were desirable stopping places for travelers and pastoral nomads because of their proximity to springs and wells.

the terebinth of Moreh Some extraordinary tree. The Hebrew word *moreh* means "teacher, oracle giver." The tree (or a cluster of such trees) was so conspicuous and famous that it served as a landmark. The phenomenon of a sacred tree is well known in many cultures.

The Canaanites were then in the land "Canaanite" here, as often, designates all pre-Israelite inhabitants. The word "then" (*az*) seems to imply that at the time of the narrator, the Canaanites no longer existed—a situation that did

have treated the Jews well, from Moslem Spain to the United States, have flourished, owing in large measure to their openness to many peoples and to the specific contributions of their Jewish citizens. Nations that began by persecuting Jews, out of their hatred for the Jewish moral code, too often have gone on to bring destruction on themselves and their surroundings.

5. the persons that they had acquired The literal meaning is, "the persons they had made." The Midrash understands this anachronistically as referring to converts whom they

had led to belief in the one true God (Gen. R. 39:14). For that reason, when converts to Judaism are given a Hebrew name they are called son or daughter "of Abraham and Sarah." According to the Sages, "One who brings a person to the Torah is regarded as having given birth to him or her" (BT Sanh. 99a). Although the women of Genesis seem to play a minor role in what are presented as patriarchal narratives, we find the Midrash pointing to the larger role they undoubtedly played. Sarah was every bit the pioneer and "soul-maker" that Abraham was.

⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “I will assign this land to your offspring.” And he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. ⁸From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built there an altar to the LORD and invoked the LORD by name. ⁹Then Abram journeyed by stages toward the Negeb.

¹⁰There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the

וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר לְזָרְעֶךָ
אֶתֵּן אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת וַיִּבֶן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ
לַיהוָה הַנְּרָאָה אֵלָיו: ⁸וַיַּעֲתֶק מִשָּׁם
הַהָרָה מִקְדָּם לְבֵית-אֵל וַיֵּט אֵהָלוּ
בֵּית-אֵל מִמֵּם וְהָעֵי מִקְדָּם וַיִּבֶן-שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ
לַיהוָה וַיִּקְרָא בְשֵׁם יְהוָה: ⁹וַיִּסַּע אַבְרָם
הַלֹּךְ וְנִסּוּעַ הַנֶּגֶב: פ
¹⁰וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ וַיֵּרֵד אַבְרָם מִצְרַיִם

not become a reality until long after Joshua’s conquest (see Ibn Ezra).

7. The LORD appeared This is the first divine revelation in the promised land.

I will assign this land The identity of the land referred to in verse 1 is now established. This is one of the Torah’s seminal texts. Hereafter, the history and destiny of Abram and his descendants, including the Jewish people of today, will be bound up inextricably with the promised land.

He built an altar there In gratitude for the promise of land. Among the patriarchs, acts of worship are always individual, never public. They do not take part in any existing religion, and they always build new altars or reuse those they previously erected.

8. From there he moved on Legal ownership of the land is not the same as actual possession. The nation does not yet exist, and the patriarch remains a wanderer.

Ai The site is identified with a mound known as et-Tell, about 1 mile (1.6 km) southeast of Bethel. It was a flourishing town in the early Bronze Age during the 3rd millennium B.C.E.

he built there an altar Bethel is identified with modern Baytīn, which lies about 10.5 miles (17 km) north of Jerusalem. It was the site of a Canaanite sanctuary to the god El.

9. toward the Negeb To southern and southeastern Judah around Beer-sheba, below the central hill country and the Shephelah. The name derives from a root meaning “dry, parched,” indicating the sparse rainfall in the area and the arid terrain. By now, Abram has covered the length of the country from north to south.

ABRAM IN EGYPT (vv. 10–21)

The divine promises of nationhood and territory are abruptly endangered by famine.

10. There was a famine in the land This resulted from the prolonged failure of the seasonal rains, which was the primary cause of famine in Canaan.

Abram went down The standard phrase for travel from hilly Canaan to low-lying Egypt, just as one “goes up” in the reverse direction.

Egypt This is the first mention of Egypt in Israelite history, foreshadowing the ambiguous nature of their future relationships. On the one hand, it was a place of shelter in time of distress; on the other, a region of mortal danger.

to sojourn there The Hebrew stem meaning “to sojourn” (גור) indicates temporary residence. Everywhere in the ancient Near East, the resident alien (*ger*) was without legal rights and protection, depending entirely on the local community’s goodwill.

10. Abram went down to Egypt He lowered himself to the moral level of that society. Even an Abraham is not immune to the influence of his surroundings. In a setting of danger and depravity, he can be vulnerable to fear and tempted to deceive others to save himself.

Clearly, to understand Abraham’s motiva-

tion is not to justify it. The Torah continually portrays its leading figures with all of their flaws, perhaps to teach us that we too can be good people without being perfect people. Reading this and similar episodes, we can condemn Abraham’s behavior while forgiving him even as Sarah forgives him.

famine was severe in the land. ¹¹As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹²If the Egyptians see you, and think, ‘She is his wife,’ they will kill me and let you live. ¹³Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you.”

¹⁴When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was. ¹⁵Pharaoh’s courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s palace. ¹⁶And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels.

לְגוֹר שָׁם פִּי־כָבֵד הָרָעַב בְּאַרְץ: ¹¹וַיְהִי
בְּאֶשֶׁר הִקְרִיב לָבוֹא מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר
אֶל־שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ הִנֵּה־נָא יִדְעוּתִי בִּי אִשָּׁה
יִפְת־מְרָאָה אֵת: ¹²וְהָיָה פִּי־יִרְאוּ אֶתְךָ
הַמִּצְרַיִם וְאָמְרוּ אִשְׁתּוֹ זֹאת וְהִרְגוּ אֹתִי
וְאַתָּה יָחִיו: ¹³אֲמַרְי־נָא אָחֹתִי אַתְּ לְמַעַן
יִיטַב־לִי בְּעַבְדוֹךָ וְחִיתָה נַפְשִׁי בְּגִלְתְּךָ:
שְׁנִי ¹⁴וַיְהִי כְּבוֹא אַבְרָם מִצְרַיִם וַיִּרְאוּ
הַמִּצְרַיִם אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה כִּי־יִפְּהָ הוּא מְאֹד:
¹⁵וַיִּרְאוּ אֶתְּךָ שָׂרַי פְּרַעֲהַ וַיְהַלְלוּ אֹתָהּ
אֶל־פְּרַעֲהַ וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה בֵּית פְּרַעֲהַ:
¹⁶וּלְאַבְרָם הֵיטִיב בְּעַבְדוּרָהּ וַיְהִי־לוֹ צֹאן־
וּבָקָר וְחֲמֹרִים וְעַבְדִּים וְשִׁפְחֹת וְאֹתָנֹת
וּגְמָלִים:

for the famine was severe Only so dire a situation would have driven Abram to leave the land.

THE SEIZURE OF SARAI (vv. 11–20)

Approaching the Egyptian border, Abram begins to fear that Sarai’s beauty will lead to his murder and her abduction. Narratives about the kidnapping of the hero’s beautiful wife are found in Canaanite and Greek epics, and it is reasonable to assume that similar sagas circulated about the matriarchs of Israel.

11. a beautiful woman Sarai is 65 at the time, 10 years younger than her husband.

12. and let you live Though in shame and dishonor.

13. Please say Although Abram’s words are not an order, they convey a sense of urgency (through the Hebrew *na*).

you are my sister The dilemma confronting the patriarch is a very real moral conflict between human life and human dignity. Ramban comments: “Know that our father Abraham inadvertently committed a great sin by placing his virtuous wife in a compromising situation because of his fear of being killed. He should have trusted in God.”

14. the Egyptians saw Clearly, Sarai did

not generally veil her face. See Comments to 24:65 and 38:14–15.

15. Pharaoh This is the first appearance of this title in the Bible. The names of the pharaohs in Genesis and Exodus are not given, thereby making it difficult to fix the chronology of the patriarchal period. The title itself derives from an Egyptian word meaning “the great house” (*per-o*), a designation of the royal palace as early as 2500 B.C.E. In New Kingdom times (from the 16th century B.C.E. on), it came to be used for the king, in the same way as “the White House” can designate the American president or “the Crown,” the British monarch.

the woman was taken This incident is illuminated by the ancient Egyptian *Tale of Two Brothers*, in which a beautiful woman comes to the attention of Pharaoh, who has her hunted down and brought to his palace. There he makes love to her, even though he knows she is married.

16. she-asses Possession of many she asses was a sign of great wealth. See Job 1:3 and 42:12.

camels This is an anachronism. The widespread domestication of the camel as a beast of burden did not take place before the 12th century B.C.E., long after the patriarchal period.

11. A *midrash* suggests that Abraham, after so many years of marriage, took his wife’s

beauty for granted until he became aware of how others regarded her (Tanh.).

¹⁷But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram. ¹⁸Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, “What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife; take her and begone!” ²⁰And Pharaoh put men in charge of him, and they sent him off with his wife and all that he possessed.

וַיִּנְגַע יְהוָה | אֶת־פַּרְעֹה נְגַעִים גְּדֹלִים
וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ עַל־דִּבְרֵי שְׂרַי אִשְׁתֵּי אַבְרָם׃
וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה לְאַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר מַה־זֹּאת
עָשִׂיתָ לִּי לָמָּה לֹא־הַגַּדְתָּ לִּי כִּי אִשְׁתְּךָ
הִוא׃¹⁹ לָמָּה אָמַרְתָּ אֲחֹתִי הִוא וְאָקַח
אֹתָהּ לִי לְאִשָּׁה וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה אִשְׁתְּךָ קַח
וְלֶךְ׃²⁰ וַיִּצְוּ עָלָיו פַּרְעֹה אַנְשֵׁים וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ
אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֵׁר־לוֹ׃

13 From Egypt, Abram went up into the Negeb, with his wife and all that he possessed, together with Lot. ²Now Abram was very rich in cattle, silver, and gold. ³And he proceeded by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been formerly, between Bethel and Ai, ⁴the site of the altar that he had built there at first; and there Abram invoked the LORD by name.

יג וַיַּעַל אַבְרָם מִמִּצְרַיִם הִוא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ
וְכָל־אֲשֵׁר־לוֹ וְלוֹט עַמּוֹ הַנְּגַבִּי׃² וְאַבְרָם
כָּבֵד מְאֹד בַּמִּקְנֵהוּ בַכֶּסֶף וּבַזָּהָב׃³ וַיֵּלֶךְ
לְמִסְעָיו מִנְּגֵב וְעַד־בֵּית־אֵל עַד־הַמָּקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה שָׁם אַהֲלָה אָהֳלוֹ בְּתַחֲלָה בֵּין
בֵּית־אֵל וּבֵין הָעֵי׃⁴ אֶל־מְקוֹם הַמִּזְבֵּחַ
אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה שָׁם בְּרֵאשִׁיטָה וַיִּקְרָא שָׁם
אַבְרָם בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה׃

⁵Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks

שְׁלִישִׁי⁵ וְגַם־לְלוֹט הָיָה אֶת־אַבְרָם הָיָה צֹאן

17. mighty plagues Their nature is not explained.

18. What is this you have done to me Pharaoh, suddenly made suspicious as a result of the affliction, must have interrogated Sarai, who admitted her true status. Abram makes no effort to justify his conduct.

20. put men in charge Ibn Ezra suggests that Pharaoh provided guards to accompany the pair across the border for their protection and as a sign of honor. Saadia maintains that it was to enforce their expulsion from the territory.

RETURN TO THE LAND (13:1–4)

1. went up See Comment to 12:10.

Lot Because he played no role in the events in Egypt, he has not been mentioned. He appears here because of the following episode.

2. Abram was very rich The divine blessing of 12:2 is beginning to be fulfilled.

silver, and gold It would not have been unusual for shepherds and herdsman in Canaan to possess precious metals. In time of famine, silver and gold were a significant source of security, being media of exchange.

3. by stages He moved from one watering place to another.

4. the site of the altar By returning to worship at the altar he had previously built (12:8), Abram renews his spiritual connection with the land.

THE SEPARATION OF LOT (vv. 5–13)

The affluence of Abram’s family becomes a threat to its tranquility.

5. Lot His family is an independent sub-

CHAPTER 13

2. Abram was very rich The Hebrew word

translated as “rich” (*kaved*) literally means “heavy, burdened.” This has prompted the comment that, for a righteous person, great

and herds and tents,⁶ so that the land could not support them staying together; for their possessions were so great that they could not remain together.⁷ And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and those of Lot's cattle.—The Canaanites and Perizzites were then dwelling in the land.—⁸ Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen.⁹ Is not the whole land before you? Let us separate: if you go north, I will go south; and if you go south, I will go north.”¹⁰ Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, all of it—this was before the LORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—all the way to Zoar, like the garden of the LORD, like the

וּבָקָר וְאֵהָלִים: ⁶ וְלֹא־נִשְׂא אֹתָם הָאָרֶץ לְשֹׁבֹת יַחְדָּו כִּי־הָיָה רְכוּשָׁם רָב וְלֹא יִכְלוּ לְשֹׁבֹת יַחְדָּו: ⁷ וַיְהִי־רִיב בֵּין רַעֲיֵי מִקְנֵה־אֲבָרָם וּבֵין רַעֲיֵי מִקְנֵה־לוֹט וַהֲפִנְעֵנִי וְהִפְרֹזִי אֲזוּ יֹשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ: ⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבָרָם אֶל־לוֹט אֵל־נָא תְהִי מְרִיבָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ וּבֵין רַעֲיֵי וּבֵין רַעֲיֵי כִּי־אֲנָשִׁים אַחִים אָנַחְנוּ: ⁹ הֲלֹא כָל־הָאָרֶץ לְפָנֶיךָ הֲפָרֹד נָא מֵעַלֵי אִם־הַשְּׂמָאל וְאִימְנָה וְאִם־הַיָּמִין וְאִשְׂמְאֵילָה: ¹⁰ וַיִּשְׂא־לוֹט אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת־כָּל־כַּפְּרַת הַיַּרְדֵּן כִּי כָלָה מִשְׁקָה לְפָנָי | שַׁחַת יְהוָה אֶת־סֹדֶם וְאֶת־עֲמֹרָה כַּגִּן־יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ

group within the larger clan, its wealth mostly in cattle.

6. the land Ecologic conditions, forcing a limit to the size of the herds, have begun to affect family harmony. Increasingly, there is friction over available pasturage and water.

7. between the herdsmen Abram acts quickly while the discord is still in its early stage and before it can embitter relationships among those involved.

The Canaanites Apparently, the natural resources would have been sufficient for two small pastoral nomadic clans. The area, however, already had a settled agricultural–urban community, which explains why both Abram and Lot have to leave the region.

Perizzites The name of a minor pre-Israelite people. It may mean “inhabitants of rural areas.”

8. Let there be no strife Although he is the older man and the uncle, Abram does not insist on priority of rights, but instead selflessly offers

his nephew first choice of grazing land and watering places.

9. north . . . south Literally, “left . . . right,” from the customary viewpoint of one facing the rising sun.

10. looked about him From Bethel, which is on a hill, he would have had a magnificent view of the Jordan Valley.

well watered Fed by streams and brooks, not depending on seasonal rainfall for its fertility.

this was before A parenthetic note to explain the contrast between this depiction of the verdant land and its rutted barrenness during later Israelite history.

all the way to Zoar This refers back to the first clause: “Lot looked about him.” Zoar was at the southern limit of the plain of Jordan (19:20–22).

like the garden of the LORD A perennially watered Eden.

wealth can sometimes be a burden, a challenge to use it wisely and responsibly.

6. Abram and Lot had been able to get along when they had relatively little. Was it prosperity that now caused conflict between them? Or was it Lot's growing recognition that he did not

share Abram's values (Pes. R.)? The text emphasizes Abram's magnanimity, which is even more striking if we take into account what we learn only later (15:2), that Abram was concerned with his posterity. Lot's departure might have felt like losing a surrogate son.

land of Egypt. ¹¹So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they parted from each other; ¹²Abram remained in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the Plain, pitching his tents near Sodom. ¹³Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against the LORD.

¹⁴And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him, “Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west, ¹⁵for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever. ¹⁶I will make your offspring as the dust of the

מִצְרַיִם בְּאֶכָּה צָעַר: ¹¹וַיִּבְחַר-לוֹ לוֹט אֶת כָּל-כַּפַּר הַיַּרְדֵּן וַיֵּסַע לוֹט מִקְדָּם וַיִּפְרְדּוּ אִישׁ מֵעַל אָחִיו: ¹²אַבְרָם יָשָׁב בְּאֶרֶץ-כְּנָעַן וְלוֹט יָשָׁב בְּעָרֵי הַכַּפָּר וַיֵּאָהֵל עַד-סְדוֹם: ¹³וְאֲנָשֵׁי סְדוֹם רָעִים וְחַטָּאִים לַיהוָה מְאֹד:

¹⁴וַיהוָה אָמַר אֶל-אַבְרָם אַחֲרֵי הַפְּרֹד-לוֹט מֵעַמּוֹ שָׂא נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה מִן-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה שָׂם צַפְנָה וְנִגְבָּה וְקִדְמָה וַיֹּמַח: ¹⁵כִּי אֶת-כָּל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה רֹאֶה לְךָ אֶתְנַנֶּה וְלוֹרְעָה עַד-עוֹלָם: ¹⁶וְשָׂמַתִּי אֶת-יִרְעָה כַּעֲפַר הָאָרֶץ

11. So Lot chose for himself He selects a setting of wealth and comfort, without concern for the nature of the morality of the inhabitants.

eastward From east of Bethel, where Abram was then encamped, as noted in 12:8 and 13:3.

Thus they parted Abram’s swift action ensures that the quarrel is settled without rancor.

12. in the land of Canaan This seems to reflect a tradition that the “cities of the Plain” lay outside the borders of Canaan (see Comment to 10:19). To what period this applies is unknown, but verses 13:14–15 revise this situation.

13. very wicked sinners This brief addition to the narrative offers the reason for the coming destruction, referred to in verse 10. It also carries with it a judgment on Lot’s character and prepares the reader for the events of chapter 19.

THE REAFFIRMATION OF THE BLESSINGS (vv. 14–17)

The earlier promise of national territory (12:7) is

now reaffirmed in different terms. This language reflects legal formulas current throughout the ancient Near East from the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C.E.

14. after Lot had parted His departure and Abram’s blessing are linked. Abram’s last tie with his father’s house is now severed and a new phase in his life begins.

15. all the land The future national territory will include the area in which Lot settles.

you and your offspring The blessings are invested solely in the patriarch and his direct lineal descendants. Abram is included, even though he, personally, cannot take possession. The language follows legal formulas used in Near Eastern royal land grant documents.

forever God gives the land to Abram and his descendants without any preconditions and in perpetuity.

16. as the dust of the earth An image of uncommon propagation and diffusion.

11. Lot journeyed eastward The Midrash reads the word for “eastward” (*mi-kedem*) as *mi-kadmono shel olam*, “away from the Ancient One.” Lot chose to live closer to Sodom and further from God (Gen. R. 41:7).

13. wicked sinners against the LORD In Jewish tradition, the sin of Sodom referred to here was inhospitality to strangers and the wayfarer. (See Ezek. 16:49, “this was the sin of your sister Sodom. . . . she did not support the poor

and the needy.”) To mistreat a stranger is to sin against God, the patron and protector of the most vulnerable.

16. as the dust of the earth The biblical promise is of great numbers and abundance. After the *Sho-ah*—when so many Jews were murdered and their bodies cremated—the Yiddish poet Yaakov Glatstein bitterly noted that God’s promise became fulfilled; Abraham’s descendants had become like the dust of the earth.

earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring too can be counted. ¹⁷Up, walk about the land, through its length and its breadth, for I give it to you.” ¹⁸And Abram moved his tent, and came to dwell at the terebinths of Mamre, which are in Hebron; and he built an altar there to the LORD.

אֲשֶׁר | אִם-יִוָּכַל אִישׁ לִמְנוֹת אֶת-עֲפָר
הָאָרֶץ וְגַם-יִרְעֶה יִמְנָה: ¹⁷ קוּם הַתְּהַלֵּךְ
בְּאָרֶץ לְאָרְבָּה וּלְרַחֲבָה כִּי לִךְ אֶתְנַנֶּה:
¹⁸ וַיֵּאֱהֶל אַבְרָם וַיָּבֵא וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֵלֵנִי
מִמְרָא אֲשֶׁר בְּחֶבְרוֹן וַיִּבְנֶה-שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ
לַיהוָה: פ

14 Now, when King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goiim ²made war on King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar, ³all the latter joined forces at the Valley of

יד וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם אֲמֶרְפֶּל מֶלֶךְ-שִׁנְעָר
אֲרִיּוֹךְ מֶלֶךְ אֵלְסָר כְּדָרְלְעֹמֶר מֶלֶךְ עֵילָם
וְתִדְעָל מֶלֶךְ גּוֹיִם: ² עָשׂוּ מִלְחָמָה אֶת-
בְּרַע מֶלֶךְ סֹדֶם וְאֶת-בְּרָשָׁע מֶלֶךְ עֲמֹרָה
שְׁנָאָב | מֶלֶךְ אַדְמָה וְשִׁמְאֵבֶר מֶלֶךְ צְבִיִּים
צְבוֹיִם וּמֶלֶךְ בְּלַע הַיֵּא-צֶעֶר: ³ כָּל-אֵלֶּה

17. walk about the land Ramban understood this traversing of the length and breadth of the land to be a symbolic act of legal acquisition. Egyptian and Hittite kings periodically would undertake a ceremonial walk around a field or a tour of the realm to symbolize renewal of their sovereignty over the land.

ABRAM'S DEPARTURE FOR HEBRON (v. 18)

18. the terebinths See Comment to 12:6.

Mamre According to 14:13,24, Mamre was a distinguished personage allied to Abram. In 23:19, Mamre is another name for the city of Hebron.

Hebron A strategically located city in the Judean heartland, about midway between Jerusalem to the north and Beer-sheba to the south. Situated about 3,050 feet (930 m) above sea level, Hebron is surrounded by a fertile countryside.

ABRAM'S RESCUE OF LOT (14:1–23)

This is the first biblical account of warfare. The narrative reveals a new side to Abram's character: He is a decisive, courageous, and skilled battle commander.

THE INVASION FROM THE EAST

(vv. 1–11)

1. Now, when Literally, “in the days of.”

Amraphel Once thought to be King Hamurabi, his identity is unknown.

Shinar This is a Hurrian name. See Comment to 10:10.

Arioch Corresponding to Arriyuk/Arriwuk, this name is mentioned in some ancient Near Eastern archives.

Ellasar Probably the city of Asshur, the mother city of the land of Assyria.

Chedorlaomer This name consists of two Elamite words that mean “the servant of [the

god] Lagamer.” It does not appear among the lists of about 40 known Elamite kings.

Elam See Comment to 10:22.

Tidal A Semitic rendering of the Hittite royal name Tudhalias borne by four kings. The first king lived in the 17th century B.C.E.

Goiim A “king of Goiim” is mentioned in Josh. 12:23. The place-name is otherwise unknown.

2. Zoar Each of the five cities has its own king; an instance of the classic city-state system that prevailed in Canaan before the Israelite conquest.

Bela This seems to be the earlier or alternative name of Zoar. In Gen. 36:32, Bela is the name of a king.

3. joined forces In the face of the common threat, the rebellious cities formed a five-city confederacy.

Siddim, now the Dead Sea. ⁴Twelve years they served Chedorlaomer, and in the thirteenth year they rebelled. ⁵In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and defeated the Rephaim at Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim at Ham, the Emim at Shaveh-kiriathaim, ⁶and the Horites in their hill country of Seir as far as El-paran, which is by the wilderness. ⁷On their way back they came to En-mishpat, which is Kadesh, and subdued all the territory of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who dwelt in Hazazon-tamar. ⁸Then

חִבְרוּ אֶל-עֶמְקֵי הַשְּׂדִיִּים הוּא יָם הַמֵּלַח׃
 4 שְׁתַּיִם עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה עָבְדוּ אֶת-
 כְּדֻרְלֹעַמֶר וּשְׁלֹשׁ-עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה מָרְדּוּ׃
 5 וּבְאַרְבַּע עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה בָּא כְּדֻרְלֹעַמֶר
 וְהַמְּלָכִים אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ וַיִּכּוּ אֶת-רְפָאִים
 בְּעֶשְׂתַּתִּת קַרְנַיִם וְאֶת-הַזּוּזִים בְּהֵם וְאֶת
 הָאִימִים בְּשֹׁה קְרִיתָיִם׃ 6 וְאֶת-הַחִרִי
 בְּהַרְרָם שְׁעִיר עַד אֵיל פֶּאֶרְן אֲשֶׁר עַל-
 הַמִּדְבָּר׃ 7 וַיָּשׁבוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-עֵין מִשְׁפַּט
 הוּא קָדֵשׁ וַיִּכּוּ אֶת-כָּל-שְׂדֵה הָעַמְלָקִי
 וְגַם אֶת-הָאֲמֹרִי הַיֹּשֵׁב בְּחֻצְצָן תְּמָר׃

the Valley of Siddim Mentioned again in verse 10 and nowhere else.

now the Dead Sea This remark implies that the valley, which clearly existed at the time of Abraham, was no longer in existence at the time of the narrator. Indeed, centuries after Abraham, the Valley of Siddim was submerged by the encroaching waters of the Dead Sea.

Dead Sea The Hebrew name means “salt sea.” The waters register the highest saline content of any body of water in the world: an average of 32 percent, compared to 3 percent in the oceans.

4. served The root of this word (עבד) occurs widely in Semitic languages in reference to the condition of being a vassal. See 2 Kings 18:7 and 24:1.

rebelled Rebellion by a vassal city or state began when it withheld payment of the annual tribute stipulated in the treaty between king and vassal.

5. the Rephaim Listed among the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land in Gen. 15:20, these people were regarded as a race of giants by the popular imagination. In the Canaanite religion, they are the spirits of dead heroes. By the time of the Exodus, they had all but disappeared (see Deut. 2:20 and 3:11).

Ashteroth-karnaim Two originally distinct but closely neighboring cities. The first was the ancient capital of Bashan, mentioned in Deut. 1:4 and Josh. 9:10. When its fortunes declined, Karnaim took its place as the capital of Bashan.

Ham This may be the city of Huma referred to in an ancient Egyptian document.

Emim Like the Rephaim, the Emim too were a race of giants, according to Deut. 2:10ff. They received their name, which might mean

“frightful,” from the Moabites who dispossessed them.

Shaveh-kiriathaim The first part of the name, which appears again only in Gen. 14:17, may mean “level, plane.” The latter part is a well-known city in the Moabite tableland and is identified with Khirbet el-Qureiye, about 6 miles (10 km) due west of Ma'daba.

6. The Horites Not easily identifiable with any of the known peoples in that region. Some scholars believe them to be the Hurrians.

Seir The name means “hairy, shaggy,” that is, covered with brush or forest. The hill country stretches southeast of the Dead Sea alongside the Arabah.

El-paran Paran is the name for the wilderness of the eastern Sinai Peninsula, but the identity of El-paran is uncertain. It may be another name for Elath, on the Gulf of Aqaba.

7. En-mishpat, which is Kadesh The full name of Kadesh is Kadesh-barnea, an important oasis on the southern border of Canaan, which served the Israelites as a leading base during the wilderness wanderings. It is identified with a group of springs 46 miles (75 km) south of Beer-sheba and 15 miles (25 km) south of Niz-zanah.

Amalekites A warlike nomadic tribe associated with the Edomites in 36:12. In later times the Amalekites became the hereditary enemy of Israel.

Amorites See Comment to 10:16.

Hazazon-tamar If Hazazon is the earlier name of Tamar or a nearby settlement, then the most likely location would be the strategically important site fortified by Solomon on the southern border of the land of Israel. It is best identified with Ain Husb, about 20 miles (32

the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar, went forth and engaged them in battle in the Valley of Siddim: ⁹King Chedorlaomer of Elam, King Tidal of Goiim, King Amraphel of Shinar, and King Arioch of Ellasar—four kings against those five.

¹⁰Now the Valley of Siddim was dotted with bitumen pits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, in their flight, threw themselves into them, while the rest escaped to the hill country. ¹¹[The invaders] seized all the wealth of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their provisions, and went their way. ¹²They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, and his possessions, and departed; for he had settled in Sodom.

¹³A fugitive brought the news to Abram the Hebrew, who was dwelling at the terebinths of Mamre the Amorite, kinsman of Eshkol and

וַיֵּצֵא מֶלֶךְ־סֹדֶם וּמֶלֶךְ עֲמֹרָה וּמֶלֶךְ אַדְמָה וּמֶלֶךְ צִבּוֹיִם וּמֶלֶךְ בֵּלַע הוּא־צֶעֶר וַיַּעֲרְבוּ אֹתָם מִלְחָמָה בְּעֵמֶק הַשְּׂדִימִים׃⁹ אֶת פְּדַרְלָעֹמֶר מֶלֶךְ עֵילָם וְתִדַּעַל מֶלֶךְ גּוֹיִם וְאַמְרָפֶל מֶלֶךְ שִׁנָּר וְאַרְיוֹךְ מֶלֶךְ אֵלְסָר אַרְבַּעָה מְלָכִים אֶת־הַחֲמִשָּׁה׃

וַעֲמַק הַשְּׂדִימִים בְּאֶרֶת בְּאֶרֶת חֲמֹר וַיִּנְסוּ מֶלֶךְ־סֹדֶם וְעֲמֹרָה וַיִּפְלוּ־שָׁמָּה וְהַנְּשָׂאִים הָרָה נָסוּ׃¹¹ וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־כָּל־רֶכֶשׁ סֹדֶם וְעֲמֹרָה וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲכָלָם וַיֵּלְכוּ׃¹² וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־לוֹט וְאֶת־רֶכְשׁוֹ בֶן־אָחִי אַבְרָם וַיֵּלְכוּ וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב בְּסֹדֶם׃¹³ וַיָּבֵא הַפְּלִיט וַיַּגֵּד לְאַבְרָם הָעֵבֶרִי וְהוּא שָׁכֵן בְּאֵלְנֵי מְמֵרָא הָאֲמֹרִי אָחִי אֲשָׁכַל וְאָחִי עֵנֶר וְהֵם בְּעֵלְי בְּרִית־

km) southwest of the Dead Sea, which is the most important highway junction in the northern Arabah.

9. four kings against . . . five Having disposed of any threat from the neighboring peoples, the invaders now engage the rebellious five cities, the main target of the campaign.

10. bitumen pits Bitumen and asphalt are native to the Dead Sea. Asphalt is found in heavy liquid form in the southern part of the sea.

ABRAM THE WARRIOR (vv. 12–16)

The city of Hebron, where Abram resided, lay outside the region of hostilities, and the patriarch had no reason to intervene—until the capture of his nephew Lot altered the situation.

13. Abram the Hebrew Israelites identify

themselves as “Hebrew” (*ivri*) when addressing foreigners. It is a term used by the latter when referring to Israelites. Many scholars relate the term to the nomadic mixed ethnic group called Hapiru in ancient Near Eastern documents. The origin and meaning of the term “*ivri*” is unknown.

Mamre . . . Eshkol and Aner The first name mentioned is also a place-name connected with Hebron in 13:18. The Hebrew word *eshkol* means “a cluster of grapes” and is the name of a wadi near Hebron (Num. 13:23). The meaning of Aner is unknown. Apparently, the three were heads of aristocratic families in Hebron.

Amorite . . . allies The Hebrew term *ba-alei b'rit* (“allies”) means “those bound by treaty.” Treaties regulating human relationships were a

CHAPTER 14

13. Abram the Hebrew The Midrash offers three possible explanations for this designation (Gen. R. 42:13). One connects the term “Hebrew” (*ivri*) with Eber, grandson of Noah, who

is mentioned in Gen. 10:24 and 11:4. Another derives it from the Hebrew word *eiver* (beyond), that is, “the one from beyond [the river Euphrates].” The third alludes to Abram's non-conformism: “All the world was on one side (*eiver*) and he on the other side.”

Aner, these being Abram's allies. ¹⁴When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he mustered his retainers, born into his household, numbering three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. ¹⁵At night, he and his servants deployed against them and defeated them; and he pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. ¹⁶He brought back all the possessions; he also brought back his kinsman Lot and his possessions, and the women and the rest of the people.

¹⁷When he returned from defeating Chedorlaomer and the kings with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of

אַבְרָם: ¹⁴וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם כִּי נִשְׁבָּה אָחִיו וַיִּרְק אֶת־חַנִּיכָיו וַיְלִידֵי בֵיתוֹ שְׁמֹנֶה עָשָׂר וּשְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת וַיִּרְדֹּף עַד־דָּן: ¹⁵וַיַּחֲלֶק עֲלֵיהֶם | לַיְלָה הוּא וְעַבְדָּיו וַיִּבְּסוּ וַיִּרְדְּפֵם עַד־חֹבָה אֲשֶׁר מִשְׁמָאל לְדַמְשֶׁק: ¹⁶וַיָּשֶׁב אֶת כָּל־הָרֶכֶשׁ וְגַם אֶת־לוֹט אָחִיו וְרֶכְשׁוֹ הַשֵּׁיב וְגַם אֶת־הַנְּשִׁים וְאֶת־הָעַם:

¹⁷וַיֵּצֵא מֶלֶךְ־סוּדֹם לִקְרָאתוֹ אַחֲרֵי שׁוּבוֹ מִהַכּוֹת אֶת־כְּדֹר־לְעֹמֵר וְאֶת־הַמְּלָכִים אֲשֶׁר אָתּוֹ אֶל־עַמְקָ שׁוּהָ הוּא עַמְקָ

common feature of the ancient Near East. The treaty entered into by Abram and the three Amorites was one among equals and involved mutual military obligations. The attack on their own kin gave Abram's allies additional incentive to support him.

14. When Abram heard Although Lot had separated himself from his uncle, the ties of kinship remained intact.

retainers, born into his household These were slaves born of slaves, regarded as more reliable than purchased slaves.

three hundred and eighteen It is unclear if this is meant to be taken literally or as a symbolic number. From early correspondence between governors of the city-states of Canaan and Pharaoh, it appears that the number constituted a powerful force.

Dan The city at the northern extremity of the land of Israel (see Judg. 20:1 and 1 Sam. 3:20). It is identified with Tell Dan (Tell el-Qadi), about 4 miles (6.4 km) west of Baniyas, at the foot of Mount Hermon on the international trade route.

15. and defeated them Abram had the ad-

vantages of fresh troops and a night engagement against a battle-weary, depleted enemy. By dividing his forces and attacking from two sides, he achieved tactical surprise and neutralized the numerical superiority of his foe.

Hobah An unidentified site north of Damascus.

17. the king of Sodom came out It took several weeks for Abram's troops to reach beyond Damascus and then return. In the meantime, the ruler of Sodom has regained his kingdom and now comes out to meet the victorious patriarch. Although five cities were involved in the alliance, this king alone is mentioned because the rescue of Lot, who lived in Sodom, is the focal point of the narrative and because Sodom was the leader of the alliance and is always listed first (Gen. 14:2; 10:19).

the Valley of Shaveh Also named "the Valley of the King" (see 2 Sam. 18:18). It may be the broad, level valley formed by the junction of the Valley of Ben-hinnom, west and south of Jerusalem, with the Kidron Valley on the east side.

The later notion of Gehenna derives its name from the Valley of Hinnom (*Gei ben Hinnom*), a

14. This verse gives us another view of Abraham, the warrior who is prepared to do battle to redeem his kin. The redemption of captives (*pidyon sh'vuyim*) in later centuries became a prime responsibility taken on by the Jewish community, which ransomed Jews who had been captured by pirates, imprisoned, or en-

slaved. Some authorities were reluctant, fearful that this would encourage the kidnaping of Jews for ransom. Still, the basic practice has continued from earliest times to the efforts on behalf of Russian Jews and Ethiopian Jews in more recent times.

Shaveh, which is the Valley of the King. ¹⁸And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High.

¹⁹He blessed him, saying,

“Blessed be Abram of God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.

²⁰And blessed be God Most High,

Who has delivered your foes into your
hand.”

And [Abram] gave him a tenth of every-
thing.

²¹Then the king of Sodom said to Abram,
“Give me the persons, and take the possessions
for yourself.” ²²But Abram said to the king of
Sodom, “I swear to the LORD, God Most High,

הַמֶּלֶךְ: ¹⁸וּמִלְכִי־צֶדֶק מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם הוֹצִיא
לֶחֶם וַיֵּינ וְהוּא כֹהֵן לֵאלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן:
¹⁹וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר

בָּרוּךְ אֱבָרָם לֵאלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן

קִנְהַ שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

²⁰וּבְרוּךְ אֱלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן

אֲשֶׁר־מָגֵן צַרִּיף בְּיָדָךְ

וַיִּתֶן־לוֹ מֵעֵשֶׂר מִכָּל:

²¹וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ־סֹדֹם אֶל־אֲבָרָם תֶּן־לִי חַמִּישֵׁי

הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְהִרְבֵּשׁ קַח־לָךְ: ²²וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבָרָם
אֶל־מֶלֶךְ סֹדֹם הֲרִימֹתִי יָדִי אֶל־יְהוָה אֵל

narrow gorge southeast of Jerusalem where idolatrous Israelites offered their children to Moloch (see 2 Kings 23:10). King Josiah defiled it and converted it into a dung heap, where garbage was burned. At about the same time, Jeremiah prophesied that the corpses of many of Israel's warriors would be left unburied there after they were slain by an invading army (Jer. 7:30–34).

THE MELCHIZEDEK EPISODE (vv. 18–20)

18. Salem Named after the Canaanite god Shalem, it is identified along with Zion (in Ps. 76:3) as the location of the Temple.

priest It is not known whether this fusion of royal and priestly offices was characteristic of Canaanite city-states or was peculiar to Salem. In ancient Israel, the two institutions were separate from the beginning (see 1 Sam. 2:35).

God Most High Hebrew: *el elyon*. In most Semitic languages, *el* means “god” or is a deity's proper name; in the Bible, it refers to the one God. The noun *elyon*, from the root עלה (ascend), expresses absolute transcendence.

19. He blessed him He invoked God's blessing on the patriarch.

Creator of heaven and earth This formula is an attested description of the deity in Phoenician sources. It is here adapted to describe the God of Israel.

20. gave him a tenth Abram gives Melchizedek a tithe of all the spoils of war. A tithe payable to the king is known from Canaanite documents and is listed among the prerogatives of Near Eastern kingship in 1 Sam. 8:15,17.

ABRAM AND THE KING OF SODOM

(vv. 21–24)

Having discharged his duty to his kinsman and paid his dues to the priest-king, the patriarch now wishes to have nothing more to do with Sodom and rejects any idea of personal gain.

22. I swear Literally, “I lift up my hand,” the universal gesture that accompanies oath taking.

23. a thread or a sandal strap That is, “from a thin to a thick cord,” a figure of speech

18. It is not clear exactly who Melchizedek is. The name may be taken to mean “righteous king,” prompting the Midrash to suggest that living in Salem (Jerusalem) inspired him to be a righteous ruler (Gen. R. 43:6). Soloveitchik sees him as having been impressed not only by Abraham's lofty ideals but by his willingness to fight for them. The commentary *Or Ha-Ḥayyim* sets

the generosity of Melchizedek in contrast to the cunning greed of the king of Sodom in v. 21.

21. The offer of the king of Sodom, translated literally, was “give me the soul(s) and take the property for yourself.” This has been the bargain offered to the Jewish people in many countries of our dispersion: Become prosperous here but at the cost of your soul.

Creator of heaven and earth: ²³I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, 'It is I who made Abram rich.' ²⁴For me, nothing but what my servants have used up; as for the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre—let them take their share.”

עֲלִיּוֹן קִנְיָה שָׁמַיִם וְאָרֶץ: ²³ אִם־מְחוּטָּ וְעַד שְׁרוּף־נֶעַל וְאִם־אֶקַּח מִכָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לְךָ וְלֹא תֹאמַר אֲנִי הִעֲשֵׂרְתִּי אֶת־אֲבִרָם: ²⁴ בְּלִעְדֵי רַק אֲשֶׁר אָכְלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וְחֵלֶק הַאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר הָלְכוּ אִתִּי עִנְרֵי אֲשָׁפֵל וּמִמָּרָא הֵם יִקְחוּ חֵלְקָם: ס

15 Some time later, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision. He said, “Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.”
²But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what can You

טו אַחֲרַי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־אֲבִרָם בְּמַחְזָה לֵאמֹר אֶל־תִּירָא אֲבִרָם אֲנִכִּי מִגֵּן לְךָ שְׂכָרְךָ הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד: וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִרָם אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה מַה־תִּתֶּנְ לִי²

used to express totality. It means “not even the smallest thing.” A similar expression in ancient Aramaic, used in the context of treaties, is “from a straw to a string.”
It is I who made Abram rich Abram did not want it to appear that he had acted for mercenary reasons. Because part of the spoil had origin-

ally come from Sodom (Gen. 14:11), he did not want to benefit from tainted possessions.
24. my servants The Hebrew term here (*n'arim*) literally means “youths” and probably is used for “warriors.” The word, borrowed from Canaanite, also appears in ancient Egyptian in the sense of “elite corps.”

THE COVENANT BETWEEN THE PIECES (15:1–21)

THE PROMISE OF OFFSPRING (vv. 1–6)

1. Some time later The literal meaning of the Hebrew is “after these things.” Here it means, very soon after the preceding events.
Fear not The patriarch is deeply concerned about the possibility of revenge by the defeated kings.
I am a shield This poetic phrase means “I am your protection.”
Your reward Abram had refused to partake of the spoils of war (14:22ff.). The rejected ma-

terial reward will be vastly exceeded by a compensation of a different kind.
2. Abram said Abram speaks to God for the first time.
O Lord God This Hebrew divine title is read aloud as *Adonai Elohim*. Rarely found in the Torah, it is used in a context of grievance, prayer, or request.
what can You give me No material reward can equal the blessing of having children.
I shall die Literally, “I shall go,” from the Hebrew meaning “to walk, go” (הלך). In Ak-

CHAPTER 15

In a mysterious vision, God promises Abraham that, after several generations of adversity, his descendants will return to claim as their own the land through which he had passed as a wayfarer. This promise is cast as a covenant between God and Abraham. A covenant implies

obligations on the part of both parties. God promises a special destiny for Abraham’s descendants even as Abraham promises loyalty and obedience to God.
1. I am a shield to you We echo these words in the opening blessing of the Amidah, praising God as *magen Avraham*, “Abraham’s shield,” or protector.

give me, seeing that I shall die childless, and the one in charge of my household is Dammesek Eliezer!"³ Abram said further, "Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir."⁴ The word of the LORD came to him in reply, "That one shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue shall be your heir."⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He added, "So shall your offspring be."⁶ And because he put his trust in the LORD, He reckoned it to his merit.

⁷Then He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to

וְאֶנְכִי הוֹלֵךְ עִרְיָי וּבְדָמֶשֶׁק בֵּיתִי הוּא
דְּמֶשֶׁק אֲלִיעֶזֶר: ³ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבָרָם הֲנֵן לִי
לֹא נָתַתָּה זָרַע וְהִנֵּה בְּיָדַי יוֹרֵשׁ
אֹתִי: ⁴ וְהִנֵּה דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר לֹא
יִירָשְׁךָ זֶה כִּי־אִם אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִמְעֶיךָ הוּא
יִירָשְׁךָ: ⁵ וַיּוֹצֵא אֹתוֹ הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר
הַבִּטְּנָא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וּסְפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם־
תּוּכַל לְסַפֵּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה
זְרַעְךָ: ⁶ וְהֵאֱמַן בְּיַהוָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ
צְדָקָה:

⁷ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ
מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לְתֵת לְךָ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת

kadian, too, "alaku" is used as a euphemism for dying.

3. will be my heir In the ancient Near East, a servant who performed filial duties for a childless couple—paying them proper respect, maintaining their household, taking care of their physical needs and comforts in their old age—could become their adopted heir. The patriarch, despairing of having children, had decided to adopt his servant.

5. Look toward heaven The visual experience—a real or dream revelation—reinforces the oral promise.

6. he put his trust in the LORD The encounter with God, which had begun on a note of fear and depression, closes with a firm statement of Abram's faith in the LORD (see Hab. 2:4).

He reckoned it to his merit The subject of the verb is God; "it" refers to Abram's act of

faith, which made him worthy of God's reward, about to be secured through a covenant. The Hebrew word *tz'dakah* (righteousness) can also have the sense of "merit."

THE PROMISE OF NATIONAL TERRITORY (vv. 7–21)

7. I am the LORD This first use of the solemn formula of self-identification emphasizes the unimpeachable authority behind the forthcoming declaration. The style "I am so-and-so" is known from Hittite and Akkadian treaties and Canaanite royal proclamations.

Ur of the Chaldeans See Comments to 11:28,31.

to assign this land God had said nothing to Abram in 12:1–3 about a gift of land, but apparently that was the original intent, unrevealed at the time.

5. count the stars From an earth-bound perspective, a star looks tiny. From the viewpoint of heaven, each star is a world by itself. The descendants of Abraham seem insignificant in terms of numbers and power, but each one is an indispensable part of God's plan (Hayyim of Tzantz). Each individual Jew, each individual human being, is a world by himself or herself.

6. An enigmatic verse. According to Moshe of Kobrin, Abraham felt that God had done him a favor, an act of *tz'dakah*, by giving him the capacity to have faith even when circumstances seemed bleak. Yaakov of Rakov understands the verse to mean instead that God cred-

ited Abraham with an act of *tz'dakah*, teaching people that there is a purpose to life, that life can be redeemed from futility. Or we might understand Abraham's putting "his trust in the LORD" to mean that he gave God the benefit of the doubt, believing not only in God's existence but in God's reliability, even when circumstances might have led him to think otherwise. The only thing we can do for God, the only thing for which God depends on us, is to hold on to our faith even when things do not go our way. This is Abraham's (and our) *tz'dakah* (favor) to God.

7. who brought you out from Ur The language anticipates the first pronouncement at

assign this land to you as a possession.”⁸ And he said, “O Lord God, how shall I know that I am to possess it?”⁹ He answered, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young bird.”¹⁰ He brought Him all these and cut them in two, placing each half opposite the other; but he did not cut up the bird.¹¹ Birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.¹² As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended upon him.¹³ And He said to Abram, “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years;¹⁴ but I will execute judgment

לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: ⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה בְּמָה אֲדַע
כִּי אֵרִשְׁנָה: ⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו קְחָה לִּי עֵגְלָה
מְשֻׁלֶּשֶׁת וְעֵז מְשֻׁלֶּשֶׁת וְאַיִל מְשֻׁלֶּשׁ וְתֹר
וְגֹזֵל: ¹⁰ וַיִּקַּח-לוֹ אֶת-כָּל-אֵלֶּה וַיְבַתֵּר
אֹתָם בַּתְּוֹךְ וַיִּתֵּן אִישׁ-בְּתָרוֹ לְקִרְיַת
רַעְהוּ וְאֶת-הַצֶּפֶר לֹא בָתַר: ¹¹ וַיֵּרֶד
הָעֵיט עַל-הַפְּגָרִים וַיֵּשֶׁב אֹתָם אַבְרָם:
וַיְהִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לָבוֹא וְתַרְדֵּמָה נָפְלָה
עַל-אַבְרָם וְהָנָה אֵימָה חֹשֶׁכָה גְדֹלָה
נִפְלֶתָ עָלָיו: ¹³ וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם יָדַע תִּדַע
כִּי-יָגֵר | יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם
וְעֲבָדִים וְעֲנֹו אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה:
¹⁴ וְגַם אֶת-הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָן אֲנֹכִי

8. how shall I know Abram, speaking not as an individual but as the personification of the future nation, asks: By what process will that nation take possession of its promised land?

9. He answered In response, God enters into a covenant with the patriarch. The covenant is modeled after the royal land-grant treaty common in the ancient Near East, by which a king bestowed a gift of land on an individual or vassal as a reward for loyal service. But here, for the first time in the history of religions, it is God who initiates the contract.

a three-year-old An animal of three years was considered to be full grown and most preferable for a religious rite.

a young bird Probably a pigeon.

10. cut them in two The cutting of the animals in Mesopotamian sources is a warning that the violator of the covenant treaty would be sliced in half, as criminals were.

the bird A collective noun referring to both birds. The fact that the birds were not cut in two may be due solely to their small size.

11. Birds of prey Carrion-eating falcons (see Isa. 18:6 and Ezek. 39:4).

12. a deep sleep An abnormal stupor is associated with the dread aroused by the awareness of the presence of God (see Job 4:13ff., 33:15ff).

13. Know well God's response to Abram's query in Gen. 15:8.

a land not theirs That is, a foreign land, other than the land of Israel.

four hundred years This is probably a round number. It does not accord with the “four generations” of verse 16, and it is not identical with the 430-year figure given in Exod. 12:40 as the entire period of time spent in Egypt.

14. I will execute judgment This refers to the plagues (see Exod. 6:6, 7:4, 12:12).

Sinai, “I am the LORD who brought you out of Egypt.”

8. Abraham is the first person in the Bible to call God *Adonai*, “my Lord,” the first person to understand that religion asks us not so much to believe in God as to serve God (BT Ber. 7a).

how shall I know that I am to possess it? Does this indicate a lack of faith on Abraham's

part, two verses after he is described as putting his faith in God? Perhaps the earlier verse refers to Abraham's commitment to faith even without proof, and this verse is Abraham's plea: “I believe; can I know that my belief is reasonable and not merely wishful thinking? I believe but, I will continue to question and challenge, out of the context of my belief.”

on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth. ¹⁵As for you,

You shall go to your fathers in peace;

You shall be buried at a ripe old age.

¹⁶And they shall return here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

¹⁷When the sun set and it was very dark, there appeared a smoking oven, and a flaming torch which passed between those pieces. ¹⁸On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates: ¹⁹the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

וְאַחֲרֵיכֵן יֵצְאוּ בְרַכְשׁ גָּדוֹל: ¹⁵ וְאַתָּה

תָּבוֹא אֶל-אַבְתֶּיךָ בְּשָׁלוֹם

תִּקְבֹּר בְּשִׂיבָה טוֹבָה:

וְדוֹר רְבִיעִי יָשׁוּבוּ הֵנָּה כִּי לֹא-שָׁלַם עֲוֹן

הָאֱמֹרִי עַד-הֵנָּה:

¹⁷ וַיְהִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בָּאָה וְעַלְטָה הָיָה וְהַיָּה

תָּנוּר עָשָׂן וּלְפִיד אֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָבַר בֵּין

הַגִּזְרִים הָאֵלֶּה: ¹⁸ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כָּרַת

יְהוָה אֶת-אַבְרָם בְּרִית לֵאמֹר לְזֶרְעֶךָ

נִתְּתִי אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת מִנְהַר מִצְרַיִם

עַד-הַנְּהָר הַגָּדֹל נְהַר-פְּרָת: ¹⁹ אֶת-הַקֵּינִי

וְאֶת-הַקְּנִזִּי וְאֶת הַקְּדֹמֹנִי: ²⁰ וְאֶת-הַחִתִּי

וְאֶת-הַפְּרִזִּי וְאֶת-הַרְפָּאִים: ²¹ וְאֶת-

הָאֱמֹרִי וְאֶת-הַפְּנִעִי וְאֶת-הַגִּרְגָּשִׁי וְאֶת-

הַיְבוּסִי: ט

great wealth This was either restitution for the decades of slave labor or in accordance with the law in Deut. 15:13ff. to the effect that an emancipated slave must be liberally provisioned by the master.

15. You shall go to your fathers A term for dying that is unique within the Hebrew Bible. It originates from the belief that one is reunited with one's ancestors after death.

16. the fourth generation Exod. 6:16–20 presents the same tradition of “four generations” between Levi and Moses. Another tradition, in Gen. 15:13, refers to the bondage as lasting 400 years.

the iniquity of the Amorites The local peoples, here called “Amorites,” have violated the universal moral law, thereby dooming themselves by their own corruption. But the limit of God's tolerance of evil—four generations—has not yet been reached, and the Israelites must wait until the time is ripe.

COMPLETING THE COVENANT

(vv. 18–21)

God, the principal party to the covenant, passes between the pieces. As in a legal document, the

nature of the instrument of transfer is defined, its promissory clause is specified as concerning a land grant, and the extent of the territory involved is delineated.

18. a covenant See Comment to 6:18.

the river of Egypt Hebrew: *nabar*. This is not the Nile, called *y'or* in the Bible, but its most easterly arm, which emptied into Lake Sirbonis near Pelusium not far from Port Said. The southwestern border of Canaan is the “Wadi (Hebrew, *nahal*) of Egypt,” which is identified with Wadi Al 'Arish and marks the boundary between the settled land and the Sinai desert.

the great river The boundaries given here, which include Tyre-Sidon, Lebanon, and Byblos, are a generalized ideal.

19. Kenites A seminomadic tribe of metal workers in the southern region of the land.

Kenizzites These people had close ties with the Edomites and were later absorbed into the tribe of Judah.

Kadmonites They may be the Kedemites (*b'nei kedem*) or “easterners,” a general term for the tribes that roamed the desert from Aram in the north down to the Red Sea. They were famous for their wisdom.

16 Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. ²And Sarai said to Abram, “Look, the LORD has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her.” And Abram heeded Sarai’s request. ³So Sarai, Abram’s wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian—after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years—and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine. ⁴He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem. ⁵And Sarai said to Abram, “The wrong done me is your

טז וְשָׂרַי אֵשֶׁת אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לוֹ וְלֹא שָׁפְחָה מִצְרַיִת וְשָׂמָה הָגָר: ²וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל-אַבְרָם הִנֵּה-נָא עֲצָרְנִי יְהוָה מִלֵּדֶת בְּאִנָּא אֶל-שָׁפְחָתִי אוּלַי אֲבִנָּה מִמֶּנָּה וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרַי: ³וַתִּקַּח שָׂרַי אֵשֶׁת-אַבְרָם אֶת-הָגָר הַמִּצְרַיִת שָׁפְחָתָהּ מִמֶּנָּה עֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים לְשֵׁבֶת אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַתִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָם אִשָּׁה לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה: ⁴וַיְבִיא אֶל-הָגָר וַתַּהַר וַתֵּרָא פִּי הָרְתָהּ וַתִּקַּח גְּבִרְתָּהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ: ⁵וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל-אַבְרָם חָמְסִי עָלֶיךָ אָנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שָׁפְחָתִי

SARAH, HAGAR, AND THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL (16:1–16)

CONCUBINAGE (vv. 1–6)

It has been 10 years since Abram parted from his father in Haran (v. 3). Throughout that decade his wife, Sarai, endured her infertility in silence. Now, to present Abram with a son, she resorts to concubinage.

1. She had Apparently, the maid attended primarily to the personal needs of her mistress and was not the common property of husband and wife.

Hagar The name, related to the Arabic word *hajara*, “to flee,” may mean “fugitive.” A people called Hagrites, mentioned in Ps. 83:7 and 1 Chron. 5:10,19ff., were pastoralists who roamed the Syro-Arabian desert.

2. kept me from bearing In ancient times

the woman, not the man, was regarded as the source of barrenness, although God was seen as its ultimate cause.

through her In the ancient Near East, it was customary for an infertile wife to provide her husband with a concubine to bear children.

Abram heeded Ramban points out that Abram took Hagar only in response to his wife’s urging.

4. her mistress was lowered in her esteem

This is a natural consequence of a situation in which barrenness is regarded as a disgrace and the social position of the wife is diminished.

5. is your fault By giving Hagar to Abram, Sarai has relinquished her exclusive authority over her. It is now Abram’s responsibility to control her behavior.

CHAPTER 16

1. In a world with few avenues of fulfilment open to women except as wives and mothers, infertility was an especially cruel and frustrating fate. Even today, in a world of wider possibilities, many women who yearn to be mothers and have difficulty conceiving and bearing children feel the frustration articulated in the Torah

by Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. In the Torah, God responds to their cries by granting them the experience of motherhood. In the modern world, God’s response can be found sometimes in the marvels of medical technology and sometimes in the pursuit of other paths to personal fulfilment and the nourishing of others’ lives.

5. The wrong done me is your fault “You heard me insulted and did not speak up on my

HALAKHAH L’MA’ASEH

16:1–2 borne him no children Jewish law is divided on whether surrogate motherhood is appropriate. The CJLS has approved two responsa on surrogate motherhood—one citing this passage in support of surrogacy, the other citing this passage to caution against relying on surrogacy as a response to infertility.

fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The LORD decide between you and me!"⁶ Abram said to Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her.

⁷An angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur,⁸ and said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" And she said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai."

⁹And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment."¹⁰ And the angel of the LORD said to her,

"I will greatly increase your offspring,
And they shall be too many to count."

¹¹The angel of the LORD said to her further,
"Behold, you are with child
And shall bear a son;

בְּחִיקְךָ וַתֵּרָא כִּי הִרְתָּה וְאִקְל בְּעֵינֶיהָ
יִשְׁפֹּט יְהוָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ*⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם
אֶל-שָׂרַי הֲנֵה שִׁפְחָתְךָ בְּיָדְךָ עֲשִׂי-לָהּ
הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיהָ וַתַּעַנֶּה שָׂרַי וַתִּבְרַח
מִפְּנֵיהָ:

⁷וַיִּמְצָאָהּ מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה עַל-עֵין הַפְּמִים
בְּמִדְבַר עַל-הָעֵין בְּדֶרֶךְ שׁוּר:⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר
הַגֵּר שִׁפְחַת שָׂרַי אֵי-מִזֶּה בָאת וְאַנָּה
תֵּלְכִי וַתֹּאמֶר מִפְּנֵי שָׂרַי גְּבַרְתִּי אֲנֹכִי
בְּרַחַת:

⁹וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה שׁוּבִי אֶל-
גְּבַרְתְּךָ וְהִתְעַנִּי תַּחַת יְדֶיהָ:¹⁰ וַיֹּאמֶר
לָהּ מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה

הֲרִבָּה אֲרִבָּה אֶת-זַרְעֶךָ
וְלֹא יִסְפָּר מִרְבּוֹ:
וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה

הִנֵּנְךָ הָרָה
וַיִּלְדֶּת בְּנִין

v. 5. נקוד על י' בתראה

6. Sarai treated her harshly The Laws of Hammurabi (numbers 146–147) deal with the problem of the female slave-concubine who bears children and claims equality with her mistress. They prescribe that the insolent concubine be reduced to slave status and again bear the slave mark. The Hebrew verb used here (*vatt'anneha*) implies that Sarai subjected Hagar to physical and psychological abuse and carries with it the nuance of a negative judgment of her actions. Ramban states: "The matriarch sinned by such maltreatment, and Abraham too by permitting it."

HAGAR AND THE ANGEL (vv. 7–14)

God appears to the lowly Egyptian maidservant, bringing her a message of hope and comfort. The narrator's sympathies are clearly with Hagar.

7. An angel of the LORD This is the first appearance of an angel in biblical literature.

on the road to Shur Hagar fled in the direction of her native land. Shur is elsewhere described as being "close to Egypt" (Gen. 25:18).

8. where have you come from A gentle way of opening a conversation. The angel knows who she is; this encounter with Hagar is deliberate.

10. the angel of the LORD said This is the first of several announcements by a divine messenger predicting the birth and destiny of one who is given a special role in God's design of history (see 25:23; Judg. 13:3).

increase your offspring Ishmael is to become the father of 12 tribes and a great nation. The fulfillment of this promise is recorded in Gen. 25:12–18.

behalf (Gen. R. 45:5). When Hagar was rude to me, you did not take my side." Sarah, quite humanly, blames Abraham, although the idea was hers to begin with.

8. Hagar, ... where have you come from, and where are you going? This is the first time in the Torah since the Garden of Eden that God speaks to a woman.

You shall call him Ishmael,
 For the LORD has paid heed to your suffering.
 12He shall be a wild ass of a man;
 His hand against everyone,
 And everyone's hand against him;
 He shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen.”

13And she called the LORD who spoke to her, “You Are El-roi,” by which she meant, “Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!” 14Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it is between Kadesh and Bered.—15Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave the son that Hagar bore him the name Ishmael. 16Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

וְקָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל
 כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל־עֲנִיָּהּ׃
 12וְהוּא יִהְיֶה פָּרָא אָדָם
 יָדוֹ בְּכָל
 וְיָד כָּל בּוֹ
 וְעַל־פְּנֵי כָל־אֲחָיו יִשְׁכֵּן׃

וְתִקְרָא שֵׁם־יְהוָה הַדְּבָר אֲלֶיהָ אֲתָה
 אֶל יְרָאִי כִּי אָמְרָה הַגֵּם הַלֵּם רְאִיתִי
 אַחֲרַי רְאִי׃ 14עַל־כֵּן קָרָא לְבְאֵר בְּאֵר
 לַחַי רְאִי הִנֵּה בֵּין־קָדֵשׁ וּבֵין בְּרֵד׃
 15וְתִלְדַּת הָגָר לְאַבְרָם בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָם
 שֵׁם־בְּנוֹ אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָהּ הָגָר יִשְׁמָעֵאל׃
 16וְאַבְרָם בֶּן־שְׁמֹנִים שָׁנָה וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים
 בְּלִדְת־הָגָר אֶת־יִשְׁמָעֵאל לְאַבְרָם׃ ט

11. Ishmael The name (literally, “God hears”) is here interpreted as “God has paid heed to your suffering.”

12. a wild ass of a man Hagar, the slave woman subjected to the cruel discipline of her mistress, will produce a people free and undisciplined. They are to be among people as the wild ass is among beasts: sturdy, fearless, fleet-footed, like the Syrian onager (Hebrew, *pere*), who roams the wilderness and is almost impossible to domesticate.

His hand against everyone A prediction reflecting the unremitting tension between the sedentary and the nomadic populations in the Near East.

alongside of all his kinsmen Better: “in confrontation with his kinsmen.”

13. she called the LORD Literally, “she called the name of YHVH.” The name—from the Hebrew root meaning “to be”—is inextricably bound up with existence. Hagar gives expres-

sion to her personal discovery by referring to God with a name that recalls the particular aspect of divine providence that she has experienced. Hagar is the only individual in the Bible (male or female) who gives God a name.

El-roi Literally, “God of seeing,” that is, the all-seeing God. Also, “God of my seeing,” that is, whom I have seen; and “God who sees me.” The several meanings are to be apprehended simultaneously.

Have I not gone on seeing Hagar is spiritually stirred by her revelatory experience. She has become conscious of God’s concern for the downtrodden.

14. Beer-lahai-roi This is either a newly coined name or the reinterpretation of an old one whose original meaning is unknown.

15. Hagar bore a son The narrative assumes that Hagar returned to Sarai, as bidden. Significantly, it is Abram who named the child, not Hagar, thus implying that he legitimized him.

I am running away from my mistress Hagar can tell the angel only what she is running from. She has no destination in mind, she only wants to escape harsh treatment.

13. El-roi “The God who sees me.” God is a God who notices the oppressed, the needy, the marginalized, those of whom human society takes no notice.

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless. ²I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous.”

³Abram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, ⁴“As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall

יז וַיְהִי אֲבָרָם בְּיָמָיו שְׁנָה וַתֵּשַׁע
שָׁנִים וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אֲבָרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
אֲנִי-אֵל שָׁדַי הַתְּהֵלֶךְ לִפְנֵי וְהָיָה תָמִים:
וְאֶתְנַה בְּרִיתִי בֵינִי וּבֵינְךָ וְאַרְבָּה אוֹתָךְ²
בְּמֵאד מְאֹד:

³וַיִּפֹּל אֲבָרָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיְדַבֵּר אֲתוֹ אֱלֹהִים
לֵאמֹר: ⁴אֲנִי הִנֵּה בְרִיתִי אֶתְךָ וְהָיִיתָ
לְאָב הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם: ⁵וְלֹא-יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת-
שְׁמֶךָ אֲבָרָם וְהָיָה שְׁמֶךָ אֲבְרָהָם כִּי אֲב-

THE COVENANT IN THE FLESH (17:1–27)

After 13 years, God’s promises still remain unfulfilled. The narrator, focusing on events that bear on the destiny of the nation yet to be born, tells us nothing about Abram’s activities during that period. Suddenly Abram experiences a series of divine communications.

THE CHANGE OF ABRAM’S NAME (vv. 1–8)

1. the Lord This sole appearance of the name *YHVH* in this chapter (*Elohim* is used nine times) is intended to link it with the name “El Shaddai” (see Exod. 6:2ff.). The use of the name *YHVH* also connects it to the covenant of Gen. 15 made by God under that name.

El Shaddai The meaning of this name of God remains unknown.

Walk in My ways Literally, “Walk before Me.” The corresponding Akkadian phrase is a technical term for absolute loyalty to a king. In

the Bible, to “walk before God” means to condition one’s entire range of experience by the awareness of God’s presence.

and be blameless This is a near synonym of the preceding clause.

3. threw himself on his face An expression of awe and submission in the presence of the LORD.

4. father of a multitude of nations The Edomites, Ishmaelites, Midianites, and several other peoples descended from Abraham, according to the genealogical lists of chapters 25 and 36. The phrase may also have a more universal meaning in that a segment of humanity much larger than those alluded to regards Abraham as its spiritual father.

5. your name In the Bible a change of name is of major significance. It symbolizes the transformation of character and destiny. See Comment to 1:5.

CHAPTER 17

1. El Shaddai The Midrash understands this name of God to mean: “the God who says, ‘Dai (Enough)!’” The people of the world have gone on long enough acting like children. It is time to demand righteous behavior of them, to proclaim that certain things are permitted and others forbidden (Tanḥ. B. 25). God’s covenant of circumcision marks Abraham as committed to teaching humanity what the God-ordained life can mean.

walk in My ways Let all your actions be done in the knowledge that you do them in My presence.

blameless In the King James translation, the word translated here as “blameless” (*tamim*) is rendered “be perfect,” an unrealistic demand. We might understand it to mean “be whole,” “come before Me with your whole self: the parts of yourself you are proud of, and the parts you are ashamed of and wish were different.” Thus do we come before God on Yom Kippur, not proclaiming our blamelessness but bringing to God our whole selves, our faults with our merits, to be told that we are acceptable in God’s sight.

5. father of a multitude of nations May a convert, bringing an offering of first fruits, recite the formula, “the land which You swore to

be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. ⁷I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. ⁸I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God.”

⁹God further said to Abraham, “As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant. ¹⁰Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised.

Abram . . . Abraham Henceforth the patriarch is referred to only by the expanded form of his name, which carries with it an intimation of his God-given destiny.

6. kings The same promise recurs in verse 16 and in 35:11. Kingship, in the context of the times, is the consummation of the process of national development. The Davidic dynasty is the fulfillment of this promise.

7. to be God to you So again in verse 8. This phrase belongs to the formal language of the covenant and recurs frequently in the Bible. God elects Israel to be His special people, demanding exclusive allegiance in return (see Exod. 19:5–6).

to you and to your offspring to come This legal terminology occurs six times in this chapter. It also appears in Gen. 35:12 and 48:4 in connection with the covenantal promises. The phrase is found in ancient Near Eastern documents relating to the transmission of property on the death of the owner; it ensured that the

הַמִּזְוֵה גוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ: ⁶וְהִפְרֵתִי אֶתְךָ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד וְנִתְּתִיךָ לְגוֹיִם וּמְלָכִים מִמֶּךָ יֵצְאוּ: ⁷וְהִקְמַלְתִּי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וּבֵין שְׁבִיעִי זְרַעְךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ לְדֹרֹתֶם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לְהִיּוֹת לְךָ לֵאלֹהִים וְלִזְרַעְךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ: ⁸וְנָתַתִּי לְךָ וְלִזְרַעְךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרֶיךָ אֵת כָּל-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְאֶחְזָת עוֹלָם וְהִיְתִי לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים:

⁹וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-אַבְרָהָם וְאַתָּה אֶת-בְּרִיתִי תִשְׁמֹר אֶתָּה וְזְרַעְךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ לְדֹרֹתֶם: ¹⁰זֹאת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְרוּ בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם וּבֵין זְרַעְךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ הַמּוֹל לָכֶם כָּל-זָכָר: ¹¹וְנִמְלַתֶם אֶת בְּשַׂר

real estate would be passed from generation to generation without restriction.

8. an everlasting holding National ownership of the land is to be eternal, like the covenant itself.

I will be their God The indissoluble union of the people Israel, the land of Israel, and God is the foundation on which Jewish civilization is built.

THE LAW OF CIRCUMCISION
(vv. 9–14)

Circumcision is both a symbol of God’s covenant and a mark of the commitment to a life lived in awareness of that covenant. The law of circumcision is the first mitzvah in the Torah addressed to Abraham and his descendants.

9. As for you This is the counterpart of “As for Me” in verse 4.

10. every male Only males, a restriction that excludes female circumcision, practiced in many parts of the world.

our forefathers [Deut. 26:4]”? The Sages rule that the convert may do so, because Abraham is the forefather of all righteous individuals (JT Bikk. 1:4).

10. The covenant (*b'rit*) of the night vision (see 15:18) is re-affirmed through the rite of circumcision. In Hebrew, the formal term for

the covenant of circumcision is *b'rit milah*. But the rite is so highly charged and symbolic that the term *b'rit* (Yiddish: *bris*) by itself has become synonymous with the circumcision ritual. Note that Abraham is given a new name at his circumcision, even as a Jewish male child is given a name at his.

¹¹You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹²And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. As for the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring, ¹³they must be circumcised, homeborn, and purchased alike. Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. ¹⁴And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant.”

¹⁵And God said to Abraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. ¹⁶I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of

עַרְלַתְכֶם וְהָיָה לְאוֹת בְּרִית בֵּינִי
וּבֵינֵיכֶם: ¹²וּבְן־שְׁמֹנֶת יָמִים יִמּוֹל לְכֶם
כָּל־זָכָר לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם יֵלִיד בָּיִת וּמִקְנֵת־כֶּסֶף
מִכָּל בְּוֶנְכָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא מִזֶּרְעִי הוּא:
¹³הַמּוֹל | יִמּוֹל יֵלִיד בֵּיתוֹ וּמִקְנֵת כֶּסֶף
וְהָיְתָה בְרִיתִי בְּבָשָׂרְכֶם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם:
¹⁴וְעָרַל | זָכָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִמּוֹל אֶת־בָּשָׂר
עַרְלָתוֹ וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעַמִּי
אֶת־בְּרִיתִי הַפֶּר: ס

¹⁵וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם שְׂרֵי
אֲשֶׁתְּךָ לֹא־תִקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמָהּ שְׂרֵי כִּי
שָׂרָה שְׁמָהּ: ¹⁶וַיְבָרַכְתִּי אֹתָהּ וְגַם נָתַתִּי
מִמֶּנָּה לָךְ בֶּן וַיְבָרַכְתִּיהָ וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם

11. the sign An outward, physical reminder of the covenant, like the rainbow after the Flood.

12. eight days The reinterpretation of the common practice of circumcision from a pubertal or nuptial rite to a covenantal rite is reinforced by the transfer of the time of the operation to the eighth day after birth. The eighth day is especially significant because the seven-day unit of time completed by the newborn corresponds to the process of Creation.

13. marked in your flesh “Flesh” is here a euphemism for “penis,” as in Lev. 15:2ff. and Ezek. 16:26, 23:20.

14. his foreskin That is, his own foreskin. When a father fails to fulfill his duty, the responsibility falls on the individual himself when he reaches maturity.

shall be cut off This punishment, known as

karet (see Lev. 20:1–6), is largely confined to offenses connected to the system of Israelite worship and to deviant sexual behavior. The Torah gives no definition of *karet*, and no analogy to it exists in ancient Near Eastern sources. In rabbinic literature, *karet* means premature death. The general idea is that one who excludes himself from the religious community dooms himself and his line to extinction, because he cannot benefit from the covenantal blessings.

THE CHANGE OF SARAI'S NAME

(vv. 15–22)

15. Sarai . . . Sarah Actually, the revised form *sarah* is simply a later modernization of the archaic form *sarai*, the second syllable being an old Semitic female ending. In either case, the literal meaning of the name is “princess.”

15. Sarah is given a new name as well, for she is a partner in the covenant. She merits, and receives, her own blessing. The letter *hei*, representing the name of God, is added both

to her name and to Abram's name, as a reward for their pious behavior. To do good deeds is to link our name with the name of God (Mekh. Yitro).

HALAKHAH L'MA-ASEH

17:12 the age of eight days This is the origin of the obligation to circumcise infant boys on the eighth day of their life in a *brit milah* ceremony (see Exod. 4:24–25). This ceremony seals the covenant in the flesh of the male generative organ, to make that covenant permanent for us and for all future generations.

peoples shall issue from her.”¹⁷ Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?”¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live by Your favor!”¹⁹ God said, “Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac; and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come.²⁰ As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation.²¹ But My covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.”²² And when He was done speaking with him, God was gone from Abraham.

²³Then Abraham took his son Ishmael, and all his homeborn slaves and all those he had bought, every male in Abraham’s household, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins

מִלְכֵי עַמִּים מִמִּנְהָ יֵהְיוּ: ¹⁷וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם
עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ הֲלֵבֶן מֵאֵה-
שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד וְאִם-שָׂרָה הַבַּת-תִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה
תֵּלֵד: ¹⁸וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים לֹא
יִשְׁמַעֲאֵל יִחְיֶה לְפָנָיִךָ: ¹⁹וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים
אָבֹל שָׂרָה אֲשַׁתְּךָ יֵלְדֶת לָךְ בֶּן וְקִרְאתָ
אֶת-שְׁמוֹ יִצְחָק וְהִקְמֹתִי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי
אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לְזִרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו:
²⁰וְלִישְׁמַעֲאֵל שְׁמַעְתִּיךָ הִנֵּה | בִּרְכַתִּי
אִתּוֹ וְהִפְרִיתִי אִתּוֹ וְהִרְבִּיתִי אִתּוֹ בְּמֵאֹד
מְאֹד שְׁנַיִם-עָשָׂר נְשִׂאִם יוֹלִיד וַנִּתְּתִיו
לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל: ²¹וְאֶת-בְּרִיתִי אֲקִים אֶת-
יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד לָךְ שָׂרָה לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה
בַּשָּׁנָה הָאַחֶרֶת: ²²וַיִּכַּל לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ וַיֵּעַל
אֱלֹהִים מֵעַל אַבְרָהָם:

²³וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת-ישְׁמַעֲאֵל בְּנוֹ וְאֵת
כָּל-יְלִידָיו בֵּיתוֹ וְאֵת כָּל-מִקְנֵת כֶּסֶףוֹ כָּל-
זָכָר בְּאַנְשֵׁי בֵּית אַבְרָהָם וַיִּמַּל אֶת-בְּשָׂרֵם

17. and laughed The laughter foretokes the name of the son of destiny that Sarah will bear Abraham (Gen. 17:19).

Can . . . or can The double question describes two conditions that together produce a state of affairs clearly inimical to any possibility of Abraham and Sarah producing a child.

18. by Your favor Abraham fears for the life of Ishmael because God’s words appear to exclude the boy from the benefits of the covenant.

19. God said God reassures Abraham, point by point.

Isaac The Hebrew word *yitzhak* means “he laughs.” All three biblical traditions relating to

the birth of Isaac (17:19, 18:12, 21:6) mention laughter in connection with doubting God’s power. Isaac’s birth represents the triumph of God over the limitations of nature.

20. Ishmael . . . heeded Although Ishmael is not to be Abraham’s spiritual heir, he receives God’s blessing and will pursue his own destiny.

twelve chieftains Corresponding to the 12 tribes of Israel, listed in 25:12–16.

22. God was gone Literally, “went up,” implying that God had “come down” to speak with Abraham. The latter verb occurs in a context of divine self-manifestation; thus “to go up” means the termination of divine communication.

20. as for Ishmael Abraham prays that Ishmael will grow up to be a good person. The reply received by Abraham implies that each individual has the responsibility to become a good person. It is not in God’s power to make people good. As the Midrash teaches, everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear

of Heaven. God, however, will bless Ishmael with wealth and family, so that neither poverty nor lack of companionship will incline him to unrighteous behavior (Barukh of Gorelitz). Ishmael will be blessed with wealth and numbers, but Isaac will, in addition, be blessed with a unique relationship to God (Mid. Ha-Gadol).

on that very day, as God had spoken to him. ²⁴Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he circumcised the flesh of his foreskin, ²⁵and his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶Thus Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on that very day; ²⁷and all his household, his homeborn slaves and those that had been bought from outsiders, were circumcised with him.

עָרַלְתֶּם בְּעֶצְמֵי הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מִפְטִיר אֱתוֹ אֱלֹהִים: ²⁴וְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן־תִּשְׁעִים וְתִשַׁע שָׁנָה בְהַמְלוֹ בְּשֵׁר עָרַלְתּוֹ: ²⁵וַיִּשְׁמַעְאֵל בְּנוֹ בֶן־שְׁלֹשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה בְהַמְלוֹ אֶת בְּשֵׁר עָרַלְתּוֹ: ²⁶בְּעֶצְמֵי הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה נִמּוֹל אַבְרָהָם וַיִּשְׁמַעְאֵל בְּנוֹ: ²⁷וְכָל־אֲנָשֵׁי בֵיתוֹ יְלִיד בָּיִת וּמִקְנַת־כֶּסֶף מֵאֵת בֶּן־נֶכֶד נִמְלוּ אִתּוֹ: פ

THE LAW OF CIRCUMCISION
CARRIED OUT (vv. 23–27)

23. *that very day* Without delay, Abraham fulfills God's command and circumcises the en-

tire male population of his household. Kinship is defined here by the residential unit; this household becomes an inclusive community. Yet heirship to the new covenant with Abraham is to be based only on a matrilineal principle (see. v. 21).

הַפְּטָרָה לְךָ לְךָ

HAFTARAH FOR LEKH L'KHA

ISAIAH 40:27–41:16

This *haftarah* is a call to the people, seed of Abraham, to return from exile to their homeland. It was delivered in Babylon, sometime in the mid-6th century B.C.E. Isaiah emphasizes God's power and providential guidance to alleviate the nation's mood of despair and fear. Through their faithful response, the people would thus renew a redemptive journey begun by their great ancestors more than a millennium earlier.

The several oracles included in this *haftarah* presumably were uttered at different times to the people in exile, presenting diverse themes and using distinct styles. At one level, these divine prophecies were anthologized on the basis of external verbal links. Thus, for example, the language of God's proclamation to the people Israel, calling on them to "renew their strength" through trust in the Lord (40:31), is repeated ironically in the following chapter, where this call for renewal is part of a challenge to the nations (41:1).

Read as part of a liturgical whole (related to public worship), the verbal connections take on thematic substance. One notable example is provided by the repetition of the phrase "the ends of the earth." It is used to describe God as Creator "of the earth from end to end" (40:28), the foreign nations ("ends of earth") who behold God's victory in fear and trembling (41:5), and God's act of liberating Israel from "the ends of the earth" to be His servant (41:9). The repetition of this phrase includes all the themes of the *haftarah*: God as creator, victor over the nations, and redeemer of the people Israel.

As a unified liturgical teaching, the *haftarah* moves progressively from the realism of despair to a near surreal vision of victory. In the process, Israel's speech moves from lament to exhilaration. These two poles are marked by Israel's opening words, "My way is hid from the LORD"

(40:27), and the final divine promise, "But you shall rejoice in the LORD" (41:16). The proof is formulated in between these two statements: God will arouse a victor who will destroy the nations and thereby help prepare the fulfillment of the divine promises. The initial cry of disbelief is countered with reasons for trust.

In an attempt to motivate the people, the prophet alludes to earlier occasions of divine support. Thus in the opening oracle, the promise that the faithful will renew their strength and soar homeward like eagles (40:31) counters the sense of being forgotten in exile. This promise echoes the people's redemption from Egypt, when God first "bore you [the Israelites] on eagles' wings" (Exod. 19:4). "Like an eagle . . . / . . . did He spread His wings and take [Israel], / Bear [them] along on His pinions" (Deut. 32:11). An even earlier event of divine guidance is alluded to in the reference to the nation as the "Seed of Abraham My friend" (Isa. 41:8). This patriarch faithfully followed God and was promised the blessing of the land for his "seed" (Gen. 15:5). So may Israel, "the Seed of Abraham," confidently anticipate its own restoration to the homeland. Designating the nation as God's "servant" whom He has "chosen" (Isa. 41:8–9) also underscores the special status of the people Israel.

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

Isaiah's reference to the people Israel as the "Seed (*zera*) of Abraham My friend" (Isa. 41:8) establishes a correlation between a late prophecy of renewal and the Torah narrative in which this patriarch was promised "offspring" (*zera*) as numerous as the stars on high (Gen. 15:5). Indeed, because of this the Judeans in Babylon may hope

that God will rescue them from Babylon just as he once “brought” Abraham “out from Ur of the Chaldeans” to the promised “land” (Gen. 15:7). At one level, therefore, the nation’s restoration from its exile completes God’s promises to Abraham. God’s ancient assurance, “Fear not” (*al tira*; Gen. 15:1), rings in the people’s ears as the prophet proclaims God’s new word of trust “Fear not” (*al tira*; Isa. 41:10) to the patriarch’s seed.

By this same means, the *haftarah* may also suggest the mystery of divine protection to later generations. The God who rewarded Abraham’s

faith with “merit” (*tz’dakah*; Gen. 15:6) speaks now to all the people with the promise of providential care: “I am your God . . . I uphold you with My victorious right hand” (*biymin tzidki*; Isa. 41:10). Here God’s gracious might sustains His creatures, not their own merit. Isaiah seeks to awaken his audience to this reality, providing the hope that renews strength. By proclaiming that the impaired spirit may be revived through trust in God’s creative vitality (40:28–31), the prophet offers a new theology of divine immanence (presence) and the renewal of creation.

40 ²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob,

Why declare, O Israel,

“My way is hid from the LORD,

My cause is ignored by my God”?

²⁸Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The LORD is God from of old,

Creator of the earth from end to end,

He never grows faint or weary,

His wisdom cannot be fathomed.

²⁹He gives strength to the weary,

Fresh vigor to the spent.

³⁰Youths may grow faint and weary,

And young men stumble and fall;

³¹But they who trust in the LORD shall re-
new their strength

As eagles grow new plumes:

They shall run and not grow weary,

They shall march and not grow faint.

Isaiah 40:27. My way is hid from the LORD

This quote from a communal criticism or lament bemoans the lack of divine knowledge, a knowledge that would lead to divine involvement. Hence the prophet responds that God’s “wisdom cannot be fathomed” (v. 28).

מ ²⁷לָמָּה תֹאמַר יַעֲקֹב

וְתִדְבֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל

נִסְתָּרָה דְרָכֵי מִיְהוָה

וּמַאֲלֵהִי מִשְׁפָּטַי יַעֲבֹר:

²⁸הֲלוֹא יֹדַעַתְּ

אִם-לֹא שָׁמַעַתְּ

אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם | יְהוָה

בּוֹרֵא קְצוֹת הָאָרֶץ

לֹא יֵיעָף וְלֹא יִיגַע

אֵין חֶקֶר לְתַבּוּנָתוֹ:

²⁹נָתַן לַיֵּעָף כֹּחַ

וְלֹאֵין אוֹנִים עֲצָמָה יִרְבֶּה:

³⁰וַיֵּעֲפוּ נְעָרִים וַיִּגְעוּ

וּבַחֹרִים כְּשׂוֹל יִכְשֹׁלוּ:

³¹וְקוֹנֵי יְהוָה יַחֲלִיפוּ כַּחַ

יַעֲלוּ אֶבֶר כְּנִשְׂרִים

יָרוּצוּ וְלֹא יִיגְעוּ

יִלְכוּ וְלֹא יֵיעֲפוּ:

28. Do you not know? / Have you not heard? The questions introduce a glorification of God as creator. A subsequent section mocks the making of idols (41:6–7).

41 Stand silent before Me, coastlands,
And let nations renew their strength.
Let them approach to state their case;
Let us come forward together for argu-
ment.

²Who has roused a victor from the East,
Summoned him to His service?
Has delivered up nations to him,
And trodden sovereigns down?

Has rendered their swords like dust,
Their bows like wind-blown straw?

³He pursues them, he goes on unscathed;
No shackle is placed on his feet.

⁴Who has wrought and achieved this?
He who announced the generations from
the start—

I, the LORD, who was first
And will be with the last as well.

⁵The coastlands look on in fear,
The ends of earth tremble.

They draw near and come;

⁶Each one helps the other,
Saying to his fellow, "Take courage!"

⁷The woodworker encourages the smith;
He who flattens with the hammer
[Encourages] him who pounds the anvil.
He says of the riveting, "It is good!"

And he fixes it with nails,
That it may not topple.

Isaiah 41:2. Who has roused a victor from the East Ibn Ezra understood this as referring to Cyrus the Mede, who is mentioned explicitly in 45:1.

4. He who announced the generations God's control of history and foreknowledge of events are crucial elements in Isaiah's theology.

מא הַחֲרִישׁוּ אֵלַי אַיִם

וּלְאֲמִים יַחְלִיפוּ כַחַּ

יָגִשׁוּ אִזּוּ יִדְבְּרוּ

יַחְדָּו לְמִשְׁפָּט נִקְרְבָהּ:

² מִי הָעִיר מִמִּזְרַח צֶדֶק

יִקְרָאֵהוּ לְרַגְלוֹ

יִתֵּן לְפָנָיו גּוֹיִם

וּמַלְכִים יִרְדּוּ

יִתֵּן כַּעֲפֹר חֲרָבוֹ

כְּקֶשׁ נֶדֶף קִשְׁתּוֹ:

³ יִרְדָּפֵם יַעֲבוֹר שְׁלוֹם

אֲרַח בְּרַגְלָיו לֹא יָבוֹא:

⁴ מִי־פָעַל וְעָשָׂה

קָרָא הַדְּרוֹת מֵרֵאשׁ

אֲנִי יְהוָה רֵאשׁוֹן

וְאֶת־אֲחֻרָנִים אֲנִי־הוּא:

⁵ רָאוּ אַיִם וַיִּירָאוּ

קִצּוֹת הָאָרֶץ יִחַרְדּוּ

קָרְבוּ וַיִּצְטַוּ:

⁶ אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ יַעֲזֹר

וּלְאָחִיו יֹאמֶר חֲזַק:

⁷ וַיִּחְזַק חָרֵשׁ אֶת־צֹרֵף

מִחֲלִיק פְּטִישׁ

אֶת־הוֹלֵם פָּעַם

אָמַר לְדֹבֵק טוֹב הוּא

וַיִּחְזַקְהוּ בְּמַסְמְרִים

לֹא יִמוּט: ס

Israel's history is living testimony to God's prophetic power (43:9–10).

8–13. An oracle of confidence, similar in language and form to oracles presented elsewhere to motivate leaders (Deut. 31:6–8) and prophets (Jer. 1:8,17).

8But you, Israel, My servant,
 Jacob, whom I have chosen,
 Seed of Abraham My friend—
 9You whom I drew from the ends of the
 earth
 And called from its far corners,
 To whom I said: You are My servant;
 I chose you, I have not rejected you—
 10Fear not, for I am with you,
 Be not frightened, for I am your God;
 I strengthen you and I help you,
 I uphold you with My victorious right
 hand.
 11Shamed and chagrined shall be
 All who contend with you;
 They who strive with you
 Shall become as naught and shall perish.
 12You may seek, but shall not find
 Those who struggle with you;
 Less than nothing shall be
 The men who battle against you.
 13For I the LORD am your God,
 Who grasped your right hand,
 Who say to you: Have no fear;
 I will be your help.
 14Fear not, O worm Jacob,
 O men of Israel:
 I will help you

—declares the LORD—

8 וְאַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדִּי
 יַעֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר בְּחַרְתִּיךָ
 זֶרַע אַבְרָהָם אַהְבִּי:
 9 אֲשֶׁר הִחַזְקְתִּיךָ מִקְצוֹת הָאָרֶץ
 וּמֵאַצִּילֶיךָ קָרָאתִיךָ
 וְאָמַר לְךָ עַבְדִּי-אַתָּה
 בְּחַרְתִּיךָ וְלֹא מָאַסְתִּיךָ:
 10 אֶל-תִּירָא כִּי עִמָּךְ-אֲנִי
 אֶל-תִּשְׁתָּע כִּי-אֲנִי אֱלֹהֶיךָ
 אֲמַצְתִּיךָ אֶף-עֲזֹרְתִיךָ
 אֶף-תִּמְכַתִּיךָ בְּיַמִּין צְדָקָי:
 11 הֵן יִבְשׁוּ וְיִכְלְמוּ
 כָּל הַנֹּחָרִים בְּךָ
 יִהְיוּ כְאֵין וַיֵּאבְדוּ
 אַנְשֵׁי רִיבֶךָ:
 12 תִּבְקָשֶׁם וְלֹא תִמְצְאוּם
 אַנְשֵׁי מִצְתֶךָ
 יִהְיוּ כְאֵין וּכְאַפֵּס
 אַנְשֵׁי מִלְחַמְתֶּךָ:
 13 כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
 מִחֻזְקִי יִמְיָנֶךָ
 הָאֵמַר לְךָ אֶל-תִּירָא
 אֲנִי עֲזֹרְתִיךָ: ס
 14 אֶל-תִּירָאִי תוֹלַעַת יַעֲקֹב
 מְתֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
 אֲנִי עֲזֹרְתִיךָ
 נְאֻם-יְהוָה

8. Israel, My servant The “servant” here is understood to be the nation (apparently also in Isa. 42:19, 43:10, 45:4, and 48:20). The prophet transfers to the nation as a whole a designation used in older sources for specific individuals (e.g., Abraham in Gen. 26:24; Moses in Deut. 34:5; David in Ps. 89:4). In this context, the title “My servant” has a strong covenantal aspect.

Seed of Abraham My friend The Hebrew for “My friend” is *ohavi*; literally, “who loves Me.” Ibn Ezra stressed the active force of the verb, distinguishing it sharply from the passive sense (“who is loved by Me”).

14. O worm Jacob A rare designation of abject suffering (see Ps. 22:7). The next phrase refers to “men of Israel” (*m’rei Yisra-el*). The Hebrew vocalization may be an error. The Akkadian noun for “maggot” (*mutu*) could yield the reading *moti Yisra-el*, leading to the parallelism of worm/maggot. This harsh designation of Israel is turned into a more positive attribute in an old *midrash*: Just as the strength of a worm is in its mouth, so the strength of suffering Israel is in its prayers and repentance (*Tanh. B’shallah* 9).

I your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

¹⁵I will make of you a threshing board,

A new thresher, with many spikes;

You shall thresh mountains to dust,

And make hills like chaff.

¹⁶You shall winnow them

And the wind shall carry them off;

The whirlwind shall scatter them.

But you shall rejoice in the LORD,

And glory in the Holy One of Israel.

וְגֹאֲלְךָ קְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

¹⁵הִנְנֶה שְׂמִיתֶיךָ לְמוֹרֵג

חֲרוּץ חֲדָשׁ בְּעַל פְּיפּוּיֹת

תִּדְוֶשׁ הָרִים וְתִדְקַ

וְגִבְעוֹת כַּמּוֹץ תִּשִּׂים:

¹⁶תִּזְרֹם

וְרוּחַ תִּשָּׂאֵם

וְסַעְרָה תִּפְיֵץ אוֹתָם

וְאַתָּה תִּגְיַל בַּיהוָה

בְּקְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּתְהַלֵּל: פ