

Parashat Lech Lecha 5781, 2020:

Va'yomer Hashem el Avram

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

When we examine the first verse of our *parasha*, “*Va'yomer Hashem el Avram — And Hashem said to Avram, ‘Lech lecha — Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you’*” (*Sefer Bereishit* 12:1), we most often focus on the phrase, *lech lecha*, the namesake of our Torah portion. In fact, Rashi (1040-1105) and the vast majority of *meforshim* do not comment upon the introductory phrase, “And Hashem said to Avram.” Since, however, Avram was the first person to whom Hashem spoke since the time of Noach and his children, the phrase may conceal far more than it reveals. What, then, is the significance of the expression *va'yomer Hashem el Avram*?

One of the earliest exegetes to address this question was Rabbeinu Ya'akov ben Asher (known as the Ba'al HaTurim, 1269-1343):

Va'yomer Hashem el Avram: This verse begins with an *amirah* — a statement of verbal communication [between Hashem and Avram] — utilizing the identical word with which the world was created [*va'yomer*]. For with ten utterances [of *va'yomer*] was the world created (*Pirkei Avot* 5:1). [Moreover,] *v'kulo lo nivra elah b'zechut Avraham — everything was created solely in the merit of Avraham, as such, the Torah writes an utterance [using *va'yomer Hashem el Avram*] in his regard.* (*Sefer Ba'al HaTurim, Sefer Bereishit* 12:1, translation and brackets my own)

Fascinatingly, according to the Ba'al HaTurim, *kulo lo nivra elah b'zechut Avraham*: All of Creation was formed solely for the yet-to-be realized merit of *Avraham Avinu*. The Ba'al HaTurim suggests that this is precisely why the Torah deployed the expression, “*va'yomer Hashem el Avram*,” wherein the first two words are those used to create the Universe.

Closer to our own time, my *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, notes that, “*Va-yomer* [Hashem] means a dialogue, a conversation held face to face. God encountered Abraham and addressed Himself to Him.” (*Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, page 139, brackets my own) Based upon this mode of thinking, the Rav analyzes the significance of the first verbal interchange between Hashem and Avraham in the following manner:

Abraham, the knight of faith, according to our tradition, searched and discovered God in the star-lit heavens of Mesopotamia. Yet, he felt an intense loneliness and could not find solace in the silent companionship of God whose image was reflected in the boundless stretches of the cosmos. Only when he met God on earth as Father, Brother and Friend — not only along the uncharted astral routes — did he feel redeemed. (<https://traditiononline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Lonely-Man-of-Faith-original.pdf>, page 32)

In this passage from his classic essay, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” the Rav portrays Avraham’s existential loneliness during the period between his discovery of the Almighty and his first encounter with Him. For Avraham, the recognition of Hashem as the one and only Master of the Universe was necessary but insufficient, for while this was knowledge, it was not yet a relationship. Therefore, “only when he met God on earth as Father, Brother and Friend...did he feel redeemed.” In sum, according to the Rav, the real significance of *va'yomer Hashem el Avram*, is to be found in the relationship these words created for evermore. We are fortunate, indeed, that the Rav describes the unique nature of this

relationship:

In many respects, God was closer to Abraham than He was to Moses. An intangible feeling of tenderness lingers over the relationship of God to Abraham. There is the creative ardor, moving devotion and a lack of tension. All that G-d requests of Abraham is destined to promote the latter's happiness and greatness. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, Michael S. Berger editor, page 155)

According to the Rav, Abraham was Hashem's friend, as we find in the following passage:

God addresses Himself to Abraham not in the commanding, authoritative tone of the Lord but in the comradely, friendly manner of a fellow wanderer. He [God] wants a covenant with him. God, as it were, is lonesome and He is anxious to find a companion. Fellowship between God and man is the motto of Abraham's life. (154-155, underlining my own)

The Rav's statement that "God, as it were, is lonesome and He is anxious to find a companion" is a theological *tour de force*. It teaches us that as much as we wish to encounter and draw close to Hashem, He, too, longs for the Jewish people's embrace.

May we ever strive, like *Avraham Avinu*, to reach out to Hashem in love and devotion, for we, too, need His unceasing presence in our lives. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and_the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.