

Parashat Lech Lecha 5784, 2023:

Fear Not Avram I Am Your Shield

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו, כל בני ישראל בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

The *brit bein habetarim* (Covenant of the Pieces), wherein the destiny of the Jewish people was revealed to *Avraham Avinu*, is introduced by this verse:

After these incidents, the word of Hashem came to Avram in a vision, saying, “Fear not, Avram; I am your Shield; your reward is exceedingly great,” *Sefer Bereishit* 15:1, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

This *pasuk* is unique in that it is the sole encounter between Hashem and Avraham that utilizes the phrase, “in a vision—*ba-mahazeh*.” Rabbi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel (1437-1508) stresses its singular nature:

It is the case that the Torah relates that prophecy was vouchsafed to Avraham on numerous occasions. It never explained, however, on which level of the prophetic experience the prophecy was to be found. For the types of prophecy are of two kinds or varieties: namely, dreams and visions... The terms “*mareh*” (“visualization”) and “*mahazeh*” (“vision”) are synonymous. As such, why did the Torah inform us in this particular case that Avraham’s prophecy was specifically a “*mahazeh*?” After all, this information is irrelevant to the matter at hand. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit* 15:1, translation my own)

The Abarbanel was not the first interpreter to raise the question as to why the Torah deploys the term “*mahazeh*.” The Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi, 1160-1235) and the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) are two classic commentators who addressed this issue. The Radak suggests that the Torah uses *mahazeh* in order to differentiate the impending prophetic experience from those that had come before:

Mahazeh is used in this instance, even though it was never said regarding any matter about which Hashem spoke to him prior to this moment, since this prophecy was not just verbal in nature. Instead, it contained elements of action, namely, Hashem taking Avraham outside, the counting of the stars and the specific matter of the *brit bein habetarim*. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit* 15:1, translation and brackets my own.)

In sum, Rav Kimchi opines that the Torah employs the term “*mahazeh*” in order to prepare us for the new kind of prophecy *Avraham Avinu* was about to experience, a prophecy of words and action, rather than one comprised solely of verbal communication.

In contrast to the Radak, the Ramban suggests that the Torah uses our expression to inform us that Avraham was now able to receive Hashem’s message at a new time: “Now Avraham was able to receive *d’var Hashem* in a vision during the day, whereas at first, his prophecy [like all of the other prophets except Moshe,] had been limited to visualizations of the night.” (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit 15:1*, translation and brackets my own)

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and disciples, takes a different approach regarding “*mahazeh*” than either the Radak or the Ramban. For the Rav, this term signifies a different category of visionary experience than in the past. Prior to this time, Hashem’s prophecies enabled Avraham to experience the Almighty’s warmth, care, and concern. Now, however, “*ba-mahazeh*,” Avraham is confronted with distance and separation from the Master of the Universe. In part, the Rav derives this concept based on the absence of the term, “*va-yomer*,” that is found in all of Avraham’s other prophetic encounters, and the presence of the newly introduced term “*d’var Hashem*:”

The introduction, “*hayah d’var Hashem el Avram ba-mahazeh*, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision” (Gen. 15:1), is very interesting... Here the Torah omits the term *va-yomer*, which it had used repeatedly to describe God’s encounters with Abraham and adds the word *ba-mahazeh*. *Va-yomer* means a dialogue, a conversation held face to face. God encountered Abraham and addressed Himself to him. *D’var Hashem* connotes communication from a distance; the message got to Abraham, but indirectly, God was not present. *Ba-mahazeh* means perspective, vision. *Va-yomer* is a higher medium of prophecy than *d’var Hashem*. Here God was a little distant because the message God delivered to him [in the *brit bein habetarim*] was one of *galut*, of exile, oppression, humiliation, and suffering. (*Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, pages 139-140, underlining and brackets my own)

The Rav continues his analysis of, “*ba-mahazeh*,” and suggests: “Before God spoke to him face to face; now, suddenly it is *ba-mahazeh*, from a distance. The word reaches him from infinity, from God’s transcendent abode.” In other words, for the first time in Avraham’s adult life, he experienced Hashem’s remoteness rather than His immanence. Little wonder, then, that he desperately needed to hear Him declare, “Fear not, Avram; I am your Shield; your reward is exceedingly great.”

Although we are blessed to have *Medinat Yisrael*, we live in a world in which the message of Hashem is far too often “one of *galut*, of exile, oppression, humiliation, and suffering.” As such, like *Avraham Avinu*, we long to hear the reassuring words: “Fear not, Avram; I am your Shield; your reward is exceedingly great.” May the realization of this promise come soon, and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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

*** 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: [The Rav](#)