

Parshat Lech Lecha

Acts of the Fathers; Sign for the Children

maaseh avot siman lebanim

This week, we will take a break from direct analysis of Torah text and enter the world of commentaries and Jewish Philosophy. We will be studying a theme which underlies the entire narrative of Sefer Bereshit. As our title indicates, we will be discussing the familiar principle of “*maaseh avot siman lebanim*”. A simple translation of that phrase is: “the actions of the fathers are a sign for the children”. What I want to examine is how this principle works!? In what way do the actions of the avot form a sign to us? Is it just that they teach us valuable lessons, or is it more than that?

Chavruta

Our Chavruta section will deal mostly with Rashi’s and Ramban’s on different places in the parsha. These commentaries are a little tough; both in their written style AND conceptually. This shiur isn’t so easy but bear with us. It’ll be worth it.

1. Read the beginning of our Parsha : BERESHIT 12:1-10.
2. SEE RASHI ON PASSUK 6-9.
Note especially Rashi’s comments regarding Avraham’s knowledge and prayer for future events?
* Make a note of the various incidents that Avraham prays for.
* What significance does Avraham attribute to 1. Shechem , 2. Elon Moreh, 3. Beit-El / Ai?
3. STUDY THE RAMBAN ON PASSUK 10.
* What parallel does the Ramban bring between Abraham’s life and the events that will befall his descendants? (The Ramban bases himself on the Midrash Rabba 40:6 - If you have time look it up.)
* The Ramban thinks that Avraham committed a grave sin. What was it? According to the Ramban what were the effects of this sin? Does this explanation of the Ramban match his previous connection of these two events?
4. SEE ALSO THE RAMBAN (v. short) ON 16:6.
Here again, the Ramban is critical, this time, of Sarah. What is Sarah’s sin? What were the effects of her sin?
5. Think about the theory of “Maaseh Avot Siman Lebanim” in the Ramban. How do the actions of the Avot affect future Jewish history?

See also the Ramban on 12/6 (read until “al kol panim”) where he outlines his theory in principle.

FOR FURTHER READING

See Nechama Leibowitz’s excellent article on Parshat Vayishlach - “History repeats itself”.

Shiur

How are we to understand the fact that one can trace repeating patterns in history? Is there a correlation between events that befell our ancestors and those that happen to ourselves? Does history repeat itself? Is this the meaning of the phrase “*maaseh avot siman lebanim*” ?

APPROACH 1 : LEARNING FROM OUR FOREFATHERS

“ Remember the days of old,
Consider the years of ages past.
Ask your father, he will inform you,
Your elders and they will tell you” (Devarim 32:7)

Traditionally, we look at our past to learn the lesson of the present. The Torah does not give us only legal directives. The Torah also gives us historical episodes - good and bad - from the lives of our founding fathers and mothers. Torah means “teaching” and we might suggest that the doctrine of “*maaseh avot*” highlights the lives and personalities of our forefathers and matriarchs as a source of teaching. We can learn correct conduct from their behaviour.

This view finds its expression in the following excerpt from a lecture of Rav Soloveichik:

“The Patriarchal Covenant ... imparts teachings to the Jewish people by example rather than by prescription. While the Sinaitic Covenant tells the Jew what to do and how to act as a member of the covenantal community, the Patriarchal Covenant addresses the ‘I’ awareness of the Jew, teaching him how to experience his Jewishness. It sensitises him in specifically Jewish ways: it expresses attitudes, ideals, and sentiments which still speak to us. It guides our feelings and consciousness rather than our physical acts.

...Our sages teach: Our father Abraham was tested with ten trials [of faith and character] and he withstood them all, demonstrating the extent of Abraham’s love of God. [Avot 5:4] These ten trials, with the climactic Akeida as the supreme expression of martyrdom, are the source of many Jewish traits which are still prevalent amongst our people.

In studying their life experiences... during our impressionable childhood and throughout our adult years, we absorb their values and nuances of feeling into our Jewish consciousness. ‘Every Jew should ask himself, when shall my deeds be like those of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?’ [Tana D’bei Eliyahu Rabba 25]

That which we know from our avot forms the bedrock of our Jewish mindset. We know our avot mostly through stories which tell us of their self-sacrifice, their generosity and their complex characters. Whether we talk about Abraham arguing with God for the city of S'dom or his welcoming guests; whether it is Rivka watering camels of a stranger in town or Jacob tricking his father; whether it is Leah's dedication to her husband or Rachel's tears; the very lives of our avot - in all their human complexity - lead the way for us in terms of morality and goodness. That is why they too are Torah.

APPROACH 2 : HISTORICAL PARRALLELS

Our theme is phrased in the following way by the Midrash Tanchuma:

"Rabbi Yehoshua of Sichnin said : God gave a sign to Abraham that everything that befell him would happen to his children: God chose Avraham from all his family ... likewise, he chose his (Abraham's) children from all the 70 nations..."

He continues by drawing parallels between God's love for Avraham and his love for Am Yisrael; between Abraham's descent to Egypt and the troubles he found there and the later exile in Egypt and the subsequent enslavement, and he concludes :

"Avraham vanquished four kings and likewise Israel will strike fear into other kings and their kingdoms.... Just as God went out and fought Abraham's enemies, so He will act similarly with his Children".

In this Midrash our past mirrors later history. What is this supposed to teach us? It seems that the Midrash aims to use the recurring pattern of historical events as a source of hope. In times of trouble we should find some reassurance and hope. Avraham faced war and famine too. It all worked out fine for Avraham, and it will work out well for his descendants as well.

The parallel works in the negative as well as the positive. Ramban's commentary on Yaakov's mysterious wrestling with an angel in the dark of night is taken to symbolise future persecution. Yaakov is wounded and limping from the battle and would appear to be permanently injured, but later, at the end of the story, the Torah "Vayavo Yaakov shalem" which can be read metaphorically as - "Yaakov emerged whole". The Ramban comments:

"The whole matter is an allusion to our future history , that there would come a time when the descendants of Esau would overcome Jacob almost to the point of total destruction."

He describes in vivid detail, the cruel persecutions of

Mishnaic times and then states:

"There were generations who did such things to us and worse than this. But we endured all and it passed by us, as is indicated by the words 'And Jacob came to Shalem'."

So the patterns of the past will recur again and again in the future. It is for this reason that many Rabbis were opposed to the establishment of a special day of commemoration for the Holocaust. They saw in the Holocaust just another episode in a recurring cycle of persecution and if we begin to fast and mourn for each persecution, we will fast all year round! Rather let us just fast on Tisha B'av. For good as well as bad, Jewish history is seen as a revolving wheel. We seem to be willing to recognise patterns and take a certain reassurance from them.

But why should history repeat itself? Why should the events of our forefathers be recur in a new situation with different conditions? It seems to defy logic!

The explanation or illustration which is frequently given for this phenomenon is that time is not linear. Rather, time is a spiral. With each year or time period, we return to the same point that we reached a year ago, just at a higher point on the spiral. Essentially nothing is new. We are travelling along the same identical route, we follow the same course. Likewise, history follows a pattern of sin and repair, exile and return. These ups and downs are the familiar signposts of Jewish life. And in that case, we can reassure ourselves, we can also warn ourselves.

Apparently the spiral begins with the avot and it will end with the future Redemption. Questions still remain however. Why should history follow a given course? There are so many other factors which affect the course of world events. And why does it seem to be that we can only spot these patterns with hindsight but when we are in the thick of a problem, the "siman lebanim" seems to be frequently a little blurred. To the rational mind, this theory appears a little lacking in understanding at best! Is it some Godly message?

APPROACH 3 : HISTORICAL DETERMINISM.

The Ramban takes "maaseh avot" a stage further. He states in our parsha:

"Understand that Avraham Avinu sinned greatly - even if inadvertently - by bringing his righteous wife into the possible hands of sin, just to overcome his own personal fear that he might be killed. He should have trusted God that He would save himself, his wife, and their entire household, for God lacks not the power to assist and to save.

ALSO his departure from the land which he was commanded to go to, just because of famine, was a sin, for God can save the starving from death. FOR THIS ACTION, IT WAS DECREED THAT HIS DESCENDANTS BE EXILED IN EGYPT BY THE HAND OF PHARAOH."

Likewise, the Ramban says that future persecution by the descendants of Yishmael are a direct punishment for Sarah's maltreatment of her maid servant Hagar. (16:6)

The Ramban explains his theory :

" I will tell you a rule to be applied throughout the parshiot of Avraham Yitzchak and Yaakov. The Rabbis stated this rule as "everything that happened to the fathers is a sign for the children". The Torah tells stories, at length, about journeying or well digging and the like. You might think that these are meaningless detail but in reality they all tell us something about the future. When an event occurs to one of the prophets who are our forefathers, he will know that it will be decreed to his descendants in some form.... and the event will take place no matter what."

The Ramban suggests that the avot, by their very actions, can determine future events for Am Yisrael. If Avraham is in Shechem and thinks about victory, then his children will be victorious there! According to the Ramban, when Avraham descends to Egypt in the wake of the famine, he determines that the same thing will occur to his children!

The Ramban sees the actions of the avot as DETERMINING the future for the Jewish people. A punishment to Abraham is a punishment for the people. A victory by Abraham will produce a resulting victory at some future time in History.

This is a radical view. Maybe we might suggest that The Ramban sees the Avot literally as fathers to the children of Israel. They are the genetic blueprint of the Jewish Nation. They are the DNA which will form Am Yisrael! If they do something, it has ramifications far greater than their individual lives. An act by the avot has an effect all the way down the line. It's like the avot are the prime elements of the Jewish people and now we live in the tracks that they trod.

Thus Avraham is born outside Israel and goes to live there. Yitzchak stays in Israel all his life. Yaakov leaves the country and later returns to it (and dies outside it). We have 3 different models of Jewish migration vis a vis Eretz Yisrael. The Ramban would suggest that had one of these not occurred to the avot it would be an impossibility for their children!

The Ramban is very difficult. I've been thinking about this theory for a number of years and I still have a long way to go in understanding it. From his writings, it would appear that the roots of this idea lie on the Kabbala. I'm afraid that the kabbala is a field of Judaism with which I am not well acquainted.

Shabbat Shalom!