

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

Avraham and the Idols:

A Midrashic Reflection of a Biblical Story

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INTRODUCTION

A literary device commonly found in Tanakh is the "implied story" – i.e., the text recounts a certain narrative using linguistic and thematic motifs borrowed from another narrative, thereby hinting at a connection between the two stories. This connection conceals a certain message, which the reader must uncover in order to understand better the biblical evaluation of the event or of the characters. Well-known examples of this device include the comparison of Eliyahu upon Mt. Carmel with Moshe Rabbeinu; the stories of Elisha against the background of the stories of Eliyahu; the story of Megillat Ruth as compared with the episode of Yehuda and Tamar or of Lot and his daughters; a comparison of the rescue of Lot from Sedom with the rescue of Rachav from Yericho; and many others.

However, it is interesting to note that this phenomenon exists not only in the actual biblical narratives, but also in the midrashim of Chazal. In many aggadic midrashim, one must first discover the biblical story to which the midrash is alluding, and then via this connection it becomes easier to understand the idea that the midrash seeks to teach. In this shiur, I shall focus on a midrash that is well-known to all – the story of Avraham and the idols. I shall uncover the biblical story that lies concealed behind this midrash, and then try to understand how our recognition of that story contributes to a deeper understanding of the message of the midrash.

DO YOUR EARS NOT HEAR WHAT YOUR LIPS ARE SAYING?

This midrash appears in different versions (see Torah Sheleima on parashat Noach). The most ancient source for it is the description in Bereishit Rabba (38:13), as part of the well-known story of Avraham being cast into the furnace by Nimrod. For our purposes, we can suffice with the excerpt describing Avraham's shattering of the idols:

R. Chiya said in the name of R. Ada of Yaffo:

Terach was an idol worshipper, and he also sold idols. One day he went somewhere, and left Avraham to sell in his place... A woman arrived, holding a plate of grain. She said to Avraham: "Take this and offer it before them." Avraham got up, took a stick in his hands and broke all the idols, leaving the stick in the hand of the largest one.

When his father returned, he asked: "Who did this to them?"

Avraham answered, "What have I to hide? A woman came, carrying a plate of grain. She said to me, 'Take this and offer it before them.' I offered it before them, and this one here said, 'I shall eat first.' Then that one said, 'I shall eat first.' The largest idol got up, took the stick, and shattered them!"

Terach said: "What nonsense are you telling me – are they then conscious?"

Avraham answered, "Do your ears not hear what your lips are saying?" Terach then handed him over to Nimrod..."

IF HE IS A GOD, LET HIM FIGHT FOR HIMSELF

The simple idea of the story – the irony of the trap in which the idolaters are caught, for they themselves do not believe in the power of the wood and stone that they worship – is not new. In the books of the prophets, it appears in a form similar to the description in the midrash – in the story of Gidon's early days, after which he received the name Yeruba'al:

It happened that night that God said to him: "Take your father's bull... and pull down the altar of Ba'al that belongs to your father, and cut down the ashera that is upon it. You shall build an altar to the Lord your God at the top of that fortress..."

Gidon took ten men of his servants and did as God had spoken to him. Since he feared his father's household and the men of the city, he could not do it by day, so he did it by night.

The people of the city awoke early in the morning, and behold – the altar of Ba'al was pulled down, and the ashera atop it was cut down... They said to one another, "Who did this thing?" They inquired and investigated, and they said: "Gidon the son of Yoash did this thing."

The people of the city said to Yoash, "Bring out your son that he may die, for he has pulled down the altar of Ba'al and has cut down the ashera atop it."

Yoash said to all who stood against him: "Will you then fight on behalf of Ba'al; will you then rescue him? Whoever fights for him – let him die by morning; if he is a god, let him fight for himself, for his altar is destroyed."

On that day, he called him Yeruba'al, saying, "Let Ba'al fight against him, for he has pulled down his altar." (Shoftim 6:25-32)

The points of comparison between the two stories – one in Tanakh, the other in midrash – are clear:

1. Both stories concern a youth who stands alone against his environment because he worships God while those around him worship idols.
2. In both cases, the youth destroys the artifacts that are used for pagan worship.
3. In both stories, there is irony directed towards the idolators. In the story of Gidon, it is found in the words of Yoash: "If he is a god, let him fight for himself, for his altar is destroyed." In the midrash, the irony is presented by Avraham himself: "Do your ears not hear what your lips are saying?"

There are also some points of contrast between the two stories, which I shall address later on. But let us now address the question: for what reason does the midrash, in discussing Avraham, hint at the story of Gidon? (It must be kept in mind that although Avraham preceded Gidon chronologically, the biblical narrative in Sefer Shoftim preceded the midrash, and therefore we must ask what message is conveyed by the comparison of Avraham to Gidon, and not the reverse.)

AVRAHAM THE CHOSEN

It must first be pointed out that the main message that the midrash seems to be teaching relates to the question of why God chose Avraham. Many opinions have been offered on this issue, which Ramban (Bereishit 12:2) formulates as follows:

This parasha does not explain the whole issue. For what reason did the Holy One tell him, "Leave your land and I will be good to you" – promising a favor that was altogether unprecedented, without any prior information that Avraham was a servant of God or a complete tzaddik?

The biblical text gives us no indication of why God chose Avraham (as opposed to its explanation of God's choice of Noach, for example). Clearly, then, the midrash is addressing this problem. It responds that the choice of Avraham arose from his unique righteousness, which existed even before God was revealed to him. The midrash thereby negates a different possibility, according to which the choice of Avraham was arbitrary, based only on God's free will, with no reason.^[1] Indeed, in light of the midrash, Ramban explains:

"The reason (for his selection) was that the people of Ur Kasdim caused him much evil because of his faith in the Holy One, and he fled from them to go to the land of Canaan, but was delayed in Charan. God then told him to leave there, too, and to do as he had originally intended, so that his service of Him and his call to all people in the name of God would be in the chosen land. There his name would become great and those nations would be blessed through him – not like in Ur Kasdim, where they despised and cursed him, placing him in a pit or in the fiery furnace. God told him that He would bless whoever blessed him, and if an individual would curse him – he himself would be cursed. That is the reason for this parasha."

The Ramban bases his explanation here on the fact that Avraham began journeying towards Canaan in chapter 11 even before God was revealed to him in chapter 12. This journey was initiated, to his view, because of the persecution of Avraham by the people of Ur Kasdim due to his beliefs. He explains further on that the reason for the Torah not stating explicitly the reason for Avraham's selection is in order not to address the difference of opinion between Avraham and the people of Ur Kasdim; the Torah wants to refrain from elaborating on idolatrous views. For the same reason, the Torah omits any explanation of the development of idolatry in the generation of Enosh.^[2]

Let us now return to the comparison to the story of Gidon. It appears that the comparison aims to highlight precisely this point. Most of the judges in Sefer Shoftim appear without any explanation in the text as to the reason for their specific selection.^[3] The sole, unique exception to this rule is Gidon, concerning whom we are informed explicitly that his selection was not arbitrary, but rather based on his unique personality and character traits. The selection of Gidon is described in the dialogue between him and the angel (Shoftim 6:11-14):

An angel of God came... and Gidon... was threshing wheat at the winepress, to hide it from Midian. The angel of God appeared to him and said to him, "God is with you, mighty man of valor!"

Gidon said to him: "Please, my lord – if God is with us, why has all of this happened to us? Where are all the wonders that our forefathers told us of, saying, 'Did God not bring us up from Egypt?' And now God has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian."

God turned to him and said, "GO WITH THIS STRENGTH OF YOURS, AND SAVE ISRAEL from the hand of Midian; have I not sent you?"

From the very outset, it is apparent that Gidon has been selected because he is a "mighty man of valor" – a fact which also seems to find expression in his courageous act of threshing wheat at the winepress in order that it be hidden from Midian. But the explicit reason appears in the words of the angel: "Go with this strength of yours, and save Israel." What is "this strength of yours"? It appears – and so Rashi and Abarbanel understand – that the reference is to the strength that Gidon displays in his words; he presents a powerful claim to God, out of a profound identification with the pain of Am Yisrael. Gidon's devotion to his nation makes God's selection of him quite logical, and by virtue of it God promises to be with him in the future as well.

Gidon's devotion is proven again later on – when he pulls down the altar of Ba'al and its ashera. It is thus demonstrated once again that God's choice of Gidon was not incidental, but rather arose from knowledge of his strength and traits.

Hence, it is no coincidence that Chazal explain the story of Avraham in a way that is reminiscent of the story of Gidon. Behind this comparison lies a perception, fitting in with the way of the midrash in general, that God's choice of Avraham was a result of his special characteristics, as we find explicitly in the case of Gidon. The nature of the explicit choice of Gidon is, according to the midrash, the same as the nature of the mysterious choice of Avraham.

This idea is repeated in other midrashim. One of the most obvious examples is also found in Bereishit Rabba (32:3):

R. Yonatan taught: The Creator does not test frail vessels, which He could not even tap once before they would break. Whom does He test? Beautiful, sturdy vessels that, even if He taps them several times, they will not break. Thus, the Holy One does not test wicked people, but rather the righteous, as it is written (Tehillim 11:5), "God tests the righteous."

AVRAHAM VS. GIDON

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the midrash takes care not to identify Gidon explicitly with Avraham. Despite his auspicious beginning, Gidon was a hesitant leader, and eventually caused the nation to stumble in the matter of the efod – "It was for Gidon and his household as a trap" (Shoftim 8:27). Avraham Avinu, on the other hand, successfully faced ten tests. For this reason, there are some significant differences between the narrative of the midrash and the textual story of Gidon.

1. Gidon carries out a mission imposed on him by God; the midrash describes Avraham as acting on his own initiative.
2. The text emphasizes that Gidon "feared... to do it by day, and so he did it by night." It was apparently because of this fear that he did not dare to act alone, but rather took ten of his servants along with him. Concerning Avraham, there is no hint in the midrash of the slightest fear.
3. Gidon is aided by his father, who presents his side of the argument towards those around them; Avraham is in conflict even with his own father, and it is his father who hands him over to the wicked Nimrod.

By means of these differences, the midrash emphasizes that the comparison of Avraham to Gidon exists only where it comes to the nature of the selection of these two men, but it does not mean to draw a parallel between them. On the contrary, the similarity of the stories in fact illustrates Avraham's special qualities in comparison with Gidon: his immense self-sacrifice and the purity of his faith.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

^[1] This line of thought is adopted in a number of sources in Chazal concerning the selection of Israel. See the lengthy chapter by E.E. Urbach in his book "The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs" (Cambridge, 1975), 525-541.

^[2] The Ramban's view here does admittedly raise a question, since the journey at the end of parashat Noach is actually initiated by Terach: "And Terach took Avram his son..." while according to the midrash Terach himself was one of those who caused problems for Avraham because of his beliefs. But

according to the literal text we need not necessarily regard Terach as an evildoer, and we may therefore accept the interpretation that the very journey to Eretz Canaan represented some sort of pull towards God's land, and it seems that this itself was the biblical seed for Chazal's view of the whole subject of the righteousness of Avraham (and his family) even prior to the revelation. For more on the two journeys to Eretz Canaan – before the revelation and following it – see M. Breuer's "Pirkei Bereishit," Alon Shvut 5759, vol. 1, pp. 223-230.

^[3] This is so regarding Otniel ben Kenaz (3:9) and Ehud ben Gera (3:15), concerning both of whom we are told, "And God raised up a savior." Concerning Devora we are told (4:4), "She judged Israel at that time" – again, with no explanation of why she was appointed a judge and why she was granted prophecy. Yiftach was appointed a judge by the elders of Gil'ad (11:7). In the case of Shimshon (chapter 13), the choice is quite clearly arbitrary, for it is made even before he is born!