

LECH LECHA (GENESIS 12:1-17:27)

The Soul Maker

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

He gazed into her eyes. He whispered to her words he had never said before. “I now realize how beautiful you are!”

How romantic! Who was this young man, who was expressing his fond appreciation of his beloved’s radiance? Who was this lovely young beauty, the subject of his admiration?

This couple, who had dedicated their lives to teaching Torah, were no youngsters. He was 75 years old. She was 65. His name was Abram; hers, Sarai. (Later known as Abraham and Sarah.)

They were on their way to Egypt. G-d had told them to leave Charan, their base of Torah outreach where “Abraham ‘converted’ the men, and Sarah ‘converted’ the women.” (Midrash Rabbah, 38:14. -- It should be pointed out that ‘converted’ does not refer to formal conversion as we understand it today. The Midrash means that Abraham and Sarah led their followers away from idolatry.) Abram and Sarai led an entourage of 72 disciples (Sefer Hayashar) plus Sarai’s brother Lot into the Land of Canaan, destined, some day, to be given to the Nation of Israel.

Their “Aliyah” didn’t last long. There was a famine in Canaan, forcing Abram and his group to find food in Egypt. That’s when Abram realized he had a problem:

As he approached Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I now realize that you are beautiful.” (Genesis, 12:12)

Abram was afraid that the Egyptians, not a nation well known for their ethics and morality, would kill him and molest her. The Talmud says that he tried to smuggle Sarai into Egypt in a closed box. It didn’t work. The Egyptians found Sarai, and took her for the king’s harem. Only through a miracle did she escape unharmed.

But let’s go back to Abram’s observation. *As he approached Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I now realize that you are beautiful.”*

I NOW realize? NOW you notice? At that point they had been married for at least twenty-three years! (The Talmud, [Avodah Zarah, 9a] tells us that they began teaching together when Abram was 52 years old. Presumably, he had known her much longer; she was, after all, more than just his wife. She was also his niece.)

How did it come to pass that it took 23-plus years for Abram to discover that his wife was pretty?!!

In order to answer this question, it might be helpful to read another verse:

Abram took his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot, and all their wealth that they had amassed, and the souls they had made in Charan, and they left for the Land of Canaan, and they arrived in the Land of Canaan.

(Ibid, verse 5)

“... and the souls they had made in Charan. . .” What does THAT mean? How do you MAKE a soul?!

Rabbi Elazar tells us in the Midrash, “Anyone who leads a person away from idolatry is considered as if he CREATED him!”

Humans have two eyes, two nostrils, two ears, and a mouth. So do all other mammals. We have hearts, lungs, livers and spleens. So do they. Is it any wonder that the PETA nuts think that we too are members of the animal kingdom?

They are almost right! If a person’s life is devoid of genuine spirituality, he is little more than an animal. Abram and Sarai taught the world that we must recognize G-d’s greatness and live according to His laws. They showed a decadent world the importance of charity, hospitality, and virtue. In that sense, they took their fellow mammals and MADE them into human beings!

This, perhaps, is what Abram meant when he said, *“I now realize that you are beautiful.”* Abram wasn’t blind! He knew that his wife was beautiful. But physical attraction was not what he loved about his wife. She was his fellow teacher in the “Yeshiva of Charan.” Sarai was a devout woman, a spiritual giant. Sarai, whose level of prophecy surpassed that of her husband, possessed an inner beauty that elevated her, and those around her, to become holy. She had assisted her husband in “creating souls.”

Now, however, the lofty and pious parents of our Nation were faced with a down-to-earth problem. They were headed toward Egypt. The Egyptians would not be impressed by the fact that Sarah was a Torah teacher of note. Her kindness and devotion to G-d were irrelevant to the depraved mind set. The Egyptians would look at Sarai and see a pretty face. And that meant danger.

It is interesting to note that Abram’s first son, Ishmael, is referred to as a . . . *“Pereh Adam” -- a wild donkey-man, his hand against everyone. . .* (Ibid, 16:12)

In Hebrew, unlike English, the noun usually precedes the adjective. *“Yeled tov”* -- good boy, literally translates as “boy good.” Since *“Pereh”* means “wild donkey,” and *“Adam”* means “man,” the phrase should have been *“Adam Pereh,”* not *“Pereh Adam.”* Why, in describing this *wild donkey-man*, did the Torah change the rules of Hebrew grammar, putting the adjective before the noun?

It didn't. Ishmael was not a "*wild donkey-man*," a man who acted like an animal. He was a "*man-wild donkey*," an animal in the form of a man.

Every human being is created in G-d's Image. That Image is obviously not physical, it is spiritual. When we live lives of Torah, we ennoble ourselves and transcend our physical states.

As spiritual beings, we have the potential to be greater than the angels. As physical beings, we have the potential to be lower than the animals.

It is through Torah that we learn to tell the difference.

Have a great Shabbos.

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