

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## DID AVRAM GO FOR HIS OWN SAKE OR FOR G-D'S?

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

G-d makes many promises the first time He speaks with Avram. But the promises come second; His first words are the order, or request, that Avram leave everything he knows and journey to an unspecified country. Avram hears G-d out and then undertakes the journey. Is he prepared to do so from the start? Or is there a beat after "to the land I will show you," in which Avram's response is uncertain, so that G-d rushes to fill the silence with promises?

Rashi preempts this question by translating G-d's opening words as a promise: "להנאתך ולטובתך" – לך לך - להנאתך ולטובתך. Lekh *lekha* = Go for yourself – to your benefit and good."

Ramban and others argue that Rashi is over-reading. "Lekha" accompanies verbs regularly in *Tanakh* in places where "to your benefit" is an implausible translation, and here as well it may just be a grammatical tic, and "The Torah speaks in the (inefficient) language of human beings." But Mizrachi notes that this is an old dispute, between Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva, and we hold with Rabbi Akiva that the goal is to maximize meaning; "כל היכא דאיכא למדרש" = wherever there is a rationale for expansive interpretation, we seize it.

The stronger challenge to Rashi is substantive: What motivates him to seek *this* expansive meaning, to structure Avram's relationship with G-d so that it begins with inducements rather than selflessness? Panim Yafot confronts this challenge directly.

וזה היה עיקר הנסיון באברהם,

דאף שהבטיח לו הקדוש ברוך הוא שכר גדול, לא היה מחשבתו לשכר,

אלא לקיים מצות הבורא,

והיינו דכתיב "וילך אברם כאשר דבר אליו ה'",

פירוש: לא כוון אלא לקיים מצות הבורא ולא להנאתו. ואפשר לומר שזה שאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא "והיה ברכה", פירוש: היינו לומר שתהא הברכה מעצמה, ולא שיכוין ע"ז. ובה מובן ביותר מה שכתבנו לעיל בפ' נח לכן אמר לו "אשר אראך" ולא אמר 'בארץ כנען', שאם היה אומר 'בארץ כנען' היה מחוייב מחמת נדרו, דכתיב שם "ויצאו אתם וגו' ללכת ארצה כנען", וכיון שגמר בלבו והתחיל ללכת הוי נדר גמור, ואין בזה נסיון כ"כ, לכך אמר לו "אשר אראך".

*This was the essence of the test of Avra(ha)m, that even though The Holy Blessed One guaranteed him great reward, his thought was not for the reward, but rather to fulfill the command of the Creator.*

*This is the meaning of "Avram went as G-d has spoken to him," meaning: his only intention was to fulfill the command of the Creator, and not for his own benefit.*

*Perhaps we can say this is when The Holy Blessed One said ויהי ברכה = "and let blessing come to be,"*

*meaning to say that the blessing should occur on its own, not that he should have intent for it.*

*This fits very well with our earlier explanation of why He said "which I will show you" and did not add 'in the land of Canaan', that if He has said "in the Land of 'Canaan', Avram would have been obligated by his oath, as Scripture writes there "and they left with them . . . to go to the Land of Canaan,"*

*and once he concluded in his heart and began to go, it was an absolute oath,*

*and this would not be such a great test,*

*therefore He said to him*

*"which I will show you."*

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G-d's promises to reward Avram are part of the test, knowing that G-d will reward him, can Avram nonetheless engage in *avodat Hashem lishmoh*, for its own sake, rather than for the sake of reward?

Panim Yafot's reading sends us deep into the paradox recorded and to some extent generated by the Book of Iyov.

Iyov initially serves G-d properly, and G-d rewards him accordingly. But the Satan then questions whether Iyov's service is **motivated** by those rewards, and would cease if Iyov lost all, so G-d allows the Satan to make Iyov the subject of a theological lab experiment. Iyov is given no opportunity to consent or decline to participate. Nonetheless, his steadfast refusal to blaspheme despite the greatest of provocations seems to prove the genuineness of his devotion.

Robert Frost points out in *The Masque of Reason*, however, that the test proves nothing **if** Iyov can imagine that G-d could permit such a test; "It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning." Otherwise, Iyov might just be assuming that the reward for passing the test would surpass all previous rewards.

But all readers of Iyov **can** imagine G-d permitting such a test! Iyov therefore teaches its readers that disinterested service of G-d out of pure devotion is possible; but in teaching this lesson, it ensures that G-d will never know whether any of its readers has achieved that state.

You may object that G-d knows what goods and what evils lurk in the hearts of men. But the conceit of Iyov is that G-d cannot conclusively know human motives-for-action directly; even He has to infer our motives from our

actions, and even He cannot know for certain how we would act in different circumstances. It follows that G-d could never know whether Avram passed Panim Yafot's test. Worse – by setting up the challenge/reward paradigm at the outset of their relationship, G-d ensures that no test can ever prove Avraham's absolute disinterestedness.

Here we must recall the rabbinic position, to which I am partial, that Iyov is a fiction. On this line of reasoning, the book may be intended to prevent G-d from knowing human motives absolutely. And on that basis, we can argue that G-d makes promises to Avram at the outset **in order to** ensure that Avram's motives will never be fully transparent, even to Him.

Why would G-d want this? Doesn't Iyov demonstrate how powerfully He should want the opposite? I have a possibly radical suggestion. In diametric opposition to Panim Yafot, I suggest that – according to Rashi – G-d makes reward obvious from the outset **so that** Avram will not allow religion to overwhelm his self. Even at the *Akeidah*, Avram is supposed to be thinking of the possibility that this is only a drill. Perhaps he would otherwise never have heard the angel telling him to stop, or else would have suspected the angel of being a despicable Satanic minion.

If G-d is just, and religious devotion is the right thing to do, it will inevitably be rewarded. It follows that for a human being to demonstrate absolutely selfless religious devotion, he or she must surrender any belief that the Object of their devotion is just. Such devotion is not pleasing to G-d. G-d is not exclusively just, but He cannot bear to be understood as excluding justice. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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