

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## TRANSLATING TORAH, NO DICTIONARY REQUIRED

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Genesis 11:28: *Haran died in the presence of his father Terach, in the land of his birthplace, in Ur Kasdim.*

Rashi 11:28: *"in the presence of his father" – (meaning) in the lifetime of his father. But in the midrash aggada there are those who say that he died through the agency of his father, that Terach complained about his son Avram before Nimrod about Avram having chopped up his idols and he (Nimrod) threw him (Avram) into a fiery furnace. Meanwhile, Haran sat and said in his heart: 'If Avram wins – I'm from his side; but if Nimrod wins – I'm from his side.' When Avram was saved, they said to Haran: "Whose side are you on?"*

*Haran said to them: "I'm from Avram's side."*

*They threw him into the fiery furnace and he was burnt up, and this is the meaning of Ur (=furnace) of the Kasdim.*

*But Menachem ben Saruk explained Ur as valley, as in Isaiah 24:15 "in the urim honor Hashem, and similarly (Isaiah 11:8) "meurat of a poisonous snake" – every hole and deep valley is called ur.*

Was Terach an idol merchant, and did Avram smash his father's idols? Was he thrown into a fiery furnace as a result, and miraculously saved? Modern Orthodox education today resolutely answers "no" to these questions, for a clear and compelling reason: many of our educators have not quite recovered from their own disillusionment on first discovering that this story is not in Chumash. Indeed, it may be that the memory of that shock – which I experienced myself – is the driving factor behind the privileging of "pshat" over "drash" in our Tanakh curricula and classrooms. It may also be past time that we got over it.

Nobody claims that every moment of Avraham's life is explicitly recorded in Chumash. Similarly, the characters he interact[ts] with had real lives outside his presence.

Kedarlaomer and his allies administered an empire, and Aner and his brothers made their livings in dramatic or quotidian ways the Torah simply doesn't bother to mention. The truth of a claim that Eshkol was a wine merchant could not be properly tested by examining whether the Torah mentions his profession, any more than the claim that Kedarlaomer hated blank verse but was madly fond of sonnets.

Now Kedarlaomer's taste in poetry probably played no role in Jewish history, and we might argue that anything the Torah leaves out is unimportant. This assumes that Torah is intended to be a self-sufficient, self-interpreting document that can be fully understood by those who know nothing outside the text. That assumption makes little sense in the text of Torah, which among other things seems to refer us on occasion to other books, but more importantly makes nonsense of the text of Torah. For example, the Torah does not contain a dictionary of itself, so how can one even begin translating it without appealing to a vast body of unwritten tradition?

The disillusionment we felt came rather because we felt that we had been taught the story as if it was actually in Chumash, or as if it could be easily derived from the text of Chumash. For example, one blogger, apparently a victim of such education, recently suggested that Chazal did not know that אור = Ur could be a place name, and so felt compelled to translate אור כשדים as the furnace of the Chaldeans.

Now Ur Kasdim is mentioned in Genesis 11:31 as well as 11:28. Verse 31 reads:

*Terach took Avram his son, and Lot the son of Haran – the son of his son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, wife of Avram his son, and*

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*they went out with them from Ur Kasdim to go toward the Land of Canaan, and they came as far as Charan and they settled there.*

Targum Yonatan translates אור in verse 28 as אורא, or furnace, but in verse 31 translates the whole phrase as דשדא אורא. In any case, I don't know any version of the story in which the entire family is thrown into the furnace, which I think means that everyone agreed that in verse 31 Ur Kasdim is simply a place name.

It should also be clear that Rashi's telling of the story here leaves out crucial details. When, and why, did Avraham smash Terach's idols? Why did Terach report his son to the king for this act of vandalism? How was Avraham saved from the furnace?

My suggestion is that Rashi is not deriving the story from the text here – rather, he is using the story, which he assumes his readers know independently, to explicate the text and make clear how and why Haran died. Note that he does this as well in 14:1 as an etymology for the name Amrafel, and in 14:10 to explain why it matters that the battle between the Four Kings and the Five Kings was fought in a quicksand environment.

This likely becomes obvious on reflection. Even if we take the name Ur Kasdim as referring to a fiery furnace, it tells us only how Haran died, not that Avram was saved from the same fate, let alone why he was consigned to that fate in the first place.

Here is another narrow textual source that might be suggested. In Genesis 15:7, Hashem identifies Himself as the One Who removed Avram from Ur Kasdim, and Nechemiah 9:7 makes the same claim about Him. The verb הוציא is what G-d does when He takes the Jews out of Egypt, and so perhaps there is a suggestion here that Avram needed rescuing. But none of this gets us any level of detail.

A different sort of argument notes that in the Book of Daniel Chapter 3, Shadrakh, Meishakh, and Eved Nego are thrown into a furnace for refusing to bow to the Chaldean Emperor Nebuchadnezzar, and miraculously saved. Perhaps the narrative of Avram is just a backformation, a midrashic transfer of plot elements from one character and context to another. But why this story? Why not save Avram instead by providing him with miraculous earth that turns into deadly weapons, or by angels staying the executioner's ax, or by clearing a dry path for him across a sea?

Finally, one might suggest with Nachmanides that the story about Avram was simply a tradition among the Jews that antedated Sinai, which the Author of Torah was entitled to presume they knew. But even if we accept this, it is only a partial solution, as the story exists in many different versions, and is conspicuously missing from several early lists of the Ten Trials of Avraham (where the number 10 came from is a topic for a different week).

The right question, I think, is not what generated the story in each of many versions, but rather why each of them was seen as both fitting with and adding to the arc of Avram's history and/or the narrative of Torah as a whole. We should focus not on the textual sources of the stories, but rather on their interpretive function, recognizing that other stories might well have served the same function. I believe that as a result we will end up in any case with a much broader set of sources.

We should start, of course, with understanding why G-d speaks to Avram. Providing a heroic backstory explains that well, although, as Ramban points out, it makes it harder to understand why the story is not in Chumash. Haran's death ties into an understanding of Avraham's life as a series of progressive akeidahs, in which every step in his religious progression is accompanied (at least so far as he knows) by the death of a beloved relative that he reluctantly bears some responsibility for (perhaps there is, or should be, a version in which angels save Haran but Avram never finds out). Casting monotheism as persecuted nonconformity explains why G-d opposed the (idolatrous) conformity pursued by the builders of the Tower of Babel (perhaps coerced conformity always tends toward the idolatrous, as it always substitutes something for God's unique Unity).

Finally, the Rabbis identify Shadrakh, Meishakh, and Eved Nego with Chaggai, Zekhariah, and Malakhi, whom they see as the last prophets. G-d's first and last calls to human beings are therefore paralleled. The question we must ask – and seek to answer with our lives – is whether the end of prophecy means that Avraham's mission has in significant part been accomplished, and our task since is to bring it to completion, or whether our task is merely to prevent a reversion to totalitarian Babel. Perhaps both answers are true.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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