



בראשית פרק טו פסוק א

אחר הדברים האלה
היה דבר ה' אל אברם במחזה לאמר
אל תירא אברם
אנכי מגן לך
שכרך הרבה מאד:

Among the challenges and joys of studying rishonim on Chumash are the times when their interpretations obviously emerge from a radically different cultural context, and we must decide whether to simply acknowledge the gap, to bring them to us through a bridging interpretation/cultural translation, or to cross over to them via a willing suspension of cultural assumptions.

Avravanal, because he thinks monarchy is halakhically optional and because his questions are more known than his answers, is often thought of as “more modern” than other classical commentators. Ben Zion Netanyahu’s biography radically undermines that impression, even with regard to the specific example of monarchy, and I want to argue that Avravanal’s immersion in courtier culture – even when he bitterly catalogues its flaws – actually makes him more distant than most from contemporary American Jews.

Let us study how he understands the aftermath of Avraham’s war to rescue Lot, and then consider whether to bridge, and if yes, which direction(s) traffic should move in.

Genesis 15:1 quotes a three-part message of G-d to Avram:

- a. Do not fear, Avram
- b. I (G-d) am your shield
- c. Your reward is very much

The relationship between the parts is not stated, so that plausible disambiguating translations include

1. Do not fear, Avram, because I am your shield and your reward is very much
2. Do not fear, Avram: I am your shield, and your reward is very much
3. Do not fear, Avram, because I am your shield: also, your reward is very much.

Abravanel seems to adopt the last version. He argues that Avram had two concerns following the war: that the defeated kings would regroup and attack him, and that it would have been better to keep the property of Sodom rather than returning it to its king. His description of Avram's fear is noteworthy both for its poetic force and for its apparent willingness to separate the pride/shame axis from the right/wrong axis.

Here is his psychological description of Avram:

Avram...had until now travelled through life naively and with utter security, working his land untroubled by any nemesis or animosity and sleeping "the sweet sleep of the laborer",...now he would of necessity be in constant fear each day and night, "sixty warriors surrounding" him "each grasping their sword out of fear" of enemies - this is doubtless a painful durance, especially for a man who has not been accustomed to that lifestyle - and the contingency of his life would constantly be evident to him.

In other words, Avram was afraid that he had entered politics. G-d therefore assures him that He would send angels to guard him, so that he would not need to live within Secret Service protection and with constant vigilance.

Note that Abravanel – unlike many previous and subsequent Rabbinic commentators – does not think Avram was in any way morally troubled by his own actions during the war, and therefore his Avram does not worry about punishment. According to Ibn Ezra et al, G-d reassures Avram that he will be rewarded rather than punished for arousing himself to rescue the oppressed from their oppressors, that he has "cleared the brambles from the vineyard" and not killed innocents. For Abravanel, Avram's concern is that those who rescue innocents are generally compelled thereafter to continue playing the chivalric part, and he has not been socially prepared to handle the stress of that role. Avram is not worried about being killed; he is worried about the lifestyle necessary to avoid being killed.

Because Abravanel's Avram does not need *moral* reassurance, his Divine Word does not need to contrast Avram with those he fought against. This yields the to--my-mind amazing result that Abravanel thinks the defeated kings would be justified in seeking to kill Avram:

יראה שאברהם, אחרי שנצח המלכים והחזיר את הרכוש למלך סדום, היה ירא ממה שעשה נגד המלכים פן יבואו עליו ויכהו - כי הנקמה ראויה לגדולי הנפש . . .

It appears that Avraham, after he defeated the kings and returned the property to the King of Sodom, was afraid because of what he had done to the kings, lest they come against him and strike him – **because vengeance is appropriate for the great-souled . . .**

In a dvar Torah some years ago I discussed Abravanel's reading of Parshat Zakhor as intended to maintain the appropriate passion of revenge among the Jews against any notion of moral equivalence that might arise during a historical cycle of violence. As a reader of Gerald Morris' Arthur series, my instinctive reaction to the knightly code is heavily colored by satiric condescension. But Abravanel's reading, as perhaps no other, accounts for the fact that Avram fights on the side of the kings whose cultures will shortly be described as so evil that G-d wipes them out utterly. Perhaps it is worth exploring Aristotle on great-souledness, and reading Mallory straightforwardly.

Abravanel's willingness to endorse knightly virtue as a value per se, rather than as a means to moral ends, emerges as well in his explanation of G-d's response to Avram's second concern. Avram is worried that he has enabled evil; G-d's response is that

it is inappropriate for one who receives a reward from a great king to receive a small reward from someone else, because this is a shame for him.

I'm not sure whether the shame attaches to the receiver, or the giver; more likely the latter. Either way, the response to Avram's pragmatic, consequentialist worry is that concerns of social honor are more important.

Here sympathizing with Abravanel is a bridge too far for me – I do not wish to understand either Avram or G-d as endorsing such a values hierarchy. At the same time, I acknowledge that Abravanel solves a serious issue – doesn't Avram know that "one should not serve the master for the sake of receiving a reward"? Why then, does G-d need to reassure him that "his reward is very much"?

Abravanel answers that the size of the reward is mentioned *to explain why* Avram's actions were correct.

However, Abravanel does not explain well the transition to the next verse, in which Avram seems to question the meaningfulness of the reward in light of his childlessness.

I welcome alternative explanations of G-d's answer that leave Avram acting *lishmoh* while explaining the flow of the conversation.

One student emailed this week to ask that the dvar Torah this week briefly eulogize Rav Ovadia Yosef z"l. The task is overwhelming, and while I agreed to speak for five minutes at Gann bemakom she'ein ish, I suspect that several readers of this list had direct contact with him as I did not, and many of you have more knowledge of his Torah. But perhaps I can add something to the portrait being competently drawn elsewhere.

First, I think that an appreciation of the value of pride and great-souledness, along the lines endorsed by Abravanel, may help us understand the magnitude of Chakham Ovadia's accomplishments for the Sefardi community and Sefardi Torah scholarship, and contextualize the legitimate reservations we have about what it took for that to be achieved.

Second, all the teshuvot I have read of Rav Ovadia impress me not only for their scholarship but for their deep humanity. He, as no other posek I have been touched by, made sure that halakhah was compatible with both noam and shalom. When issues of personal status came up, in beit din or outside, it was tremendously reassuring that, when it was clear what the answer should be, but I didn't have the head to justify that answer or the shoulders to carry it out, the question could be sent to Rav Ovadia with complete confidence that the right answer would be given, justified, and carried out – no one would suffer unnecessarily because a posek lacked knowledge, courage, or compassion. His death is therefore a great personal loss, one I am far from coming to terms with, and diminishes klal yisroel immensely. Yehi zikhro barukh.

Shabbat shalom

Aryeh Klapper

אברבנאל בראשית פרק טו

אחר הדברים האלה היה דבר ה' אל אברם במחזה לאמר אל תירא אברם אנכי מגן לך שכרך הרבה מאד.

יראה שאברהם, אחרי שנצח המלכים והחזיר את הרכוש למלך סדום, היה ירא ממה שעשה נגד המלכים פן יבואו עליו ויכוהו - **כי הנקמה ראויה לגדולי הנפש** - וחשב אברם שהיה עד עתה הולך בתום ילך בטח עובד אדמתו אין שטן ואין פגע רע ומתוקה שנת העובד, ושעתה יצטרך להיות בפחד תמיד כל היום וכל הלילה ששים גבורים סביב לו כלם אחוזי חרב מפחד אויב, וזה בלא ספק עמל מכאיב, אף כי לאיש אשר לא נוסה ללכת באלה ויהיו תמיד חייו תלויים מנגד.

וגם נסתפק אם היטיב בהחזירו את הרכוש למלך סדום בהיות הוא ואנשיו רעים וחטאים לה' מאד, ואולי היה יותר טוב להביא את הרכוש אל ביתו ולתנו לאכול את השומרים את ראשו.

הנה בעבור היות שתי המחשבות האלה בלבו של אברהם אמר לו ית':
אם לראשונה - אל תירא אברם אנכי מגן לך,

ר"ל שלא יירא מהמלכים ולא מהמונם כי הוא ית' יהיה לו מגן להושיע ולא יצטרך לגבורים שישמרוהו, כי מלאכיו יצוה לו, והוא יהיה תמיד מגן אברהם.
ואמנם לענין הרכוש שהחזיר - אמר שכרך הרבה מאד,

כלומר הטיבות במה שהשיבות את הרכוש אל מלך סדום, כי הנה שכרך הרבה מאד הלא הוא כמוס עמדי חתום באוצרותי, והמקבל פרס ממלך גדול אין ראוי שיקבל דבר מועט מאדם אחר, כי חרפה היא לו.

ABRAVANEL

It appears that Avraham, after he defeated the kings and returned the property to the King of Sodom, was afraid because of what he had done to the kings, lest they come against him and strike him – **because vengeance is appropriate for the great-souled** – and Avram, who had until now travelled through life naively and with utter security, working his land untroubled by any nemesis or animosity and sleeping “the sweet sleep of the laborer”, though that now he would of necessity be in constant fear each day and night, “sixty warriors surrounding” him “each grasping their sword out of fear” of enemies” - this is doubtless a painful duration, especially for a man who has not been accustomed to that lifestyle - and the contingency of his life would constantly be evident to him.

He was also in doubt as to whether he had done well by returning the property to the King of Sodom, seeing as he (King of Sodom) and his minions were evil and great sinners against G-d, so that perhaps it would have been better to bring the property to his (Avram's) own house and use it to feed those who guarded his (Avram's) head.

Because these two thoughts were in Avram's heart. The Blessed said to him:

Regarding the first – “Do not be afraid, Avram, I am your shield”,

meaning that Avram should not be afraid of the kings or of their multitudes, because He the Blessed would be a shield for him to save him, and Avram would not need warriors to guard him, “because Hashem would command His angels regarding him”, and he would constantly be the Shield of Avraham.

And regarding the property that he returned – Hashem said “your reward is very great”, which means to say that you have done well in returning the property to the King of Sodom, because your reward is very great “behold it is concealed with Me sealed in My vaults”, and it is inappropriate for one who receives a reward from a great king to receive a small reward from someone else, because this is a shame for him.