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PROPHECY AND MORAL DISCOMFORT: AN ABRAHAMIC MODEL

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In Chapter 17 of Genesis, G-d speaks to Avram/Avraham five times. Four of those speeches are consecutive; the fifth follows Avraham's four-word plea "Would that Yishmael live before You". The speeches seem partially redundant. However, Rav Yosef Ibn Caspi spectacularly claims that the entire chapter takes place in the mind of Avraham and reflects his continually deepening intellectual engagement with an initial revelation.

Ibn Caspi's unified reading of the chapter is supported by two other literary points. First, the chapter has an envelope structure, with both beginning and end reporting Avraham's age. Secondly, the first revelation is preceded by Hashem appearing to Avraham, and the last is followed by "G-d finished speaking with him, and G-d ascended from upon Avraham". (Ibn Caspi's comments with my rough translation can be found at <https://moderntoraleadership.wordpress.com/2021/10/13/draft-rav-yosef-ibn-caspi-on-prophetic-experience/>)

Let's assume that Ibn Caspi is correct in general that prophets often need time and thought to understand their own experience. Every prophet is to some extent **נִיבָא וְלֹא יָדַע מָה שְׁנִיבָא**, a conduit for the Divine who speaks more than they understand. On the other hand, most expressions of non-Mosaic prophecy are actually interpretations.

Ibn Caspi understands Avram's initial revelation as verbal = consisting of words. But certainly, some prophetic experiences are pictorial, and I think some philosophers argue that only Mosheh was capable of experiencing revelation verbally. For example, Yeshayahu and Yirmiyahu's inaugural prophecies appear to be descriptions rather than transcriptions. I think the best understanding of Sefer Yirmiyah is very much akin to Ibn Caspi's understanding of Genesis 17; Yirmiyah spends his life trying to understand and convey one or maybe two fundamental revelations. The tragedy of the book is that either we nor he ever finds out the meaning of "to build and to plant".

However, there is at least one other model for explaining Genesis 17. Exodus 33:19 – 34:3 consists of four consecutive Divine responses to Mosheh's question **הֲרֹאֵנִי נָא אֶת כְּבוֹדְךָ**. Professor Moshe Bernstein taught me that these responses (or at least the first three; I may have added the fourth) reflect increasing concessions as Mosheh stolidly refuses to react gratefully or joyously to G-d's responses. "I will cause all My goodness to pass before you etc." (poker face). "You cannot see my Face, because no human can see Me and live!" – (shrug). "Behold a place with Me etc. (shrug). "Carve for yourself two

tablets like the first ones." – (reaches for chisel). In this model, consecutive reports of Divine communication reflect G-d kebeyakhol changing His mind in response to human dissatisfaction.

Ibn Caspi might respond by pointing to a key literary difference. In Exodus, we are given no description at all of how Mosheh reacts to G-d's initial communications. By contrast, Genesis 17 describes Avraham's as falling on his face in response to the first revelation, and as falling on his face and engaging in internal dialogue before responding verbally to the fourth revelation. So perhaps the best approach is a hybrid, in which Avraham's both grows in understanding and also implicitly challenges G-d.

Let's begin to play out how such an approach might play out in our text. I look forward to your critiques of my attempt and especially your own interpretations of the text using this approach.

Here is the first Divine speech:

אֲנִי־אֶל־שְׁמַי
הִתְהַלַּקְתָּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תָּמִים:
וְאֶתְנֶה בְּרִיתִי בֵינִי וּבֵינֶךָ
וְאֶרְבֶּה אוֹתְךָ בְּמֵאֹד מְאֹד:

I am E-I Shad-dai
Walk before Me and be *tamim*
and I will situate My covenant between Myself
and you
and I will increase you very greatly.

This section has four key elements:

1. Identification of G-d
2. Avram's responsibilities
3. Covenant (possibly conditional on fulfillment of 2)
4. Growth.

Each of these elements is presented succinctly, but we don't yet know whether that brevity reflects clarity or confusion. For example, we don't know whether the term "Shad-dai" was previously familiar to Avram, or whether the idea of 'walking with G-d' had an experiential analog in either polytheistic religion or human relationships.

Let's examine if and how these same elements appear in the second Divine speech.

אֲנִי
הִנֵּה בְּרִיתִי אֵתְךָ
וְהָיִיתָ לְאָב הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם:

וְלֹא יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת־שְׁמֵךְ אַבְרָם וְהָיָה שְׁמֶךָ אַבְרָהָם
כִּי אֲבִי־הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ:
וְהִפְרִתִי אֶתְךָ בְּמֵאֹד מְאֹד וְנִתְּתִיךָ לְגוֹיִם וּמְלָכִים מִמֶּנּוּ
וַיֵּאָוֶר:
וְהַקְמֹתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וּבֵין זַרְעֶךָ אַחֲרָיִךְ
לְדֹרֹתֶם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם
לְהַיּוֹת לְךָ לֹא־לֵהִיִּם וְלִזְרַעֲךָ אַחֲרָיִךְ:
וְנִתְּתִי לְךָ וְלִזְרַעֲךָ אַחֲרָיִךְ
אֶתְּלֹאֲרֵץ מִגְרִיבֶיךָ אֶת כָּל־אֲרָץ כְּנָעַן לְאַחֲזֹת עוֹלָם
וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לֹא־לֵהִיִּם:

I

behold My covenant with you
You will become father of a trove of nations.
Your name will no longer be called Avram; Your
name will be Avraham
because I have situated you as father of a trove (*av
hamon*) of nations.
I will make you very greatly fruitful
I will ?situate you? as nations
kings will emerge from you
I will establish My covenant between Myself and
you
and between your descendants after you, for all
their generations, as an eternal covenant
to be for you an Elo-him, and for your descendants
after you.
I will give to you and to your descendants after you
the land of your sojourning, the entire land of
Canaan, as an eternal homestead
and I will become for you an Elo-him.

1. Identification of G-d

Here G-d plainly eschews identification (“I am E-I Shad-dai” – “I”) in favor of description. The notion of being/becoming a relational Elo-him may also be the key element of this. But it may be much of the section expounds “Shad-dai”.

2. Avram’s responsibilities

This section contains no explicit mention of human responsibilities, although one might argue that becoming a relational E-lohim requires a partner. From a literary perspective, though, it seems more likely that the renaming of Avram to Avraham parallels the obligation to walk with G-d and be *tamim*. Perhaps being the “father of a trove of nations” implies responsibility for humanity.

3. Covenant (possibly conditional on fulfillment of 2)

G-d clarifies that the covenant is multigenerational and eternal (assuming that *berit olam* doesn’t mean that it lasts only until the next Jubilee year). There is no mention of conditionality.

4. Growth.

Avraham will be very greatly fruitful, become many nations, and have royal descendants. It’s not clear how the “nations” he will become relate to the “trove of nations” that he will be father to.

Overall, I think it would be reasonable, in Ibn Caspi’s framework, to see this section as resulting primarily from intense

meditation on the phrase “I will increase you very greatly”, with the primary outcome being that “increase” refers to having many descendants. The promise of the Land responds to the pragmatic challenges of population growth.

The transformation of an individual into family into multiple nations inevitably carries with it profound moral challenges. These relate both to tensions among those descendants, as population growth may lead subgroup identities to become more powerful than the overall family, and between those descendants and others. There may be tension between the description of Avraham as a father of multiple nations, and the statement that his descendants will inherit only one land (remembering that the land was not large enough to hold Avraham and Lot together). It may be that Avraham needs to internalize the realities of his future before he can begin to deal with their moral implications.

The third Divine speech concretizes the covenant as circumcision. This is a human responsibility, and failure to circumcise is a nullification of the covenant. But I think the deeper significance of this section is that it makes clear that Avraham’s descendants are intended and required to set themselves apart. He is not a universal father.

However, the obligation of circumcision also applies to males who are not biological or legal descendants =

וְכֹרֵשׁ מִנְּתִיבֵי יָמִים וְיָמֹל לָכֶם כָּל־זָכָר לְדַרְתֵּיכֶם וְלִיד בְּיַת וּמִקְנֵת־קָסָף מִכֹּל בֶּן־נָכָר אֲשֶׁר
לֹא מִזְרַעֲךָ הֵוא:

So, Avraham’s descendants. This extension reminds me of Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky z”l’s argument that Judaism would be racist if it did not allow for conversion.

The fourth Divine speech is entirely about Sarah. Why is she introduced at this point? Here I think Dr. Bernstein’s approach is useful: the third speech must have been dissatisfying to Avraham. The question is whether his dissatisfaction arose from a sense that Sarah had not been given a role as Foremother, or else because G-d’s failure to mention Yishmael specifically left open the possibility that Yishmael was not a covenantal descendant. On that reading, G-d’s answer is oblique, and Avraham is compelled to actively ask “If only Yishmael would live before You”. G-d’s response is a concession – “Regarding Yishmael – I have heeded you”, and Yishmael is now promised a great but separate destiny. G-d leaves after speaking – it’s not clear whether Avraham had more he wanted to say.

The overall thrust of this reading is that while Yishmael is circumcised, the dialogue surrounding the command of circumcision is the beginning of what Rav Amital z”l called *akeidat Yishmael*. Avraham does not immediately understand, and perhaps resists knowing, that his covenant with G-d will not extend to all his descendants. When G-d ended their conversation (or: when Avraham’s understanding of his own prophetic experience plateaued), he still had questions about how his status as “father of a trove of nations” could be squared with Yishmael’s non-covenantal destiny. Perhaps part of our human responsibility within the covenant is to keep asking those questions.

Shabbat Shalom!

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