

Parsha Lech Lecha (A Discussion of ATBASH by Rabbi David Fohrman)

The parsha Lech Lecha has at least 9 components including the critical verse at the beginning telling Abraham to leave his homeland, his birthplace and his father's house and is told to go to the land that God will show him. The parsha discusses, his journey to Egypt where he must lie about his wife, his receiving riches from Pharaoh, his argument with Lot, the war between the nations, the covenant of the parts and the covenant of the Brit Milah or circumcision, Abraham's rescue of Lot, his relationship with Hagar, and the birth of Ishmael.

I have chosen an idea which is well known in the Jewish Bible, especially in Jeremiah and is known as the concept of what is called ATBASH. This is a cipher where the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet aleph is encrypted to the last letter of the alphabet, Tav, and the second letter Bet is combined with the second last letter of the alphabet, Shin and so forth, and this encryption gives us the word ATBASH.

Rabbi David Fohrman in discussing his commentary on Lech Lecha from his Alpha Beta Academy which can be found on the Internet every week uses the first 17 passukim of Chapter 17 which are found starting on page 89 and concluding on page 92.

Please turn in your Etz Chayim Chumash to page 89 and we will start with sentence 3. The idea of Rabbi Fohrman is to create a chiasm between the 3rd and 17th passukim and then the 4th and 16th passukim to obtain a final conclusion about the ultimate importance and purpose of Abraham's journey into Canaan. Chiasms are structured A-B-C.....C'B'A'. Eventually as one reaches the center of the chiasm, the final conclusion of the text in this portion of the parsha is obtained. Simply put, a chiasm is a repetition of similar ideas in reverse sequence. The importance of the chiastic structure is found in its hidden emphasis. So instead of quoting the great masters of Torah commentary such as Rashi, Maimonides, Nachmanides, Sforno, or Ibn Ezra, the chiastic structure is a commentary within the Torah itself. The Torah does this to pack a lot of meaning into a relatively small amount of space.

Let us start with passuk 3 on page 89 and see where we can conclude with a critical idea of this part of Lech Lecha. This conclusion at the end of the chiasm will be the take away message from this D'var Torah. Thus the first passuk will mimic the last passuk and the second passuk will mimic the second last passuk and so forth. When we get to the end of this ATBASH pattern, we may conclude with the most important message that the Torah is telling us in this portion of the Parsha. The chiasm is always pointing toward the center. This a way for the Torah to give a commentary about the text.

It is telling us about the main idea of the text. This part of the Torah is about the covenant of circumcision. This is the story of God's revelation of the idea of Brit Milah.

Abraham is 99 years old and God comes to him and said there is going to be a deal here. There is going to be a Covenant. There are going to be obligations here. Obligations that God gives to Abraham and obligations that Abraham gives to God.

Let us start with verse 3 on page 89. "Abram threw himself on his face,". This is a fascinating thing. Towards the end of this chapter on page 92, you are going to find this very same phrase in passuk 17, "Abraham threw himself on his face," It turns out that this is the beginning of this chiastic structure. The sort of ATBASH pattern. Now look at verse 4 on page 89. "My covenant is going to be with you; you are going to be the Father of many nations". Now if you look at passuk 16, it turns out that Sarah is going to be the mother of many nations. Now in verse 5, there is a name change, your name is not going to be

Abram anymore, your name is going to be Abraham. This is the third part of the chiasm. And wouldn't you know it, in passuk 15, there is a name change for Sarai, "you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah."

Now take a look at the very first word in passuk 6. V'hiphrayti, I will make you exceedingly fertile. Now at the bottom of the chiasm, you see the word at the end of verse 14, Heyfar. The same letters, hey, peh, raish, but with an opposite meaning. Heypharti means I will multiply you but Heyfar means I will nullify.

Look at the larger element, the fourth element, I will multiply you greatly, God said, and kings shall come forth from you. You will not only have many children but I will make them into a great nation. They will become one autonomous body. All of these individuals will be one nation. But look at the fourth from the last element in passuk 14. Any male who does not follow this covenant of Brit Milah, circumcision, will be cut off from his kin, he has broken my Covenant. So God is saying that if you follow my covenant, I will make you a great nation, and Kings will come forth from you and if you do not follow my covenant, that person shall be cut off from his kin. You are not part of the nation. Because you nullified the covenant.

This is the way that the Jewish nation is different than any other nation. Every other nation comes about by happenstance. A King conquers land and people become beholden to him for some protection. But the Jewish nation is different because God created this nation with certain obligations. And this covenant is at the center of it. If you violate the covenant, the nation is going to fall apart. The covenant is essential for nationhood.

Let's look at the next element. Verse 7: To establish my covenant with you, a covenant forever. Now look at the next to last element. Verse 13, thus my covenant of circumcision will be an everlasting pact.

Now we are moving toward the center of this text. Verse 8, I am going to give this land to you and your offspring to come. 3 things that are being said. I am going to be your God and a God to your children. Idea 3 is I am going to be your God and a God for your children. And sandwiched in between, I am going to give you this land. Lo and behold, it is exactly the same structure. At the bottom of the chiasm, the next element has that same 3-fold structure. You shall circumcise because it is part of covenant. You shall be circumcised at the age of 8 days.

The centers kind of connect. What is it that God is promising Abraham as His part of the deal? God is promising two things. 1) Children that will coalesce into a nation. And 2) Land for the nation to live in.

The promise for the children to coalesce into a nation was dependent upon the Brit. You could not have a nation without the Brit. Any person without the Brit would be cut off from the nation.

Now it is the same thing for Land. The center of these two chiasms mirror each other. And what is the center about? The center for God is that I am going to give you land. What is the center of the bottom of the chiasm? But for man, he is going to keep the Brit. THE LAND IS DEPENDENT UPON THE BRIT. Also the coalescence of the children into a uniform nation is dependent upon the Brit.

That is why, by the way, in Sefer Yehoshua (Joshua), before they went into the land, what do they need to do? Everyone stops and those that were not circumcised were circumcised. You do not go into the

land without that Brit. Both great promises, children and land. This is essentially tied to the covenant between God and Abraham.

Finally, we are ready for the center of the chiasm.

The promise from God to Abraham is that a nation will rise up from him and Sarah, and occupy the land that God is showing him, and the obligation Abraham has to God is to keep the covenant of the Brit Milah.

In conclusion, God has an obligation to Abraham and is the promise of many children who will become the nation of Israel and Abraham has an obligation to God and that is to keep the Brit Milah forever. Thus the very center of the chiasm is Land and Children (God's obligation on the one hand and the Brit Milah, Abraham's obligation to God).

The concept of the Atbash or the chiasm I thought would be of interest because next week in Parsha Va'era, an Atbash occurs in the binding of Isaac. I sincerely hope you have enjoyed this new concept of ATBASH. But why is the Brit Milah so important as Abraham's obligation to God?

I would like to conclude my D'var Torah this morning by reviewing a crucial dialogue between a Roman governor and Rabbi Akiva on the significance of the Brit Milah and its relationship to Judaism. These words appear in a Midrash on Parsha Tazria, possibly written by Rabbi Tanchuma, called Tanchuma Tazria 5-7.

Turnus Rufus, the wicked Roman governor, asked Rabbi Akiva, while he is in jail waiting to be murdered by the Romans, "Whose deeds are better---Those of God or those of humans?" Rabbi Akiva amazingly replied, "Those of humans". Rabbi Akiva then showed the Roman governor, 2 stalks of wheat made by God and 2 baked rolls made by humans. Rabbi Akiva said "are these baked rolls not more beautiful". Then the governor asks the question "Why do you circumcise yourself?" Rabbi Akiva replied "I knew you would ask that question, which is why I pre-empted and told you that things made by humans are better than things made by God."

Turnus Rufus's initial question is audacious, surpassed in its daring only by Rabbi Akiva's surprising answer. We would expect the great sage to laugh at the suggestion that the omnipotent and benevolent Master of the Universe can even be compared with earthly beings, who, we learn in Bereishit, are made from dust and will return to dust. And yet, Rabbi Akiva's almost blasphemous response dares to rank the work of humans higher than that of God. In his estimation, circumcision, the symbol of our covenant, acts as a bold reminder that God did not create a perfect World; rather, God left the world unfinished, inviting us to be partners in creation. The original context of the first circumcision in Bereishit provides some indication that perhaps the boldness displayed by Rabbi Akiva is itself a central part of the covenant — a covenant that is not merely God's charge to us to *complete* the world, but a Divine mandate to seek what's broken or unjust and right these wrongs.

The circumcision covenant gave Abraham the right to challenge God and protest in next week's parsha in regard to Sodom and Gemorrah. As children of Abraham, it is the covenant of circumcision that allows us to boldly declare God's world broken, to challenge the world as it is, and even to challenge God. But along with this right comes the responsibility to be soldiers of justice. Not only are we permitted to stand up for justice, even when it means challenging God - we are required to.

I would like to conclude my remarks with a very brief description of the first Patriarch Abraham. Rabbi David Kimchi (13th century Provence), also known as Radak, spells out Abraham's qualifications: "God awakened him from among the idol worshipers and every place he went, wherever he set his feet, he spoke of truth and righteousness, saying leave your idolatry which has no substance and worship the Creator of the world. He taught them the ways of faith. There is nothing more awesome than this."

Shabbat Shalom