SIDRA OF THE WEEK: לך לך

1. For the first seventy years or so of his life, Avrom had dedicated himself to teaching everyone he could reach that the idol-worship and paganism that had enslaved almost the whole of Mankind was wrong and degrading. Instead of the lives of men being ruled by their blind superstitions and their fear of imagined, capricious gods and forces, Avrom taught that in truth the world and all of creation is the work of the One True G-d Who has called everything into purposeful existence. He it is Who oversees everything in existence and He it is Who is the True Judge of all His creatures, Who grants just reward and punishment for all human behaviour. Avrom thus brought about the most fundamental change in the story of Mankind, for his teachings ultimately free humanity from the serfdom of idolatry and paganism. He brought everyone who came into contact with his teachings a new-found realization of the human potential and its genuine purpose and showed how all of Mankind can elevate itself and fulfil its spiritual yearning when it conforms with G-d's Will. But in teaching this, Avrom incurred the wrath of the priest castes of the old order of the pagan world and those kings and rulers whose domination and tyranny was founded on their subjects' ignorance and superstition. For this reason, Avrom had had to leave his birthplace, for the king there, Nimrod, saw in him a challenge to his authority. [*See last week's* **SIDRA OF THE WEEK** : נח.] Despite this opposition, wherever he went, Avrom sought to open the eyes of the people to the Sovereignty of HaShem and thus he indeed founded a new world order.

2. Even though he was firm in his belief and trust in HaShem and was able to convince hundreds and thousands of people to throw off the shackles of idol-worship and paganism, he had never received even a single revelation from HaShem Himself to encourage him in his life's work, for HaShem wants people to come to the true belief in Him through their own efforts, without any direct prompting from HaShem Himself. Thus, it was only when Avrom was about seventy years old that he received his first prophecy. In this, his first direct communication from HaShem, he was told to move away even further from his homeland, in the locality of the town of Ur. (Ur, today's el Muqeiyar, not far from present-day Kuwait City, subsequently became a part of that country settled by the later-emerging Chaldeans, hence the misnomer "Ur of the Chaldees.") Although Avrom had already moved away from Ur with his father, Terrach, and was at Chorron (today's Haran) in the Land of the Two Rivers — about six hundred miles away from Ur — HaShem now directed Avrom to distance himself also from the influences of his birthplace and his father's house, for Avrom's teachings were to be free of any of this old culture and background.

3. HaShem promises Avrom that He will make him into a great nation, that He will bless him with fabulous wealth and that He will make him vastly famous. In this way, people will more readily listen to his teachings for it is the common reaction of people to dismiss out of hand a radically new idea if the one who teaches it is of poor social standing, but to

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treat with more respect and to consider the merits of that message more carefully if the new ideal is taught by a very rich man. Thus, the teachings of Avrom will come to be accepted by the peoples of the world and, through the nation that descends from him, will be continued for all time and in every place.

4. Avrom obeys HaShem's command and, without knowing exactly where he is to go, except that it is to the south, he travels southwards. When he arrives in the land then inhabited by the Kenaanites, HaShem tells him that this is the Land that HaShem will give to Avrom's children. But just then a famine breaks out in that very Land (though the neighbouring countries were not affected). This was another of the tests of Avrom and demonstrated how he did not complain about his descendants being given this Land which seemed to be prone to famine and drought. Avrom's trust in HaShem remains steadfast and without any complaint or question, he travels down to Egypt where there is an abundance of food and water for his family and the hundreds of people who have chosen to be his followers.

5. As soon as he arrives in Egypt, however, his clanswoman Sorai (who is his wife) is taken against her will to Par'o, king of Egypt, for she was exceedingly beautiful and the Egyptians, unaccustomed to such beauty, thought that she would be fitting as the wife of their king. Par'o is severely punished by HaShem for this abduction, but he is spared from further punishment when he makes amends and honours Avrom, bestowing great wealth and many possessions upon him. Avrom, knowing that HaShem would save his wife from any harm (in fact, this was another of the tests that demonstrated his trust in HaShem) regarded the fame and fortune that had been so suddenly thrust upon him as the Will of HaShem, for now people held him in high esteem and some awe, and his message about HaShem being the Compassionate G-d and Father of all Mankind made a deep impression upon everybody. *(It is worthy of note that the barbaric rite of human sacrifice, which was practised in ancient Egypt, has been shown to have suddenly ceased completely at the very time which corresponds exactly with Avrom's short sojourn there.)* Indeed, throughout Avrom's life and travels, it was HaShem's plan that he should come into personal and direct contact with kings and rulers, who always showed the greatest genuine respect to the man that they called the "Prince of G-d."

6. After this, Avrom returns to the Land of Kenaan, where the famine has ended (its purpose, Avrom's visit to Egypt and his unnatural rise to fame, being accomplished) but there is strife between the shepherds of Lot (the nephew of Avrom, who travelled with him) and the shepherds of Avrom, on account of their vast flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. Even though he had benefited greatly through being related to Avrom (the king of Egypt had lavished gifts upon him, too) Lot now ungratefully presumed to be the inheritor of his ageing uncle, as Avrom had no children. But their argument was made more painful because of Lot's own dishonest behaviour towards the Kenaanite inhabitants of the Land, which reflected badly on Avrom himself and what he represented. But in any case, Lot found life with Avrom and his G-d too restrictive for his libertine tastes, and he chose to move away from Avrom so as to settle near to S'dom, a town which already at that time had a reputation as a place of wickedness.

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7. Just as soon as Lot has moved away, HaShem again assures Avrom that the Land, at that time occupied by the Kenaanites and their fellow clans, will indeed be given to Avrom's descendants, the Jewish People.

8. It was around this time that the five kings of the cities that made up the Confederation of Sdom rebelled against their distant overlords to whom they had sent tribute in years past. These mighty kings of the north (one of them was Nimrod) then marched against the rebel city states with a vast horde of fighting men and in the battle of these five kings and the four, the revolt was mercilessly crushed and all the people of the five towns of the Confederation were taken captive, together with their possessions. Lot, who had by then settled in the vicinity of Sdom, was taken too, and the news of Lot's capture was brought to Avrom, who immediately pursued the victorious kings and their fighting men. In a night time raid, Avrom, with his trusty three hundred and eighteen man, attacks the kings of the north and rescues all the captives and their possessions, together with Lot and all his possessions.

9. Upon his return, Avrom is greeted by the king of Sdom (who comes out of hiding once Avrom has completely routed the kings of the north) and Avrom returns all the possessions to him, refusing to take anything for himself from the king of Sdom, saying, "Let it not be said that the king of Sdom has made me rich when it is HaShem alone Who has prospered me."

10. HaShem appears to Avrom and reassures him that He will greatly reward him for his good work. HaShem instructs Avrom to set up the Covenant of the Pieces and HaShem promises Avrom that despite his advanced age, he will indeed be the father of the great and renowned People of G-d, the Jewish People. He is told that they will possess the Land as promised, though only after being enslaved and even cruelly treated. But after thus having been tested and cleansed through their sufferings, and having learned to live under the yoke of foreign masters, the Jewish Nation will also always know to trust in HaShem as their Redeemer from their slavery and troubles. After learning obedience to their Egyptian slave-masters they will be well-trained to instead place themselves under the Authority of HaShem and His Torah. And having suffered persecution as foreigners and strangers, they will have learned to sympathize with the foreigner and stranger and to teach the lesson of the brotherhood of Man to the whole world. Thus, their Egyptian Experience would form an essential part of this training and preparation to be the People of G-d and His messengers to all Mankind.

11. During their short stay in Egypt, Par'o, besides the gift of material wealth that he had bestowed upon them, had shown to Avrom and his wife much honour and high regard. Even though Par'o himself, and his people, were steeped in idolatry and immorality, and even though they chose not to give up their own ways, nevertheless, they recognized the truth and goodness of Avrom's new teachings. In fact, because Par'o saw in Avrom such goodness and nobility of spirit, and, even more, when he experienced the miracles done to protect Sorai when she was abducted and withheld by him, he wished his own daughter, Hoggor, to join Avrom's household. "It is better that my daughter should be a member of this household — even as a servant girl — rather than she should be a

mistress of another's house." Thus it was that Hoggor, the Egyptian princess, daughter of Par'o, became the handmaiden of Sorai.

12. *(Incidentally, much the same had happened many years before, with Nimrod, the king of Avrom's country of birth, who had sent Avrom and his family away. Before they had left, Nimrod, ostensibly as a rare token of respect, had given his own son to Avrom to be Avrom's servant. Really, he had intended to plant him in Avrom's household that he should report back to him Avrom's plans of military conquest or rebellion, for that was the only real threat that he could envisage in the ascendancy of Avrom that had been foretold by his clairvoyants. In the event, this man, called Eliezer, became the true servant of Avrom and is held up as the epitome of loyalty and trustworthiness.)*

13. At Sorai's instigation, Avrom marries Hoggor so that she, Sorai, who was not able to have children of her own (and in any case was now long passed childbearing age) would be able to foster Avrom's children from Hoggor. However, when Hoggor sees that she is pregnant, she imagines herself superior to Sorai, who has not been blessed to have children from Avrom, and because of Sorai's unfairly harsh treatment of her, she runs away. An angel of HaShem appears to her and she is ordered to return to Sorai her mistress, and at the same time she is told of the future birth of her son Yishmo'el, whose descendants will be numerous and from whom will emerge a nation that will have a great influence over the families of man.

14. Avrom was ninety nine years old when HaShem appeared to him and commanded him concerning Bris Mi'loh. He tells him also that his name is no longer to be "Avrom," meaning "the leader of the people of Arram" (his country of origin) but "Avrohom," meaning "the father of a multitude of nations." Sorai's name, meaning "my princess," is to be changed too, to "Soroh," meaning "the princess," for she is to be the princess over all. HaShem tells Avrohom that he shall have a son from Soroh and they shall call him "Yitzchok" ("meaning, "happy laughter," on account of Avrohom's joyous response to the foretelling of his birth) and that the Jewish Nation is to be from him. In answer to Avrohom's concern about Yishmo'el, he is told that Yishmo'el, too, will become a great nation, for he too is the son of Avrohom.

15. Immediately after this communication from HaShem (even before he had a calm moment in which to gently tell his wife Soroh of HaShem's assurance that she will give birth to a child) Avrohom makes the necessary preparations and, as commanded by HaShem, circumcises all the males of his household, including his son Yishmo'el (who was thirteen years old at the time) and then himself. This, the Bris Mi'loh, the Covenant of Circumcision, is the sacred sign on our physical bodies of that special Covenant between HaShem and the Jewish People and is called, to this day, "the Covenant of Avrohom our father, peace be upon him —"בְּרִיתוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ עָלָיו הַשָּׁלוֹם".

For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra לך לך please go to HAFTORAHS.