The Revolution of Terah and Avraham

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The Revolution of Terah and Avraham

The opening of Lekh Lekha raises numerous questions. Why did God choose Avraham? Why was it necessary to choose anyone? Why does the focus of Sefer Bereshit suddenly shift from a broad universal focus to a narrow, particularistic one?

Let us begin with an observation about the structure of Sefer Bereshit. More than any other book in Tanakh, Bereshit can be identified as a book of toledot, of listing generations. There are only 13 times in all of Tanakh that a passage is introduced by the words elleh toledot or zeh sefer toledot (“These are the generations of…” or “This is the book of generations of)—and 11 of those are in Bereshit. This expression is so dominant that one could argue that it is the defining literary element of the book. That is, Bereshit is essentially comprised of 11 books of toledot, with Chapter 1 as an introductory chapter—and each unit of toledot ends just before the next one begins.

One interesting literary element defining each book of toledot is that it begins by repeating some information that we already know. Thus, toledot Adam begins with the birth of Shet, even though the end of the previous section concluded with that information; toledot Noah begins by telling us about his three sons, even though we were told that just a few pesukim earlier; toledot Yitzhak begins by telling us that Avraham had fathered Yitzhak. This insight leads us to a somewhat puzzling observation—there is a toledot Terah, but no toledot Avram or toledot Avraham. How are we to understand this?

We would need to begin by defining what we believe toledot refers to. A survey of the 11 records of toledot reveals that “toledot” means neither children nor generations, as many would like to think. One need look no further than the first time it is used—toledot shamayim ve-ha-aretz, the “toledot” of the heavens and the earth (Bereshit 2:4). The heavens and the earth have neither children nor generations. It would appear that the term refers to an outcome or result, as in Mishlei 27:1—lo teda mah yeled yom—who knows what this day will give birth to, or, what will be the final outcome of what this day brings? What was the result of the creation of shamayim va-aretz? In the end, what came from Noah? The word toledot can almost be understood as meaning legacy. What was the legacy of Yitzhak? What was the legacy of Yishmael, or Esav?

Sefer Bereshit, then, would be the unfolding of the legacy of God’s creation, followed by the legacy of human involvement in that creation, followed by successive legacies. What was the final legacy of Yishmael? That the promise given by the angel to his mother came true—Yishmael would be a great nation and dwell as a nomad. What was the legacy of Esav? That his father’s blessing came true, as he finds a place to settle, establishes (or takes over) a kingdom, and plants his permanent roots outside the Promised Land.

Applying this observation to our earlier question yields a most bizarre conclusion. Since there is a toledot Terah but no toledot Avraham, Terah leaves a legacy under which Avraham’s entire life’s work is subsumed. How are we to understand this? Hazal understand Terah as nothing more than an idolater. His idolatry is unquestionable, and is mentioned explicitly in a pasuk in Yehoshua (24:2). Yet an investigation of his introduction to us in Bereshit reveals another aspect to Terah, one that is truly revolutionary. Terah is introduced to us at the end of Parashat Noah. Right from the start it is clear that he represents the end of one era and the beginning of a new one—each previous generation is introduced as having borne a single son (there were others, but they were unimportant to the Torah’s story), Terah has three named sons. Terah fits into a pattern in Bereshit, in which

significant figures have three sons. Adam has three named sons; Lemekh has three named sons; Noah has three named sons; and now it is Terah.

Interestingly, there appears to be a pattern within those three sons. One son is clearly outside of the main line of the story (Kayyin, Ham, Haran), one is the central figure from whom the story will continue (Shet, Shem, Avram) and one son plays a "supporting role" (Hevel, Yefet, Nahor). Beyond that, however, there is an anomaly in the description of Terah and his family—his family. The Torah's description of Terah's family members is excessive in its mention of their relationship to him. Take one example. After introducing his three children, the death of Haran and the marriages of Avram and Nahor, the Torah describes a journey Terah initiates (11:31): "Terah took Avram, his son, Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, Sarai, his daughter-in-law, the wife of his son Avram …". Every relationship mentioned in this pasuk is unnecessary—we were just told that Avram is his son, that Lot is his grandson (from Haran), and that Sarai is Avram's wife. The text could have easily been written as: "Terah took Avram, Lot, and Sarai …," yet it chose to accentuate the familial bonds. What the Torah seems to be emphasizing is that the value of family, and the responsibility for family, was a paramount value for Terah. This is further accentuated by the verb va-yikah—he took. The very fact that Terah took his orphaned grandson suggests a sense of responsibility for grandchildren (contrast that to Noah who curses his grandson). But the verb va-yikah is used in the same passage to describe acts by Avram and Nahor, who took wives. This "taking" was apparently also an act of taking responsibility for orphans, as Milkah and Sarai (possibly another name for Yiskah) were their orphaned nieces. Orphaned nephews are adopted, orphaned nieces are married. That is how they are cared for. (This may be why Hazal suggest that Mordekhai was married to his orphaned cousin, Esther.) The value of family, and the responsibility for family, is Terah's legacy.

It is not surprising that the end of toledot Terah indicate this as well. As we suggested earlier, each book of toledot ends just before the next one begins. Toledot Terah ends with death of Avraham and his burial. It is the first time in the Torah that we have explicit reference to a man being buried by his children—the sense of family responsibility has been extended to children's responsibility for parents. Even more, it is both Yitzhak and Yishmael who bury Avraham. Even the family torn by strife is unified by the sense of responsibility for parents. It is also not surprising to find that Terah's son, Nahor, bears the same name as Terah's father. Terah honored his father by bestowing his name on his son.

Let us examine more closely the marriages of Avram and Nahor. Reading the first 11 chapters of Bereshit we are struck by the description of 20 generations of man; not just mankind, but man. There are 20 generations of men begetting men. The only exceptions are the strange references to Lemekh's wives (4:22–24) and the anonymous references to the wives of Noah and his sons. To be sure, the absence of women in the narrative should not be surprising; the narrative reflects the culture and mores of the times. In this strictly patriarchal society, the primary role of women was to carry the man's seed for the next generation of men.

Enter Terah's children. Avram and Nahor are the first individuals in Shet's line to be described as having taken wives. Even more—it becomes clear early on that Sarai is barren. In a society for whom women's function was to serve as incubators for the man's seed, taking—and keeping—a wife who will not bear children was nothing short of revolutionary. If such a revolution were to take place, it would make sense for it to happen within the sphere of the man who effectively "invented" family values.

Aside from the fact that Avram's entire life is subsumed under toledot Terah, and we now understand that it is Terah's legacy of family which Avram continues, there is additional textual evidence that Avram continues—or completes—what Terah set out to do. Let us look at two pesukim, written with only five pesukim separating them. One describes Terah's journey from Ur Kasdim, the other describes Avram's journey from Haran. (Bereshit 11:31 and 12:5) The structure of the two pesukim is identical. Even the unnecessary descriptions of the family relationships (we already know that Sarai is Avram's wife and that Lot is his nephew) is copied in the description of Avram's journey. And just as Terah took responsibility for his orphaned grandson, Avram takes his orphaned nephew under his wing.

The key difference between the two descriptions is that whereas Terah planned to go to Canaan he never arrived. By contrast, Avram finished the journey that Terah started. Both literally—in terms of the arrival in Canaan, and figuratively—in terms of developing the notion of family, Avram completes Terah's journey. It does not surprise us that most of the challenges Avraham faces revolve around his family. The command to leave his father, Sarai with Pharaoh in Egypt and with Avimelekh in Gerar, Lot in Sedom, Hagar and Sarai, Yishmael and Akedat Yitzhak, all involve sacrifices related to family. The man of family must endure challenges to his core values.

All of this begs the question—why is family so important? Our answer, to put it simply, is that the Torah understands the family as the core unit for the

transmission of values. This is actually explicit in the Torah. Prior to the destruction of Sedom, the Torah informs us of God's choice of Avraham and His decision to reveal His impending plan to him. "Avraham will become a great and mighty nation, and through him will come blessing to all other nations of the earth. Since I know that he will instruct his children and his household after him, that they will observe God's way in doing justice and righteousness—that is why Avraham will receive all of which has spoken about him" (Bereshit 18:18–19). The opening words identifying Avraham as the one who will become a great and mighty nation and through whom will come blessing to all of the other nations, are a clear reference to the beginning of Lekh Lekha, where God initially chooses Avraham and promises him precisely those things (12:2–3). If so, then this passage is where the Torah explicitly identifies the reason for the choice of Avraham—because Avraham will use the vehicle of the family as the unit of transmission of the values of tzedakah and mishpat.

Let us explore this innovation of Avraham from a number of angles. If the Torah highlights Terah's legacy as the one who founded the notion of family, to the extent that Avraham's entire life is subsumed under it, we must be curious as to why God did not choose Terah and instruct him with lekh lekha. The answer here is apparently clear—Terah was, as stated in Yehoshua, an idolater. Although Terah's innovation of family was significant, it was insufficient, since he was unprepared to leave his idolatry. Perhaps even more interesting is the question of tzedakah and mishpat, which Avraham apparently championed. From where did Avraham learn these values, and why were his predecessors not chosen? One could easily argue that these were Avraham's innovations, yet it appears from the text that Avraham carried with him an earlier tradition. Hazal identify this earlier tradition as the "yeshiva of Shem and Ever," and this bears a closer examination.

Our introduction to Ever's legacy is introduced by an unusual comment. Back in Parashat Noah, when identifying the legacies of Noah's sons (toledot benei Noah—Bereshit 10:1), Shem is identified as the father of all of the "Ever-ites" (benei Ever—10:21). This is a strange appellation on two accounts. First, Ever has not been identified yet. He is first introduced three pesukim later. Second, when Ever is introduced, he is only one of Shem's great grandchildren. Apparently, the Torah is suggesting that there is some link between Shem and Ever. Even more, there is a link between Shem and all those identified with Ever. Although at the end of Parashat Noah that identification is still a mystery, that mystery is cleared up later as Avram is identified as an Ivri—a descendant of Ever (14:13). (This appellation is later given to Yosef, and then to Yosef's brothers. They are all the benei Ever referred to in Parashat Noah.) Thus the text is suggesting that there is

some legacy which began with Shem, was passed to Ever, and then to all those who are identified with Ever. Shem's precise legacy is left unclear—it might have begun with the incident after the Mabul in which he protects his father's dignity and receives his blessing, and it may have to do with Avraham's notions of tzedakah and mishpat.

All this returns us to our original question. If, indeed, Avraham carries a tradition from Ever, passed on through Shem (or, in Hazal's language, a tradition that Avraham learned in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever), why were Shem and Ever not chosen by God for the lekh lekha command and blessing? The answer, I believe, is that while Shem and Ever may have been champions of particular values, they were unable to find an appropriate vehicle through which to transmit those values. Shem waited for three generations before he found someone worthy to teach; Ever waited even longer. Absent a reliable vehicle for transmitting values, they had to wait until a worthy recipient of their tradition could be found. Avraham, however, presented a new model. Avraham married the values of family he learned from his father with the values of tzedakah and mishpat, and understood that the family had the potential to serve as the vehicle for the transmission of other values. Terah, as an idolater, lacked those other values; Shem and Ever lacked the reliable vehicle of transmission of their values. Hence God's testimony about Avraham's commitment to instruct his children and his household in upholding God's values of tzedakah and mishpat (Bereshit 18:17–19).

The significance of the Terah-Avraham revolution in Bereshit cannot be overstated. The first toledot is toledot shamayim ve-ha-aretz, creation itself. What was the result, or the legacy, of that process? It was a two-fold legacy. On the one hand, it was the legacy of a shattered family, of the first fratricide. On the other hand, it was the legacy of Enosh, who began to call in the name of God (4:26). Humans had the capacity to recognize God, but they would need some help in putting their families in order. The second toledot, that of Adam, yielded an even more troubling dichotomy. There were individuals, like Noah, who managed to find favor in God's eyes (6:8), but for the masses, their thoughts and actions were becoming increasingly bad (6:5). That left God with little choice but to start anew. Following the Mabul, toledot benei Noah leaves us with a world that is repopulated and diverse. Indeed, God has successfully brought about a fulfillment of His original intent of peru u-revu u-milu et ha-aretz, albeit not without considerable effort and intervention (the dispersion from Bavel helped considerably).

The question that remained was whether humanity would once again call in God's name, as did Enosh. With the choice of Avram that question was finally answered. Avram heeds God's instruction, journeys to Canaan, and when he reaches Bet El he builds an altar and calls in God's name (12:8). With the emergence of Avram, who transforms into Avraham, we are returned to a state which existed prior to the Mabul. The return to this state, however, was not a step backward but a step forward. For whereas Enosh's calling in God's name comes in the backdrop of the first failed family, one that did not transmit its values, Avram's calling in God's name is accompanied by his championing of the value of family. With the vehicle for the transmission of values in place, the story can progress.

Yet as we know, although Terah and Avram innovated the notion of family, the families in Bereshit are hardly models worthy of emulation. Tensions between spouses and siblings abound. Those tensions lead to multiple breakups, planned vengeance, and even plots to kill. Indeed, it is my contention that all these family challenges are an essential part of what hindered the process of Bereshit. Strife in the families of the Avot prevented God from moving forward. After all, how could we continue if the central vehicle we need for the transmission of the values God wants to propagate is dysfunctional? This, I believe, is the underlying tension in the story of Yosef. If Yosef disappears, if the brothers don't somehow figure out how to maintain their nuclear unit, then God's plan cannot continue. It is only at the very end of the story, after Yaakov's death and the fear expressed by the brothers and Yosef's response, that it becomes clear that there is a mutual commitment. It is only with the mending of the family that the story can continue. That is why Bereshit ends with a story of a family that reunites following a generations-long conflict. That is why at the end of Bereshit we hear of Yosef raising his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren (50:23). That is why Bereshit can close with Yosef's understanding of his need for his brothers, and of the long-term destiny of his people. And that is why immediately following Bereshit we see the transformation of a family into the seed of a nation.