

Shavua Tov

Weekly  Parsha

A Road Awakening! Torah Commentary
By Glenn McWilliams

Torah Portion: *Lech Lecha*

לך לך

“Go Yourself”

God said to Abram, 'Go away from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you'

Vayomer Adonay el-Avram lech lecha me'artsecha umimoladetecha umibeyt avicha el-ha'arets asher ar'eka

Scripture for study:

Bereshit (Genesis) 12:1 - 17:27

Within the first words YHWH spoke to Abraham there is a very powerful commandment with immediate and prophetic ramifications.

“Now YHWH had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee:” (Genesis 12:1)

The Hebrew words are made emphatic by their redundancy. The words “Lech Lecha” (LAMED KOF, LAMED KOF) literally means “Go for yourself” or “Go alone”. There are several different ways in which we may understand this command. First we may simply understand that this command is for Abraham himself and no one else. Clearly by the fact that YHWH tells him to separate from his kinsmen and even his father’s house it is implied that Abraham alone carries this unique calling. Just as Noah found favor in the eyes of the Holy One, so it appears that Abraham likewise found favor in the eyes of the Creator. We may also understand the command to “Go for yourself”, as being an instruction for Abraham’s own benefit. In other words we see in these words YHWH’S instruction to Abraham to remove himself from the pollution and corruption of the peoples around him and to go to a place where blessing may be experienced. In this aspect of the command we may hear echoes of YHWH’S invitation to Noah and his family to remove themselves from the coming judgment upon the world for it is in their own best interest to enter the ark. It may be somewhat difficult, however, to understand the benefit of leaving one’s country, kinsmen, and fathers house in order to follow YHWH, when it is met with numerous trials and testing. The Mishnah tractate Avot declares,

"With ten temptations was Abraham our father tempted, and he stood steadfast in them all, to show how great was the love of Abraham our father."ⁱ

There is great debate about what these ten tests were. I will include two such lists for your considerations.

Rashi gives the following tests.

1. *Abraham hid underground for 13 years out of fear of King Nimrod who sought to kill him for destroying his father's idols and preaching YHWH as the only Elohim.*
2. *Nimrod threw Abraham into a fiery furnace to kill him but Abraham emerged unscathed.*
3. *Abraham was commanded to leave his family and homeland.*
4. *Was forced to leave the new land that YHWH showed him due to famine.*
5. *Sarah was kidnapped by Pharaoh's officers*
6. *The kings captured Abraham's nephew Lot forcing Abraham to fight with his neighbors*
7. *YHWH reveals to Abraham that his offspring will suffer under the reign of four monarchies.*
8. *At an advanced age Abraham is called to circumcise himself.*
9. *Abraham was commanded to drive away Ishmael and Hagar*
10. *Abraham was commanded to offer up Isaac.*

Rambam gives this alternative list of tests.

1. *Abraham is exiled from family and homeland.*
2. *There is famine in Canaan after YHWH promised him to become a great nation*
3. *The corruption in Egypt that resulted in the abduction of Sarah*
4. *The war with the four kings*
5. *His marriage to Hagar after having despaired that Sarah would ever give birth*
6. *The command of circumcision*
7. *Abimelech's abduction of Sarah*
8. *Driving away Hagar after she had given birth*
9. *The very distasteful command to drive away Ishmael*
10. *The binding of Isaacⁱⁱ*

Regardless of which list one agrees upon, the point is that it is often difficult for us to understand that such trials and tribulations are given for our own benefit. The Ramban teaches that the Creator knows that the person being tested will indeed persevere and pass the test. YHWH does not impose trials that are beyond the capacity of the individual being tested.ⁱⁱⁱ Here we may recall the teachings of the apostle Shaul;

"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but Elohim is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." (1 Corinthians 10:13)

The Ramban goes on to teach that Elohim only tests righteous people who will do His will, not the wicked who will disobey. Thus the Torah's trials are for the benefit of those who are being tested. Since man has free choice, the righteous man must find the inner strength to choose to

do what is right. By doing this the righteous man or woman translates their potential for doing good into actually doing good thus becoming a good person. According to Ramban, actions, rather than potential are what favorably tip the scales in the divine economy.^{iv} Here we should remember that the Hebraic understanding of doctrine is “to do” (Heb: *asah*) as opposed to merely believing. Understanding the purpose of testing helps to give us strength when enduring trying circumstances in our lives. While at the time of testing it may seem that YHWH is against us. In reality, it is as Ramban has declared; that these testings are for our benefit.

There are at least three positive functions evident in each testing. The first purpose of testing is to **reveal**. For an event to be called a test it must drive us to a new limit beyond our comfort zone and previous knowledge of ourselves or Elohim. When circumstances drive us beyond where we have been in the past we begin to see what we are made of, how strong we are, how patient, how faithful, how willing, and how convicted we are. Trying circumstances also tend to reveal all of our short comings and weakness as well. This brings us to the second reason for testing, **refining**. As we have just said, when YHWH turns up the heat it tends to bring out the dross in all of us. When this dross is revealed we are then able to address these short comings in our lives and remove these flaws from our character. This leads us to the final purpose of testing which is to **strengthen** us. By revealing and refining from our character everything that hinders our walk with Elohim we are strengthened and tempered for serving in the kingdom. Like progressive resistance weight training each time we stretch beyond our previous limit we become a little stronger. When YHWH calls us beyond our limits He not only reveals what we are made of but he also reveals Himself. When we survive these trials by fire, we realize that we do so by the hand and mercy of the Holy One of Israel. With each progressive test we learn that we may trust YHWH more and more. When we understand this process we begin seeing the trials and tests as opportunities for YHWH to reveal the depth of his love and grace toward us, as well as being an opportunity for us to grow in faith and character for the sake of the kingdom. These tests then begin to form the basis for YHWH to reveal the depth of his love for us, as we likewise demonstrate the strength and depth of our love for him.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch points out another benefit in YHWH’S call to Abraham to leave his country, kinsmen, and father’s house. Much in the same way that Noah struggled to lead a righteous life in a corrupt world, so too Rabbi Hirsch points out that Abraham lived in the world that created the tower of Babel and sought to elevate itself over and above the Creator of the Universe. It was this generation that raised up tyrants and debased men into submission and bondage to such men. To be called out of such a godless place would clearly be a great benefit. Thus Hirsch contrasts Abraham’s calling to the world around him.

“Was Abraham’s first stand in keeping with the spirit of his times-in the midst of the temples of Chaldea, Babylon, Assyria, Phoenicia, and Ancient Egypt? In those lands the doctrine of the day was the worship of power and sensuality. The Asians worshipped pleasure, while the Ancient Egyptians deified power and stifled personal freedom. Except for a few faint traces the God-idea had almost vanished. And here, at a time when everyone else seeks to establish himself, to integrate, there arises Abraham who is to leave his homeland, give up his rights of citizenship, become an outsider of his own free will and hurl his protest into the face of the idols worshipped by all the nations. Such conduct demands courage and a firm belief in the truth of one’s inner convictions and one’s

awareness of God; it demands Jewish awareness and Jewish obstinacy. This was the first situation in which Abraham had to put his calling to the test.”^v

Clearly Abraham is called to separate himself from his country, kinsmen, and father’s house. But this does not necessarily imply that it is for the purpose of selfishly escaping judgment. Just as we discovered in last week’s Torah portion^{vi} YHWH is all about choosing life^{vii}. So we came to understand that everything that happened to Noah was not only for Noah’s sake but for the sake of all mankind. So it should also be understood in the calling of Abraham. As Rabbi Hirsch pointed out the idea of the One True Elohim had nearly been lost. Idolatry was rampant upon the earth. Every tribe and tongue of people had their bevy of gods that they worshipped. Creation was being worshipped more than the Creator. From out of this cacophony of idol worshippers came the voice and walk of Abraham who was called to leave all of this behind and to cross over to become the root of a new vine planted by the Creator in a new land. Abraham, like his Elohim, was to stand alone. The calling and command to Abraham was that he would dare not to integrate or assimilate but be perfect and walk before YHWH. Abraham’s obedience to this calling marks the beginning of the history of the Hebrew people. It is a history and calling that we desperately need to understand and embrace today.

In his book *A Short History of Judaism; Three Meals, Three Epochs*, Jacob Neusner breaks down the history of Israel into three periods as reflected in three meals celebrated by the children of Israel. The first epoch of time is described as “The Priest’s Meal with God in the Temple of Jerusalem: the Judaism of Sacred Place and Holy Time.” This epoch covers Israel’s history from the giving of the Torah through the building and functioning of the Temple in Jerusalem. The second epoch is “All Israel’s Meal with God, No Place in Particular: The Judaism of Any Place and All the Time.” This epoch covers the time after the destruction of the Temple, when the rabbis began searching for ways to preserve the customs and culture of this unique people without its central element the Temple Service. The final epoch is described as being “All Israel’s Meal at Home, on the Special Occasion of Family Gathering: The Judaism for Once in a While.” There is within this description of Israel’s history a picture of a slowly declining culture and sense of calling. Neusner writes,

“From ancient time Jews had defined themselves as only Israel, that is, a people that dwells apart, a people that was holy to God. In Islam and Christendom they found a useful place for themselves as a distinct group, understood by the dominant faiths within the framework of those faiths, understood by themselves on their own terms. Christendom wiped out pagans but accorded to Israel the right of survival as a subordinated and – at best – a tolerated minority. Islam accorded the same status to both Christians and Jews. For its part, living its distinctive life, Israel, the Jewish people, ate its own food, wore its own clothing, spoke its own language, pursued its own particular crafts, and found in the Torah the complete and exhaustive account of what it was to be and to do. Israel was only Israel, nothing else – without apology.”^{viii}

Due to various economic, and political changes in the west, such as the French Revolution and the American Constitution it became possible for the children of Israel to become something other than just Israel. The Constitution and Bill of Rights for example declared that all men are created equal and therefore have certain rights regardless of what people group they come from

or belong to. This gave the Jews the opportunity to become citizens of another country. Neusner goes on to write,

“The new politics defined the social order not by groups but by individuals. Whatever else people were, they all were one thing – citizens of a common nation-state. In the debates on the Rights of Man, French revolutionaries who favored the inclusion of Jews within the France that was being created in the 1790s accorded to the Jewish people the rights of citizens, but to Israel as a social entity no recognition whatsoever. For their part, Jews, particularly in Western Europe and the United States, welcomed the new order. They accepted the notion that they could be Israel and American, British, French or German. This meant that the simple definition of Israel that had formerly served because they corresponded to the social world in which Jews lived, no longer sufficed. People had to figure out what it meant to be both “Israel” that is , Jewish, and also American, German, British, or French...Being “Israel” – and that alone – no longer defined the limits of the everyday life of Jews.” ix

Sadly this attitude of accommodation and assimilation lead to an attitude of practicing one’s faith in the confines of one’s home or synagogue but not in the eyes of the public. Neusner describes it as follows,

“Be a Jew at home, and a human being when you go out, meaning, difference from Gentiles was acceptable in private, at home and in the family, while in the shared life of the city where people lived, Jews should not differ from others. Consequently, the Judaism that had been defined in ancient times would live in the family.” x

While we have seen the righteousness of Noah^{xi} and Lot^{xii} compared to that of their generations Rabbi Hirsch warns;

“No one may say of himself, I am as good or as righteous, as is the fashion here nowadays. Every individual is directly responsible to God for his personal conduct. If it becomes necessary, if the principle idolized by the majority is not the one which is truly divine, then the individual must go alone, his own way with God.” xiii

Clearly the calling given to Abraham through the commandment Lech Lecha, is to separate himself from the masses of those living around him. Let us take careful note of the progressive nature of this departure. If we were to fulfill this calling one would assume that we would leave our father’s house, then journey out of our neighborhood, and eventually out of our country. But this is not how the Torah lists the journey. The Torah lists the journey in the exact opposite order. This is so because the Torah is speaking not only about our physical movement but also that of heart. Thus YHWH tells Abraham first to leave that which is least dear to his heart, his country, and then his extended family until finally he is ready to leave even his father’s house. Here again we see a fundamental principle of Torah being taught, it is not potential but action that matters. We see this again later in the Torah portion concerning the covenant of circumcision.

“This is my covenant, which ye shall keep between me and you and thy seed after thee; every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the

flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you." (Genesis 17:10-11)

Notice that in the beginning of this text YHWH refers to circumcision as the covenant. In the second part of the text however, YHWH says that circumcision is just a token of the covenant. Rabbi Hirsch explains that a commandment always has two parts; the physical act and the spiritual and moral teaching underlying the act. It is therefore never enough simply to mechanically perform the commandment devoid of a motive of love for YHWH hand his creation. Nor is it enough to philosophize and ponder a commandment lovingly but never perform it.^{xiv} We witness this principle in the teachings of Yeshua and the specifically about circumcision in the writings of Shaul.

"But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The First. Yeshua saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of Elohim before you." (Matthew 21:28-31)

"Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonorest thou Elohim? For the name of Elohim is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written. For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision. Therefore if the uncircumcision keeps the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfill the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law? For he is not a Jew which is one outwardly; neither is circumcision, which is outward in the flesh; But he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter whose praise is not of men but of God." (Romans 2:23-29)

Let us be very clear here that Shaul is not saying that we do not have to be circumcised. If the uncircumcision is to keep the Torah then they must fulfill the Torah commandment to circumcise their male children on the eighth day. What Shaul is saying is that being circumcised in the flesh no more makes one a child of Israel than where wearing a cross or being sprinkled with water makes one a Christian. The external actions must be the expression of a true heart felt desire to serve YHWH by keeping his commandments.

So it is that when YHWH called Abraham to "Lech Lecha" he had was not only to physically separate from his past but also with his heart as well (lech lecha carries with it an alternate yet much deeper meaning . . . Abraham, "go out *from yourself*"). We witness that Abraham quickly fulfilled the calling in the flesh, leaving his father's house, then traveling from his town and kinfolk and eventually leaving even his country. Emotionally however we should note that Abraham did not so quickly fulfill the command.

“So Abram departed as YHWH had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abraham was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son...” (Genesis 12:4-5)

It was not until Abraham came into the new land that he finally separated from his father’s house when he separates himself from his nephew Lot.

“And the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together: for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s cattle and the herdsmen of Lot’s cattle: and the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled then in the land.” (Genesis 13:7)

Here we see that Abraham’s disobedience, though well intentioned, ultimately led to strife and a diminishing of the intended blessing. Realizing the error of his way, and fearing that the name of YHWH would be blasphemed among the Gentiles by the strife between he and Lot, Abraham repents and seeks to correct the problem by dividing the blessing of the land with Lot.

“And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdsmen and thy herdsmen; for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? Separate thyself, I pray thee from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or it thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left.” (Genesis 13:8-9)

Oh, that we would learn from our father Abraham how to deal with such disputes. Notice that Abraham acts out of concern for the honor of YHWH first, that he be not blasphemed by the Gentiles due to our rude and violent attitude toward our brother. Next, notice that Abraham desires peace with his brother even over the promised blessing of the land. We should also remember that the right hand is the hand of blessing. Thus when Abraham offers Lot the choice of the right hand, he is offering him the best and choicest of the blessing. Near sighted Lot of course chose based upon the lust of his eyes instead of thought for YHWH. Here we see a great contrast between Abraham and Lot. Abraham, on the other hand, was willing to give the best for the sake of the honor and glory of YHWH, while Lot was willing to cast his lot with the depraved and wicked men Sodom for personal honor and gain.

For our study however we need only realize that it was after Abraham completed the commandment to separate from his father’s house that YHWH confirmed the blessing with him.

“And YHWH said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever.” (Genesis 13:14-15)

There are several important lessons that we should learn from what has been said already. First we should realize that it is not enough for us to think about doing the Torah, or simply incorporating the Torah into our already established lives. Keeping (Heb: *shamar* – to guard) the

Torah is about leaving the past behind. We cannot truthfully keep Torah and still be holding onto old Christian customs and mindsets. We are not to secretly keep the Torah at home in private while publicly doing all in our power to fit into the world around us. Like Abraham we must learn to walk before YHWH. If we are to be a child of Abraham we must learn to walk in the faith of Abraham.^{xv} To be a child of Abraham and a recipient of YHWH'S promised blessings means we must LECH LECHA. We must step out and separate ourselves from the past life and begin following YHWH with all of our heart. Yeshua said it the best when he said,

“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of Elohim.” (John 3:5)

Another lesson that we should realize is that incomplete obedience is the same as disobedience and brings strife instead of blessing. For obedience to be true obedience, however, it must generate from a heart that desires to keep YHWH'S commandments out of love for Him and His people. Finally we should realize that YHWH desires that we serve him with all our mind, heart and strength. We cannot serve YHWH and hold onto our connections to the old world.

“No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other.” (Matthew 6:24)

“He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross and followeth after me is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10:37-38)

“If any man come to me and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children and brethren and sisters, yea and his own life also he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26)

“And Yeshua said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of Elohim.” (Luke 9:62)

With all of this said concerning the calling to separate from the world around us, we should realize that this does not mean that we are to become elitist in our attitude or isolated in our living. Clearly the calling to be separate from the world is not just for the benefit of Abraham but for the world itself. This becomes clear in the blessing itself.

“Now YHWH said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great, and thou shalt be a blessing. And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee; and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

By faithfully and obediently keeping YHWH'S command, Abraham becomes a light in the darkness, proclaiming an alternative to the many false gods of the world he left behind. By the miracles, deliverances, and blessings extended to Abraham and his descendants the nations will begin to see the truth of YHWH ELOHIM. But for this truth to be illuminated in the world

around him Abraham must keep himself separated from the world and neither assimilate nor synthesize with the world around him. Abraham and his descendants are being asked to be perfect and walk before YHWH. Abraham understood the cost of this calling. It required him to leave everything of his identity and heritage behind. Abraham also realized that this calling was not something that he would or could do alone. While he may be a willing vessel, it was YHWH who would have to do the miracles, delivering, and blessing. Here we witness that YHWH is not only asking Abraham to commit himself and his seed, but the Holy One is also committing himself to this mission for the sake of all creation.

For years I have been hearing that the commission of Genesis 12:1-3 was an unconditional covenant made by YHWH with Abraham. What we see in Genesis 12:1-3 as well as Genesis 13:14-18 are simply the promises of YHWH, these are not covenants. As Abraham completes the calling to separate from his father's house, and Lot departs from Abraham, Now Abraham's complete obedience merits a changed relationship with YHWH. It is not until Genesis 15:1-20 that YHWH binds himself and enters into a covenant relationship with Abraham.

"In the same day YHWH made a covenant with Abram." (Genesis 15:18)

We see this same pattern elsewhere in the Torah as well. In last week's portion, YHWH calls Noah to build an ark and gather animals in a specific fashion. Both of these things were unusual requests. After seeing that Noah was indeed willing to submit to the will of the Creator he then declared,

"But with thee will I establish my covenant;" (Genesis 6:18)

But it is not until the flood is over and Noah and his sons come off the ark that YHWH finally makes his covenant with Noah.

"And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you;" (Genesis 9:9)

"And I will establish my covenant with you; ...: (Genesis 9:11)

"And I will remember my covenant which is between me and you..." (Genesis 9:15)

"And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it that I may remember the everlasting covenant between Elohim and every living creature.." (Genesis 9:16)

Here we see a pattern of Noah being called, and then tested, and finally a covenant is entered into. We see the same pattern in the book of Exodus. YHWH makes the promise of a covenant relationship while Israel is still in captivity, but this covenant is not made until after Israel is tested at the Red Sea and in the wilderness that YHWH enters the covenant with Israel.

“Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am YHWH and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments: and I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you an Elohim:” (Exodus 6:6-7)

“Then said YHWH unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law or no.” (Exodus 16:4)

“Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine.” (Exodus 19:5)

Only after these trials did YHWH bind himself to his word and the children of Israel. So it is with Abraham. Abraham did indeed walk with YHWH, but was concerned for the assurance that YHWH would fulfill the promise of descendants. It was at this time that YHWH entered into a covenant with Abraham. After again promising Abraham that seed from his own body shall be his heir and that his descendants shall be as numerous as the stars in the heavens YHWH gives Abraham specific instructions concerning the cutting of the covenant.

“Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtle dove, and a young pigeon. And he took unto him all these and divided them in the midst and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not. And when the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away. And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them, and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And thou shall go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. And it came to pass that when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. In the same day YHWH made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I give this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates: the Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.” (Genesis 15:9-21)

Many preachers and teachers declare that the Covenant of the Cutting, or the Covenant of the Pieces is an unconditional covenant. They teach this because we are told that Abraham fell into a deep sleep, and that only a smoking furnace and a burning lamp, representing the presence of the Holy One passed between the pieces. In a normal covenant both parties in the covenant would agree on the terms of the covenant and then bind themselves to the covenant by walking through the pieces. Clearly in this text only the Holy One passes through the cuttings. Therefore it is widely taught that this covenant is binding on YHWH alone, and is therefore

unconditional to Abraham. I disagree. I believe that this is only half of the covenant. From chapter 12 of Genesis we have been listening to the Creator promising Abraham seed. Clearly YHWH had a plan for Abraham to have descendants. But after the events of the cutting of the covenant, Abraham returns home to Sarah with news of the promise.

*“Now Sarai Abram’s wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, YHWH hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.”
(Genesis 16:1-2)*

The fruit of this coupling between Abram and Hagar is the child Ishmael. We will address him in a moment. But first let us focus upon Sarah’s answer to Abram. Notice that Sarah declared that it was YHWH that restrained her from having children. We should recognize that there is a pattern in the Tanak of other women who likewise suffered from barrenness. Barrenness was considered a shameful thing. It was often understood to be a reproach from YHWH. But what is also clear is that sometimes YHWH is preparing a vessel that will bring forth at a certain time as YHWH needs. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah and Elizabeth were all chosen vessels. They all suffered the shame of barrenness and yet all were vindicated when they brought forth leaders for Israel. Thus Sarah had perceived correctly, it was YHWH that restrained her from having children until the proper time had arrived. As we shall see timing in this matter is everything. What Sarah did not understand was why YHWH restrained her from having children. This demonstrates the importance of submitting to the will of YHWH even when we do not understand its purpose. The story of the conception and birth of Ishmael and all of the strife that follows was not the plan of YHWH, but the fruit of the misguided effort of Abraham and Sarah to fulfill in their own strength that which YHWH promised he would do. Therefore, for the sake of argument, let’s pretend that this never happened. Let’s pretend instead that Abraham went home and told Sarah about the covenant and they both waited upon YHWH. If this happened there would be no chapter 16. So rip it out of your bibles! What comes next? Chapter 17, which begins with YHWH promising to make a covenant with Abraham.

And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, YHWH appeared to Abram and said unto him, I am the El Shaddai; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face and Elohim talked with him saying, As for me behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name anymore be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee in their generations, and an everlasting covenant to be an Elohim unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, and I will give unto thee and to thy seed after thee the land wherein thou are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their Elohim. And Elohim said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou and thy seed after thee in their generations. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep; between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every

man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations...." (Genesis 17:1-12)

We should immediately recognize the similarities between the covenant of the cutting and this covenant. They are both promising land and seed. We should also note that they both involve cutting. This is because they are two halves of the very same covenant. Remember that if we did not have the interruption of Abraham and Sarah's misguided attempt to fulfill the promise of YHWH in their own flesh we would be reading chapter 17 immediately after chapter 15. We would clearly understand that these are two parts of the same covenant. Why is this so important to understand? Because it explains why Isaac inherits the land and not Ishmael. As the story reads right now, Ishmael is Abraham's first born male child. Generally the first born son is the heir. Ishmael fits the criteria in that he is Abraham's seed. He is also circumcised on the same day that Abraham was circumcised.^{xvi} It would appear here that Ishmael and his descendants should be the rightful heirs of the covenant promises, and the land of Canaan. This is what the war in the middle-east is all about. But what does the Torah teach? Isaac is the heir of the covenant. Here we must ask ourselves why? What did Isaac do that Ishmael did not do? The answer is simple. YHWH restrained Sarah from having children until after Abraham was circumcised. Ishmael, like Abraham bore the token of the covenant, but only the seed of Isaac actually entered the covenant by passing through the cutting! Just as YHWH passed through the cutting in chapter 15 thus entering into the covenant, so the seed of Isaac will likewise pass through the cutting of Abraham's circumcision and thus become the second party of covenant. Ishmael bore the sign but never passed through the cutting, and therefore Isaac and not Ishmael is the rightful heir of the land and covenant promises.

There are numerous ramifications to this reality that are beyond the scope of this study. But for now let us focus simply on the fact that we have been called and chosen to be the children of Abraham. We do this by leaving the world behind us, that we may cross over into the covenant relationship with YHWH Elohim. Let us not put our hand to the plow and look back, but let us look to YHWH and submit to his will for our lives, even if this means we walk alone.

SHAVUA TOV !

ⁱ The Mishnah; Avot 5:3, Herbert Danby, D.D, Oxford University Press Pg. 455

ⁱⁱ The Stone Edition The Chumash, Mesorah Publications, Ltd. Pg. 100

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid Pg. 54-55

^{iv} Ibid

^v The Pentateuch, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Judaica Press, Inc. Pg. 60

^{vi} Noach Genesis 6:9-11:32

^{vii} Deuteronomy 30:19

^{viii} A Short History of Judaism: Three Meals, Three Epochs, Jacob Neusner, Fortress Press, Pp. 171-172

^{ix} Ibid

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Genesis 6:9

^{xii} 2 Peter 2:6-7

^{xiii} The Pentateuch, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Judaica Press, Pg. 60

^{xiv} The Stone Edition The Chumash, Mesorah Publications, Pg. 75

^{xv} Galatians 3:7

^{xvi} Genesis 17:23-24