

# PARASHAH ELEVEN

Genesis 14:1–24; Isaiah 41:2–14; Hebrews 7:1–19

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## *Living Righteously in a Fallen World*

Immediately after the announcement of blessing upon Abram, the providential circumstances of his life test his faith. Famine in the land makes him go south to Egypt for help, where he is confronted with the personal safety of his family, especially his attractive wife, Sarai. Though Abram faltered, nonetheless God honors His word of blessing and brings Abram back to the promised Land richer than ever. So rich, in fact, was Abram and his extended family, that they finally decided to separate geographically to accommodate the many herds and flocks in their possession. The text notes that Lot “pitched tents as far as Sodom,” an ominous narrative notice. Though Abram and his descendants had been promised the covenant blessings of HaShem Himself, they would still have to deal with the mundane realities of a fallen world. And nothing represents the fallen world with such obvious debauchery as Sodom.

As was often the case in the ancient world, peoples were subdued by other peoples. In our text, four kings of northern nations had subdued the peoples south of them, requiring of them regular tribute and allegiance. After living with this arrangement for 12 years, the peoples of the south under the leadership of their vassal kings (five in all), rebelled against the rule of the north and stopped paying tribute. This situation prevailed for 13 years (so read the Sages, though the text might suggest that they rebelled in the 13th year) after which the alliance from the north decided to bring the southern nations into compliance with the broken covenant of servitude. Rather than give in, the kings of the south rallied their troops to fight the kings of the north. They failed, however, and were trapped in the tar pits of the valley of Siddum.

In the wave of victory the northern kings enjoyed, they decided to plunder all who dwelt in the south, including (of course) Abram and his clan. By this time Abram and his extended family had gained a great deal of wealth so that they presented to the marauding kings a much sought-after booty. Since Lot was living near Sodom, he was the obvious target of the initial attack. Without military forces, Lot and his family were easy prey to the northern forces, and were taken away, “lock, stock, and barrel.” News reached Abram via “the fugitive” (which the Sages, in fanciful midrash, identify as Og, king of Bashan) and he rallies the men of his clan (called *חַנִּיךְ*, *chanich* in the Hebrew, a word used only here and interpreted by the Sages as “disciple” or “student.” Others consider the word to mean “vassal” or “one indebted to another”). The text gives a specific number of Abram’s troops: 318. Perhaps the primary reason for including this was to show the dismal odds from a human perspective: 318 against a coalition of 4 nations! But, as the Sages suggest by calling the 318 “disciples” or “students,” a small force of men who know the Torah can overpower a great host of those who are ignorant of its teachings!

God does, indeed, give Abram the victory—a miraculous work not unlike that of Hanukkah—the few defeat the many. Even more miraculous is that Abram is able to re-

turn with Lot and all his family, as well as the booty which had been taken. Like David (cf. 1 Sam 30), Abram returned with everything that had been taken—nothing was lost!

But the most important part of the story comes when Abram returns home. The king of Sodom approaches, no doubt to negotiate the return of his subjects. He is willing to give away the material things to retrieve the people. Now, this does not present itself to the reader as a strong temptation in Abram's eyes, but a minute's contemplation makes one think differently. Who wouldn't have been tempted to increase one's personal worth at this point? After all, Abram rendered a priceless service to the defeated king of Sodom, a service that the returned booty could hardly have paid for in full! Abram could have rationalized its safe keeping without hardly a pause. "If someone wants to pay me for work well done, why should I refuse?"

But here we are offered an insight into the way Abram thinks. So central to his life were the covenant promises that HaShem had made (one of which was material blessing, or at least this would seem to be included in the general promise of blessing), that he could never think of giving any opportunity for a mortal to take credit for what was actually the outcome of God's faithfulness to His covenant partner.

Now this tells us two important things: (1) Abram, by faith, so believed the covenant promises would come true that he lived his life accordingly even before the promises were actually realized. (2) Abram, by faith, put the glory of HaShem above his own personal comforts and advantages.

Abram fully expected God to keep His word, meaning he would inevitably be blessed. Living in the reality of this promise, Abram was able to see that taking a gift of the booty from the king of Sodom now, might diminish the glory God deserved in the future. He was able to forego the moment's gratification for the eternal glory of HaShem's faithfulness. In short, he lived by faith, not by sight.

Another king now comes into the picture—Melchizedek, king of Salem (=Jerusalem). The name is made up of Melech (=king) and Zedek (=righteous), as our Apostolic section emphasizes. Once again, the Sages attempt a fanciful interpretation in the midrash, making Melchizedek to be Shem, so called because he was king of Jerusalem, the future sight of the Temple, the place of the righteous, and the place where the glory of God would reside. (Remember that God had promised to dwell "in the tents of Shem.")

But we should pay close attention to the text: what it says and what it does not say. This Melchizedek shows up suddenly without introduction, and disappears from the text just as quickly. Who is he? From where did he come? How had he come to be a priest of El Elyon, "God Most High"? All of these questions are shrouded in mystery, as the writer to the Messianic Jews (Hebrews) makes clear. Was this a pre-incarnate appearance of Yeshua, as some think? Was Melchizedek a special person who was born by supernatural means and who, like Enoch, never saw death?

Speculation about these and other questions may be fun, but in the end the text is silent. Yet the text does teach us something extremely important! (1) There existed a priest of God Most High before the giving of the Sinai covenant. How would he have known how to minister before HaShem as a priest? And how could he have carried on his priestly function without the Tabernacle or the Temple? (2) This priest did not receive his office by genealogy (even the Sages agree with this). Here is a priest of God before

there was any tribe of Levi. It is clear that he received his priestly office by means of God's direct appointment. (3) This priest honored Abram by blessing him as the covenant partner with God (note the Hebrew text says, v. 19, "blessed is Abram who belongs to God Most High ...").

Melchizedek is a foreshadow of Yeshua as our High Priest. In the narrative, he has no beginning or end, and he has his office of priesthood by direct appointment of God Himself. What is more, he stands above the levitical priests and above Aaron, since Abraham offered him a tithe. This foreshadows Yeshua's priesthood as eternal, as genuine (even though He is of Judah, not Levi), and as supreme.

The final phrase of v. 20 is all important, especially in the argument of the author to the Messianic Jews: Abram gave a tithe to Melchizedek. From this the Sages derive the Torah commandment to pay tithes to the Levite, Melchizedek being a foreshadowing of the later Mosaic legislation. But in our Apostolic *parashah*, the emphasis is put upon the obvious fact that Abram, himself progenitor of the Levites, paid a tithe to Melchizedek. The obvious conclusion? Melchizedek is greater than Levi, as far as the priesthood is concerned. Thus, David, and eventually Yeshua, David's greater son, would both be priests in a different class, a class higher than the Levites, not only in function but in longevity as well, for the priesthood that is patterned after Melchizedek is an eternal one (cf. Ps 110).

One of the common arguments put forward by those who deny that Yeshua is Messiah is that He could not function as a legitimate priest before HaShem since He is not from the tribe of Levi nor from the family of Aaron. Of course, our *parashah* answers this by showing that Melchizedek was a legitimate priest before God, acknowledged to be so by Abram himself, through the paying of tithes. Furthermore, Ps 110:1-4 makes it clear that David's Master (who is Yeshua, cf. Matt 22:41-46) was also declared to be a priest in the same way that Melchizedek was divinely appointed to that office. Yet some have questioned the wording of Ps 110:4, and this has been a common argument of the anti-missionary movement in our times.

Ps 110:4 reads אַתָּה כֹּהֵן לְעוֹלָם עַל דְּבַרְתִּי מֶלְכִי-צֶדֶק, *ata cohen l'olam al devarti malki-zedek*, literally, "you are a priest upon the cause of Melchizedek." The uncommon Hebrew word is *devarti* from the root *divrah* meaning "a legal plea," "manner," or "with regard to." How is it used in this text? Since the word *devarti* has the same consonants as the Hebrew word meaning "word" (דְּבַר, *dabar*), the rabbis understood the verse to mean: "after the words of Melchizedek" rather than "after the manner of Melchizedek," but this explanation seems very likely to have arisen as a polemic against the use of Ps 110 in the Apostolic Scriptures as applied to Yeshua. The rabbis teach that since Melchizedek blessed Abram, it means that Abram was his superior, and that he (Melchizedek) had therefore transferred the priesthood to Abram through the "words" of his blessing. In this way, the priesthood was also bestowed upon David, a descendant of Abram. But such an interpretation does not fit the Psalm, for the One who gives enthronement to David's Master in the opening verse, is the same One who divinely appoints Him as priest in verse four. This priesthood is "after the manner" of Melchizedek because like Melchizedek, it is a matter of direct, divine appointment rather than through bloodline to the tribe of Levi. Moreover, if the Psalmist had intended us to understand *devarti* to

mean “after the *words* of Melchizedek,” he would have used the plural construct דְּבָרָי (*divrei*) not דְּבָרָתַי (*devarti*). As the Hebrew stands, the uncommon word דְּבָרָתַי, from the root דְּבָרָה (found only 5 times in the Tanach, Ps 110:4; Job 5:8; Eccl 3:18; 7:14; 8:2) must be understood to mean “after the manner of Melchizedek,” that is, after the same “legal plea” or “accepted manner” in which Melchizedek was a *bona fide* priest before God. To argue that Yeshua could not function as our High Priest because He is not of the tribe of Levi is to ignore the clear case of Melchizedek and to say that HaShem has no authority to appoint priests according to His sovereign will. It can be readily seen how utterly unfounded such an argument is.

In this most propitious meeting between Abram and Melchizedek, we see the faith of Abram the Hebrew to have also been the possession of Melchizedek. This king of Salem knew and acknowledged the one true God, and ascribed to Him utter sovereignty. He refers to God as the “Most High, Maker (or Possessor) of heaven and earth.” The word translated by some as “Maker” is literally “Owner,” (from קָנָה, *qanah*, “to purchase”). Sovereignty and ownership go hand in hand, as the story has demonstrated. Abram was robbed of his rightful possessions, and God gives them back on the basis of justice. In like manner, everything belongs to God and thus Melchizedek, while viewing the booty with which the king of Sodom negotiates, rightly ascribes its ownership ultimately to God, who owns everything.

Abram understood this! Why accept tribute from a pagan king when, in the end, the One Who owns everything has promised to bless him with all that he needs? What is more, Abram saw the faithfulness of God to His covenant promises already being fulfilled. Had not God said that He would bless those who blessed him, and curse the one who cursed him (Gen 12:1-3)? In this very story that blessing of God had been manifest. Those who would have done harm to Abram and his family are defeated, and in turn, Abram is blessed. God was proving His faithfulness to Abram in the midst of a fallen world. Abram also believed that God would supply all of his needs.

It is this theme that caused the Sages to choose our *haftarah*, for here, in the prophesy of Isaiah, the promise of God to bless Israel is predicated upon His sovereign ability and purpose to bring upon the nation of His choosing the kinds of blessings that only the Most High, Owner of everything, could give. Note carefully how the utter inability of Israel is put in stark contrast to God Who accomplishes all of His will. Jacob (Israel) is referred to as a “worm” (v. 14) in contrast to “the First and the Last, the One calling forth the generations from the beginning” (v. 4). What Israel could never do, God will accomplish. Moreover, the supreme blessing of protection and victory given to Israel is based upon the fact that Israel is God’s chosen one who is descended from “Abraham, My friend” (אַבְרָהָם אֱהִיבִי), literally, “Abraham My beloved.” We find this same description of Abraham in 2Chron 20:7–

Did You not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel and give it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever?

James, in his epistle, combines the key verse describing Abraham’s faith (Gen 15:6) with this concept of Abraham as God’s friend:

and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. (James 2:23)

It is in the context of James' teaching on faith and *mitzvot* that he calls Abraham a "friend of God." For James, friendship is a "two way street." Not only had God chosen Abraham and brought him into a covenant relationship and the blessings this covenant afforded, but Abraham also gladly lived his life in obedience to God, the highest example of which was his willingness to offer up his son Isaac (James 2:21). Abraham's faith therefore stands as a model of what genuine faith actually is. When we read that Abraham was a "friend of God," it is easy to emphasize the divine blessing and protection that comes from such a friendship. But what James wants us to remember is that such a friendship involves Abraham's response to God, not merely God's faithfulness to him. We all know that a "one-sided" friendship is no friendship at all.

Here, as always, we are given an example of the deep relational aspects of faith as taught in the Tanach. Some would have us believe that such a close, personal relationship with God is revealed only in the Apostolic Scriptures, as the fruit of the "New Covenant" which the "Old Covenant" lacked. But nothing could be further from the truth. Like the Psalmist who constantly speaks in relational terms when he describes his faith in God, so Abraham is called the "friend of God." This should cause us to consider deeply our own relationship with the Almighty. As Isaiah, in our *haftarah*, prophecies about the sovereign love of God displayed in His gracious salvation and redemption of Israel from all of her enemies, he also includes the fact that Abraham was a "friend of God." God, Who is seen as the First and the Last, the One Who is a warrior overcoming the enemy and even mocking the folly of idolatry (vv. 5–7), is also a gentle, loving, understanding, and faithful Friend. Do we not only acknowledge this but also live in the reality of this truth? Do we find in our friendship with God that which satisfies our deep longings for companionship, a relationship that gives us an enduring sense of meaning and significance? And when other friends fail us, is His friendship enough?

Like any friendship, our relationship with God must be fostered and deepened. In our Apostolic portion, the author to the Hebrews teaches us that the High Priestly work of Yeshua allows us to "draw near to God" (v. 18). James exhorts us in similar words:

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (James 4:8)

He shows us the first steps in "drawing near" – cleansing our hands, which speaks of our actions, and purifying our hearts, which speaks to one's inner thoughts and motivations. If we are living in ways that are contrary to God's will, then we must first "clean our hands" before we can draw near to Him as a close friend. If our desires and hopes are set upon worldly rather than godly things, we need to purify our hearts and get the focus of our lives back on track. In short, we need to follow the words of our Master when He taught:

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matt 6:33)

We can understand this to mean “but as the highest priority, seek to do what pleases the King by living according to His ways of righteousness, and all of your needs will be amply supplied.”

Thus, to the admonition of James, which speaks to cleansing and purifying our lives, must be added the positive exercises of building friendship with God. These include regular times of prayer, opening our hearts to Him, expressing our praise and adoration, and seeking His help and guidance for all matters of life. This includes corporate as well as private, scheduled as well as spontaneous, prayer. “Pray without ceasing” (1Thess 5:17); “with all prayer and petition praying at all times in accordance with how the Spirit prompts you to pray” (Eph 6:18). Deepening our friendship with God also means knowing Him as He truly is. One of the core elements of friendship is a greater personal knowledge of the one befriended. We know God through His word (the Bible) and through the witness of the indwelling Spirit. If we would foster a deepening friendship with God, we must do so by hiding His word in our hearts and constantly seeking the aid of the Spirit so that the word would be illumined in such a way as to make it understandable and applicable for life. Even as friends separated by distance cherish the words of letters they exchange, so we treasure the word of God as a divine letter sent directly to us, for us. If we would emulate the faith of Abraham who was a friend of God, we must seek to know and enjoy that same kind of friendship.

What a comfort to know that our Great High Priest, Yeshua, prays for us!

Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Heb 7:25)

Yeshua’s goal in His prayer on our behalf is that we should draw near to God, that we should grow in close communion with Him. And the wonderful thing is that we can count on Yeshua’s prayers being fully answered! “He who has begun a good work in you will bring that work to its perfect completion, with a view to the day Yeshua Messiah returns” (Phil 1:6). This is the path we are on, a road that leads inevitably to our full salvation as those who are chosen and beloved by God.

See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1Jn 3:1–3)