

# ONEG!

A collection of fascinating material on the weekly parsha!

Rabbi Elchanan Shoff

## PARSHAS LECH LECHA

***And Hashem said to Avraham, ‘go for yourself’...*** (Gen. 12:1). Ramban notes that the Torah does not introduce to us Avraham by regaling us with stories of his great righteousness. The famous story of Avraham when he is thrown into the fiery furnace is never mentioned in the Torah! Rather, the Torah begins its account of Avraham with God’s comment to go to Canaan, and already assumes that the reader knows that Avraham was righteous. Why is this so? *Sfas Emes* (Year 1872) explains that according to the *Zohar*, God’s command to go to the Holy Land was not said to Avraham exclusively. Rather, He constantly gives this command to all men in all times, yet it was only Avraham who heeded this command. By opening its account of Avraham with this commandment and Avraham’s pursuit of its fulfillment, the Torah actually does open with Avraham’s righteousness, for only he was righteous enough to follow God’s directive.<sup>1</sup> Hashem speaks to everyone with His message. What set Avraham apart was his willingness to listen. Others heard nothing at all.

***And the families of the earth will be blessed through you*** (Gen. 12:3). *Chizkuni* explains that the word “blessed” (וְנִבְרַכְתָּ) can also be read as “grafted” (וְנִבְרַכְתָּ). This alludes to the notion that all families of the world will desire to connect with Avraham’s family, and be “grafted” onto his family tree.

***And the souls which they made in Charan*** (Gen. 12:5). Some works cite the *Sefer ha-Eshkol* that most of the converts to monotheism that Avraham influenced reverted to their original ways. Indeed, one can already find such sources *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 29) and in *Meshech Chochmah* (to Gen. 21:33). However, if one looks at the *Sefer ha-Eshkol* (vol. 1, *Hilchos Milah* p. 131) it says: “The slaves which Avraham circumcised against their will had descendants who did not last as part of the Jewish People. Rather, Avraham only

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<sup>1</sup> In other places, *Sfas Emes* offers other answers to this same question. In Year 1876, he explains that the existence of the entire creation depends on Avraham, as the Torah refers to God creating the Heavens and the Earth as **בְּהִבְרֵאם** (Gen. 2:4), which can be descrambled to spell out the name Avraham (**אֲבִרְהָם**). Nonetheless, this does not mean that the world’s right to exist depends solely on the merits of Avraham, for it is really God who maintains the world’s existence, not somebody else’s merits. Rather, Avraham was just a vehicle for God justifying the world’s existence, but if he did not have the merits, God would have used another reason to justify maintain His creation. For this reason, the Torah minimizes Avraham’s righteousness by omitting it from the beginning of the story of his life, and opening the story with God’s commandment to go to Canaan. Elsewhere, *Sfas Emes* (Year 1887) gives another answer to this question: He explains that Avraham only attained his level at the pinnacle of completion once he had already been circumcised. Before that, he was not yet wholly righteous. Therefore, in order to stress his later, more complete, righteousness, the Torah omits any mention of Avraham’s righteousness in the beginning of its account, and saves that for later.

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circumcised them for reasons of ritual purity, so that they would not defile his food and drinks etc." The *Sefer ha-Eshkol* never said that those who Avraham converted reverted to their heathen ways, rather we only see that the slaves whom Avraham circumcised did not remain Jewish in subsequent generations.

**Going and travelling southbound (Gen. 12:9).** In many places in the Torah, the words for north and south are *smol* and *yemin*, respectively. Those two words are mean “left” and “right”. This is because the presumed standard position is that one faces eastwards, such that north is to his left (*smol*) and south is to his right (*yemin*). Indeed the word for "east", *kedem* is the word for "forward". Based on this, R. Yeshaya Horowitz (*Shnei Luchos ha-Bris, Lech Lecha, Torah Obr* 4) explains the significance of Avraham travelling southwards (even though here the Torah uses the word *negev* for “south”) is that he was striving for the spiritual level of the right-hand side. The *Likkutei Torah* written by R. Shnuer Zalman of Liadi further explains that this means that he actively pursued the love of God. The *Zohar* (1:111b) explains that Avraham’s travelling southwards is demonstrative of his pursuit of wisdom (because in the Sanctuary of the Holy Temple, the *Menorah*, which represents the seven branches of wisdom, was placed in the south). Indeed, R. Yonasan Shteiff (*Lech Lecha, Amaros* 39) explains that as Avraham travelled through the Holy Land, he became wiser and wiser. The Talmud says (*Bava Basra* 25b): “He who wishes to become wise, should incline towards the south”, (which means he should pray facing the menorah), coupled with the fact that the air of the Land of Israel has the ability to make one wise (*Bava Basra* 158b). To this effect, the Midrash (*Bereshis Rabbah* 61:1) reveals that Avraham’s two kidneys became like two teachers which spewed forth words of Torah and Wisdom to teach Avraham. The Talmud (*Yoma* 28b) attests to Avraham’s great wisdom by asserting that he followed all the ideals and principles of Torah, even before it was given. R. Avraham Saba (*Tzror ha-Mor* to Num. 13:17) explains that when Moses sent the Twelve Spies to scout out the Holy Land, he told them “Go up to this land in the south”, in order to guide them in the proper way of scouting the land without sinning. In doing so, he wished to invoke the memory of Avraham who similarly traversed the Holy Land by travelling southwards.

**Behold I now know that you are a woman of beautiful looks (Gen. 12:11).** The Talmud (*Bava Basra* 16a) contrasts Avraham’s piety with Job’s, as Job did not look at any woman who was not his wife, but Avraham did not even look at his wife (until this point). However, this passage is quite problematic because the Talmud elsewhere says (*Kiddushin* 41a) that it is forbidden for a man to marry a woman unless he has seen her, and Avraham was said to have observed all the laws of the Torah, even the rabbinic ordinance of *Eruv Tavshilin* (*Yoma* 28b). Based on this, *Maharsha* asks: how could Avraham have married his wife without ever having seen her, if it is forbidden to do so? *Maharsha*’s question bespeaks his assumption that

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the Talmud means that one *must* look at a woman before marrying her. However, Rambam (Laws of *Isbus* 3:19) understands differently: Rambam understands that the Talmud simply means that one is *allowed* to look at a woman before marrying, and that doing so is even commendable, but is not obligatory. According to Rambam's view, *Maharsha's* question does not even begin. Another way of answering this question is by differentiating between “seeing” and “staring”. The *Beis Yosef* (Orach Chaim 229) cites the Abudraham (p. 344) who asks: how can one stare at a rainbow when he recites the special *bracha* on seeing a rainbow, if elsewhere it says that one who stares at a rainbow loses his eyesight? He answers by differentiating between “seeing” and “staring”, one must *see* the rainbow when he recites the *bracha*, but should not *stare* at it because that can adversely affect one's eyesight. By applying this logic to the issue at hand, we can say that Avraham *saw* his wife before marrying, in order to fulfill the abovementioned Talmudic requirement, but he did not *stare* at her until the later episode when he commented on her beauty. Nonetheless, this still requires further analysis because we have not accounted for why Avraham all of a sudden now *stared* at his wife.

***And Avraham came up from Egypt.. and Lot with him (Gen. 13:1).*** R. Mordechai HaKohen of Tzfas cites in *Sifsei Kohen* (end of Parshas Lech Lecha, in the *Gematria* section from Rabenu Shimshon) that this verse alludes to the Erev Rav that left Egypt with the Jewish people. Just as Avraham accrued much property as he left Egypt (Gen. 13:2), so did the Jewish People leave Egypt with great wealth. Just as Avraham left Egypt with Lot tagging along, so did the Jewish People leave Egypt with the Erev Rav tagging along.

***And Lot chose the entire Jordan Valley, and Lot travelled from the East, and each man separated from upon his brother (Gen. 13:11).*** The Klausenberger Rebbe writes (*Shefa Chaim, Vayera* pg. 329) that the spiritual challenges of today are more dangerous than they've ever been in the past. Nowadays, there is no middle ground, either a person toils constantly in Torah Study, or he is almost bereft of any observance of even the most fundamental aspects of Judaism. Anybody for whom the success of his descendants are important, should follow the dictate of R. Nehorai (*Kiddushin* 82a) who said: “I leave aside all the professions in the world, and I only teach my son Torah, as it says, ‘when you go to sleep, safeguard it [the Torah], and when you are awake, it [the Torah] shall be your topic of conversation’ (Prov. 6:22).” For this reason, the Torah elaborates on the story of Lot and the downfall of Sodom. It serves to teach us that the fate of the ignoramus who chooses to run away from the Yeshiva of Avraham. Who can see his future and what will be of him? In the end, the Ammonites and Moabites—who are forever banned from marrying into the Jewish People—are the products of such an attitude.

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Regarding the idea that world has become a polarized world of extremes, The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 98a) says that Moshiach will only come in a generation which is either entirely righteous or entirely wicked. Normally this is understood to mean that either the generation living at the time of moshiach will be entirely wicked, or else entirely righteous. The Vilna Gaon (cited in *Darkei Yosher to Avos* 1:7 by R. Moshe Meir of Pietrekov) explains however that this means that the people of Messiah's generation will not be two-faced, but rather wholly transparent. There will only be two choices at the time - either entirely righteous or entirely wicked. The righteous will be entirely righteous on the inside and on the outside, and the wicked will be entirely wicked both on the inside and on the outside. This idea is also discussed in *Techeles Mordechai* of R. Mordechai Gimpel (*Bayis* 7).

***I lift my hands to Hashem, the Highest God, Owner of the Heavens and Earth...*** (**Gen. 14:22**). Targum translates this passage as "I lifted my hands *in prayer before* Hashem...". Why did Targum add the idea of prayer to this verse which is seemingly absent from a plain reading of the text? Rabbi Shimon Sofer of Krakow (a son of the *Chatam Sofer*, in his work *Michtav Sofer* p. 34 in the 2005 edition) explains: The Rabbis say<sup>2</sup> that one who receives benefits from other people may not use the Holy Names for magical purposes. Therefore, when Avraham refused the King of Sodom's offer to take from the booty of the war, this might have led the Sodomite King to think that Avraham's success was due to his use of Holy Names, which is why he did not want to benefit from the plunders of the war. In order to counter this, Avraham said, "I lifted my hands *in prayer before* Hashem..."; meaning, it was through his *prayers* to God that he was successful in the war, not because he used the Holy Names in magical ways.

***And Avraham said: 'O God Hashem, what will You give me? I am going childless, and the supplier of my house—he is the Damasacene Eliezer (Gen. 15:2).*** The Midrash *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 7:10 says that Jerusalem will one day extend all the way to Damascus. The name Eliezer (אליעזר = 318) in *gematria* equals the word "conversation" (שיח = 318), to teach us that the "conversations" of Torah Scholars are also considered Torah Study. The greatness of Torah scholar is that even his mundane chores are influenced by his great ideals, and he turns them to holiness. Thus even his idle chatter is packed with meaning. This is what will happen to the world when the ideals of Jerusalem are implemented and its holiness extends its influence all the way to Damascus. This is what Eliezer, the servant of Avraham represents as well. He was a servant charged with taking

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<sup>2</sup> The source given for this is Talmud Yerushalmi (*Yoma*, Ch. 3) and *Koheles Rabbah* (3:15), but I have not found this in those sources.

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care of tasks for Avraham. The level of holiness that he achieved through his relationship with Avraham as an extension of someone so holy speak to this very idea. Elsewhere the Midrash *Beresbis Rabbah* 44:9 explains that Eliezer is called a Damasacene because he helped Avraham chase the four Mesopotamian kings out of the Holy Land all the way to Damascus. Moreover, according to that Midrash, when it says that Avraham drafted his three-hundred and eighteen household members to support this effort, it does not mean that he took 318 people at all but only refers to Eliezer whose name in *gematria* equals 318, and was worth 318 men.

***‘Stare up at now at the Heavens and count the stars’... and He said: ‘such will be your descendants’... (Gen. 15:5).*** Rashi cites the Midrash (*Beresis Rabbah* 44:12) that God took Avraham above the hemisphere and had him look towards the Heavens. Rabbi Yonasan Shteiff (*Lech Lecha, Amaros* 80) writes in the name of Rabbi Yaakov Koppel Reich (of Budapest) that God showed Avraham how enormous the stars really are, and how each star is as big as a planet, yet when looking at them from Earth, they look tiny. According to this, when God told Avraham to count the stars, He did not just refer to counting the *number* of stars, but also to taking note of their *quality*. The message which He wished to tell Avraham was that just as the stars are exceptional in both quantity and quality, so will Avraham’s descendants be exceptional both in quantity and quality. And, just as each star is *much greater* than it looks here on Earth, so will each individual descendant of Avraham shine brightly onto the world as if each individual is a world onto his own.

***And He said: ‘Stare up at now at the Heavens and count the stars’... and He said: ‘such will be your descendants’... (Gen. 15:5).*** Why does it say “And He said” twice in this verse if God is the only One speaking? I saw quoted in the name of Rabbi Meir Shapiro (in the work *Ohel Moshe* by Rabbi Moshe Scheinerman) that the reason that the Torah says “And He said” twice is that after God told Avraham to count the stars, he began continuing and only afterwards did God continue and say: “such will be your descendants”. The fact that Avraham began counting the stars—an obviously impossible task—teaches us an important lesson: Even though it seemed like a mission impossible for him to carry out, Avraham still tried his best to fulfill God’s command and began counting. Certainly, then, for us when a Mitzvah seems too hard to perform, we should at least try our best at doing so instead of giving up from the onset.

***...rather [he] who will exit your innards... (Gen. 15:4).*** Ibn Ezra explains that “innards” are euphemistic way of referring to one’s reproductive organs which are close by.

***And he said: ‘O God Hashem (written: My master Hashem), through what shall I know that I will inherit it? (Gen. 15:8).*** The Talmud (*Brachos* 7b) says: R. Yochanan said in

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the name of R. Shimon ben Yochai that from the day that God created the world, nobody called Him “master” (*adon*), until Avraham came along and called him “master”, as evidenced by the passage at hand. *Ateres Tzvi* (cited in *Likutei Basar Likutei*) writes that for this reason we begin praying *Shacharis* (morning prayers) with the poem *Adon Olam* because Avraham instituted the prayer of *Shacharis* (*Brachos* 24b). I also saw (*Yeshurun* Journal vol. 6, p. 217) that the story is told in the name of the Brisker Rav that when R. Pinchas the Maggid of Plotzk came to the Vilna Gaon to ask for an approbation to his work *Siddur Shaar ha-Rachamim* with his commentary *Maggid Tzedek*, the Vilna Gaon peeked at his *sefer* and noticed that it connected the poem of *Adon Olam* to Avraham and to the *Shacharit* prayer. About this, the Vilna Gaon commented: “If your *sefer* was only written because of this explanation, it would have sufficed”. Nonetheless, the claim that Avraham was the first person to call God “master” is somewhat hard to make sense of because the Midrash elsewhere says (*Bereshis Rabbah* 17:4) that Adam was the first person to call God “master”.<sup>3</sup> The *Chasam Sofer* (*Shalos Uteshuvos Chatam Sofer* vol. 5, *Choshen Mishpat* 192) writes that until Avraham came along, people might have pronounced God’s Ineffable name as *Adonai* (“my master”),<sup>4</sup> but that they did not apply *Adon* as a separate epithet in reference to Hashem. He explains that there is a difference between these two names because there are two ways in which God is Master. One way is that He is the reality which caused all other reality to come into existence, and He created everything. Because of His role as Creator, He is considered the Master of the Universe, even if He would hypothetically remove Himself from all future involvement and delegate the administration of the world to other intermediaries, He would always remain the God of gods. However, He is also Master in another way: He did not leave the administration of the world up to other intermediary bodies, rather He himself constantly recreates the world everyday and actively oversees every minute detail of creation. In this way, He remains the Master of All, even without calling Him so because of His role in Creation. Accordingly, the Chasam Sofer explains that before Avraham, mankind recognized God as Master of the Universe simply because of His role in creating the world, but they did not recognize that He also remains an integral part of the upkeep of the world. They only called Him *Adon* in conjunction with His name—the Four Letter name which represents His role in making existence into a reality (as the four letter make up the letters

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<sup>3</sup> See what R. Shmuel Jaffe-Ashkenazi wrote in his commentary *Yefeh Toar* to *Genesis Rabbah* (there) in the name of the Rashba. The Chasam Sofer writes that perhaps the Rashba’s intent was to write as he explains (see below), and that the *Yefeh Toar* did not properly understand what the Rashba meant.

<sup>4</sup> See *Chiddushei Maran HaRiz HaLevi* to Maimonides’ Laws of *Avodah Zarah* 2:7 who explains how it can be that the 4 letter name can be pronounced *Adonai* even though it is not written that way. See also what R. Ephraim Kirschenbaum writes about this in *Kovetz Yeshurun* (vol. 7, pgs. 387–389).

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"היה הוה יהיה" ("was is and will be") but not as a separate epithet. Avraham, on the other hand, recognized God as both the Creator of the World and Administrator of the World. For Avraham, *Adon* is not **just** connected to God's 4 letter Ineffable Name, but is **also an independent name** which recalls His active role in administering that which He created. R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (*Haamek Sheilah* on *Sheiltos*, *Ekev* pg. 204) writes that before Avraham came along the world only existed on whatever nature God had engrained in its creation. Reward and punishment based on one's good or bad deeds only sporadically happened, like in the case of the Generation of the Flood or the Tower of Babel, but general human behavior was left up to nature until Avraham came along. Then Hashem began to run nature based upon personal reward and punishment for choices, and the world began to function using *hashgacha pratit* (divine exactitude.) He explains that this is the meaning behind the teaching of our Sages in Meseches Avodah Zara that the first 2 thousand years of this world were chaos, and the next two thousand were those of the Torah. The first 2000 years (Avraham was born in the year 1948 after creation) were un-policed in the way that a parent doesn't worry much about a very young child's behavior, knowing that he will grow out of much of it. But when the child starts studying Torah he expect more of him and holds him to higher standards, making sure that behavior carries with it appropriate reward and consequence. It is thus that our sages say that Avraham "gave the world to God." It was the teachings of Avraham that allowed the world to have the sophistication to relate to God as active in their lives. Indeed, until Avraham, the world related to God as an abstract creator with little involvement in ones life as ones personal master, and Avraham let the world develop to the point where Hashem could indeed be the Adon - the master - over each and every person. R. Shimon Sofer of Krakow, a son of the *Chasam Sofer*, writes further (*Michtav Sofer*, *Drush* 15) that when Avraham called God "master" he did not just mean as a name for God, but as a means of rendering himself a servant to God. In doing so, Avraham accepted the responsibility to serve God with all his might for the sake of his Master (not for his own sake). Other righteous men of the generations before Avraham were indeed righteous and great people, but they did not make themselves into servants of Hashem, they simply called him "master" without recognizing that they ought to be His servants.

***I have put your maidservant in your bosom... (Gen. 16:5).*** Rashi explains that Sarah put an Evil Eye upon the pregnancy of Hagar, and she miscarried her child. For this reason, the angel later tells Hagar "Behold you will become pregnant" (Gen. 16:11); because even though she was already pregnant, she lost that first pregnancy. Rabbi Chaim Vital (*Likkutei Torah*, *Lech Lecha s.v. bo na*) explains the significance of this event and its deeper meanings. Why of Avraham's two wives, did Hagar bear offspring first, and Sarah only afterwards? R. Vital explains that Sarah and Hagar are comparable to a fruit and its peel. Just as before one eats the fruit, one encounters the peel, so did Hagar (the peel) have to become pregnant

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before Sarah (the fruit). However, what happened was that Sarah's jealousy gave Hagar an Evil Eye the first time she became pregnant. The effect of that Evil Eye was that Hagar first child became unsustainably evil in the same vein as Cain. For this reason, Hagar's first pregnancy resulted in a miscarriage (*neifel*, literally "fallen [child]"), just as Cain's descendants are known as *nefilim* (Gen. 6:4). But because Hagar the Peel had to have children before Sarah the Fruit, she became pregnant again and gave birth to Ishmael (who resembled Hevel in that evil did not flourish within him—at least until the time of the Binding of Isaac).

**And Avraham fell on his face (Gen. 17:3).** Rashi explains that he fell because of his awe of Hashem, for prior to his circumcision, he did not have the ability to stand up while the Holy Spirit was upon him. It sounds like from Rashi that every time that God spoke to Avraham before his circumcision, Avraham would fall down. So then why does the Bible only report on this now when it is describing Avraham receiving the command to perform circumcision? R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk writes in *Meshech Chochmah* that this can be understood based on a Talmudic passage (*Yevamos* 70a) that says that an uncircumcised Kohen is forbidden from eating *terumah* or using oil of *terumah* as ointment. However, if the uncircumcised Kohen is less than eight days old, then this prohibition does not apply. The same ruling is found in the Talmud Yerushlami (*Yevamos* 8:1) and Rambam (*Laws of Terumos* 1:7). The upshot of this ruling is that an uncircumcised person before the age of eight-days old does not have the Halachic status of uncircumcised. This is because the status of an uncircumcised person is only the result of the *commandment* to perform circumcision, so when the commandment has not yet come into effect (e.g., if a baby is too young to be obligated in the Mitzvah), then the status of "uncircumcised" also does not kick in. In the case of Avraham, explains R. Meir Simcha, as long as he was not yet commanded to perform his circumcision, he was not yet considered uncircumcised, and therefore he was able to stand while the Holy Spirit spoke to him. Only at this juncture when God is introducing to him the commandment of circumcision does the Torah report that he fell down, because now that he is receiving the commandment to be circumcised, he has assumed the status of an uncircumcised person. The difficulty with this explanation is that Rashi (to Num. 24:4) writes concerning Bilaam that because he was uncircumcised, he too fell down when God spoke to him. How can Bilaam ever have the status of an uncircumcised person, if he is not Jewish and the entire commandment of circumcision is inapplicable to him? We can answer this question by citing the words of Rambam (in his commentary to the Mishnah, *Terumos* 3:9) who writes that even though non-Jews are not obligated in the *Mitzvos* of the Torah, if they do perform *Mitzvos*, then they receive credit for doing so. Accordingly, a non-Jew is not completely divorced from the commandment of circumcision, inasmuch that if he performs the commandment—even though he is not obligated to do so—he received reward from Above, and will have indeed

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performed the mitzvah.<sup>5</sup> If this is true, we can explain that had Bilaam performed circumcision, he would have been considered fulfilling the commandment of circumcision, and therefore his failure to do so (even though he was not obligated to do so) renders him an uncircumcised person (as opposed to a child before the age of eight-days or Avraham before receiving the Divine dictate who even if they performed circumcision would have been considered circumcised as far as the mitzvah goes, and so they cannot be considered uncircumcised before doing so at all).

***And Avraham was ninety-nine years old when he circumcised the flesh of his foreskin. And Yishmael his son was thirteen year old when he circumcised the flesh of his foreskin (Gen. 17:24–25).*** If you look at the Hebrew text of the Torah, you will notice that when describing Avraham's circumcision, the word *es* does not appear, yet when using the exact same expression to describe Yishmael's circumcision, the word *es* does appear. Why is this so? In general the word *es* is understood by our Sages to include something extra which is not explicitly mentioned in the text. To that effect, Rashi cites a Midrash which explains that concerning Avraham the word *es* is absent because Avraham only needed to *cut off* his foreskin, but did not require any extra actions. On the other hand, Yishmael had to *cut off* his foreskin, and also fold back the remaining skin (known as *priah*); this last step is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah, but is rather alluded to via the word *es*. Rashi explains that Avraham did not require folding back the remaining skin because that skin had already been “beaten down” or “subdued” through his various acts of intercourse

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Rambam himself in a *teshuva* in *Pe'er ha-Dor* (60) explicitly writes that if a gentile performs circumcision, then he has the status of a person who is not commanded to do and does. This is different than the approach of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (*Igros Moshe*, Yoreh Deah vol. 2, 7 and *Dibros Moshe*, *Kiddushin* 8:2, p. 57b) where he says that the Rambam's position that a gentile can perform a mitzvah and receive credit for it does not extend to *bris milah*, since a sign of a covenant can only be meaningful if there is indeed a covenant. This is explicitly contradicted by the aforementioned *teshuva*. See also what Rabbi Yitzchok Sorotzkin writes in *Gevuros Yitzchak* (to the Mishnah in *Terumos*) where he claims that Rambam retracted what he wrote in his commentary to the Mishnah there. See also *Chavatzes ha-Sharon* (Reah, p. 713) and *Shaalos Uteshuvos Mishnas Rebbi Aharon* (volume XXX, §35:6). Rambam's understanding, it is a bit difficult to understand the significance of a purely physical circumcision without it representing any metaphysical covenant (see *Emunas Itecha, Lech Lecha* where R. Wolfson addresses this question). Perhaps the answer is simple. Aside from the covenant with God, there is spiritual benefit to *milah* like other commandments as well. For example. Rambam writes that *milah* helps a person subdue his physical desires for intimacy, by reducing the pleasure in the sexual act. Indeed others who offer reasons for the commandments offer additional insight into the spiritual benefits of *milah*. Thus it would seem to be reasonable to suggest that though *milah* when performed by a gentile may not introduce them into the covenant of Avraham, it would nevertheless give them spiritual reward, just as all other mitzvos provide them with reward.

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Rabbi Elchanan Shoff

## PARSHAS LECH LECHA

throughout his life, whereas Yishmael was still young and did not have as much sexual experiences as his elderly father. Although Rashi seems to refer to Avraham's experiences on a physical plane, we can uncover a deeper layer of understanding that also fits with Rashi's words. Many commentators throughout the ages have asked that if Avraham kept the entire Torah before it was given, then why did he not also perform the commandment of circumcision before God told him to do so explicitly. Rabbi Chaim Palagi in his work *Nefesh Chaim (Maareches Aleph, 15)* collates fourteen different answers to this question. We will focus on answer #10, in which Rabbi Palagi writes that the reason that Avraham did not perform a circumcision on himself prior to receiving the commandment is that he knew that the purpose of circumcision is to subdue one's instincts for evil and eliminate illicit desires. According to the Talmud (*Bava Basra 17a*), Avraham was one of three people over whom the Evil Inclination could not exert control, and indeed the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Brachos 9:5*) explains that Avraham had actually transformed his Evil Inclination into a Good Inclination. Given this view of events, explains R. Chaim Palagi, Avraham was completely in control of his desires, and did not need any extra support in subduing his Evil Inclination. For this reason, he did not feel the need to perform a circumcision on himself, and held back from doing so until God explicitly told him he should. Based on this, we can explain that when Rashi says that Avraham's remaining skin had been previously subdued due to his prior acts of intercourse, it means that his methods of engaging in physicality in the proper way actually served to have the spiritual impact of controlling his Evil Inclination and placing it under his control, in much the way that the covenant of Avraham, Bris Milah, guides his descendants to behave.