

Lech Lecha

Chase 'em to Damascus!

*Hashem, what can you give me if I remain childless; the heir to my household is
Damascus Eliezer.*

Bereishis 15:2

Avraham had a servant called Eliezer. Eliezer is referred to as “Damascus Eliezer,” says the Talmud.¹ The word “Damascus” (*Damesek* in Hebrew) alludes to Eliezer’s role in Avraham’s household as the *doleh umashkeh*, the one “who drew and gave others to drink” from the waters of Avraham’s teaching. Eliezer may have even been from Damascus,² but still – why is that name the one that tells us that he was the one who drew from Avraham’s teachings to satisfy those who were thirsty? What does this have to do with the actual place Damascus?

“Eliezer,” in *gematria*, is equal to 318. The verse³ tells us that Avraham went to war with what the Torah describes as 318 men, and our Sages⁴ tell us was really just Eliezer. He was like 318 men. We are left wondering – in what way was Eliezer similar to 318 men, and why is that exact number the one that suits him so?

Another reason that Eliezer was called “Damascus” is because when he went out to war with Avraham to save Lot, he chased the kings that he battled all the way to Damascus.⁵ His prowess in war is what earned him this name. Let us discover more about Damascus so that we can gain more insight into Eliezer.

“Do good in your favor to Zion, build the walls of Jerusalem.”⁶ Rashi⁷ writes, based upon Vaykira Rabbah, that the word “*heitivah*” (which we translated as “do good”) was David’s request from God that he build a Temple within Jerusalem in the lifetime of his son Solomon. R. Ovadia Sforno⁸ comments that David was asking that God reveal to them the site where the Temple would one day stand. The common theme among the commentaries is that the word *heitivah* is seen as a request that God do good, and each commentator goes on to discuss what that good is.

1 Yoma 38b

2 Bereishis Rabbah 44:9; Targum to Bereishis 15:2, and Rashi there.

3 Bereishis 14:14

4 Nedarim 32a; Bereishis Rabbah 43:2; Rashi to Bereishis, ad loc.

5 See Bereishis 14:15

6 Tehillim 51:20

7 To Tehillim, ad loc.

8 Ad loc.

However, R. Yosef Kara⁹ explains, pointing to a verse in the book of Hoshea,¹⁰ that the word *libheitiv*, of the same root, can be used to refer to abundance and expansion. We find in Talmudic parlance that the root “*tov*” was also used to mean abundance of quantity, as in the expression¹¹ “The wine belongs to the owner but the abundance [*tivusa*] that one receives depends upon the server.” We can therefore suggest this as another reading of our verse. In the Midrash,¹² R. Yochanan is recorded as having said, “Jerusalem is destined to extend until the gates of Damascus!” Thus, this verse can be seen as a prayer for the extension of Jerusalem, “Let Zion *expand in quantity* – and the gates of Damascus will then be the gates of Jerusalem.” The verse therefore appropriately concludes with, “build the walls of Jerusalem.” Indeed, they will need to be built anew in their new location.

The eventual extension of Jerusalem all the way to the gates of Damascus is, of course, much more than a simple geographical prediction. But what is it?

Eliezer came from a place very distant from that of Avraham, not only physically, but sociologically and emotionally as well. Yet, he was profoundly influenced by the message of monotheism and morality that Avraham espoused. Perhaps he was able to reach others with Avraham’s message precisely because he was from a culture with teachings quite removed from Avraham’s monotheistic message. Eliezer was a man whose name carries the same *gematria* (318) as the word *siyach*, which means “idle conversation.” We are told that even the most idle conversation of the great people requires study.¹³ Even the simple conversation of Eliezer was recorded as its own Parsha in the Torah, to teach us how important the conversations of the servants of great people are.¹⁴

Eliezer represented Avraham’s ability to extend even into the most distant of places. Even the idle conversation of the people who were touched by Avraham’s message was different from then on. Avraham worried that his message would become lost in the world – that he would not have another child, who, himself, would have created his own “Eliezers,” and sent out his messengers of goodness to wipe out evil and injustice as far away as Damascus. That is why he wanted a child to carry on his mission so badly. “Hashem, You must give me a child,” he cried, “after all, my home has produced a *Damesek* Eliezer.”

The ability to change the world, with Torah and Truth, is what we seek to do with our time here. We want to bring the world to a place where the gates of Jerusalem extend well beyond their small borders, and even reach the distant gates of Damascus.

9 Commentary to Micha 7:3

10 10:1

11 Bava Kamma 92b according to the commentary of Tosafos, s.v. *hamra*

12 Shir Hashirim Rabbah, 7:11

13 Avoda Zarah 19b

14 Bereishis Rabbah 60:8, see Rashi to Bereishis 24:42, s.v. *vavo*