



Success From Failure: What Michael Jordan Can Teach Us About the Brit Ben HaBetarim

By Rabbi Yehuda Avner ('13)

In this week's Parashah, we learn about Avraham Avinu leaving his past behind and living a life completely connected to Hashem. Despite promises from Hashem, at the beginning of Perek 15, Avraham starts to have doubts and asks Hashem to promise that he will have children to inherit everything. In one of the most dramatic episodes in the Torah, Pasuk after Pasuk describes the intricate details of Avraham cutting animals in half for him to walk through. As the sun set and the dramatic music reached its crescendo, a deep sleep overcame Avraham, and with it came the beginning of the Brit Bein HaBetarim. Hashem starts this covenant by describing how the Jewish people will be slaves in a land that was not their own for 400 years! At this moment, Avraham Avinu was in a state of doubt, which is why he needed this covenant. So why would Hashem start with this negative of the enslavement of Avraham's children?

There was a famous Michael Jordan commercial that may lend insight. The commercial has Jordan giving a voice-over in which he says, "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. That is why I succeed!"

The Brisker Rav says the beginning of this Brit is supposed to give us strength throughout history. Avraham Avinu needed to hear about our failure and our suffering in order to understand and believe that our religion and nation are true and everlasting! This statement of enslavement isn't a prophecy but the covenant itself! The fact that Hashem destined us for slavery in Egypt for 400 years isn't meant to be taken literally. In fact, Rashi (15:13) says the Pasuk doesn't say we will be in Egypt for 400 years, but rather "in a land not [our] own." All of our suffering throughout history is referenced in this Brit. Unfortunately, the list of our suffering is long and never ends. From Rome to Bavel, from Germany to our current anti-semitic climate, we are no strangers to being downtrodden. Hashem is

telling Avraham that these sufferings are proof that Hashem is with us! No other nation, especially as small as the Jews, has gone through even a fraction of what our people have been through, and yet the only place where you can find our oppressors are in museums, while Jews are leaders, standing proud in the face of adversity. It is actually our suffering, our failures, and our enslavement that brings proof to our everlasting existence! We do not know why we have to go through such suffering, but from the Brit Bein HaBetarim, we can look at all of our sufferings as a strength that Hashem is fulfilling the promise made to Avraham.

Pirkei Avot (1:15) teaches, "Say little, but do a lot." Rabbeinu Yonah comments, in the Brit Bein HaBetarim, Hashem says He will "Dan," "Judge" (15:14). The word Dan is written with just two letters. Rashi comments that these two letters reference the 10 Makkot and all the miracles that Hashem did to take us out of Egypt. Suppose all the miracles associated with Yetzi'at Mitzrayim were alluded to with just two letters in the Torah. How much more amazing will the Ultimate Ge'ulah be when there are so many Perakim written about it throughout Tanach?!

We should all be Zocheh that all our sufferings and failures will be seen for what they truly are, stepping stones for success, and see the ultimate success, the Final Ge'ulah!

The Individual Path to Faith

By Abie Russ-Fishbane ('23)

When first reading the beginning of Parashat לך לך, there are several perplexing questions that pop out, beginning with the very first Pasuk: "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וּמִמְּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ: "Hashem said to Avram, 'Go forth from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you'" (BeReishit 12:1).

There is a glaringly obvious question about the phrasing, and what Hashem directs Avraham to do. Go from your land, then your birthplace, and then your father's house? The Pasuk is backward! First one leaves their home *in order to* leave their birthplace *in order to* leave their land. So why is it phrased in such a way?

The אור asks this question and resolves it in the following way: “אכן הטעם הוא להיות כי בערך צער הפרידה קטן הוא צער” פרידתו מארצו מפרידת מולדתו ופרידתו ממולדתו מפרידתו מבית אביו לזה סדר “ההדרגות ממש למעלה” (ibid).

The תורה, as he explains, lists the departures per the pain Avraham would feel as he left each one. It is less painful to leave one’s country than it is to leave one’s hometown and less painful to leave one’s hometown than to leave one’s home, to which one feels the most intimate bond.

Rav Soloveitchik highlights that Hashem directed Avraham with the language of “לך-לך”. Had the Torah merely wanted Avraham to visit the land of Canaan, it would have sufficed to say “לך”. The addition of “לך” indicates that Avraham needed to not only physically abandon his home but psychologically do so as well. Avraham needed to “leave the past, to blot out his memory...לך-לך” commanded a psychological break with Avraham’s past, with his ancestral family and tradition”.

We can then see the true meaning of Hashem’s phrasing. He was preparing Avraham for the psychological and emotional struggles he would face.

But while this answers one question, it brings about another one. Why was Avraham chosen at all?

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, in his philosophical work the Kuzari, asks: “Would it not have been better had God given His approval to all men alike?” Namely, why did Hashem single out just Avraham to spread his message?

Ramban (ibid, 12:2) adds another question: “והנה זאת” הפרשה לא בארה כל הענין, כי מה טעם שיאמר לו הקב”ה עזוב ארצך ואיטיבה עמך טובה שלא היתה כמוה מעולם, מבלי שיקדים שהיה אברהם עובד אלקים או צדיק תמים, או שיאמר טעם לעזיבת הארץ שיהיה בהליכתו אל ארץ אחרת קרבת אלקים.”

Why, אור asks, does the תורה not give any backstory before jumping into the story? Wouldn’t it make sense to preface the הקב”ה’s command with an explanation of how Avraham was loyal to God, righteous, etc.?

While the תורה does not give any explanation, there are multiple Midrashic accounts of Avraham’s past given, and the רמב”ם cites them in the first פרק of זרה:

כיון שנצטוו אבותינו להתחיל לשוטט בדעתו והוא קטן והתחיל לחשב ביום ובלילה והיה תמה היאך אפשר שיהיה הגלגל הזה נוהג תמיד ולא יהיה לו מנהיג ומי יסבב אותו. כי אי אפשר שיסבב את עצמו... עד שהשיג דרך האמת והבין קו הצדק מתבוננתו הנכונה. וידע שיש שם אלוה אחד והוא מנהיג הגלגל והוא ברא הכל ואין בכל הנמצא אלוה חוץ ממנו... ובן ארבעים שנה הפיר אברהם את בוראו. כיון שהפיר וידע התחיל להשיב תשובות על בני אור כשדים ולערף דין עמקם ולומר שאין זו דרך האמת שאתם הולכים בה ושבר הצלמים והתחיל להודיע לעם שאין ראוי לעבד אלא לאלוה העולם ולו ראוי להשתחוות ולהקריב ולנסות כדי שייפירוהו כל הברואים הבאים... כיון שגבר עליהם בראיותיו בקש המלך להרגו ונעשה לו נס ויצא לתרו. והתחיל לעמוד ולקרא בקול גדול לכל העולם ולהודיעם שיש שם אלוה אחד לכל העולם ולו ראוי לעבד. והנה מהלך וקורא ומקבץ העם מעיר לעיר ומממלכה לממלכה עד שהגיע לארץ כנען והוא קורא שנאמר (בראשית כא לג) “ויקרא שם בשם ה’ אל עולם”.

cited these מדרשים as part of his overview of the history of זרה, discussing how Avraham began to search for Hashem at an early age. Avraham finally found Hashem at age forty,

when he began smashing idols and debating his neighbors, defied the king, and then left for Cena’an.

Additionally links these stories of Avraham’s past as reasonings for why he was chosen. But the obvious question is why the תורה did not discuss Avraham’s past, instead leaving it to אור to explain. רמב”ן suggests that it was because the תורה did not want to discuss the opinions of idol worshippers, even in the context of Avraham’s enlightenment. We can see the תורה’s hesitancy to discuss idolatry as it deals very briefly with the generation of Enosh and their innovation of idolatry.

But another point, noted by Rabbi Alex Israel, is that had the תורה discussed Avraham’s path to God, we would have considered it the only path to God. We would think we must follow in the footsteps of Avraham exactly, and discover God in the same way, leaving no room for personal growth, challenge, or individuality. As Rabbi Israel says, “I can well imagine that had the Torah recorded such a story, we would end up with a section of Shulchan Aruch that would read something like: ‘At age three, a child must look at the sun and say “Is this the power that controls the world?” The same evening, the child must then behold the moon and recite: “Far from it! The moon has superseded the sun, and hence the moon is more powerful.”’”

Benno Jacob, as cited by Nehama Leibowitz, notes that the Shoresh ב.ר.כ. occurs five times in the opening Pesukim of the Parashah, and this “abundance of blessing corresponds with the fivefold occurrence of light on the first day of creation (אור), which appears five times.” Here, she says, we have a second world created with the advent of Avraham, a world of blessing given from man to man.

But it was not limited to just Avraham’s journey. Avraham brought the light of discovery to the world, but we are not limited to his path. As Avraham’s story teaches, we can each find our own path to God in our own way.

In חובות הלבבות, Rabbeinu Bachya discusses the seven advantages to one arriving at an understanding of Hashem through the שכל, and the seven advantages to one arriving at an understanding of Hashem through the תורה. He reasons that “both phases of submission are praiseworthy and lead to the path of deliverance in the world of peace, but the one [תורה] is only the cause of the other, a step leading to the higher one [שכל]...submission through alertness of the mind and logical demonstration is better in God’s eyes, preferable to Him and more pleasing.”

We can learn from Avraham that it is the individual path to faith that is significant. We all have our own path toward Hashem, filled with our own illuminating discoveries and unique challenges, and what is important is that we ultimately arrive at Hashem, not how we get there.

Authenticating a Navi Sheker Part One

By Rabbi Chaim Jachter

We must abide by the words of a Navi, and if we fail to do so, the punishment is “Mitah Bidei Shamayim,” “Death by the hands of God” (Devarim 18:19 and Rambam Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 9:2). On the other hand, the Torah instructs us to

execute a false Navi (Devarim 18:15-22). How do we know who is an authentic Navi and who is a false Navi? The written Torah presents a basic sketch of how to authenticate a Navi, which Rambam (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah, chapters 8-10) explains at some length. The authentication of prophets also serves as a model, to a certain extent, for how we determine today who is an authentic Torah authority and leader. This essay is based on a 2002 study with students at the Torah Academy of Bergen County, members of the Congregation Shaarei Ora women's Chumash Shiur, and my cousin Yehuda Brandriss.

The Model of Moshe Rabbeinu

Hashem told Moshe that He would present prophets to Am Yisrael "Kamocha," "like you" (Devarim 18:18). This appears to be problematic because Moshe was a Navi that was in a class by himself and was greater than any other Navi that will ever arise among Am Yisrael, as stated explicitly in the Chumash (Devarim 34:10). Rashbam (Devarim 18:15) explains that future prophets must model themselves after Moshe Rabbeinu even though they cannot reach his level of Nevu'ah. They must be completely devoted to Torah and neither detract from nor add to the Torah. They must be thoroughly devoted to relaying the truth as they heard from Hashem and they must be on an especially high spiritual level. Interestingly, the very last Nevu'ah that Am Yisrael received was Malachi exhorting us to "remember the Torah of Moshe" (Malachi 3:22), which is very much in synch with the idea of a Navi modeling himself after Moshe Rabbeinu.

In fact, Rambam (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 10:1) writes that someone who presents himself to Am Yisrael as a Navi must be deemed suitable for this role even before we begin to test him to determine if he is a true Navi. Rambam (Hilchot Y.H. 7:1) describes the personal characteristics of a Navi. This includes being an extraordinary scholar who possesses excellent character and consistently masters his Yeitzer HaRa without fail.

Testing a Candidate for Nevu'ah

The Torah (Devarim 18:22) presents a straightforward manner for determining the authenticity of a legitimate candidate for Nevu'ah – we test whether his prophecies are fulfilled. There appears to be a problem, though (as TABC Talmid David Ginsburg notes), because the Torah (Devarim 13:2-6) teaches that if someone presents himself as a Navi and performs a miracle to legitimate his call to worship Avodah Zara, we should ignore him, as Hashem is simply testing us. Accordingly, even though someone's prediction is fulfilled, the person is not considered a Navi. What is the difference between Devarim 13:2-6 and Devarim 18:22?

There appears to be at least two solutions to this problem. First, a prerequisite to even considering someone to be a candidate as a Navi is that he model himself after Moshe Rabbeinu and demonstrate complete fidelity to the Torah. Someone who urges the worship of idols is automatically rejected and thus the miracles he performs are irrelevant. Second, the false prophet presents an Ot or Mofet, a sign or wonder. A legitimate Navi, on the other hand, does not produce such a phenomenon. Instead, he proves his credentials by making predictions that come true. Rambam explains that every detail of the predictions must be fulfilled without the

slightest deviation. The Navi is tested repeatedly and if he passes the tests without exception then he is accepted as a Navi.

Interestingly, Rambam cites as a proof text for his assertion that the Navi must be tested repeatedly, the Pasuk describing the Navi Shmuel: "VaYeida Kol Yisrael MiDan Ve'Ad Be'er Sheva Ki Ne'eman Shmuel LeNavi LeHashem," "And all of Israel from Dan to Be'er Sheva knew that Shmuel was accredited as a prophet of Hashem" (Shmuel 1:3:20). This indicates another requirement for accreditation as a Navi, that the entire Jewish people accept the individual as a Navi. Indeed, we do not find in the Tanach any accepted Navi (save perhaps with the unusual circumstances of Yirmiyahu¹) whose authenticity was mired in controversy. We trust the collective wisdom of the Jewish people to determine the legitimacy of a Navi, as a false prophet will not succeed in fooling the entire Jewish people.

My cousin Yehuda Brandriss makes the following poignant observation. He asks why the Torah refers to a false prophet as a Navi if he is not a Navi. Shouldn't the Torah describe him simply as a fraudulent person or liar? Yehuda suggests that the Torah is communicating a subtle warning that we should be aware that the false prophet would deceptively appear to have credibility as a prophet. He will be a person of some substance whose words do not have the obvious appearance of falsehood. Indeed, Chazal (see Rashi to Bemidbar 13:27) teach, "Any lie that does not contain a measure of truth does not stand." Jewish History does bear out the accuracy of Yehuda's insight, as the leaders and ideologues of deviationist groups have been people of intelligence and oratory ability. They are false prophets rather than simple charlatans.

We should also note that Rambam is emphatic that an Ot or Mofet is inadequate to prove the legitimacy of a Navi. In fact, Rambam devotes the eighth chapter of Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah to teaching that Moshe Rabbeinu's stature as a prophet does not rest upon the miracles that he performed. Rather, the fact that we all saw at Ma'amad Har Sinai that Hashem communicated directly with Moshe Rabbeinu is what endows Moshe Rabbeinu with legitimacy. The signs that Moshe Rabbeinu performed (Shemot 4:30) before Am Yisrael to prove that God spoke to him were only a temporary measure to introduce Moshe Rabbeinu to Am Yisrael upon his return to Mitzrayim. Mollie Fisch and Abby Leichman explain that these signs were merely a "hook" to demonstrate that Moshe Rabbeinu was a unique individual. His eternal stature as the greatest of all Nevi'im was established at Ma'amad Har Sinai, as is indicated by the Torah (Shemot 19:9). For further discussion of this issue, see Nechama Leibowitz's New Studies in Sefer Shemot (pp. 118-123).

This idea may be compared to the contemporary use of Torah codes to introduce people to the Torah. They cannot serve as a foundation of a lifelong commitment to Torah, but they can serve as a "hook" to demonstrate to people that the

¹ The dispute regarding Yirmiyahu's authenticity stemmed from the highly unwelcome message of the pending Churban, Yirmiyahu was broadcasting.

Torah is no ordinary book and motivate them to further explore the Torah.

The Model of Yehoshua

We may ask, though, how did Yehoshua establish credibility as a Navi, as we find no evidence in the Chumash of his providing verification of his status as a prophet? Rambam (Hilchot Y.H. 10:5) explains that a Navi need not demonstrate his legitimacy if another Navi vouches for his authenticity as a Navi. Rambam writes that one about whom an accepted Navi has testified to his legitimacy is accepted “BeChezkat Navi,” as a presumed Navi. One who is BeChezkat Navi need not be tested as a Navi and is accepted as a Navi unless evidence to the contrary emerges.

Similarly, today many great Sages develop their reputations because of older and well-accepted Rabbinic Greats affirming their stature. This explains, in part, why younger Rabbanim ask older Gedolei Torah to write Haskamot (letters of approbation) to their Sefarim. Two examples are Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach’s Me’orei Eish, endorsed by Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski and Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook and the first volume of Rav Ovadia Yosef’s Teshuvot Yabia Omer’s adornment with the Haskamot of many of the Torah giants of the day such as Rav Ezra Attia and Rav Zvi Pesach Frank. These works were published when Rav Shlomo Zalman and Rav Ovadia were young, and the approbations and content of these works gave them prominence.

The Yonah Question

Many people ask that since a prophet’s failed prediction proves that he is a false prophet, why is Yonah not considered a Navi Sheker (false prophet)? After all, Yonah prophesized that in forty days, Nineveh would be destroyed, and this did not happen. Rambam (Hilchot Y.H. 10:4) explains that evil tidings may not materialize because people might do Teshuvah and motivate Hashem to abrogate the evil decree. Thus, a prophet will verify his stature by predicting only good tidings. If these do not materialize, then we can be sure that the person is a Navi Sheker.

The Eliyahu Question

Another question that people often pose regards the action of Eliyahu HaNavi at Har HaCarmel (Mount Carmel), when he offered Korbanot outside of the Beit HaMikdash to disprove the false prophets of Ba’al (Melachim 1 chapter 18). The problem is that the Torah strictly prohibits offering Korbanot outside the Beit HaMikdash after the Beit HaMikdash was established in Yerushalayim (VaYikra 17:1-9). Accordingly, why isn’t Eliyahu HaNavi discredited for violating a specific Torah prohibition? Rambam (Hilchot Y.H. 9:3, based on Sanhedrin 89) explains that four criteria must be satisfied to permit radical action, such as the step taken by Eliyahu at Har HaCarmel. First, the prohibition against engaging in Avodah Zara is never waived in any circumstance (as is indicated by Devarim 13:2-6). Second, there must be an extremely good reason to violate the Torah. In Eliyahu HaNavi’s time, so many people were involved with the popular mode of worship of the time (Ba’al) that Eliyahu had to take drastic action and challenge the “prophets” of Ba’al to offer Korbanot alongside him and see upon whose Korban fire would descend from the heavens. It was inconceivable to do this in the Beit HaMikdash, as it is intolerable for the Nevi’ei HaBa’al to offer their

sacrifices there. Third, the Navi must only temporarily suspend the prohibition. A Navi who claims that a particular prohibition should be permanently removed from the Torah must be dismissed as a Navi Sheker. Fourth, the individual who calls for the temporary suspension of a Torah prohibition must be an accepted Navi whose authenticity is beyond reproach. A modern application of this idea is Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook referring to his implementation of Rav Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor’s Heter Mechirah (selling farmland of Eretz Yisrael to a Muslim to side-step Shemittah regulations) as a Hora’at Sha’ah, a temporary ruling. Although Rav Kook was not engaged in what he believed to be a direct violation of Torah law, he nevertheless felt that the Heter Mechirah offends the spirit of the Torah and was permitted only temporarily because of dire circumstances faced by the Jews living in Israel in his time.

Contemporary Leaders

Contemporary leaders also must prove themselves to Am Yisrael before we recognize them as Gedolei Yisrael. They must have excellent character as well as excellent scholarship. An interesting example is Rav Moshe Feinstein, who permitted many women to remarry on the basis that their husbands perished in concentration camps. To this day, none of the men he pronounced dead was later discovered alive. The same applies to the thousands of Agunot (many of whose husbands went missing in action during the Yom Kippur War) Rav Ovadia Yosef permitted to remarry. A Poseik and Gadol can also prove himself by demonstrating his fidelity to Torat Moshe and his competence in Torah teachings and rulings to the point when the committed portion of our nation regards him as a Gadol, as they regarded Shmuel in the days of Sefer Shmuel.

Conclusion

The process of identifying an authentic Navi serves as a model for identifying legitimate Torah leadership in all generations. It also parallels the manner in which we shall soon identify the Mashiach (as described in the Rambam Hilchot Melachim 11:4). An authentic Jewish leader does not deviate from the teachings of Moshe Rabbeinu in any generation. A legitimate Torah leader does not seek to change Halachah but rather guides Am Yisrael on how to properly observe the Torah amid the many challenges that individuals and communities encounter in every generation.

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