

Meshech Chochma

- Jacob Solomon

Lech L'cha

After these events (Avraham's successful and miraculous military intervention saving his nephew Lot, plus the urban district of S'dom from the Great Power nations of the Middle East), the word of G-d came to Abram in a vision saying: "AL TIRA AVRAM - Do not fear, Avram. I am your shield; your reward will be very great" (15:1).

There are three occasions in the book of B'reishit where G-d communicates to the Avot with the words "AL TIRA". The first time is to Avraham, after his success in his rescue of Lot in the war against the four kings (as above). The second time is with Yitzchak: "AL TIRA", after his success in obtaining an uncontested source of water. And the third is with Ya'akov, when he was en route to Egypt to be reunited with Yosef after learning that he was still alive and ruling over Egypt: "AL TIRA in going down to Egypt, for there I shall make you into a great nation" (46:3).

Common to all three is that those words "AL TIRA" were not used when, at first glance, it would have made sense for the Avot to actually feel afraid. G-d did not add the words to Avraham when he was told to "go the

land that I shall show you" (12:1). Nor to Yitzchak, when he was to be a stranger in the lands of Avimelech. Nor to Ya'akov, when he fled to Lavan, or was about to face Eisav and his four hundred men.

On the contrary, "AL TIRA" headed periods of success, periods of victory. "AL TIRA" came on the cusp of moments of success, not of dreaded imminent disaster.

Rashi addresses this problem in his comment on 15:1. He remarks that "AL TIRA" was directed at Avraham's concern that his miraculous deliverance in his rescue of Lot from the four kings would have exhausted his supply of merits in the Divine scales of justice for help in any future crisis. 'Do not fear', said G-d to Avraham, 'I will continue to act as your protector' (ibid). The same reasoning could be inferred to the other situations. Yitzchak suspected his successful years in foreign territory (even though in part of Eretz Yisrael) used up his merits. And the same could apply to Ya'akov, on hearing the stunning news that Yosef was very much alive and running the Egyptian economy.

Successes as a human condition bring challenges and fears of its own, especially as it opens a new chapter of potentially disorientating experi-

ences. And it can be all the lonelier as people who have not been in that precise situation do not understand... But G-d did understand. And He showed it with those words to the Avot: "AL TIRA".

However, the Meshech Chochma implies that in Avraham Avinu's case, not all was as good as it looked. There was a dimension that was disturbing. He suggests that in those days it was the practice that when empires conquered small nations (as Assyria was to do to the Northern Kingdom of Israel more than a millennium into the future), they would forcibly take the entire conquered population out of their home environment and resettle them in a distant region, disorientated and confused, far away from home and far away from their traditions. And not likely to create any further trouble. S'dom deserved it: the Tanach source that throws light on the underlying character of the people of S'dom is where Yechezkel makes an angry comparison between the Jews of his time and the people of S'dom:

Behold! This was the sin of your sister S'dom: pride, an abundance of bread, an abundance of idleness in it, and in its daughters. They did not strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy (Yechezkel 16:49).

In other words, Yechezkel refers to the people of S'dom as economically successful, but lazy and sordidly selfish. Indeed, the Talmudic tradition shows the people of S'dom in a similar light - with the famous story of a young woman who was tortured to death under the legal code of S'dom for offering hospitality to strangers in their city (Sanhedrin 109). As R' Samson Raphael Hirsch derives from the text, the reason that the S'domites were doomed was because their society turned wickedness into the law of the land, and cruelty into justice. That was their way of life.

The Meshech Chochma suggests that Avraham Avinu knew who indeed the people of S'dom were, and it deeply disturbed him. Had he done the right thing in saving them, knowing who they were and what underlay their culture? And in returning them to their familiar environment only to harm more?

G-d answered his question. "AL TIRA AVRAM". Your focus was your gratitude. Judgment on S'dom is in My hand, not yours. You took nothing from the returned spoils of S'dom, "not even a thread or a shoe lace" (14:23). You knew that you were successful because I assisted you. You recognized that by refusing to

take anything from the spoils of S'dom. You were an example to your future generations by recognizing My helping you and not taking credit along the lines of I succeeded entirely through my own efforts (D'varim 8:17). AL TIRA AVRAM. T