RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY כנסת הרבנים

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# *Magen Avraham*: Divine Protection and Lovingkindness

*Parashat Lekh Lekha* 2026/5787 | Rabbi Noam Kornsgold*

## A. Abraham's Shield: Protection and Punishment

| 1. Genesis 14:20, 15:1 | 1. בראשית יד:כ, טו:א |
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| **14:20** "...And blessed be God Most High, Who has **delivered** your foes into your hand." And [Abram] gave him a tenth of everything. | **יד:כ** וּבָרוּךְ קֵל עֶלְיוֹן אֲשֶׁר־מִגֵּן צָרֶיךָ בְּיָדֶךָ וַיִּתֶּן־לוֹ מַעֲשֵׂר מִכֹּל: |
| **15:1** Some time later, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. He said, "Fear not, Abram, I am a **shield** to you; your reward shall be very great." | **טו:א** אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְבַר־ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם בַּמַּחֲזֶה לֵאמֹר אַל־תִּירָא אַבְרָם אָנֹכִי **מָגֵן** לָךְ שְׂכָרְךָ הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד: |

| 2. Rashi, Genesis 15:1, s.v. אחר הדברים האלה [R. Solomon b. Isaac, 11th century, France] | 2. רש"י, בראשית טו:א, ד"ה אחר הדברים האלה |
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| ...The Omnipresent said to him, "Don't be afraid, Abram. I am a shield to you from punishment so that you will not be punished over those people that you killed [in the war between the four kings and the five kings]..." | ...אָמַר לוֹ הַמָּקוֹם אַל תִּירָא אַבְרָם אָנֹכִי מָגֵן לָךְ, מִן הָעֹנֶשׁ, שֶׁלֹּא תֵּעָנֵשׁ עַל כָּל אוֹתָן נְפָשׁוֹת שֶׁהָרַגְתָּ... |

### *Discussion Questions*:

- Genesis 14:20 (source #1a) describes God as delivering Abraham's enemies into his hands, while Genesis 15:1 (source #1b) describes God as Abraham's shield (notice the similar words used in both instances). How might these two descriptions of divine protection differ?
- According to Rashi (source #2), what exactly does Abraham fear following his military victory? What does this suggest about Abraham's understanding of his own actions?
- Why might God need to reassure Abraham that he will not be punished, even though his victory was divinely sanctioned?
- What is the difference between God protecting Abraham from his enemies and God protecting Abraham from the consequences of his own actions?

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- How does Rashi's understanding of the original context of *magen avraham* enhance or change your understanding of the closing line of the first blessing of the *Amidah*?

## B. The Primacy of Lovingkindness

| 3. Babylonian Talmud, *Pesaḥim* 117b | 3. תלמוד בבלי, פסחים דף קיז עמוד ב |
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| R. Shimon b. Lakish said, "'And I will make of you a great nation' (Genesis 12:2) - that is what they say, 'God of Abraham [in the first blessing of the *Amidah*];' 'and I will bless you' - that is what they say, 'God of Isaac;' 'and I will make your name great' - that is what they say, 'God of Jacob.' It might be thought that they conclude [the first blessing of the *Amidah*] with all of them. The Torah therefore says, 'And you shall be a blessing' - with you they conclude, but with all of them they don't conclude. | אָמַר רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן לָקִישׁ: "וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל" (בראשית יב:ב), זֶהוּ שֶׁאוֹמְרִים "אֱלֹקֵי אַבְרָהָם." "וַאֲבָרֶכְךָ," זֶהוּ שֶׁאוֹמְרִים "אֱלֹקֵי יִצְחָק." "וַאֲגַדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ," זֶהוּ שֶׁאוֹמְרִים "אֱלֹקֵי יַעֲקֹב." יָכוֹל יְהוּ חוֹתְמִין בְּכוּלָּן? תַּלְמוּד לוֹמַר: "וֶהְיֵה בְּרָכָה." בְּךָ חוֹתְמִין, וְאֵין חוֹתְמִין בְּכוּלָּן. |

| 4. *Divrei Yisrael, Lekh Lekha*, p. 55 [R. Israel Taub, 19th-20th centuries, Poland] | 4. דברי ישראל, לך לך, עמ' נה |
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| Behold, our Sages of blessed memory said (*Avot* 1:2), "The world stands upon three things: upon Torah, upon divine service, and upon acts of lovingkindness." This is the meaning of that which we say [in the *Amidah*], "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." That is, we seek to draw their modes of divine service upon ourselves, which correspond to the three pillars upon which the world stands. "The God of Abraham" refers to the pillar of lovingkindness; "the God of Isaac" refers to the pillar of divine service; and "the God of Jacob" refers to the pillar of Torah, as is well known...And the explanation is that, in truth, a person must serve God through all three of | הנה אמרו רז"ל (אבות א:ב) על שלשה דברים העולם עומד על התורה ועל העבודה ועל גמילות חסדים, וזה הוא הענין שאנו אומרים אלקי אברהם אלקי יצחק ואלקי יעקב, היינו שאנו רוצים להמשיך עלינו העבדות שלהם, שהוא השלשה העמודים שהעולם עומד עליהם, "אלקי אברהם" היינו עמוד גמילות חסדים, "אלקי יצחק" הוא עמוד העבודה, "ואלקי יעקב" הוא עמוד התורה כידוע...והענין הוא, כי באמת צריך האדם להיות עובד בשלשתן, אך כל זה היה מקודם שהדורות היו שלמים בכוחם שלא התגבר עליהם עול הגלות כל כך, אבל עכשיו בעונותינו הרבים מחמת אריכת הגלות נתמעט לבבינו עד שאין בנו כח לתורה ולעבודה כראוי, על כך עכשיו עיקר קיום העולם הכל תלוי בגמילות חסדים, ועל ידי זה נותן קיום להכל, כי ענין גמילות |

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| them. However, this was possible in earlier times, when the generations were still whole in their strength, when the burden of exile had not weighed so heavily upon them. But now, because of our many sins, owing to the prolonged exile, our hearts have become diminished, to the point that we no longer possess the strength to engage in Torah study and divine service as is fitting. Therefore, now, the continued existence of the world depends primarily upon acts of lovingkindness, and through them, everything else is sustained. For the essence of lovingkindness is to give even when not entitled to receive according to strict justice. And similarly, a corresponding response will arise Above, to bestow upon us through [God's] attribute of goodness alone. | חסדים הוא שנותן אף שאין מגיע מצד הדין, וכן יתעורר למעלה גם כן להשפיע אלינו במדת טובו לבד. |

***Discussion Questions*:**

- How does Reish Lakish (source #3) derive from Genesis 12:2 that only a mention of Abraham, as opposed to also Isaac and Jacob, should conclude the *Amidah*'s first blessing?
- How does *Divrei Yisrael*'s (source #4) explanation of the Gemara (source #3) potentially stand in tension with Rashi's (source #2) of *magen avraham*? In other words, how does the meaning of *magen avraham* in the *Amidah* act as a counterbalance to the meaning of *magen* in the Torah as interpreted by Rashi?
- Why is it somewhat ironic that, according to *Divrei Yisrael* (source #4), the core pillar of the *Amidah* is that of lovingkindness and not the pillar of divine service?
- *Divrei Yisrael* defines lovingkindness as giving even when the recipient is not entitled to receive according to strict justice. How does this definition differ from ordinary generosity or charity?
- According to *Divrei Yisrael*, human acts of lovingkindness elicit divine goodness. Does this mean that divine lovingkindness is conditional upon human behavior? How might this complicate his definition of lovingkindness?
- Based on *Divrei Yisrael*'s definition of lovingkindness, why is Abraham a fitting avatar for this pillar?

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## C. Mercy and Covenant

| 5. ***Shu"t ha-Rashba* 5:115** [R. Solomon ibn Aderet (Rashba), 13th century, Spain] | 5. שו"ת הרשב"א ה:קטו |
|---|---|
| As for these three [first] blessings [of the *Amidah*]: The first was established according to Abraham, who was a man of lovingkindness (*ḥesed*), as it is said, "Lovingkindness to Abraham" (Micah 7:20). | וג' ברכות אלה, הראשונה נתקנה כנגד אברהם, שהוא איש חסד, כאומרם: חסד לאברהם (מיכה ז:כ). |

| 6. **Micah 7:18-20** | 6. מיכה ז:יח–כ |
|---|---|
| (18) Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression; who has not maintained His wrath forever against the remnant of His own people, because He loves lovingkindness! (19) He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea. (20) You will keep faith with Jacob, lovingkindness to Abraham, as You promised on oath to our fathers in days gone by. | (יח) מִי־קֵל כָּמוֹךָ נֹשֵׂא עָוֹן וְעֹבֵר עַל־פֶּשַׁע לִשְׁאֵרִית נַחֲלָתוֹ לֹא־הֶחֱזִיק לָעַד אַפּוֹ כִּי־חָפֵץ חֶסֶד הוּא: (יט) יָשׁוּב יְרַחֲמֵנוּ יִכְבֹּשׁ עֲוֹנֹתֵינוּ וְתַשְׁלִיךְ בִּמְצֻלוֹת יָם כָּל־חַטֹּאותָם: (כ) תִּתֵּן אֱמֶת לְיַעֲקֹב חֶסֶד לְאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לַאֲבֹתֵינוּ מִימֵי קֶדֶם: |

### *Discussion Questions*:

- How does Rashba (source #5) make the connection between Abraham and lovingkindness?
- How can we better understand Rashba's comment when we look at Micah 7:20 (source #6) in context? To what extent does the relationship conveyed in Micah reflect the analysis presented in *Divrei Yisrael* (source #4)? Does the original context complicate or enhance *Divrei Yisrael*'s interpretation?
- Rashba (source #5) calls Abraham "a man of lovingkindness," but Micah 7:20 (source #6) speaks of God showing lovingkindness to Abraham. What is the significance of this distinction?
- How does Micah's description of divine forgiveness help us reconsider God's reassurance to Abraham in Genesis 15:1 (source #1)?
- Having considered all the sources, is *magen avraham* primarily a statement about God's relationship with Abraham, Abraham's character, or the relationship we seek to establish with God? How does the inclusion of *u-foked sarah* change this calculus?