

# Chazon: Shabbos of Vision

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While most national origin stories center upon human strength, heroism and fortitude, the Jewish national origin story of the Exodus from Egypt tells, not of human prowess, but rather of Hashem's fulfilling a promise made to Avraham, thus introducing the legal-ethical category of the "trust relationship" between Hashem and the nation into the center of Jewish society.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the centrality of this fiduciary relationship, at times, is obscured by events in history, as characterized by the three-week period between the 17th of Tammuz and Tisha B'av. During these times, our experience of the covenant is maintained by our faith in its fulfillment beyond the immediate circumstances—and this requires vision. Perhaps for this reason, based on its *haftara's* opening words, the Shabbos before Tisha B'av has become known as "Shabbos Chazon," which means "Shabbos of Vision."

## First Use of the Word *Chazon* or *Machaze*

A word's first use in Tanach often reflects the nuance of its meaning. The word *chazon*, in its variant form *machaze*, first appears in Tanach regarding the *Bris Bein HaBesarim* between Hashem and Avraham.

The Torah records seven times that Hashem spoke with Avraham. The first and seventh times are marked by the words "*lech lecha*," "go for yourself" (Gen. 12:1, 22:2). The second, third, fifth and sixth times discuss Avraham's "seeing" Hashem (Gen. 12:7, 17:1, 18:1) and the land (Gen. 13:14). And the fourth time—the middle one—involves Hashem's speaking to Avraham in a *machaze*, a vision, as Bereishis 15:1 states:

אחר הדברים האלה היה דבר ה' אל אברם במחזה לאמר אל תירא אברם אנכי מגן  
לך שכרך הרבה מאד.

<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to the memory of my father-in-law, Rabbi Levi Meier *zt"l*, who lived with vision and loved Rashi's approach to *Bereishis* 15:5.

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*After these events, the word of Hashem was to Avram in a vision (machaze) saying: “Fear not Avram—I am a shield for you; your reward is very great.”*

The meaning and implication of the word *machaze* is suggested by the subsequent description of the *Bris Bein HaBesarim*, which states in its initial section (Gen. 15:4-5):

והנה דבר ה' אליו לאמר לא יירשך זה כי אם אשר יצא ממעיך הוא יירשך. ויוצא אתו החוצא ויאמר הבט נא השמימה וספר הכוכבים אם תוכל לספר אתם ויאמר לו כה יהיה זרעך.

*And behold, the word of Hashem came to him saying: “[Your servant Eliezer] will not be your heir; instead, one that will come forth from within you will be your heir.” And He took him outside, and He said: “Gaze, please, toward the heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them;” and He said to him: “So will be your children.”*

The Torah does not generally involve itself with “stage direction,” so it is unclear why this verse specifies the location—whether outside or inside—where Hashem spoke to Avraham during each part of this discussion. Rashi, who as a rule emphasizes the textual significance of each word in the Torah, provides three explanations for the verse’s inclusion of the phrase (Gen. 15:5): “And He took him outside.”

Rashi’s first approach “*lefi peshuto*” (i.e., the most evident interpretation) is simply that Avraham had to walk outside of his tent and view the stars in order for Hashem to underscore the promise of descendants to him by comparing the number and steadfastness of his descendants to the stars.<sup>2</sup> This is the verse’s most straightforward meaning. Yet, it does not explain why the phrase “and He took him outside” is included at all, given that no meaning would have been lost had this phrase been omitted completely. We would just have thought that Avraham was standing outside the entire time. Also, this approach does not account for the overt symbolism in this

<sup>2</sup> The end of the verse “so will be your descendants” does not specify whether this comparison to the stars refers only to the large number or also to the intrinsic nature of these descendants. Indeed, the *gemara* in *Shabbos* 156a and *Nedarim* 32a appears to apply the phrase at the end of the verse “so will be your descendants” to the entire verse, and implies that this comparison to the stars speaks, not only to quantity of, but also to the inherent quality of these descendants. Yet, in *Bereishis* 26:4, Hashem tells Yitzchak that his descendants will be like the stars, and there the simile is about the large number of these descendants. In *Devarim* 1:10, Moshe likewise tells the Jewish people: “Hashem, your God, has multiplied you and, behold, you are like the stars of heaven regarding great number,” which indicates that this simile refers to the large number of these descendants (see also *Shemos* 32:13). However, Rashi comments on extraneous words in *Devarim* 1:10, and he notes that the census population after the Exodus, to which Moshe references, was only 600,000 which is far fewer than the myriads of stars. Therefore, Rashi on *Devarim* 1:10 additionally emphasizes the steadfastness of the stars as an aspect of this simile.

verse, especially considering that Avraham already had been told in the preceding verse that he was going to have children who would inherit from him.

Accordingly, Rashi's second approach "*lefi midrasho*" (i.e., an interpretation based on the contextual implication, rather than the localized simple translation) emphasizes that Hashem's taking Avraham outside of his tent, itself, was intended to serve as a metaphor to him. Rashi (based on *Bereishis Rabba* 44:10) explains that Hashem was telling Avraham not only to leave his physical tent and view the stars, but also, more broadly, to "leave [his] astrology." Avraham had concluded that he and his wife would not have children. But the reality was that his destiny was still unfolding and, after his name would be changed from Avram to Avraham and his wife's name would be changed from Sarai to Sarah, they would have children. Thus, Hashem told Avraham that He would give him a degree of independence from systems of causality—from *gezeiros* that are ostensibly inalterable—which, at that time, were characterized by the "signs in the stars." Avraham no longer would be subject to these astrological "signs." His destiny would take a new turn.

But this approach still does not account for the Torah's description of the *Bris Bein HaBesarim* as a whole. In particular, the Rashbam (quoted in *Tosafos* on *Brachos* 7b) emphasizes a striking incongruity in the verses. The middle part of the *Bris Bein HaBesarim* is described as occurring just as it was starting to get dark (Gen. 15:12): "And it happened as the sun was going to set, a deep sleep fell upon Avram; and behold—a dread; great darkness fell upon him." This is followed by a famous passage that is recited in the Haggada, and then the final part of the *Bris Bein HaBesarim* states (Gen. 15:17): "And it happened when the sun set and it was very dark. And behold, there was a smoky furnace and a pillar of fire that passed between these pieces." So during the middle section of the *Bris Bein HaBesarim* (Gen. 15:12) the sun was just starting to set, but during the first part (Gen. 15:5), when the verse says that Hashem took Avraham outside and told him to count the stars, it was still day. The implication of *Bereishis* 15:5 in context, therefore, is that Hashem took Avraham outside and instructed him to look toward the stars during the day!<sup>3</sup>

Accounting for this, Rashi's third interpretation of the phrase "and He took him outside" (based on *Bereishis Rabba* 44:12) states that Hashem took Avraham out, not just from his tent, but "from the space of the world" entirely, and raised him "above

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3 Because of this, the Rashbam quoted by *Tosafos* on *Brachos* 7b applies the concept that there is no chronological order to the verses (*ein mukdam u-me'uchar baTorah*), and that this part, as well, occurred at night. But this still raises the question of why the Torah presents the *Bris Bein HaBesarim* in this manner which, taken as a whole, conveys the incongruity of Hashem telling Avraham to count the stars during the day.

the stars.” As Rashi explains: “This is the language of [the word] ‘*habata*,’ [which is to gaze] from on high toward something lower.” Indeed, the fiduciary covenant between Hashem and Avraham in the *Bris Bein HaBesarim* was outside of, and completely above, nature. It was *sui generis*. The patterns and precedents of cosmology, politics, sociology and history would hold no sway over it at all. This is what Rashi describes in his third explanation of the verse’s phrase “and He took him outside” as Hashem’s having lifted Avraham “above the stars.”

Thus, Rashi interprets the phrase “and He took him outside” on three distinct levels—the regular (“*lefi peshuto*”), the exceptional (“*lefi midrasho*”), and the transcendent (“*davar acher*”). Rashi’s first approach is that Avraham simply stepped outside of his tent to view the stars. His second approach is that Hashem was going to change Avraham’s name and personal direction, but the systems of causality as a general matter would remain fixed as a constant. And Rashi’s third approach is that Hashem raised Avraham “above the stars” so that he not only circumvented, but transcended these systems entirely, gaining perspective over and above the regular order of things.

These three approaches to *Bereishis* 15:5 are necessitated by the verse’s immediate and wider contexts. It is as if Rashi is focusing a lens, first zooming in and then broadening the contextual scope. As Rashi emphasizes in his remark to *Bereishis* 3:8: “There are many *aggadic midrashim* and our Rabbis have already arranged them in their proper setting in *Bereishis Rabba* and in other *midrashim*, and I have come [in writing this commentary] only for the simple meaning of Scripture and for *aggadah* that resolves the words of Scripture with each word stated in its proper place and with its correct meaning.”

### **The Enduring Effect of Sustained Inner Vision**

It is not obvious from the verses, and Rashi does not comment on, whether the entire section—including the phrase “and He took him outside” (Gen. 15:5)—was part of the *machaze* that the opening verse in *Bereishis* 15:1 references. Indeed, considering that the phrase “behold, the word of Hashem came to him saying” (Gen. 15:4) is repeated in the middle of the section, the beginning of the section might have taken place in a vision and the events described afterward might have happened at a separate time.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the Radak cites the apparent anomaly stated in the verses of Hashem telling Avraham to “go outside” to count the stars during the day (Gen. 15:5), and he concludes based on this that the entire *Bris Bein HaBesarim* must have been part of the *machaze* that *Bereishis* 15:1 references.

<sup>4</sup> This textual uncertainty is compounded by Rashi’s comment to *Shemos* 12:40.

The Rambam takes a similar approach and includes the phrase “and He took him outside” (Gen. 15:5) as an example of events in Tanach that occurred as part of an inner vision (*Moreh Nevuchim* 2:46):

כמו שנאמר באברהם “ויוצא אותו החוצה” והיה זה במחזה ... נאמר באברהם “היה דבר ה' אל אברם במחזה לאמר” ונאמר באותו מראה הנבואה “ויוצא אותו החוצה ויאמר הבט נא השמימה וספר הכוכבים” והנה זה ברור שהוא במראה הנבואה שהיה רואה שהוא הוצא מן המקום שהיה בו עד שראה את השמים ואחר כך נאמר לו “וספר הכוכבים” ונאמר תאור הדבר כפי שאתה רואה.

[W]hen it is said of Avraham: “And He took him outside” (Gen. 15:5), this occurred in a vision (*machaze*)... [I]t is said of Avraham: “The word of Hashem was to Avram in a vision (*machaze*), saying” (Gen. 15:1). And it is stated in this same vision of prophesy: “And He took him outside, and He said: Gaze, please, toward the heavens and count the stars.” (Gen. 15:5). It is clear that it was in a vision of prophesy that he saw that he was brought out from the place he was in until he could see the heavens, and that afterwards it was said to him “and count the stars” (Gen. 15:5), and it was said [to him] describe it as you see.

Thus, the Rambam emphasizes that the vantage that was provided to Avraham from “above the stars” does not mean that he was physically brought through the expanse of the universe. Rather, this happened as part of an inner vision (*machaze*), as referenced in the introductory verse to the *Bris Bein HaBesarim*.<sup>5</sup>

The *Bris Bein HaBesarim* is a central event in *Sefer Bereishis* and it is the elemental precursor of Hashem’s redemption of the Jewish people from *Mitzrayim*. That it took place as part of a vision demonstrates the extent to which an inner vision—specifically, one that contains and expresses the “*dvar Hashem*” (Gen. 15:1)—can have essential impact, and endure.

## Conclusion

Uniquely among the weeks of the year, the Shabbos before Tisha B’av has been given a significant title: “*Shabbos Chazon*,” thus highlighting the requirement, especially during the period *bein hametzarim*, to have inner vision. The task and focus during this time period is not only and simply to mourn, but also to strengthen our capacity

<sup>5</sup> Although the Ramban (Commentary on Gen. 18:1) disagrees with the Rambam’s interpretation in *Moreh Nevuchim* 2:42 regarding the visit by the angels in *Parashas Vayera*, he does not disagree here, perhaps because this section begins with a statement that this occurred in a *machaze*. The Ramban specifies that this *machaze* was comparable to the ability of the Jewish people to see sound during *Ma’amad Har Sinai*.

for inner vision that, as in the *Bris Bein HaBesarim*, is reflective and expressive of the *dvar Hashem* through *Toras Hashem*. It is a time, in other words, of inner motion and *teshuva*.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the Shabbos after Tisha B'av has been given the title "*Shabbos Nachamu*" in appreciation of the fact that, even while the *Beis HaMikdash* has not yet been rebuilt, this capacity for inner vision, once cultivated, sustains.<sup>7</sup> It does not quickly abate like a flash in the pan. Instead, throughout the *shiva denechemta*, it continues to unfold toward the *Yomim Noraim* and the entire year, and to develop, *be"H*, into actualized redemption.

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<sup>6</sup> See Rav Mayer Twersky, "Avenues of *Teshuva*" (TorahWeb.org, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> See Rav Twersky, "The Consolation of *Shabbos Nachamu*" (TorahWeb.org, 2003).

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