

The Enduring Covenant: Insights into *Bris Bein HaBesarim*

Introduction

Bris Bein HaBesarim (literally “the covenant between the parts”) — the treaty sealed with Avraham Avinu² promising the Land of Israel to his progeny — is one of the most dramatic and seminal events recorded in the Torah. Aside from the promise of the Land, *Bris Bein HaBesarim* contains a prophecy regarding the servitude in Egypt³ as well as the ensuing Exodus.⁴ Rabbinic tradition records that subsequent exiles and redemptions are alluded to as well. The covenant is formalized through an elaborate ritual involving a series of animals and birds whose parts were positioned opposite each other while a smoky furnace and torch of fire passed in between them.

The Haggadah Shel Pesach invokes *Bris Bein HaBesarim* as a basis for reinforcing our faith in Hashem. The passage “*Baruch shomer havtachaso le’Yisrael*” — Blessed is He who fulfills His promise for the Nation of Israel — affirms the Divine role in calculating the endpoint of the Egyptian exile as foretold to Avraham Avinu.⁵ The subsequent passage, “*ve’hi she’amda la’avoseinu velanu*” — And it is this (the aforementioned promise) which has stood for our fathers and for us — attests that Jewish survival throughout the ages can be traced to the promise of *Bris Bein HaBesarim*. Additionally, the extended *Tachanun* prayer recited on Mondays and



Rabbi Elchanan Adler

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

Thursdays includes a request that Hashem recall *Bris Bein HaBesarim*. Apparently, the reservoir of promise latent within this covenant is never depleted.

What are the main features of *Bris Bein HaBesarim*? Why does it have such significance? What is the symbolism associated with its enigmatic details?

Two Aspects of *Bris Bein HaBesarim* and their Inter-Relationship

As is evident from its closing pesukim (v. 18-21), the essence of *Bris Bein HaBesarim* lies in its promise that Avraham’s offspring would inherit the Land of Israel. Although Hashem had previously⁶ informed Avraham that his children would receive the Land (Bereishis 12:7, 13:14-17), this is the first time that such a prophecy is accompanied by a covenant. Additionally, *Bris Bein HaBesarim* delineates clear borders (river to river) and enumerates ten nations⁷ whose lands were included in the promise.⁸

Another significant aspect of this covenant is the prophecy regarding

the enslavement in Egypt⁹ and the subsequent Exodus (v. 13-14). This includes a number of components: the length of the servitude, the judgment to be meted out against the oppressor nation and the victimized nation exiting with great wealth. Concomitantly, Avraham is assured that he would be personally spared the ravages of this slavery (v. 15).

Why did Hashem inform Avraham about the slavery in Egypt alongside the promise to bequeath the Land of Israel to his offspring? What is the connection between these two aspects of *Bris Bein HaBesarim*?

The Gemara (*Nedarim* 32a) cites the opinion of Shmuel that the Egyptian slavery was decreed as a consequence of Avraham’s question, “How shall I know that I am to possess it?”¹⁰ According to this view, the juxtaposition of the two prophecies is clear. However, the Gemara cites other opinions, which link the decree of servitude to other lapses committed by Avraham.¹¹ According to these views, there must be a more basic link between the promise of the Land and the prophecy regarding the bondage in Egypt.

Main Text of Bris Bein HaBesarim¹ (Bereishis 15:7-21)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי ה' אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לָתֶת לְךָ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ. ח וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹקִים בְּמָה אֲדַע כִּי אִירְשֶׁנָּה. ט וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו קַח־לִי עֵגְלָה מְשֻׁלֶּשֶׁת וְעֵז מְשֻׁלֶּשֶׁת וְאֵיל מְשֻׁלֶּשׁ וְחֵר וְגֹזַל. י וַיִּקַּח לֹו אֶת כָּל אֵלֶּה וַיִּבְתֵּר אֹתָם בְּתוֹךְ וַיִּתֵּן אִישׁ בְּתוֹךְ לְקַרְאֵת רַעְהוּ וְאֶת הַצֶּפֶר לֹא בָתֵּר. יא וַיֵּרֶד הַעֵיט עַל הַפְּגָרִים וַיֵּשֶׁב אֹתָם אַבְרָם. יב וַיְהִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לְבוֹא וַתִּרְדְּמָה נַפְלָה עַל אַבְרָם וְהָנְה אִימָה חֹשֶׁקָה גְדֹלָה נִפְלֶת עָלָיו. יג וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם יָדַע תִּדַע כִּי גֵר יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וְעַבְדוּם וְעָנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה. יד וְגַם אֶת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָן אֲנִי וְאַחֲרָי כֵן יֵצְאוּ בְרִכְשׁ גָּדוֹל. טו וְאַתָּה תָּבוֹא אֶל אֲבֹתֶיךָ בְּשָׁלוֹם תִּקְבֵּר בְּשִׂיבָה טוֹבָה. טז וְדוֹר רְבִיעִי יֵשׁוּבוּ הָנֶהָ כִּי לֹא שָׁלֵם עֹן הָאָמְרִי עַד הַנֶּהָ. יז וַיְהִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בָּאָה וְעֵלְטָה הָיָה וְהָנְה תְנוּר עֹשֵׂן וְלִפִּיד אֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָבַר בֵּין הַגְּזָרִים הָאֵלֶּה. יח בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כָּרַת ה' אֶת אַבְרָם בְּרִית לְאָמֵר לְזַרְעֶךָ נִתְתִּי אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת מִנְהַר מִצְרַיִם עַד הַנְּהָר הַגְּדֹל נְהַר פְּרָת. יט אֶת הַקְּיּוּנִי וְאֶת הַקְּנֹזִי וְאֶת הַקְּדָמְנִי. כ וְאֶת הַחֲתִי וְאֶת הַפְּרֹזִי וְאֶת הַרְפָּאִים. כא וְאֶת הָאָמְרִי וְאֶת הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְאֶת הַגְּרִגְשִׁי וְאֶת הַיְבוּסִי.

7 He said to him, "I am Hashem who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to assign you this land as a possession." 8 And he said, "My Lord, Hashem, how shall I know that I will possess it?" 9 He answered, "Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young dove." 10 He brought Him all these; he cut them in the center, placing each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut up the bird. 11 Birds of prey descended upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. 12 As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and behold — a great dark dread descended upon him. 13 And He said to Abram, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; 14 But also the nation that they shall serve, I shall judge, and afterwards they shall leave with great wealth. 15 As for you, You shall go to your fathers in peace; You shall be buried in a ripe old age. 16 And they shall return here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." 17 When the sun set and it was very dark, there appeared a smoking oven, and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. 18 On that day Hashem made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates: 19 the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, 20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

This connection can be discerned from a pasuk that serves as a bridge between the two aspects of the covenant (v. 16): "And they shall return here in the fourth generation."¹² The juxtaposition of this pasuk with the reference to the Egyptian exile implies that the reason for mentioning the latter event was in order to impress upon Avraham that his offspring's inheriting of the Land would not happen until after their being enslaved in a foreign

land. Indeed, several commentators interpret Avraham's question, "How shall I know that I will possess it?" to mean "In what way will I inherit the Land?"¹³ To this query Hashem responded that the inheritance would not be granted immediately inasmuch as the iniquities of the Amorites were not yet complete. Rather, there would first be a four-hundred-year period of servitude which would culminate in an Exodus, after which the later generation would inherit the

Land bequeathed to Avraham in this covenant.

Taking this a step further, we may suggest that the slavery in Egypt was not merely a "holding period"; it was a necessary condition — a prerequisite for receiving the Land. In order for the Jewish people to become worthy of the gift of Eretz Yisrael, they would first need to undergo a refinement process through the travails of the Egyptian servitude.¹⁴

In this vein, Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik (The Griz) elucidates a comment of Rashi which implies that *Bris Bein HaBesarim* was a voluntary covenant incumbent on those descendants deemed to be spiritual heirs to the legacy of Avraham. Commenting on the verse that describes Esav's leaving the Land of Canaan to settle in Seir "because of his brother Yaakov" (Bereishis 36:6), Rashi states:

מפני יעקב אחיו, מפני שטר חוב של גזירת כי גר יהיה זרעך, המוטל על זרעו של יצחק, אמר אלך לי מכאן, אין לי חלק לא במתנה שנתנה לו הארץ הזאת, ולא בפרעון השטר.

Because of Yaakov his brother — Because of the contract of debt of the decree (Genesis 14:13), "your seed shall be sojourners etc." which was imposed upon Isaac's descendants. He said, "I will get myself away from here. I desire no part, neither of the gift of this land which has been made to him (my father) nor in the payment of the contract."

The Griz infers from Rashi's comments that inheriting the Land was conditioned upon first spending time as sojourners in a foreign land. By leaving Canaan now for the "greener pastures" of Seir, Esav wished to avoid "paying the price" associated with inheriting the Land.

Based on this insight, the Griz elucidates the significance of the

words “*yado’a teida*” — “know well” — which introduce the prophecy of the Egyptian bondage (v. 13). By prefacing the prophecy with these seemingly superfluous words,¹⁵ Hashem wished not only to inform Avraham about the impending bondage of his children but also to stipulate the terms relating to his offspring’s inheritance of the Land.

Symbolism of the Various Creatures — *Korbanos*

Bris Bein HaBesarim is replete with symbolism. In response to Avraham’s question, “How shall I know that I will possess it?” (v. 8), Hashem instructs him to take¹⁶ “a three-year-old¹⁷ heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove and a young dove. The animals were all cut into halves while the birds¹⁸ were not.” The next verse (v. 10) relates, “Birds of prey descended upon the carcasses and Avraham drove them away.” Rashi notes that in ancient times, the splitting of animals and walking between them was a common symbolic act of entering into a covenant.¹⁹ However, the commentaries probe the details described here for deeper symbolic meaning and offer an array of fascinating insights.

Rashi explains that the animals represent various *korbanos* that Bnei Yisrael would eventually bring to atone for their sins.²⁰ The heifer corresponds to the heifer brought on Yom Kippur, the heifer brought for mistakes of the Sanhedrin (*par he’elem davar shel tzibbur*) and the *eglah arufah* (the cow that is killed when a body is found between cities). The she-goat corresponds to the goat that was brought on Yom Kippur, the goat brought on the holidays and the goat

brought for individual sin offerings. The ram symbolizes the *asham* sacrifice for specific definite sins (*asham vadai*) and contingent sins (*asham taluy*) and the sheep offered for an individual sin offering.²¹

According to Rashi, the *korbanos* served as the merit upon which the promise of the Land was based. Avraham’s query “How shall I know that I will possess it?” is interpreted to mean, “In what merit will I possess it?” Hashem’s response was that it would be through the merit of *korbanos*, which would provide atonement.²²

Ramban similarly interprets the creatures’ symbolism in terms of *korbanos*, and notes that the birds were not cut since the Torah states with regard to the bird offering (Vayikra 1:17 and 5:8), “He shall not separate [them].”²³ Additionally, the Ramban explains the symbolism of the birds of prey that descended upon the carcasses and were chased away by Avraham as reminiscent of an era of religious persecution where attempts would be made to abolish the service of *korbanos* in the Beis Hamikdash, but the Jewish people would successfully resist these challenges.²⁴

The Creatures as Symbolic of Am Yisrael and the Nations of the World

Rashi, based on the Midrash, provides additional symbolism of the creatures mentioned in the *Bris Bein HaBesarim*. The animals represent the nations of the world who are compared to heifers, rams and goats, while the Jewish people are compared to the turtledove. The splitting of the animals portends the eventual demise of the various nations. The birds were not cut because they correspond to the

Jewish people who are eternal.

Based on this symbolism, the Radak explains that the animal halves were positioned opposite one another (v. 10) to indicate that the nations of the world would eventually “self-destruct” as a result of mutual military aggression. In addition, it illustrates that their competing ideologies and inherent factionalism inhibit them from joining together in a harmonious alliance. By contrast, the Radak notes, the birds (symbolizing Am Yisrael) were not cut because despite the Jews’ historical split into two separate kingdoms, they remain a nation united by their faith capable of joining together in the Messianic era. It also reflects the fact that during the long period of exile, the Jewish people will remain loyal to the Torah and never completely assimilate.²⁵

Radak proceeds to offer an insightful interpretation of the birds of prey that descended upon the carcasses and were driven away (v. 11). Radak suggests that the *pegarim* (carcasses) described are not the animal carcasses but rather the whole birds who represent the Jewish people. Based on this he writes the following:

רמז לו בזה כי בכל דור ודור אומות העולם
עומדים עלינו לבלותינו והקב“ה מצילנו מידם
בזכות אברהם.

*This is an allusion to the fact that in each generation, the nations of the world stand ready to destroy us and the Holy One Blessed Be He saves us from their hand in the merit of Avraham.*²⁶

Radak’s comments, taken almost verbatim from the *Vehi She’amda* passage of the Haggadah, shed a beautiful light on the aforementioned passage. The word *Vehi* — “And it” — refers to *Bris Bein HaBesarim* (referenced in the previous paragraph in the Haggadah). The section goes

on to relate how in every generation there are those who rise up to destroy Am Yisrael; yet HaKadosh Baruch Hu saves us from their clutches. How has *Bris Bein HaBesarim* stood for our forefathers and us? The answer lies in the symbolism of this verse as interpreted by the Radak. The vultures attempted to harm the whole bird carcasses but Avraham, with Divine assistance, successfully drove them away.

The Symbolism of the Four Exiles and Their Significance

Commenting on the phrases associated with the dread that overcame Avraham (v. 12), the Midrash states the following:

והנה אימה חשיכה גדולה נופלת עליו אימה זו
 בבל דכתיב (דניאל ג) באדין נבוכדנצר התמלי
 חמא חשיכה זו מדי שהחשיכה עיניהם של
 ישראל בצום ובתענית גדולה זו יון ... נופלת
 עליו זו אדום שנאמר מקול נפלים רעשה
 הארץ. ויש שמחלפין נופלת עליו זו בבל
 דכתיב בה (ישעיה כא) נפלה נפלה בבל גדולה
 זו מדי דכתיב (אסתר ג) אחר הדברים האלה
 גדל המלך אחשוורוש חשיכה זו יון שהחשיכה
 עיניהם של ישראל בגזרותיה שהיתה אומרת
 לישראל כתבו על קרן השור שאין לכם חלק
 באלהי ישראל אימה זו אדום דכתיב (דניאל
 ו) וארו חיוא רביעאה דחילה ואמתני ותקיפא
 יתירא.

*"A great dark dread descended upon him," Dread refers to Bavel ... Dark refers to Madai ... Great refers to Greece ... Descended upon him refers to Rome ... There is a different version: Descended upon him refers to Bavel ... Great refers to Madai ... Dark refers to Greece ... Dread refers to Rome.*²⁷

Bereishis Rabbah no. 44

According to the Midrash, *Bris Bein HaBesarim* contains symbolism regarding the four exiles that will span the course of history until the

Messianic age.²⁸ The Torah alludes to each of these exiles with a particular word used in connection with the terror experienced by Avraham as he was about to be informed about the Egyptian servitude.²⁹

What is the connection between the four exiles and *Bris Bein HaBesarim*, whose focus seems to be on the promise of Eretz Yisrael?

Ramban explains that the four exiles constitute a built-in caveat to Hashem's gift of the Land. If the Jewish people sin, they will have to suffer through exile and only then will they receive the Land of Israel.³⁰

On the other hand, Abarbanel (in *Sefer Yeshuos Meshicho*) explains that the purpose of *Bris Bein HaBesarim* was to show Avraham four kingdoms and their destruction in response to Avraham's question "How shall I know?" According to Abarbanel, Avraham wished to know if the Jewish people would inherit the Land on a permanent basis like all other inheritances. In response, Hashem showed Avraham that even after the Jewish people enter the Land, they will be exiled and experience four different exiles.³¹ Once those four kingdoms will be destroyed, Mashiach will arrive and the Jewish people will possess the Land forever.

Radak follows this approach as well. He explains that Avraham's question "How shall I know?" related to how the inheritance will take place. Namely, will the Jewish people remain in the Land permanently or will they be exiled? If they are to be exiled, what will come afterward? In response, Hashem showed him the animals which represent different periods of exile. The heifer represents the exile to Egypt. The goat represents the Greek Empire which is compared to a goat.

Thus began a period of bondage in Eretz Yisrael, which was continued by the Roman Empire, culminating in the Jews' exile from the Land.³² The Ram represents the First Temple and the exile to Bavel, which was extended by Paras and Madai.³³

We may further suggest that the four exiles and the redemption from them correspond to the bondage in Egypt and the ensuing Exodus. The bondage and redemption from Egypt serve as a blueprint for all subsequent exiles and redemptions. Just as we find after the splitting of the sea that "there did not remain a single one" (Shemos 14:28), so too, the nations responsible for Am Yisrael's future exile will fade into oblivion (as symbolized by the cutting up of the animals). When Hashem informed Avraham about the exile to Egypt and the redemption, it symbolizes all periods of exile and that "in each generation, they stand ready to destroy us and Hashem saves us from their hand."³⁴

Further Symbolism in *Bris Bein HaBesarim*

According to midrashic sources, *Bris Bein HaBesarim* contains symbolic allusions to profound concepts and historical milestones. These include: Beis HaMikdash, Gehenom, *kerias Yam Suf* and Matan Torah.³⁵ Each of these aspects and the relationship between them carries enormous mystical significance that transcends our discussion.³⁶

From a linguistic perspective it is noteworthy that *Bris Bein HaBesarim* shares some striking commonalities with the Torah's narrative concerning Avraham's pursuit of the four kings. These include the names of some of the 10 nations whose land was being

promised, as well as several word associations.³⁷ The significance of these literary parallels is not explicitly addressed in the midrashim,³⁸ and merits further attention.³⁹

Conclusion: *Bris Bein HaBesarim* as a Source of Ongoing Inspiration

Pesach affords us a golden opportunity to revel in the remarkable historical journey experienced by our people from *yetzias Mitzrayim* until our very day. Simultaneously, we are summoned to renew our faith in the glorious prophecies associated with the Messianic age. For both of these dimensions, *Bris Bein HaBesarim* serves as an anchor and guidepost. It is, at once, a powerful testament to Hashem's protection of our people throughout the ages, as well as a compass that lays out a vision drawing us to our ultimate inheritance of the Promised Land and to the rebuilding of the *Beis HaMikdash*.

Endnotes

1 According to most commentaries, *Bris Bein HaBesarim* begins with "*Achar hadevarim ha'eila*" (15:1). See, however, Tosafos to *Berachos* 7b, who posits (based on several textual discrepancies) that the account described in verses 1-6 occurred at a subsequent occasion, while *Bris Bein HaBesarim* begins with verse 7.

2 For the sake of clarity we have consistently referred to the protagonist by the name Avraham. It should be noted, however, that the name change from Avram to Avraham did not occur until later on in Parshas Lech Lecha (in connection with the commandment of *Bris Mila*).

3 Interestingly, the verses here do not reference Egypt by name but speak instead of a "land that is not theirs." According to Midrashic sources, this is because the 400 years of sojourning began with the birth of Yitzchak and included the years that the latter

spent as a stranger in Eretz Yisrael (which was then under the dominion of other nations). [See, however, Shemos 12:40 and the commentaries there.]

4 Indeed, Rashi (Shemos 12:42) cites a midrashic tradition that *Bris Bein HaBesarim* took place on the night of the 15th of Nisan, the same calendar day as the Exodus itself.

5 See *Chidushei HaGriz al HaTorah*, Parshas Bo (cited also in *Haggadah MiBeis Levi*) who suggests an ingenious explanation of this passage in terms of how Hashem manipulated various numerical calculations associated with the Exodus to ensure that they each converged at the identical point in history.

6 It should be noted that various midrashic accounts suggest that Avraham was 70 years old at the time of *Bris Bein HaBesarim* (see Rashi to Shemos 12:40). This assumption necessitates reconstructing the chronological flow of the events described in Parshas Lech Lecha since the Torah records Avraham's age at the outset of the parsha as 75. [For further elaboration, see Ramban to Shemos ibid, *Daas Zekeinim* to Bereishis 12:4, Tosafos to *Berachos* 7b and *Shabbos* 10b s.v. *Shel*.] If so, the prophecies of *Bris Bein HaBesarim* actually preceded those recorded earlier in the parsha.

7 As noted by Rashi, seven of the ten nations were promised for an earlier point in history while the remaining three (Keini, Kenizi and Kadmoni) were intended for the Messianic era.

8 Ramban to Bereishis 15:18. See there for an analysis of the relationship between the various promises issued to Avraham regarding his offspring inheriting the Land.

9 See note 3 above.

10 The language employed in the Gemara in describing this sin is "*shehifriz al midosav*," which Rashi interprets to mean that Avraham went beyond what was appropriate in inquiring about Hashem's attributes. See, however, *HaKesav Ve'Hakabala*, who notes that this statement should not be taken literally. See also *Gevuros Hashem* (chapter 9) of the Maharal for a profound interpretation of this statement.

11 See Maharal ibid, who finds a common motif in all of the various opinions. See, also, *VaTisa'eini Ru'ach* by R. Shabtai Sabato (Parshas Lech Lecha) for an original perspective on the various opinions cited in the Gemara. Also noteworthy are the comments of the Ramban (Bereishis

12:10), who views the bondage in Egypt as a punishment for Avraham's going down to Egypt when there was a famine rather than remaining in the Land and having faith in Hashem. For a discussion of Ramban's view, see the notes of Rabbi Chavell ibid.

12 For differing interpretations as to whether "the fourth generation" refers to Avraham's progeny or to the Emorites, see Rashi and Ramban ibid.

13 See *Bechor Shor*. [By contrast, Rashi explains that Avraham wished to know what merits were required for his offspring to inherit the Land. According to the Ramban, Avraham requested assurances that his sins or those of children would not cause Hashem to renege on this guarantee.]

14 Indeed, the Gemara (*Berachos* 5a) lists Eretz Yisrael as one of the three gifts that were granted to the Jewish People via *yisurim* (suffering).

15 The words *yado'a teda* seem extraneous in light of the comment of the Ramban in *Moreh Nevuchim* that every prophecy is transmitted with absolute certainty. Therefore, it must mean something more than just knowing that the prophecy will be fulfilled.

16 Most commentaries assume that the Torah's description of Avraham's taking and cutting up of the animals were events that actually transpired as he received the prophecy. According to Abarbanel (*Yeshuos Meshicho*, p. 16) all of this was part of Avraham's prophetic vision.

17 An alternative rendition offered by the *meforshim* for the word "*meshuleshes*" is an animal that was a third-born to the mother (see Radak). Rashi, based on midrashic sources, explains that three animals of each species were taken.

18 Although the Torah uses the singular expression ("*ve'es hatzipor lo vasar*"), most commentators explain that this refers to both the turtledove and the young dove whose carcasses remained intact and were placed opposite one another. [Interestingly, *Pirkei de'Rebbi Eliezer* implies that they remained alive.]

19 For elaboration of this practice see Rabbeinu Bachya (15:18) and *Sefer Haikarim* of R. Yosef Albo (Maamar 4, #45).

20 Rashi does not explain which *korbanos* the turtledove and the young dove refer to.

Perhaps the reference is to the *korban oleh v'yored* (see Vayikra 5: 7-10) — for which an individual who cannot afford an animal as a sin offering may offer two birds instead.

21 By assigning three animals for each species, Rashi accords with his interpretation of *meshuleshes* (and *meshulash*) as connoting “three animals” (see earlier note).

22 The *Beis HaLevi* cites a Gemara in *Megilla* (31b) that Avraham feared the extinction of his children as a result of intentional sin. If so, he asks, how can sacrifices which atone for accidental sin serve as an adequate reassurance. *Beis HaLevi* answers that intentional sins emerge out of an environment where accidental sins are commonplace and go unforgiven. Hence, atonement for accidental sins serves to avert the committing of intentional sins on a mass scale.

23 The meaning of “he shall not separate” has different connotations in the two cases. With regard to an *olah* bird it refers to not separating the wings from the body; with regard to the *chatas* bird it refers to not severing the head (whereas with the *olah* bird the head was to be severed). Interestingly, the Midrash interprets the phrase “and the bird he did not cut” as referring to one of the birds in accordance with the practice of *chatas ha'of*, while the other bird which symbolized the *olas ha'of* was cut.

24 The Ramban does not indicate which historical period is being alluded to. Perhaps it refers to the religious persecutions that took place during the times of the Chashmonaim. See *Yekev Ephraim* on the Ramban.

25 Abarbanel (*Yeshuos Meshicho*, p. 16), who interprets the halving of the animals as an aspect of the prophetic vision (see note 16), explains that Avraham prayed that the forces of the four Empires (see later section) be weakened. This was accomplished through pitting of one Empire against the other, thus allowing the Jewish Nation to remain intact.

26 For other interpretations of this verse, see Rashi, Abarbanel (*Yeshuos Meshicho*, p. 17).

27 There are various (and at times conflicting) midrashic accounts regarding the four Empires. See *Mechilta* to Parshas Yisro (on the pasuk

Vechol ha'am roim es hakolos 20:15), *Pirkei de'Rebbi Eliezer* (Chapter 28 – and in *Yeshuos Meshicho*, pp. 10-15), Targum Yonasan ben Uziel. There is much discussion among the Rishonim as to whether Yishmael is included among the four empires. See Ramban, *Sefer HaGeulah* and commentary to Bamidbar 24:23. In some versions, the Kingdom of Persia is mentioned instead of Edom. See *Emes LeYaakov* of R. Yaakov Kaminitzky who conjectures that “Persia” was inserted instead of “Edom” out of censorship concerns. See, however, *Sanhedrin* 98b, and Rashi there (s.v. *She'ain kol dekel*), as well as *Midrash Eicha* 1:41 (on *paras reshesh l'raglai*) and *Midrash Shir Hashirim* 8:13, which speak of a Persian assault on Eretz Yisrael at the end of days.

28 For an extensive hashkafic analysis of the four exiles, see the sefer *Ner Mitzva* of the Maharal of Prague.

29 See *Pirkei de'Rebbi Eliezer* (ibid) who interprets the various animals as corresponding to the four Empires. See also Radak who similarly interprets the animals as corresponding to different exiles, but who views the calf as a reference to the first exile in Mitzrayim.

30 This idea dovetails with the comments of the *Beis HaLevi* (based on the Gemara *Megillah* 31b) that Avraham was concerned that his children would sin and forfeit the Land. Hashem responded that He will treat them differently. Instead of waiting until their sins amass and they are worthy of destruction, He will exile them upon their first sinning in order that they could eventually return to inherit the Land.

31 Abarbanel's interpretation which views the four exiles as an inevitable part of the process of Am Yisrael's inheriting Eretz Yisrael is in stark contrast to that of Ramban who views the decree of subjugation to the four exiles as contingent on Israel's sinning. In addition, Abarbanel's interpretation of Avraham's question as referring to Am Yisrael's ultimate inheritance of Eretz Yisrael is at odds with the Ramban who explains that the Divine promise of eternal possession of Eretz Yisrael was made in connection with Avraham's

receiving the commandment of Bris Milah, whereas the question of “How shall I know?” reflected Avraham's desire for reassurance that the promise would not be reneged on in the event of his offspring's sinning or the Canaanites' repentance (see Ramban's commentary to 15:7 and 15:18).

32 Hence, both the Greek and Roman Empires are symbolized by the goat.

33 See Radak who offers several explanations of why these three kingdoms are alluded to by the symbol of a ram.

34 See Rashi's comments to “But also (*ve'gam*) the nation that they shall serve, I shall judge,” which interprets the introductory word “*ve'gam*” as an allusion to the four world empires who subjugated Am Yisrael.

35 Kerias Yam Suf is alluded to in the expression “between the pieces.” Matan Torah is alluded to by the “smoking oven and flaming torch.”

36 The midrashim speak of a delicate choice that Hashem placed before Avraham regarding his offspring: whether to subject them to Gehenom or to subservience to the nations of the world. The Rabbis (*BR* # 44 on “*Vayehi hashemesh lavo*”) debate which one Avraham opted for. For an analysis of this issue, see *Yaaros Devash* Vol. I, ch. 2.

37 For example: the word “Dan” appears in connection to Avraham's pursuit of the kings (14:14) and with regard to Hashem's judging the oppressing nation (15:14); the word *rechush* (property) appears with regard to Avraham's restoring Sedom's wealth (14:16,21) and in connection to the Exodus (15:14); the notion of “halving” appears in connection to the nocturnal pursuit (14:15) and with the various animals cut into parts (15:10).

38 The one midrashic connection between the two narratives is the symbolic linking of the four kings with the four exiles (see Ramban to Bereishis 14:1).

39 For some interesting conjectures see *VaTisa'eini Ruach* by R. Shabtai Sabato (Parshas Lech Lecha) and *Patterns in Genesis and Beyond* by R. David Sykes (pp. 77-97).



Find more shiurim and articles from Rabbi Elchanan Adler at
<http://www.yutorah.org/Rabbi-Elchanan-Adler>