



CCAR and HUC-JIR  
Joint Commission for Sustaining Rabbinic Education



# Sefirah Study

Portraits of the Holy Land: Antiquity to the Present  
*April 25 – June 13, 2005*

## Week 4 – Conclusion

### **Brit Bein ha'Betarim: The Divine Promise to Israel of Nationhood and Land – A Biblical and Rabbinic Perspective Dr. Ben Hollander**

*Below are Ben Hollander's questions and some thoughts responding to each.*

*1) What question of logic are these three midrashim addressing? (Consider the events of the previous chapter)*

Why would Abraham be fearful after having achieved a striking military victory?

*2) Each midrash suggests that Abraham's fear was in a certain realm. Pinpoint the respective realms, each in one word. Cite a modern example of each.*

The first midrash deals with the moral realm, the second with the political/practical, and the third with the theological.

With each, we find contemporary parallels: for the first, the death of so many innocent Iraqis in the current conflict, for the second, the fear that Iraq could become another Vietnam, and the third that the present conflict with the Palestinians and among ourselves is eroding religious Zionism and distorting normative Judaism.

*3) Rashi on verse 1*

*a) As you can see, the midrashim are the source for this Rashi. Explain how it is a good example of how Rashi works with his sources.*

Rashi synthesizes, condenses, edits, clarifies and connects the midrashim to the text.

*b) What change does Rashi make in the wording of the midrash through which he raises a moral question that is different from that raised by the midrash?*

The midrash suggests that Abraham was concerned lest those killed in the the war included righteous people. But Rashi writes that he was concerned over anybody that he might have killed.

4) Summarize verses 5-8 as follows:

v.5 God's promise of **SEED**

v.6 Abraham's response: **believes in the promise and is grateful**

v.7 God's promise of **His descendants inheriting the land of Israel**

v.8 Abraham's response: **disbelief and skepticism**

5) What problem of logic is created by Abraham's response in verse 8?

Why should he believe without question in the first promise and be so disinclined to believe in the second.

6) And how does the following Rashi attempt to solve it? (Rashi on verse 6 "v'he'e'min baShem" and "vayachsheveha lo Tzedakah" but skip the first part of this second Rashi and only do the devar acher)

Rashi's first answer is that it wasn't that he believed in the first and disbelieved in the second, but that he did not ask for a sign concerning the first and did ask for a sign concerning the second.

Rashi's second answer is that he believed equally in both promises but assumed that the second would not be fulfilled unless Israel merited its fulfillment and was asking God to explain how they would gain this merit.

7) What is the textual basis for Rashi's answer?

In the following verse God instructs Abraham to prepare a sacrifice. From this, Rashi infers that this constituted God's answer to Abraham that the key to their merit would be in the offering of the sacrifices. A modern formulation might be: the future of the state of Israel depends primarily on the degree of conviction that the Israelis and Jews feel for the centrality of the Zionist enterprise in Jewish belief, practice, and expression.

v. 11 (Rashi "vayashev") (Ramban "vayashev otam")

8) Why do Rashi and Ramban feel compelled to explain the swooping down of the vulture and Abraham chasing it away, symbolically?

Both Rashi and Ramban subscribe to the assumption that there are no wasted words or superfluous episodes in the Biblical narrative. Here, therefore, they feel compelled to explain it symbolically in order to give it significance.

9) Fill in the following chart: (Adapted from N. Leibowitz's Studies in Bereshit)

	<i>The bird of prey</i>	<i>The carcasses</i>	<i>Abraham chasing birds away</i>
<b>Rashi:</b>	King David	Heathen Nations	Restraining King David from Consuming those nations
<b>Ramban:</b>	Heathen Nations	Sacrifices Israel attempted to make	People of Israel continuing to maintain their religious practice

10) *How could each parshan argue that his perush in more in keeping with the context of the chapter?*

Rashi argues that the subject of this chapter is the promise of the land, and the symbolism therefore, should refer to the time of Israel's sovereignty in the land. For Ramban, the chapter includes reference to 400 years in harsh exilic conditions, so the symbolism should refer to that harshness. Here, I tend toward Rashi because the promise of the land is the primary subject of the chapter and the *Brit Bein Habitarim*.

11) *In sum, each parshan feels that when God makes the covenant with Abraham for nationhood, Land and peoplehood, He conveys to the patriarch, via the vulture that he needs to chase away, the most crucial challenge that his people will face in the course of their history. What is that challenge according to Rashi, and what is it according to Ramban? How does each play out today?*

For Rashi, the central challenge for the Israelites is having power and not abusing it. For Ramban, the challenge facing Jews is how to maintain your way of life in safety without power and freedom. Currently, for Rashi's perspective, the Jewish State faces the challenge of how to avoid becoming a victimizer – especially in light of Jews having so often been victimized. For Ramban, the essential challenges to Jewish identity and life in the diaspora remain the threat of anti-Semitism, discrimination, persecution, assimilation, etc.

Whatever the Promise was, it comes with the awesome responsibility to balance sovereignty and independence with morality and the judicious use of power. The mandate was not simply to be "*mamlacha*" or "a goy - nation" - it was to be a "*mamlechet kohanim vgoi kadosh*" - a kingdom of priests and holy people. Maintaining the consciousness of that promise of the land to Abraham's descendents is conditioned on merit, and that with sovereignty and power, comes awesome responsibility. Accordingly, the viability of Zionism is contingent upon a morally meritorious society whose power is an instrument for protecting and advancing the freedom of all those under its control. This is the dialectic that the modern State faces daily. The core of the challenge is that it is contrary to the usual separation of church and state. That is, the *mamlalcha* is separate from the *kohanim* and the *goy* from the *kadosh*. Kohanim, in fact, often meditate in mountains or monasteries, while governments keep their distance from religion in order that the democratic process will remain viable. But we are commanded to be a *mamlechet kohanim* and a *goy kadosh*. Today we articulate the goal as being a Jewish state and a democratic state. The success or, God forbid, failure of the Zionist enterprise revolves around fulfilling this aspiration, which was first commanded at Sinai.

That is why, according to Rashi, Abraham unquestioningly accepts the promise of seed, but does question the promise of inheriting the land with the words "how do I know that they (my descendents) will inherit it?" Specifically, Rashi suggests that while the promise of seed does not depend upon merit, the promise of the Land does. Thus, Abraham was in fact asking, "by what merit will they inherit it." God's instructing Abraham in the next verse to take this animal and that animal etc. is, according to Rashi, God's answering that it will be through the merit of the sacrifices, ie, maintaining the way of life. On a personal note, when I taught kids and youth in the Diaspora, I felt that when I succeeded I opened to somebody the possibility of a more fulfilling life. Here, in Israel, however, I felt that I was also making a small contribution to the physical viability of the State as the student would be less likely to leave in adulthood and more likely to be willing to serve and contribute.