

One Man's Journey - study guide

Goal of Shiur:

To explain the cryptic reference to "Avraham Ha'ivri" based on the Midrash. Through this, to provide a sketch of who Avraham Avinu was. What are we, as descendants of Avraham, to learn about who we are based on this study?

The expression is used when Avraham is contacted by the "Palit" during the war with the four kings. Any explanation of the term should also take into consideration the context in which the term is mentioned.

View #1 in the midrash:

Was descendant of **Ever**. Show the pesukim. But this is problematic because although Ever is said to have headed a Yeshiva (Yeshivas Shem V'ever), this is true of the midrashic tradition. In the Torah text itself, though, no such information is given. It's therefore hard to say that without spelling out this prominent role of Ever in history, the Torah would – in the context of Avraham Avinu – we would be told that he is a descendant of Ever. It's being Toleh a Gadol B'katan.

View #2 in the midrash:

Was **m'ever l'nahar**. Ie across the Tigris and Euphrates. But this is seemingly just a geographical reference. Not clear why the Chumash introduced it here ; moreover, since we know from late Parshas Noach and early Lech-Lecha that Avraham made such a journey – why do we have to be told it again?

Sources 3-7 try to give some context to this view.

From Sefer Yehoshua (source 3) we see that being from M'ever l'nahar meant being exposed to idolatry. Avraham's being taken from there by Hashem is removing him from such surroundings and influences.

In the next source, the Rashi, we identify Amrafel from the start of the packet – ie the war with the kings. He's none other than Nimrod. There was tension between Avraham and Nimrod prior to the war – Nimrod led a rebellion (against Hashem, Migdal Bavel) and threw Avraham into the fiery furnace.

Avraham Avinu's agenda (source 6) was to spread the belief in monotheism. This was the threat to Nimrod and other idolaters like him.

The midrash in Bereishis Rabba 41:6 also declares that **Avraham and Lot looked identical**; The Psikta Rabti says that **Lot was taken captive only by mistake**; the kings thought that they had captured Avraham!!; The Sforno notes that **Avram Ha'Ivri** refers to Avraham believing, like Lot, in the theology originally promoted by Ever. **SO IN OTHER WORDS, THE CAPTURE OF LOT AND THE EFFORTS OF AVRAHAM TO FREE HIM ARE ALL PIVOTING ON THIS LONG-STANDING THEOLOGICAL BATTLE BETWEEN AVRAHAM AND NIMROD.** Nimrod was trying to neutralize Avraham's influence and captured Lot by mistake. This fleshes out the "Me'ever Lanahar" reference: In context, Avraham Ha'ivri DAVKA is being informed that Lot was captured (by mistake).

The Sforno's explanation (above) may also help make sense of the first view of the midrash, which is essentially saying the same thing. It's the "Ever"-ness of Avraham that is the backdrop for this capture.

View #3 in the midrash:

He's on one side of the world, and the whole world is on the other side. This could be reflecting the same basic theme – but there's another dimension evident in sources 8-10 – and that is, that Avraham defies nature – he does not function according to the same rules of Teva as do other people. The plain pshat of the Chumash says that through his tenacity, he defeated the kings with 318 men! The midrash goes further and says it was only him and Eliezer – Gematria 318 – and other miraculous feats in the Gemara. He also learned Torah all night before it was given – he physically defies nature.

This is a difficult idea to convey. My suggestion (based on Rav Nebenzhal): Hakadosh Baruch Hu created the world so that His program for the world would be implemented. To the extent that man fulfills G-d's purpose, he is granted dominion over rules of nature that otherwise would limit him. One who brings Kavod to Hashem has teva handed over to him to an extent.

This is consistent with what the Netziv says on the pasuk (source #8)

To date:

Ivri – Bnei Banav shel Ever

Ivri – Me'ever L'nahar

Ivri – Hu bitzad echad, vikor Ha'olam bitzad sheni

Finally, with the introduction of the Rambam on the Asara Nisyonos of Avraham, I would like to convey the following final interpretation of Ivri: He is even on the other side of HIMSELF!!!!

Let me explain: Avraham is the Av of Chesed. Starting with the landmark case of the war with the kings, this midda is challenged:

1. a) War involves killing and aggression
2. b) Sending away of Hagar
3. c) Sending away of Yishma'el
4. d) Akeidas Yitzchak

With the first 3, Avraham could always explain to himself that he was ULTIMATELY serving the interests of Chesed:

How so?

1. a) The war could be seen as protecting the world from idolatrous practices and belief – an expression of Kindness to the world. Rescuing Lot was also an act of Chesed
2. b) Sending away Hagar: Avraham had to build a people and this was essential as was c) sending away Yishma'el – who was a very poor influence on his son. So, ultimately a chesed value – of protecting his child and the nucleus of the Jewish people was achieved.
3. c) But the binding of Isaac doesn't seem to have a chesed component? That's just the point, it was the final test which really determined whether Hashem's command and not the "religious identity" of our forefathers was going to determine their course of action. Now Avraham always felt the Torah internally, through his Keliyos, that were two little internal Rebbees for him; this final test was a hard pill to swallow. In the last sources, "makom" has two meanings – literally meaning is place but another reading is Hashem, the Makom. Avraham saw Hashem from a distance on his way to the Akeida – he couldn't grasp any value in the Akeida, G-d said Yitzchak will be your continuation - and now, he's being told to sacrifice him? This is parallel to an interpretation of Miriam standing by the water to see what would happen to Moshe. Her prophecies, ie if Mom and Dad get married, the redeemer of Israel will be born – seemed to be coming to a grinding halt with the possible imminent loss of Moshe. She, too saw the "Makom" from a distance.

The greatness of Avraham, and hence Am Yisrael, is that we're able to work towards objectifying what the Torah wants us to do – to step outside of ourselves – so we're on the "other side" of ourselves. The ultimate Kovea is Ratzon Hashem, and that's Avraham Ha'ivri.