

# Parashat Lekh Lekha לך לך

**Torah: Genesis 12:1–17:27**

**Haftarah: Isaiah 40:27–41:16**

## **Melchizedek: The Mysterious Man**

### **General Overview**

Ever since the mini-series called "Roots" was first aired on national television in the United States over 30 years ago, more and more people from all sections of society have been driven to search out their own personal roots or origins. Among other things, this phenomenon seems to reflect a need inside of many to know from where they have come. It appears from the parasha now before us, that this intensive longing to know our beginnings may, in fact, be placed inside of us by our Creator. This particular Torah portion records the historical roots of the Jewish people through the recording of the story of our father Abraham.

Unlike the two previous parshiyot, whose contents spanned the millennia from Eden to Babel, *Lekh Lekhah* focuses on the life of a single individual and his family, covering perhaps two centuries at the most. However, even though the subject is limited to a few related people, the events are as far-reaching as both the Fall and the Flood.

### **Exposition**

The contents of this parasha can be summarized in two simple words: people and promises. Therefore, our commentary outline will be:

- I. Special People
- II. Special Promises

In this excerpt from Parashat Lekh Lekha, we will focus on the rather enigmatic Melchizedek.

### ***Melchizedek: The Mysterious Man***

The chronicle of Melchizedek is found in chapter 14. If we remove chapter 14 from Genesis, the flow of the narrative of the book will not be hindered. Among other things, this may tell us that the author had some very definite reasons to insert this interlude purposely into the story of Abraham.

Undoubtedly, a major reason for Moshe to write the contents of chapter 14 is to introduce us to the mysterious person of Melchizedek. Indeed, he is an enigma. The information we have on him is scanty. We know, for instance, that his name means, "King of righteousness." We also know that he was a priest-king in the time of Abram. In addition, the text indicates that he worshipped the Most High God and that Abram tithed to him. Beyond that, we are left to speculation.

### **1. Sage Speculations**

The literature of the sages demonstrates how great was the speculation throughout the centuries by some commentators. Some of the ancient Jewish sages demonstrated great ingenuity in their speculations about Melchizedek. However, their highly creative traditions unfortunately raise the level of confusion

and mystery concerning this figure. As an example of such speculation, let us look at a piece of literature from the late Second Temple period or later, 2 Enoch. We are uncertain whether this writing is of Christian or Jewish origin. Nonetheless, it may reflect at least some ancient Jewish traditions. One such tradition relates to the birth of Melchizedek found in 2 Enoch 71:1–21. Here, he is miraculously born just when his elderly virgin mother dies! Upon his birth, he comes out as a fully developed three-year-old!

One of the most interesting ancient references to Melchizedek is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In *11 Q. Melch*, we find Melchizedek being highly exalted over all the angels. Moreover, according to Dead Sea Scroll scholar James Charlesworth, “It is stated that he will preside over a heavenly [tribunal] and exact punishment, with the help of other angels.” He also says that it appears that the Scrolls depict Melchizedek as,

A high priest of the heavenly Temple and identified with the archangel Michael, who fulfils the role of the heavenly priest in rabbinic literature.<sup>1</sup>

The exaltation of Melchizedek by the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls has led some modern scholars to suggest that perhaps the book of *Hebrews* may have been written to encourage Jewish believers who have come from such a background. (We also hold to this viewpoint.)

In the modern era, Rabbi Ellie Munk, perhaps best represents some of the common rabbinic traditions and understanding of Melchizedek. He says that since Shem, Noah’s son, carried with him the knowledge of the Most High God, Melchizedek is to be identified with Shem. However, Abram was the first to recognize that God is not only the Creator of heaven and earth, but that each one of us personally depends upon Him to survive.

Hence, unlike Melchizedek/Shem, Abram called God Adonai, “my lord.” Because of his rather inferior relationship to God, Munk says,

[that the] dignity of priesthood was taken from the descendants of Melchizedek and given to the children of Abram. It was because Melchizedek reversed the order of the essential ideas; he relegated the principle of Divine Providence to second place.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately for Munk, the Scriptures do not seem to hold to such an inferior viewpoint about Melchizedek. Nor do the Scriptures equate Melchizedek with Shem.

The union of king and priest at Jerusalem was to move David (the first Israelite to sit on Melchizedek’s throne) to sing of a greater Melchizedek to come.<sup>3</sup> In fact, if the following understanding is correct, it speaks of a rather exalted Melchizedek that had already come! (See Psalm 110:4)

## **2. A Complete King**

Psalm 110:4 reads in English, “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” This verse is also used in reference to Yeshua in Hebrews (Hebrews 5:6). To whom is the Psalm referring? The answer is in verse 1 where we see a conversation within the Godhead, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand’.” If the Lord is a priest “after the order of Melchizedek,” to what is this “order” referring? Is it referring to some heavenly priestly group, a spiritual organization, or group of priests, or something else?

It appears that the Hebrew sheds quite a bit of light on our question and can, therefore, help us to answer it. The Hebrew of 110:4 is

עולם כהן אתה ינחם ולא יהוה נשבע

על-דברתי מלכי-צדק:

The Hebrew is fairly straightforward. However, a problem arises when one encounters the words *'al divarti* (על-דברתי). The most common translation of these words, על-דברתי, is "after the order." But the best way to render them is by the phrase, "upon my word." This translation also fits in better with the context where "upon my word" would be in parallel position with the first part of the verse, "The Lord has sworn, and will not change his mind." Hence, "words" and "swear" would be perfectly parallel to each other.

In other words, the thrust of this Psalm from the Hebrew is that the Holy One is talking to David's Lord and saying to Him: "by My word, You (David's Lord), Melchizedek, are a priest forever," thereby assuring Melchizedek of his eternal priesthood.

With this interpretation in mind, let us take another look at Genesis 14:18. The English reads, "But Melchizedek, King of Salem." Here "Salem" is understood as a place name. However, the Hebrew could just as well say, "But King of Righteousness, a perfect (complete) king" by taking the word "salem" not as a place name, but as an adjective from the word shalom (שלום), meaning completeness, wholeness, or even perfection.

In light of all of this, here is what our friend and Israeli biblical Hebrew expert Dov Chaikin, whose exegesis is reflected above, concluded concerning the appearance of Melchizedek in Genesis 14:

But if the person confronting Abraham is someone whom he recognizes as being so much greater than himself, the Perfect King, the sequence in Genesis 14:18–20 takes on a most significant meaning. At what stage had Abraham sworn an oath (to YHWH)? And why had Malki Tzedek appeared on the scene, out of the blue, just as the king of Sodom set out to meet Abraham? Here, to me, was an obvious manifestation (the first recorded) of YHWH in human form!<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, Dov, then, explains that it was this passage that resolved many of his personal doubts concerning Yeshua's claim to divinity that solidified the assurance of his salvation.

We can sure understand why this was so. Apparently the writer to the Hebrews had the same thing in mind when he equates Yeshua with Melchizedek in Hebrews 7. In fact, the writer to the Hebrews says this concerning Melchizedek:

[that he] was without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever. (7:3)

Moreover, if Dov's interpretation is correct, then perhaps this was one of the moments in Abram's life about which Yeshua spoke in John 8:56, "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day." (Another moment was certainly in Genesis 22, more comments on that in a later commentary.) Which day does Yeshua have in mind? It is the day when Yeshua, the perfect King of Righteousness will reveal Himself to all and take His rightful place on the throne of David, the one who wrote about Him!

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (vol. 1), 249–250.

<sup>2</sup> Elie Munk *The Call of the Torah (Bereshit)*, 181.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis (TOTC)*, 121, and Psalm 110:4.

<sup>4</sup> Dov Chaikin, “After the Order Of,” *Tishrei*, vol. 2, No.2, 29–30.