

(4) Behold, the word of God came to Avram, saying: “This one [Eliezer] will not inherit your possessions; only one that will be born from you will inherit you.”

(5) [Then] He took him outside and said [to him], “Now gaze (הִבֵּט) at the heavens and count the stars [and see] if you are able to count them!” And He said to him, “So will be your offspring.”

(6) And he believed in God, Who reckoned this as righteousness on his part.

have children.⁸¹ And although he knew that God has the power to override astrological fate,⁸² he thought that He does not do so for the sake of a single individual. Avram thus said: “*Look!* For *me* — an individual who, according to the stars, is not destined to have children — You have not overridden the laws of nature.” Avram then supports his argument further, continuing: “*You* — Who have the power to override the laws of nature — *have not given me offspring* until now; if it had been Your intention to do so, You would have done so already.” [This answers Question 6.]

Answer to
Question 6

AVRAM IS ELEVATED ABOVE THE HEAVENS

The following Midrash on verse 5 will help us understand this section properly:

R’ Yehudah said in the name of R’ Yochanan, “God elevated Avram above the dome of the heavens. This is [the sense of] His words to Avram, ‘Gaze (הִבֵּט) at the heavens,’ for the word הִבֵּט applies only to [gazing] down [at something] from above”...⁸³

81. See Rashi, *Bereishis* 15:5.

82. See *Shabbos* 156a–b.

83. The Alshich notes that while there are *pesukim* in Tanach where the root הִבֵּט

(ד) וְהִנֵּה דְבַר־ה' אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר לֹא יִירָשְׁךָ זֶה כִּי־אִם אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִמְּעִיךָ
הוּא יִירָשְׁךָ.

(ה) וַיּוֹצֵא אֹתוֹ הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הִבֵּט־נָא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְסַפֵּר הַכּוֹכָבִים
אִם־תּוּכַל לְסַפֵּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ.

(ו) וְהָאֱמֹן בָּהּ וַיַּחֲשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה.

R' Levi said [that God instructed Avram], “While shoes are on your feet, walk on the stars. For whoever is placed below the stars fears them [i.e., fears their influence], but you, who have been placed above them, trample them!” (*Bereishis Rabbah* 44:12).

Consider the following questions:

1. We explained above (on verse 2) that Avram’s main concern about not having offspring was that his happiness and fulfilment in *Olam Haba* would not be complete if he had no children to continue his path in serving God. The fact that he did not have anyone to inherit his material possessions was mentioned only as a secondary consideration. We would thus have certainly expected God (in His answer to Avram) to concentrate on Avram’s spiritual reward in *Olam Haba* rather than on his material reward in this world. Why then does Hashem’s answer begin by focusing exclusively on the material aspect, as if this is the major issue: “*This one will not inherit your possessions*”?
2. Why does verse 4 begin with the unusual expression, “*Behold (הִנֵּה), the word of God came to Avram*”?

does not have this connotation, Chazal learn a *gezeirah shavah* from *Yeshayahu* 63:12 and *Tehillim* 80:15, both of which contain the phrase *הִבֵּט מִשָּׁמַיִם וַרְאָה* *Gaze [down] from the heavens and see*. Our phrase *הַשָּׁמַיְמָה* also contains the word *הִבֵּט* and therefore similarly means “gazing down.”

3. According to the Midrash, Hashem spoke with Avram in verse 5 after raising him above the world. Why then did God begin the conversation on earth (verse 4)? After all, everything He told him forms part of one interconnected dialogue!
4. Why does verse 5 state וַיֹּאמֶר — that God “said” to Avram — twice?
5. Why does the Torah mention here that Avram *believed in God*? Wouldn't anyone believe in God, if He had just promised him something through a prophetic revelation?! Yet the Torah tells us that God *reckoned this as righteousness on his part*.

Let us begin with our second question. The word הִנֵּה (translated above as *behold*; lit., *here is*) denotes something that is present and is happening currently (or imminently). Thus, verse 4 begins with the words: הִנֵּה דְבַר ה', *Here is the word of God*, to emphasize that God spoke these words to Avram right away, i.e., while Avram was still on earth — not waiting to take him into the heavens before promising that he would have a child to inherit him. To emphasize this point, the Torah purposely does not use the more ordinary phrase, “And God spoke to Avram.”⁸⁴ [This answers Question 2.]

This also explains why God initially spoke to Avram down here on earth (Question 3). There was no need to elevate him above the heavens and tell him to “trample on the stars” only to promise him offspring, for that was relatively easy to achieve.⁸⁵ God raised Avram above the heavens in order to promise him a reward of much greater magnitude: that amongst his offspring

84. Furthermore, Alshich suggests that the word הִנֵּה in our verse relates back to the word הִנֵּה in verse 3, where Avram used that word in saying that he does not have a child to inherit his worldly riches.

85. Of course, Hashem can do anything and everything with no effort at all. We are speaking here in relative terms. See next footnote.

there would always be holy, great *tzaddikim* — people who would not be subject to the constellations but rather would rule over them. Thus Hashem told Avram, “I have brought you here (above the stars) to show you that you and your offspring will rule over the constellations.”⁸⁶ [This answers Question 3.]

But where is there a hint to such a promise in our passage?

The answer is that it is intimated in the statement that Avram’s offspring would be like the stars. For we see elsewhere in Scripture that the righteous are compared to the stars, as *Daniel* 12:3 says: וְהַמְשֻׁכְּלִים יִזְהָרוּ כְּזֹהַר הַרְקִיעַ וּמִצְדֵי יְקִי הַרְבִּים כְּכֹכְבִּים לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד, *The wise ones will shine like the radiance of the heavens and those who teach righteousness to the multitudes* — i.e., the *tzaddikim* — [will shine] like the stars forever and ever.⁸⁷ The phrase in our verse, “So (i.e., like the stars) will be your offspring,” thus means not only that Avram’s descendants would be numerous, but also that they would be righteous.

Indeed, it was clear to the Sages that the words כֹּה יִהְיֶה זַרְעֶךָ, *So will be your offspring*, could not simply refer to the promise that Avram’s offspring would be numerous, for if that were the case there would be no need for the Torah to say the words “*He said to him*” twice in verse 5 (once before challenging him to see if he could count the stars, and again before promising, כֹּה יִהְיֶה זַרְעֶךָ). The statement, כֹּה יִהְיֶה זַרְעֶךָ, performs a second, separate promise: Avram’s descendants would not only be as numerous as stars, they would be like stars in another way — i.e., they would be *tzaddikim*, just as Avram was. [This answers Question 4.]

However, it is obviously not possible that all of Avram’s descendants would be righteous. It is for this reason that elsewhere⁸⁸

86. The reason this second promise would be more “difficult” for God to fulfill (see preceding footnote) is that it is a fundamental tenet of Jewish belief that God does not make anyone a *tzaddik* or a *rasha*. See further, on verse 6.

87. See also *Devarim Rabbah* 1:14.

88. *Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeira* 13.

(7) [God] said to [Avram], “I am Hashem Who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land to inherit it.”

(8) He said, “My Lord, Hashem, how shall I know that I am to inherit it?”

(9) [God] said to him, “Bring me three calves, three goats, three rams, a turtledove and a young dove.”

(10) Avram brought Him all these. He cut them in half and placed each half opposite the other. But he did not cut the [adult] bird.

the Midrash quotes R' Tanchum in the name of R' Acha as stating: What did God mean when He said, כִּנְהַיָּה זְרַעֲךָ? He meant that the world never has less than thirty [complete] *tzaddikim*, for the *gematria* of כִּנְהַיָּה is thirty. In other words, God guaranteed [at least] thirty *tzaddikim* from Avram's descendants in every generation.⁸⁹

In light of what we have explained, we can now understand as well why God began by telling Avram about his reward in this world, and only afterwards spoke with him about the completeness of his reward in *Olam Haba* (Question 1). It was not because the material reward was more important. Rather, he was saying: “First (while you are still on earth) I want to tell you about your reward here on earth, viz., that you will have a child to inherit your possessions. However, your principal reward, viz., that you will always have *tzaddikim* among your offspring,⁹⁰ I will promise you only after I elevate you above the heavens.” (As explained above, God's telling Avram to “trample the stars” would signify to him that his descendants would have dominion over those forces that govern the fate of the rest of humanity.) [This answers Question 1.]

Finally, based on what we have said here, we can answer our fifth question as well: The promise God had just made to Avram

89. The Alshich alludes also to *Midrash Sechel Tov, Vayeira* 19:35, where R' Tanchum bar Chanilai is cited as saying that God informed Avram that the world would never have fewer than thirty *tzaddikim*.

90. As noted above (see Question 1), Avram's major concern was that his reward in *Olam Haba* would be incomplete if he did not have offspring who would continue in his path.

- (ז) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָם ה' אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לָתֵת לְךָ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ.
- (ח) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹהִים בְּמָה אֵדַע כִּי אֵירֶשְׁנָה.
- (ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי קַחָה לִּי עֵגְלָה מְשֻׁלֶּשֶׁת וְעֵז מְשֻׁלֶּשֶׁת וְאֵיל מְשֻׁלֶּשׁ וְתֹר וְגֹזֶל.
- (י) וַיִּקַּח־לוֹ אֶת־כָּל־אֵלֶּה וַיִּבְתֵּר אֹתָם בְּתוֹךְ וַיִּתֵּן אִישׁ־בְּתָרוֹ לְקִרְיַת רְעֵהוּ וְאֶת־הַצֶּפֶר לֹא בָתָר.

(that his descendants would be righteous) was not an ordinary promise. Did it not contradict the principle that human beings have free choice? Our Sages⁹¹ have taught us, “Everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven.”⁹² If so, how could God make this promise?

The Torah therefore tells us that Avram *believed in God*. Avram believed that God would fulfill His promise somehow, even though it seemed to contradict the normal way He runs the world. And because Avram had this faith in God, He *reckoned this as righteousness on his part*. [This answers Question 5.]

Answer to
Question 5

ERETZ YISRAEL — A PERSONAL INHERITANCE

Consider the following questions:

1. Why does God link Avram’s inheritance of the Land specifically with his deliverance from the fiery furnace of the Kasdim?⁹³

91. *Berachos* 33b.

92. Indeed, if not for this principle, the whole idea of God rewarding and punishing us for our actions would be incomprehensible.

93. Many years earlier, King Nimrod had cast Avram into a fiery furnace as a punishment for rejecting idolatry and smashing his father, Terach’s, idols. God

2. Why did Avram ask, “How shall I know that I am to inherit it?” Surely this showed a lack of faith on his part, for God had just told him that he would inherit the Land!
3. How did God’s instruction to bring *three calves*, etc., serve to reassure Avram?⁹⁴
4. Why did God command Avram to split the animals in half, and why did He tell him not to cut the bird?⁹⁵

If we look carefully at verse 7, we will see that God is promising to give Avram himself the Land of Israel, for the *pasuk* states, “... to give **you** this Land to inherit it.” This is difficult to understand since the Land did not actually pass into Bnei Yisrael’s possession until the time of Yehoshua, more than four hundred years later. But the explanation is that God is promising Avram that at the end of history, at the time of *Techiyas HaMeisim* (the Resurrection of the Dead), He would raise him up from the dust of the earth and give him, personally, the Land of Israel.

Based on this, we can explain why God mentions Avram’s salvation from the fire of Kasdim at this time. God is telling Avram not to be amazed at the idea that He would resurrect him from the dust of the earth, for He had already performed a similar miracle for him when He saved him at Kasdim.⁹⁶ Just as

performed a great miracle, allowing Avram to emerge from there unscathed. The name of Avram’s city, “Ur Kasdim,” means “the fire of Kasdim” and refers to this event (see Rashi on *Bereishis* 11:28).

94. Although this was a covenant, the Alshich notes that God had already made a covenant with Avram regarding the Land (see *Bereishis* 12:7); why was this one special? In addition, he asks, why did God have to go through such an elaborate procedure in this covenant — and one that involved cutting animals in half, at that?

95. The Alshich presumes that Avram acted in response to God’s command.

96. The connection between Avram’s salvation from the ashes and the promise of his resurrection from the dust of the earth is more apparent in Hebrew, since the words

He had prevented the fire from burning him up at Kasdim, He would prevent the dust of the earth from permanently consuming him. Thus God said, “*I am Hashem Who brought you out of Ur [i.e., the fire of] Kasdim*” — Who brought you back to life, as it were, from the ashes of the fiery furnace. You can therefore trust that I will give you this land to inherit it personally — when I bring you back to life from the dust of the earth at the time of *Techiyas HaMeisim*. [This answers Question 1.]

Answer to
Question 1

It was in response to this that Avram asked, “*How will I know that I will inherit it?*” He was not questioning if God would give the Land to his descendants; he was questioning if he personally would ever get to inherit the Land. For that could only happen through *Techiyas HaMeisim*, which would depend on the Jewish people’s surviving the travails of history. If Israel ceased to exist, there would be no Resurrection, neither for them nor for Avram.⁹⁷ Therefore, Avram was asking, “How do I know that my offspring will survive? How do I know that they will not misuse the gift of free choice and fall prey to sin during the many generations between now and the Resurrection — especially in light of the difficult exiles that You have told me they will have to endure, when they will be persecuted and scattered amongst the nations of the world?⁹⁸ Perhaps the challenges will simply be too great.” [This answers Question 2.]

Answer to
Question 2

for ashes and dust are very similar: אפר means dust and אפר means ashes. Avram himself uses both words together in *Bereishis* 18:27 where he states, “I am but ashes and dust.” (Cf. *Bereishis Rabbah* 49:11, which understands this to refer to Avram’s deliverance from the ashes of the fire of Kasdim and his salvation from returning to the dust of the earth at the hands of the Four Kings.)

97. That is, if Israel would assimilate and cease to exist as the Jewish people, they would not be worthy of *Techiyas HaMeisim* (for the wicked do not get to enjoy the perfected world of the Resurrection Era). The Alshich adds the novel point that even the righteous Avraham will not come back to life if there are no Jews in the resurrected world. Compare Alshich below, *Parashas Vayeira*, 18:16–19.

98. See Alshich on 13:16 above.

(11) The bird of prey came down upon the carcasses but Avram saved them [from it].⁹⁹

(12) Before the sun set, a deep [prophetic] slumber fell upon Avram and suddenly a [feeling of] dread [and] great darkness fell upon him.

(13) And He said to Avram: “Know, you should know,¹⁰⁶ that your offspring will be a stranger in a land that does not belong to them. [Your descendants] shall serve them and they shall oppress them for four hundred years.

(14) “But I will also bring judgment against the nation that they will serve; after that they will leave with great wealth.

In order to understand how God’s instruction reassured Avram (Question 3), let us look at the following Midrash:¹⁰⁰

Bring me three calves — this refers to Babylonia, which established three kings: Nevuchadnetzar, Evil-merodach, and Belshatzar.

Three goats — this refers to Media,¹⁰¹ which established three kings: Koresh, Daryavesh, and Achashverosh.

Three rams — this refers to Greece, which conquered three out of the four directions of the world. (They did not conquer the East.)

A turtledove and a young dove (לִּילִיָּהּ) — this refers to Edom, which appears to be kosher (pious) like a turtledove but in fact is [evil like] a robber (לִּילִיָּהּ).¹⁰²

99. Most commentators translate טֹרֵף as a collective noun meaning *birds of prey*, and interpret the end of the verse to mean: *and Avram chased them away*. The Alshich, however, takes טֹרֵף to be a single *bird of prey*; and interprets the end of the verse to mean: *and Avram saved them* (i.e., the carcasses) from the bird of prey.

100. *Bereishis Rabbah* 44:15.

101. That is, Persia/Media.

102. The Midrash expounds לִּילִיָּהּ, *and a young dove*, as if it were written: לִּילִיָּהּ, *and it robs*.

- (יא) וַיִּרְדֵּ הָעֵיט עַל־הַפְּגָרִים וַיֵּשֶׁב אֹתָם אַבְרָם.
 (יב) וַיְהִי הַשָּׁמֶשׁ לָבוֹא וְתִרְדְּמָה נִפְלְאָה עַל־אַבְרָם וְהִנֵּה אֵימָה חֲשֵׁכָה
 גְּדֹלָה נִפְלְתָת עָלָיו.
 (יג) וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם יָדַע תִּדַע כִּי־יָגֵר יִהְיֶה זֶרְעֲךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם
 וְעַבְדוּם וְעֵנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה.
 (יד) וְגַם אֶת־הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָן אֲנֹכִי וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יֵצְאוּ בְרִכְשׁ גָּדוֹל.

God instructed Avram to [slaughter and] cut in half all the animals that represent the four world empires (Babylonia, Media, Greece, and Rome), that would harass and oppress the Jewish people.¹⁰³ He was thereby telling Avram that these empires would eventually be split in two — i.e., broken up and destroyed. However, God instructed Avram not to cut the turtledove, which represents the Jewish people (who are compared to a dove);¹⁰⁴ thus the *pasuk* says: *But he did not cut “the bird”* — referring to the turtledove. This symbolizes the fact that the Jewish people would never be destroyed, but will survive until the time of *Techiyas HaMeisim* and beyond.¹⁰⁵

God thus reassured Avram that he would certainly inherit the Land himself at the time of the Resurrection together with the rest of the Jewish people. [This answers Questions 3 and 4.]

Answer to
Questions
3 and 4

103. According to the Alshich, it would appear that God also instructed Avram to cut the *gozal*, which represents Rome.

104. See *Shir HaShirim* 2:14. The Midrash’s statement that Edom “appears to be kosher (pious) like a turtledove” could accordingly be taken to mean that Rome appears to be pious like Israel.

105. The Alshich also cites *Sotah* 9a, which expounds *Devarim* 32:23 as stating that although God will punish Israel throughout history, the Jewish people will always continue to exist.

106. Translation follows the Alshich (see below).

(15) “You will go to your ancestors in peace and you will be buried at a good old age.

(16) “The fourth generation will return here since the sin of the Emorites will not be complete until then.”

(17) After the sun set, there was a thick darkness; there was a smoking furnace and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces [of the animals].

AVRAM CHOOSES EXILE FOR HIS OFFSPRING

Consider the following questions on verses 11, 12, and 17:

1. What is the significance of the fact that a bird of prey came down upon the carcasses and that Avram drove it away (verse 11)?
2. Why is it necessary to know that Avram’s prophecy began before sunset (verse 12)?
3. Why is it necessary to know that Avram saw the *smoking furnace* after sunset, when it was very dark (verse 17)?

Let us begin by looking at two Midrashim that discuss God’s prophecy to Avram in our passage:

- I. *Bereishis Rabbah* 44:17 takes verse 12 as hinting to the four exiles that the Jewish people would endure in the future: *A dread* (אִימָה) refers to Babylonia; *darkness* (חֹשֶׁךְ) refers to [Persia and] Media; *great* (גְּדֹלָה) refers to Greece; and *fell upon him* (נִפְלְתָה עָלָיו) refers to Edom (Rome).¹⁰⁷

107. The Midrash cites Scriptural support for connecting each of these four expressions to its respective empire.

(טו) וְאֵתָהּ תָּבוֹא אֶל-אֲבֹתֶיךָ בְּשָׁלוֹם תִּקְבֹּר בְּשִׂיבָה טוֹבָה.
 (טז) וְדוֹר רַבִּיעִי יָשׁוּבוּ הֵנָּה כִּי לֹא-שָׁלֵם עֵוֹן הָאָמְרֵי עַד-הֵנָּה.
 (יז) וַיְהִי הַשָּׁמֶשׁ בָּאָה וַעֲלָטָה הָיָה וְהֵינָה תַּנּוּר עֵשֶׂן וְלִפִּיד אֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר
 עֵבֵר בֵּין הַגְּזֵרִים הָאֵלֶּה.

II. *Bereishis Rabbah* 44:21 takes the expression *smoking furnace* (תַּנּוּר עֵשֶׂן) in verse 17 as a reference to Gehinnom. The Midrash explains that God told Avram to make a choice: Either his descendants would have to endure four difficult exiles among the nations (alluded to in verse 12, as explained just above), or they would have to descend to Gehinnom. Avram chose that they should endure exile.¹⁰⁸

There are two distinct eras in human history. The first is the current era, while the second is the time of Judgment that will take place at the End of Days (at the beginning of the Era of the Resurrection — *Techiyas Hameisim*).¹⁰⁹ The former is compared

108. The truth is, the Midrash does not simply say that Avram’s descendants must suffer either exiles or Gehinnom. Rather, it says they must suffer one of these punishments — as chosen by Avram — if they fail to involve themselves in certain mitzvos that have protective merit (see there with commentary of Radal). It appears that the Alshich brings this Midrash only to make the points that our passage alludes to these two potential punishments, and that a time could come when Avram’s descendants would have to suffer one of them.

109. See *Ma’amar Ha’Ikkarim* by R’ Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (printed at end of the Feldheim edition of *Derech Hashem*) in the section called “The Redemption” (p. 395): “At the time of *Techiyas HaMeisim* both the righteous and the wicked will be brought back to life. The wicked who have not yet been adequately punished for their sins will then be given an appropriate punishment. This involves the great Day of Judgment which will take place [right] after *Techiyas HaMeisim*, when God will judge all mankind. He will determine who is worthy of enduring forever [in the post-Resurrection world] and who should be [permanently] annihilated...” [See, however, *Derech Hashem* 2:2:4, where R’ Luzzatto writes that because people are punished for their wickedness when they die and thus become purified (most prominently through their souls suffering in Gehinnom), “the number of people who are actually annihilated is small and insignificant. It consists only of those who are dominated by evil

to daytime; the latter is compared to the night that follows. It is far preferable for the Jewish people to be cleansed of their sins during the first period, while it is still day (the time of God's kindness and mercy) — before darkness comes (the time of God's harsh judgment). Even though the former requires exile (i.e., the atonement brought by suffering under the four great empires of the world), it is better than the alternative, which is to be condemned to the punishment of Gehinnom at the time of Judgment at the End of Days.¹¹⁰

Answer to
Question 2

The Torah informs us that Avram's prophecy began *before the sun set* because the initial part of his prophecy (verse 12, as expounded by the Midrash cited above) speaks of the current era with its four exiles. By conveying this to Avram first, when it was still day, Hashem conveyed to him that this was His preferred option. [This answers Question 2.] The Torah then tells us (verse 17) that when Avram saw the *smoking furnace* which symbolizes Gehinnom,¹¹¹ it was *after the sun set*, when there was a *thick darkness* — i.e., the dark night of Judgment. This was the second, less-preferred alternative he was being offered: that Israel could have their sins purged through the terrible suffering of Gehinnom. [This answers Question 3.]

Answer to
Question 3

Verse 17 may further be understood as conveying what will happen at the End of Days if Avram (wisely) chooses the “four

so completely that it is impossible for them to have any chance of experiencing the true reward and everlasting delight of experiencing God.”]

110. It is evident from the Alshich that he is not speaking of the suffering that sinners' souls experience in Gehinnom right after death. Rather, he is speaking of the Gehinnom representing the [permanent] annihilation that will be decreed upon those who have not been adequately punished for their sins before the Day of Judgment.

The underlying assumption here is that the Jewish people will accumulate many sins. But see the next section (“The Reason for the Enslavement in Egypt”).

111. Gehinnom is a place of fire. Furthermore, *Yeshayahu* 31:9 and *Malachi* 3:19 utilize the word תַּבְּיֵר, *furnace* — the same word used in our *pasuk* — in the context of Gehinnom.

exiles” option. The verse’s opening words, “*After the sun set, there was a thick darkness,*” refer to the harsh nighttime of the great Judgment. The continuation of the verse, “*there was a smoking furnace and a flaming torch,*” refers to Gehinnom (a place of fire, as mentioned above). And the conclusion of the verse, “*which passed between these pieces of the animals,*” refers to the Four Empires (the four exiles).¹¹² Verse 17 thus states that the punishment of Gehinnom will be visited not upon the Jewish people but rather upon the Four Empires who exiled and oppressed them. However, the people of Israel, having gained their atonement through their exiles, would not suffer in the Great Judgment. As verse 10 said, *But [Avram] did not cut the [adult] bird* — which represents Israel (see commentary above to that verse) — into pieces. The fires of Gehinnom in the time of Judgment would affect the other nations, but not Israel.

We now turn to verse 11, which states that *the bird of prey came down upon the carcasses but Avram saved them*. The Midrash¹¹³ identifies the *bird of prey* with King David (who devoured his enemies like a bird of prey); *the carcasses* are the nations of the world.¹¹⁴

The *pasuk* is accordingly telling us that approximately 500 years after the events of our passage, King David was fighting successfully against the enemies of Israel and wanted to completely destroy them. But because of the choice that Avram made, God prevented David from doing so (thus “saving” the non-Jewish nations).¹¹⁵ For if David had succeeded in his efforts, the Jewish

112. See *Bereishis Rabbah* 44:15, cited in the Alshich’s commentary to verses 9–10 above, that the various animals mentioned in verse 9 allude to the Four Empires.

113. *Yalkut Shimoni* 76.

114. See footnote 99.

115. The Alshich writes that since God acted as He did because of the choice Avram made, it is regarded as if Avram himself had saved the other nations (this is why verse 11 states, “... **but Avram saved them**”). See similarly Rashi to verse 11, who writes that our verse alludes to the fact “that David the son of Yishai shall come to annihilate [the pagan nations], but Heaven will not allow him to do so, until the Mashiach shall come.”

people would have lost their chance of being purged of their sins through exile at the hand of the Four Empires — and would instead be condemned to Gehinnom. [This answers Question 1.]

THE REASON FOR THE ENSLAVEMENT IN EGYPT

Consider the following questions on verses 13–16:

4. Why does the Torah place verses 13–16, announcing the Egyptian bondage, between verses 12 and 17, which speak of Avram's choice of exile among the Four Empires or Gehinnom? After all, what happened in Egypt was not part of Avram's decision; his descendants would go into slavery there no matter what. So why was the flow of the narrative interrupted?
5. What is the significance of the double expression יָדַע תִּדַע in verse 13?
6. Why does verse 13 say that Avram's descendants would serve the Egyptians for 400 years, when in reality the Jewish people were in Egypt for only 210 years?
7. Why does verse 13 first refer to Avram's offspring in the singular, גֵּר יִהְיֶה זְרָעֲךָ, *your offspring will be "a stranger,"* and then switch to the plural, וַעֲבָדוּם וַעֲנוּ אֹתָם, *"they" shall serve them and they shall oppress "them"?*
8. Why does God tell Avram that at the end of the Egyptian bondage, *"they will leave with great wealth"?* This seems to be offered as a type of consolation to Avram that at the end of all their suffering, his descendants would become rich with the spoils taken from Egypt. What kind of consolation is this? Is it worth 400 years of slavery just to become rich?

We have learned that God gave Avram the option of choosing exile or Gehinnom for his offspring. This implies that once Avram

had chosen exile, his offspring would no longer be able to avoid it. They would of necessity suffer whichever punishment Avram selected — even if they led completely virtuous lives! For once God announces that something will happen, it must come true.¹¹⁶

However, Hashem does not desire to run the world this way. He wants to leave the possibility open for people to choose to do good and thus avoid punishment. Therefore, as soon as Avram had made his choice, God immediately informed him that the four exiles were not inevitable. How did He convey this to Avram? By referring to the Jewish people's bondage in Egypt. To explain: The only way for the Jewish people to avoid the four exiles would be if they would not sin. Yet ever since the snake in the Garden of Eden caused Chavah to sin and injected spiritual impurity (זוהמָא) into man,¹¹⁷ this level of righteousness was not really achievable.¹¹⁸ It would only be possible if the Jewish people could free itself from its spiritual impurity and receive the Torah — for only then would the nation have true freedom of choice and the ability to fully choose good over evil.¹¹⁹ How

116. The Alshich writes that God's spoken word must come to fruition (see similarly in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:5 and *Devarim* 4:35). However, this applies only when Hashem states that something will definitely happen.

117. See *Shabbos* 146a and *Yevamos* 103b with Maharsha to *Yevamos* *ibid*.

118. Of course, individuals (like the Patriarchs and Matriarchs) were fully righteous. The Alshich is saying that the masses would not be able to be righteous enough to avoid exile (unless they would receive the Torah — see further).

119. The Torah (*Shemos* 32:16), speaking about the *Luchos*, writes that *the writing was the writing of God, engraved (חָרוּת) on the Tablets*. The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabbah* 32:1 et al.) says that the word חָרוּת is to be expounded as if it were written חֵירוּת, *freedom*, and the verse is to be translated: "freedom [was gained] on account of the Tablets." What freedom would the Jewish people enjoy because of the Tablets, i.e., through getting the Torah? The Alshich cites the opinion that it means "freedom from the subjugation of foreign kingdoms" (i.e., from exiles). The Alshich understands that this freedom from subjugation would come as a result of the Jewish people's having true free choice to choose good over evil. See Alshich below, *Parashas Vayeira* 21:2–5, where he writes that when the Jewish people received the Torah, their זוהמָא ceased, and they returned to the level of Adam before he sinned with the Tree of Knowledge. Among other things, this means that their *yetzer hara* became much more subdued and manageable. (The

would the Jewish people accomplish this? Through their servitude in Egypt. Their lengthy period of bondage and suffering would cleanse them of the negative effects of Adam and Chavah's sin; they would become elevated to such spiritual heights that they would be prepared to receive the Torah directly from God on Mount Sinai.¹²⁰ And as a result, they would indeed have the capability of avoiding sin completely, which would obviate the necessity for exile.

Indeed, Israel's suffering in Egypt was a great kindness from Hashem. For the Sages tell us that the negative effects of Adam and Chavah's sin were supposed to disappear (and mankind would thus be able to receive the Torah) only after a thousand generations.¹²¹ But God caused the impurity to be removed after only twenty-six generations.¹²²

It is for this reason that the Torah placed verses 13–16, which speak about the slavery in Egypt, between verses 12 and 17: to show that despite Avram's choosing exile, this destiny was not pre-determined. Israel could avoid this fate through their free-willed choice to do good. [This answers Question 4.] This is also why Hashem used the double expression יָדַע יָדַע, “Know, you should know.” He meant: “Just as I am making known to you the future exiles of your descendants, you should also know that it is possible for them to avoid these exiles.”¹²³ [This answers Question 5.]

Answer to
Question 4

Answer to
Question 5

Alshich writes that Adam, too, had a *yetzer hara* even before he ate from the Tree, for this is how he came to sin; and the Jewish people similarly had a *yetzer hara* even after they received the Torah, for this is how they came to sin with the Golden Calf.)

120. The Alshich notes that according to the Sages, those Jews who were not able to be spiritually cleansed and remained evil — 80% (or perhaps a much higher percentage) of the Jews in Egypt — died during the Plague of Darkness (see Rashi to *Shemos* 13:18 and *Mechilta* there).

121. *Bereishis Rabbah* 28:4 thus quotes *Tehillim* 105:8, דָּבַר צִוְיָהּ לְאֶלֶף דּוֹר (the word He commanded for a thousand generations), and says that this refers to the Torah.

122. From Adam to Moshe Rabbeinu (and the giving of the Torah) there were twenty-six generations.

123. The Alshich will give a different reason for this double language in *Parashas*

Continuing with our analysis of verse 13: The statement *your offspring will be a stranger in a land that does not belong to them* refers to Yitzchak and Yaakov, both of whom lived their entire lives “in a land that does not belong to them” (for Eretz Yisrael did not yet belong to Avram and his family).¹²⁴ It is because this clause refers to Avram’s offspring when they were still very few in number (Yitzchak and Yaakov) that the *pasuk* uses the singular form, “*your offspring will be a stranger in a land that does not belong to them.*” Indeed, Yitzchak and Yaakov were not enslaved; they were merely residents (“strangers”) in a land not their own.

The next clause, “*they shall serve them and they shall oppress them for four hundred years*,” is speaking of the Children of Israel. The *pasuk* switches to the plural form because at that point Avram’s offspring already numbered many thousands. And of course, they were not merely strangers in a land not their own; rather, they had to *serve* the Egyptians, who *oppressed* them. [[This answers Question 7](#)]

The verse goes on to say, “*for four hundred years*,” because if you add together the period of Yitzchak and Yaakov being “strangers” in a land not their own¹²⁵ to the 210 years that Yaakov and his descendants spent in Egypt, the total comes to 400 years. [[This answers Question 6](#)]

In the next verse (verse 14) God tells Avram, וְאַחֲרָיִךְ כִּן יֵצְאוּ בְרַכָּשׁ גָּדוֹל — which we have translated: *after that they will leave with great wealth*. This does not refer to material wealth, but rather to spiritual wealth.¹²⁶ It hints to the fact that the Egyptian exile would

Vayeishev 37:1–2 when he explains verse 15:13 more in line with the simple meaning of the text.

124. See verse 16 in our passage and Rashi to *Bereishis* 13:7. (Yitzchak spent his entire life in Eretz Yisrael. Yaakov spent most of his life there, except for 20 years in the house of Lavan in Padan Aram, and the last 17 in Egypt. See next note.)

125. This period began when Yitzchak was born. Yaakov was born when Yitzchak was 60. Adding 60 to 130 (Yaakov’s age when he came to Egypt) yields 190 years.

126. The Hebrew word רְכִישׁ means more literally “property” or “acquisition.” It can thus easily refer either to material or spiritual acquisitions.

- (1) Avram was ninety-nine years old when God appeared to Avram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai. Walk before Me and be perfect.
- (2) I will place My covenant (בְּרִית)¹²⁶ between Me and you, and I will increase your numbers very much.”

purify them of the spiritual pollution caused by Adam’s sin, and raise them to such a level of spiritual greatness that they would be able to hear God’s words directly from His mouth on Mount Sinai (see *Devarim* 5:4). As explained above, Avram’s descendants would thereby achieve a way to avoid future exiles — if they would only exercise their free choice not to sin. The promise of this kind of *great wealth* was certainly a great consolation for having had to suffer enslavement in Egypt. [This answers Question 8.]

Answer to
Question 8

AVRAM’S BRIS MILAH

Consider the following questions:

1. Why does God choose to use the Name *El Shaddai* in connection with the commandment of *bris milah*?¹²⁸
2. Why is it specifically in connection with the mitzvah of *bris milah* (rather than any other mitzvah) that Avram is instructed to *walk before Me and be perfect*?
3. What does God mean when He says, “I will place My covenant (בְּרִית) between Me and you”? A covenant is generally “made,” not “placed.”

127. In verses 10–14 God explains that this covenant refers to the mitzvah of *bris milah*.

128. The doubled Name אֵל שַׁדַּי is fairly unusual, appearing only seven times in all of Scripture.

(א) וַיְהִי אַבְרָם בְּן־תְּשַׁעִים שָׁנָה וַתֵּשַׁע שָׁנִים וַיְרֵא ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי־אֵל שְׂדֵי הַתְּהֵלֶךְ לְפָנַי וְהָיָה תָמִים.
(ב) וְאַתָּנָה בְרִיתִי בֵינִי וּבֵינְךָ וְאַרְבָּה אֹתְךָ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד.

4. Why does God promise Avram that through the covenant of *bris milah* He will give him numerous offspring (“I will increase your numbers very much”)? Did Avram fulfill God’s commands only when rewards were promised?!

Before we proceed to the answers, let us pose two more questions that have often been asked about the mitzvah of *bris milah*:

5. All of God’s ways are perfect and His handiwork is perfect; and man is His most perfect creation. If so, is it possible that God created man’s physical form with a defect that he needs to correct by removing the *orlah* (foreskin)?
6. Our Sages tell us that Avram kept the entire Torah even before it was given.¹²⁹ If so, why did he delay performing the great mitzvah of *bris milah* until God commanded him to do so when he was ninety-nine? This mitzvah is so precious that “thirteen covenants were made with regard to it.”¹³⁰ (In contrast, only three covenants were made with regard to the Torah as a whole.)¹³¹ How then is it possible that, of all the mitzvos, Avram failed to perform only this one?

129. See *Yoma* 28b, *Kiddushin* 82a. For discussion, see Ramban to *Bereishis* 26:5; Mabit, *Beis Elohim, Sha’ar HaYesodos*, Ch. 37; and *Nefesh HaChaim* 1:21.

130. Mishnah *Nedarim* 31b. In his Commentary to the Mishnah, Rambam explains that the Mishnah’s source for this statement is the fact that the Torah uses the word *קְרִית* 13 times in connection with *bris milah* in our chapter. (The Gemara frequently uses this fact to prove the great importance of this mitzvah; see *Berachos* 48b, *Shabbos* 133a, *Pesachim* 69b, *Yevamos* 5a.)

131. See *Devarim* 28:69 and 29:11; Rambam, *Hilchos Milah* 3:9.

We will begin with Question 5:

The Kabbalistic Approach

The Kabbalah teaches that Adam was initially created without an *orlah*. However, when he sinned with the Tree of Knowledge he caused great destruction in the spiritual worlds, and consequently the entire physical universe became contaminated by a spiritual pollution.¹³² Man's soul became subject to impure forces and even his physical form was changed; from then on man was born with an *orlah*.¹³³ According to this approach, man (Adam) was indeed created perfect; as such, Question 5 does not even arise.

The Rational Approach

In *Moreh Nevuchim* (3:49), Rambam explains that the *orlah* is not to be considered a defect in God's creation that needs to be removed. Physically speaking, the body is perfect as is. However, God wants man to perfect his *middos* (character traits). *Bris milah* weakens man's attachment to the physical desire associated with that organ, a desire that leads him to pursue indulgences and embrace heretical ideas.¹³⁴

132. Compare *Shabbos* 146a and Alshich to 15:11–17 above. See *Derech Hashem* 1:3:5–9.

133. Only a handful of individuals came into the world free of the effects of these forces of impurity, and were thus born without an *orlah*. See *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Parashas Noach* 5) where it lists seven individuals. *Midrash Tehillim* (to *Tehillim* 9:6) lists thirteen.

134. Further in his comments to our passage, the Alshich explains that there are three areas in which a person needs to refine himself before he can properly serve God. (i) He must avoid being influenced by his intellect to form heretical ideas. (ii) He must avoid being influenced by his earthly desires that result from the coarse nature of his physicality. (iii) He must avoid falling prey to arrogance and pride. All three things are corrected by *bris milah*: Removal of the *orlah* weakens the strength of the physical drives (ii), which are what pulls a man toward arrogance (iii). And having been humbled, he will no longer form heretical ideas (i), for humility prevents a person from thinking he knows everything.

The View of Non-Believers

In the writings of our Sages, we find this question asked only by those who see the laws of nature as immutable [and who therefore cannot accept the Kabbalistic teaching that the world changed after Adam's sin]. For example, the *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Tazria* 5) tells us that Turnus Rufus¹³⁵ asked Rabbi Akiva: "Whose actions are more pleasing, those of God or those of man? ... Why, then, do you practice circumcision?"

Similarly, another Midrash¹³⁶ tells us that when God told Avram to perform *bris milah* on himself, he was concerned that the nations of the world would not want to associate with him anymore, for they would consider it bizarre for Avram to tamper with the perfect form of man that God had created — and consequently he would no longer be able to perform the acts of lovingkindness that sustain the world.¹³⁷ Finally, in a third Midrash¹³⁸ a certain non-believer challenged Rabbi Hoshea: "If *bris milah* is such a precious commandment, why did God not already instruct Adam to circumcise himself?" This non-Jew could not believe that Adam could not circumcise himself because he was born without an *orlah*, for he could not accept the idea that man's form changed as a result of the sin.

It emerges that there are three approaches to this question. (1) The explanation based on Kabbalistic teachings, which is not normally publicized. (2) The rational approach of Rambam.

135. Turnus Rufus (also known as Tinius Rufus) was the Roman governor of Eretz Yisrael during the reign of the emperor Hadrian.

136. *Bereishis Rabbah* 47:10. See also *Bereishis Rabbah* 46:3.

137. The Alshich here is explaining the Midrash he just quoted (*Bereishis Rabbah* 47:10) based on another Midrash. The other Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 12:12) says that after the Torah was given, the world stood on three pillars: on the Torah, on Divine service, and on lovingkindness (see also *Avos* 1:2 and discussion in *Alshich on Avos* [Feldheim, 2014]). However, before the Torah was given, it stood on the pillar of lovingkindness alone. [It should be noted that according to our text of *Bamidbar Rabbah*, it was God's lovingkindness (not Avram's) that sustained the world. See also *Midrash Pison Torah, Parashas Vayedaber* (pp. 110–111).]

138. *Bereishis Rabbah* 11:6.

(3) The non-believers' view, rejected by the Rambam, that the *orlah* is a defective part of the human body that needs removal. [This answers Question 5.]¹³⁹

Based on the understanding of the Rambam, we can now answer some of our questions. God uses the Name *El Shaddai* here (Question 1) for a very specific reason. The Sages¹⁴⁰ tell us that when God was creating the universe, it kept expanding outwards until God said: “Enough! Do not expand anymore!” In Hebrew, the letter *ש* means “that” or “who”; and the word *די* means “enough.” Our Sages thus explain *אל שדי* to mean: God (*אל*) Who (*ש*) said to His world, “Enough (*די*)!” Hashem was in essence telling Avram: “When I was creating man, I could also have said ‘Enough!’ and stopped the *orlah* from developing in the first place. But I wanted to give you the merit of perfecting your *middos* by allowing you to remove the *orlah* yourself.” [This answers Question 1.] In addition, “Removing the *orlah* will enable you to *walk before Me* in complete purity.” And since of all the limbs of the body, Avram’s sole imperfection lay in the *orlah*, God told Avram that it was specifically through *bris milah* that he would become *perfect*. [This answers Question 2.]

Through the performance of this mitzvah Avram would create a special angel called *Bris*.¹⁴¹ When Hashem said to Avram,

139. The Alshich proceeds to cite the full text of *Bereishis Rabbah* 11:6, and shows that all three approaches are alluded to there.

140. *Chagigah* 12a.

141. Our Sages tell us that whenever a person does a mitzvah, he creates an angel. (This angel serves as a “defense attorney” for him in the Heavenly Court, testifying to the mitzvah that he did. See *Avos* 4:11 and *Shabbos* 32a. See also *Alshich on Avos* [Feldheim, 2014], end of commentary on *Avos* 4:2.) To explain why the angel would be named *Bris*, the Alshich cites *Bamidbar Rabbah* 10:18. The Midrash there explains that the angel created through Shimshon’s Nazirite oath was given the name *קלאי* (*Shoftim* 13:18), because that name is related to the mitzvah Shimshon was fulfilling. (As *Bamidbar* 6:2 says, ‘*אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה כִּי יִפְלֵא לְנֹדֵד נֹדֵד גְּזִיר לְהִזִּיר לַה'*, *When a man or a woman expresses [יִפְלֵא] a Nazirite vow to Hashem.*) In like manner, Avram’s angel would be given the name of the mitzvah that brought it into being: *Bris*.

“I will place My ‘Bris’ between Me and you,” He was referring to this angel, telling Avram He would “place” that angel as an additional connection between them. This angel and this connection could not have existed if God had created Avram without an *orlah*. [This answers Question 3.]

Answer to
Question 3

Why Avram Delayed His Bris Milah

We asked above (Question 6) why Avram did not perform a *bris milah* before God commanded him to do so at age 99. The Midrash¹⁴² explains that Hashem did not want Avram to have a *bris milah* before the birth of Yishmael because He specifically wanted Avram to father Yishmael while in a less holy, uncircumcised state.¹⁴³ In stark contrast to this, Hashem wanted Avraham to be circumcised before the birth of Yitzchak, because he wanted Avraham to father Yitzchak in the purest state possible. This was also why He did not want this to occur until Avram was 99 (13 years after the birth of Yishmael). As the Midrash explains, Hashem specifically wanted Avram to father Yitzchak at this age because by then his passion was abated and his *yetzer hara* completely overcome; Yitzchak would thus be conceived in maximal purity. For this reason, God hid the mitzvah of *bris milah* from Avram until this time.¹⁴⁴ [This answers Question 6.]

Answer to
Question 6

142. *Bereishis Rabbah* 46:2.

143. The Alshich explains that the snake in Gan Eden implanted spiritual impurity (*zuhama*) into man (see *Shabbos* 146a); and since Hashem wanted Yitzchak to be born in maximal purity, He wanted as much *zuhama* as possible to be removed from Avraham before he fathered Yitzchak. Hashem thus arranged for Avraham to father his first child, Yishmael, while still uncircumcised (because an uncircumcised state attracts *zuhama* to itself); and that he should do so through Hagar who, as a non-Jew, would also draw much *zuhama* into herself. The purpose of all this was to begin the process of purifying Israel to receive the Torah (see at greater length in Alshich below, *Parashas Toldos* 21:2–5).

144. This is the Alshich’s second approach. In his first approach he assumes that Avram indeed knew of the mitzvah of *bris milah* earlier in life (just like he knew of the other mitzvos), but he held back from performing it because he was afraid people

- (1) Avram was ninety-nine years old when God appeared to him and said to him, “I am El Shaddai. Walk before Me and be perfect.
- (2) “I will place my covenant (בְּרִית) between Me and you, and I will increase your numbers very much.”
- (3) Avram fell upon his face [to the ground], and God (אֱלֹהִים) spoke with him, saying:
- (4) “As for Me, here is My covenant with you: You will be a father (אב) to a multitude (הַמֶּלֶךְ) of nations.
- (5) “No longer will you be called by your name Avram; your name will be Avraham because I have made you the father (אב) of a multitude (הַמֶּלֶךְ) of nations.
- (6) “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and make nations of you; and kings shall descend from you.
- (7) “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and between your offspring after you, throughout their generations, as an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you;
- (8) “And I will give you and your offspring after you the Land of your sojourns, the whole land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I shall be God to them.”

Now we can understand why God promises Avram at this point that He would give him numerous offspring. Hashem is not promising Avram a reward, He is just telling him a fact: Once he does *bris milah*, he will be sanctified to the point that

would no longer want to accept his hospitality (see text above in footnote 136). As to why, then, he performed it now and was not concerned about this, see Alshich above, 18:2–3, where Alshich follows this approach and answers this question.

The Alshich refers us further to *Bereishis Rabbah* 49:2, where the Midrash cites the *pasuk*, סוּד ה' לִירְאָיו, *the secret of Hashem is to those who fear him* (*Tehillim* 25:14), and says that the “secret” is *bris milah*, which was not revealed to anyone in the history of the world until Avram, whom Hashem called a *God-fearing man* (*Bereishis* 22:12).

- (א) ויהי אברם בן־תשעים שנה ותשע שנים וירא ה' אל־אברם ויאמר אליו אני־אל שדי התהלך לפני והיה תמים.
- (ב) ואתנה בריתי ביני ובינך וארבה אותך במאד מאד.
- (ג) ויפל אברם על־פניו וידבר אתו אלהים לאמר.
- (ד) אני הנה בריתי אתך והיית לאב המון גוים.
- (ה) ולא־יקרא עוד את־שמוֹ אברם והיה שמוֹ אברהם כי אב־המון גוים נתתיך.
- (ו) והפרתי אתך במאד מאד ונתתיך לגוים ומלכים ממך יצאו.
- (ז) והקמתי את־בריתי ביני ובינך ובין זרעך אחריך לדרתם לברית עולם להיות לך לאלהים ולזרעך אחריך.
- (ח) ונתתי לך ולזרעך אחריך את ארץ מגרית את כל־ארץ כנען לאחזת עולם והייתי להם לאלהים

he will be ready to bring a holy nation into the world.¹⁴⁵ [This answers Question 4.]

Answer to
Question 4

AVRAM'S NAME CHANGE

Consider the following questions:

1. Our Sages¹⁴⁶ tell us that Avram fell to the ground (verse 3) because he was still uncircumcised and could not withstand a direct revelation of God's presence. If so, why did he not fall to the ground as soon as God began speaking to him in verse 1?

145. See end of the Alshich's commentary on verse 2, where this answer is implied. (The Alshich addresses this question more directly in the beginning of his commentary on verse 2. However, the approach he presents there is Kabbalistic and beyond the scope of this work.)

146. *Pesikta Zutresa* and *Midrash Seichel Tov* to verse 3.

2. Since verse 1 already stated that God began speaking with Avram, why does the Torah need to repeat in verse 3 that “*God spoke with him*”?
3. The Torah tells us that אַבְרָם’s name was changed to אַבְרָהָם because he would become a *father* (אב) to a *multitude* (הַמּוֹן) of *nations*. But if so, his new name should have been changed to אַבְרָהָם, not אַבְרָהָם. Why did the letter ר (*reish*) remain part of his name?

Our Sages teach that after Avram was circumcised, he no longer fell to the ground during a Divine revelation.¹⁴⁷ We may suggest that while Hashem was commanding him about the mitzvah of *bris milah*, he was similarly protected from falling — and this is what occurred in verses 1–2: “*Walk before Me through the merit of circumcising yourself,¹⁴⁸ and be perfect; I will place my covenant (i.e., mitzvah of *bris milah*) between Me and you, and I will increase your numbers very much (i.e., do not be concerned; the *bris* will not hamper your ability to have children).*” Avraham was thus able to hear God speak these two verses without falling to the ground. However, in verses 4–8, God is only telling Avraham about his reward for performing the circumcision (rather than about the mitzvah itself). At that point, Avraham was no longer able to remain standing, and he fell to the ground. [This answers Question 1.]

With this we can also understand why the Torah repeats (in verse 3) that *God spoke with Avraham* even though it had already told us (in verse 1) that Hashem was speaking with him: When Avraham fell to the ground, God’s revelation was momentarily interrupted. God therefore had to begin speaking with Avraham a second time. [This answers Question 2.]

147. See *Bereishis Rabbah* to verse 3 and *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* Ch. 28 (Hager ed.). The Sages there point out that after his *bris milah*, Avraham was actually sitting down while Hashem spoke to him (in the beginning of *Parashas Vayeira*).

148. See commentary to verses 17:1–2 above (answer to Question 1).

Answer to
Question 4

Answer to
Question 2

As to our third question: In *Bereishis Rabbah* (46:7), our Sages themselves asked why אַבְרָם's name was changed to אַבְרָהָם rather than אֶבְרָהָם. They answered that the *reish* remained so that the *gematria* of the new name should equal 248.¹⁴⁹ [This number corresponds to the number of limbs in the human body — which corresponds, in turn, to the 248 positive commandments¹⁵⁰ — and signifies that after the *bris milah* Avraham's physical form was now complete.] [This answers Question 3.]

However, there is no hint of this answer in the language of our *pasuk*. Perhaps we may therefore offer a different answer: God's words to Avraham were, "Your name will be Avraham because I have made you the father (אב) of a multitude (הַמְיוֹן) of nations." If we look carefully at the reason given for the new name אַבְרָהָם, we will see that it contains two elements: (1) that Avraham will be the father of multitudes; and (2) that God is the one who is causing this (*I — God — have made you...*). Both these elements needed to be incorporated into Avraham's new name. The Name with which God speaks to Avraham here (verse 3) is אֱלֹהִים. Its *gematria* may be calculated in a way that equals 200.¹⁵¹ The single letter *reish* also has a numerical value of 200. Accordingly, it is easily understood why the new name given was אַבְרָהָם and not אֶבְרָהָם: The letters אבהם signify that Avraham was

149. א = 1, ב = 2, ר = 200, ה = 5, מ = 40. The total is 248. [It should be noted that the Alshich here is offering his own interpretation of the Midrash, taking the Midrash's word נֹטְרִיקוֹן to mean *gematria*. The standard translation of this word is "abbreviation" or "contraction" — the Midrash stating that the words אב הַמְיוֹן can be contracted to אֶבְרָהָם.]

150. See the Alshich below, in the beginning of *Parashas Vayeira*.

151. According to the conventional method, the *gematria* of אֱלֹהִים is 86 (א = 1, ל = 30, ה = 5, י = 10, מ = 40, for a total of 86). However, there is another method of calculating *gematria*, whereby the value of the first letter is added to the value of the first two letters, which is then added to the value of the first three letters, etc. (For an example of this method, see *Sotah* 36a.)

If we follow this approach with אֱלֹהִים, it yields the number 200 as follows:

א = 1, אל = 31, אלה = 36, אלהי = 46, אלהים = 86.

Adding up these numbers: 1 + 31 + 36 + 46 + 86 = 200.

(15) God said to Avraham, “Your wife Sarai — do not call her by the name Sarai, for her name is Sarah.

(16) “I will bless her and I will also give you a son through her. I will bless her and she will become [the mother of] nations; kings of nations will be [descended] from her.”

Another
Answer to
Question 3

to be the father (אב) of multitudes (הַמִּוֹן); and the letter ר signifies that God (אֱלֹהִים), whose numerical value equals that of the letter ר) was the One causing all this to happen. [This is another answer to Question 3.]

SARAI BECOMES SARAH

Consider the following questions:

1. What is the significance of the name change from Sarai (שָׂרַי) to Sarah (שָׂרָה)?
2. Why did God say, “Her name is Sarah,” which suggests that this was already her name? Surely He should have said, “Her name will be Sarah” — just as He said to Avram, “Your name will be Avraham” (above, verse 5).
3. God says to Avraham, “I will bless her **and** I will also give you a son,” which implies that the blessing does not refer to the gift of a son but to something else. To what does it refer?
4. Why does God tell Avraham a second time that He will bless Sarah?

The word שָׂרַי would be translated in the sense of “my leader”;¹⁵² the word שָׂרָה is simply the feminine form of the word “leader.”

152. More literally, the name means: *my officers*.

(טו) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם שְׂרֵי אִשְׁתְּךָ לֹא־תִקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמָהּ שְׂרֵי כִּי שָׂרָה שְׁמָהּ.

(טז) וּבִרְכַתִּי אֶתְּהָ וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לְךָ בֵּן וּבִרְכַתִּיהָ וְהִיְתָה לְגוֹיִם מְלִכֵי עַמִּים מִמֶּנָּה יִהְיוּ.

Answer to
Question 1

God told Avraham not to call his wife “שְׂרֵי” anymore, for that name implies that Sarah is a leader only to Avraham, or only to those women whom she had converted to the worship of God.¹⁵³ Rather, he was to call her “שָׂרָה” — conveying that she was simply a *leader*, i.e., of all mankind. This was unrelated to her merit in being Avraham’s wife [or any other external factor]; she was intrinsically and essentially שָׂרָה, a leader. [This answers Question 1.]

As to why God said to Avraham, “Her name is Sarah,” which implies that she had already been given that name: The Midrash¹⁵⁴ says that the moment אַבְרָם’s name was changed to אַבְרָהָם (above, verse 5), the *yud* from שְׂרֵי’s name was transformed into two of the letter *heh* (ה).¹⁵⁵ One *heh* went to complete the name שָׂרָה, and the other went to complete the name אַבְרָהָם. As such, Sarah’s name was indeed already שָׂרָה when God said to Avraham, “Her name is Sarah.” [This answers Question 2.]

Answer to
Question 2

Now, at the beginning of our *parashah*, when God told Avraham (verse 12:2), וְהָיָה בְרָכָה, “Be a blessing,” He had given Avraham the unique power of bestowing blessings upon others.¹⁵⁶ Now, however, when He told him, “I will bless her (Sarah),” He was telling Avraham: Even though I have given you the power of bestowing

153. See Rashi, *Bereishis* 12:5. It is specifically those women who would call her “my leader.”

154. *Bereishis Rabbah* 47:1.

155. The *gematria* of the letter *yud* is 10. The *gematria* of the letter *heh* is 5. The *yud* may thus be replaced by two of the letter *heh*.

156. See Rashi ad loc.

(17) Avraham fell upon his face and laughed (וַיִּצְחַק). He said to himself, “Is it possible that a child should be born to a hundred-year-old man? And Sarah — can a ninety-year-old woman give birth?”

(18) Avraham said to God, “Please let Yishmael live before You!”

berachos, I am now giving a *berachah* to your wife, Sarah.¹⁵⁷ This is a gift I am giving to her — besides the gift to you mentioned in the continuation of the *pasuk*, viz., “I will also give you a son through her.” [This answers Question 3.]¹⁵⁸

The reason God tells Avraham “I will bless her” a second time is to indicate that her blessing was greater than his: (i) When God told Avraham (verse 6) that he would be the father of many nations, He said, וְנָתַתִּיךָ לְגוֹיִם, lit., “I have given (or, **granted**) it to you to be (or, become) nations.” The phrase “I have granted” implies that this was given to him as a gift, and not as something of which he was intrinsically worthy. By contrast, God here says about Sarah, וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם, “she will **be** (or, become) nations,” wording that implies that becoming the mother of nations was something Sarah intrinsically deserved. (ii) God had promised Avraham (verse 6), וּמְלָכִים יִמְלְאוּ מִמְּךָ יֵצֵאוּ, “kings shall descend from you.” This means that kings of individual nations would descend from Avraham. By contrast, God here says about Sarah, מְלָכֵי עַמִּים מִמֶּנָּה יֵהְיוּ, “kings of nations will be [descended] from her. The phrase “kings of nations” refers to Shlomo HaMelech, who ruled over all the nations of the world,

157. As to the content of this *berachah*, the Alshich on verse 18 below cites Rashi to verse 16 (from *Bereishis Rabbah* 47:2) that it was a blessing to return Sarah to her youthfulness.

158. The Alshich adds that God’s wording in our verse, “I will also give a son to you through her,” is to be understood as conveying: Sarah’s child will be considered your son, unlike the son you had with Hagar, who is considered Hagar’s son but not yours. (This is evident from Sarah’s statement to Avraham [in verse 21:10]: “Drive away the maidservant and **her son; the son of this maidservant** will have no share in the inheritance together with... Yitzchak.”)

(יז) וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ הֲלִבְנֵי מֵאָה-שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד
וְאִם-שָׂרָה הִבְתַּתְּשָׁעִים שָׁנָה יִלְדָּה.
(יח) וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים לוֹ יִשְׁמַעְאֵל יִחְיֶה לְפָנָיִךְ.

and to the future Mashiach, who is similarly destined to rule over the entire world.¹⁵⁹ [This answers Question 4.]

Answer to
Question 4

WHY DID AVRAHAM LAUGH?

Consider the following questions:

1. How could Avraham express disbelief that Sarah would bear him a child? God had just promised him, *“I will bless her and I will also give you a son through her.”* Doesn’t his reaction show a startling lack of *emunah* on his part?
2. Avraham responds to God’s promise by saying, *“Please let Yishmael live before You!”* This sounds like he is saying that notwithstanding God’s promise, he does not need another child, for Yishmael may suffice. But how can he speak on behalf of Sarah, who would never agree to this? Furthermore, if God has just promised him a child as great as Yitzchak, how could he be satisfied with a lesser child like Yishmael?
3. What exactly did Avraham mean when he said, *“Please let Yishmael live before you?”* What type of “living” was he referring to? And why did he add the words *“before You”*? Is there any type of living that is not before God?

159. Of course, these kings are also descended from Avraham. But God is telling Avraham that it is through Sarah’s merit rather than his own that “kings of nations” will descend from them. (The Alshich himself alludes to this in his closing words on our verse.)

(19) God said, “But your wife Sarah is going to bear you a son. You shall name him Yitzchak, and I will fulfill My covenant with him as an eternal covenant for his descendants after him.

(20) “And I have heard you with regard to Yishmael; I have blessed him and I will make him fruitful and make his [descendants] extremely numerous. He will father twelve princes and I will make him into a great nation.

(21) “And I will fulfill My covenant through Yitzchak whom Sarah shall bear you at this same time next year.”

The first thing we must establish is that when Avraham laughed and said, “*Is it possible that a child be born...*” he was not expressing disbelief in God’s promise to him, God forbid. He was laughing out of joy and happiness, and marveling at the miracle of a hundred-year-old man fathering a son. [This answers Question 1.]

Avraham had been concerned about Yishmael. He knew that his son was born with a lack of holiness and was wicked.¹⁶⁰ It thus did not seem possible that he would have any portion in *Olam Haba*. Avraham realized that in order for Yishmael to merit any sort of eternal life, God would have to transform him into an entirely new being and help him do *teshuvah*. Now, up to this point he had not dared make such a huge request of God. But now Hashem had promised him that Sarah would bear him a child. He joyfully exclaimed: “*Is it possible that a child should be born to a hundred-year-old man? And Sarah — can a ninety-year-old woman give birth?*” In other words: “God is doing miracles for me, enabling me to have a child at my age. And He is transforming Sarah into a young woman¹⁶¹ — a new being! — just so that I can have a child through her.”

Thereupon, filled with happiness and excitement, Avraham

160. See the end of Alshich above, 17:1–2.

161. See Rashi to this verse, from *Bereishis Rabbah* 47:2.

(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֲבַל שָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ יֹלְדֶת לְךָ בֵּן וְקִרְאתָ אֶת־שְׁמוֹ יִצְחָק וְהִקְמֹתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לְזָרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו.
 (כ) וְלִישְׁמַעֵאל שְׂמִיעֲתִיךָ הִנֵּה בִּרְכָתִי אִתּוֹ וְהִפְרִיתִי אֹתוֹ וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֹתוֹ בְּמֵאד מְאֹד שָׁנִים־עֶשְׂרִי נָשִׂיָאם יוֹלִיד וּנְתַתִּיו לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל.
 (כא) וְאֶת־בְּרִיתִי אֶקִּים אֶת־יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד לְךָ שָׂרָה לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה בְּשָׁנָה הָאַחֶרֶת.

dared to request: “Please let Yishmael live before You!” — meaning: May Yishmael merit a share in *Olam Haba*, which is called “living before God.”¹⁶² As mentioned above, for this to happen, God would need to transform him into a new being and help him to do *teshuvah*. And indeed, Hashem fulfilled this request.¹⁶³ [This answers Question 3.] Avraham was certainly not requesting that Yishmael live instead of Yitzchak; he was overjoyed that he was going to have a son through Sarah. However, he was making an additional request: that Yishmael, who was spiritually dead, should be given the chance to gain true life. [This answers Question 2.]

Answer to
Question 3Answer to
Question 2

GOD’S COVENANT FULFILLED THROUGH YITZCHAK, NOT YISHMAEL

Consider the following questions:

1. God replied to Avraham’s request with the words: “But your wife Sarah is going to bear you a son.” The word *But* implies that there was a part of Avraham’s request

162. This is because in *Olam Haba*, the individual basks in the radiance of the Divine Presence.

163. The Alshich cites *Bereishis Rabbah* 38:12, which says that God promised Avraham that Yishmael would do *teshuvah*. *Bereishis Rabbah* 59:7 states that Yishmael indeed did *teshuvah* in Avraham’s lifetime. See also Rashi to verse 25:9.

that Hashem was not going to fulfill. What request was that?

2. Why does God tell Avraham now to name his son Yitzchak?¹⁶⁴
3. God said, *“And I have heard you with regard to Yishmael.”* Why do we need to be told that God heard Avraham? Do we have any doubt that God heard him?
4. Avraham had requested of God (verse 18) that He let Yishmael “live before Him” (i.e., that He should let Yishmael have a share in *Olam Haba*, as we explained there). How can God tell Avraham, *“I have heard you,”* and then promise him something that has nothing to do with his request, namely: *“I have blessed him and I will make him fruitful and make his [descendants] extremely numerous. He will father twelve princes and I will make him into a great nation”*?
5. Why does God say, *“I have blessed him,”* in the past tense, while the rest of His statement, *“I will make him fruitful...”* is in the future tense?
6. Why does God tell Avraham in verse 21: *“I will fulfill My covenant through Yitzchak”*? Did He not already tell him just two verses earlier, *“and I will fulfill My covenant with him”*?
7. Why does God need to tell Avraham exactly when Sarah is going to give birth — *“at this same time next year”*?

We have learned that when Avraham said to God, *“Please let Yishmael live before You!”* (verse 18), his intent was that Hashem should help Yishmael to do *teshuvah* and merit *Olam Haba*. But included in this request was another one: that God’s special

164. Hashem did not make mention of this earlier, when he first told Avraham that he would have a son (in verse 16 above). It is thus striking that He does so here.

covenant with him should be fulfilled not only through Yitzchak and his descendants, but through Yishmael and his descendants as well. To this second request, God answered him, “*But your wife Sarah is going to bear you a son.*” He meant, “I am sorry, but I cannot agree to this second request of yours. Your wife Sarah is your soul-mate, and her *neshamah* is holy like yours; it is Sarah who *is going to bear you a son*, i.e., her son will be called your son and her descendants will be called your descendants.¹⁶⁵ Not through your impure maidservant Hagar, but through Sarah alone will you have a son through whom My covenant will be fulfilled.” As verse 19 continues, “*You shall name him Yitzchak, and I will fulfill My covenant with him as an eternal covenant for his descendants after him.*” [This answers Question 1.]

Answer to
Question

With this we can understand why it is in this *pasuk* (and not earlier in *pasuk* 16) that God tells Avraham what to name his son. “*You shall name him Yitzchak, and I will fulfill My covenant with him*” means that only a son worthy of the name Yitzchak is the son through whom God’s covenant can be fulfilled. According to the Sages,¹⁶⁶ the four letters of Yitzchak’s name (יצחק) allude to four things that relate specifically to the son of Avraham and Sarah: The *yud* (י, whose *gematria* is 10), represents the Ten Commandments. The *tzadi* (צ, whose *gematria* is 90), alludes to the fact that Sarah was ninety years old when she gave birth. The *ches* (ח, whose *gematria* is 8), alludes to the eighth day, on which Yitzchak had his *bris milah*. And the *kuf* (ק, whose *gematria* is 100), alludes to the fact that Avraham was 100 years old when Yitzchak was born.

To explain more deeply: The ultimate purpose of God’s covenant with Avraham was that his offspring should stand at Mount

165. As *Bereishis* 21:12 says, וְרַע, בְּיִצְחָק יִקְרָא לְךָ זָרַע, through Yitzchak will offspring be considered yours.

166. *Bereishis Rabbah* 53:7. And see an expanded explanation of the letters of Yitzchak’s name in the Alshich below, *Parashas Vayeira* 21:2–5.

Sinai and receive the Ten Commandments (i.e., the Torah).¹⁶⁷ For the Jewish people to be worthy of this, they had to overcome the spiritual contamination that affected man after the snake convinced Adam and Chavah to eat from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden.¹⁶⁸ For this to happen, it was necessary that their forbear Yitzchak be born in a pure state. Thus, Avraham had to be 100 years old when he fathered Yitzchak, because at that age his *yetzer hara* [which had become an intrinsic part of man after he ate of the Tree of Knowledge] had been subdued.¹⁶⁹ And Sarah had to be 90 years old (that is, post-menopause¹⁷⁰) when she gave birth to Yitzchak, because menstrual blood is a consequence of Chavah's sin in the Garden of Eden.¹⁷¹ Avraham and Sarah's spiritual purity would thus ensure that Yitzchak would be born similarly pure. Furthermore, Yitzchak had to have his *bris milah* when he was eight days old because he was destined to be an offering to God at *Akeidas Yitzchak*; he was thus

167. The Ten Commandments contain within them all the 613 mitzvos of the Torah (see Rashi to *Shemos* 24:12, citing Rav Saadiah Gaon). Receiving the Ten Commandments therefore symbolizes receiving the entire Torah. [See also Mabit (R' Moshe Trani) in *Beis Elohim, Shaar HaYesodos*, Ch. 12, who writes that the 620 letters in the Ten Commandments correspond to the 613 commandments and the seven Noahide laws.]

168. See Alshich above, 17:1–2 with first line of footnote 143.

169. See end of commentary there.

170. We may ask: Wouldn't Sarah have reached menopause well before the age of 90? The answer is that in all likelihood she did indeed do so. However, since Sarah was 10 years younger than her husband, and Avraham had to be 100 years old before having Yitzchak (because, as the Alshich explains on verse 21:5 below, only then was his *yetzer hara* subdued), Sarah had to be post-menopause and 90 years old.

171. This is taken from the Alshich below, *Parashas Vayeira*, 21:2–5. He refers to the teaching of our Sages (*Bereishis Rabbah* 47:2) that Sarah was miraculously returned to her youth in order to conceive Yitzchak, and notes that there are different opinions if her menstrual cycle resumed as well. However, he writes that even according to the opinion that it did resume, it was a miraculous blood, unrelated to the spiritual contamination caused by the snake.

It emerges that both Sarah and Avraham had to a great extent overcome the effects of the sin in Gan Eden before Yitzchak was born.

comparable to an animal sacrifice, which by law must be at least eight days old.¹⁷² Indeed, Yitzchak's purity was such that he is called an עולה תמימה, a complete, perfect *olah*-offering.¹⁷³ And Yitzchak's purity could then be passed on to his descendants, who would thus be able to stand before God at Mount Sinai.

In sum, Yitzchak's name reveals why God's covenant would be fulfilled through him and not Yishmael. And this is why God chose to reveal the name in verse 19, which specifically links Yitzchak to that covenant, and not earlier.¹⁷⁴ [This answers Question 2.]

Yishmael Does Not Really Deserve Olam Haba

Avraham had requested that Yishmael do *teshuvah* and merit a share in *Olam Haba*. When Hashem said to Avraham in verse 20, "And I have heard you with regard to Yishmael," He was saying: The only reason I am granting this is because *I have heard you* ask for it. If you had not requested it, I would not have done it, for Yishmael does not deserve it. By contrast, everything I have promised you with regard to Yitzchak is not only because I heard you ask [but more because it is deserved]. [This answers Question 3.] However, now that you have made a request on behalf of Yishmael, I will not only fulfill that request and grant Yishmael a share in the World to Come, but I hasten to decree further good upon him as well. Thus the verse says: *I have heard you with regard to Yishmael; I have blessed him* (i.e., in the past tense, because God has now agreed to fulfill Avraham's request, so it is as if it was already done); *and further, I will make him*

172. *Vayikra* 22:27.

173. See, e.g., *Aggadas Bereishis* 26:35 (Buber ed.). The Alshich on 21:2–5 below writes that it was because of Yitzchak's exalted, pure, and righteous state that he went to the *Akeidah* completely willingly; see *Bereishis Rabbah* 56:3–4.

174. See footnote 167.

Answer to
Questions
4 and 5

fruitful and make his [descendants] extremely numerous (i.e., in the future). He will father twelve princes and I will make him into a great nation. [This answers Questions 4 and 5.]¹⁷⁵

Answer to
Question 6

As to why God repeats His promise to fulfill His covenant with Yitzchak in verse 21 when He made the same promise already in verse 19: God has just told Avraham (in verse 20) that He is denying his request that Yishmael be part of His covenant. He therefore re-emphasizes that He will fulfill this covenant only through Yitzchak. [This answers Question 6.] And He adds: “...whom Sarah shall bear you at this same time next year,” to make two points: 1) Since it is the holy and pure Sarah who will bear this child, Yitzchak will be far superior to Yishmael, who was born to the Egyptian Hagar; and 2) this will only happen *at this same time next year* because that is when Avraham and Sarah will reach the ages of 100 and 90, respectively. As explained above, they needed to reach these ages so that Yitzchak would be born in maximum purity. [This answers Question 7.]

Answer to
Question 7

175. Question 4 was based on the assumption that the words “*I will make his [descendants] extremely numerous*” were an answer to Avraham’s request that Yishmael merit *Olam Haba*. However, we now understand that they are an unrelated promise. (It is possible that this promise was a consolation to Avraham for not granting his second wish that God’s covenant with him would be fulfilled through Yishmael as well as Yitzchak.)

וִירָא
VAYEIRA

In honor of
Dayan **Chanoch Ehrentreu** *shlita*
Av Beis Din Europe

(1) To him God appeared in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to the tent in the heat of the day.

BECOMING A NEW PERSON THROUGH *BRIS MILAH*

Consider the following questions:

1. Why does the verse say, “*To him God appeared,*” and not “*God appeared to him*”? It should have put God’s Name first.
2. Why does it say “*To him*” and not “*To Avraham*”? Since this verse begins a new *parashah*, it should have mentioned Avraham’s name.
3. Why do we need to know where Avraham was sitting — or even that he was sitting?
4. Why do we need to know that it was a hot day?

The answer to all of these questions lies in the following principle: The Torah is showing us how the performance of mitzvos (and specifically, the mitzvah of *bris milah* which Avraham performed in the previous *parashah*¹) sanctifies and purifies a person — to such an extent that he can in fact be considered a new being. Indeed, this idea is embedded in the formula of the *berachos* we recite before each and every mitzvah we perform: “Blessed are You, O God, Who made us holy with His mitzvos.”

There are 248 positive commandments in the Torah, corresponding to the 248 limbs of the body, and 365 negative commandments, corresponding to the 365 sinews of the body. Each commandment that a person fulfills causes the corresponding part of his body to become sanctified and purified.

1. *Bereishis* 17:26.

(א) וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהֵי ה' בְּאֵלֶינִי מִמֶּרָא וְהוּא יָשָׁב פְּתַח־הָאֵהָל כְּחֵם הַיּוֹם.

In this vein, *Koheles* 12:13 states: “Fear God and keep His mitzvos for this is the entirety of a person.” As we explained in our commentary to *Koheles*, this verse is to be understood as follows: “Fear God” — be fearful not to violate the negative commandments. “Keep His mitzvos” — make sure to keep the positive commandments. “For this is the entirety of a person” — become holy in all the 613 parts of your body, as the total number of mitzvos equals “the entirety of a person,” who consists of 248 limbs and 365 sinews.

Returning to our verse, we see that its language was carefully chosen to convey the following message: Through performing the mitzvah of *bris milah*, Avraham’s entire body became sanctified, and his very essence became holier in various ways.

That it was his *bris milah* that brought about these changes is alluded to in the verse’s very first words, וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהֵי ה', *To “him” God appeared*. If it had said, “To Avraham,” it might have appeared that it was the change of name from Avram to Avraham (with the extra ה) that brought about Avraham’s growth in holiness. Therefore it just says, “To him,” meaning: to the one mentioned in the previous *parashah* who had just been circumcised. [This answers Question 2.]

Answer to
Question 2

The verse then goes on to convey how Avraham became holier in four different ways through performing *bris milah*:

- (1) The first way is hinted to in the verse’s unusual word order, “To him God appeared” (instead of “God appeared to him”). The difference between these two phraseologies emerges from a discussion of our Sages elsewhere.² The Sages wondered why some of the *Tehillim* begin with the

2. *Yalkut Shimoni, Iyov* 917.

phrase, “*To David a song*,” and others with the phrase, “*A song to David*.”³ By way of answer, they brought a verse from *Iyov* which states, “*I clothed myself in righteousness and it clothed me...*” (29:14), and they explained: Sometimes the person enhances his clothes, and sometimes his clothes add something to him. *Iyov* said, “I add something to righteousness when I clothe myself in it, and it enhances me when it clothes me.” Similarly, not only does the song enhance David (“*A song to David*”); David also enhances the song (“*To David a song*”).⁴

The word order of our verse may thus be explained: Before Avraham did *bris milah*, the Torah uses language such as: “God said to Avraham,” “God appeared to Avraham,” “God’s word came to Avraham.” God’s Name is always mentioned first, to indicate that God was benefiting Avraham, uplifting and elevating him. Since Avraham was uncircumcised, he could not give anything to God. But now that he had performed *bris milah* the Torah says, “*To him God appeared*.” The changed word order indicates that now Avraham was also actually able to give something back to God.⁵ [This answers Question 1.]

Answer to
Question 1

3. For example, *Tehillim* 23, 29 and 38 begin, “*A song to David*,” while *Tehillim* 24, 101 and 110 begin, “*To David a song*.”

4. When David sings the song, it gives him pleasure and inspiration. But David also beautifies and brings out the full potential of the song when he sings it.

5. The idea of “giving something” to God may sound strange. *Nefesh HaChaim* (1:3–5) writes that there are countless worlds between the one we inhabit (the most physical) and the highest of the heavenly spheres (the most spiritual), with each world serving as the “body” of the world above it and as the “soul” of the world below it. And our (physical) actions affect the (more spiritual) worlds above our own, extending all the way up to the highest worlds. [This is similar to the idea that an individual’s (physical) actions affects his (spiritual) soul (“staining” it, for example, when he sins).] Indeed, *Nefesh HaChaim* quotes from the Midrash (*Eichah Rabbah* 1:33) that when the people of Israel fulfill God’s will, they make God Himself stronger, as it were; and when they do not fulfill His will, in a manner of speaking they make Him weaker.

- (2) The second way Avraham's essence was transformed can be seen from the words, "*while he was sitting*." Before his circumcision, he was unable to withstand the holiness of a prophetic revelation without falling to the ground.⁶ After his circumcision, he was able to maintain a sitting position while God revealed Himself to him.
- (3) The third way is indicated by the words "*at the entrance to the tent*." Normally a prophet needs to be in a place where there are no other people (הַתְּבוּדָה) in order to attain a state of prophecy. But now, through the merit of the mitzvah of *bris milah*, God appeared to him at the entrance to the tent — a place where people come and go and solitude is impossible. [This answers Question 3.]
- (4) Finally, the words "*in the heat of the day*" indicate a fourth way. Generally, prophecy can be attained only in a state of happiness, not in a state of distress.⁷ Our Sages tell us that on the *day* mentioned in this verse, God removed the normal protective barriers that moderate the sun's heat.⁸ Consequently, Avraham was in intense pain from the effects of the scorching high temperature — and nevertheless, he was able to receive prophecy. [This answers Question 4.]⁹

Answer to
Question 3

Answer to
Question 4

We see, then, that as a result of the mitzvah of *bris milah*, Avraham's very essence was enhanced in four crucial ways that made him into a new person.

6. See *Midrash Tanchuma* (Buber ed.), *Lech Lecha* 27.

7. See *Shabbos* 30b, *Pesachim* 117a.

8. Hashem did this so that Avraham would not be bothered by guests, who would refrain from traveling in the extreme heat (Rashi).

9. This is the Alshich's explanation of the plain meaning of Scripture. See Alshich further for discussion of the Gemara's statement (*Avodah Zarah* 3b) that the removal of the sun's protective barriers in Messianic times will actually have a healing effect on the righteous.