

Abram is the first person in the Bible who is referred to as a Hebrew. That occurs in our parasha when, during the war between the four Mesopotamian kings and the five Canaanite kings (Gen. 14), Lot is taken captive and held hostage by the marauding Mesopotamians. News of his capture arrives via someone who was able to escape:

ויבא הפליט ויגד לאברם העברי והוא שכן באלני ממרא האמרי אחי אשכל ואחי ענר והם בעלי ברית אברם.

One who escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew—he was dwelling by the Oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner; they were Avram's covenant-allies.

The rest of the story details how Abram musters 318 men and embarks on a mission to rescue Lot. In this episode we learn of Abram's courage, and his uncompromising commitment to his nephew, despite the fact that they had already

separated some time before this event. He risks his life to

AND THERE CAME ONE THAT HAD ESCAPED, AND TOLD ABRAM THE HEBREW, FOR HE WAS THEN ENCAMPTED AT THE TEREBINTHS OF MAMRE THE AMORITE, KINSMAN OF ESHKOL AND ANER, WHO WERE ABRAM'S CONFEDERATES.



rescue Lot, and in so doing, becomes the most enduring example of the commitment to rescue of captives-*pidyon shvuyim* - an example that Jews have sought to emulate even now, as we mark the devastating milestone of

400 days of captivity of the hostages in Gaza. We also learn of the depth of Abram's moral integrity. He refuses to take possession of the plunder that he retrieved when he rescued Lot and the other captives who had been abducted with him. But it is the use of the term **עברי** (which we commonly translate as "Hebrew") that interests us. In this story, the term **עברי** is used by a person (unconnected to Abram) who had evidently been captured alongside Lot who escaped and returned to Canaan, and who was able to locate Abram and inform him that Lot was being held hostage. The term **עברי** occurs elsewhere in the Bible. Potiphar's wife refers to Joseph as an **עברי**: ↓

ראו הביא לנו איש עברי לצחק בנו. (בר' לט:יד)

See! He has brought to us a Hebrew man to play around with us! (Gen. 39:14)

as does Pharaoh's wine-steward: ↓

ושם אתנו נער עברי. (בר' מא:יב).

Now there was a Hebrew lad there with us (Gen. 41:12).

Joseph refers to his homeland as **ארץ העברים**—*the land of the Hebrews* (Gen. 40:15) and later on, when the brothers come down to Egypt and Joseph makes a feast for them, the narrator tells us that they ate separately from the Egyptians:

כי לא יוכלו המצרים לאכל את העברים להם כי תועבה הוא למצרים (בר' מג:לב).
for Egyptians will not eat bread with Hebrews—for that is an abomination for Egyptians (Gen. 43:32).

Throughout the Exodus story the Israelites are referred to as Hebrews. In the Book of Samuel, the Philistines use this term as well. When

Jonah escapes to Tarshish he identifies himself with these words: **עברי אנכי** - *I am a Hebrew* (Jonah 1:9). The common feature of all of these cases, is a context in which **Hebrew** individuals, either by themselves (Abram, Joseph, Jonah) or collectively (the Israelites in Egypt or in the land of Israel) are located opposite individuals from other nations, or as opponents of other peoples. The term is subject of scholarly debate, however, as Nahum Sarna states: *The true origin of the term "Hebrew" is still to be determined. Perhaps it came to be used of social elements marginal to a particular society. If it be a self-designation for the people in the formative period of Israelite history, it would explain why it is used exclusively of Israel. At any rate, the term fell into disuse with the founding of the monarchy until it was revived in much later times.*

It does not surprise us that the rabbis debated the meaning of **עברי**. This is from Bereishit Rabbah 42:8:

רבי יהודה ורבי נחמיה ורבנן.
רבי יהודה אומר:
כל העולם כלו מעבר אחד.
הוא מעבר אחד.
רבי נחמיה אומר
שהוא מבני בניו של עבר.
ורבנן אמרי שהוא מעבר הנדר,
ושהוא משיח בלשון עברי.

Here is an imaginary recreation of their debate:

R. YEHUDA: עברי -IVRI IS A MORAL MODIFIER.

This is the debate between R. Yehuda, R. Nehemia, and the Rabbis.

R. Yehuda said: The term ivri means, the entire world is on one side, me'ever ehad, and he, Abram, was on the other side, me'ever ehad. R. Nehemia said that he, Abram, was from the sons of the sons of Eber.

And the Rabbis said that the term ivri indicates that he, Abram, came from beyond me'ever, the river (Euphrates), and that he spoke the Ivri language (Hebrew).

I operate with the premise that the Torah is trying to teach us something about Abram by using *this* particular word as opposed to many other words that it could have used to describe Abram. For example, it could have easily described Abram as, *Abram the Terahite*, to indicate that he was part of the family of Terah, or *Abram the Aramean*, to indicate that he came from Aram. I know that my colleagues want to connect him with his

ancestor, **עֵבֶר-Eber**, or identify him as coming from a geographical area, **עֵבֶר-ever**, beyond the Euphrates river. But there is more going on here. **עֵבֶר** is not about his ancestral family or his ancestral land. **עֵבֶר** refers to *Abram's moral character. It is not an ethnic or geographical modifier. It is a moral modifier.* We are familiar with Abram from a rich body of legends that describe how unique he was. The fundamental characteristic of Abram is his uniqueness. He stands for things that no one else stands for. One is tempted even to call him a radical. He is fiercely loyal to God, no matter what God puts him through. As descendants of Abram, we are always standing opposite the world. Abram is a model of uniqueness. His task is to bring blessing to the world. If every people were to emulate Abram and aspire to its own uniqueness, there would be more blessing in the world.

R. NEHEMIA: עֵבֶר MEANS LOYALTY TO FAMILY AND INSPIRED BY ANCESTOR עֵבֶר-Eber

I appreciate the passion of R. Yehuda's argument, and I agree with his claim that Abram is unique, but the Torah has other texts to demonstrate his uniqueness. After all, what is **וְהָיָה בְרָכָה-you shall be a blessing** if not a statement of uniqueness! *No, what the Torah is trying to emphasize here by calling him an עֵבֶר is his family kinship, and his loyalty to family. This is one of Abram's most distinct characteristics.* If you read Gen. 11, you will observe that **עֵבֶר-Eber** was Abram's great-great-great-great-grandfather. The text calls Abram an **עֵבֶר** to emphasize his ancestry and also how others saw him: as a descendant of **עֵבֶר-Eber**. *Abram's heroic effort to rescue his nephew Lot emerges from the intense loyalty to his family, and his intense conviction to the very idea of family itself, a conviction that remains with us, his descendants, to this day.* But, I

AND WHEN ABRAM HEARD THAT HIS KINSMAN WAS TAKEN CAPTIVE, HE MUSTERED HIS RETAINERS, BORN INTO HIS HOUSEHOLD, 318 OF THEM, AND WENT IN PURSUIT UP TO DAN.



would be remiss if I did not offer an imaginative interpretation based on our legends. We have a tradition that **עֵבֶר-Eber** was a prophet, a righteous and wise figure, whom people sought for wisdom and guidance. According to this legend, **עֵבֶר-Eber** foresaw the great splintering of the world's population in the post-Flood era. While it was customary for people of that time to name their children for events that took place in the past, **עֵבֶר-Eber**, who lived before the Tower of Babel, named his son **Peleg** which means "division" "splitting," because he foresaw the linguistic divisions that were to come about in

humanity, as a result of the Tower of Babel *in the future!* *When Abram is called, Abram ha-Ivri it is a reference not only to his family loyalty to his moral pedigree.*

The RABBI: ABRAM IS A FOREIGNER.

We have learned a lot from R. Yehuda and R. Nehemia, but we need to come back to a more precise interpretation of this word **עֵבֶר-ever**, based on its very plain sense. R. Nehemia says **עֵבֶר** is related to the ancestor **עֵבֶר-Eber** and R. Yehuda says **עֵבֶר** is related to Abram's oppositional defiance of prominent cultural norms and trends. He referred to our interpretation, that **עֵבֶר** means "someone **מֵעֵבֶר-from over there**." We think that the defining feature of Abram's life at this point in his story is that he is an immigrant in Canaan. He is still very much a sojourner; he has not yet "landed". Moreover, in the eyes of the local inhabitants, he is seen as a foreigner, perhaps even as an interloper. He is, quite literally, **מֵעֵבֶר-from the beyond**, from a land beyond this land. And, on top of that, he speaks a foreign language, **לְשׁוֹן עִבְרִי-leshon ivri**, i.e. Hebrew! In Canaan they speak Canaanite, **לְשׁוֹן כְּנַעֲנִי-leshon kna'ani**! Abram would have had to learn Canaanite to speak to the local inhabitants! In this story, when the fugitive comes to inform Abram about Lot, he is aware of Abram's foreignness. Not only is there an ethnic barrier between them, but a linguistic one as well. What we are trying to emphasize here, as opposed to Abram's moral character, R. Yehuda's point, and as opposed to Abram's pedigree, R. Nehemia's point, is something fundamental to our understanding of Abram: *Abram is an outsider. Abram is a foreigner. The term appears here with deliberate irony: here Abram, the one destined by God to take possession of the land, is called עֵבֶר by those destined to be uprooted from the land! This gives us insight into Abram at this moment of his life. Despite God's promise, and despite having built three altars, and despite having traveled the land extensively, he is still a foreigner in the eyes of others. Eventually that will change. But the deeper reason why we think this is the correct interpretation, is because Abram's descendants, living outside the land of Israel, will always be thought of as foreigners. No matter how deeply entrenched they will become in their societies, whether Persia or Babylonia, along the Mediterranean or throughout the world, Abram's descendants will always be foreigners in the eyes of those who live in those lands. That will be a permanent feature of Jewish diaspora existence.*

So there you have it. Abram the Hebrew: Moral radical, Descendant and Heir of Eber, Foreigner. Shabbat Shalom!

TODAY IS THE 400th DAY OF THE CAPTIVITY OF THE HOSTAGES. WE LONG FOR THEIR FREEDOM. MAY GOD SHIELD ISRAEL FROM TERROR AND PROTECT THE IDF FROM DANGER IN GAZA AND IN LEBANON. MAY GOD GRANT A HEALING OF BODY AND A HEALING OF MIND TO THE VICTIMS OF THE SOCCER POGROM IN AMSTERDAM ON THURSDAY EVENING.

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