

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yosef ben Dovid a”h
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

The First—and Last—World War PARSHAS LECH LECHA 5776

The first global military conflict actually took place years before Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated by a Serbian radical. As recorded in the Torah in this week’s *parshah*, it pitted the major powers of the ancient world, represented by four kings (“And it was in the days of Amrafel king of Babylonia...” [*Bereishis* 14:1]), against the five kings (including the king of Sodom) who had been their vassals until that point. Also taking part in the battle was Avraham Avinu, who aligned himself with the latter group.

War Aims

What was Avraham’s involvement in this campaign? Based on a cursory look at the *pessukim*, he entered the fray to rescue his nephew, Lot. Lot, who had been residing in Sodom, was taken captive by the axis of the four kings, and so Avraham intervened.

But there are indications from Chazal that much more was afoot here. The Medrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 43:2) quotes Avraham as sounding an idealistic note as he prepared to take up arms: “Let me go and risk my life for the sake of *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctifying Hashem’s Name).” Apparently, this was more than a simple rescue operation.

Furthermore, it is apparent that Avraham played a very direct role in the conflict. In fact, he was the real target of these world powers; their aim in waging this war in the first place was to destroy Avraham. Thus the *medrash* expounds upon the *passuk* in Tehillim (37:14): “‘The wicked opened with the sword... to slaughter the man of the upright way.’ ‘The wicked opened with the sword...’ – This refers to Amrafel and his cohorts; ‘...To slaughter the man of the upright way’ – This refers to Avraham” (*Bereishis Rabbah* 42:1). It should be noted that they already had a history between them. Rashi (*Bereishis ibid.*) identifies Amrafel with Nimrod, who had previously cast Avraham into a fiery furnace – from which he emerged alive.

What, then, was at the root of this campaign? Why did these “superpowers” deem it necessary to initiate such a major endeavor just to draw Avraham into battle? What were they really after? And who exactly were these four powers in the first place?

From the Beginning of Time

In its continuation, the *medrash* identifies these four kings as representative of the “four kingdoms,” that is, the major powers whose dominion spans the course of all history: Bavel, Madai, Yavan and Edom (Babylonia, Media, Greece, and Rome). These kingdoms were initiated at the beginning of the world; as the *medrash* earlier (2:4) expounds the second *passuk* in the Torah: “‘And the land was confusion’ – This is the exile of Bavel... ‘And emptiness’ – This is the exile of Madai... ‘And darkness’ – This is the exile of Yavan... ‘On the surface of the deep’ – this is the exile of the evil (Roman) government” (considered by Chazal to be the current exile).

To understand what the primary function of these four dominions really is, it is necessary to first understand something even more basic: the purpose of Creation. Hashem's goal in creating the world is stated very clearly in the final Mishnah in Avos (6:11):

כָּל מַה שֶׁבְּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּעוֹלָמוֹ, לֹא בְּרָאוֹ אֶלָּא לְכְבוֹדוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר כָּל הַנִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁמִי וְלְכְבוֹדִי בְּרָאתִי וְצִרְתִּיו אִף עֲשִׂיתִיו.

“All that Hashem created in His world, He created only for the purpose of His glory; as it states (*Yeshayah 43:6*): ‘All that is called in My Name, I have created it for My honor; I have formed it and even fashioned it.’”

The Maharal elucidates the nature of these four powers based on the principle expressed by Shlomo Hamelech: זֶה לְעִמְתִּיזָה עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים – “This opposite that did G-d fashion”. (*Koheles 7:14*). The goal of creation is for the glory of Hashem to be recognized and proclaimed. And so the primary aim of these four dominions is to counter this all-important ideal; they seek to suppress the honor of Hashem in the world, claiming that it is “nature,” not Hashem, which reigns supreme.

Ongoing Conflict

This, explains R' Yeruchem Olshin, was the basis for the war of the four kings. As we have learned, they were emblematic of the four dominions; as such, they were dedicated to the “ideal” of denying the glory of Hashem in the world. And this is why they sought to eradicate Avraham, for he was the paradigm of proclaiming the glory of the Creator. The Rambam (*Hilchos Avodah Zarah 1:2,3*) writes at length how Avraham was raised in a climate in which the entire world, then steeped in idolatry, had forgotten Hashem. But Avraham recognized Him as the One true Creator and dedicated his life to disseminating this belief. This was something the four kingdoms could not tolerate, and so they waged war against the individual who championed this ideal. Avraham was well aware of their intentions, but he was ready to join the battle, stating: “Let me go and risk my life for the sake of *Kiddush Hashem*.”

This battle continues into our day. While a significant section of the world is no longer involved in outright paganism, the campaign to conceal Hashem's Presence in the world is still waged fiercely. In truth, Hashem's glory fills the world in a most open fashion; any child, in fact, can follow in Avraham's footsteps and recognize from the skies and the forests and the oceans and all creations that there is a Creator. Lest someone try to remind the world of that fact, he is immediately silenced by an army of scientists and secularists who zealously adhere to the religion of Evolutionism.

The four kingdoms, and their manifestation in modern times, will continue to yield their power so long as the exile continues. As part of the prayers recited on the *Yamim Nora'im* (High Holidays), we proclaim our yearning: כִּי תַעֲבִיר מִמִּשְׁלַת זָדוֹן מִן הָאָרֶץ – “When You shall remove the dominion of evil from the earth.” As the Maharal states, the dominion of these four kingdoms will disappear with the arrival of *Mashiach*, for then the world will fully recognize the Kingship of Hashem. As the *Navi* (prophet) states: וְהָיָה ד' לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ, בַּיּוֹם – “And Hashem will be the only King over the whole earth; on that day, Hashem will be (recognized as) One, and His Name will be One” (*Zechariah 14:9*).