

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Our Biblical portion opens with G-d's election of Abraham: "Go away, for your own good, from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I shall show you. I will make you into a great nation... You shall become a blessing... All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3). And here indeed is the first Divine Commandment to the first Jew - and it is the command to make aliyah. It will be important for us to try to understand why living in Israel should be so central an aspect of our status as the people of the covenant, but even prior to this is an even more obvious query: Why did G-d choose Abraham? The Bible has not yet told us of any significant act which he performed or any path-breaking ideology that he discovered which would warrant his election. Almost apropos of nothing, G-d seems to have chosen this son of Terah to be a source of blessing for the world. On what basis?

The great philosopher - sage of the twelfth century, Maimonides, basing himself on the earlier midrashim, maintains that it was actually Abraham who discovered the concept of ethical monotheism - a unique and single Creator of the universe who demands justice, compassion and peace. Abraham shattered the idols in Ur Kasdim, was chased to Haran where he continued to preach his new-found religion, and was at that time addressed by G-d and sent to the land of Israel (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry 1,3). In effect, then, if the question is raised: "How odd of G-d to choose Abraham for the Jews" the logical answer must be: "It was not at all odd because Abraham chose G-d".

At this point in our inquiry, our earlier question becomes a major issue: Why is travel away from country, birthplace and father's house necessary to propagate this new faith? The first issue to be understood is that in fact it is the propagation of this new credo which is the source of the Abrahamic blessing for the world and is the essence of his election. Not only does G-d stipulate that "through (Abraham) all the families of the earth shall be blessed," but Maimonides also pictures the first Jew as an intellectually gifted forerunner of "Yonatan Appleseed," planting seeds of ethical monotheism and plucking the human fruits of his labor wherever he went.

And, as strange as it may sound, this "missionary activity" on behalf of G-d which was established by Abraham is a model for all of his descendants and even (according to many authorities) an actual commandment! In the words of the Midrash Sifrei (Deut 6,5), in interpreting the commandment "to love the Lord your G-d," our Sages teach: "(we are commanded) to make Him (G-d) beloved to all creatures, as did Abraham your father, as our Biblical text teaches, 'the souls which they (Abram and Sarai) made in Haran' (Gen 12:5). After all, if all the people of the world were to gather in order to create one mosquito and endow it with a soul, they would be incapable of accomplishing it, so then what is the text saying in the words, 'the souls which they make in Haran?' But apparently this teaches that Abraham and Sarah converted them and brought them under the wings of the Divine Presence."

The midrash further confirms that the propagation of ethical monotheism was the major vocation of Abraham when it explains the reason for G-d's command that he leave Haran in favor of Israel:

"Said R. Berakhia: to what could Abraham be prepared? To a vial of sweet smelling spices sealed tightly and locked away in a corner- so that the pleasant aroma could not spread. Once the vial began to be transported, its aroma radiated all around. So did the Holy One Blessed be He say to Abraham, 'Move from your place, and your name (and message) will become great universally'" (Bereishit Rabbath 39).

But this midrash flies in the face of the Biblical text. It was in Ur Kasdim, and then in Haran, that Abraham and Sarah won converts (souls) to their religion! And this is confirmed by a daring Talmudic statement, "Said R. Elazar, the Holy One Blessed be He sent Israel into exile amongst the nations of the world only in order to win converts..." (T. B. Pesahim 77b). So if propagating the faith is so essential to the Jewish election and mission, why did G-d command and send Abraham (as well as his descendants) to live in one place, Israel? It would seem that a large diaspora would be far more efficacious in bringing multitudes of souls into our faith!

The true answer lies in the fact that we are a nation as well as a religion, a people imbued with a mission not only to serve G-d but also - and even principally - to perfect society. From our very inception the Bible understood that the world is a global village, that nations are inter-dependent, and that an ethical and

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moral code of conduct was central to the survival of a free world.

Only from the back-drop of our formation of a nation - desperately involved with daily problems of peace and war, wealth and poverty, racial and ethnic differences, education for every spectrum of society - do we have the opportunity of influencing other nations, because they have become impressed with the society which we develop. Our goal therefore must be to influence others because they strive to emulate us, not for us to be a nation like all nations but rather for us to be a light unto the nations.

Even more to the point, no one can influence another unless he/she knows very well his/her own self definition. A minority group dominated by a host-culture majority will expend so much energy merely attempting to survive that there is little ability or will left over to develop a unique culture as a model for others; besides, unless one is in control of the society, there is no living laboratory to test our ethical and moral ideas, to see if they can be expressed in real life situations.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, expressed it very well. There were three brilliant and disenfranchised Jews who developed unique world outlooks. Karl Marx argued that human beings are controlled by social forces, mainly economic, tied to land or real estate. Spinoza maintained that humanity is controlled by nature and natural instincts, biological drives and genetic determination. Freud believed that every human personality is formed by the laboratory of his/her parents home, fraught with traumas of Oedipus and Electra complexes and all too often arrested from proper emotional development by parental insensitivity.

G-d commands Abraham: "Free yourself of the Marxian determinism of land, the Spinozistic determinism of genetic birthplace, and the Freudian determinism of parental home. All of these will have an influence, but human freedom emanating from our being children of a G-d of love will empower us to transcend these limitations and create a more perfect society. Hence G-d tells Abraham that he must leave Marxist nationalism, Spinozistic materialism and Freudian determinism to forge a unique nation dedicated to the ultimate values of human life and freedom, societal justice and compassion, international pluralism and peace - so that through his special nation

the world will be blessed and humanity will be redeemed. © 2006 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Our father Avraham is a wanderer. All of his life he moves from place to place driven by his inner voice to spread the message of the one G-d in the world and other times by Divine command itself. In this as in all other matters he is the harbinger of the wanderings of his children throughout the ages. The Jewish people are a people of wanderers, moving restlessly from one country and continent to another.

There have been numerous reasons given to this Jewish restlessness. The most obvious one is the attempt to escape poverty and persecution and find a better life for one's self and family. However there have been spiritual reasons also advanced for this phenomenon of constant movement. One is in order to acquire righteous converts from the souls of non-Jews who really wished to accept the Torah when offered to the world before Sinai but whose voices were drowned out in the noise of the general "no" of their fellows.

A more kabbalistic reason was offered for the Jewish wanderings. It stated that there are scattered throughout the world holy "sparks" - nitzozot - that are enclosed in imprisoning "husks" - klipot - and that those "sparks" can only be released through the positive and holy behavior of Jews who are then physically present there. Another explanation advanced for the scattering and wandering of the Jewish people is that this is somehow a guarantee of Jewish survival. It allows Jews to escape from annihilation in certain areas of the world by moving somewhere else.

Undoubtedly all of these reasons have validity to them. However, the bottom line to all of this is that Jews follow in the footsteps of our father Avraham and are constantly mobile and on the move.

Again like our father Avraham, Jews have had a profound influence on all areas of the world where they have lived. Avraham, a lonely, single, unique individual, single-handedly changed the course of human civilization. The prophet Yeshayahu described Avraham as being one of a kind. Well, that description fits all of Israel as well. A small, persecuted, unique people, Jews have contributed to all facets of human civilization in a grossly disproportionate manner.

This is in fulfillment of G-d's promise to Avraham in this week's parsha that "through you all of the families of the world will be blessed." Perhaps it is the very wanderings and restlessness of Jews that has contributed to this unnatural outpouring of talent and contribution to all of human society. A sedentary people rarely look for new adventures or inventions. It is usually very self-satisfied with what it already has. Immigrant-built nations like the United States and Israel have pushed the envelope of technology and creativity

forward more than the sedate and established powers of the Old World.

The common wisdom in life is "If it is not broken, then why fix it?" The Jewish people, always striving for perfection and utopian achievement, constantly view the world and society as still somehow broken and therefore in need of fixing. If we no longer wander geographically now that we are home in Israel, we still wander in our souls and minds in search of greater perfection and spirituality. We cannot help but to do so. It is in the genes that our father Avraham transmitted to us. ©2006 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**O**ur forefather Avraham, peace be upon him, was tested with ten tests and withstood them all" (Avos 5:3). While these ten tests were are not mentioned in the Mishnah, they are listed in many other places (some from the same era, others by commentators in later eras). However, these lists are not always the same, leaving us with more than ten tests. Why are some tests included in some lists and excluded from others? By examining each potential test, perhaps we can understand why they might meet some criteria but not others.

(1) Avraham was wanted since birth, and had to hide underground for 13 years. Nimrod's astrologers warned him that Terach's son would compete with him ideologically and eventually win everyone over (to monotheism). Therefore, Nimrod and the other leaders of the kingdom wanted to kill him from the moment he was born. This is the first test listed in Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer (and its parallel in Yalkut Shimoni 68) and the commentators that base their list on it (i.e. Rashi). Almost every other list does not include it (although the Meiri combines it with the next one). Since the Rambam says that all ten tests are mentioned explicitly in the Torah, his excluding this one is understandable, as it is based totally on tradition. Others don't mention this criterion, but may have excluded it because it was not really a test, as Avraham had no choice to make here; his parents put him into hiding when he was a child. On the other hand, he didn't use it as an excuse later to explain why he couldn't succeed, accepting the situation life (and G-d) had presented him and making the most of it. Whether in order to qualify as a "test" it must be a choice made immediately or can be made well after it happened may be what determined if it was included or not.

(2) Avraham was put in prison for 10 years, then thrown into a furnace (Ur Kasdim). After emerging from his underground hiding spot, Avraham was put into

prison for espousing his monotheistic belief, and finally threatened to be thrown into a burning furnace if he didn't renounce it. He refused and was thrown into the fire, but walked out unscathed. Most only include his choice to die rather than turn his back on G-d, a test that is self-explanatory. Almost everybody includes this test; the Rambam (and those who relied on his basic list) didn't, as it is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah. The Midrash Tanchuma (Vayaira 22) seems to leave it off as well, as even though it doesn't provide a list of all ten tests, it says that leaving his land/birthplace was the first test (and going to Mt. Moriah for the akeidah the last).

(3) Avraham left his land and birthplace because G-d asked him to, despite not knowing exactly where He wanted him to go. This is included on every list, and even suggested as being two tests by some. Avos d'Rav Nasan (33:2) doesn't provide an exact list, stating merely that "2 are in Lech Lecha, 2 were with his 2 sons, 2 with his 2 wives (according to the Vilna Gaon it reads "2 with his wife"), 1 with the kings, 1 between the pieces, 1 in Ur Kasdim and 1 by the covenant of circumcision." Most understand the "2 in Lech Lecha" to refer to leaving his birthplace and the famine (see below); R"Y Ibn Eknin, however, suggests that his leaving Ur Kasdim and his leaving Charan are two separate tests. This would ostensibly remove the famine from the list, but could explain the alternate version of Avos d'Rav Nasan (36), as otherwise there are only 9 tests listed (with the famine being one of them). The Rashash, in order to avoid the Ramban's problem that Avraham was actually disobeying G-d by leaving Canaan during the famine, suggests that Avraham was never told where his destination was, even after arriving in Canaan. There were therefore two separate aspects to this test, leaving his birthplace, and going on a trip without knowing where he was headed. While everyone seems to counts this as 1 test (made greater because it had both aspects), it could be considered two separate tests as well, especially if he was not told what the final destination would be for such a long period of time.

(4) The famine in Canaan. Avraham follows G-d's instructions to go to Canaan, only to experience a severe famine that only affected the very place G-d led him to. Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer maintains that this was the very first famine in history. This occurred despite being promised that in his new land he will prosper. Everybody seems to include this as one of the 10 tests, although (as the Rashash pointed out) according to the Ramban, who says that our Exile in Egypt was the result of Avraham leaving the Holy Land and going there, it would be difficult to count this as a "passed test." (R"Y Ibn Eknin's explanation of Avos d'Rav Noson would fit well though.)

(5) Sarah taken by Paro. This is included in everybody's list.

(6) The war with the kings. Lot being taken prisoner is often made a primary part of this test, which is included on every list I have seen except for the alternate version of Avos d'Rav Noson. Since there are only 9 on that list, it may have been inadvertently omitted (by printers or the like).

(7) Having to marry Hagar. Avraham's strongest characteristic was chesed, kindness, yet when he was convinced that G-d intended for him to have children with someone other than his beloved Sara, married Hagar despite what it would do to her. Rabbi Meyer Esrog (in his edition of the Gra's commentary on Avos) suggests that having children through a maid still did not make Avraham question G-d's promise. This test is only included by the Rambam (and others who based their list on him) and Midrash Tehillim (18:25), perhaps (as suggested by some) it was more a test for Sara than Avraham, or because it was Sara's idea (see Beraishis 16:2), not a commandment from G-d.

(8) Avraham was warned about the suffering of his descendants during their exiles. This is included on most lists, but not all. It was left off by the Rambam (et al) and Rabbeinu Yonah, perhaps because it involved the suffering of his descendants, not his own (suggested by Rabbi Meyer Esrog). It is also not listed by Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer and the Yalkut (76), which instead includes Avraham experiencing more types of visions than other prophets. I'm not sure how this is considered a test, and the commentators who claim that their list is the same as PdR"E's include the warning about the exiles instead, leading to the conclusion that they are one and the same. This is supported by the fact that the "Covenant Between the Pieces," where Avraham was told of these exiles, is discussed at length immediately after the test of having additional types of visions is mentioned. Perhaps it was precisely the range of visions that Avraham was able to have that allowed him to receive the prophecy about the exiles. If ignorance is bliss, then not reaching the spiritual heights that could enable a disturbing vision is also more blissful. Are we better off being simplistic and therefore better able to maintain a simplistic faith in G-d, or capable of understanding the finer details which require understanding G-d and His ways on a deeper level? Perhaps this was the test Avraham faced, and chose to strive for even greater spiritual growth rather than backing away.

(9) Getting circumcised at an old age. This is included by all with the exception of a manuscript of Rashi's commentary on Avos. It is included in the "standard" Rashi commentary.

(10) Sara taken by Avimelech. This is included in most lists, and in two of them (Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer and the Tiferes Yisroel's list based on Avos d'Rav Noson) included as part of the test of Sara being taken by Paro. Was her being taken a 2nd time a separate test? Was it the same test that Avraham had

already passed? Did it happening a second time make it a harder test? These may be factors that were considered when either including or excluding it from the list.

(11) Sending Yishmael away. This is included by all, although most include having to send Hagar away at the same time as part of the same test.

(12) Sending Hagar away. This is considered a separate test according to the Rambam and the Tiferes Yisroel. It is interesting to note that the Rambam considers both having to marry Hagar and having to send her away as tests.

(13) The Akaidah. Avraham's willingness to sacrifice his son is included by all, except for Rabbi Shlomo Kluger (in Magen Avos), who suggests that the 10 tests were all needed in order to allow for Yitzchok to be born. This is despite the Torah explicitly saying (22:1) that this was a test.

(14) Having to buy a burial plot for Sara. Despite being told that G-d will give the land to him, Avraham has to purchase this at a premium, yet never questions G-d's promise. This is included by Rabbeinu Yonah, Rabbeinu Yosef Chayin (who otherwise follows the Rambam) and Rabbeinu Yitzchok bar Shelomo in his listing based on Midrash Tehillim (even though it is not listed there). Was another test needed after the Akaidah? Didn't Avraham realize that the promise was not yet fulfilled (which was the basis for his disagreement with Lot)? Or did he think that once Yitzchok was born the promises were applicable? All possible factors in this being included as one of the 10 tests.

Aside from these, I think there's another way to explain the varying lists. Even after passing the ten tests, it would be difficult to say that Avraham had no more tests at all, that his free will was no longer needed. We are all faced with constant tests, until the day our soul returns to its maker. What makes these tests special, aside from their level of difficulty, was that they accomplished a specific purpose. Whether to show mankind why G-d chose Avraham and his descendants, to show the angels how special he was, or to bring the potential for greatness into the realm of reality, they had to be these tests. Which tests? Perhaps for each intended purpose, a different formulation was necessary. Certain tests may impress the angels more than humans, and vice versa. If in the merit of passing the ten tests Avraham received the reward that should have gone to the previous 10 generations, and we were able to have 10 miracles done for us during the exodus from Egypt, and we were able to receive the 10 Commandments, and G-d gave us another chance after we tested Him 10 times, it is likely that each aspect needed different corresponding tests. And Avraham passed them all. ©2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI LEVI COOPER

Public Funds

Leaders at all levels bear responsibility for dispensing public funds. Charities need to carefully consider how they will distribute monies so kindly entrusted to them: Which individuals are most worthy? Which individuals are most needy? Governments agonize over how to allocate scarce resources, with budget debates often the most protracted issue in the parliament and its committees. Even householders need to wisely weigh the options as they set aside a portion of their income for worthwhile philanthropic causes.

While it is a privilege to make such decisions, the task carries much accountability, and those entrusted to make such important determinations must be dependable, trustworthy and reliable.

The Talmud relates a paradigmatic tale of the responsibility of one whose duty involves public money (B. Berachot 18b). The father of the talmudic scholar, Shmuel, was entrusted with orphans' money. When the custodian passed away, his son was not by his side and he told no one where these monies could be found.

Suspecting the worst, people began to taunt Shmuel, calling him "the son of the one who consumed the orphans' money."

Troubled by this snide heckling and hurt by the affront to his father's honor, Shmuel made his way to the courtyard of the cemetery. Being a kohen, Shmuel could not enter the cemetery grounds and remained outside the burial area (B. Megilla 22a). Facing the graves, Shmuel addressed the deceased: "I seek Abba."

"Abba," however, was a popular name, and the dead spirits retorted: "There are many Abbas here."

Seeking to provide more detailed information, Shmuel responded: "I seek Abba the son of Abba."

This, too, was insufficient: "There are many Abbas the son of Abba here."

"I seek Abba the son of Abba, the father of Shmuel. Where is he?"

"He has ascended to the Heavenly Academy."

In the meantime, Shmuel spied a former colleague, Levi, who was sitting at a distance from the other dead spirits. The deceased spirits appeared to be sitting in a circle, while Levi had positioned himself outside that ring.

"Why are you sitting outside the circle?" inquired Shmuel.

Levi responded: "I have not been admitted to the Heavenly Academy on account of the distress I caused Rabbi Afeis when I declined to go to his academy. My entry has been barred for the equivalent number of years that I did not accord Rabbi Afeis the respect he deserved" (B. Ketubot 103b).

Despite being worthy of joining the Heavenly Academy, Levi was not granted entrance. Nevertheless, it was unsuitable for him to join the circle of the undeserving deceased and hence he sat outside the group (Gra, 18th century, Vilna).

It is unclear why the Levi episode is a necessary part of the tale. Perhaps recounting Levi's punishment for paining Rabbi Afeis is an indication of the retribution that awaited those who insinuated a misappropriation of the orphans' money by Shmuel's father.

While Levi and Shmuel were talking, Shmuel's deceased father arrived. Shmuel noticed that his father was both crying and laughing: "Why are you crying?"

The father replied: "For you will soon be coming here to join me," alluding to Shmuel's looming death.

Hearing news of his impending demise, Shmuel quickly asked: "Why are you then laughing?"

"For you are highly regarded in this world," answered the deceased father, referring either to the world of the living or to the heavenly realm.

Seizing the opportunity to help his peer, Shmuel promptly responded: "If I am so highly regarded then let them admit Levi to the Heavenly Academy on my account." The ploy worked and Levi was given leave to enter.

Now Shmuel turned to his father with the purpose of his visit: "Where is the orphans' money?"

"Go take the monies from inside the bed-stone of the flour mill. The money on the top and the money on the bottom are ours, while the money in the middle belongs to the orphans."

Surprised by this method of storage, Shmuel inquired: "Why did you place the money this way?"

"So that if robbers would pinch any of the money, they would steal ours first, since our money was on top. And if the earth would cause some of the money to rot, our money at the bottom would be destroyed before the orphans' funds were affected."

Not only had Shmuel's father not pilfered the orphans' money, he had gone to great lengths to protect their interests, putting his own funds in danger in favor of the safety of the monies of his charges.

Despite being a learned and pious person (B. Beitzah 16b; Rashi, Hullin 111b), Shmuel's father appears to be a nondescript character. Throughout rabbinic literature, he is known simply as his famed son's father. In this passage where we are privy to his name - Abba - we learn that it is the most common of names. Even when his spirit is called from the dead, it is raised by the name of his illustrious son: "I seek Abba the son of Abba, the father of Shmuel."

Yet Shmuel's father serves as a most powerful paradigm: Custodians of public funds must be extremely concerned with civic well-being, perhaps even at the expense of their own personal financial security. How we would laud contemporary leaders

were they to improve the lot of their constituents at their own expense!

Thus, Shmuel's father's seemingly characterless name - Abba, meaning father - reveals his essence as a father figure to the unfortunate orphans. Just as it would be incongruous for a parent to steal from a child, it is inconceivable that Shmuel's father would embezzle the orphans' money.

Being in charge of the money of others is a privilege, but as with so many honors and opportunities, this privilege entails responsibility. A leader is more than an elected ruler; a leader should be a civil servant, with the public interest foremost in any reckoning. Indeed, this is a high moral standard, but it is a worthy benchmark to which we should aspire as we debate the best use of public funds. © 2006 Rabbi L Cooper. *Rabbi Levi Cooper teaches at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the Jerusalem Post and Up Front Magazine. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud, Brachot, citing classic commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts.*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

At Sarah's insistence, Abraham marries Hagar. Soon after, Hagar becomes pregnant and Sarah then becomes enraged. Here, the Torah uses the word va-te-a'ne-hah, which is commonly translated "and she (Sarah) oppressed her (Hagar)." (Genesis 16:6)

Rabbi Aryeh Levin, the late tzaddik of Jerusalem, insists that va-te-a'ne-hah cannot literally mean that Sarah oppressed Hagar. Sarah actually treated Hagar no differently than she had treated her up to that time. However, now that Hagar had become pregnant and perceived herself as Abraham's true wife, the simplest request that Sarah made of Hagar was considered by Hagar to be oppressive.

Nachmanides disagrees. For him, va-te-a'ne-hah literally means oppression. So outrageous was Sarah's conduct, that her children, until the end of time, would always suffer the consequences of this wrong. In Nachmanides' words, "Our mother Sarah sinned...as a result Hagar's descendants would persecute the children of Abraham and Sarah."

But what is it that Sarah did wrong? After all, Sarah had unselfishly invited Hagar into her home. Soon after, Hagar denigrates Sarah. Didn't Sarah have the right to retaliate?

Radak points out that Sarah afflicts Hagar by actually striking her. It is here that Sarah stepped beyond the line. Whatever the family dispute, physically striking the other is unacceptable. An important message especially in contemporary times when physical abuse is one of the great horrors challenging family life.

For Nehama Leibowitz, Sarah had made a different mistake. By inviting Hagar in, she doomed herself to failure by "daring to scale unusual heights of

selflessness." "When undertaking a mission," says Nehama, one must ask whether one can "maintain those same high standards to the bitter end. Otherwise, one is likely to descend from the pinnacle of selflessness into much deeper depths..." It is laudable to reach beyond ourselves, but to tread where we have no chance to succeed is self-destructive.

Sarah's wrong is compounded when considering the following. While in Egypt with Abraham, Sarah was afflicted by Pharaoh, the master of the land. She barely escapes. (Genesis Chapter 12) Instead of learning from her oppressor never to oppress others, she did the opposite, persecuting Hagar, causing her to flee. Having herself been victimized, Sarah should have been more sensitive. Hence, whatever her rationale, her retaliation was inappropriate. The message is clear. Victims of oppression should reject rather than incorporate their oppressor's ways. Love the stranger, the Torah exhorts over and over, "For you too were strangers in Egypt." (Leviticus 19:34)

But whether one maintains this position or the position of Radak or Leibowitz, underlying this disturbing fact of Sarah's oppression is an extremely important message. In most faiths, leaders or prophets are perfect. They can do no wrong and any criticism of their actions is considered sacrilegious. While strong sentiments within Judaism exist to defend biblical spiritual leaders as perfect, there is, at the same time, an opposite opinion in Jewish thought. It maintains that our greatest biblical personalities, while holy and righteous, were also human and made mistakes. They were real people...not G-d.

This position makes the biblical narrative much more believable. Moshe, our great leader, sins by hitting the rock instead of speaking to it. The great King David gives into sexual temptation and sins. It is precisely because these holy, inspirational leaders, including Sarah herself, were so human that we are able to look to them and say that maybe, just maybe, we, in all of our flaws and faults, can strive to be great leaders too. ©2006 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. *Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.*

RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG

Between the Lines

The Talmud (Taanit 4a) teaches that, although the Jewish people made an improper request, nevertheless, G-d answered them properly. The Jewish people's request is derived from a biblical verse in which the people say, "Let us know and strive to know G-d like the morning that is found with certainty; may G-d come down to us like the rain." (Hoshea 6:3)

According to the Talmud, G-d responds to this request with a more appropriate offer. Since rain is not always desirable, G-d answers the people based on

another verse: "I will be like dew for the Jewish people." (Hoshea 14:6)

We see from this dialogue that the people want G-d to be like rain for them, whereas G-d suggests acting like dew for them. What is the significance of this give and take? What is the difference between rain and dew?

The Shem MiShmuel provides a beautiful explanation of this passage based on the unique qualities of rain and dew. When rain falls on produce in the fields, it completely saturates the earth. Dew, on the other hand, has a gentler influence. Dew provides a light layer of moisture as "encouragement," enabling produce to moisturize itself.

Based on this idea, we can understand the give and take in the Talmudic passage we quoted above. When the Jewish people are striving to become more spiritual, they cry out to G-d: "Make us holy! Make us into everything we can be!" G-d's response to the people redirects their desire for growth. Instead of G-d acting like rain and saturating the people with externally-imposed demands, He offers to act like dew and encourage their own inner process of spiritual development. With dew, G-d can gently show the people their personal reservoirs of unlimited spiritual strength, thereby enabling them to take themselves to levels they never dreamed possible.

The Midrash, which discusses the first verse in this week's parsha, touches on this idea as well (Bereishit Rabba 39:3 on Genesis 12:1). The Midrash quotes Rabbi Brachya, who finds a reference to Abraham in the verse from Song of Songs (8:8), "We have a young sister (achot)." This is a strange comment. Why would Abraham be considered a sister? Rabbi Brachya explains that the Hebrew word for sister, achot, can be interpreted to mean she-icha- that he joined and connected all the people of the world.

It seems that this refers to Abraham's "connecting" all the people of the world to Divine service. At the end of the Midrash, Bar Kapara adds that joining people to G-d can be compared to one who joins the two sides of a ripped garment. How are we to understand this final comment? How is Abraham's joining people to G-d similar to joining the sides of a ripped garment? And how is the joining of a ripped garment different from joining two separate pieces of cloth that had not been ripped?

We can resolve these questions based on the teaching of the Shem MiShmuel that we mentioned earlier. The Midrash does not say explicitly that Abraham joined the people of the world to G-d; it simply says that he joined all the people of the world together. We could therefore suggest that Abraham facilitated people's connection to THEMSELVES, by making them aware of the spark of holiness within them. The first step in achieving our spiritual potential is to recognize that we contain tremendously rich inner resources. Once we are aware of the Divine spark within, we have

the ability to access it, and to grow to new spiritual heights.

The Tifferet Shmuel uses this idea to explain how Abraham was able to convert so many people to monotheism. Abraham's genius was in showing people how extraordinary they were already! Through seeing people's inner spark of beauty and goodness, Abraham could show them that acting in negative ways was not consistent with their true selves. He could therefore encourage them to return to their pure essence.

This explains Bar Kapara's metaphor of the ripped garment. Abraham saw that everyone was originally created whole and holy, just as the two sides of the ripped garment were originally one. Abraham was successful at joining together the people of the world because he saw people's potential for wholeness so clearly. He could therefore encourage them to connect themselves to who they had been before they were ripped-to return to their true inner selves.

May we all merit to drink the dew of success by awakening ourselves to the purity and greatness of our innermost potential! © 2006 Rabbi A. Wagensberg & aish.com

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

Adapted by Shaul Barth

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“**H**e moved from there to the mountain... and there he called in G-d's Name" (/Bereishit/ 12:8). Avraham is identified, more than any other quality, by the characteristic of "calling in G-d's Name," meaning the publicizing of G-d's existence in the world. The nature of this publicizing is not clear from our parasha, but in parashat Chayei Sara Rashi notes the discrepancy between two verses, one of which describes G-d as "G-d of the heavens," while the other refers to Him as "G-d of the heavens and G-d of the earth." He explains:

"[The first time] he does not declare, 'G-d of the earth'... [because] he said: Now He is G-d of the heavens and G-d of the earth, for I have made people familiar with Him. But when He took me from my father's house, He was 'G-d of the heavens' but not 'G-d of the earth,' for people did not know Him."

What is the meaning of Avraham's achievement, namely, "bringing down" G-d from the heavens to the earth? We may say that the integration of G-d into the world is achieved and expressed on two levels.

On the one hand, we see instances of G-d's "descent" to the world, whether for the purposes of Divine intervention ("G-d came down to see the world and the tower that the humans had built"), or for purposes of revelation ("G-d came down onto Mount

Sinai, at the top of the mountain"). On the other hand, there is the possibility of elevating man towards G-d through spiritual ascent.

As important as were Avraham's actions in turning G-d into "G-d of the earth"-either by means of His "descent" or through man's ascent towards Him-they carried two dangers. The first danger is that, following G-d's "descent," He may be perceived exclusively as "G-d of the earth," and no longer as "G-d of the heavens." If G-d, Who is transcendent and abstract, having no body nor any physical form, descends to the level of ruling this world, then the world may lose the understanding that G-d rules everything-including that which is above and beyond our world.

The second danger, no less grave, is that in the wake of G-d's descent, man may relate to G-d on his own terms. In other words, people can come to believe that they know and understand G-d, and depict Him in their thoughts using concepts familiar to them. Such personification must be avoided at all costs.

These two dangers are addressed in the declaration, "Hear, O Israel- the Lord our G-d, the Lord is One." On the one hand, the Lord is One: there is none other, in the heavens or on earth. On the other hand, the Lord is "our G-d": He is unlike us in any form that we might imagine, and we are unable to understand how He acts or thinks.

Avraham's enormous contribution lay in his success in inculcating in the world the understanding that the Lord is G-d of the heavens and the earth-without ever personifying Him or limiting His Kingship to the earth alone. (*This sicha was delivered on leil Shabbat parashat Lekh Lekha 5763 [2002].*)

RABBI ADAM LEIBERMAN

A Life Lesson

Ten generations had passed since the death of Noah. The world had once again begun to worship all sorts of idols and held complete contempt for any monotheist view-everyone except for one man named Abraham. After significant and thorough thought and investigation, he was certain that there was only one G-d and began teaching this radically different belief to anyone who would listen. When G-d saw just how committed Abraham was to spreading this message, G-d appeared before him and said...

"Go for yourself from your land... to the land that I will show you... So Abraham went as G-d had spoken to him..." (Genesis, 12:1-4)

According to surveys, moving ranks is one of the most stressful things a person ever does. A reason for this is that human beings are creatures of habit and don't like to move away from things that are familiar and comfortable.

G-d not only told Abraham to move, He didn't even tell Abraham where he would be going. Certainly seems like a doubly stressful situation.

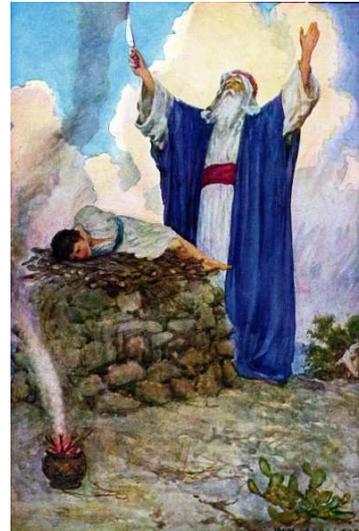
But it wasn't.

Because when someone leaves the familiar and comfortable to go to something of a much higher and worthy cause, then the stress involved in the move is dramatically decreased. Because Abraham was leaving his home to spread the word of G-d, the stress involved was reduced to almost nothing.

Suppose a doctor decided to close up his practice, pack his bags, and move to a third world country in order to help the people in desperate need of his skills. The doctor's stress of leaving his familiar surroundings is now replaced with excitement and purpose. But if instead, the doctor was moving to a different city just because he wanted a larger house, then this move now becomes filled with anxiety and worry.

As creatures of habit we tend to shop in the same stores, have the same circle of friends, and eat the same types of foods. We will always enjoy the comfort of the familiar versus the anxiety of the unknown. But when the unknown is for a higher and greater purpose, then the anxiety is diluted in the sea of purpose.

When we're making a difference in the world, we're acting consistent with how G-d created us. So if we move away from something comfortable toward something unfamiliar-but the unfamiliar will better the world-then almost all stress is left behind. The reason the stresses of the unknown are no longer present is that the unknown is now known-your higher purpose is awaiting you. ©2006 Rabbi Z. Leff & aish.com



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