

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

In Parshat Lech Lecha, among the blessings that Avraham was to receive for leaving all that he had was the blessing that he himself should be a blessing (12:2). How does one become a blessing? Furthermore, Rashi comments that G-d promised Avraham that although he would be identified with Yitzchak and Yakov, any such blessings would end with Avraham's name at its conclusion. If the sages are correct that Yitzchak and Yakov reached higher levels than Avraham, what made him so special that any blessing would end with him?

Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that Avraham merited greater distinction because he was the first to establish faith in Hashem (G-d). Although those after him reached greater heights, Avraham's accomplishments were more worthy. Maybe this can explain how Avraham himself became the blessing: Taking initiative and starting something you believe is important for society is a blessing on its own, because it lays the framework for others to build on it! G-d promised Avraham, and in turn promised us, that, if we become leaders and initiators, our initial efforts will never be forgotten and we will always be remembered as a blessing! © 2009 Rabbi S. Ressler & torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

The first war waged (see Tanchuma 7) was between the four kings led by Kedarla'omer and Amrafel (a.k.a. Nimrod) against the five kings of the Sedom metropolitan area (Beraishis 14:1-16). These four world powers had just finished decimating the giants of the area (14:5-7) before defeating the (no longer subservient) residents of the Sedom area (14:8-12). Upon hearing that his nephew/brother-in-law Lot was among those captured, Avraham (or Avram, as he was then known) goes after the victors (14:14), frees all those captured, and recovers all the looted property (14:15-16). Sounds like a wonderful story, with the good guy coming out on top because he has G-d on his side. But what was Avraham thinking? How did he put himself in such a dangerous position, attacking the army that had just wiped out every single giant but one (see Rashi on 14:13)? How could he go to war knowing that the only way he could survive (let alone win) was if

G-d performed miracles for him? No matter how righteous a person is, he or she cannot rely on a miracle; how could Avraham do just that?

Radak (14:1) tells us that "this story was written in the Torah to inform us of how consistent the heart of Avraham was with G-d, and how he trusted Him with all his heart." He then continues, "and to inform us that it is appropriate for a person to put himself in a dangerous situation in order to save his relative, as Avraham did." It would seem, then, that if someone knows he has full trust in G-d, and has a valid reason to put himself at risk, he is allowed to. The Yefay So'ar (Beraishis Rabbah 43:1) mitigates this a bit, telling us that Avraham's trusting G-d in this situation does not contradict our sages telling us (Shabbos 32a) to avoid dangerous situations lest a miracle not occur, "because for Avraham, who experienced miracles on a regular basis and was completely righteous, his heart trusted G-d that He would perform a miracle for him." The Yalkut Reuvaini (pg. 159) also asks "how Avraham could rely on a miracle in a situation where damage is likely, by chasing after [the] four kings," and quotes a Midrash to answer the question: "When [Avraham] left his house, he left with the intention of redeeming him (Lot) with a large sum of money. And when he left the door of his house (i.e. actually went out) he saw the Shechina (divine presence) and a large army (presumably of angels that would fight for/with him) [and] immediately chased after them."

[Even though many Midrashim and commentators say that the whole pretext for the war was to capture Lot and draw Avraham into battle, with Avraham first "hearing" what happened (14:13) and then "understanding" (14:14) that he was the real target, it is still theoretically possible that he would have attempted to "buy" Lot's freedom, hoping that Nimrod's greed would overpower his hatred. Similarly, even though Avraham prepared his "students" for war (14:14), it is possible that this preparation didn't happen until after Avraham saw the heavenly army coming to help him. Nevertheless, the most straightforward approach is that Avraham decided to attack upon hearing that Lot was captured.]

Following the train of thought of these commentators, only one who knows that he is fully righteous (and who can really say that about themselves; it is hard to imagine that even Avraham considered himself completely righteous), has a strong reason to put himself at risk (such as saving a relative),

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has a history of miracles being performed for him, and sees the pieces falling into place for another miracle to occur, can put himself in danger and rely on a miracle. Even so, there may be more to the story.

Avraham and Nimrod had a long history, starting from when Avraham was born and Nimrod tried to kill him (see Yalkut Shimoni 68, Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer 26, Sefer Hayashar and Mei'am Lo'aiz), forcing Avraham to spend the first 13 years of his life hiding underground. When Avraham protested against the paganism that Nimrod was promoting and refused to back down, Nimrod threw him into a burning furnace. Now, Nimrod had captured Avraham's nephew/brother-in-law in an attempt to get him to come out and fight, so that he could finally kill the father of ethical monotheism. It is an interesting progression from Avraham being totally passive (as an infant, with absolutely no say in the matter), to being a participant, albeit a reluctant one (given the choice to renounce his beliefs or be thrown into the fire), to being active, choosing to chase after Nimrod to save Lot when he could have stayed home and avoided it. However, even though Avraham could have avoided this confrontation, he knew that a confrontation was inevitable. Nimrod had always been after him, and his starting a regional war as a pretext to capture Lot and draw Avraham to the front lines was only his latest attempt. Even if Avraham stayed at home this time, it would only delay this confrontation temporarily.

"Rabbi Elazar ben Avina said [that] if you see governments in confrontation with each other, keep watch for the footsteps of Moshiach. You should know this because in the days of Avraham, through the confrontations between governments redemption came to Avraham." What kind of redemption is Beraishis Rabbah (42:4) referring to? "For Nimrod had always been trying to kill [Avraham], and here he brought upon him all of these kings, and when he killed them, this was his everlasting redemption." Although not everyone agrees with the Maharzo's implication that Nimrod was killed here (other Midrashim have it as Eisav, Avraham's grandson, that killed Nimrod), it is certainly likely that after this war Nimrod gave up trying to kill Avraham, thereby constituting a "redemption." If Avraham was "redeemed" after the threat of Nimrod passed, he must have always felt threatened by him until then.

There are other indications that Avraham knew that Nimrod would try attacking him. Avraham had made a "treaty" with Eshkol, Aner and Mamray (14:13), and he made sure they got their share of the spoils (14:24), signifying that this treaty was about (or included) coming to each other's aid in wartime. Having signed such a treaty even before Nimrod captured Lot shows us that Avraham was expecting some kind of attack.

"There is no one who went up against time (i.e. tried to force the issue) and was not pushed back. And whoever gives room for time (i.e. allows things to happen), time comes back and is given over to his hand. You should know this from our father Avraham, who fled from Nimrod and allowed time to take its course, and time returned and gave them (Nimrod and the other kings) into his hand." The Midrash Hagadol (14:5-6) seems to be saying that after Avraham was saved from the burning furnace and Nimrod was still after him, Avraham was well within his rights to attack him right there and then. If after such an obvious miracle Nimrod was still trying to kill him, it was inevitable that he would keep trying, and perhaps Avraham should have put a stop to it right away. Nevertheless Avraham didn't force the issue, and ran away (first to Charan and then to Canaan).

There would be a time when he would have to confront Nimrod again, but it didn't have to be in Ur Kasdim. When it would be was unclear, but that it would be was pretty clear. Avraham prepared for it by making allies with the locals, but was in constant danger nonetheless. When Nimrod captured Lot, Avraham realized (14:14) that now is the time, for his relative had been captured. He enlists his students and servants, chases after Nimrod and company, and soundly defeats them.

Did Avraham put himself in danger, creating a situation that would need a miracle for him to survive? Or was he already in danger, a situation that would ultimately need G-d's miraculous help anyway, and knew that now was the time to act? As the Radak put it, from the fact that Avraham went after kings so much mightier than he we see how much he trusted G-d. And from the fact that because his relative was in danger he decided to have the necessary confrontation now, we see how important it is to make personal sacrifices for family. What we don't see, though, is that Avraham necessarily created an additional danger, one that would require an additional miracle to survive. © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

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Later on in the parsha, the pasuk says: "And the fugitive came and told Avram, the Hebrew

(halvri)..." [Bereshis 14:13]. This is a very famous pasuk in that it is the only place in the Torah where Avraham is referred to by the title that became associated with his descendants—the Hebrew (halvri). Our Sages tell us that this title connotes the separation and distinctiveness of Avraham and his descendants. "The entire world was on one side of the river (m'ever echad) and he was on the other side (m'ever hasheni)."

Avraham is the loner among mankind. He is the iconoclast. He is not bothered that he is out of step with the entire world. "This is who I am, these are my opinions, I believe in One G-d and I don't care if the entire world thinks that I am crazy for it." This is one profile our Sages paint of Avraham.

Our Sages paint another profile as well. Avraham is one who influences the masses to follow his ways. He impacts his entire generation and revolutionizes the theology of mankind. He is surrounded by crowds of followers who gathered around him while he was still in Charan! Our Sages contrast Noach who was righteous and influenced his family—but no one beyond his immediate family, with Avraham who influenced the entire world. Avraham is the first Kiruv professional. He influenced everyone with whom he came in contact.

Don't these two images contradict each other? Was Avraham a loner or did he have great influence on people? How can he be both at the same time? We do not usually think of an iconoclast who stands in opposition to the whole world as a person of great influence.

Rav Schach derives a lesson in the correct way to be me'karev [draw people near] to Torah from this contradiction. Some people are tempted to compromise on their own ideals in their zeal to influence others. They feel that it is necessary to "meet these people half way", to join them, and approach them at their own level. Sometimes, they argue, the ends justify the means. Avraham teaches us that this is not the proper course to follow. Avraham was an Ivri. He stated who he was and stuck to his ideals and let truth show the way. In the final analysis, it will be Emes [truth] that wins out and influences people. One can have much influence and draw near many people without compromising one's own positions. It is essential, in trying to influence others, to remain committed to one's own principles.

This idea is buttressed by the following Yalkut from Parshas Yisro. "All that G-d spoke, we will do and we will hear" [Shmos 24:7]. The Yalkut states that it would have made more sense to state "we will hear and (then) we will do". However, the Jews told the Almighty "before we even heard Your words we fulfilled them." In other words, Klal Yisrael justified their saying "we will do and we will hear" by the fact that their forefathers already fulfilled the entire Torah before it was even commanded.

The Yalkut proceeds to demonstrate how the Patriarchs already fulfilled the commandments. For example, the first commandments (I am the L-rd Your G-d... You shall have no other G-ds before Me. [Shmos 20:2-3]) were fulfilled by Yaakov when he said, "Remove the foreign G-ds from your midst" [Bereshis 35:2]. The Yalkut proceeds to show how Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Yosef, and Moshe fulfilled the entire set of the Ten Commandments before the Revelation at Sinai.

As an example of fulfillment of the command, "Do not testify falsely" the Yalkut cites the Patriarch Avraham's testimony to the entire world that G-d was Creator and Master of the Universe.

Someone once asked Rav Weinberg about the meaning of this Medrash. How was Avraham's testimony that G-d was Creator of the world a fulfillment of not testifying falsely? The late Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel answered that we see from here that if people say falsehoods, one who does not object to these falsehoods, corroborates them. It is as if he has stated the falsehood himself. If the entire world said that there was more than one G-d and Avraham would have stayed in his own 4 cubits without objecting, that would have been acquiescing to falsehood and ultimately corroborating it.

This is the meaning of the Medrash. In fact, Avraham did not keep quiet. He went around and insisted to everyone that Hashem is the One Master of the Universe. Had Avraham not done so, he would have been guilty of the same sheker [falsehood] as everyone else.

This was Avraham's greatness. He had great influence, but he remained true to his ideals. "Everyone was on one side of the river and he was on the other side." © 2009 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd Sarai acted with mastery over her [Hagar], and [Hagar] fled from before her" (Gen. 16:6). In the Book of Genesis, the relationship between two women married to the same man is never simple; indeed, the B.T. Tractate Yebamot refers to the second wife as tzarah (literally, pain). In the case of Abraham, founder of the Hebrew nation and religion, the situation is even more complex, since Hagar's son is Yishmael, progenitor of the Arab world, and Sarah's son is Isaac, the father of Jacob-Israel. To this very day an intense rivalry between these half-brothers continues, children of one father and two different mothers.

I'd like to suggest that a close examination of the difficult lives of this complex family reveals with astonishing clarity insights into the current political situation in the Middle East. In Canaan, the ten-year long marriage of Sarai and Abram has not borne fruit,

prompting Sarai to turn to her handmaiden Hagar to provide her husband Abram with a much-desired son and heir. Hagar quickly becomes pregnant - "which makes her look at her mistress (Sarai) with contempt" (Gen. 16:4). Sarai complains to her husband, blaming Abram for the maid's contemptuous attitude. Abram supports his wife; "'Your maidservant is in your hands. Do with her as you see fit.' And Sarai humbled her, and [Hagar] fled from before her" (Gen. 16:-6).

A number of Biblical commentaries are critical of our forbears for their treatment of Hagar. The Radak (Rav David Kimhi 1157-1236) suggests that the Bible wants to expose Sarai's bad traits - in order to stress the importance of acquiring good traits. "Sarah acted neither in accordance with morality nor piety." The Ramban (1194-1270) goes even further: "Our matriarch sinned with this humbling, and so did Abraham by allowing her to act in such a way. And so G-d heard [Hagar's] suffering, and gave her a son who would be a wild beast of a man, and would afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all sorts of mastery afflictions."

Rav Elhanan Samet, in his commentary on the weekly portions, cites the Code of Hammurabi, (144, 146, 147) which totally justifies Sarah's action. This ancient code of the King of Babylon which served as the legal standard for the Fertile Crescent during the period of the Patriarchs rules that if a wife gives her maidservant to her husband to bear him children, once she bears him a child, she rises from servant to the status of wife. But if she then tries to place herself on an equal footing as her mistress - the first and chief wife, then her mistress may demote her back to her original status of a servant, though she may not sell her to another master, because the servant may not be separated from her children. So Sarah's conduct was perfectly in accordance with the Hammurabi Code, which is why the angel instructs Hagar who has fled to the desert to return to Sarah and to allow herself to be dominated by her mistress. (16:9).

Rav Samet understands the next Sarah-Ishmael-Hagar-Abraham encounter, which appears in Parshat Vayera a week from this Shabbat, also in terms of the Hammurabi Code. Abraham and Sarah are finally, miraculously blessed with their own son, Isaac, who is brought up in the home alongside Ishmael and Hagar. "Sarah saw that the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she bore to Abraham, was mocking (metzahkek). And she said to Abraham, 'Banish this maid-servant and her son, because the son of this maid-servant must not inherit with my son, with Isaac'" (Gen. 21:9,10).

Rav Samet explains that Sarah's demand is based on another law of Hammurabi (170), which rules that if the children of the maid-servant are declared by the father to be his children and are counted along with the primary wife's children, then - when the father dies - all the children have to divide the inheritance equally, with the primary wife's children choosing their share

first. Sarah wants Ishmael to be banished to prevent Hagar's son from sharing Abraham's inheritance of the Land of Israel. After all, as G-d will soon explain to Abraham, "It is through Isaac that you will gain posterity" (21:12); Isaac is the son with the birthright!

However, this does not explain why Ishmael was laughing in the first place nor why Abraham didn't merely disown, or disinherit, Ishmael rather than sending him out to the desert.

It seems to me that Sarah was willing to live together with Hagar and Ishmael in one household - and even to have Ishmael and Isaac divide their father's inheritance - as long as Hagar and Ishmael understood that she was the primary wife and that her son Isaac was the primary heir and successor to Abraham. The land itself could be divided (even equally); however, the moral birthright and bearer of the Abrahamic mission of righteousness and morality through which all the families of the earth would be blessed must belong to Isaac.

When Sarah witnesses the mocking, scoffing, aggressive and supercilious manner of Ishmael towards Isaac, noting how much older, bolder and stronger Ishmael is than his brother, Sarah probably recalled the Divine angel's blessing to Hagar: "Behold, you will conceive and bear a son, for G-d has heard your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand over everything [insisting on taking it all] and with everyone's hand against him; in the presence of all his brother's shall he dwell" (Gen. 16:11,12).

Sarah has no problem with the two half-brothers sharing the inheritance of the land, but she has begun to realize that Yishmael is incapable of sharing, his hand is over everything, insisting on having it all. This is why she wants him banished, as she declares to Abraham: "Banish this maidservant and her son, because the son of this maidservant will not [agree to] inherit with my son, with Isaac" (21:9); - he will try to grab it all for himself.

And isn't this today's reality, "the stories of the Patriarchs foreshadow what will happen to the children." From the very beginning of the conflict of the two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, claiming the same land, we have always been willing to share: we accepted the U.N. partition plan of Nov 29, 1947, we were prepared to remain in our borders following the War of Independence, only acting in self-defense in the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars when the Arab world wanted to push us into the Mediterranean Sea, and in the year 2000 we were willing to give up 97% of the West Bank lands that we won in the aggressive war fought against us. Even to this day, Mahmoud Abbas refuses to recognize the legitimate rights of the Jewish people to a Jewish state in Israel, and continues to incite the Palestinians against us in the authority's textbooks and public media.

Nevertheless, the Bible promises that Abraham will be the Patriarch of many nations (Gen 17:5), that

Yishmael will have seed too numerous to count (16:10-12), that twelve princes will emerge from Yishmael (25:12), and that the descendants of Yishmael and the descendants of Isaac will always dwell in the same region of the world (16:12, 25:18). Our Sages also believe that we will eventually dwell together in peace. This they derive from the fact that Abraham was properly and respectfully laid to rest by, "Isaac and Yishmael his sons," in the Cave of the Couples (25:9, Rashi ad loc). And once a mutually respectful peace is genuinely honored by both sons of Abraham, anything and everything is possible. © 2009 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Our father Avraham and our mother Sarah wandered for a great deal of their lives. Their career begins with the journey from Mesopotamia to the Land of Israel as described in this week's parsha. From the construction of the dates regarding the age of Avraham as they appear in the Torah, the commentators reckon that Avraham made a number of journeys to the Land of Israel before permanently settling there. And while living in the Land of Israel Avraham and Sarah continue to wander across the face of that land.

A famine forces them to travel to Egypt and eventually they return to the Land of Israel. Travel and wandering take a toll on people. The feeling of impermanence and insecurity is always a byproduct of too much travel and of forced wanderings and migrations. Avraham and Sarah exploit their travels to spread the message of monotheism in a pagan world. They experience war, tyranny, famine, disappointments, family disruption and continuing frustrations.

G-d's promises of greatness and eternity do not carry a guarantee of an easy and comfortable life. In spite of all of their successes and the vast numbers of followers that they have created, they lead an essentially lonely existence. And, they are uncertain of their future and are apparently unable to have progeny that will carry on their work in the next generations. All in all it seems that they are forced to pay a high price personally for being the father and mother of nations and the conscience of humanity.

The basic truth of the entire narrative regarding our founders of Judaism is that their lives serve as a paradigm and model for the Jewish story generally throughout the ages. We are a nation of wanderers. We have traveled the world, willingly and otherwise, spreading the basic ideas of monotheism, goodness and compassion towards others and the hope for a better future for all of humankind. Naturally the disappointments, defeats and frustrations of Avraham and Sarah are repeated and repeated again throughout all of Jewish history.

And the wandering gene that is within all Jews remains part of us today. And people who are by nature wanderers find it difficult to feel satisfied with what they have or where they are. Avraham himself will complain to G-d "What have you given me?" It is only at the end of his life that Avraham achieves the serenity and permanence that he has always sought. The achievements of Jewry over the ages against formidable odds are extraordinary. But they are all at great cost.

One should realize that there is no easy way to be a true descendant of Avraham and Sarah. It is not merely a matter of biology and genetics that makes one a descendant of our ancestors. It is matter of commitment, tenacity and toughness in the face of loneliness and opposition. I pray that our wanderings are approaching their final station and that again, as our father Avraham, we will also reach the shores of serenity and permanence in our personal and national life. © 2009 *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*

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.

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RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah teaches us never to despair or feel abandoned. The Prophet Yeshaya opens with sharp words of rebuke to the Jewish people for their shameful attitude regarding Hashem's concern for them. He asks, "Why does Yaakov say, 'My path is concealed from Hashem and my judgment alludes Him?'"

This desperate plea is based on the tight control the nations exercise over the Jewish people during their seemingly endless years of exile. They exclaim in bewilderment, "If Hashem really cares how could He allow the world to continue on its present course!? Where is the Jewish nation's reward for their perseverance throughout the ages? Why doesn't Hashem respond to the nations' cruelty and deliver them their well deserved catastrophic blows?" These emphatic cries reflect the Jewish people's deep-seeded feelings of pain and anguish during their difficult moments in exile.

Yet, this similar perspective is shared by the mighty powers of the world who perceive themselves in total control. They see Hashem as aloof from His world and incapable-Heaven forbid-of interfering with their vicious hatred towards His devout children. In this week's haftorah, Hashem responds to the Jewish nation's plea and calls the world's mighty powers to task. Hashem engages them in heavy dialogue and invites them to defend their audacious position about Him. Hashem says, "Be silent distant nations and mighty powers recharge yourselves. Draw near and speak; come together for judgment. Who inspired the (dweller) of the east to proclaim My righteousness with his every step; delivered nations into his hands and gave him the control over the kings? Who transformed dirt into his sword and chaff into his bow?... It is I, Hashem, who declares the generations from the beginning. I am the first and will remain with the final ones." (41: 1,2,4)

The Sages explain that the "dweller of the east" here refers to our patriarch Avrohom Avinu. (Breishis Rabba 43:3) In this moving dialogue Yeshaya reveals to us the secret behind Avrohom Avinu's success. In truth, Hashem was responsible for this total turnabout of an entire world. Hashem inspired this lone soul, Avrohom to reject the universally accepted practice of paganism that had distorted the view of every known human being on earth. Hashem kindled the fire within Avrohom Avinu to educate the entire world about their perversions. Hashem, likewise, protected Avrohom Avinu against every attempt to thwart his sacred undertaking of preaching the unpopular to the masses. And Hashem assisted Avrohom Avinu in his miraculous war against the four mighty kings that resulted in Hashem's universal acceptance by all leading world powers. (See Breishis Rabba 42:3; Rashi Lech Lecha 14:17)

The above words send a powerful message to all regarding Hashem's active concern for the world and its affairs. Historically speaking, Avrohom Avinu's generation could have brought anyone to total despair. The entire world- save a hidden pocket of Shemites-had no clue of Hashem's existence and were engaged in aggressive idolatry. Yet, even during those times, Hashem controlled His world and ministered its spiritual development. In response to this tremendous spiritual decline Hashem designed from the outset for Avrohom

Avinu to be born in that dark era. Hashem armed Avrohom Avinu with an incredible mind to oppose an totally misguided generation and launch a single-handed campaign in the belief in the one, true Hashem. In fact, Meiri teaches us that through lectures, writings and personal example Avrohom Avinu convinced most of the world's population to believe in Hashem. (Intro to Avos) This incredible accomplishment, against all odds, displays Hashem's interest and involvement in His world. Hashem secured the world's direction by planting Avrohom Avinu-the greatest of all thinkers- in the generation most needy of him.

This remarkable upheaval serves as perfect testimony to Hashem's ability and involvement. The fact that one lone soul convinced an entire generation to abandon its previous beliefs speaks for itself. The shocking phenomena that Avrohom was not executed for his beliefs but was instead miraculously spared and victorious against the mightiest powers tells the complete story. Obviously, Hashem controls the world and is constantly leading it to its necessary perfection. Consequently one must conclude that even the nations' control over Hashem's people only happens with His permission. With these words Yeshaya addressed the Jewish people and emphatically declared Hashem's concern for them. When Hashem appears to be removed from them this can only result from their wrongdoings.

Ramchal teaches us that, in truth, Hashem is involved at all times in leading the world to perfection. Overtly, Hashem operates the world through the system of reward and punishment allowing for free will, good and bad. This general policy leaves room for one to perceive that Hashem is not involved in His world. He permits evil to reign in untold proportions and allows His dearest to suffer for their most minute of transgressions. True reward and punishment is reserved for afterlife and only faint traces of Hashem's response can be discerned during one's lifetime. Yet, irrespective of all the above Hashem is secretly leading His world to its fulfillment. Working under cover, Hashem is perpetually involved in directing all world events in preparation for the final day of redemption. (see the Knowing Heart section 48)

Avrohom Avinu's era is a perfect example of this. On the surface, the world was as far away from its purpose as one could fathom. Civilization already experienced partial and total destruction during the days of Enosh and the devastating flood. The world's population was forced to separate and disperse in response to their rebellious attempt to build the tower of Babel. Yet despite all the above humanity did not learn its lesson and was totally absorbed in the ugly practices of idolatry. This was the world's record within the system of free will, good and bad, reward and punishment.

However, Hashem conducts His world with a second system of sovereignty wherein He directs the

world to its ultimate purpose. According to the time tables of this system the time had arrived for Hashem's truths to illuminate the world. The Sages explain that Hashem's original plan of creation called for six thousand years of existence divided into three equal segments. The first of them allowed the world to remain spiritually void, the second demanded the dissemination of the Torah's truths and the final segment was designated for the years of Mashiach. (see Mesichta Avoda Zara 9a) Prior to Avrohom Avinu, the first segment was drawing to a close with practically no trace of Torah ideals or people to personify Hashem's truths and ethical lessons. The sad reality was that not one person existed who could be entrusted with the sacred task of furthering the world's spiritual development.

Suddenly, out of nowhere emerged the perfect candidate. Avrohom Avinu, born to a family of idolators discovered the truth of Hashem and developed into the pillar of the world. His contagious and uncontrollable love for his newly discovered Creator inspired everyone who came within his midst to sign up to the program. Within a span of fifty years there was not a person in the world who had not heard of Avrohom Avinu and his principles of faith.

In addition to Avrohom's personal lessons Hashem extended these truths through miracles and revelations revolving around Avrohom Avinu. Until this point Hashem's overt involvement in this world was limited to severe punitive responses to mankind's wrongs. Avrohom Avinu, however, merited Hashem's constant protection manifested through open tangible miracles. These experiences convinced the world of Hashem's existence and involvement and eventually led them to crown Avrohom as the prince of Hashem.

Avrohom Avinu's story is perfect testimony to Hashem's system of sovereignty. During those days one could never have imagined how the world would shape up. Virtually no one was on the proper path or even reflected interest in getting there. Yet, Hashem's system of sovereignty called for the world's accelerated upswing. Immediate action needed to transpire with a relentless commitment to the furtherance of truth. The answer came within the system of free will and the world was privileged to the shining beacon of Avrohom Avinu. Hashem inspired, guided and protected Avrohom Avinu throughout his struggle until the world was eventually pointed in the direction of perfection.

The Prophet Yeshaya reminds the Jewish people that their path is never concealed from Hashem. The world is constantly moving towards its ultimate purpose with the Jewish people playing the lead role in this development. Hashem spares no effort in accomplishing His goal and, as we learn from Avrohom Avinu's era, steps in and guides the entire world towards its necessary spiritual climax.

This timely insight is so apropos for our times. The rapid moral decline in our times coupled with mass rejection of the practice of Judaism are certainly

significant factors for despair. The descending direction of the world's population through secularism and immorality projects its ultimate detachment from Hashem. However, Hashem declares that He never loses sight of His world and His people. He secured Avrohom Avinu's appearance in his appropriate time and inspired him to lead his nearly insurmountable campaign. In this same vein Hashem secured the salvation of His world through the eventual arrival of Mashiach. Hashem pledged to send the world an individual of Davidic descent wiser than Shlomo Hamelech blessed with a similar prophetic level to that of Moshe Rabbeinu. Mashiach, like Avrohom Avinu, will totally devote himself to Torah and Mitzvos, educate and inspire all Jewish people in the Torah's ways and fight the wars of Hashem. (see Rambam Hilchos M'lochim 2:4 and Hilchos Tshuva 9"2) Hashem never forsook His world or people and secured their spiritual perfection since the beginning of time. Mashiach's successful campaign, like Avrohom Avinu's, will eventually educate the entire world and bring them to the true recognition of Hashem in its fullest capacity.

May we merit to witness this speedily in our days. © 2009 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

To the victor belong the spoils, but sometimes he's just not interested. Abraham was cut from that cloth. He had just won a fierce war against four powerful Mesopotamian kings who had invaded the land of Canaan. After laying waste to the countryside, the Mesopotamians had carried off the population and wealth of Sodom and set off for home, but Abraham gave chase. He routed the invaders and pursued them all the way to Damascus, and in the process, he liberated the captives and recovered the stolen wealth..

The king of Sodom begged Abraham to keep the wealth, but Abraham absolutely refused. "I will not even take a thread or a shoelace nor anything else that is yours," he declared, "so that you should not be able to say, 'I enriched Abraham.'"

The Sages of the Talmud greatly admired Abraham's refusal to accept a reward from the king of Sodom. In fact, they point out, because Abraham spurned the strings and shoelaces of Sodom, his descendants were rewarded with the two commandments of the tzitzith fringes and the tefillin straps. The commentators, however, are puzzled by the connection. They also wonder why Abraham chose to mention these trivial articles. Why wasn't it enough to say that he would take nothing at all? That certainly would have been perfectly clear. Furthermore, why indeed did he refuse to take them?

The answer, they explain, lies in Abraham's attitude toward his great wealth. He never thought he had been blessed with wealth so that he would be able

to indulge all his whims and desires. Rather, he saw himself as a caretaker. He believed that the Almighty had entrusted him with all that wealth so that he could spread sweetness and light in the world and draw people closer to Him. He saw his wealth as a sacred trust that extended even to the smallest part of it, because even the most minute things can be used to bring honor to his name.

Abraham, therefore, specifically mentioned threads and shoelaces to show that everything must be seen as a gift from Hashem. And he refused to accept these things from the king of Sodom, because he was concerned that the king would claim the credit for having given these gifts to Abraham, thereby bringing dishonor to the Name of Hashem.

With profound insight, Abraham had discerned the transcendent value of even the smallest things. The Torah, therefore, rewarded his descendants with the tzitzith fringes and the tefillin straps, seemingly insignificant items which play a very exalted role in connecting people to the Creator and bringing them untold Heavenly blessings.

A young man came to a great sage and asked to be accepted as a disciple. The sage took the young man for a stroll through the garden as they discussed various weighty philosophical and ethical issues. The young man was very astute and intelligent, and he impressed the sage with his sharp questions and insightful observations. After an hour, they returned from the garden. The sage shook the young man's hand and said, "Farewell and good luck to you."

The young man was stunned. "Do you mean that you will not accept me as your disciple?"

"That is correct."

"But why? Haven't I passed the test? I thought I had made such a good impression on you."

"Young man," said the sage, "when we were walking in the garden you were pulling leaves off the bushes and tossing them on the ground. Why?"

"I don't know," the young man replied. "What does it matter?"

"That exactly is the problem with you. You think the leaves on the bushes don't matter. But they do. Everything has a purpose, and I assure you that those leaves were not put there for you to destroy so casually.."

In our own lives, we live in a society that pursues riches at breakneck speed with barely a backward glance. Everything is expendable and disposable as long as it gets us from one moment to the next. Nonetheless, it is important that every once in a while we pause and take stock. It is important that we see and appreciate the value in all the little things Hashem has placed in the world as part of His divine plan. And in the end, we may even find that focusing on those little things may actually be the most enriching pursuit of all. © 2009 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org