

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

The most influential man who ever lived does not appear on any list I have seen of the hundred most influential men who ever lived. He ruled no empire, commanded no army, engaged in no spectacular acts of heroism on the battlefield, performed no miracles, proclaimed no prophecy, led no vast throng of followers, and had no disciples other than his own child. Yet today more than half of the billions of people alive on the face of the planet identify themselves as his heirs.

His name, of course, is Abraham, held as the founder of faith by the three great monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He fits no conventional stereotype. He is not described as unique in his generation, as in the case of Noah. The Torah tells us no tales of his childhood, as it does in the case of Moses. We know next to nothing about his early life. When God calls on him, as He does at the beginning of this week's parsha, to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father's house, we have no idea why he was singled out.

Yet never was a promise more richly fulfilled than the words of God to him when He changed his name from Abram to Abraham: "For I have made you father of many nations." (Gen. 17:5)

There are today 56 Islamic nations, more than 80 Christian ones, and the Jewish state. Truly Abraham became the father of these many nations. But who and what was Abraham? Why was he chosen for this exemplary role?

There are three famous portraits of Abraham. The first is the Midrash we learned as children. Abraham, left alone with his father's idols, breaks them with a hammer, which he leaves in the hand of the biggest of the idols. His father Terah comes in, sees the devastation, asks who has caused it, and the young Abraham replies, "Can you not see? The hammer is in the hands of the largest idol. It must have been him." Terah replies, "But an idol is mere of wood and stone." Abraham replies, "Then, father, how can you worship them?" (Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 38:13)

This is Abraham the iconoclast, the breaker of images, the man who while still young rebelled against the pagan, polytheistic world of demigods and demons, superstition and magic.

The second is more haunting and is enigmatic. Abraham, says the Midrash, is like a man travelling on a

journey when he sees a palace in flames: "He wondered, 'Is it possible that the palace lacks an owner?' The owner of the palace looked out and said, 'I am the owner of the palace.' So Abraham our father said, 'Is it possible that the world lacks a ruler?' God looked out and said to him, 'I am the Ruler, the Sovereign of the universe.'" (Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 38:13)

This is an extraordinary passage. Abraham sees the order of nature, the elegant design of the universe. It's like a palace. It must have been made by someone, for someone. But the palace is on fire. How can this be? Surely the owner should be putting out the flames. You don't leave a palace empty and unguarded. Yet the owner of the palace calls out to him, as God called to Abraham, asking him to help fight the fire.

God needs us to fight the destructive instinct in the human heart. This is Abraham, the fighter against injustice, the man who sees the beauty of the natural universe being disfigured by the sufferings inflicted by man on man.

Finally comes a third image, this time by Moses Maimonides: "After he was weaned, while still an infant, Abraham's mind began to reflect. Day and night, he thought and wondered, 'How is it possible that this celestial sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn, for it cannot be that it turns itself?' He had no teacher, no one to instruct him in anything. He was surrounded, in Ur of the Chaldees, by foolish idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshipped idols, and he worshipped with them. But his mind was constantly active and reflective, until he had attained the way of truth, found the correct line of thought, and knew that there is one God, He that guides the celestial spheres and created everything, and that among all that exists, there is no God beside Him." (Maimonides, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:3)

This is Abraham the philosopher, anticipating Aristotle, using metaphysical argument to prove the existence of God.

Three images of Abraham; three versions, perhaps, of what it is to be a Jew. The first sees Jews as iconoclasts, challenging the idols of the age. Even secular Jews who had cut themselves adrift from Judaism were among the most revolutionary modern thinkers, most famously Spinoza, Marx, and Freud. Thorstein Veblen said in an essay on "the intellectual pre-eminence of Jews," that the Jew becomes "a

disturber of the intellectual peace... a wanderer in the intellectuals' no-man's-land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon."

The second sees Jewish identity in terms of *tzedeq umishpat*, a commitment to the just society. Albert Einstein spoke of the "almost fanatical love of justice" as one of "the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it."

The third reminds us that the Greek thinkers Theophrastus and Clearchus, disciples of Aristotle, speak of the Jews as a nation of philosophers.

So these views are all true and profound. They share only one shortcoming. There is no direct evidence for them whatsoever in the Torah. Joshua speaks of Abraham's father Terah as an idolater (Josh. 24:2), but this is not mentioned in Bereishit.

The story of the palace in flames is perhaps based on Abraham's challenge to God about the proposed destruction of Sodom and the cities of the plain: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" As for Abraham-as-Aristotle, that is based on an ancient tradition that the Greek philosophers (especially Pythagoras) derived their wisdom from the Jews, but this too is nowhere hinted in the Torah.

What then does the Torah say about Abraham? The answer is unexpected and very moving. Abraham was chosen simply to be a father. The "Av" in Avram/Avraham means "father". In the only verse in which the Torah explains the choice of Abraham, it says: "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him." (Gen. 18:19)

The great scenes in Abraham's life -- waiting for a child, the birth of Ishmael, the tension between Sarah and Hagar, the birth of Isaac, and the Binding -- are all about his role as a father (next week I will write about the troubling episode of the Binding).

Judaism, more than any other faith, sees parenthood as the highest challenge of all. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah -- the anniversary of Creation -- we read of two mothers, Sarah and Hannah, and the births of their sons, as if to say: Every life is a universe. Therefore if you wish to understand the creation of the universe, think about the birth of a child.

Abraham, the hero of faith, is simply a father. Stephen Hawking famously wrote at the end of *A Brief History of Time* that if we had a Unified Field Theory, a scientific "theory of everything", we would "know the mind of God." We believe otherwise. To know the mind of God we do not need theoretical physics. We simply need to know what it is to be a parent. The miracle of childbirth is as close as we come to understanding the love-that-brings-new-life-into-the-world that is God's creativity.

There is a fascinating passage in Yossi Klein Halevi's book on Christians and Muslims in the land of Israel, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*. Visiting a convent, he is told by a nun, Maria Teresa: "I watch the families who visit here on weekends. How the parents behave toward their children, speaking to them with patience and encouraging them to ask intelligent questions. It's an example to the whole world. The strength of this people is the love of parents for their children. Not just the mothers but also the fathers. A Jewish child has two mothers."

Judaism takes what is natural and sanctifies it; what is physical and invests it with spirituality; what is elsewhere considered normal and sees it as a miracle. What Darwin saw as the urge to reproduce, what Richard Dawkins calls "the selfish gene", is for Judaism high religious art, full of drama and beauty. Abraham the father, and Sarah the mother, are our enduring role models of parenthood as God's gift and our highest vocation. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2023 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah now proceeds from the general and universal story of humankind to concentrate on the particular and individual story of the founding of the Jewish people. The story of Avraham and Sarah, their difficulties and challenges, their loneliness and spiritual quest, form the essence of this parsha and the next one as well. In this life story they create the prototype for all later Jewish and familial society.

The Torah, unlike many more pious modern books of today, avoids painting for us a blissful picture of righteous people being blessed with serenity and perfection of character and behavior. Rather, it shows us the ever present challenges to faith in the Almighty, the difficulties of maintaining domestic harmony and of creating a positive worldview while surrounded by enemies, jealousy and an immoral general culture.

Tradition and the Mishna crown Avraham with the laurel of having withstood and overcome ten major challenges in his lifetime. It is interesting that the great Jewish commentators to the Torah differ as to which ten challenges the Mishna is referring to. Thus, if we combine all of their opinions, there are a significantly greater number of challenges in the life of Avraham than just ten.

The Torah's portrayal of these events -- the wandering and rootlessness of coming to the promised land of Israel, the disloyalty of Lot, the difficulties with Sarah and Hagar, the behavior of Pharaoh and his courtiers, to mention some of them -- all portray for us a life of struggle, of pain, of striving and of hurdles to overcome.

In spite of all of these very troubling details and incidents as recorded for us in the parsha, there is a tenor and tone of optimism and fulfilled purpose that permeates the entire parsha. Even the cursory reader senses that Avraham and Sarah are up to something great – that this is no ordinary tale of pioneering and struggle. There are Godly covenants and blessings, commitments made that surely will be met and a vision presented of a great and influential people and of a holy land.

God's relationship with humankind generally will be centered in His relationship to the family and progeny of Avraham and Sarah. Nations and beliefs will vie for the honor of being the descendants and followers of Avraham. Millions will adopt his name and follow his monotheistic creed. He and Sarah will be some of the most influential personages in world history. They will not avoid trouble and travail in their personal and family lives but great will be their reward in spiritual and historical achievement.

As such, they truly are the forerunners of the story of the Jewish people – a small and lonely people, wanderers and beset by inner disloyalty and external persecution – which nevertheless is optimistic and vastly influential in a manner that belies its physical numbers and temporal power.

Generally, Avraham is the father of many nations and of all monotheistic believers. But particularly he is the founder and father of the Jewish people whose march through human history parallels the life of Avraham himself. And, the Godly covenant and blessings will assuredly be fulfilled through the accomplishments of the Jewish people, its nationhood and land. ©2023 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 SHLOMO RISKIN

Torah Lights

“**A**nd in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3) Our biblical tradition seems to live in a paradox between the universal and the particular; our obligations to the world at large and our obligations to our own nation and family.

This tension is evident from the opening sentence of the Torah: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ While it seems these words are a clear proclamation of universality, Rashi's opening comment turns the verse on its head. He argues that the fact that the Torah begins with Creation has nothing to do with a grand universal vision, but rather everything to do with establishing Jewish rights to the land of Israel. He cites a midrash that says since God created the world, He can parcel out specific areas to ‘whomever is righteous in His eyes.’ This tension between the

particular and the universal also permeates the High Holy Day festival period. The universal dominates Rosh Hashanah when we crown God as the King of the entire universe, and Yom Kippur when we declare, “...for My house (the Holy Temple) shall be called a house of prayer for all people.” (Is. 56:7)

Further, the seventy sacrifices offered over the course of the festival of Sukkot symbolize our commitment to the welfare of all seventy nations. But in stark contrast, Shemini Atzeret signifies a more intimate and particularistic rendezvous between God and Israel, when the Almighty sends all the other nations home, wishing to enjoy a celebration with Israel alone. Simhat Torah, the added celebration of our having completed the yearly reading of the Pentateuch during this festival, merely emphasizes the unique and separatist significance of this holiday.

The tension is apparent in God's dealings with Abraham. At first God instructs Abraham, “Go out of your land, and from your kindred birthplace and your father's house, unto the land that I will show you.” (Gen. 12:1)

There are no introductions or apologies. It's straight to the point: Abraham is to found a new family-nation in the specific location of the land of Israel. However, in the next verse, this ethnocentric fervor of going up to one's own land is somewhat muted by the more universalistic message of God's next mandate: ‘...And through you shall all families of the earth be blessed.’

From this moment onwards, both of these elements – a covenantal nation with a unique relationship to God and the universal vision of world peace and redemption – will vie for center stage in the soul of Abraham's descendants.

In the case of Abraham himself, it is the universalistic aspect of his spirit which seems the most dominant. He quickly emerges in the historic arena as a war hero who rescues the five regional nations – including Sodom – from the stranglehold of four terrorizing kings. Even after Abraham's nephew and adopted son, Lot, rejects Abraham's teachings, he still wants to continue his relationship with Lot, and even bargains with God to save the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. According to the Midrash, the ten righteous people for whom Abraham wishes to save these evil cities are none other than Lot and his family – even though Lot rejected Abraham (and presumably the Abrahamic way of life) for the greener and more permissive pastures of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham also initially opposed the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael – Hagar his Egyptian mistress whom Sarah gave her husband for the sake of enabling him to bear a child and who treated Sarah with derision, and Ishmael, who was the perennially mocking hedonist, interested only in immediate gratification (the metza'nek) – apparently because this universalistic patriarch would have preferred a place for everyone under the

Abrahamic umbrella.

The Midrash magnificently captures Abraham's concern with the world and world opinion in a trenchant elucidation of the opening verse in the portion of Vayera, where the Torah records the moment of God's appearance to Abraham after the patriarch's circumcision in the fields of the oak trees of Mamre. Why stress this particular location, including the owner of the parcel of trees, Mamre? The Midrash explains that when God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, he went to seek the advice of his three allies – Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre.

Now Aner said to him, 'You mean to say that you are one hundred years old and you want to maim yourself in such a way?' Eshkol said to him, 'How can you do this? You will be making yourself unique and identifiable, different from the other nations of the world.' Mamre, however, said to Abraham, 'How can you refuse to do what God asks you? After all, God saved all of your two hundred and forty-eight limbs when you were in the fiery furnace of Nimrod. If God asks you to sacrifice a small portion of only one of your limbs, how can you refuse?!' Because Mamre was the only person who gave him positive advice, God chose to appear to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. (Gen. Raba 42:14)

What I believe is truly remarkable about this midrash is that it pictures Abraham as 'checking out' the advisability of circumcision with his three gentile friends and allies, in order to discover just how upset they would be by the introduction of this unique and nationalistic sign upon his flesh. The tension between the universal and the particular poses a serious threat to Abraham's relationship with his wife, Sarah. It would seem that theirs is a union of love and genuine cooperation. After all, the very first time that the Bible mentions a husband choosing a wife is in the case of Abraham: "And Abram and Nahor took for themselves wives; the name of the wife of Abram was Sarai." Gen. 11:29)

Until that time, the women are generally anonymous, with all the 'begetting' seeming to take place because of the men alone [Gen. 5]! Hence when the Bible records: "And Abram took his wife Sarai...and all their substance that they had gathered and the souls that they had gathered in Haran." (Gen. 12:5)

Rashi hastens to explain based on the Midrash, that to 'gather souls' meant that 'Abraham converted the men, and Sarah converted the women.' At least our Sages believed that they truly worked together as consecrated partners to accomplish the work of the Lord.

Indeed, Abraham is deeply committed to Sarah, and also seems to be aware of her higher gift of prophecy. When she, tragically barren after many years of marriage, suggests to her husband that he father a child with her maid-servant Hagar, the text records 'And Abraham hearkened to the voice of Sarah' [Gen. 15:2] – suggesting that Abraham's role in this matter was entirely subject to the will of Sarah. And if Sarah's sug-

gestion seems rather jarring and out-of-wifely-character to the modern ear, it is important to note that this was precisely the method of adoption practiced by the ancient Near Eastern world. The secondary wife would literally give birth 'on the knees' of the primary wife, causing the baby to be adopted by the primary wife 'as if she had borne him.'

Moreover, Abraham assumes a purely passive role in the second marriage: 'And Sarai the wife of Abram took Hagar her Egyptian maid-servant and she gave her to Abram her husband for a wife' [Gen. 16:3]. This description belies the usual biblical formula for marriage: 'When a man takes a woman....' Yet despite Abraham's total devotion to Sarah – all we have to do is consider the effort and expense he invests in the purchase of her permanent burial place in Hebron – they differ strongly in one area. Hagar may have been brought into the picture by Sarah, but when Sarah realizes that the behavior of Hagar's son Ishmael constitutes a serious threat to her family, she is not willing to compromise: Hagar and her son must be banished.

Since Abraham's vision wants to embrace all of humanity, how do we understand his willingness to cast his own flesh and blood to the desert? The Tosefta on Masekhet Sotah, commenting on the verse spoken by Sarah in Lekh Lekha: '...I was derided in her [Hagar's] eyes. Let God judge between me and you,' expands this theme and demonstrates how Abraham and Sarah held two very different world-views. The Sages in the Tosefta fill in the following dialogue between Sarah and Abraham: 'I see Ishmael building an altar, capturing grasshoppers, and sacrificing them to idols. If he teaches this idolatry to my son Isaac, the name of heaven will be desecrated,' says Sarah to Abraham. 'After I gave her [Hagar] such advantages, how can I demote her? Now that we have made her a mistress [of our house], how can we send her away? What will the other people say about us?,' replies Abraham. (Tosefta Sotah 5:12)

Sarah's position is crystal clear. She is more than willing to work together with Abraham to save the world – but not at the expense of her own son and family. She teaches us that our identity as a unique people must be forged and secure before we can engage in dialogue and redemption of the nations. God teaches Abraham that Sarah is right: "Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for through Isaac shall your seed be called." (Gen. 21:12)

Indeed, one of the tragedies of life is that we often fail to appreciate what we have until we lose it – or almost lose it. It may well be argued that the subsequent trial of the binding of Isaac comes in no small measure to teach Abraham to properly appreciate – and be truly committed to – his only son and heir Isaac, who, in the final analysis, will carry on his traditions and life's mission. And at the end of the day, nothing remained for Israel from 'all of those souls whom they [Abraham and Sarah] made in Haran.' The legacy of Abraham was

carried on by one individual and he was Isaac! *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. © 2023 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

While there is unanimity among Jewish religious thinkers that the primary covenant, Brit Sinai, took place at Sinai, there is disagreement about its precursor.

In his Kol Dodi Dofek, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik argues that the foundational covenant is Brit Mitzrayim, the covenant formed through the Egyptian bondage, first alluded to in the covenant of the pieces. There, God tells Abraham that his seed will be slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years (Genesis 15:13, 14).

Rabbi Soloveitchik identifies this covenant as the covenant of fate forged through the Jewish People's shared suffering. "Fate signifies in the life of the nation... existence of compulsion." In simple terms, even if a Jew doesn't wish to identify as a Jew, he or she will be so labeled by the enemy. For the anti-Semite, there is no distinction between the observant and the less observant. Such divisions are irrelevant. What counts is that you're a Jew. If so, you're the enemy. This commonality equalizes and unites all Jews.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook sees the precursor to Brit Sinai differently. In his view, the foundational covenant stems from an inner, soulful superiority intrinsic to Jews – what he calls brit Avot (the covenant of the patriarchs), established in the covenant of the pieces (15:18). Brit Avot, says Rabbi Kook, is "the higher soulfulness that Jews possess" (Iggerot Hare'iyah, n.565).

These two brilliant, saintly rabbis are my revered teachers. And yet, I struggle with both their positions. Rooting covenant in suffering poses the danger that Judaism will be misunderstood as primarily reactive, focused on victimhood, fighting forces wishing to annihilate us. At the same time, anchoring covenant in the theory of soul superiority flies in the face of the Torah's primary teaching that all human beings are of equal value – all created in the image of God.

My humble sense is that the foundational covenant is that of family, found as well in the covenant of the pieces, which is bracketed by God's promise that Abraham and Sarah will be the first patriarch and matriarch of the Jewish People. Covenantal heirship will come from them (Genesis 15:4; 17:19).

It is from the family of Abraham and Sarah that the nation of Israel is born at Sinai. There – at the covenant established at Sinai – we are given the mandate to bring ethical monotheism into the world (Exodus 19:5, 6).

From this perspective, the nation of Israel is also the family of Israel, as brit Sinai emerges from and remains forever linked to what can be called brit mishpachah (the covenant of family). As a loving family, the nation becomes closer than ever, consisting of brothers and sisters caring unconditionally for each other and ultimately for the larger family of humankind – mishpechot amim (Psalms 96:7). © 2023 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

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Circumcision (Brit Milah)

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Not all *mitzvot* are followed by a festive meal, but this is the custom when celebrating a circumcision (*brit milah*). In fact, the *Shibolei HaLeKet* considers the meal at a *brit* obligatory. However, at this festive meal (*seudat mitzva*), we do not recite the blessing of *SheHaSimcha BiMe'ono* (joy is in His dwelling) as we do at a *sheva berachot*. Since the baby is in pain, it would be insensitive to say these words. This leads to the question: why at a *brit* do we have a festive meal at all?

Several reasons are suggested. One is that of *Tosafot* (*Shabbat* 130a), citing *Bereishit* 21:8. There we read that Avraham made a party "on the day that Yitzchak was weaned" (*beyom higamel et Yitzchak*). Though the verse does not seem to be referring to circumcision, some creative wordplay can help make the connection. The first letter of the word *higamel* is the letter *hey*, whose numerical value is 5. Add to that the numerical value of the second letter, *gimmel*, and we have an additional 3. The last two letters of *higamel* form the word *mal*, "circumcise." Thus the word *higamel* can be interpreted to mean "on the eighth (5+3) day, circumcise (*mal*)." Following this exegesis, the verse means that Avraham made a party on the day of Yitzchak's circumcision.

Rashi points to another source to show that *milah* is a joyful occasion. We read in *Tehillim* 119:162, "I rejoice over Your instruction like one who finds abundant spoils." What specific instruction is being rejoiced over? The very first "instruction" given to our forefather Avraham, i.e., *milah*.

The Abudraham quotes a different verse from *Tehillim* (50:5): "Gather My devout ones unto Me, sealers of My covenant (*kortei briti*) through sacrifice (*alei zavach*)." The word *briti* clearly hints at *brit milah*, while the word *zavach* can be understood homiletically as "flowing (*zav*) on the eighth," another hint at *milah*. (The final letter of *zavach* is the letter *chet*, which has a numerical value of 8.)

Some say that a person who is invited to a *brit* and does not attend is rejected by heaven. Therefore, common practice is simply to inform family and friends of

when and where a *brit* will take place, and not to issue personal invitations. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"After these things, Hashem's word came to Avraham in a vision saying, "Do not fear Avram, for I am your protector, your reward is very great." (Beraishis 15:1) When his nephew Lot was taken captive during the war between the four kings and the five kings, Avram knew he had to act. He had promised Lot to be there for him, and despite the odds, Avram went to rescue his kinsman, miraculously defeating the powerful armies at the same time.

The king of Sodom, who was saved by Avram's heroics, offered a deal. "Give me the people, and keep the spoils of war for yourself." But Avram refused. He told the king that he relied on Hashem alone, and would not take gifts of Man. Not even if he had "earned" them by his own efforts, would Avram allow anyone to say that his wealth didn't come directly from the hand of Hashem.

He responded, "Biladai, not me," but that his friends who accompanied him should get their proper due. We find this word, Biladai, used by Yosef as well, when he demurred that he had no power to interpret dreams, and that it all came from Hashem. It is a mark of humility that these righteous men used the phrase, negating themselves and giving all honor to Hashem.

It was after these things, as the Ibn Ezra explains, going to rescue his kinsman and completely relying on Hashem, that Hashem came to Avraham in a vision and promised to protect him. Previously, Avraham had merited only visions at night, but now he merited a vision by day. It was because through his actions, the name of Hashem was glorified.

Hashem also told Avram not to fear. He was afraid of two things: first, that the relatives and friends of those he had killed would come to attack him. Hashem said, "Don't worry, I will protect you." Then he was worried he might be punished for taking the lives of those he'd killed in battle. To this Hashem replied, "your reward is great." Not only will you not be punished for it, but you will be rewarded for ridding the world of this evil.

We are now at a time of war. The inhuman forces of Hamas are out to hurt us and our people. It is a time for us to stand up and not be afraid. We must put all our trust in Hashem and come to our nation's aid as best we can. Then, by following these two behaviors of Avraham our forefather, we will merit the Magen Avraham, the Shield of Abraham, which will usher us into the times of Moshiach, where a great reward will be awaiting us for our faith, devotion, selflessness, and humility.

R' Shimon of Yaroslav lived to a ripe old age. When he was asked the secret of his longevity he replied thusly: "Everything that Hashem does is good. However,

when things happen to people that they consider bad, they question Him and say that it was unfair, or should not have happened. He therefore has to take them to the Olam HaEmes, the World of Truth of the next world, to show them why what He did was not only just, but good and necessary.

I, on the other hand, am content with whatever Hashem does to me, because I know that all He does is for good. Since He has nothing to prove to me, He has no need to bring me to the next world just yet." ©2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Avram and Par'oh

After Avram and Sarai traveled to Canaan and were promised the land for their children, a famine came upon the land which caused Avram and his family to go down to Egypt to get food. Before they began their journey, the Torah tells us an interesting interchange that Avram had with Sarai. The consequence of that interchange caused a serious problem for Sarai. Several aspects of this story need further explanation.

The Torah states: "There was a famine in the land, and Avram descended to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. And it occurred, as he was about to come to Egypt, he said to his wife, Sarai, 'Behold, now have I known that you are a woman of beautiful appearance. And it shall occur, when the Egyptians will see you, they will say 'This is his wife!' then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me for your sake, and that I may live on account of you.' But it occurred, with Avram's coming to Egypt, that the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. The officials of Par'oh saw her, and they lauded her to Par'oh, and the woman was taken to Par'oh's house. And he treated Avram well for her sake, and he (Avram) acquired flocks, and cattle, and donkeys, and slaves and maidservants, and female donkeys, and camels. And Hashem afflicted Par'oh and his household with severe plagues because of the matter of Sarai, the wife of Avram. Par'oh summoned Avram and said, 'What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she is your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister' so that I would take her as my wife? Now, here is your wife, take her and go.' And Par'oh commanded men upon him, and they sent off him and his wife and all that was his."

The Ramban looks upon this sequence of events as a precursor to events of the Jewish People. There is a term, "ma'aseh avot siman labanim, the actions of the fathers are a sign (or lesson) to the sons." Avram went down to Egypt to dwell there, but only for a short period of time. because of a famine in the land. The Egyptians mistreated his family by taking Sarai as a wife for Par'oh. Hashem took vengeance on Par'oh with serious plagues, and Avram and his family left with many cattle, flocks, and silver. Yitzchak also had his wife taken

by Avimelech, and Ya'akov endured a similar exile and treatment in Egypt after a famine, though his test lasted for several generations before the Jews were freed.

The Ohr HaChaim asked why Avram put Sarai in such a dangerous position. The Ramban saw Avram's actions as an unintentional sin. Even though he placed his faith in Hashem to protect Sarai, one is not allowed to depend on miracles. Perhaps Avram should not have left the land, even though there was a strong famine, but Avram saw this exile as Hashem's directive. The Ramban explains that Avram's faith was what convinced him that Hashem wished him to leave the land because of the famine. The land was promised to his children, and he needed to preserve his life so that he would be able to have children who could inherit the land. The Ohr HaChaim also questioned why Avram brought Sarai with him if this journey would be fraught with danger for her. Avram had no other place to leave Sarai, and "righteous people have faith in Hashem." The faith of the righteous is not considered to be like depending on a miracle.

The words of the Torah tell us the command to Sarai, "When the Egyptians will see you, they will say 'This is his wife!' then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me for your sake, and that I may live on account of you." Avram understood that her words, while true, would be misinterpreted, since a "sister" could mean any female relative, and Sarai was his niece. The question is whether Avram was more in fear for his own life or in fear that Sarai would be brought to Par'oh. When Avram focused on her beauty, as he knew the Egyptians would, he knew in advance that Sarai would likely be taken. The only question then was whether he would live or die. The Kli Yakar stresses that Avram was not interested in the wealth he would receive in exchange for Sarai, as the wealth he refused later from the spoils against the four kings was even greater.

According to the Kli Yakar, Sarai only told the Egyptians that she was Avram's sister, but she told Par'oh the truth, that she had lied to save Avram's life. Par'oh did not believe her, thinking instead that she was lying now out of fear of being married to such a powerful man. Hashem was forced to intervene to save Sarai from adultery, but also to save Par'oh from punishment. Hashem afflicted the entire household of Par'oh so that Par'oh would understand that he had made a mistake that could involve everything he owned. HaEmek Davar explains Par'oh's anger with Avram. Par'oh believed that marrying Sarai was giving respect to Avram as he recognized and appreciated the intellect of both Avram and Sarai.

HaEmek Davar explains much of this section as a sign of the three pillars that secure the foundation of the world: Torah, Avodah (service to Hashem), and Gemilut Chassadim (righteous acts towards others). These pillars correspond to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. Though each of the forefathers embodied all

three foundations, as with most people, one aspect of their personality shined greater than others. Avraham embodied Torah; his entire life was dedicated to understanding Man's relationship with his Fellowman and Man's relationship with Hashem. Using his superior comprehension, it is said that he was capable of discerning many of the laws of the Torah even before they were given to Moshe, several generations later. Yitzchak embodied Avodah, service to Hashem. The Akeidah, in which he was bound for sacrifice, did not take place by Avraham overpowering Yitzchak. Midrash tells us that Yitzchak was thirty-seven years old and could have prevented his father from sacrificing him. He chose to serve Hashem according to Hashem's wishes. Ya'akov embodied Gemilut Chassadim beyond the very nature of man, as was evident in his caring for Lavan's sheep. For these differences, we can understand that each of the forefathers called the Temple Mount by a different name. Avraham saw the mountain as protection in times of battle, so he called the mountain Har (Mountain or Height). Yitzchak saw the mountain as a place to grow both food and the spirit, both to be used in serving Hashem. He called the mountain Sadeh (Field). Ya'akov saw the mountain as the place where Hashem dwelled, so he called the mountain Bayit (House).

May we emulate our forefathers to study Torah, to serve Hashem, and to act righteously to our fellowman. May we learn the lessons from our forefathers to act as foundations of the world for our lives and for future generations. © 2023 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Yosef Chaim Cara, a 17th century Polish rabbi, points out in his sefer Kol Omer Kra that after Hashem tells Avram, concerning his future progeny, to "Look heavenward and count the stars, if you are able to count them" (Beraishis 15:5), the Torah goes on to say that "the sun was ready to set..." (ibid, 15:12).

So "count the stars," it seems, was spoken during daytime.

Rav Karo perceives in that fact a poignant idea. The Jews have never been as multitudinous as the stars -- and have never even comprised a population of major proportions. Hashem's message to Avram, says Rav Karo, was not about numbers but rather about impact.

It was: "Are you able to count the stars of the heavens when the sun is shining? Even though the stars are there, they are invisible because of the powerful light of the sun."

Your progeny, Hashem was telling Avram, will not be many in number but will, like the sun's light, be overwhelming in importance.

"All the nations," explains Rav Karo, "will learn from [the Jews] what is proper and just. Without them, he continues, "the world would only continue to sink into

darkness."

Paul Johnson, in the epilogue of his "A History of the Jews," writes about his subject: "To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life, and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice... [of] monotheism.

"It is almost beyond our capacity to imagine how the world would have fared if they had never emerged."

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RABBI YITZCHAK ADLERSTEIN

Ksav Sofer

“I will bless you, and make your name great. You shall be a blessing.” (Bereishis 12:3) The three elements in this pasuk, say Chazal, are references to the three avos, as they are referenced in the first bracha of Shmonah Esrei. Nonetheless, they are not treated equally. The conclusion of that bracha mentions only one of them: magen Avraham. We are kept in the dark as to why it is that only Avraham is featured at the end of the bracha.

We'll get to the answer only after dealing with another question, this time in Chumash Devarim. "I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse. Choose life! so that you will live, you and your offspring." (Devarim 30:19) Who is going to respond to this? If a person is already convinced that he is obligated in all the mitzvos (as mentioned in previous verses), he will observe them without the dramatic appeal. If he does not believe, then no threat is going to change his mind.

The point may be that observing mitzvos is insufficient. Many people do so, simply out of force of habit. Observance is something that the family does. It is part of their life-style -- meaningful practices that are sprinkled on as a garnish to life otherwise unrelated to Hashem. They don't see themselves as created for the sole purpose of serving Hashem, either because they don't comprehend what this means, or because they just don't believe it.

The difference between the two attitudes becomes apparent in the education of their children. Those whose own observance is simply the continuation of the life-style they knew when they were young are not going to make following the dictates of the Torah the primary focus of their parenting. Those who understand that they exist only to serve HKBH will communicate that to their children as well.

The first one who fully understood and committed himself to a life of singular purpose was Avraham. He also inculcated his values in his son Yitzchok, and Yitzchok did the same with Yaakov. That is not to say, however, that Yitzchok and Yaakov were merely carrying on "tradition." Their greatness was in blazing their own trails in avodas Hashem, having found

their own ways to commit themselves to Hashem's service.

The Torah demonstrates this when it says, "I will remember my covenant with Yaakov, and also my covenant with Yitzchok, and also my covenant with Avraham." (Vayikra 26:42) Why are they given in reverse chronological order? Rashi says to teach us that each was sufficient on his own. What this may mean is that each one's contribution was sufficient through his own avodah, and not merely a product of his upbringing. Although Yaakov had a supportive father and grandfather, his commitment to Hashem resulted from his own achievement.

This explains Moshe's challenge to his people in Devarim. Choose life! Commit yourselves to a life whose chief goal is drawing closer to Hashem. Don't make the mistake of coasting on the vehicle of family practice. Choose a Yiddishkeit of real depth, rather than one of ceremony and "tradition!"

We arrive back at our pasuk and its lesson. Yes, each of the avos made his own contribution, and each one is worthy of mention. Still, we conclude the first bracha of Shemonah Esrei with Avraham, because his job was more difficult than the others. He had to buck the trend in his home. Yitzchok and Yaakov achieved their own greatness, but the task was much easier for them. They at least received a jump-start from their early chinuch.

We therefore put Avraham front and center. He was the first, by reason of his determined personal choice, to provide an antidote to the Fiddler. The latter would soon be toppled from the roof where he shouted "Tradition!" by changing times. Avraham lives on. © 2023 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein and torah.org



"Just imagine, our posterity will be as numerous as the stars – and I'm going to put you in charge of remembering birthdays!"