

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and the souls which they made in Haran, and they came to the Land of Canaan” (Genesis 12:5). One of the major challenges facing the State of Israel today - specifically in terms of its future as Jewish state - is the fate of close to 400,000 Israeli citizens from the former Soviet Union who are not halachically Jewish. These people were granted automatic Israeli citizenship under the law of the Right of Return for a compelling reason: since the Nazis' definition of a Jew to be murdered in Auschwitz was someone with one Jewish grandparent - even if it was on the paternal side, those same criteria were adopted for anyone seeking refuge in Israel. Hence, our society is faced with a large influx of non-halachically Jewish citizens who are fighting and sometimes dying for us in the IDF. Their children are attending kindergartens, schools and universities with other Israeli children, but they cannot be married in a Jewish religious ceremony and they cannot even be buried in a Jewish cemetery. This opens the door to a massive problem of intermarriage and countless desecrations of G-d's name, as bereaved parents ask why their beloved children were Jewish enough to sacrifice their lives for the Jewish state, but not Jewish enough to be buried alongside other Jews.

The most natural solution lies in "conversion" - a procedure first described in the Book of Ruth. Ruth was a Moabite, and the Bible forbids Moabites from "entering into the congregation of the Lord" (Deut. 23:4). Nevertheless, she forsook her family and culture, committing herself to the faith, fortune and nationality of her beloved mother-in-law, Naomi, saying: "Wherever you go, I shall go, where you sleep, I shall sleep, your nation shall be my nation, your G-d my G-d" (Ruth 1:16). The Talmud explains that a religious court determined that the ancient Biblical law only prohibited male Moabites from converting, females were permitted to join our nation (Yevamot 69a). Ruth, therefore, is praised as an "Abrahamic" figure, who married the prominent Judean leader Boaz, and became the great-grandmother of David, King of Israel and forerunner of the Messiah.

The Talmud (B.T. Yevamot 45, 46) sets down the fundamental procedures for conversion, which are

codified by the Shulhan Aruch to include acceptance of the commandments, ritual immersion, and circumcision for males. The Talmud maintains that while general acceptance of commandments is mandatory, the would-be convert need only be informed of "some of the more stringent laws and some of the more lenient laws" (specifying only Shabbat, aspects of kashrut, and the charitable tithes). Another Talmudic passage (B.T. Shabbat 31) suggests in the name of Hillel that as long as the conversion candidate has embarked on a positive process of Torah study, he/she is to be accepted immediately.

Unfortunately, however, the religious courts in Israel - and especially the ultra-Orthodox religious community - have established much stricter standards, which is hardly conducive for the large numbers of converts which our present national situation so desperately demands. I believe that whether or not we apply a user-friendly attitude towards potential converts depends upon how we see our Jewish mission, especially now that we have returned to the Land. Many Talmudic commentaries actually count conversion as one of the 613 commandments. The Ra'avad (12th Century) derives this command from our Biblical portion, which mentions the souls [that Abraham and Sarah] made in Haran (Genesis 12:5). The Midrash, cited by Rashi, says Abraham converted the men while Sarah converted the women.

Maimonides goes one step further. In his Book of Commandments, Positive Command 3, he cites the Sifrei in explaining that the commandment to "love the Lord" really means "making Him beloved to all of humanity, like Abraham did. This is the meaning of the verse '...and the souls that they made in Haran...'" Maimonides expounds that, "Just as Abraham harnessed his great love of G-d to bring humanity to faith, so too, you shall 'love the Lord' to the extent of calling other people to Him."

As the Mishna in Avot (1:12) teaches us, "love all humanity and bring them close to Torah." © 2010 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### Wein Online

**W**hy is Avraham so special? The Torah does not grant him the complimentary adjectives that it lavished upon Noach at the beginning of last week's parsha. His willingness to die on behalf of his

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belief in one G-d at the test of the furnace of Ur Casdim is not even mentioned in the Torah text. It was only inferred by the rabbis from tradition and a reference to one word-Ur-in the text itself.

So why is Avraham the father of many nations and generations and the spiritual ancestor and guide to so many millions in the world, even thirty five centuries after his death? The rabbis of Mishna Avot have long ago provided the answer to these questions. They stated that our father Avraham was sorely tested by life and the Creator ten times and he rose greater each time from the experience.

I have often thought that the most remarkable quality of the Jewish people is not necessarily or even mainly its scholarship and its contributions to the betterment of humanity, as much as it is its resilience. This resilience is personified in the life and vicissitudes of our father Avraham. To a great extent we all pray that we not be tested too often or too severely in our lives. Yet simply being a Jew and not deserting the cause of the Jewish people at the time of its need is a significant test.

Many are the critics and enemies of Avraham. Yet he never loses his faith. His hopes for humanity and his loyalty to the values that have guided his way in life survive all of his experiences in life. That is the Jewish definition of the quality of resilience that has become the hallmark of Jewish life throughout the ages.

I have also often thought that the most difficult tests in Avraham's life concerned members of his immediate family. Throwing one's self into a fire for an ideal or a closely held belief is not unique to the Jewish people. Even though we may be the leader in continuous world martyrdom we are not the only ones with such a history and value.

Perhaps that is why the Torah did not choose to stress the test of Ur Casdim in its text. But, it does tell us, in painful detail, of the betrayal of Avraham and his values and life style by his ungrateful nephew, Lot. How does one deal with such a disappointment? Yet Avraham goes to war to save Lot and his wealth and it is because of Avraham alone that Lot apparently undeservedly survives the destruction of Sdom.

Avraham's son Yishmael behaves like a wild beast in human guise. Parents may be helpless and even blameless regarding the behavior of their adult children, but the hurt that those adult children can inflict

upon their parents with wrongful behavior is immeasurable. Yet Avraham does not waver, and at the end of his life he lived to see that Yishmael repented and returned.

It is the unwavering courage and tenacity of Avraham, in the face of all defeats, hurts, hostile enemies and false friends, that most impresses us about our father. This strength of constantly renewing resilience is the legacy that he has bestowed upon us, his generations and descendants. © 2010 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd G-d said to Avram, 'you [shall] go, from your land and from where you were born, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.' Rashi (Beraishis 12:1) explains why G-d told Avraham that "you" ("lecha") [should] go (as opposed to just saying "go," without having to specify that it is "you" that should go); G-d was telling Avraham that going would be "for your benefit, and for your own good," as G-d would bestow much blessing upon him there. Since the move to Canaan was one of Avraham's "Ten Tests," telling Avraham that he will be much better off there kind of ruins the test. What's the big deal about moving to a different location if it comes with a guarantee that things will be better there?

Over the centuries, numerous suggestions have been made to address this question. The Tur (early 14th Century) simply writes that "even though this is considered one of the Ten Tests, G-d told him that it was for his benefit, as his moving from where he was born was still a test." In other words, despite the fact that knowing that he will be better off mitigates the harshness of the test, it was still a difficult thing to do, so is considered a test nonetheless. The Panim Yafos (late 18th Century) also notes that having this information makes it less of a test, and dismisses the possibility that trusting that G-d will fulfill His word (that it will be better there) was the essence of the test. Instead, he suggests that the test was whether Avraham, despite knowing that he would benefit from the move, would still make the move in order to fulfill G-d's commandments and not because of the other benefits he would receive as a result of the move.

The Chasam Sofer (early 19th Century) implies that the test was based on this commandment coming less than 30 years after the dispersion of peoples after G-d prevented the Tower of Bavel from being completed, when much land had still not become inhabited by people. Avraham therefore thought that G-d was telling him to move to an area that was uninhabited, where he could build his own homeland.

Nevertheless, upon reaching Canaan and seeing (12:6) that it was already inhabited (by giants, no less) and that he would have to be a "stranger" in someone else's land for the rest of his life, Avraham still didn't question why G-d told him to move there (and not to an uninhabited area that could be his).

The Chasam Sofer's son, the Kesav Sofer (19th Century) says that promising that things would be so good really did make it a tougher test rather than an easier one, as despite the famine occurring shortly after he arrived (12:10), Avraham still didn't question G-d. However, this should be (and is, by most) categorized as the test of the famine, not as a separate test of moving to a new country. It is slightly awkward that one test (moving) should be made easier in order to make a different one (the famine) harder. [Interestingly, the Keav Sofer's son, Shimon (19-20th Century), in Shir Ma'on (printed in the back of some editions of Toras Moshe), makes the same suggestion that the Panim Yafos (who taught his grandfather, the Chasam Sofer, for a short time) had made a century earlier.]

In the 20th Century, Rav Moshe Feinstein addressed this issue as well, making several suggestions. In the first volume of "Darash Moshe" he points out that whatever G-d would do for Avraham in Canaan, He could do for him in Charan, and suggests that the test was whether or not Avraham would question why G-d made him go through the upheaval before giving them to him. In the second volume of "Darash Moshe," before restating (in different words) his earlier approach, Rav Moshe comes from a slightly different angle, suggesting that the test was whether Avraham would still believe that G-d could have done those things for him in Charan even though He told him he had to move to Canaan in order to get them. Now, in the 21st Century (despite not belonging in the same category as those quoted above), I would like to add one more suggestion.

Although most people need to work on curtailing their selfishness, this is primarily true when it comes to materialistic things. The Nesi'im (Tribal leaders) were taken to task (see Rashi on Shemos 35:27 and on Bamidbar 7:3) for letting others fulfill the mitzvah of donating towards the Mishkan rather than taking part themselves. We are responsible for our own spiritual growth at least as much as we are for helping others with theirs, but no one can accomplish as much for their own growth as they can themselves. There needs to be some sort of balance, with the concept of "ma'aser" (donating 10%) being applied to a person's time too. Nevertheless, one of the tools of the Yetzer Hara (evil inclination) is to rationalize not focusing on one's own growth for the sake of helping others. Even though others might, in the short term, be negatively affected if more time is devoted to developing one's own soul rather than helping them with theirs, in the long term they will benefit from having a more developed soul to help them. [It is vital to keep in mind

that even though not helping others as much as possible is permitted for personal growth, it is forbidden to take something away from someone else (whether in the realm of the spiritual or of the physical) even if the purpose is spiritual growth. Besides the fact that there can't be true spiritual growth if it's done at someone else's expense, taking away something that someone else already has is not the same as not providing them with something that could have been provided but was not because of the self-growth.]

Avraham's very essence was bringing others to monotheism. He got into trouble in Ur Kasdim because of his mission to expose the ridiculousness of idol worship, and "converted" others, in Charan before he left and in Canaan after he moved there, to recognize the One True Creator. It would be very easy for Avraham (who had returned to Charan from Canaan five years earlier, quite possibly to strengthen the community he had converted there, see [www.aishdas.org/ta/5768/lechLecha.pdf](http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5768/lechLecha.pdf), pg. 7) to think that he could spread belief in G-d more effectively in his hometown, where he related to the people more than he did to those in a foreign country. G-d therefore told him "go for yourself," i.e. for your own spiritual needs, because you can become the best you can be there. As Rav Moshe points out (in a later piece in the second volume of "Darash Moshe"), the first altar Avraham built when he entered Canaan (12:7) did not include "calling out in G-d's name," indicating that its purpose was Avraham's own spiritual growth. It was only after he was there for a while that building an altar to G-d included "calling out in His name" (13:4), i.e. bringing others closer to G-d too.

If the "benefit" G-d was telling Avraham he would receive after he moved was his own spiritual growth, and the "test" was whether Avraham would be able to put aside his "kiruv" work (at least temporarily) in order to focus on his own growth, the blessings he was promised after the move have little bearing on how much of a test it was. Avraham went, and passed the test. © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

**CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

## Covenant & Conversation

**T**he 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 6 billion 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, like Noah, described as unique in

his generation. 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 G-d calls on him, as he does at the beginning of this week's parasha, 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 G-d 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 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 one 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 Terach 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." Terach replies, "But an idol is mere of wood and stone." Abraham replies, "Then, father, how can you worship them?"[1] 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. It compares 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?' G-d looked out and said to him, 'I am the ruler, the Sovereign of the universe.'"

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 G-d called to Abraham, asking him to help fight the fire.

G-d 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 G-d, he that guides the celestial spheres and created everything, and that among all that exists, there is no G-d beside him."

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

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 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 u-mishpat*, 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 evidence for them whatsoever in the Torah. Joshua speaks of Abraham's father Terach 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 G-d 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 birth of their child, 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 G-d." We believe otherwise. To know the mind of G-d 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 G-d'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 G-d's gift and our highest vocation. © 2010 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**A**t 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 YONASON SACKS

## TorahWeb

**A**lthough the ethics described in Maseches Avos are incontrovertibly a product of the original Sinai mesorah, no sefer hamitzvos (works of Rishonim which enumerated the 613 mitzvos) reckons these ethics among the 613 canonical mitzvos of the Torah. This salient omission prompts questions pertaining to the mandate for their obligatory observance.

R' Asher Weiss (Minchas Asher, Bereishis 21, Devarim 14) explains that not every mitzvah which a Jew must fulfill is actually written in the Torah or reckoned among the canonical 613. Beyond the written and canonized mitzvos, every Jew is obligated to fulfill the broader meta-halachic category of "ratzon haTorah-the will of the Torah." Although such mitzvos were never actually written in the Torah, the Torah nonetheless makes clear that it desires certain modes of behavior.

For example, the accepted halacha maintains that tza'ar ba'alei chaim- inflicting pain upon animals-is Biblically prohibited (see Bava Metzia 32a). Interestingly, however, the Gemarah itself never cites a source for this prohibition. The Rishonim suggest various possibilities: Rashi (Shabbos 128b, sv. Tza'ar), for example, identifies the mitzvah of prikah- the obligation to assist in the unloading of a burdened animal-as the source for this prohibition, while the Ra'avad (Shitah Mekubetzes ibid. 32b) cites the prohibition of muzzling a plowing animal. R' Weiss explains that neither Rashi nor the Ra'avad would argue that one who inflicts pain upon an animal actually violates these particular commandments; rather, both of these commandments reflect the Torah's disapproval of mistreating animals, thereby rendering tza'ar ba'alei chaim a bona fide Biblical prohibition, despite the absence of a specific source.

Other mitzvos may fall under the category of ratzon haTorah as well. R' Elchanan Wasserman (Kuntrus Divrei Sofrim 22, 23) suggests that all Rabbinic laws fall under the rubric of ratzon haTorah-despite the absence of a specific source, the Torah wills that every Jew should follow the instructions of the Sages. The Chazon Ish (Yoreh Deah 149:8) adds that perhaps the mitzvah of kibbud av v'eim-honoring one's father and mother-may similarly fall under this category. The Gemarah in Maseches Kiddushin cites specific actions which must be performed for this mitzvah: a child is obligated to provide food and drinks for his parents, along with helping his parents dress themselves. The Chazon Ish, based on a comment of the Rashba,

explains that although these specific actions fulfill the positive Biblical precept of kibbud av v'eim, nonetheless, the concept of ratzon haTorah dictates that a child do whatever brings pleasure to a parent, even beyond the Gemarah's specific examples.

This concept of ratzon haTorah may also underlie a classic ruling of the Ba'al HaMaor. The Gemarah (Shabbos 134b) teaches that in Talmudic times, all babies who underwent bris milah were bathed in hot water before and after the milah to ensure their safety; failure to do so was believed to pose a significant threat to the baby's life. If a milah was to be performed on Shabbos, the hot water would be boiled before Shabbos for subsequent administration on Shabbos itself (although the act of milah itself overrides the Shabbos, the preparations for a milah do not override the Shabbos). Because the preparatory boiling of the water does not override the Shabbos, in a case where all of the boiled water accidentally spilled from the urn on Shabbos, before the milah could be performed, one would not be permitted to boil new water on Shabbos. In such a scenario, all opinions would agree that the milah must be deferred to Sunday.

The Rishonim debate, however, what the halacha would be if only half of the boiled water spilled out before the milah on Shabbos. In such a situation, may one proceed with the milah? The Ramban (cited by Ran, Shabbos 53a in Rif, s.v. V'heicha) rules that the milah may indeed be performed: the remaining hot water which did not spill will suffice to wash the baby before the milah, and after the milah, the principle of pikuach nefesh-saving a life-will permit the boiling of additional water to wash the baby and save its life. The Ba'al HaMaor, however, disagrees. Although the principle of pikuach nefesh certainly overrides the Shabbos, one is not permitted to intentionally orchestrate a situation in which this permit can be used. For example, if, G-d forbid, an individual suffers an unexpected heart attack on Shabbos, he may certainly violate the Shabbos to save his life; however, to deliberately perform a bris milah without sufficient boiled water, knowing that such an action will inevitably create a situation of pikuach nefesh, is absolutely prohibited.

While the Ba'al HaMaor explicitly prohibits the deliberate invocation of the license of pikuach nefesh on Shabbos, the Achronim debate the nature of this prohibition. R' Shlomo Zalman Orbach (Minchas Shlomo 7:2) reasons that the prohibition is merely Rabbinic in nature: no matter a person's intentions, the Torah itself will always permit a person to violate Shabbos in order to save a life. It was the Sages, however, who felt that such deliberate orchestration was improper. R' Asher Weiss, however, argues that perhaps the Ba'al HaMaor's prohibition constitutes a violation of ratzon haTorah: just as the Torah wills that a person fulfill all of its applicable commandments, so too the Torah wills that a person not intentionally create situations which will exempt himself from its

commandments. Accordingly, the Ba'al HaMaor's prohibition could indeed be Biblical in origin, despite the absence of an explicit Scriptural source.

In light of the aforementioned examples, perhaps one could similarly suggest that the source for the ethics prescribed in Maseches Avos is the concept of ratzon haTorah. Although the Torah never states these ethics in a particular chapter or verse, the consistent emphasis upon proper conduct and refinement of character through fulfillment of the mitzvos reveals the Torah's ultimate desire that a person uphold oneself in an ethical fashion. © 2010 Rabbi Y. Sacks and The TorahWeb Foundation

### RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

## RavFrand

The Medrash Rabbah on this week's Parsha states in the name of Rav Levi: There are two times that "Lech Lecha" is written in the Torah and we do not know which is G-d's favorite? the first or the second. The first "Lech Lecha" is obviously the first pasuk of our parsha [Bereshis 12:1]: "Go out from your land, from your birth place, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." The second "Lech Lecha" is in connection with Akeidas Yitzchok [the Binding of Yitzchak], where Avraham is told "Go out to the Land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you." [Bereshis 22:2] Rav Levi concludes that Akeidas Yitzchok was a greater test than the test of Avram leaving his homeland and thus the second instance of "Lech Lecha" is "more precious to G-d".

It is actually strange that Rav Levi was even puzzled by this question. Why would anyone think that the test of leaving one's homeland (particularly in the context of the great reward that HaShem promised to Avram if he complied with this commandment) might be comparable to the test of the Akeida? The Akeida would be most difficult for any parent? particularly such a person as Avraham, who was the paradigm of Chesed [kindness] and who had preached monotheism and the virtues of a Merciful G-d all these years to his many disciples.

A Nesivos Shalom (by the Slonimer Rebbe) at the beginning of the parsha addresses this issue. Certainly, the Akeida was a very difficult nisayon [test], but it was a "one shot affair". Avraham was called upon to ascend the mountain, sacrifice Yitzchak, and then the nisayon would be over. However, the nisayon of Lech Lecha in our parsha is a test of beginning a journey that will affect him and will last the rest of his life.

Everyone has his own personal odyssey in life. We are all charged with the task of bringing completeness (shleimus) to our souls. We have to achieve correction (tikun) of our neshma [soul] in our own personal fashion. That is the charge of Lech LECHA (go in YOUR OWN way). This charge involves

a lifetime of work. Many times, this charge requires getting out of the box that is one's environment, one's society, and one's family. We never enter life with a clean slate. We all enter life with baggage? emotional baggage, financial baggage, genetic baggage, family baggage. Sometimes the "baggage" is very good and extremely helpful. Other times the baggage can be a real handicap. The type of people that we are and the characteristics (middos) that we have are primarily not our own choosing.

When a person is given a mission in life and a goal to accomplish, it may involve the need to rid himself of so much of the baggage that he came with (one's land, one's birthplace, one's family). Such a challenge is not a one shot deal. Rather, it accompanies us day in and day out. Such a constant? lifelong? challenge may indeed be cumulatively a greater test than a test requiring only a momentary rise to the occasion, as difficult as that challenge may be. © 2010 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org

### RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

## Weekly Dvar

We are introduced to Avraham in this Parsha. In this and the next Parsha, Avraham goes through his Ten Tests. Initially, when G-d tells Avraham to leave his birthplace, he goes to the land of Canaan. In chapter 12, verse 6, we are told: "And Avraham passed into the land, until the place of Shechem, until Elon Moreh? and the Canaanites were still living in the land? This is just one example in which the Torah is giving us seemingly unimportant details about the story of the Patriarchs. Does it really matter in which towns Avraham stopped along his way?

What matters is the Ten Tests he underwent. Why does the Torah insert these details? The Ramban answers: "Ma?asei Avot Siman laBanim?? All events that happen to our Patriarchs can help their descendants. So why do we need to know details about Avraham? The answer is that if we want to be kind people, we can?t just do what our hearts (our emotions) tell us to do. Avraham methodically built up and perfected the trait of kindness, and if we want to access that information, we have to learn how Avraham acted. By delving into his deeds we will be able to tap into the trait of kindness. The same applies to Yitzchak, who developed the trait of self-control, and Yaakov, who perfected the attribute of mercy. If we look at the Patriarchs, we will be able to understand our spiritual potential and how to cultivate that spiritual potential. © 2010 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

### RABBI YAAKOV MENKEN

## Lifeline

In this week's reading, our forefather Avraham is told to leave home. He is to journey to the Promised Land, where, G-d promises, Avraham will grow to be a great

nation. But as we know, the Nation of Israel only develops after most of the intervening years are spent in exile-Yaakov spends decades in the house of Lavan, and then he and all of his children reside in Egypt for over 200 years. Why was it so important for Avraham to go to the Land of Israel?

The verse itself tells us that it wasn't just about where he was going- it was about leaving, as well. "... Go for yourself out of your country, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you." [Gen 12:1] Avraham had to leave his comfortable home environment in order to grow to be that great nation. He could not remain in the house of his father, surrounded by idols, and achieve his destiny.

In order to grow, it is necessary to move. Sometimes that move is physical- to Israel, or to a community where one is surrounded by others also committed to Jewish growth. But even more, there must be a mental move, out of our comfort zone. To grow as a Jew means to challenge preconceptions and stereotypes, to explore spiritual alternatives and Commandments that may at first seem foreign. That may make the journey seem difficult-but fear not: for Jews, it is a well-traveled path! © 2010 Rabbi Y. Menken and torah.org

#### **RABBI NAFTALI REICH**

### **Legacy**

**B**efore Abraham could be deemed worthy of becoming the Patriarch of the Jewish people, Hashem put him through ten ordeals to probe the depth of his devotion-all of which he passed brilliantly. The last and most familiar is, of course, the Akeidah, when Hashem commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, only to stay his hand at the very last moment. This week's parshah describes one of the earlier ordeals, Hashem's command to Abraham to leave Mesopotamia and settle in a different land.

The Midrash considers this ordeal comparable to the Akeidah as a test of Abraham's devotion. But how can these two situations be compared? On the one hand, we have the tragic image of an old man blessed with an only son at the age of one hundred and now being asked to bind him hand and foot and place him on the altar as a sacrificial lamb. Not only would he be left childless and devastated, but for his remaining age-dimmed years, during his every waking moment, he would think of nothing else but what he had done to his son. What a shattering ordeal! An ordinary man could not possibly have withstood it. On the other hand, we have the image of a man in vigorous middle age being told to relocate to a different land. Granted, relocation is an unpleasant experience. But tragic? Harrowing? Shattering?

Furthermore, let us take a closer look at the wording of the command. "Go away from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house to the

land I will show you." (Bereishis 12:1) Logically, it would seem, an emigrant first leaves the house of his father, then the city of his birth and, finally, his country. Yet here, Hashem tells Abraham to make his exits in the reverse order. Why is this so?

The answer lies in a deeper understanding of the command of departure. Hashem was not merely telling Abraham to relocate geographically a few hundred miles to the west. He was telling Abraham to make a complete break with the culture in which he had grown up and spent all of his life. Abraham had indeed recognized his Creator at a very young age and was completely free of pagan ideology, but he was still connected by cultural ties to the pagan society in which he lived. The style of his home, the clothes he wore, his modes of language, the cultural timber of his daily existence were all Mesopotamian. As long as he remained thus connected to the corrupt society of his ancestors he would never be able to reach the highest levels of prophecy and attachment to his Creator. The only choice was to break away and move to a different land. In a strange land, even a corrupt pagan one, he could remain totally detached from his cultural surroundings. Standing alone in Canaan in his stalwart purity and righteousness, he could penetrate to the highest spheres of Heaven. But not in the land of his fathers.

Therefore, Hashem commanded him to sever all his cultural umbilical cords in a logical progression. First, his attachment to the country in general. Then his closer attachment to his birthplace. Finally, his attachment to the very household in which he was born. When this final detachment was accomplished, he could begin his spiritual journey toward prophecy and the establishment of the Jewish nation.

This departure, therefore, was a most difficult ordeal indeed. Abraham was required to purge himself every cultural vestige of his entire life, to penetrate every hidden crevice of his heart and soul, search out every hidden crumb of Mesopotamian culture and sweep it out. Perhaps this ordeal was not as frightening and tragic as the Akeidah, but in pure difficulty it may have surpassed it.

We all live in our own Mesopotamia, and no one can deny that the sinister tendrils of the surrounding culture insinuate themselves into the innermost crevices of our own hearts. We are not Abrahams, of course, and we cannot be expected to extricate ourselves completely from these entanglements. However, we can at least recognize them for what they are and try to keep them at arm's length so that we can grow spiritually even as we live in such an environment. © 2010 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

