

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Why Abraham? That is the question that haunts us when we read the opening of this week's parsha. Here is the key figure in the story of our faith, the father of our nation, the hero of monotheism, held holy not only by Jews but by Christians and Muslims also. Yet there seems to be nothing in the Torah's description of his early life to give us a hint as to why he was singled out to be the person to whom God said, "I will make you into a great nation... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

This is surpassingly strange. The Torah leaves us in no doubt as to why God chose Noah: "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generations; Noah walked with God." It also gives us a clear indication as to why God chose Moses. We see him as a young man, both in Egypt and Midian, intervening whenever he saw injustice, whoever perpetrated it and whoever it was perpetrated against. God told the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart; I have appointed you as a Prophet to the nations." These were obviously extraordinary people. There is no such intimation in the case of Abraham. So the Sages, commentators, and philosophers through the ages were forced to speculate, to fill in the glaring gap in the narrative, offering their own suggestions as to what made Abraham different.

There are three primary explanations. The first is Abraham the Iconoclast, the breaker of idols. This is based on a speech by Moses' successor, Joshua, towards the end of the book that bears his name. It is a passage given prominence in the Haggadah on Seder night: "Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshipped other gods" (Josh. 24:2). Abraham's father Terah was an idol worshipper. According to the Midrash, he made and sold idols. One day Abraham smashed all the idols and left, leaving the stick with which he did so in the hand of the biggest idol. When his father returned and queried who had broken his gods, Abraham blamed the biggest idol. "Are you making fun of me?" demanded his father. "Idols cannot do anything." "In that case," asked the young Abraham, "why do you worship them?"

On this view, Abraham was the first person to

challenge the idols of the age. There is something profound about this insight. Jews, believers or otherwise, have often been iconoclasts. Some of the most revolutionary thinkers -- certainly in the modern age -- have been Jews. They had the courage to challenge the received wisdom, think new thoughts and see the world in unprecedented ways, from Einstein in physics to Freud in psychoanalysis to Schoenberg in music, to Marx in economics, and Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman in behavioural economics. It is as if, deep in our cultural intellectual DNA, we had internalised what the Sages said about Abraham halvri, "the Hebrew," that it meant he was on one side and all the rest of the world on the other. (Bereishit Rabbah (Vilna), 42:8)

The second view is set out by Maimonides in the Mishnah Torah: Abraham the Philosopher. In an age when people had lapsed from humanity's original faith in one God into idolatry, one person stood against the trend, the young Abraham, still a child: "As soon as this mighty man was weaned he began to busy his mind... He wondered: How is it possible that this planet should continuously be in motion and have no mover?... He had no teacher, no one to instruct him... until he attained the way of truth... and knew that there is One God... When Abraham was forty years old he recognised his Creator." (Laws of Idolatry, chapter 1) According to this, Abraham was the first Aristotelian, the first metaphysician, the first person to think his way through to God as the force that moves the sun and all the stars.

This is strange, given the fact that there is very little philosophy in Tanach, with the exception of wisdom books like Proverbs, Kohelet and Job. Maimonides' Abraham can sometimes look more like Maimonides than Abraham. Yet of all people, Friedrich Nietzsche, who did not like Judaism very much, wrote the following: Europe owes the Jews no small thanks for making people think more logically and for establishing cleaner intellectual habits... Wherever Jews have won influence they have taught men to make finer distinctions, more rigorous inferences, and to write in a more luminous and cleanly fashion; their task was ever to bring a people "to listen to reason." (The Gay Science, translated with commentary by Walter Kaufmann, 291)

The explanation he gave is fascinating. He said that only in the arena of reason did Jews face a level

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playing-field. Everywhere else, they encountered race and class prejudice. "Nothing," he wrote, "is more democratic than logic." So Jews became logicians, and according to Maimonides, it began with Abraham.

However there is a third view, set out in the Midrash on the opening verse of our parsha: "The Lord said to Abram: Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house..." To what may this be compared? To a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw 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?" The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, "I am the ruler, the Sovereign of the universe."

This is an enigmatic Midrash. It is far from obvious what it means. In my book *A Letter in the Scroll* (published in Britain as *Radical Then, Radical Now*) I argued that Abraham was struck by the contradiction between the order of the universe -- the palace -- and the disorder of humanity -- the flames. How, in a world created by a good God, could there be so much evil? If someone takes the trouble to build a palace, do they leave it to the flames? If someone takes the trouble to create a universe, does He leave it to be disfigured by His own creations? On this reading, what moved Abraham was not philosophical harmony but moral discord. For Abraham, faith began in cognitive dissonance. There is only one way of resolving this dissonance: by protesting evil and fighting it.

That is the poignant meaning of the Midrash when it says that the owner of the palace looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." It is as if God were saying to Abraham: I need you to help Me to put out the flames.

How could that possibly be so? God is all-powerful. Human beings are all too powerless. How could God be saying to Abraham, I need you to help Me put out the flames?

The answer is that evil exists because God gave humans the gift of freedom. Without freedom, we would not disobey God's laws. But at the same time, we would be no more than robots, programmed to do whatever our Creator designed us to do. Freedom and its misuse are the theme of Adam and Eve, Cain and

Abel, and the generation of the Flood.

Why did God not intervene? Why did He not stop the first humans eating the forbidden fruit, or prevent Cain from killing Abel? Why did the owner of the palace not put out the flames?

Because, by giving us freedom, He bound Himself from intervening in the human situation. If He stopped us every time we were about to do wrong, we would have no freedom. We would never mature, never learn from our errors, never become God's image. We exist as free agents only because of God's tzimtzum, His self-limitation. That is why, within the terms with which He created humankind, He cannot put out the flames of human evil.

He needs our help. That is why He chose Abraham. Abraham was the first person in recorded history to protest the injustice of the world in the name of God, rather than accept it in the name of God. Abraham was the man who said: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?" Where Noah accepted, Abraham did not. Abraham is the man of whom God said, "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." Abraham was the father of a nation, a faith, a civilisation, marked throughout the ages by what Albert Einstein called "an almost fanatical love of justice."

I believe that Abraham is the father of faith, not as acceptance but as protest -- protest at the flames that threaten the palace, the evil that threatens God's gracious world. We fight those flames by acts of justice and compassion that deny evil its victory and bring the world that is a little closer to the world that ought to be. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd there came one that had escaped, and told Abram the Hebrew: now he dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, the Amorite, brother of Eshcol, and brother of Aner; and these were confederate with Abram." (Genesis 14:13) "Go away, for your own good, from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I shall show you. "I will make you into a great nation... You shall become a blessing... All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:1-3). Our portion opens with the first Divine Commandment to the first Jew -- the command to make aliya.

Why did God choose Abraham and why was it so important for him to move to the Land of Israel? Maimonides, basing himself on earlier midrashim, maintains that Abraham discovered the concept of ethical monotheism -- a single Creator of the universe

who demands justice, compassion and peace.

Abraham shattered the idols in Ur Kasdim, was chased to Haran where he continued to preach his newfound religion, was addressed by God and sent to the Land of Israel (Mishneh Torah, "Laws of Idolatry" 1,3). It is the propagation of this new credo that is the source of the Abrahamic blessing for the world and is the essence of his election.

Not only does God stipulate that "through [Abraham] all the families of the earth shall be blessed," but Maimonides also pictures the first Jew as an intellectually gifted forerunner of "Yonatan [Johnny] Appleseed," planting seeds of ethical monotheism and plucking the human fruits of his labor wherever he went. This "missionary activity" on behalf of God which was established by Abraham is a model for all of his descendants, and even according to many authorities an actual commandment! The midrash interpreting the commandment "to love the Lord your God" teaches: "[We are commanded] to make Him [God] beloved to all creatures, as did Abraham your father, as our text states, 'the souls which they [Abram and Sarai] made in Haran' (Gen. 12:5). After all, if all the people of the world were to gather in order to create one mosquito and endow it with a soul, they would be incapable of accomplishing it, so what is the text saying in the words, 'the souls which they make in Haran'? This teaches that Abraham and Sarah converted them and brought them under the wings of the Divine Presence."

The midrash confirms that the propagation of ethical monotheism was Abraham's major vocation and this is why he was commanded to move to Israel.

"Rabbi Berachia said... Abraham can be compared to a vial of sweet-smelling spices sealed tightly and locked away in a corner – so that the pleasant aroma could not spread. Once the vial began to be transported, its aroma radiated all around. So did the Holy One Blessed be He say to Abraham, 'Move from your place, and your name [and message] will become great universally.'" This midrash flies in the face of the biblical text after all, it was in Ur Kasdim, and then in Haran – places in the Diaspora – that Abraham and Sarah won converts to their religion. And this is confirmed by a daring Talmudic statement, "Rabbi Elazar said the Holy One Blessed be He sent Israel into exile amongst the nations of the world only in order to win converts...."

So if propagating the faith is so essential to the Jewish election and mission, why did God command and send Abraham (and his descendants) to live in one place, Israel? It would seem that a large Diaspora would be far more efficacious in bringing multitudes of souls into our faith! The answer lies in the fact that we are a nation as well as a religion, a people imbued with a mission not only to serve God but also – and even principally – to perfect society. From our very inception, the Bible understood that nations are interdependent,

and that an ethical and moral code of conduct is central to the survival of a free world, and it is only another nation that can be in the position to influence other nations. Our goal must be to influence others to strive to emulate us. We must be a nation, but not a nation like all nations, but rather "a light unto the nations."

No one can influence another unless they know their self-definition.

A minority group dominated by a host-culture majority will expend so much energy merely attempting to survive that there will be little ability or will left over to develop a unique culture as a model for others. And unless one controls the society, there is no living laboratory to test one's ethical and moral ideas, to see if they can be expressed in real-life situations.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, expressed it very well. There were three brilliant and disenfranchised Jews who developed unique world outlooks. Karl Marx argued that human beings are controlled by economic forces, Spinoza maintained that humanity is controlled by nature and natural instincts, Freud believed we are formed by our parents' home, fraught with traumas of Oedipus and Electra complexes.

God commands Abraham: "Free yourself of Marxian, Spinozistic and Freudian determinism. All of these will have an influence, but human freedom as children of the God of love will empower us to transcend these limitations and create a more perfect society."

Hence God tells Abraham that he must leave to forge a unique nation dedicated to the ultimate values of human life and freedom, societal justice and compassion, so that through his special nation the world will be blessed and humanity will be redeemed.
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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

It is interesting to note that the Torah in its opening chapters deals with the lives of individuals with a seemingly very narrow focus. It portrays general society for us and tells us of the events that led up to the cataclysmic flood that destroys most of humanity, but even then, the Torah focuses on the lives of an individual, Noah and his family. This pattern continues in this week's reading as well with the story of human civilization condensed and seen through the prism of the life of an individual Abraham, his wife Sarah and their challenges and travails.

Unlike most history books which always take the general perspective and the overview of things, the Torah emphasizes to us that history and great events spring forth from the actions of individuals and even though Heaven preordains events and trends, they only occur when individuals actually by their choice, implement them and make them real. The prophet

Isaiah described Abraham as “one” – unique, alone, individualistic... important and influential.

We often think that an individual really doesn't make much of a difference in the world of billions of human beings. However, all of history teaches us that individuals are the ones that shape all events, both good and better in the story of humankind. For every individual contains within him and her seeds of potential and of future generations, of events not yet visible or foretold.

The greatness of Abraham is revealed to us in the Torah through the fact that he was a person of strong and abiding faith. We are taught that his faith in God never wavered and that the Lord reckoned that trait of faith as being the righteousness that transformed him into being the father of all nations. However, faith in God carries with it the corollary of faith in one's self and one's purpose in life. There is a great difference between the poison of arrogance and hubris and the blessing of self-confidence and self worth.

Abraham describes himself as being nothing more than dust and ashes. Yet, as a sole individual standing against kings, armies, societies and the accepted mores of the time, he is confident in the success of his mission, in calling out for the humankind to hear, over the millennia, the name and sovereignty of the Lord.

It is the sense of mission within us that drives our creativity and accomplishments in all spheres of our existence. The journey of the Jewish people through the ages of history and the countries of this planet are the journeys of our father Abraham and our mother Sarah during their lifetimes. Both sets of journeys are driven by this overriding sense of mission, of the importance and worth of every individual who shares that sense of purposeful existence. ©2019 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

Terah, Avraham's father, is often viewed as an evil man and nothing more than an idol worshipper. A review of the text indicates otherwise. First of all, Terah's son, Haran, dies during Terah's lifetime. The Torah's description of his demise – “in the face of his father Terah” – expresses Terah's deep pain. (Genesis 11:28) This is certainly understandable. After all, the way of the world is that children sit shiva for parents, not the reverse.

Second of all, Terah acts with great responsibility toward his family. Rather than leaving Haran's child Lot to be raised by others, Terah takes him in. This is truly a noble deed, especially when

considering the pain Terah felt upon losing his own child. Notwithstanding this suffering, Terah has the inner strength to raise his grandchild as his own. (Genesis 11:31)

Third of all, Terah seems to understand the importance of the land of Israel. Years before Avraham is commanded by God to go to the Holy Land, Terah decides on his own to do so. He instinctively recognizes the centrality of Israel. (Genesis 11:31)

Finally, Terah must have been a man of considerable spiritual energy. Consider his three children: Avraham, of course, would become the first patriarch. Nahor's granddaughter was Rebecca who would become the second matriarch. And Haran's son, Lot, fathers Moav from whom Ruth and King David were born, and from whom the Messiah will one day emerge.

Of course, Terah was no Avraham. God does not speak to him. He sets out to the land of Israel but never arrives. Still, the Torah, as it begins the narrative about Avraham and Sarah, seems to underscore the contribution that Terah makes to the development of the people of Israel.

Unfortunately, it is too often the case that successful children forget the roles their parents played in shaping their personalities and careers. It shouldn't be this way. Children should always be aware of the seeds planted by their parents and grandparents.

Thus, it is important that we appreciate Terah, the father of the Jewish people. He was the foundation from which the patriarchs and matriarchs emerged. Hence his name, Terah –from the word ruach, spirit. Indeed, it was from Terah, whose name begins with the letter taf, which denotes future, that Am Yisrael would be born. ©2019 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

Hatafat Dam Brit

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

What would be the law if a child was circumcised by mistake before the eighth day? Would we need another ceremony? Would we need to perform again “Hatafat Dam Brit?”

The Rashba states that in such an instance no action would be required. He draws the parallel between an infant born already circumcised which in that case there must be at least “Hatafat Dam Brit” because of a special reference in the Torah “Yimol Bisar Orlato” Vayikra 12:3 (“the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised”). However others draw a difference between a child born circumcised and the case cited by the Rashba in that in the former instance usually some flesh of the foreskin is left. However since in our case

the full circumcision was already completed, and there is certainly no foreskin left, nothing need be done on the eighth day.

The question however is; In such a case that was sited what do we do with the Mitzva of "Uvayom hashmini yimol bsar orlato" ("On the eighth day you must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin") which would indicate that there is a special Mitzvah to circumcise on the eighth day?

Rav Chayim M'brisk explains that though the Mitzvah of Circumcision is on the eighth day, the directive of "Hatafat Dam Brit" is not. Thus if the circumcision was performed before the eighth day one need not do anything,

However both the Shach and the Taz believe that in such a case there must be "Hatafat Dam Brit" just as we would require it of one who was circumcised in the evening and not in the day as required. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID S. LEVIN

Avraham & the Four Kings

Our parasha of Lech L'cha is devoted to several tests that Avraham Avinu endures. One of these is the war between the four kings and the five kings. Had Lot, Avraham's nephew, not lived in Sodom and been taken captive, this entire section of the Torah might not have been recorded. What is fascinating is the detail that is found here unlike in other stories from the Torah. It appears that there is a deeper reason for this episode to be included in the Torah

Ramban posits that this event is recorded to show us that there will be four "kingdoms" that will rule over the entire world. In the end, Avraham's children will succeed against them and establish a "kingdom" of Torah and belief in Hashem. The Ramban associates each of the kings with the "kingdoms" which will conquer the world. The first king mentioned is the king of Bavel (Babylon), Amrafel the King of Shinar, or Bavel (Iraq) and its surroundings. The next king was Aryoch the King of Elasar which Ramban believes is a city in Persia. The third city mentioned was Eilam with its king K'darl'omer. Eilam is the city in which the first major Greek king, Alexander, was coronated. The last king mentioned was Tid'al the King of Goyim which Ramban associates with Rome as the city over many nations (goyim).

Another reason for recounting this event stems from their opponents in this battle. We know the story of the eventual destruction of the five cities that were associated with S'dom, but this is our first introduction to these cities and their kings. The very names that were given them indicate their level of corruption and evil: (1) Bera king of S'dom. His very name means "with evil;" (2) Bir'sha the King of Amora. His name means "with wickedness;" (3) Shin'av the King of Admah. His name was a contraction of the words

"Soneh Aviv bashmayim, he hated his Father in the heavens;" (4) Shemeiver the King of Tz'voyim. The medrash indicates that he placed (sham) an extra limb (eiver) on his body to rebel against Hashem; (5) The fifth king was so unimportant that his name is not even mentioned though his city is. This is where Lot lived.

Another reason for including this story within the Torah is the relationship of Avraham and Lot. We learn that Lot was now becoming a wealthy man with large numbers of sheep and shepherds who worked for him. Prior to this time Lot was totally dependent on Avraham. Lot's new wealth became a problem which eventually caused Avraham and Lot to separate. Lot chose S'dom where the land was very fertile even though the people were evil. Avraham blamed himself for not being available to protect Lot when the Kings attacked. For that reason alone, Avraham might have felt a responsibility to save his nephew and the people of the valley.

Our Rabbis indicate that these events are important because of the miracle of Avraham's defeat of the four kings. These four powerful kings were kings of large cities. According to HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch, this is the first mention of kings in world history. They defeated the kings of S'dom and took the people captive with all their possessions. Avraham immediately set out with his students and his friends Eshkol, Aner, and Mamre to free Avraham's nephew, Lot. Rashi quotes a Midrash that the three hundred and eighteen students were really only Avraham's servant Eliezer whose name is the equivalent to this number in its numerical form. Avraham managed to pursue the four kings and defeat them near Damascus, a far distance from Chevron. This miraculous defeat of Avraham's enemies could not have happened without Hashem's help.

Still another reason for our story is the concluding episode in which Malkitzedek and Avraham meet with the King of S'dom. According to Midrash, Malkitzedek was Shem, one of the sons of Noach and the son from whom Avraham and the Jewish people are descended. He is described as Melech Shalem which is the first reference to Jerusalem in the Torah. Malkitzedek is also described as a "priest to Hashem the Most High." Malkitzedek blesses him and Avraham in turn gives Malkitzedek one tenth of the spoils of his conquest. Here we learn several important facts: (1) Malkitzedek came to Jerusalem because it was a special place of Hashem, (2) Malkitzedek blessed Hashem as the Maker and owner of the Heavens and the Earth, (3) Avraham initiated giving the Kohein a tenth of his blessing as his rightful possession.

When the King of S'dom saw that Avraham was willing to part with one-tenth of the captured possessions, he immediately sought out Avraham's generosity. The King said to Avraham, "give me the souls, and the possessions you should take for

yourself." At first glance this might appear to be generous on his part, but on examination it was anything but that. The king had abandoned his people and run away. Even if he had stayed and been taken into captivity, he would have been entitled to neither the souls nor their possessions. Yet Avraham wanted nothing from his conquest. Aside from the tenth that he gave to Malkitzedek and the portion of the spoils that rightly belonged to his partners, Mamre, Aner, and Eshkol, he wished to take nothing for himself. Avraham was concerned that the king of Sodom might claim that Avraham's wealth came from taking advantage of the people of S'dom and their generosity.

Hirsch explains that the message of this passage has to do with the wealth accumulated by each city which then required a king to rule over them. This was for their benefit but also worked against them. The king desired more wealth and attacked others to gain their possessions. The message for Israel was clear: "(The Jewish people) will only be allowed to enjoy freedom and independence in this land as long as they nurture with all devotion the one factor by which luxurious 'milk and honey' abundance ... becomes transformed into something salutary and blessed." This can only come through the Law, the Torah, which demands self-control. Even a Jewish King of a Jewish nation must exhibit this same self-control.

We must all learn the lesson of self-control. We must choose as Avraham did to distance ourselves from tainted money, tainted behavior, and tainted desires. May we accept that it is better to live with less if it means that we will live, controlled by the Laws of Torah. © 2019 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Cloudy Vision

People who have experienced a miraculous rescue will usually tell you that their lives are forever changed. Mundane matters that had once loomed large and important, such as the pursuit of financial success and status, are suddenly rather inconsequential, while spiritual matters become the focal points of their lives. They begin to think about mortality and eternity, about the rewards of kindness, of tending primarily to the needs of the soul rather than the body. They live with a new perspective, a new awareness.

In this week's Torah portion, however, we find the exact opposite happening. During the time of Abraham, the Babylonian Empire was the dominant force in the Middle East, and the small kingdoms of Canaan paid annual tribute to the imperial coffers, as did every other principality that didn't want to be invaded and crushed. But the thought of paying tribute was irksome, and Sodom and four neighboring cities formed an alliance and rebelled. A few months later, the Babylonians arrived in force and easily defeated the

rebels. They took Abraham's nephew Lot hostage and carried off the bulk of the wealth of the vanquished cities.

When he heard the news, Abraham and his small retinue pursued the imperial armies, miraculously routed them and freed Lot. He also recovered all the captured wealth of the defeated cities and returned it to the original owners, without taking even a shoelace for himself.

What an astonishing spectacle the people of Sodom witnessed! First, they saw the clear intervention of Heaven to effect Abraham's victory over the massive imperial armies. Second, they saw the most phenomenal altruism on the part of Abraham, refusing the customary victor's share of the spoils. The rapid recovery of their former grandeur and prosperity was undoubtedly the farthest thing from their minds, and yet, in not much longer than the blink of an eye, it happened.

What effect should this miraculous turn of events have had on the people of Sodom? Surely, they should have undergone a radical change of perspective, a total shift of focus. But they did not. In next week's Torah portion, we read about the utter degeneracy of their lifestyle and its destruction by a rain of fire and brimstone. Why were they impervious to the miracles that took place in their behalf? Why did they remain the as self-centered and greedy as ever?

The commentators explain that clear vision requires a certain detachment, an ability to step outside oneself and do some critical self-examination. Abraham in his youth was able to step back from his aristocratic background and privileged social status and take a hard, objective look at the world around him. This ability opened his eyes and allowed him to recognize the existence of the Creator. The people of Sodom, however, had become so entangled in their physical existence that they were no longer able to view themselves with any degree of detachment. They saw everything through a sensual fog, and the most obvious miracles could no longer redirect their jaded minds.

A drunk was sitting at the curbside, taking huge gulps from a bottle of wine. His clothes were filthy and disheveled, and chunks of grime lodged in his hair.

"I don't understand you," a disgusted passerby berated the drunk. "You want to drown your life in a bottle? Fine. But why do you have to be such a slob? Why can't you at least shake the grime out of your hair?"

"If I had the sense to shake the grime from my hair," said the drunk with a twinkle in his eye, "I'd have the sense to go home and have a normal life."

In our own lives, we often get caught up in the mad rush of daily life. We become absorbed in our businesses and professions and the myriad little tasks of maintaining a good standard of living. But we must never forget to retain a healthy measure of detachment,

to keep everything in perspective, to know which things are truly essential and which are just pleasant appurtenances. And every once in a while, we should take the time to step back and examine our lives with as much honesty as we can muster. At the very least, it will engender in us the habit of seeking the truth, a habit that can only bring us benefit and fulfillment.

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RABBI DANIEL STEIN

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The text of the Torah provides us with a scant amount of information regarding the background of Avraham Avinu, and no indication whatsoever regarding the nature of his previous activities or accomplishments. We are formally introduced to Avraham somewhat abruptly, as he is taking leave of his ancestral birthplace and embarking upon a pilgrimage to Eretz Yisrael. It is only in the Medrash where we discover that Avraham independently deduced the existence of a Creator, and that he courageously promoted his monotheistic convictions to an unreceptive pagan family and society. In fact, the episode which occurred at Ur Kasdim, wherein Avraham was miraculously rescued from the clutches of a fiery furnace, is not mentioned at all in the pesukim of the Torah. Additionally, the Gemara (Avodah Zara 14b) attests that Avraham elucidated four hundred chapters of original halachic rulings in the area of avodah zara, none of which are recorded anywhere for posterity or future study. The Ramban and many other meforshim wonder, why would the Torah omit these impressive events which are not only critical to the narrative of Avraham but also justify why he alone was chosen to be the cornerstone of the Jewish people?

Rav Moshe Shapiro (Mimamakim) answers that while Avraham Avinu's brave brand of belief in the existence of Hashem was undoubtably noteworthy, emunah comes in varying degrees and depths. The Maharal (Gevuros Hashem ch. 7) explains that a theoretical belief in the existence of Hashem is merely the preamble to a religious existence. Mature and complete emunah requires a person to also be able to implement their belief in Hashem as a guiding force in their lives, even when confronted with evidence to the contrary. Therefore, the Torah commences the story of Avraham not by describing the profundity of his innovative theological breakthroughs or even with his willingness to sacrifice himself while defending the tenets of his faith, but rather with the transitional moment when his emunah began to dictate his actions even in the face of adversity. The true triumph of traveling to Eretz Yisrael was not in overcoming the inconvenience of the initial upheaval, but in Avraham's unwavering commitment to his divine mission even while being temporarily forced to flee as a result of the

ensuing famine. Avraham only became the father of the Jewish people because his emunah in Hashem brought him to continue to invest in the promise of an enduring spiritual legacy despite the fact that he was aging and childless. Therefore, it is with these feats, and not the adventures of his past, that the Biblical narrative of Avraham's life begins.

For this reason, only after enduring the first round of challenges and tests is Avraham regarded as a "believer", when the pasuk states, "and he believed in Hashem and He considered it as charity" (Breishis 15:6). Why does Avraham only merit to be recognized as a believer at this relatively late stage of his life? How can the Torah discount the decades he spent developing and defending the articles of his faith? The Bnei Yissaschar (Sivan 5) explains that Avraham's emunah fully blossomed for the first time when he refrained from doubting the wisdom and legitimacy of Hashem's instructions despite the hardships and setbacks he had to endure. Only when he remained determined in the face of resistance did the reality of his transcendent emunah become tangible. This clarifies the comparison between Avraham's emunah and the institution of charity. Ostensibly, the requirement to give charity results in a fiscal loss for the benefactor; after all, money is being transferred out of his account and deposited into the account of another. However, from the perspective of a maamin, who trusts in Hashem's promise to reimburse and reward all those who distribute their resources to the needy, tzedakah is an investment which pays handsome dividends. Therefore, every sincere and enthusiastic act of tzedakah is likely the manifestation of a deeply held emunah.

According to the Rambam (Sefer Hamitzvos 1), belief in Hashem is a positive commandment and the first mitzvah. Other rishonim do not consider emunah to be a mitzvah at all since the entire notion of a mitzvah presupposes a basic belief in Hashem. Indeed, without some measure of emunah the very concept of mitzvos cannot possibly exist, for how can we speak of a commandment without a commander. Since this argument is so overwhelmingly compelling, many meforshim suggest that the Rambam would have to cede this point as well. The Rambam only asserts that the mitzvah of emunah demands more than just a rudimentary belief in the existence of Hashem, it requires us to act in accordance with that belief and to remain steadfast despite the difficulties we might encounter along the way. In other words, to fulfill the first mitzvah, emunah must be practiced not just preached.

This is supported by the Gemara (Makkos 24a) which recounts that Habakkuk distilled the entire system of mitzvos to one central theme, which is encapsulated by the pasuk "ve'tzaddik be'emunaso yichyeh -- the tzaddik lives with his faith" (Habakkuk

2:4). The Ben Yehoyada notes that the gematriah of the word emunah is 102 while the numerical value of the word tzaddik is 204, because every tzaddik (204) must have two (2) dimensions to their emunah (2 102). There must be a theological belief in the existence of Hashem, but also a determination to put that emunah into practice. It is the relationship between these two facets of emunah which serves as the framework for the rest of religious life.

The Mishnah (Avos 5:19) identifies the disciples of Avraham as those who possess a good eye, a humble spirit, and a controlled personality. At first glance this is surprising, since the defining quality of Avraham was certainly his unshakable emunah. How can the emergence of emunah be completely absent in any reflection on Avraham Avinu's contributions? Rav Eliezer Geldzahler (Sichos Eliezer) suggests that intellectual emunah alone is not enough. Emunah is only meaningful when it is translated into action and ultimately produces a person who has a good eye, a humble spirit, and a controlled personality. Therefore, as we read about Avraham's historic accomplishments, we should be inspired to not only reinforce the theological foundations of our own faith, but to also concentrate on living constantly with that emunah and allowing it to become the guiding force in all that we do. Only if we are successful in this challenge may we proudly renew our claim to be the faithful students and spiritual heirs of Avraham Avinu. © 2019 Rabbi D. Stein & TorahWeb.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

On that day Hashem made a covenant with Avram, saying, 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates River.'" (15:18)

"When Avram was ninety-nine years old, Hashem appeared to Avram and said to him, 'I am Kel Shakkai. Walk before Me and be perfect. I will set My covenant between Me and you, and I will increase you very, very much.'" (17:1-2)

R' Leib Mintzberg shlita (Yerushalayim) asks: Why did Hashem make two covenants with Avram/Avraham separated by many years? Why wasn't one covenant enough?

He explains: The Jewish People's reason for existence has two aspects, each of which is represented by one of these covenants.

First, the Jewish People are mankind's representatives to serve Hashem. Because Hashem created the world, all creations are obligated to honor and serve Him, their Master. However, Hashem selected the Jewish People to be a nation of kohanim / priests to serve him on behalf of all of mankind.

Second, the Jewish People in their own right, not just as representatives of all of Creation, have

found favor in Hashem's eyes. Hashem views us as His relatives, his children. Because of this, Hashem pays special attention ("hashgachah") to us and provides us with special blessings. It is because of this, as well, that He gave us the opportunity, as well as the obligation, to receive the Torah. This requires a higher level of service from us, more than just being good people.

The beginning of our parashah speaks of the first relationship. Thus, for instance, it refers to "the souls they made in Charan" (12:5), which our Sages understood to mean "converts." This describes Avraham in his role vis-?-vis the world. Similarly, the Gemara (Berachot 7b) notes that Avraham was the first person in history to address G-d as "Master." In this passage, Avraham is reaching out to the world and is compared to the world's other inhabitants. When Avraham takes an oath in the first half of our parashah, it is to "the Creator of heaven and earth" (14:22). The promise that is made to Avraham at the beginning of this parashah is, "I will make of you a great nation" (12:2) -- a "nation" among other nations, a player on the world's stage.

At the time of the second covenant, however, the covenant (brit) of milah (circumcision), Avraham is told, "Walk before Me and be perfect." The relationship is between Avraham and Hashem. No one else in the world is mentioned. And, the promise that is made to Avraham at this time is, "I will increase you very, very much." Hashem said further: "I will ratify My covenant between Me and you and between your offspring after you, throughout their generations, as an everlasting covenant, to be a G-d to you and to your offspring after you" (17:7) -- not a covenant with a nation, but rather with a family. (Ben Melech: Shir Ha'shirim p.20) ©2014 S. Katz 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!"