

# THE IMPORTANCE OF REFLECTION

*by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky*

## 1. The Importance of Reflection

The Torah tells us that after the Akeidah (the binding of Yitzchak), Sarah (Our Matriarch) passed away. The Torah states, "...and Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her (v'livkosa)." Rashi cites Chazal which explain that Avraham came from Mt. Moriah (Har HaMoriah) after performing the Akeidah to find that his wife had passed away. Rabbeinu Bachya explains that "and Avraham came" does not refer to location but rather that Avraham internalized the reality of his tragedy. In order for a person to achieve a certain state of mind one must reflect upon what has transpired in order to come to that state of mind. Avraham had to first "come" to that point within himself before he was able to eulogize and cry for Sarah.

The Hebrew letter "kof" in the word v'livkosa (crying) is written smaller than the other letters. The Commentators offer many interpretations as to why this letter is written small. The Kesav Sofer writes that after Avraham returned from the Akeidah, which was the most difficult of his ten tests and the climax of his spiritual success, he discovered that his wife Sarah had passed away. Not only was the Akeidah the most difficult of his tests, and despite that he succeeded, he also realized the infinite benefit the Akeidah would have for the Klal Yisroel until the end of time. It is in the merit of the Akeidah that when Satan prosecutes the Jewish people on Rosh Hashanah (The Day Of Judgement), he is silenced. The level of joy an ecstasy that Avraham was experiencing, as a result of his accomplishment, was unique. The Kesav Sofer explains that it is humanly impossible for a person who is at the height of his joy to fall into the depths of sadness because of sudden tragedy. Because of the Akeidah, Avraham did not have the capacity to fully internalize the pain and the loss of his wife to the point of being able to grieve for her as he would have under other circumstances. This is the reason the "kof" in the word v'livkosa is written smaller -to indicate that Avraham was emotionally held back.

We see that a person can fully intellectually understand an event; however, to fully appreciate and internalize that reality, we are only able to experience those events with limitations set by our emotional capacity. We are unable to process one event following another and adapt instantaneously to fully experience the other event. Halacha dictates that when one enters into a synagogue to pray, one must wait minimally the period of time it takes to walk four cubits before one starts to pray. The reason for this is, that when one goes from one situation to another it takes at

least that length of time to detach oneself from the previous situation and experience the next.

Halacha states that tefillah (prayer) and study of Torah should not be in a context of levity and lack of seriousness. One must take some time to understand and contemplate what he is about to do and bring himself to the proper mindset for that beginning. A person could have experienced a once in a lifetime event, but was not able to appreciate it to its fullest extent because he was not sufficiently prepared for that experience. However Avraham could not fully internalize the pain and grief of Sarah's passing because he was coming from the ultimate level of joy.

The reason we are not able to be affected by many positive events in our lives, to their fullest extent, is because we do not reflect upon them. Thus, their relevance to us is only on an intellectual level rather than on an experiential level. If we would take time out to reflect and meditate on many areas in our lives we would definitely be different people.

Every day at the end of each of the daily services (Shachris, Minchah, Maariv), we conclude with the Aleinu prayer. We say, "You are to know this day and take to your heart that Hashem is the only G-d." Meaning that it is not enough to understand that Hashem is the only G-d, but rather, one must reflect on that fact and ponder it in order for one to fully appreciate and internalize that reality.

## **2. What is Considered Emulating G-d**

The Torah tells us that Avraham purchased a burial location (the Machpelah) for his wife Sarah from Ephron and he buried her there. The Midrash tells us that after Avraham purchased the tomb of Machpelah to bury Sarah, Hashem said, "My profession is doing Chesed and you have taken hold of my profession. Come and cloak yourself with My Cloak". Meaning, now that Avraham had done Chesed for his wife Sarah, he became worthy of wearing the Cloak of Hashem. The question to ask is Avraham, at the time of the passing of Sarah was 137 years old. Avraham had been involved in Chesed at the most advanced level his entire life. If this is the case - why only now (with the burial of his wife) is he considered worthy to wear the Cloak of Hashem. How do we understand this?

Every one of the Patriarchs emulated a different facet of Hashem's characteristics. Avraham assumed the characteristic of Chesed (Loving Kindness). He is known as the pillar of Chesed because he accommodated other people's needs selflessly -whether they were worthy or not. Yitzchak (our Patriarch) assumed the posture of Justice (which is self perfection on the most advance level). Yaakov assumed the posture of Mercy, which is a synthesis of Chesed and Justice. The question is when Avraham assumed the posture of Chesed to emulate Hashem, were his acts of Chesed for the sake of Chesed itself or were these acts of kindness only a means to an end? G-d's Chesed is for its own sake - "The world was created as an expression of Hashem's Chesed." G-d's Chesed is not a means, but rather an end unto itself. However, when Avraham chose to assume the Attribute of Chesed, it was only used as a vehicle to espouse G-d's existence to the world. It was only a means to an end. The fact that Avraham's hospitality was unequalled was only because it was through his hospitality did Avraham turn pagans into monotheists. Therefore Avraham's attribute of

Chesed was not identical to Hashem's Attribute of Chesed - which is for its own sake. Thus, Avraham's Chesed was only a semblance of G-d -therefore he was not worth of wearing the Cloak of Hashem.

However, when Avraham buried Sarah that act of Chesed was for its own sake. Avraham had no other reason to do this Chesed other than for the recipient of this Chesed, which was Sarah. This is why it is only at this moment did he become worthy to wear the Cloak of Chesed.

Shlomo HaMelech states in Mishlei (Proverbs), "One who despises gifts will live." Why is this the case? The ultimate Perfection and Goodness is Hashem Himself - who is only a benefactor and never a beneficiary. Therefore if one wants to cleave to the source of life, which is Hashem, one must emulate Hashem in this context - to be a benefactor and not a recipient of another's gift or service.

The Chofetz Chaim, because of his financial status, was not able to even afford to purchase paper to record some of his works of Torah. One day he happened to be together with the Sefas Emmes who was the leader of the Chassidic dynasty of Gerer. The Sevas Emmes noticed the Chofetz Chaim's need to record his works and therefore offered him as much writing paper as he needed. The Chofetz Chaim's response was that he does not accept gifts. The Chofetz Chaim explained that although one may think that the value of a few sheets of paper is no more than the value of a penny and that it is not considered that he is receiving much. Nevertheless if one would steal as much as a penny the consequences are grave. The Rebbe insisted that the Chofetz Chaim take the paper. Begrudgingly, the Chofetz Chaim agreed. The next day when the Rebbe was putting on his boots he realized that there were coins in the bottom of his boots - the value of the writing paper - and the Chofetz Chaim was already gone.

If one wants to have a relationship with G-d, he must emulate Him in every way possible. Therefore one should not be on the receiving end but rather on the giving end because Hashem is THE benefactor. If one does Chesed with ulterior motives (although they may be pure), it is nonetheless not the Chesed that is expressed by Hashem.

### **3. Understanding Innate Character Traits**

The Torah states, "And Avraham said to his servant (Eliezer), the elder of his household who controlled all that was his: "Place now your hand under my thigh. And I will have you swear by Hashem, G-d of heaven and G-d of earth, that you not take a wife for my son from the Canaanites, among who I dwell." Avraham gave specific instructions to his dedicated servant Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak. Avraham made Eliezer swear not to deviate from the qualifications that he set forth. If Eliezer would have violated the oath, he would forfeit his share both in the physical and spiritual world.

Avraham trusted his faithful servant Eliezer to administer all of his affairs - both financial and spiritual. Eliezer disseminated Torah as his master had. The Torah refers to Eliezer as "the elder (zikan) of his

household". The Midrash explains that the word "zikan" indicates that the facial features of Eliezer resembled his master Avraham. (Just as we find regarding Yosef who was referred to as "Ben Zikunim" - which is interpreted to mean that Yosef looked identical to his father Yaakov). The Talmud in Tractate Yomah tells us that Avraham taught Eliezer all of the Torah that he knew. Although Eliezer pedigree was Canaanite, he nevertheless was spiritualized through the teachings of Avraham to such a degree that he radiated the holiness of his master Avraham. The Midrash tells us that when Eliezer approached the house of Besuel, to negotiate the hand of Rivka (Rebecca) - on behalf of Yitzchak- they mistakenly believed that Eliezer was the master Avraham. The Yalkut explains the word "Mosheil- dominate" that is stated regarding Eliezer means that he controlled his Evil inclination to the same degree as his master Avraham did. If this is the case why was Avraham so mistrusting of Eliezer that he had to subject him to such a serious oath?

The Midrash cites a verse which states, "the scales of Canaan are deceit", which indicates that the Canaanites are innately a deceptive and deceitful people. Therefore Avraham was concerned, because of the inherent characteristics which Eliezer possessed, that his wishes may not be carried out as instructed. Although Eliezer was the disciple of his master, in every sense of the word (in the physical and spiritual realm), Avraham nevertheless had a concern and therefore bound him with an oath.

We see that a person can be conditioned to the point that he may be the equivalent of a living angel; however, that behavior pattern is only "second nature". The essence and the character of the person does not change. Meaning, despite all the spiritual conditioning that Eliezer had undergone with Avraham, he still possessed latent and dormant inclinations and characteristics- which were those of Canaan. As Avraham told Eliezer, "You come from a cursed stock and I come from a blessed stock." As the Torah tells us that Noach cursed Cham's son Canaan who was the forefather of the Canaanites.

Despite how one behaves or how far one may advance himself spiritually, the reality remains that there is an underlying essence which most often is never changed. One must strive to conduct himself in accordance with the Torah principles despite one's inclinations. The latent characteristics of a person can be activated depending on the particular situation. Since Avraham understood that the future of the Jewish people was going to be determined through the wife of Yitzchak (who would be the Matriarch) he had to guarantee his instructions would be followed exactly by compelling Eliezer to take an oath despite his greatness.

#### **4. The Special Role of the Matriarch**

The Torah tells us that when Eliezer discovered that Rivka (Rebecca) was in fact the woman meant to be the wife of Yitzchak, he gave her a golden nose ring and placed two golden bracelets on her arms. The Torah states, "...the man took a golden nose ring, its weight was a beka, and two bracelets on her arms, ten gold shekels was their weight." Rashi cites Chazal, which explain that the reason the

Torah states the weight of the nose ring -(beka), is to allude to the Machtzis Ha Shekel that was given during the time of the Bais HaMikdash for the purchase of communal offerings. The Midrash continues to explain that the reason the Torah tells us that the weight of the bracelets were "ten gold shekels" is to allude to the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments which would be given to Moshe at Sinai. What relevance do the bracelets and nose ring given to Rivka have to the future of the Jewish people?

The Maharal of Prague cites the Midrash which states that the word "B'Hebarom - when He (Hashem) created them (existence)," used at the time of creation (the Portion of Bereishis), refers to Avraham because the word "B'Hebarom" contains the same letters that are in the name of Avraham. The Maharal concludes from this that Avraham is not a continuation of the previous existence but rather the beginning of a new existence. He is a dimension of person that has not relevance to anything that had preceded him. Just as Adam was the father of mankind, Avraham (as a spiritual being) is the father of the Jewish people.

The Torah tells us that Rivka our Matriarch was was barren. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh asks why did Hashem allow Rivka to be barren? He explains that the Torah tells us that before Eliezer left the house of Besuel with Rivka, her brother Lavan gave her a blessing -"Our sister, may you come to be thousands of myriads, and may your offspring inherit the gate of its foes." The Ohr HaChaim explains that if Lavan's blessing were to be effective then it would be that Lavan , whose essence was Evil, would have a degree of input into the creation of the Jewish people. Rivka was chosen to be the Matriarch because she possessed the qualities that were needed to produce a Yaakov- who fathered the entire Klal Yisroel. If Lavan's blessing had any relevance to the evolution of the Jewish people it would have seriously limited their potential. Thus, Hashem caused Rivka to be barren so that she could only conceive through a miracle.

According to the Ohr HaChaim's explanation, the Jewish people came into existence not as a result of anything that preceded them, but rather, they were the beginning of their own existence. Just as Avraham considered a new creation without any relevance to his antecedents, so too was Rivka's conception of Yaakov (the father of the Jewish people) unrelated to her antecedents. The essence of the Jewish people is spiritual and not physical. Therefore the bracelets and the nose ring that were given by Eliezer to Rivka were a representation of the future events (Ten Commandments and Machtzis Ha Shekel) that were to impact the Jewish people because she herself was an embodiment of holiness- which had no relevance to what had preceded her.

In the Megilas Esther (the Megillah of Esther) we read that in order to seal the fate of the Jewish people, Haman had given 10,000 talents of silver to Achashverosh (King of Persia) annihilate every Jewish man, woman, and child. The Gemara in Tractate Megillah tells us that before Hashem brings punishment upon the Jewish people, He always provides the antidote for that punishment in advance. The Commandment of giving the Machtzis Ha Shekel, which had preceded the decree of annihilation by 1,500 years, was the antidote that negated the talents of silver that were given by

Haman.

Avraham, understanding the significance of the Matriarch of the Jewish people, instructed Eliezer to give her a nose ring that weighed a "beka" in order to actualize the potential of the Machtzis Ha Shekel. Without the Machtzis Ha Shekel the Jewish people would not have been able to annul the decree of Haman.

Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the reason Haman chose to give the ten thousand talents of silver was because he understood the significance of the nose ring that was given to Rivka by Eliezer. Haman wished to uproot and nullify the effect of the nose ring through the talents of silver. However, since the Machtzis Ha Shekel had been given at the time of the Bais HaMikdash, many years before Haman's evil plan, he was not able to negate the special effects of the Machtzis Ha Shekel - which was actualized through the nose ring.

Now that we understand the far-reaching effects and significance of Rivka's role as "Matriarch" we can understand why Eliezer's daughter did not qualify to be the wife of Yitzchak who was the Matriarch of the Jewish people. Although Eliezer's daughter was devout and righteous, the Matriarch had to be completely detached and unrelated to her origins in order to insure the purity of the Jewish people. As Avraham said to Eliezer, "You come from a cursed stock and I come from a blessed stock."

In order to establish the Klal Yisroel as the Am Hashem (People of G-d) the Matriarchs and Patriarchs needed to be on firm spiritual footing. It is only because of the strength of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs that we are able to survive to the end of time.

## **5. The Meaning of Thankfulness**

After Eliezer succeeded in his mission of securing the proper wife (Rivka) for Yitzchak, the Torah states, "So the man (Eliezer) bowed low and prostrated himself to Hashem. He said, "Blessed is Hashem G-d of my master Avraham, Who has not withheld His kindness and truth from my master..." Rashi cites Chazal, which explain that we learn from Eliezer's behavior that one must give thanks when receiving good tidings. What Chazal extrapolate from Eliezer's expression of thanks to Hashem seems to be understood as proper behavior. If a person receives a promotion that he has been working towards for his entire life, do we need to have a verse in the Torah to teach us that he gives thanks to Hashem? It seems obvious that when one is a recipient of anything good he expresses his thankfulness to Hashem. How do we understand this?

The Torah tells us that Eliezer not only thanked Hashem verbally, but he also bowed and prostrated himself on the ground to express his thanks to Hashem. The Halacha is that when one recites the Modim (prayer of thanks) in the Amidah (silent prayer) one must bow to the point of being even with one's midsection. The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that one must bow to the point of stretching all of the vertebrae in his back during the Modim. What is the significance of the gesture of bowing and prostration?

When the Jewish people heard the Name of G-d pronounced by the High Priest (Kohen Gadol) in the Sanctuary of the Bais HaMikdash (Temple) on Yom Kippur, they all prostrated themselves on the ground. The prostration on Yom Kippur signified that one was totally negated in the Presence of G-d. Therefore when the name of Hashem was pronounced one prostrated himself. However, regarding the Modim or the behavior of Eliezer (when he offered his thanks to Hashem), what is the significance of bowing or prostration in the context of thanks? Why should Eliezer bow and prostrate himself when he gave thanks to Hashem for finding Rivka? He could have merely said, "Thank You Hashem for bringing me this good tiding."

As the Gemara tells us, standing upright is the posture of an arrogant person. An arrogant person believes that the world revolves around him and that he is entitled and deserving of all the good that comes to him. The arrogant person does not appreciate what he receives because he believes that he is only receiving what is rightfully his. When a person bows, which is an act of humility and submission, because of this humbling act, he has the capacity to appreciate the words of thanks that he is saying. Some people say "thank you" in a perfunctory manner without even feeling thankful. These words are only words of etiquette.

True thankfulness is an expression of feeling beholden because of what one receives. In order for one to truly appreciate and have the capacity to internalize the good that he receives he must be humble himself. Bowing and prostration are acts of humility and submission. This is what the Torah is teaching us from Eliezer's prostrating himself before Hashem to show his thankfulness.

Bowing while reciting Modim is intended to give a person a sense of humility so that he can be able to properly give thanks to Hashem in a meaningful manner. The Gemara tells us in Tractate Shabbos that covering one's head causes one to be humbled because one has a sense that there is G-d above him. The Gemara relates a story of a young man who was born under the sign of the Zodiac, which indicated that he would be a thief. His mother went to the rabbis to ask them what her son could do to control his inclination. The rabbis told her that as long as his head is covered, he will have a sense of G-d above him and this will cause him not to steal. The young man heeded the advice of the rabbis and he did not steal. However, one day his head-covering accidentally was removed and he immediately had an uncontrollable desire to steal fruit from another's orchard.

The Torah tells us that after Cayin (Cain) killed his brother Hevel (Abel), Hashem rebuked him. After being rebuked the Torah tells us that, "Cayin left the Presence of Hashem." Rashi cites the Midrash that explain that this verse indicates that Cain left the Presence of Hashem in a seemingly subdued and humbled manner; however, in truth Cayin's subdued behavior was only outwardly a posture of humility, but in his heart he believed that he was able to deceive Hashem.

A truly arrogant person could bow and say "thank you" but in his heart he has no true understanding of appreciation. Bowing is more than a physical act or a gesture of etiquette. The Nazis (may their name be obliterated) adhered to the principles of cultured behavior and etiquette. However, if they

could, they would have destroyed the entire world to further their cause. When one bows in humility before Hashem one will feel in his heart the true sense of thankfulness.

---

Copyright © 2002 by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Kalatsky is the founder of the [Yad Avraham Institute](#), a New York-based learning center whose mission is to disseminate Torah to Jews of all backgrounds and walks of life.