

# THE UNIQUE LEVEL OF AVRAHAM

*by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky*

## 1. Continuous Commitment to Torah Mitzvos

We say every morning in the P'sukei D'zimra at the end of V'yivorach Dovid (and David Blessed Hashem...) "You are Hashem, the G-d, who chose Avram, took him out of Ur Kasdim, and gave him the name Avraham. And you found his heart faithful before You."<sup>[1]</sup> What is meant by the phrase "took him out?" We see from the Parsha that Hashem said to Avraham "Lech Lecha" or "Go for yourself..." from this we would think that there is a contradiction between what we say in the P'sukei D'zimra and the Parsha.

The Chazal explain that Ur Kasdim was the name of the kiln (in Kasdim) used to threaten Avram. As we learn, Avram was given an ultimatum by Nimrod to either bow to the idol or be thrown into the fiery kiln. Of course Avram did not bow to the idol and was thrown into the fire. Hashem performed a miracle and Avram emerged from the kiln unharmed. And as a result of Avram's great devotion to Hashem, which he demonstrated by not bowing to the idol, he was given the name Avraham, thus beginning his ascent into greatness. So we see from here that the Hashem miraculously "took" Avraham out of Ur Kasdim.

Clearly, Avraham passed an incredible test of faith and was saved and elevated to greatness; yet, we do not see that the Chazal sight the incident of Ur Kasdim as one of the ten tests faced by Avraham. This is one point that needs to be understood. Another point to be understood is Nimrod's reaction to the revealed miracle performed for Avraham. One would expect that after witnessing such marvels of Hashem, Nimrod should have prostrated himself and declared Hashem as the one and only G-d. Who could imagine a person being thrown into fire and emerging completely untouched? Yet we find that he did not react in this manner. Why?

Avraham had a brother named Haran, who also was in line waiting to come before Nimrod to be given the choice to bow or be thrown into the fire. Haran chose to wait and see what would happen to Avraham. He thought that if Avraham would go into the fire and perish then he would bow to the idol. If, however, Avraham emerged from the fire then he too would go into the kiln and not bow. So after Avraham appeared from the fire, Haran chose not to heed Nimrod's threat and he went into the fire. Only this time, Haran did not emerge as his brother. Nimrod observed this and concluded that there was nothing special about what happened to Avraham. Because he could see that both brothers did not bow to the idol yet only Avraham came back alive. He therefore was not compelled

to change his ways and accept Hashem. But one must ask, Why did Avraham come out of the fire alive and his brother not? Avraham went into the fire because he was willing to give up his life for Hashem, while Haran went into the fire simply because he believed that Hashem would perform a miracle for him just as He had done for Avraham. This is why Haran did not come out alive. Hashem only performed the miracle for Avraham because he was willing to die rather than bow to the idol. So this makes our question even greater. Why is this not counted as one of the ten tests faced by Avraham?

The answer lies in the following. We find that Jews throughout history from varied backgrounds were willing to give up their lives rather than succumb to idol worship. The observant Jew as well as the loosely affiliated Jew are both willing to die rather than bow to an idol. Yet we see that observing Shabbos properly is not universally undertaken. Even though observing the Shabbos is a testimony to believing that Hashem created the world. If one is willing to give up their life, which is most precious, for the sake of Hashem then why not be as committed to observing Shabbos properly? There are many excuses for not seeing it correctly. Rabbi Meir Simcha explains that a task that can be completed quickly in a single action is much easier to perform than one, which is repetitive and ongoing. Jumping into the fire takes a second; however, observing Torah Mitzos such as Shabbos is ongoing. This requires one to be at a higher level. We can now begin to understand why the incident at Ur Kasdim is not listed as a test and Lech Lecha counts as the beginning of Avraham's challenges.

Jumping into the fire, as we said, is instantaneous. However Lech Lecha is an ongoing process for Avraham. Avraham must leave his land, family, and countrymen and live continuously with this commitment despite any feelings to have remained with him. This is an ongoing issue. In addition, after Avraham returns from the Akeidah his wife passes away and he must pay a tremendous sum of money to acquire a burial plot. One would not regard this as a reward for performing the selfless act of the Akeidah, yet we see that Avraham is not shaken by these events. He in some way was able to push these issues aside and have complete faith in Hashem. To live in a continuous state of faith and trust despite any adverse events is a true test. This level of commitment is exceptional. Avraham did not require any level of explanation or understanding. He negated himself completely and followed the will of Hashem continuously. This is why the instantaneous act of going into the fire is not regarded as one of the ten tests faced by Avraham.

The Parsha begins with, "Hashem said to Avram, 'Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house...'. Everyone is in agreement that this was one of the most difficult tests that Avraham faced. Yet, on the face of it, it is difficult to understand why this would be regarded as such a great test. We see from the Chazal and the Midrash, that the relationship that Avraham had with his father, relatives, and countrymen was not desirable in any way. At Ur Kasdim, it was Avraham's father Terach that informed Nimrod that Avraham had destroyed the idols. His father basically informed on him to the authorities to be killed. The Chazal also tell us that Abraham had to hide in a cave for thirteen years because his countrymen wanted to kill him for espousing

monotheism. He was a fugitive in his own country. After thirteen years of hiding and after being thrown into the fire, Hashem tells Avraham Lech Lecha. One would think that Avraham would gladly leave immediately given the circumstances. However, Avraham's leaving is considered one of his most difficult tests. How can we understand this? The question is made even stronger, because not only does Hashem tell Avraham to leave a land filled with people who hate him, but that he would be blessed, become a great nation, with children and wealth if he leaves. Does Hashem need to give all of these incentives to Avraham in addition to asking him to leave an untenable situation? What could have been holding back Avraham from simply fleeing immediately?

## **2. A Test for One Person is not a Test for Another**

We find that Chazal label Adam one lacking in gratitude. Hashem asked Adam "Why did you eat from the tree?"[2] To this Adam responds, "Because of the woman You gave me." [3] Adam basically blames Hashem for his mistake despite all that Hashem had done for him. According to Chazal, Hashem therefore calls him an ingrate. We find that throughout our history when we have complained to Hashem he refers to the Jewish people as "Ingrates who are descended from an ingrate." If one were able to see things correctly one would be tremendously thankful to Hashem and not blame Him or complain. But what is it that determines if we are able to see things correctly or incorrectly. If a person is an ingrate and does not want to be beholden to Hashem, then one has a warped sense of reality. However, if one truly understands that we are continuous beneficiaries of Hashem's kindness then we would be beholden to Hashem to the nth degree on an ongoing basis. And a person would not deviate from Hashem's commandments in any way.

The Gemara teaches us that a child's obligation's to the parents, in terms of honoring them, stems from the fact that a child needs to be beholden to his parents. One would not be in existence had it not been for the parents. Therefore it is obligatory to honor one's parents. Despite the nature of the relationship between parent and child, one is still obligated. Hashem commands Avraham to leave his father and community and insists that he would not be successful in his attempts to help them reach any level of spirituality. Leaving was difficult for Avraham because he believed that he had an obligation to his father and his community. Avraham could not abandon them despite how terribly they treated him. Avraham viewed his obligation as a genuine debt to his father and community. A person would still owe money to his creditor despite how the creditor treats him. This is an indication of Avraham's greatness that regardless of how badly he was treated he still felt obligated. And this demonstrates Avraham's capabilities of being completely devoted to Hashem despite any hardships because he owes everything to Hashem. Therefore Avraham was conflicted between leaving and staying; however, when Hashem commanded him to leave he went immediately without question. This was Avraham's level of self-negation to Hashem. He was able to completely forget any feeling of obligation and indebtedness simply because Hashem told him to leave. This was the test- to what degree could Avraham subordinate his own sentiment of obligation.

If this test were given to an average person, they would have left without issue. There would not

have been any hesitation to leave such a difficult situation. One would not even have the feelings of obligation to overcome. This was a test specific to Avraham.

The Chazal teach us that we should not pass judgment on our fellow Jew until we are able to put ourselves in their place. Just as we can see that this was a test for Avraham because of his unique level and not for the average person. We have no relevance to Avraham's level of indebtedness therefore this would not be considered a test for us. Only Hashem knows what a person is able to handle and overcome. Only He can judge what is a true test.

### **3. The Tremendous Potential of Every Jew**

The Torah tells us that after Avraham arrived in Canaan, Hashem appeared to Avraham and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." [4] Through this statement, Hashem tells Avraham two points: firstly that he would have children and secondly that the land which Hashem promised to him would be his and his children's at this moment. The Torah goes on to say that Avraham immediately built an altar to "Hashem who appeared to him" in order to commemorate this event. [5] Rashi explains that the altar was built as a memorial to attest that Hashem promised Avraham children and that the land would be his. The Ohr Ha'Chaim states that Avraham built the altar to only commemorate Hashem's appearance to him. However, Avraham at the time was childless, 75 years old, and had no land because he left his homeland at Hashem's instruction. Even though Hashem reassured Avraham by promising children and land, this was secondary to Avraham compared with the mere appearance of Hashem. He wished to express his thankfulness and excitement about the experience of Hashem's appearance and he therefore built the altar. The experience, to Avraham, was much greater than the promises. But does the Ohr Ha'Chaim's explanation contradict Rashi's commentary on the pasuk?

The answer is no. We are dealing with two separate items. For example, we can see from a story: A 100-year-old man went to a fellow Jew and said to him that Hashem had appeared to him and that Hashem promised him a child and that the entire country was his! The 100-year-old man then goes on to state that he is going to give charity in honor of Hashem appearing to him. The average person would ask, "What about the child? What about the land you were promised? Why no mention of these amazing promises?" People relate to physical reality - a child for example, perpetuates one existence, land represents wealth. The appearance of Hashem is less relevant. It is the promise, which is important. In terms of what the world at large is able to gain from seeing the altar built by Avraham - it is the promise of children and the land (as Rashi explains); however, the Torah is attesting to what the altar meant to Avraham. To Avraham it was the experience of Hashem's appearing to him. To Avraham Hashem was everything. Children and land were only a means to an end.

The Chazal tell us that every Jew must say to himself, "When will I be able to achieve what Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yakov achieved?" Meaning, the potential of every Jew is that of each of the Patriarchs.

What do we aspire to in our generation?

We read in European Jewish history that the entire community would dress in Shabbos clothing and come out into the streets to greet a Torah sage when they would be visiting their community. This behavior was the same as when a king passed through the community. This attests the mindset, values, and type of upbringing that existed during that era. What was Avraham's mindset? For example, at the Akeida the challenge to Avraham was not that he had to slaughter his only son; but rather, Avraham clearly saw in Yitzhak the potential of being his successor to espouse Hashem's existence. Slaughtering Yitzhak would have ended all of Avraham's work in this world in terms of serving Hashem. This level of understanding is accessible to every Jew, while the world at large has almost no relevance to these concepts. This is why the altar built by Avraham from the perspective of the world was to commemorate the promise of children and land, while to the Jew it is meant to represent the special experience of Hashem.

#### **4. Measure for measure**

We read about the war of the kings in this week's Parsha[6]. One of the kings defeated and captured by Avraham was the King of Sodom. As a captor, the King of Sodom arrogantly comes to Avraham and tries to dictate terms even though he was the defeated party. He suggests that Avraham should take the spoils of the war and that he should take the people. The King of Sodom's behavior was indicative of the arrogance and level of the people of Sodom. As it says in the Chazal the people of Sodom recognized Hashem but openly defied Him. What should have Avraham's response been to the king's request? Perhaps he should have killed him immediately being that he had just lost the war. But this is not what Avraham did.

Avraham swears in the name of Hashem, Maker of heaven and earth, that he will not take as much as a thread or a shoe strap from the King of Sodom so that he should not say that Avraham's riches came from him. For Avraham all blessings and wealth came from Hashem. Why was it necessary for Avraham to take an oath not take as much as a thread or a shoe strap? We also find that if Hashem gives a Tzadik so much as a penny he will value it more than his existence. We see this from Yakov, when he went back to retrieve the small vessels. Evidently Hashem wanted to give Avraham tremendous wealth because he helped him to win the war. How could Avraham give this wealth to an evil person who would probably use it to do more evil?

The Gemara tells us that in the merit of Avraham's mentioning of the thread in his oath the Jewish people merited the mitzvah of tzitzit. Because Avraham mentioned the shoe strap in his oath the Jewish people merited the mitzvah of tefillin. What does one have to do with another? Is this just a play on words?

We all have conflicts of interests and they are difficult to reconcile. Avraham believed that if he were to take the wealth, albeit rightfully his, an evil person (the King of Sodom) could say that he was the person who made Avraham wealthy. That would be a chilul Hashem. Yet the wealth was his since

Hashem granted it. This created a conflict for Avraham. Avraham wished to see the world clearly with no conflict. Therefore Avraham needed to take an oath to separate himself from the wealth. Once the oath was taken, the wealth was no longer available to him and the conflict resolved. He was able to see the world clearly. Rabbenu Yona explains in Perke Avos that the value of acquiring a friend is that the friend would be able to help us out of conflicts of interest that cloud our judgment. This is true because the friend does not have the same set of issues and therefore is not conflicted and he could advise us to take the correct path.

Avraham had a tremendous level of commitment to Hashem and a cognizance of Hashem. In order to maintain this he took an oath to eliminate conflict. But what is the measure for measure between the thread and tzitzit and the shoe strap and tefillin? We know that the mitzvah of tzitzit states that, "you shall look upon them and remember all the commandments of Hashem and fulfill them." [7] Tefillin represent the dedication of the head and the heart to Hashem: "You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for you a reminder between your eyes." [8] These two mitvos are specifically related to maintaining the cognizance of Hashem. This is the measure for measure. Avraham had a continuous cognizance and clarity as to not succumb to the wealth, thus avoiding a chilul Hashem. Hashem says that in the merit of your cognizance and clarity I will give the Jews these two mechanisms to maintain cognizance and clarity like you. These are tzitzit and tefillin. One must however understand that by looking at the tzitzit one is "reminded" of the mitvos. In order to be reminded of something one needs to know it to begin with. Therefore one needs to learn Torah so as to be able to look at the tzitzit and be reminded of one's learning.

## 5. Foundation in fact

We read in the Parsha about the war between the four kings against the five kings during which the five kings were defeated. One of the kings who were defeated was the King of Sodom. The Torah tells us, "The Valley of Siddim was full of lime pits (or bitumen wells). The King of Sodom and Gomorrah fled and fell into them while the rest fled to the mountain." [9] The obvious question is why does the Torah need to teach us that the King of Sodom fell into a lime pit while he was fleeing? Rashi explains the pasuk by quoting the Chazal who teach us that normally if one were to fall into this kind of pit it would be lethal; however, a miracle was performed and the King of Sodom was saved. Why should such a miracle have been performed for this evil man? The Chazal continue by explaining that some people of the world did not believe that Avraham was saved from the fire at Kasdim by a miracle from Hashem. However, now that the people witnessed the King of Sodom being saved from the lime pits, they were able to retroactively believe that Hashem brought Avraham from the fire. Therefore this pasuk is needed to teach us about the King of Sodom's falling into the lime pit in order to explain that the world was forced to believe the miracle at Ur Kasdim as a result of this second miracle.

While this explanation seems to help us understand the purpose of the pasuk, we are left with a difficulty. Avraham was a tremendous tzadik while the King of Sodom was a monumental rasha who

personified evil. Both men were on opposite ends of the spectrum, yet we see that Hashem performed a miracle for both. In fact we learn that the people of the world believed the miracle performed for Avraham only through the miracle performed for the King of Sodom. What does this teach us?

We learn from here that it was important for Hashem first to establish the fact that Avraham was saved by a miracle. The further question of why Hashem chose to establish this fact through the King of Sodom is for a later discussion; however, we see that it was imperative for Hashem to establish the fact to the world regardless of the situation. How can we understand this? We know that without establishing a fact as the basis for further discussion the entire discussion is meaningless. For example, if one does not believe that millions of Jews left Egypt and gathered around Mount Sinai to receive the Torah then the factual history of the Jewish people is denied. Without the basic belief in these facts any following discussions on the meaning of Mount Sinai, the Torah, etc. have little meaning. Therefore it is important to establish the facts from which deeper understanding can be attained.

I had once said that the whole basis for Judaism is mesora, the unbroken chain of transmission from generation to generation. While we may not have been at Sinai we know that our ancestors were at Sinai as a result of this chain of transmission. Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk has an interesting explanation, which will help us to further understand the power of mesora. He asks why is it so vital to honor and revere one's parents? Rabbi Meir Simcha explains that trusting one's parents stems from honoring them. Without the reverence and honor for a parent, the child would not trust the parent. This mechanism of honoring parents is a fundamental mitzvah, which is vital to the infrastructure of Judaism because it is through trust that Torah can be transmitted from generation to generation and without honor there is no trust.

We find a very unfortunate state of affairs, which stems from the gap between parents coming from one generation and their children growing up in another. This is particularly true in first or second-generation immigrant families where the children regard the parents as being antiquated. By regarding the parent as antiquated in terms of skills, jobs, etc. the child cannot have the level of trust in information transmission from the parent needed to perpetuate Judaism. Where there is no honor and reverence there is not trust and therefore to transmission. It is therefore important to re-establish the value of the unbroken chain. For example, there are those who give validity to Reform Judaism that is approximately 150 years old. However, any events or beliefs that were held prior to Reform Judaism are regarded as antiquated and archaic. Is this to say that prior to 150 years ago there were not any Torah sages? Brilliant minds? Accomplished people? This is a lack of respect and honor that stems from the breaking of the chain of transmission. Therefore we see that it is imperative to establish the facts from which all understanding will follow. Once the facts are established only then it is possible to discuss the value of Torah.

## **6. Converting anxiety to growth**

We read in this week's parsha about the Covenant Between the Parts, which is connected with the promise of the Land of Israel as well as the future of the Jewish people. Hashem tells Avraham that, "Your offspring shall be strangers in a land not their own..."<sup>10</sup> The Seforno has an interesting commentary on this section. He explains that Hashem is informing Avraham that the inheritance of the land by the Jewish people will be delayed. Seemingly after Yakov, the Jews should have inherited the land yet we see that the Jews spent 210 years in Egypt. The Seforno attributes this delay to the sin of the Amorite. The Amorite were a nation that lived in Canaan and whose sin had not yet reached a climax. Since their level of sin had not reached its highest point, it would be unjust to drive them out of the land prematurely. Therefore Hashem explains to Avraham that even though the land is promised to your descendants there must be a delay due to the fact the Amorite cannot be expelled until their sin reached an apex. Hashem further explains to Avraham that the delay of inheritance should not be misunderstood as an indication of it not passing to the Jews as promised.

We find that there is much to be learned from this interchange between Hashem and Avraham for our daily lives. We often pray to Hashem with various requests and we consequently experience almost endless delays in having these requests fulfilled. We are unsure if our requests, even those in line with Torah and Hashem's will, would even be fulfilled. The waiting could be distracting and agonizing, yet we see from the interaction between Hashem and Avraham that there is a tremendous opportunity. The not receiving of our requests as well as the feelings of anxiety are themselves kapara for us not being at the level which we should be.

Hashem is the ultimate in justice and He will not grant a request at the expense of some other injustice. Our faith may be tested while we anticipate the outcome of our requests, yet we must always believe that the outcome is just and in our best interest. Therefore we need to utilize the time of our waiting to grow and introspect. Avraham was at a level where Hashem made him aware of the reasons for the delay. We are not at that level and despite the unexplained delays we need to operate within Hashem's timetable and exercise faith in Him with complete understanding that the result will always be for the best.

## Footnotes

[1] *Nechemia 9:5-8*

[2] Paraphrase from Genesis 3:11-12

[3] Ibid.

[4] Genesis: 12:7

[5] Ibid.

[6] Genesis: 14:1-10

[7] Shema



[8] Ibid

[9] Genesis:14:10

[10] Genesis: 15:13

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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.