

UNDERSTANDING TRUTH

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. Understanding the Specialness of Avraham's Hospitality

The Torah tells us that on the third day of Avraham's recovery from his circumcision, three angels (in human form) were sent to him by G-d. Being unaware of who these individuals actually were, Avraham approached them and urged that they accept his hospitality which consisted of offering the shade of his tree to protect them from the sun, bread to satisfy their hunger, water to wash their feet, and meat from the calves that he slaughtered.

The Talmud tells us that because of Avraham, Klal Yisroel (the Jewish people) merited special accommodations from Hashem during its forty-year sojourn in the desert after leaving Egypt. In the merit of offering the shade of his tree, the Jewish people merited the Clouds of Glory that protected them in every way. In the merit of the bread that Avraham offered, the Klal Yisroel merited The Mann (Manna, which sustained them for forty years). In the merit of the water that was offered, the Jewish people merited the Wellspring of Miriam that provided them with water in the desert. Hashem scrutinizes every aspect of Chesed that is performed by Avraham for the angels. For example, Avraham offered water to the angels through an intermediary (rather than providing it directly himself) and consequently, when the Jewish people were given water in the desert it had to be extracted through an intermediary - through Moshe striking the rock.

When Avraham hosted the angels, he was ninety-nine years of age. He had already devoted his entire life to acts of Chesed (Kindness). The Chofetz Chaim asks - why is the Torah so exacting with these acts of Chesed that Avraham did for the angels and not with those done throughout his lifetime?

The Chofetz Chaim answers that the value of the act of Chesed is not only determined by the quality of the person doing it but also by the specialness of the beneficiary. For example, the Chesed that is provided for the Torah Scholar (who is in need) has greater value than that done for an ordinary person with the equivalent need. Since Avraham had invested his entire life in doing good, Hashem provided him with the ultimate opportunity - to provide for an angel in human form. Therefore, the Chesed that Avraham did for the angels reached another dimension of mitzvah. The residual effect of his acts had unlimited value and therefore provided all the material needs of the Jewish people throughout their forty years in the desert. The question is what Avraham did that was considered so worthy that he merited receiving such special guests.

The answer is - if one dedicates himself selflessly on a continuous basis to do the Will of Hashem, G-d will provide him with a more advanced level of opportunity.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that if a person recites his daily prayers in a designated location, it will be said, (after he passes away), that he was "Chassid v'anav - Pious and Humble, a student of Avraham Aveinu." One can understand why this person is considered "Pious" since he consistently prayed in a fixed location. This is in accordance with (Normative Halacha) Jewish Law. However, why would one also be considered "Humble" when designating a location for his daily prayer service? The Torah tells us that when Avraham prayed for the communities of Sodom and Amorah he did so in a location that he designated for prayer (tefillah). The Nodah B'Yehudah explains in his commentary (Tzlach) that this selected location assumes a degree of sanctity every time one prays because of what transpires there. Whenever one performs a mitzvah with an object, it also becomes increasingly more holy because of its continuous usage for the purpose of a mitzvah. Thus, when one prays in a designated location it becomes increasingly more sanctified with every prayer.

The person who believes that he is not sufficiently worthy on his own for Hashem to be attentive to his tefillah (beseeching) believes that he needs the sanctity of the location to elevate the value of his prayer. This behavior is a demonstration of humility. Therefore this individual, when he passes away, will not only be referred to as pious for designating a location for his tefillah, but also humble, as a student of Avraham Aveinu.

The aggregate effect of the Chesed performed by Avraham throughout his life culminated with deserving an opportunity to host the most special guests. This act of Chesed had far-reaching effects, which impacted upon the entire Jewish people for a forty year period. When one is consistent throughout life to live as a proper Jew, performing the dictates of the Torah, he will continuously come upon new horizons because of the cumulative effect of his past accomplishments.

2. Going Beyond the Visual

After Avraham hosted his three guests, the Torah states "So the men got up there, and gazed (vayashkeefu) down toward Sodom, while Avraham walked with them to escort them." Rashi cites Chazal who explain that whenever the Torah uses the term "vayashkeefu - gaze" it indicates something sinister, or destructive, except when it is used regarding distribution of tithes to the poor. In the case of the angels gazing upon Sodom, the term vayashkeefu is used in the context of destruction. When the same term is used regarding the distribution of tithes, it is within a context of G-d gazing from his heavenly abode to rain blessing and bounty upon us. The merit of giving tithes to the poor will overturn the Attribute of Justice (Midas HaDin) into the Attribute of Mercy (Midas HaRachamim). So why is it that if the term "gazing" always indicates something sinister or destructive, why should its usage regarding tithes to the poor be so positive?

Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) tells us in (Koheles) Ecclesiastes "There is no man who is a righteous person in existence who does not sin." Meaning, that there is no one that is perfect. Everyone has some degree of spiritual deficiency. The Gemara tells us that the only person referred to as "Ish Elokeem - The Man of G-d" is Moshe Rabbeinu. The appellation of "Elokeem" refers to the Attribute of Justice, which is the most exacting, precise, and does not tolerate imperfection to any degree. Thus by referring to Moshe as "Ish Elokeem" the Torah is indicating that Moshe Rabbeinu was the only human being who was able to withstand the scrutiny of the Attribute of Justice. Not even our Holy Patriarchs (Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov) were at that level and therefore are not referred to as "Ish Elokeem".

Why is the term "gazing" associated with the Attribute of Justice? The answer is when one's spiritual record is looked at carefully, inevitably a flaw will be found. Therefore, whenever the Torah uses the term vayashkeefu (gazing) it is an indication of something sinister and destructive because upon close examination there is no record that is perfect. This scrutiny only comes about when there is prosecution from Satan (which causes the implementation of Midas HaDin).

The Torah tells us that when Moshe matured into adulthood, he went out to see his brothers and he "saw" their suffering. He witnessed an Egyptian beating a fellow Jew. Rashi in his commentary on the words, "and he saw their suffering" says "he saw with his eyes and he felt with his heart to feel their pain." Meaning, seeing visually would not have been enough for him to sense the pain of his fellow Jew and subdue the Egyptian. It was only because he allowed himself to feel the plight of his brother that he responded the way he did. Moshe internalized the pain and suffering of his Jewish brothers. Had he not internalized their suffering, he would have glossed over it and not acted.

When one responds to the needs of the poor, it is not because he "sees" their needs, but rather, he identifies and internalizes the other person's needs. Another person's plight becomes his own. It is only through "gazing" (which is more than seeing) that one senses the other person's need. Therefore although vayashkeefu/gazing usually refers to something sinister and destructive (as we explained because one's record is scrutinized and activates the Attribute of Justice), when one engages in charity, such as distributing the tithes to the poor, one is also "gazing" and relating to the need of the impoverished. This causes the Attribute of Justice to be overturned and the Attribute of Mercy to be implemented (measure for measure).

The Torah tells us that there is a Positive Commandment regarding the giving of charity to the needy and a Negative Commandment, if one withholds his hand and does not assist his brother. The Torah states, "If there is one among your brothers who is destitute, do not harden your heart and do not withhold your hand from your brother." We see that the cause of withholding and not sensing another person's need is a consequence of the hardening of one's heart. Although one may "see" the suffering of his brother, if he does not feel his need with his heart, he will withhold his hand. The Torah is telling us that to help another Jew, one must internalize the other's needs - just as Moshe Rabbeinu responded to the suffering of his fellow Jews because he felt their pain in his heart.

Measure for measure - if we feel the need of another individual, which comes about only as a result of "gazing" at the other's needs (which is more than seeing), Hashem will act in kind and not allow our record to be scrutinized, and will cause the Attribute of Mercy to come upon us in the most positive manner.

3. The Importance of not Missing Opportunity

The Torah tells us that before Hashem destroyed Sodom He informed Avraham of His plans. Avraham immediately beseeched G-d to reconsider destroying this evil city in the merit of the righteous people who may be living in Sodom. The Torah states, "Will You also stamp out the righteous along with the wicked? What if there should be fifty righteous people in the midst of the city? Would You still stamp it out..." The Torah tells us that Avraham pleaded back and forth with Hashem until it was determined that there were no righteous people in Sodom; therefore, G-d destroyed the city with its inhabitants.

A question to ask is why did Avraham beseech Hashem to spare Sodom? The Torah states regarding Sodom, "...their sin against G-d has been very grave..." Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the people of Sodom recognized G-d and they defied Him. They personified the most potent form of Evil and were the antithesis of Avraham. Avraham was a tzaddik who devoted his life to espousing the existence of Hashem. Why would Avraham intercede on behalf of Sodom? An additional question arises from what Shlomo HaMelech states in Mishlei (Proverbs), "When the Evil are destroyed it calls for rejoicing (song)." Avraham should have been rejoicing that Hashem was going to destroy the Evil of Sodom. Yet he beseeched Hashem to save the city in the merit of the righteous inhabitants. Why was Avraham not rejoicing over the destruction of Sodom? Another question is - if Hashem told Avraham that He was going to destroy Sodom what gave Avraham the right to intercede on their behalf?

The answer is Hashem did not need to inform Avraham about His plans. G-d could have destroyed Sodom without approaching Avraham at all. Evidently, since G-d informed him in advance, Avraham believed that Hashem was giving him the opportunity to intercede and pray on their behalf to stay the destruction. The question remains - why did Avraham pray to Hashem to save such an Evil city? Why would Hashem want Avraham to intercede on their behalf? The verse from Mishlei states, "The names of the Evil should rot" - in other words should be blotted out. How do we understand this?

The Gemara in Tractate Nidarim says that one of the reasons why the Jewish people experienced 210 years of bondage in Egypt was because Avraham did not take advantage of an opportunity that was presented to him after defeating the Four Mighty Kings. The Torah says that after the defeat of the Four Mighty Kings, "The King of Sodom said to Avraham, "Give me the people and take the possessions for yourself. Avraham said to the King of Sodom, "...I shall not take anything of yours..." The Gemara says that Avraham should have taken the people from the King of Sodom because he could have converted them to monotheism. The people of Sodom were pagans and Avraham

missed the opportunity to bring them under the wings of the Divine Presence (Shechina). Since Avraham allowed the people of Sodom to remain pagans, the Jewish people were doomed to become idol worshippers during the slavery in Egypt.

Therefore when Hashem informed Avraham in advance that He was going to destroy Sodom, Avraham took this to mean that Hashem was giving him the opportunity to correct his failing regarding the people of Sodom. He believed that there would be an opportunity for them to come under his influence and become monotheists. If it were not for Avraham's shortcoming, Sodom may have become monotheistic and not have needed to be destroyed in the first place. Avraham believed that he was being given the opportunity to pray on behalf of Sodom, thus correcting his failing and consequently rescinding the decree of the Egyptian bondage. Avraham understood that he would be able to do teshuvah and correct his previous error by interceding on their behalf. Hashem, nevertheless, found no saving grace to spare the communities of Sodom and Amorah.

We see from this that the level of Avraham's culpability was so severe that Hashem needed to have millions of Jews suffer over 210 years in Egypt in order to correct Avraham's missed opportunity. The Jewish people needed to fall to the point of near spiritual extinction from worshipping idols in Egypt. Only after this could they be redeemed.

4. Recognizing One's Good Fortune

We read in this week's parsha that prior to the destruction of Sodom and Amorah an angel was sent to save Lot and his family. The angel escorted Lot, his two daughters and his wife out of Sodom; however, Lot's wife was turned to a pillar of salt because she turned back to look at the city as they left. Lot and his two daughters fled to a cave where they hid in fear that the world was ending. Lot's older daughter urged the younger one that since the end of the world was at hand, they needed to perpetuate the human race by procreating with their father. As planned, they gave wine to their father and had relations with him and subsequently each gave birth to male children who were the forbearers of Moab and Ammon.

The Torah states, "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the congregation of Hashem, even their tenth generation shall not enter the congregation of Hashem, to eternity, because of the fact that they did not greet you with bread and water on the road when you were leaving Egypt." Meaning even if a Moabite or an Ammonite converts to Judaism they are considered illegitimate. If these nations could behave in such a cruel and insensitive manner towards the Jews then they are not to be accepted as part of the congregation of the Jewish people. Is this reason enough to negate and shun these nations? Or is there a deeper meaning that goes beyond the lack of hospitality?

The story of Lot's daughters having relations with their father raises some obvious questions. Lot's daughters legitimately believed that the world had come to an end and that they needed to perpetuate existence by having relations with their father. Just as Cain and Abel were permitted to cohabit with their sisters so too could Lot's daughters cohabit with their father under the

circumstances. Chazal teach us, regarding Cain and Abel, that existence could not have been perpetuated if they had not been permitted to have relations with their sisters. This was the basis for justifying the actions of Lot's daughters. However, there is an obvious difference between the two incidents. In the case with Lot's daughters, they had a very special uncle - Avraham.

When Lot's father was killed, Avraham adopted him as his own son. When Avraham left Ur Kasdim he brought Lot along with him. When Avraham traveled to Egypt he again brought his nephew with him and Lot returned with great wealth only because he was the nephew of Avraham. A disagreement between the shepherds of Lot and those of Avraham arose which lead to the separation of Avraham and Lot. When Lot was taken captive, Avraham resorted to supernatural means in order to save him. If it were not for Avraham's sacrifice, Lot would have been killed.

With this degree of selflessness demonstrated by Avraham, one would think that Lot should have been completely beholden. However, we find this not to be the case even at the most minimal level. If Lot had appreciated what his uncle had done for him, he would have definitely shared it with his family and told them of Avraham's specialness. How do we know that Lot did not share this information with his family? This can be deduced from the behavior of Lot's daughters. Their only justification for being involved in an incestuous act with their father was because they believed that the world had ended. However, if they had known about their exceptional uncle Avraham, they would never have believed that their father survived the cosmic destruction and their uncle, along with the rest of the world, did not. This would have been an impossibility.

Lot never shared his experiences with his children about his uncle Avraham because he was a consummate ingrate. He never recognized all the good that Avraham had done for him. His life, his wealth, and his status in reality were all attributable to Avraham's kindness. Lot did not wish to acknowledge this; therefore, he did not share it with his children. This was the basis for the separation between Avraham and his nephew Lot. Lot was not willing to subordinate himself to his uncle, although Avraham tried to make him understand that his behavior was unacceptable (allowing his flocks to graze in other people's fields). Lot exemplifies the person who does not have the capacity to appreciate the goodness that was done to him by others.

The Moabites and Ammonites were direct descendents of Lot. They should have had a sense of gratitude to the Jewish people who descended from Avraham. There was a debt to be paid which they did not understand. Therefore, because they saw no basis for reciprocation to the Jewish people, they did not offer them bread and water when they were traveling in the desert. Their position as ingrates was a manifestation of Lot's lack of understanding of what it means to be a beneficiary of another's kindness.

The basic principle underlying the service of Hashem is to be beholden and appreciative. They did not have this quality. Their lack of gratitude is the antithesis of the Jewish people who descend from Avraham and who personify appreciation and thankfulness. Therefore, Hashem would not allow

these two nations (Ammon and Moav) to assimilate into the Jewish people.

5. What is the Meaning of Truth?

The Torah tells us that after Sarah had heard that she was going to have a son, she said to herself, "After I have withered shall I again have delicate skin? And my husband is old!" Sarah was skeptical that she would conceive because she was beyond her childbearing years and therefore it was seen as an impossibility. Hashem said to Avraham, "Why is it that Sarah laughed, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, though I have aged?' - is anything beyond Hashem?" Rashi cites Chazal, which explain that although Sarah had actually said, "my husband is old," Hashem altered what Sarah said (when communicating with Avraham) to - "I (Sarah) have aged" for the sake of maintaining harmony between husband and wife.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us "the Signet of Hashem is Truth." The Maharal of Prague explains that Truth must be completely unadulterated. Even if what is said is 99.999% true - it is not considered Truth. The Hebrew spelling of the word Emmes (truth) indicates this, which is spelled aleph mem tuf. The letter "aleph" denotes the smallest amount - even something miniscule. If the aleph is removed from the word Emmes -meaning even if the truth is diminished as much as an iota - all that is left is "mem tuf" which spells the word "mes" (death). Meaning that even if an iota of truth is missing it is not Truth. How could Hashem have altered what Sarah had actually said when he communicated it to Avraham?

We read in this week's Portion that when Avraham went to Gerar he presented Sarah as his sister. Avimelech, the Philistine king had taken Sarah to his palace to cohabit with her. Hashem appeared to Avimelech and commands him to return Sarah to her husband Avraham or he and his community will die. Avimelech followed G-d's dictate; however, he admonishes Avraham for presenting his wife as his sister. Avraham responded by saying that in actuality Sarah was his sister in a Halachic sense. Sarah was the daughter of his brother (being his niece), and therefore the granddaughter of his father Terach. Based on the principle that grandchildren are considered like the children of the grandparents, Sarah was consequently his sister. The question is why did Avraham have to justify his statement? Why was it not sufficient to say that since his life as Sarah's husband was in jeopardy, he is permitted to lie in order to save his life. Nevertheless, we find that Avraham explained what he had said (within a Halachic context) was not a lie. It is evident from Avraham's behavior that even in a life-threatening situation, if one deviates from Truth more than is necessary he will diminish his own commonality with Hashem whose Signet is Truth.

The Torah tells us that Yaakov's mother, through her prophecy, instructed him to go to his father and take the blessings that were rightfully his. In order for Yaakov to accomplish this task, he needed to present himself as his brother Esav who was the designated recipient of Yitzchak's blessings (as the firstborn).

When Yaakov presented himself to his father, Yitzchak asked him, "Are you my first born Esav?"

Yaakov responded, "I am Esav your first born." Rashi explains in his commentary based on Chazal that in actuality what Yaakov said was, "I am (meaning I am who I am) and Esav is your first born." In actuality the words which were verbalized by Yaakov were not a lie. It was only Yitzchak's understanding of the words that was incorrect - as was intended by Yaakov. How are we to understand this? If in fact Yaakov misled his father, it should be considered irrelevant how to punctuate the words.

The effectiveness of one's words is determined by the purity of one's mouth. If one only speaks the truth, then his power of speech is not diminished. Avraham and Yaakov understood this with absolute clarity. They understood the power of speech. Therefore, they carefully phrased their comments to be true in expression although not in the understanding of what they were communicating. They did this because they had no choice.

The Gemara in Tractate Bava Metzia tells us that Talmudie Chachamim alter their words in certain situations. An example of this is if a Torah Sage is asked if he knows the entire Talmud, or a certain tractate of the Talmud (when asked the question purely for the sake of curiosity), he is permitted to alter his response for the sake of humility. Since it is important for a person to remain humble, one is permitted to respond in a humble manner even though the facts may be otherwise. Is this considered to be contrary to Emmes (Truth) - the Signet of G-d? Evidently, it is not since the Torah tells us that it is a proper form of behavior.

Hashem altered Sarah's words when He repeated them to Avraham in order to maintain harmony in the home. Although "The Signet of Hashem is Truth" Hashem's communication to Avraham is not contradictory to his Signet. The reason for this is that Hashem who determines what is proper and correct defines Truth. Therefore, if the Torah teaches us that in certain contexts one is permitted to alter what is being said, then this is considered correct - such as Hashem's communication to Avraham. This is also the case regarding the Talmud Chacham denying his own level of achievement for the sake of humility. However, in other circumstances such as those previously mentioned with Avraham and Yaakov where they were permitted to communicate something that was misunderstood, they nevertheless had to express themselves in some way that was consistent with Truth without compromising their expression.

We learn from this that anything that is consistent with the Torah is considered as Emmes (Truth). Conversely, anything that is contrary to the principles of the Torah is not Truth. Therefore, if a person does not speak Truth as it is defined within the context presented in the Torah then he has compromised Truth - thus having less relevance to Hashem whose Signet is Truth.

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.