

THE RETURN OF ABRAHAM

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

This week we read of Avraham's experiencing both a humbling failure and stunning accomplishment. After he was informed of the wonderful news that a child will be born to him and Sora, Avraham is told bad news. Though it would not affect Avraham personally, Avraham took it personally.

Hashem informed Avraham that he was about to destroy the city of S'dom. That city's customs were diametrically opposed to every one of Avraham's principles and teachings. Where he espoused kindness, they preached selfishness. Where Avraham spoke of Hashem, S'domites promulgated heresy. Avraham should have reveled in their demise, but he did not. He pleaded with Hashem to spare them.

"Will You stamp out the righteous together with the wicked? "Perhaps," he cried "there are 50 righteous men in the city. Shall You not spare the city in the merit of the 50?" (cf. Genesis 18:23-24). But there were not 50, There were not 40. In fact, there were not even 10 and Avraham had no more bargaining chips. Hashem did not spare S'dom. Avraham lost his case. The Torah tells us that, "Hashem departed after he finished speaking to Avraham and Avraham returned to his place." (Genesis 18:33). What does the Torah mean, "Avraham returned to his place"? Where else should he go? To watch the fireworks that once was S'dom?

This is not the only time that Avraham returns. At the end of the portion, we read of Avraham's great faith and fortitude. He is told by Hashem to sacrifice his only son, Yitzchak up on a mountain the Akeida. Unquestioning and determined, Avraham embarks to fulfill Hashem's wishes. Before the knife reaches his son's neck, an angel stops Avraham AND tells him that he has passed the test of commitment. Hashem promises to increase Avraham's offspring like the stars, and declares that all the nations of the world will bless themselves by Avraham's offspring. After the remarkable incident the Torah tells us that "Avraham returned to his young men. "

What does the Torah mean? Of course he returned. Should he stay on the mountain forever? Of course he returned!

Rabbi Dovid Koppleman tells the story of Rabbi Abish, the Rav of Frankfurt who was known for his extraordinary humility. In addition, he would often raise funds for the needy families of his city. Once he heard that a wealthy man was on business in town and went to the man's hotel suite to ask him for a donation. The tycoon was arrogant and assumed that the Rav was a poor shnorrer, and after a

few moments drove him out of his room. A few minutes later the man went to leave his suite and looked for his silver cane. Noticing it was gone, he immediately suspected that Reb Abish took it during his brief visit.

Quickly, the man bolted toward the lobby of the hotel where he accosted Reb Abish. "Thief," the man shouted while pushing the Rav, "give me back my cane!" Reb Abish calmly pleaded. "I did not steal your cane. Please do not accuse me! Please believe me. I did not steal your cane!"

The man was adamant in his arrogance and began to beat the Rav while onlookers recoiled in horror. Reb Abish, despite the pain, remained steadfast in his humble demeanor. "Please believe me. I did not steal your cane!" Finally, the man realized he was getting nowhere and left Reb Abish in disgust.

That Saturday was Shabbos Shuva. The entire community, including the wealthy visitor, packed Frankfurt's main synagogue for the traditional Shabbos Shuva Speech. Horror gripped the visitor as a familiar looking figure rose to the podium and mesmerized the vast audience with an eloquent oration. It was the very shnorrer he had accosted in the hotel!

As soon as the speech ended, the man pushed his way toward the podium and in a tearful voice tried to attract the Rabbi's attention. He was about to plead forgiveness for his terrible behavior when Reb Abish noticed the man.

In all sincerity Reb Abish began to softly plead with him. "I beg of you please do not hit me. I truly did not steal your cane."

Avraham's greatness engendered his humility in every circumstance, in victory and defeat. After losing the case of Sodom, he returns. After his amazing accomplishment of the Akeida, he returns. Avraham returns home, never showing the haughty spoils of victory or the despondent embarrassment of defeat. He remained constant in his service to Hashem and in his attitude to his family and peers. Avraham does not revel in victory nor despair in defeat. He returns the same way as he leaves. Steadfast in faith and constant in character.

Good Shabbos

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

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Drasha is the e-mail edition of FaxHomily, a weekly torah facsimile on the weekly portion which is sponsored by ***The Henry and Myrtle Hirsch Foundation***

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