I'm always amazed by the difference between my initial perceptions of a scriptural text, and the way the Sages explained its meaning. Their insights reflect an incredibly thorough knowledge of the scriptures. One such insight is found in the commentary of Rashi, the medieval French commentator.

The passage states that Noach walked with G-d (Genesis 6:9). Rashi points out that later in Genesis (Genesis 24:40) Avraham is quoted as saying the following: "G-d who I walked _before_ etc." Rashi explains that these passages are a window into understanding the inherent difference between Noach and Avraham. "Noach needed an aid to support him." (This is why it states that he walked _with_ G-d). This is in contrast to Avraham who was able to walk _ahead_ of G-d, so to speak.

Anyone who reads the passage which states that Noach walked with G-d feels a deep reverence for Noach. He walked with G-d! They don’t say that about me! Yet, his walking with G-d also reflects his weakness. He would not have remained righteous if he didn’t have the constant support of G-d’s nearness. He would have fallen prey to the negative influences of his generation. Avraham, on the other hand, was a self-starter. He sought and found G-d’s presence where it was not apparent. He actively fought the distorted religious perceptions of his contemporaries. He proved that he was willing to die for his beliefs and teachings. What made Avraham so unwavering in his service of G-d?

A few short stories provide us with the answer.

It was the eve of Yom Kippur. In the DP (displaced persons) camp of Feldafing after WWII, the Klausenberg Rebbe, Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Halberstam was preparing for the holy day. His preparations were lengthy and involved, and he preferred at that time to be alone. A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts when a young woman, also a survivor, entered with a request. "My father died in the camps, I have no one to bless me. Rebbe, please bless me" (As is customary for parents to bless their children on the eve of Yom Kippur). The rebbe graciously complied and he blessed her with the customary blessings. Soon, there was another knock ushering in yet another orphaned young woman. "Please bless me rebbe." The rebbe again graciously complied. Then another girl came, and another. A line formed, and by the end of the day close to one hundred girls had come to be blessed, and received the rebbe’s blessing, until it was time to go to synagogue. Thus the rebbe had indeed prepared well for the holy day, acting as a surrogate father for orphaned girls.

Years ago in Jerusalem there was a doctor named Dr. Kook. He was a general practitioner. He had a
very simple office in his home. There was a front parlor which served as the waiting room, and everyone who came waited there and was taken in turn. The only person who was given preferential treatment was Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna, the highly respected Head of the Chevron Yeshiva in Jerusalem. Once, when Rabbi Sarna was waiting among other patients, Dr. Kook came out of the examining room for the next patient. Rabbi Sarna began to rise, but Dr. Kook motioned to an elderly lady to go next.

When Rabbi Sarna was admitted, he apologized for getting up out of turn. Dr. Kook replied that normally he would have taken him next, but this time he had to take that elderly woman first. He explained that she was a poor woman whom he did not charge for his services. If he had taken the Rabbi out of turn, she would have thought that she deserved less attention than the “paying” patients. He had specifically taken her first so she wouldn’t think that she was receiving less care than anyone else. (Paraphrased from “In the Footsteps of the Maggid” Rabbi Payach Krohn, Mesorah Publications)

We understand Avraham’s own motivations from the deeds of his descendents. He was driven by his love of the Creator, and His creations. Avraham’s love of G-d gave him the ability to walk ahead of G-d. This means that Avraham had the independence to act even when he didn’t feel G-d’s nearness. Noach walked with G-d. He needed the reassurance of G-d’s manifest aid. Avraham’s greatness was in his ability to see behind the veil in which G-d concealed Himself and proceed in his service with perfect love and perfect faith.

Good Shabbos!