

A PORTRAIT OF THE TEACHER

by Rabbi Label Lam

It's a very big wonder why the servant of Avraham gets so much "air time" in the Torah. Not only does the narrative tell his story but his retelling of the episode is recorded over again in an uncharacteristically verbose style. About this Rashi quotes Rabbi Acha: "The conversations of the servants of the patriarchs are more dear than the Torah of the children. Evident by the fact that the Torah doubled the subject of Eliezer and yet many essential laws are based solely upon subtle indicators." Why are "the conversations of the servants of the patriarchs" so dear?

Years ago I was blind sided by a statement while guiding a group of minority students through the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The presenter was explaining to the students that in order to heal the warring factions within themselves they had to understand and appreciate the rich culture from which they sprung. He said, "To know where you are going in life, you have to know where you come from!" At that moment he looked at me and said, "You're a son of Abraham, right!?"

After a few awkward moments and after realizing that nothing pejorative had been said or implied I simply said, "That's right!" Having agreed publicly to such a thing the words owned me. I rushed home and took the old bible I had received from the sisterhood on the occasion of my bar-mitzvah 10 years earlier. It was parked next to my brothers' bibles, which had also never been touched or moved. I started to read about Abraham. Amazed to find a portrait of my ancient relative I felt like someone who had dusted off a box in the attic uncovering an amazing family tree dense with pictures and rich with history.

For weeks I obsessed with the idea that I know who my great-great-great-grandfather is going back 3700 years. I researched whether anyone else had any credible information about relatives going that far back down the highway of history. I felt uniquely proud as a Jew and saw myself in a much different context.

With the asking of a question my mind shifted from the perspective of the present to a view from the past. I wondered what Abraham had done that made him worthy that his children's children 3700 hundred years hence would not only know of him but hold him in such high esteem. What would I have to do or be that my great grand children would ever care or know who I was? What would it take?

Attempting to capture my thinking then, I recorded a few words in my personal diary. I imagined a small stone entering a still glass-like pool of water and sending out ever widening co-centric circles

till the stone settles and the water becomes quiet and smooth again as if nothing had ever wrinkled the calm. "Pebbles in ponds are our ponderings, but boulders in oceans were our fathers' notions whose waves still rock the sea, whose waves still rock the sea!" Now I imagined a giant stone hitting the earth thousands of years ago and settling to the bottom of the ocean. We don't know the velocity with which it hit or the mass of the object but we can only begin to estimate the awesome size by the fact that the ocean is still ebbing and flowing strongly thousands of years later from its impact.

It's difficult to appreciate the intensity of the sun at noon. It is so distractingly bright. At night when the sun has slipped from our view we can appreciate it when we behold the reflected glory of a moon-lit sky. Similarly, when one perceives the deep loyalty and unswerving honesty of Eliezer we can also detect the signature of a master on the canvas of his associates.

When the Chofetz Chaim met the Alter from Slobodka, (who stood up some of the giants of American Jewry i.e. Rabbi's Y. Kaminesky, A. Kotler, Y.Y. Ruderman, and Y.Hutner just to name a few) the Alter expressed his admiration for the Chofetz Chaim for having written such amazing Torah works. The Chofetz Chaim is reputed to have answered, "I am a admirer of you. I write books, but you make people!" Avraham didn't just make an impression on people he made impressive people. From the character of the students we can begin to piece together a portrait of the teacher.

Good Shabbos!

The source of this dvar Torah is the work "Yalkut Lekach Tov."

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