

THERE IS A BUILDER

by Shlomo Katz

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Today's Learning:
Machshirin 3:2-3
Orach Chaim 4:20-22
Pesachim 76
Yerushalmi Pesachim 43

The midrash records how a young Avram (later Avraham) concluded on his own that G-d exists. Just as a palace cannot exist without a builder, it is not possible for a world such as ours to exist unless it had a creator, Avraham reasoned.

When the students of the Mir Yeshiva took refuge in Shanghai, China during World War II, they found a vast, empty synagogue available for the yeshiva's use. There was no rational reason for a synagogue of that size to exist in a city that had never had more than a tiny Jewish presence. Perhaps concerning this event, R' Yechezkel Levenstein z"l (mashgiach of the yeshiva) observed in a 1941 address: "Although we have never seen the builder or the caretaker of this shul, we understand without a doubt that there was a builder and there is a caretaker."

He continued: But how does a person like Avraham, who lives in a world devoid of knowledge of G-d, come to recognize G-d? The answer is that if a person is troubled enough by a problem, he finds a

solution. Even if the solution is beyond one's normal abilities, one finds a way to attain it when he feels that he has no other choice.

The gemara teaches that although prophecy has been taken away from the prophets, it has been given to the wise. Indeed, said R' Levenstein, it is nothing less than prophetic when a person struggles over a problem and then sees light. Avraham, too, could not rest because he was so troubled by not knowing who had "built the palace," and thus he found an answer. (Mi'mizrach Ha'shemesh p.40)

"If so much as from a thread to a shoelace; or if I shall take from anything of yours! So you shall not say, 'It was I who made Avram rich'." (14:23)

The Midrash Tanchuma states: Hashem said to Avraham, "Because you said, 'If so much as from a thread to a shoelace,' I will purify your descendants on an altar surrounded by a thread. Also, because you said, 'If so much as from a thread,' I will give your descendants the mitzvah of the tzitzit threads.

"Because you said, 'to a shoelace,' I will give your descendants the mitzvah of removing their shoes. Because you said, 'shoe,' I will give your descendants the mitzvah of Korban Pesach, about which it says (Shmot 12:11), 'Thus shall you eat it . . . your shoes on your feet'."

R' Yaakov Ettlinger z"l (see page 4) explains this midrash as follows: There are four risks to being rich. First, wealth may make a person haughty. Second, wealth may cause a person to abandon G-d. Third, wealth gives a person the ability to pursue all of his desires, which may lead a person to sin. Finally, wealth brings increased worries.

As a reward for Avraham's statement in the above verse, Hashem promised Avraham that He would protect Avraham's descendants from these four risks. First, the thread surrounding the altar refers to the line that separated the top half of the altar, where the blood of the chatat was sprinkled, from the bottom half, where the blood of the olah was sprinkled. Chazal teach that an olah sacrifice atones for haughtiness because the sinner sees that the blood is sprinkled low down on the altar. Similarly, recalling the line (or thread) on the altar protects a person from haughtiness.

Second, wearing tzitzit protects a person from forgetting Hashem and abandoning Him because tzitzit are a constant reminder of all of the mitzvot (see Bemidbar 15:39).

Third, removing one's shoe reminds one to distance himself from material desires. Thus, for example, one removes his shoes in a holy place (see, for example, Shmot 3:5). Also, one who refuses to perform the mitzvah of yibum (marrying the widow of his childless brother) is commanded to remove his shoes. (Such a person effectively says that he refuses to allow the Torah to choose a wife for him and would rather marry based on personal attraction alone.)

Finally, the mitzvah of Korban Pesach is intended to counteract excessive worries, in particular, fear of death. Bnei Yisrael were commanded to eat the Korban Pesach with their shoes on in order to be prepared for the Exodus on a moment's notice. Similarly, Hashem may call a person to Him at any moment and he should be ready to go joyfully. (Minchat Ani)

"Fear not Avram, I am your shield, your compensation is exceedingly great." (15:1)

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch z"l (19th century) explains G-d's words as follows: I remain your shield, and the happiness which blossoms from your devotion and self-sacrifice has no bounds.

R' Hirsch observes further: In Tanach, there is very little said about reward. The good that G-d wants us to practice is itself the truest reward. Compensation is only demanded by one who believes he has sacrificed something, but to a true Jew, fulfilling a duty, doing a mitzvah, is no sacrifice but is itself a gain. "The compensation for a mitzvah is a mitzvah" [we are taught in Pirkei Avot]. (Commentary on the Torah, p.268-269)

In his commentary to the quoted mishnah in Pirkei Avot, R' Hirsch writes: "The good that you do will lead to more good, and every act of duty bears its own reward. The knowledge that you have done the will of your Father in Heaven will bring you closer to Him; it will enrich your spirit with the happy awareness of having done the right thing. (The Hirsch Siddur p.474)

R' Natan Zvi Brisk z"l (Cseke, Hungary; 20th century) explains the above mishnah as follows: Hashem wants to reward man for his good deeds. Therefore, it is a mitzvah to enable Hashem to compensate you for an earlier mitzvah. One performs this mitzvah by performing other mitzvot.

Similarly, the mishnah states: "The compensation for a sin is a sin." When one causes Hashem to punish him, he saddens Hashem. This is itself a sin. (Nachalat Zvi)

"She called the Name of Hashem Who spoke to her, 'You are the G-d of Vision,' for she said, 'Even here I saw after having seen'." (16:13)

R' Chaim of Volozhin z"l (early 19th century) explains: The gemara (Mo'ed Kattan 25a) says that a certain sage was worthy of being a prophet, but one cannot become a prophet outside of Eretz Yisrael. If so, the gemara asks, how did the prophet Yechezkel receive prophecy outside of Eretz Yisrael? The gemara explains that if someone previously experienced prophecy in the Holy Land, his prophecy can continue outside of the Land.

Similarly, says R' Chaim, Hagar was now outside of Eretz Yisrael (see Targum Onkelos and the beginning of Tractate Gittin). In our verse, she recognized that she saw an angel now only because she was used to seeing angels in Avraham's house. (Quoted in Be'urei Rabbenu Chaim Mi'Volozhin)

R' Asher Wallerstein z"l

R' Asher was born in 1754, in the old age of his father, the Sha'agat Aryeh (one of the greatest Torah scholars of the 18th century). R' Asher was a student of his father and of R' Meir Zayeh of Metz, and later served as rabbi of Karlsruhe.

R' Gedaliah Rothenburg of Bodingheim, a student of the Sha'agat Aryeh and of R' Asher, writes of the latter (in his approbation to the former's Talmud commentary, *Gevurat Ari*):

The son is a limb of his father . . . and is a famous rabbi known throughout the diaspora. . . As a youngster, seven or eight years old, he already had a sharp and well-honed mind. At that age, if he was shown a difficult passage by Rambam and was told in what part of the gemara the answer lay, he could work out the answer in a short time. When he became bar mitzvah, his father said to him, "Because I know that you have a clear mind and that you are a vessel which is fit to receive the Torah of Hashem, therefore be strong and become a person who is great in Torah - "A wise son pleases his father" [in the words of Mishlei 10:1] - then I will be honored because of you in the world of Truth." When he was 15 years old, he studied with his father an entire tractate every day . . . When he was 17 or 18, the rabbinical court and the Torah scholars of Metz and all the travelers who passed through Metz were amazed by his sharpness and vast knowledge, and his father publicly declared that his son was sharper than he.

The best known student of R' Asher was R' Yaakov Ettlinger, author of the popular Talmud commentary, *Aruch La'Ner*, and teacher of R' Samson Raphael Hirsch. R' Ettlinger attributed to R' Asher the most powerful influence on his way of learning.

Some of R' Asher's Talmudic interpretations are printed in *She'eilot U'teshuvot Sha'agat Aryeh Ha'chaddashot* and in R' Ettlinger's *Binyan Zion*. R' Asher died in 1837. (Sources: *Gedolei Hadorot* 532-533; Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch [Artscroll], p.40)

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