

SPIRITUAL EATING HABITS

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Today's Learning
Machshirin 4:8-9
Orach Chaim 8:9-11
Pesachim 83
Yerushalmi Pesachim 50

The Torah describes to us Avraham's greatness in that, despite his weakness and the unbearable heat, he was saddened that no guests arrived at his door. The Torah describes that when he saw three "men" approaching, he ran to them and invited them in. The Torah further describes in detail the food that he prepared for them and served them.

R' Shalom Mordechai Schwadron z"l (of The Maggid Speaks fame; 1913-1997) asks: Since Avraham was so hospitable, presumably he had overnight guests in his tent who had arrived on previous days. Why then was it so important to him that new guests come? R' Schwadron explains that Avraham's goal in having guests was not merely to feed them. His goal was to teach them how a person should eat - not in a ravenous, animal-like manner, but in a refined way. He taught that eating should be part of man's spiritual life, not a physical activity. And, just as Hashem renews His creation every day, so Avraham wished to renew his own work every day.

The midrash Tanna D'vei Eliyahu states that although angels do not ordinarily eat, Hashem opened the "mouths" of the angels who came to Avraham's house and they ate. R' Schwadron explains that this was a reward for Avraham. Since he taught men to behave like angels during their meals, his reward was that real angels ate in his house.

Chazal say that Avraham's descendants received the mahn in the desert as a reward for the bread which Avraham offered to the angels. Because Avraham fed human food to the angels while trying to teach humans to eat like angels, his descendants survived on the mahn, which was not real food and which Chazal refer to as the "bread of angels." (Lev Shalom p.145)

"Avraham awoke early in the morning, took bread and a bag of water and gave them to Hagar." (21:14)

R' Binyamin Kornet z"l (New York; mid-20th century) writes: Avraham was hinting to Hagar that man's primary mission is "to wage war"/"le'hilachem" - related to "lechem"/"bread" - against the yetzer hara. Also, man must not fall prey to his desires; rather he must live in accordance with the Torah, which Chazal frequently liken to water. Indeed, the Torah forms a "wall"/"chomah" - related to "chemet"/"bag" [of water] - around us.

The next verse relates: "He placed them [the bread and water] on her shoulder . . . She departed and strayed in the desert . . ." R' Kornet explains: The mitzvot are intended to be a yoke on a Jew's shoulders to keep him from straying, as a yoke keeps an ox from straying. However, Hagar departed on her own way and therefore strayed in the desert. As a result, the next verse tells us, the water dried up from the chemet, i.e., whatever Torah she had learned departed from her and she was not protected from spiritual predators by any forces of holiness. (Kibbutz Mezareh Yisrael)

"It happened after these things, G-d tested Avraham . . ." (22:1)

What were "these things" which preceded the akeidah? Rashi explains that the satan complained: "Avraham made a party in honor of Yitzchak [verse 21:8] and did not offer even one sacrifice." Hashem responded that Avraham would even sacrifice Yitzchak if he were so commanded.

R' Chaim Moshe Gostynski z"l (Poland and New York; 20th century) observes that if the names of the letters of the word "akeidah" are spelled out (as follows: ayin-yud-nun kuf-feh yud- vav-dalet dalet-lamed-yud-tav heh-heh) their gematria equals 784, the same as the gematria of the phrase, "Achar divrei satan"/"after the words of the satan." (Nachalat Chamishah)

The Greatness of the Akeidah

R' Chaim Yosef David Azulai z"l ("Chida"; 1724-1806) writes: R' Moshe Almosnino z"l (16th century) asks in his work, Yedei Moshe: Why is Avraham glorified so for his willingness to sacrifice his son? How many thousands of Jews sacrificed themselves for Hashem from ancient times until today?

R' Almosnino answers: Avraham's greatness was that he fulfilled Hashem's command joyfully. How do we know that he did? Because he experienced prophecy in the middle of the akeidah (see 22:11), and Chazal teach (Pesachim 117a) that prophecy can be experienced only when the prophet is in a joyful state. Surely one would have expected Avraham to experience sadness as he prepared to sacrifice his son, but Avraham experienced only joy at fulfilling the word of Hashem.

Chida himself offers a different answer. Throughout Jewish history, when Jews went to martyrdom, they were forced to do so. Even Avraham, when he entered Nimrod's furnace as a child, was forced to enter it. Not so Avraham at the akeidah; nobody forced him to sacrifice his son, yet he did so willingly.

Another way in which Avraham's actions were noteworthy is that he did not question Hashem's judgment. Avraham had every reason to question Hashem, Who had previously promised that Yitzchak would be the progenitor of a great nation and Who now appeared to have changed His mind, yet Avraham remained silent. [Although there may have been other martyrs who did question their lot, they had not previously received promises from Hashem of a glorious future. No question that they might have asked would have had the same force as the question that Avraham could have asked.]

Also, writes Chida, we know that Avraham was the epitome of a kind person. Surely it was against all he believed in to slaughter his son. Nevertheless, Avraham conquered his natural tendencies and fulfilled Hashem's will. (Ruach Chaim: Drush 19; quoted in Torat Ha'Chida Vol I. p.138)

R' Elchonon Wasserman, who himself died a martyr's death in 1941 (see below), offers a different answer to our question: Martyrdom is relatively easy, for the martyr knows that he is going to a better place, to Olam Haba/The World-to-Come. What if, however, a martyr were asked to give up his Olam Haba? Could he do it?

Avraham was asked to do something even harder than giving up his Olam Haba, for Avraham valued the continuation of his teachings in this World more than he valued his place in the World-to-Come. (We learn this from the fact that after Hashem promised Avraham (15:1), "Your reward is very great," Avraham replied (15:2), "What can You give me when I am childless?") If Avraham had slaughtered Yitzchak, the continuity of Avraham's teachings would have been at an end. Even so, Avraham went willingly to the akeidah. (Kovetz Ma'amarim p.43)

The details of R' Elchonon Wasserman's last days were related after the war by survivors of the Kovno ghetto:

"Reb Elchonon was fully aware of what awaited him. Hence his face brightened, exhibiting what

could only be called an angelic expression. The Jews who saw him then - among them, only two were to survive - all received the same clear impression, that of a great leader of Israel preparing to offer his life for the sanctification of G-d's Name.

R' Elchonon told his fellow captives: "Apparently they consider us tzaddikim in Heaven, for we were chosen to atone for Klal Yisrael with our lives. If so, we must repent completely here and now. We must realize that our sacrifices will be more pleasing if accompanied by repentance, and we shall thereby save the lives of our brothers and sisters in America." (Reb Elchonon, pp.409-410)

R' Yaakov Beruchin z"l

R' Yaakov ben R' Aharon was born in 5548 (1787/8). He and his brother, R' Yitzchak (author of the Talmud commentary Keren Orah) were among the leading students of R' Chaim of Volozhin. It is said that R' Chaim sometimes asked R' Yaakov to lecture in the yeshiva.

R' Yaakov was rabbi of Karlin and was recognized as one of the leading sages of his generation. He is best known today for his work Mishkenot Yaakov.

R' Yaakov is credited with "discovering" R' Yitzchak Elchonon Spektor, who would be the leading posek/halachic authority of the second half of the 19th century. This happened after R' Yitzchak Elchanan lost all of his wedding presents in a business venture and came to seek R' Yaakov's advice. Finding R' Yaakov immersed in a Talmudic problem, R' Yitzchak Elchanan volunteered that the question was answered in a certain work. So impressed was R' Yaakov with the young scholar that he recommended R' Yitzchak Elchanan for his first rabbinical position. (He also gave the young scholar 40 rubles.)

R' Yaakov died in 5605 (1844/5). In his last minutes, he asked his son to read to him from Ramban's Torah commentary because he was very fond of that work. The tombstone which R' Yaakov shares with his brother reads in part:

On the death of the two sons of Aharon - The staff of Aharon gave forth a blossom and a flower and it was to the congregation of Israel a miracle and a wonder. The honor of Hashem shone on the house of Aharon. These two sons of his were a wonder; they were known as the genius of Yaakov and Yitzchak, and they raised a banner and a mast on the sea of Torah. They were known to their nation for their [written] works Kehillot and Mishkenot Yaakov and Keren Orah. Woe! The cedars of G-d in the land; they studied the Torah of Hashem the entire day. Who will teach our nation? Who will close the breach?

(Readers may recognize the many biblical allusions in the above text.) (Source: Gedolei Torah p. 571-572; Avi Ha'yeshivot p.416)

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