

# SAVED IN YAAKOV'S MERIT

*by Shlomo Katz*

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Today's Learning:

Yevamot 2:1-2

Orach Chaim 331:8-10

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Nazir 25

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Bava Metzia 27

Many commentaries count among Avraham's ten tests his being flung into a fiery furnace by King Nimrod. Yet, there is no mention of this episode in the Torah. Why?

R' Menachem Mendel Krochmal z"l (Poland, 1600-1661; the "*Tzemach Tzeddek*" - not to be confused with the chassidic rebbe of the same name) explains: We read (Mishlei 17:6), "The crown of the elders is their grandsons." Says the midrash: "Avraham was not saved from the furnace except in the merit of his grandson Yaakov." Why was Avraham's merit alone not enough to save him? And, why does the midrash cite the merit of his grandson Yaakov and not that of his son Yitzchak?

R' Krochmal answers: Why did Nimrod sentence Avraham to death? Because Avraham smashed the idols in his father's store. Avraham endangered himself and brought this sentence on himself, which he had no right to do according to halachah. This is why the event is not mentioned in the Torah; the purpose of reading the Patriarchs' stories is to learn from them; here Avraham acted

contrary to the Torah and we should not learn from it. This also is why Avraham was not saved in his own merit.

Yaakov's behavior was the opposite of Avraham's. Hashem had promised to return Yaakov safely to his homeland, but Yaakov nevertheless took necessary precautions against Esav such as sending him bribes and praying for G-d's assistance. This is behavior that the Torah wants us to learn; indeed, comparing Yaakov's actions to Avraham's highlights the lesson for us, and thus Avraham could be saved in Yaakov's merit. (Pi Tzaddik, Drush II).

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R' Simcha Kook shlita (Chief Rabbi of Rechovot, Israel) observed: According to the midrash, Shir Hashirim 8:8-10 describes the deliberations that took place when Avraham was thrown into a fiery furnace by King Nimrod because he (Avraham) would not renounce his belief in one G-d. "We have a little sister," says the verse; she is still young and inexperienced-- just as Avraham was thrown into the furnace before he had ever seen G-d perform any miracles for him. The verse continues, "What shall we do for our sister on the day she will be spoken for?" What will happen at the "moment of truth" when Nimrod throws Avraham into the fire?

Hashem answers (in the words of verse 9), "If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver; and if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar." The midrash explains that G-d is laying down the conditions: if Avraham stands firm like a wall, and is willing to protect his belief in G-d with all that he has -- even his life -- then he will be enclosed with silver. This is a simile for Israel. (See Tehilim 68:14 - "You will be like a dove coated with silver.") If Avraham is willing to give his life, he will live. Moreover, he will be surrounded by, and perpetuated through, his descendants, the Children of Israel. But if Avraham reacts like a door (in Hebrew, "delet," from the root "dal," meaning "poor, dismal"), he will be enclosed only with boards, which can rot and be eaten away. Furthermore: the disadvantage of a door compared to a wall is that the latter is a permanent protection, allowing unwanted entrance to no one. A door, however, is the weakest part of a building's enclosure. It opens and closes, and it is unstable, and it therefore affords only temporary protection. If Avraham is not stable, then there is no hope for the future. For Avraham is the head of the believers -- not just the first, but the chief and the leader.

Avraham answers (in verse 10): "I am a wall!" -- Not only am I ready to give my life, but also my children, Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (who were thrown into a furnace by Nevuchadnezzar), Rabbi Chananiah ben Tradion and his colleagues who were killed by the Romans for the Sanctification of G-d's Name, and all those who gave their lives for the same purpose throughout the generations are ready. And for this, Avraham emerged unscathed from Nimrod's burning furnace - thanks to the call, "I am a wall; I stand firmly for the sake of belief in G-d!"

R' Kook concludes: Every one of us has a spark of Avraham within him, and we pray and strive that this spark should be seen. This is why we recite three times a day the blessing (in shemoneh

esrei),"Magen Avraham" / "Shield of Avraham." We ask Hashem to "shield" the "Avraham-ism" of unyielding faith that lies within each and everyone of us. If we are a wall, we will be like silver, which does not rot, and is very long-standing and durable. But if not, we will be as vulnerable as wood. (From an address delivered October 24, 1999 / 14 Cheshvan 5760)

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*"[Avraham] trusted in Hashem, and He reckoned it to him as tzedakah." (15:6)*

We are accustomed to using the word "tzedakah" to mean "charity." However, writes Rambam z"l ("Maimonides"; 1135-1204), we can learn from this verse what "tzedakah" in fact means.

Tzedakah means fulfilling the obligations which fall on a person because of his duty to practice good character traits. When one performs tzedakah -- for example, when one helps the downtrodden get up -- he fulfills an obligation to himself by doing what his own soul (or intellect) requires. This is different from "chessed" (usually translated "kindness"), on the one hand, and mishpat (sometimes translated "justice"), on the other. Chessed refers to giving a person more than he is entitled to while, mishpat refers to giving someone what he deserves (for example, paying a worker his wages and paying off one's debts).

When Avraham trusted in Hashem, as related in our verse, Hashem reckoned this to Avraham as tzedakah because Avraham was doing that which he was obligated to do - believing Hashem's promise. (Moreh Nevochim III, ch. 53)

In other words, writes R' Yosef Kapach z"l (1918-2000; rabbi in Yemen and Israel), when you give a pauper a donation, you are not performing an act of kindness, but merely fulfilling the obligation which the Creator has placed upon you. We can thus understand statements of our Sages such as (Ketubot 68a), "One who turns his eye away from tzedakah is akin to an idol- worshiper."

The Sages taught us that just as a person's earnings are decreed on Rosh Hashanah, so his expenses are decreed on Rosh Hashanah. The gemara relates that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai dreamt that certain of his relatives would have an unusual expenditure of 700 coins during the coming year. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai tried to persuade his relatives to donate that amount to charity, but all they gave was 683 coins.

On Erev Yom Kippur, the gemara continues, a tax collector knocked on the relatives' door. "Don't worry," Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said. "All he will take is 17 coins [i.e., the 700 coins which Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai dreamt his relatives would have to expend minus the 683 coins they had given to charity]." And so it was.

Unfortunately, writes R' Kapach, we sometimes see charity collectors as nuisances or even thieves. If we give them even a small donation, we do so with annoyed expressions as if we have just done them the greatest favor. If we act in this way, we clearly have forgotten the above lessons as well as Rambam's assurance, "No person ever became poor from giving tzedakah, not did any person ever

suffer as a result of giving." (Ma'amar "Musag Ha'tzedakah Be'Torat Yisrael" Collected Writings, Vol. I, p. 114)

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### **R' David Shlomo Grodzenski z"l**

R' David Shlomo Grodzenski was the father of R' Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, one of the leading figures in the Lithuanian Torah- world between the World Wars. However, R' David Shlomo also was a noteworthy figure in his own right.

R' David Shlomo was born after his parents had been childless for approximately 25 years. His father, R' Moshe Aryeh, was his first teacher, and he later studied in the Neviezer kollel headed by R' Yisrael Salanter.

In 1857, R' Moshe Aryeh passed away, and R' David Shlomo inherited his position as rabbi of Ivye, Lithuania. Although he was offered more prestigious positions, R' David Shlomo remained in Ivye until his death in 1904.

The following story is told about R' David Shlomo during his tenure in Ivye:

Early one morning, the rabbi was making his way to the bet midrash to study for a few hours before the morning prayers when he encountered a wagon-driver berating his apprentice. "Imbecile! I told you to buy pitch for the wheels last night before the stores closed. What were you doing instead -- stuffing yourself with food? Now we will be delayed at least three hours until the stores open."

The rabbi interrupted the wagon-driver and offered to buy pitch for him. However, being a stranger in town and not knowing that the man offering his help was the rabbi, the wagon-driver refused to advance the two kopecks needed to buy pitch without taking security. So leaving his hat behind, the rabbi set out to buy pitch.

Word of the rabbi's act spread through the town, and an irate community council dispatched one of their members to admonish the rabbi for his seemingly undignified behavior. The messenger, however, did not have the nerve to criticize the rabbi, so he instead began speaking to the rabbi of the evils of haughtiness. His plan was that the rabbi would think that he was being accused of possessing that trait and would defend himself by referring to the morning's events; then the messenger would argue that the rabbi's humility had taken him too far.

Instead, R' David Shlomo stood silently and accepted the messenger's rebuke. When the messenger finished speaking, R' David Shlomo said, "Yes, haughtiness is despicable and I suffer from it. However, I can tell you that I have worked for many years to overcome this trait and I hope that some day I will."

R' David Shlomo's wife Rivka Elka was a niece of R' Ze'ev Wolf Einhorn, author of Peirush Maharzav on Midrash Rabbah. (Sources: Gedolei Ha'dorot p. 726; Reb Chaim Ozer p. 19-22).

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Rabbi and Mrs. Sam Vogel on the yahrzeits of their fathers Aharon Shimon ben Shemaryah a"h (Arthur Kalkstein) Aharon Yehuda ben Yisrael a"h (Leon Vogel)

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