

ASK FOR SPIRITUAL WEALTH

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Today's Learning:

Bava Metzia 5:5-6

Orach Chaim 533:4-534:1

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Kamma 92

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Demai 20

The midrash teaches: "One must always say, 'When will my deeds equal those of my ancestors Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?'" Why, exactly, must one say this? asks R' Yitzchak Blazer z"l (1837-1907). Is it a prayer?

He explains: We read in Mishlei (2:4-5), "If you ask for it as if it were silver, if you search for it as if it were a hidden treasure - then you will understand the fear of Hashem and discover the knowledge of G-d." There are two types of people who are likely to succeed in their search for wealth, writes R' Blazer. The first is someone who is energetic by nature and who applies his energy to traveling wherever the search for wealth takes him. (On the other hand, one who is lazy by nature is likely to act lazily in his search for wealth as well, and is likely to fail.) The second type of person who is likely to find wealth is one whose desire for wealth is very great. Even if he is lazy by nature, his desire for wealth will overcome his laziness and he will stand a good chance of success.

The same two types of people may be found among those who serve Hashem. Some people are endowed with special abilities that allow them to grow and to improve their Divine service. They actively "search" for the hidden treasure, i.e., knowledge of G-d. Others are less endowed, but still have a burning desire to serve Hashem. They can only "ask" for spiritual wealth.

Just as young businessmen spend many hours talking about their role models, so the aspiring servants of Hashem in the latter group express their desire to emulate their role models. The more they say, "When will my deeds equal those of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?" the greater is their chance of ultimate success. (Kochvei Ohr p. 50)

"Hashem said to Avram, 'Go for yourself . . .'" (12:1)

R' Bezalel Darshan z"l (17th century rabbi in Slutsk, Poland) writes:

The midrash describes young Avraham's realization that the world has a Creator with the following parable:

A man walked past a castle and saw candles burning inside. "Surely," he said, "a castle with lights inside must have an owner."

"Yes," said another man, poking his head out of a window. "I am the owner." So, too, Avraham reasoned that our well-ordered and beautiful world must have a Master.

"Yes," said G-d, revealing Himself to Avraham. "I am the Master of this world."

[The midrash continues, quoting Tehilim 45:12:] "Then the King will desire your beauty; for He is your Master, so bow to Him." Thus it is written, "Hashem said to Avram, 'Go for yourself'."

We are obligated to know, writes R' Bezalel, that there is a Creator, that He actively manages our world, and that He is alone. Avraham realized these things, but how could he win over his contemporaries? He tried to persuade them. (For example, writes R' Bezalel, Avraham's contemporaries claimed that one god cannot be responsible for both good and bad, but Avraham argued that nature is full of things that are good for some people and bad for others. The sun, for example, brings warmth and light to those who need it, but may also dry out a farmer's field and destroy his crop. And, just as the sun does not change, rather, whether the sun is good or bad depends on the recipient, so whether Hashem appears as good or bad depends on the recipient.) But Avraham could not say simply, "I know that G-d exists because He revealed Himself to me." Had he said that, he would have been ridiculed and accused of lying. Hashem therefore told him, "Go for yourself." Set out and allow My hand to guide you so that everyone will know that you have a Master and everyone will bow to that Master. (Amudeha Shivah)

"Lot journeyed from kedem / the east . . ." (13:11)

Rashi comments: He journeyed away from the Kadmon / the One Who Preceded everything.

R' Yosef Leib Bloch z"l (Rosh Yeshiva of Telshe; died 1929) writes: The story of Lot demonstrates that it is not enough to know that there is a Creator and that He is actively involved with His world. The Sages teach that Lot was accustomed to seeing angels in Avraham's house. Nevertheless, he readily chose to leave Avraham and to live among the evil-doers of Sdom. How did this happen? It happened because a person who does not actively work on character refinement will forever remain enslaved to his human nature, the side of him which sees the wealth of Sdom but not its evil.

This explains, as well, why the generation of the Exodus stumbled repeatedly. They attained a knowledge of G-d and His Power that no generation before or since has attained. Nevertheless, unless one actively works on character refinement, all of his abstract knowledge will not save him. (Shiurei Da'at, Vol. I, p. 92)

From the Midrash . . .

"The heavens / ha'shamayim declare the glory of G-d, and the firmament tells of His handiwork" (Tehilim 19:2). [How can this be?] The heavens are fixed in their place and do not move! Rather, although everything is His and everything is His handiwork, He rejoices only with the descendants of Avraham, as it is written (ibid. v.3), "Day following day utters speech." What is the nature of these days? This refers to Moshe's day, which foretold Yehoshua's day. [The midrash continues by describing how Moshe made the sun stand still during the wars against Amalek and Sichon and how Yehoshua made the sun stand still during the war against the Canaanites.] (Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabbah, ch. 2)

This midrash obviously requires explanation. R' Shmuel Heide z"l (died 1685) explains as follows:

When we say that heavenly bodies praise and glorify Hashem, we refer to the fact that their movements in their orbits in accordance with His Will declare that He is their creator. The proof of this is that when Yehoshua wanted the sun to stand still, he did not say, "Sun, stand still," but rather (Yehoshua 10:12), "Sun, be silent." The sun's [perceived] movement is its praise of G-d. To the sun, being silent and standing still are synonymous.

In contrast, the heavens themselves are inanimate; they are always "silent." How then do the heavens declare the glory of G-d?

Because of this question, the midrash concludes that the reference to "heavens" is a metaphor. Indeed, the gematria of "ha'shamayim" equals the gematria of "neshamah" / soul. Just as when a person praises Hashem, it is not his body which offers the praise - the body by itself is lifeless - but rather it is his neshamah, so the "shamayim" of our verse also refers to something living: the

descendants of Avraham.

Why the descendants of Avraham? We read in our parashah (14:19), "Blessed is Avram to G-d, possessor of heavens and earth." Avraham, says another midrash based on this verse, acquired the heavens and the earth through his deeds. (In fact, says that midrash, the sun refused to obey Yehoshua until Yehoshua reminded it that Avraham had previously "acquired" the heavens.) We also read in our parashah (15:5) that Hashem told Avraham to gaze towards the heavens, for his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. This symbolizes, say Chazal, that Avraham and his descendants would not be subject to the laws of nature (for Avraham and Sarah were naturally infertile). Rather, Avraham's descendants would be subject only to Hashem's direct providence. The many miracles that Hashem was destined to do for Avraham's descendants would themselves "declare the glory of G-d and . . . tell of His handiwork." (Zikukin De'nura)

R' Dr. Dov (Bernard) Revel z"l

R' Dov Revel was born in Pren, a suburb of Kovno, Lithuania on September 17, 1885 / 8 Tishrei 5646. His father, R' Nachum Shraga, the rabbi of Pren, was his first teacher, and young Dov excelled at his studies. (R' Nachum Shraga died in 1896 and was buried next to his close friend R' Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor, the leading halachic authority in Lithuania in the late 19th century. The community later erected an ohel / structure over their two graves.) Thereafter, R' Revel's teachers included R' Yitzchak Blazer ("R' Itzele Petersburger," one of the three leading students of R' Yisrael Salanter), and he also studied briefly in Telshe, where he attended the lectures of R' Yosef Leib Bloch, the rosh yeshiva.

R' Revel received semichah / ordination at age 16, but it is not known from whom. Thereafter, the young scholar earned a Russian high school diploma, apparently through independent study. He also became involved in the Russian revolutionary movement, and following the unsuccessful revolution of 1905, was arrested and imprisoned. Upon his release the following year, he emigrated to the United States.

Immediately upon his arrival, R' Revel enrolled in New York's Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan. Shortly afterward, one of America's senior rabbis and president of the Agudat Harabanim / Union of Orthodox Rabbis, R' Bernard Levinthal of Philadelphia, visited the yeshiva and, after discussing Talmudic topics with the new student, invited him to come to Philadelphia as the rabbi's secretary and assistant. While in Philadelphia, R' Revel began to become acquainted with the unique challenges facing American Jewry and the special needs that a yeshiva would have to meet if its graduates were to minister to Americanized congregations and keep their members loyal to Torah. At this time, R' Revel began attending law school in Philadelphia, but he eventually decided that the law was not his calling. In 1911, he earned a doctorate from Dropsie College, the first graduate of that school.

While still in Philadelphia, R' Revel announced a plan to create a subject index to responsa literature written since the completion of the Talmud in 475. (This herculean project was dropped after an index was compiled to the works of only one scholar, Rabbeinu Asher, the "Rosh.") R' Revel also began to write a commentary to the Jerusalem Talmud, but this too was never published.

In November 1908, R' Revel was introduced to his future wife, Sarah Travis of Marietta, Ohio. The members of the Travis family were Lubavitcher chassidim and wealthy Oklahoma oil-men, and R' Revel moved to Oklahoma to join the family business after finishing his doctorate. (R' Revel wore his yarmulke in the oil fields, surely an unusual sight.) But even while serving as an assistant to his brother-in-law Solomon, learning the petroleum business, and amassing his own fortune, R' Revel's primary occupation continued to be his Torah study.

In 1915, R' Revel was appointed President and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan, and he returned to New York.

- to be continued in a future issue -

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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