

AVRAHAM "OUR FATHER"

by Shlomo Katz

Sponsored by
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on the bar mitzvah of their grandson Ze'ev

In this week's parashah, we begin to read about the activities and experiences of the Patriarch Avraham. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (chapter 5) teaches: "Avraham Avinu was tested ten times, and he withstood them all." Many commentaries ask: Why is Avraham referred to as "Avinu" / "our father" in this mishnah, whereas he is not given that title in the previous mishnah which also mentions his name?

R' Chaim Sanzer z"l (18th century Poland; not to be confused with the chassidic rebbe R' Chaim Halberstam z"l of Sanz) explains: When Adam, the father of all of mankind, was created be'tzelem Elokim / in "G-d's image," he was meant to emulate the ten attributes (middot) of Hashem. When he sinned, he failed in his mission.

Not until the Patriarchs did anyone begin to correct the resulting spiritual damage. Specifically, Avraham's passing *ten* tests somehow rectified Adam's failure to emulate G-d's *ten* attributes.

Adam's sin did not damage his soul alone. Adam's soul included within it the souls of all of his future descendants. Likewise, Avraham's spiritual accomplishments did not benefit himself alone. Rather, as Ramban writes, "Ma'asei Avot siman la'banim" / "The experiences of the Patriarchs foreshadow the experiences of their descendants." This is why specifically when we are told that Avraham withstood ten tests, he is called "Avinu" / "our father." (Ne'edar Ba'kodesh)

"You shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, " (12:2-3)

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l (1903-1993) comments: The Torah says that man was created male and female and was commanded to procreate. This refers not only to physical activity, but to intellectual and spiritual growth as well. In the language of kabbalah, "male" refers to a giver and "female" refers to a recipient. A person who aspires to spiritual growth must be both male and female, able to impart to others whatever spiritual gifts he or she has to offer, and able to receive from others what

they can contribute towards his or her (i.e., the recipient's) growth.

This was the blessing to Avraham recorded in our verses: You shall be a blessing to others, because you will give to them. And, those who bless you, shall be blessed, indicating that Avraham will also receive from others.

(Yemei Zikaron p.32)

"Avram was seventy-five years old when he left Charan." (12:4)

R' Mordechai Shulman z"l (rosh yeshiva of the Slobodka Yeshiva in Bnei Brak) observed: The entire saga of Avraham Avinu's spiritual elevation, the means by which he succeeded in transforming his body into a spiritual entity, is not recorded in the Torah. The ultimate test at Ur Kasdim [when young Avram was thrown into the furnace] is only hinted at.

Nevertheless, one who does not ponder the events which preceded Ur Kasdim and how Avraham reached the level where he could withstand that test, one who does not analyze the beliefs of that errant generation and see how strongly those beliefs influenced people's behavior, has no way of appreciating the power and greatness of Avraham's emunah / faith and the intensity of his closeness to G-d at a time when he was isolated from the whole world. One against everyone-a different path, a different faith-crying out against an indifferent world for many years, without any obvious support from Above, waging a tireless battle and continuing the fight in the face of the flames of Ur Kasdim.

One who does not evaluate all this properly does not understand the spiritual heritage we have received from Avraham. He cannot possibly fathom the power of actions performed out of such deep conviction that they can influence children and grandchildren for generations to come until the end of time-to the extent that these descendants are willing to sacrifice their lives for kiddush Hashem / the sanctification of G-d's Name [as Avraham was ready to do at Ur Kasdim]. Without pondering this, one cannot even begin to understand the basics of the concept of ma'asei Avot / the experiences of the forefathers, and he certainly has no idea how these actions form a siman la'banim / foreshadowing for their descendants, and how we benefit to this very day from our Patriarchs' deeds.

A person may say: What difference does it make if I don't understand the true significance of Abraham's recognizing his creator at the age of three?

R' Shulman answers: Our Sages (Tanna D'vei Eliyahu chapter 25) obligate a person to say, "When will my actions equal those of my forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?" Careful analysis of this obligation reveals that a person must understand how and why the Avot merited their great reward. Without this understanding, a person may, G-d forbid, arrive at mistaken ideas concerning reward and punishment-a form of denial of G-d.

R' Shulman concludes: In our days, there are people who say, "I live by simple faith." They imagine that they are following in the ways of Avraham Avinu. However, there is a vast difference between these people and Avraham. Avraham walked in simple faith because he saw the light. These people walk simply without realizing they are walking in darkness.

(Quoted in Legacy of Slabodka p.106)

"But also the nation that they shall serve, I shall judge, and afterwards they shall leave with great wealth." (15:13- 14)

Why should the nation that would oppress Avraham's descendants be judged when they would merely be fulfilling G-d's decree? asks R' Eliezer David Gruenwald z"l (leading Hungarian rabbi and rosh yeshiva; died 1928). He explains:

Rambam z"l states that the Egyptians were punished for oppressing Bnei Yisrael more than G-d intended, so-to-speak, along the lines of the verse (Zechariah 1:15), "I became slightly wrathful and they augmented the evil." However, says R' Gruenwald, we do not see this in our verses. Hashem did not say to Avraham, "If the nation that they serve augments the decree with additional oppression then I will judge them"!

Rather, writes R' Gruenwald, the expression "I shall judge [them]" should be understood differently. R' Yosef Albo z"l writes in Sefer Ha'ikkarim that there are two kinds of love. One type of love is based on the absolute qualities of the person or thing that is loved. The second type is based on the relative value of the subject. This explains the meaning of the prophecy of Malachi (1:2), "I loved you," said Hashem, and you said, 'How have You loved us?' Was not Esav a brother of Yaakov -- the words of Hashem -- yet I loved Yaakov." In other words, even when we do not merit Hashem's love because of our own (absolute) qualities, we still merit His love because of our (relative) qualities compared to Esav's descendants.

So said Hashem to Avraham: When your descendants are oppressed for 400 years, they will lose those qualities that make them special. But don't worry, for I shall judge the nation that oppresses them and find Bnei Yisrael to be special in comparison to that nation.

(Haggadah Shel Pesach Chasdei David)

"Yesod Ve'shoresh Ha'avodah"

("The Foundation and Root of Divine Service.")

This year, we are presenting excerpts from the work Yesod Ve'shoresh Ha'avodah by R' Alexander Ziskind z"l (died 1794). In the section entitled Sha'ar Ha'gadol / Sha'ar Avodat Ha'lev, chapter 5, the author tries to train us to evaluate every event in terms of whether it brings pleasure to G-d or

detracts from His satisfaction with His creations.

For example, if one notices that a regular shul-attendee is absent one day, it is proper to feel great sorrow that our Creator, may His name be blessed, will not be "enjoying" that person's service that day. One should moan over the loss of the pleasure that Hashem could have received from the absent person's responses to kaddish, barchu and kedushah.

If one hears of a Torah scholar who is ill, G-d forbid, one should feel sorrow about the service to G-d [i.e., Torah study] which is not being performed as a result. Conversely, if one sees a person praying with intense concentration or serving Hashem in some other manner with great devotion, one should rejoice intensely at the pleasure that is being given to G-d.

If one hears that a baby was born, one should rejoice that another servant of G-d has come into the world. In particular, the father of the child should feel extreme joy and should thank G-d in his heart that he has merited to have a child to be a servant of Hashem. [Likewise, he should feel extreme joy and thank Hashem] for the fact that he will have descendants who will bring pleasure to Hashem.

When one's child becomes a little older and one sends him to school to study the holy Torah--and likewise, at any point in life, when one recalls any mitzvot or Torah study performed by his children--he should be extremely joyous as mentioned above [because they are giving pleasure to the Creator].

Another part of this mode of service requires one who hears that another person has amassed a fortune to be happy with the knowledge that the newly wealthy person has probably uttered some praises of Hashem as a result of his success. Conversely, if one hears that a formerly wealthy person has lost his fortune, he should share in his sorrow for the reasons mentioned above.

[Ed. Note: The feelings described above are not necessarily meant as substitutes for sharing in the joy or sorrow of a person who experiences a significant life event. As the author himself makes clear, one who is able to assist the sufferer must do so. Ultimately, however, the true significance of every event lies in whether or not it furthers the goal for which Hashem created the world, i.e., to bring honor to Him.]

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