

RELIGIOUS COERCION

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Vayera

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Today's Learning:
Eruvin 3:7-8
O.C. 459:4-6
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Eruvin 45
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Berachot 47

The Midrash relates that after Avraham would feed the guests who passed his way, he would say, "Now thank G-d whose food you have eaten." If the guest refused, Avraham would say, "Then pay me! The wine costs such-and-such, the meat costs such-and-such, the bread costs such-and-such. Who would give you wine in the desert? Who would give you meat in the desert? Who would give you bread in the desert?" At that point, Avraham's guests would agree to thank G-d.

The commentaries ask: Why did Avraham do this? Of what value is a blessing which is extracted under financial duress? R' Yitzchak Or Zarua z"l (13th century) answers that Avraham did not actually ask his guests for money. Rather he argued, "Think how much you would be willing to pay for food and drink in the desert. Behold! G-d has prepared that food and drink for you by causing me to be here in your time of need. Moreover, it's all free. You would have been willing to pay a small fortune had I requested it, but I ask you for nothing for myself."

Upon realizing that G-d indeed looks out for each person's needs, Avraham's guests would willingly thank G-d for their food, the Or Zarua explains.

R' Moshe Zuriel shlita (former mashgiach of Yeshivat Shaalvim) adds: At first glance, the above Midrash appears to say that Avraham practiced "kefiah datit" / forcing others to observe halachah against their will. However, the Or Zarua's explanation reveals that the opposite is true. Avraham caused people to serve Hashem by showing them how Hashem cares for every human and by demonstrating the beauty of serving the One G-d. (Otzrot Hatorah Vol. I. p.54)

"Hashem appeared to him [Avraham] in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day." (18:1)

The Midrash explains that Hashem appeared to Avraham to visit the sick, for it was the third day after Avraham's circumcision and he was in pain.

The Gemara says that Avraham had a gem that hung at his throat, and anyone who looked at it was healed from any injuries he had suffered. When Avraham passed away, Hashem hung that gem from the sun. If so, asks R' Bezalel Darshan z"l (Poland; 16th century), why was Avraham still in pain three days after his circumcision? Why didn't he just look at the stone that hung around his neck?

R' Bezalel explains: Avraham did not literally have a gem hanging on a necklace. Rather, the Gemara means that Avraham's throat, i.e., his voice, spoke "gems" of truth about G-d that cured idolators of their spiritual ills. After Avraham died, that gem was hung from the sun, meaning that a person who wished to find G-d could do so through an intensive study of nature, represented by the sun in the Gemara's statement.

In this light, says R' Bezalel, we can understand another Midrash which emphasizes that Avraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent in order to "open a door" through which travelers and converts

could enter the service of the One G-d. The Midrash means to answer the same question we asked above, i.e., why didn't Avraham look at his gem and heal himself? The answer is that Avraham did not have a real gem. Rather, the gem referred to was his voice, which he used to "open doors" for converts, and the healing referred to was spiritual healing.

(Amudehah Shivah)

"Hashem said, 'Because the outcry of Sdom and Amorrhah has become great, and because their sin has been very grave. I will descend and see . . .'" (18:20-21)

"Avraham came forward and said, 'Will You also stamp out the righteous along with the wicked?'" (18:23)

Why did Avraham think he had the right to speak to Hashem this way? R' Shimon Schwab z"l explains: Very often, we do not understand Hashem's actions or His plan. However, when the Torah uses words such as "I will descend," Hashem is saying that He will descend to man's level, i.e., He will act in a way that mankind can understand. This fact gave Avraham the right to question.

(Selected Speeches p.35)

"On the third day, Avraham raised his eyes and perceived the place from afar. Avraham said to his young men, 'Stay here by yourselves with the donkey, while I and the lad will go until there; we will worship and we will return to you.' . . . Then Yitzchak spoke to Avraham, his father, and said, 'Father . . . Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?'" (22:4-7)

Why did Yitzchak wait until the third day to ask where the sheep for an offering was? R' Yechezkel Abramsky z"l (rabbi in Poland and London and rosh yeshiva in Israel; author of Chazon Yechezkel; died 1976) once said, "I learned from here that before one asks a question, he should look around to see if there are people there whose presence might discourage candor. Yitzchak did not ask his question before the third day because he suspected that Avraham might not speak freely in the presence of Yishmael and Eliezer who accompanied them.

(Quoted in Peninei Rabbeinu Yechezkel)

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' Moshe Zaturensky z"l (19th century Lithuania) explains: The last of Avraham's tests (according to

most commentaries) was the Akeidah / Binding of Yitzchak. Our Sages highlight the fact that Avraham reasonably could have asked Hashem, "Previously You told me (21:12), 'For through Yitzchak will offspring be considered yours!' Now, You are telling me to offer him as a sacrifice?" In other words, it was precisely the fact that Avraham was destined to be "Avinu" / "our father," whereas sacrificing Yitzchak would have eliminated that possibility, that made the Akeidah was such a difficult test.

On a simpler level, the Akeidah was a difficult test because it asked Avraham to do something that was contrary to his paternal instincts. For both of these reasons, he is given the title "Avinu" / "our father" in this context.

(Darkei Moshe Al Pirkei Avot)

R' Yehuda Zvi Eichenstein z"l

R' Yehuda Zvi Eichenstein, the rabbi and chassidic rebbe of Rozdol, was born in 1791. He was the son of R' Moshe of Sambor and was the son-in-law and successor of R' Zvi Hirsch of Zidachov.

R' Eichenstein was considered one of the leading kabbalists of his generation and wrote a number of works in that field. He died on 7 Cheshvan 5608 / 1847.

R' Eichenstein had a number of fierce opponents, and it was his practice to send them gifts from time to time. When his wife questioned his behavior, he explained it as follows:

"Why do chassidim travel to a rebbe and bring him gifts? It is because every building needs a foundation. The world is called a building - as in the verse (Tehilim 89:3), 'The world will be built on chessed' - and the tzaddik is called the foundation of the world (Mishlei 10:25). By helping to support the foundation of the world, i.e., the tzaddik, the chassidim are holding up the world itself.

R' Eichenstein continued: "I know that I am no tzaddik. However, there is another way that I can be considered the foundation of the world. Specifically, our Sages say that the world exists in the merit of those who avoid dissension. This is why I try so hard to appease my enemies." (Sources: Gedolei Ha'dorot p.584; Encyclopedia La'chassidut)

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Torah.org](#) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>.

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