

THE DEEDS OF THE PATRIACHS

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Lech Lecha

The Deeds of the Patriachs

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Sponsored by Harold and Gilla Saltzman on the yahrtzeit of his mother Rivka Rachel bat Yehuda Leib a"h (Rebecca Saltzman)

The Vogel family on the yahrzeit of father and grandfather Aharon Shimon ben Shemayah a"h (Arthur Kalkstein)

The Edeson and Stern families, on the anniversary of Jacob S. Edeson's bar mitzvah

R' Bachya ben Yosef ibn Pekuda z"l (Spain; 11th century) lists 30 types of cheshbon ha'nefesh / accounting with one's soul that a person must perform, the twenty-fourth of which is the following: "Reconsider everything you have known since your youth and the beginning of your education about G-d and His Torah, about the words of the earlier generations, about the riddles of the Sages, and about the prayers, for these subtle matters are not the same to one whose understanding is immature [i.e., a youth] as they are to one whose understanding is mature.

"Therefore, do not be content with the images you have in your mind from the beginning of your studies. Rather, when your mind has matured you should begin again to study the Torah of Elokim and the books of the Prophets. [Learn them with a fresh perspective] like someone who is first learning to read, and accustom yourself to explain them, to elaborate upon their allusions, and to look carefully at their wording and phraseology. Also, recognize which statements are meant to be understood straightforwardly (peshat), and which are not meant to be understood that way. . . If you do this, you will see the secrets of the Torah and the secrets of the Prophets and Sages in way that is impossible if you continue to learn the way you learned as a child." (Chovot Ha'levavot: Sha'ar Cheshbon Ha'nefesh ch.3)

R' Isaac Sher z"l (1875-1952; rosh yeshiva of the Slobodka Yeshiva in Lithuania and Bnei Brak) applies these words studying the Book of Bereishit. He writes: A person learns Sefer Bereishit as a child and

grasps what he learned on a childish level. This forms his understanding of the Patriarchs and their deeds. The typical person does not thereafter reexamine his understanding of these "stories" as the years pass.

He continues: As a result, we are unable with our limited perspective to understand the Torah's stories and to learn about the deeds of the Patriarchs. We do not appreciate their depth. Worse yet, some of the deeds of the Patriarchs appear to us to have been sins, and we have the nerve to say, "After all, there is no tzaddik who is perfect." This is wrong! Rather, we are obligated to say, "When will my deeds reach the level of the Patriarchs' deeds?!" (Lekket Sichot Mussar Vol. I p.37)

"There was a famine in the land, and Avram descended to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. . . . 'Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me for your sake, and that I may live on account of you'." (12:10, 13)

R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270; Spain and Eretz Yisrael) writes: Know that Avraham sinned a great sin, albeit inadvertently, when he placed his wife at risk of stumbling into sin [i.e., with Pharaoh] merely because he (Avraham) was afraid for his life. Rather, he should have trusted in G-d to save him and his wife, for G-d has the ability to protect. Leaving the land to which he had been commanded to travel [i.e., Canaan] because of the famine also was a sin, for G-d can save man from death by famine. Because of this, G-d decreed that Avraham's descendants would go down to Egypt. (Peirush Ha'Ramban Al Ha'Torah)

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) challenges Ramban's assertion that Avraham sinned in our verse, for we read (in next week's parashah) that Avraham traveled to the land of the Plishtim where he again said that Sarah was his sister. How could Avraham have make the same mistake a second time after being told (later in our parashah) that his descendants would be exiled, which according to Ramban was a punishment for endangering Sarah the first time?! [Presumably, Avraham would have known why he was being punished and would not repeat his sin.]

Rather, Maharal writes, Avraham committed a different sin--specifically, when he said (15:8), "My Lord, Hashem/Elokim-How will I know [i.e., give me a sign] that I will inherit [the Land]?" It was for the subtle lack of faith implied in this question that Avraham was punished and his descendants exiled. (Gevurot Hashem ch.9)

R' Shimshon Raphael Hirsch z"l (1808-1888) cites Ramban's comment, but disagrees, as well, and writes that Avraham did not sin in our verses. Briefly, he explains that Avraham would not have done what he did unless he had no alternative, and we are not in a position to judge him. However, R' Hirsch adds: The Torah never presents our great men as being perfect, and it deifies no man. The Torah never hides from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great people. This in no way

makes them smaller; it actually makes them greater and more instructive. If they stood before us as the purest models of perfection, if they had no internal struggles, we would attribute to them a different nature than we have. In that event, they would not be a model that we could hope to emulate. Take, for example, Moshe's humility. If we did not also know that he was capable of anger (see Bemidbar 20:10 & 31:14), his humility would seem to us to be nothing more than his inborn nature. Now, however, we know that his humility was the result of immense self-control which we should copy. From the Ramban (above) we learn that it is not our task to whitewash the spiritual and moral heroes of our past. Rather, the seal of the Torah is truth. (Commentary on the Torah)

R' Moshe Chaim Luzzato z"l (Ramchal; Italy and Eretz Yisrael; 1707-1746) writes: The greatest and most powerful antidote to the yetzer hara, albeit an easy antidote, is for a person to take time every day, completely removed from any distractions, to ask himself: What did the Patriarchs do that caused G-d to want to have a relationship with them? What did Moshe Rabbeinu do [to cause his closeness to G-d]? What about King David, G-d's anointed one? What about all of the great people who preceded us? (Derech Etz Chaim)

R' Isaac Sher (see above) quotes Ramchal and notes that we know relatively little about the Patriarchs' specific deeds. We know that Avraham was willing to give his life for his beliefs [from the midrash describing how he was thrown into a furnace], that he took in guests, and that he was willing to sacrifice his son because G-d said so. Pirkei Avot tells us further that he was humble and generous. Still, there are few details to learn from! Moreover, we find Avraham doing some things that seem to contradict these traits.

Regarding the latter point--who are we to judge the Patriarchs, especially when our Sages have taught us (Tanna D'vei Eliyahu ch.25), "Every Jew is obligated to ask himself, "When will my deeds reach the level of the Patriarchs' deeds"? Rather, if we don't understand one of their actions, it is because our understanding is superficial.

What then can we learn from the Patriarchs? We know that they were prophets, and the Rambam tells us the steps that a person must go through to attain prophecy. Obviously, then, the Patriarchs accomplished all of those steps. Furthermore, as we refer to G-d as the "Elokim of Avraham, of Yitzchak and of Yaakov," we can infer that they made themselves vessels through which G-d could be revealed. On a practical level, this means doing the mitzvot not only because they are mitzvot, but with the goal of attaining perfection. (Lekket Sichot Mussar Vol.I p.37)

Letters from Our Sages

This letter was written by R' Yitzchak Hutner z"l (1904-1980; Rosh Yeshiva of Mesivta Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn) in response to a former student. The correspondent apparently had

bemoaned the fact that he faced spiritual struggles; as quoted by R' Hutner, he had written: "I will never forget the desire that I once had to succeed and to climb 'from strength to strength,' but now, my hope is lost." The letter is found in Pachad Yitzchak: Igrot U'ketavim No. 128.

Your letter reached my hand, and your words touched my heart. Know, my friend, that your very letter belies the descriptions that it contains. Now, let me explain this statement.

It is a terrible problem that when we discuss the greatness of our gedolim, we actually deal only with the end of their stories. We tell about their perfection, but we omit any mention of the inner battles which raged in their souls. The impression one gets is that they were created with their full stature.

For example, everyone is impressed by the purity of the Chafetz Chaim's speech. [Ed. Note: The Chafetz Chaim led the battle against lashon hara and is held up as the model of how a Jew should speak.] However, who knows about all the wars, the battles, the impediments, the downfalls, and the retreats that the Chafetz Chaim experienced in his fight with the evil inclination?!

As a result [of this gap in our knowledge of gedolim], when a young man who is imbued with a [holy] spirit and with ambition experiences impediments and downfalls, he believes that he is not planted in the house of Hashem. This is because this young man thinks that being planted in Hashem's house means experiencing tranquility of the soul "in lush meadows beside tranquil waters" [Tehilim 23:2].

However, know my friend, that the key for your soul is not the tranquility of the yetzer hatov, but the war against the yetzer hara. Your letter testifies that you are a faithful warrior in the army of the yetzer hatov. There is a saying in English, "Lose the battle and win the war." You surely have stumbled and will stumble again, and you will be vanquished in many battles. However, I promise you that after you have lost those battles, you will emerge from the war with a victor's wreath on your head.

The wisest of all men [King Shlomo] said [Mishlei 24:16], "The tzaddik will fall seven times and will rise." The unlearned think that this means, "Even though a tzaddik falls seven times, he will rise." The wise know well that the meaning is: "Because a tzaddik falls seven times, he will rise." On the verse [Bereishit 1:31], "And Elokim saw all that He had made and it was very good," the midrash comments, "'Good' refers to the yetzer hatov; 'Very good' refers to the yetzer hara." [In line with this midrash, R' Hutner continues:] If you had written to me of your mitzvot and good deeds, I would have said that it was a good letter. Now that you tell me of your falls and stumbles, I say that I have received a very good letter. Please, don't picture to yourself that a gadol and his yetzer hatov are one and the same; rather, imagine the gedolim at war with all types of base tendencies . . .

I have seen fit to write these words to you so that you can refer to them from time to time. Regarding specific details, it is preferable to speak face-to-face.

You are one who is planted in Hashem's house!

Sharing in your suffering,
Confident that you will prevail,
Praying for your success,
[Signed] Yitzchak Hutner.

P.S. Now you understand the opening sentence.

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.

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