

TAKE THE INITIATIVE!

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Lech Lecha

Take the Initiative!

We learn in Pirkei Avot (ch.5), "There were ten generations from Noach until Avraham. This teaches how patient Hashem is, for they all angered Him continuously until Avraham Avinu came and received the reward of all of them." Commentaries ask: What about Noach, his son, Shem, and the latter's great-grandson, Ever, all of whom were righteous?

Rav Ovadiah Yosef (see back page) explains: Rashi (to Bereishit 24:7) writes that Avraham told his slave, Eliezer, "Originally, Hashem was 'the G-d of the heavens,' but I accustomed people to know Him so that He is 'the G-d of the earth' also." This is a reference to the fact that Avraham and Sarah converted many believers to monotheism.

In contrast, Noach, Shem and Ever did not reach out to others. Though our Sages speak of the "Yeshiva of Shem and Ever," only a small, isolated group of students studied there, and only if they (the students) had sought out the teachers.

This, writes Rav Yosef, is the difference that caused Avraham to receive the reward for the good deeds of all of them. They did not trouble themselves to sanctify Hashem's Name in public, while Avraham did. To what may this be compared? To the Gemara's teaching (Berachot 47a), "One should always arise early to be among the first ten in shul. Even if 100 more men come afterward, he receives reward equal to all of them [because of his initiative.]" (Anaf Etz Avot p.325)

"Your reward is very great . . . What will You give me?" (15:1-2)

Avraham Avinu seems to be asking, "Of what use is a reward if I have no child to leave it to?" Why did Avraham ask this? Perhaps Hashem was promising Avraham great reward in Olam Ha'neshamot / the "World of Souls" (what we commonly refer to imprecisely as "Gan Eden" or "Olam Haba")!

Râ€™™ Moshe ben Nachman zâ€™l (Ramban; 1194-1270) explains: Avraham did not understand Hashemâ€™™s promise to be referring to reward in Olam Haâ€™™neshamot because the existence of such reward is obvious and requires no promise. Since our souls are not corporeal or physical, it is obvious that they do not die with the body, but rather live forever.

For the same reason, Ramban writes, the existence of Olam Haâ€™™neshamot is not mentioned anywhere in the Torah; one can logically deduce that such a world exists. Rather, the Torah focuses on non-obvious, seemingly unnatural consequences, for example, that rain will fall if we serve Hashem or that a person will become wealthy if he gives maâ€™™asrot / tithes properly. (Derashat Torat Hashem Temimah)

â€™œHe said to Avram, â€™~Know with certainty that your offspring will be aliens in a land not their own, they will enslave them, and they will oppress them four hundred years. But also the nation that they shall serve, I shall judge, and afterwards they shall leave with great wealth.â€™ (15:13-14)

We read in Shmot (11:2) that Hashem said to Moshe, â€™œPlease speak in the ears of the people, â€™~Let each man request of his fellow and each woman from her fellow silver vessels and gold vesselsâ€™™.â€™ The Gemara (Berachot 9a) comments on the use of the word, â€™œPleaseâ€™â€™ Hashem said, â€™œI implore you to tell them, â€™~Please ask the Egyptians for silver and gold vessels so that tzaddik [Avraham] wonâ€™™t say that I kept My promise to enslave them but not My promise that they would leave with great wealthâ€™™.â€™

This requires further explanation! Could anyone think that Hashem would not keep His promise? Râ€™™ Reuven Margalit zâ€™l (1889-1971; Poland and Eretz Yisrael) explains:

The above teaching of the Gemara was said in the name of â€™œthe academy of Rabbi Yanai.â€™ The same scholars, â€™œthe academy of Rabbi Yanai,â€™ observe later (Berachot 32a) that Moshe defended Bnei Yisrael after the sin of the Golden Calf by saying to Hashem, â€™œItâ€™™s Your fault! You gave them the gold.â€™ In short, according to â€™œthe academy of Rabbi Yanai,â€™ Moshe would have preferred that Bnei Yisrael not receive the Egyptiansâ€™™ riches and that is why Hashem had to implore him. (Nitzotzei Ohr: Berachot 10a)

â€™œKnow with certainty that your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own, they will serve them, and they will oppress . . .â€™ (15:13)

Râ€™™ Yehuda Loewe zâ€™l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) writes: Commentaries have offered a

number of explanations for why G-d decreed the exile in Egypt, nearly all of which are premised on some sin committed by Avraham Avinu (though they disagree what the sin was). If so, why did only Avraham's descendants suffer the exile, not Avraham himself?

Maharal explains: It was Hashem's plan that the family that suffered the exile would inherit Eretz Yisrael. Since He didn't want the descendants of Yishmael and Esav to have a share in the Land, He waited until they had split off from the Patriarchs' family before beginning the exile.

In reality, Maharal continues, the question above does not require an answer. The reality is that a person (here, Avraham) may be deserving of punishment, but his merits will protect him. However, if his children have insufficient merits, they will not be protected and will suffer because of their ancestor's sin, provided that there is a reason for the children to suffer. Here, the reason for their suffering was to eradicate from Avraham's descendants the minute vestige of lack of emunah / faith that was reflected in Avraham's question, "How shall I know that I am to inherit it?" (Gevurot Hashem ch.g)

"When Avram was ninety-nine years old, Hashem appeared to Avram and said to him, 'I am Kel Shakkai; walk before Me and be tamim.' (17:1)

R' Avraham Halevi Fattal (died 1981; father-in-law of R' Ovadiah Yosef) explains: Avraham Avinu's greatest desire was to teach others to recognize Hashem. He did this by persuading people with rational arguments to believe that there is one G-d and that He is the Creator.

Avraham might have worried that the mitzvah of brit milah, which requires converts paid, would discourage potential converts. Therefore, he was commanded to be "tamim," in the sense of "innocent," i.e., not questioning G-d's judgment.

R' Fattal continues: This interpretation is alluded to in the midrash which explains that G-d used the Name that we pronounce as "Shakkai" because that Name (which is spelled "shin-dalet-yud") as if to say, "I am the One who said 'Dai!' / 'Enough!' to Creation." He meant: If I had not said "Enough!" the universe would have continued to expand forever. But that was not My desire. Similarly, I am not interested in the *numbers* of converts you assemble, but in their *quality*, which will be tested by their willingness to sacrifice part of themselves at My command. (Va'yomer Avraham)

Memories of Yerushalayim

R' Yisrael Meir Lau shlita (former Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel) records the following memory of Râ€™™ Ovadiah Yosef zâ€™™l (1920-2013; former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel), who passed away earlier this week. This story took place in the early 1950s, when the orphaned Yisrael Meir Lau was a teenager studying in Yeshivat Kol Torah in Yerushalayim.

My fatherâ€™™s sister, Aunt Mata â€™™h, worried about my health and sent me from New York an \$18 money order with which to buy food to supplement the meager rations in yeshiva. I didnâ€™™t use it for that purpose--first, because I didnâ€™™t want to eat alone and there wasnâ€™™t enough money to feed all the students; second, because of my great desire to buy sefarim. . .

There were three used-sefarim stores in the Meah Sheâ€™™arim neighborhood: â€™™Pappenheim,â€™™ â€™™Shtitzburg,â€™™ and â€™™Schreiber.â€™™ On Fridays, when I was free from yeshiva, I used to go and wander in the stores, searching for bargains. These were very small stores, with sefarim piled from the foundation until the ceiling. It was impossible to walk around in these stores; there was barely room to stand there. One of the three booksellers said to me, â€™™You are beginning to remind me of Rabbi Ovadiah.â€™™ He explained, â€™™There is a married student here, a Yerushalmi Torah scholar, by the name of Ovadiah Yosef. He comes to the store wanting to look at the sefarim. He has no money to buy sefarim. He is the father to a large family. I allow him to stand on the ladder, which he does for three hours at a time--one leg on one side and one leg on the other--studying a book until he completes it. Thereafter, that book is stored in his head as if it were filed away.â€™™ (Al Tishlach Yadcha El Haâ€™™naâ€™™ar p.139)

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](https://torah.org)** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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