

IF IT BOTHERS YOU ENOUGH . . .

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A midrash records how a young Avraham concluded on his own that Hashem exists. Just as a palace cannot exist without a builder, he reasoned, so a world such as ours cannot exist unless it has a Creator.

When the students of the Mir Yeshiva took refuge in Shanghai, China during World War II, they found a vast, empty synagogue available for the yeshiva's use. There was no rational reason for a synagogue of that size to exist in a city that had never had more than a tiny Jewish presence. Subsequently, R' Yechezkel Levenstein z"l (mashgiach ruchani of the yeshiva) observed in a 1941 address: "Although we have never seen the builder or the caretaker of this shul, we understand without a doubt that there was a builder and there is a caretaker."

He continued: But how does a person like Avraham, who lives in a world devoid of knowledge of G-d, come to recognize G-d? The answer is that if a person is troubled enough by a problem, he finds a solution. Even if the solution is beyond one's normal abilities, one finds a way to attain it when he feels that he has no other choice.

The gemara teaches that although prophecy has been taken away from the prophets, it has been given to the wise. Indeed, said R' Levenstein, it is nothing less than prophetic when a person struggles over a problem and then sees light. Avraham, too, could not rest because he was so troubled by not knowing who had "built the palace," and thus he found an answer. (Mi'mizrach Ha'shemesh p.40)

“Avram took his wife Sarai and Lot, his brother’s son, and all their wealth that they had amassed, and the souls they made in Charan . . .” (12:5)

The Aramaic translator and commentator, Onkelos z”l, translates “the souls they made in Charan” as “the souls they subjugated to the Torah in Charan.”

Rashi z”l explains: They brought them under the wings of the Shechinah. Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women, and the Torah treats it as if they “made” them.

R’ Abba Mari of Lunel z”l (Provence; late 13th-early 14th centuries) describes the process that led Avraham to attract these converts:

Avraham Avinu was the father of all philosophers who expounded the truth. He found a world that was desolate, filled with false beliefs. Man in those days could not contemplate anything beyond the physical universe, and they worshiped the stars and constellations. They said: The sun is the great power that controls the upper world, and the earth is beneath it. . . This led to a belief that the world had always existed. Then Avraham came along; he enlightened the face of the eastern lands [a play on a verse in this week’s haftarah – Yeshayah 41:2] and made it his mission to uproot these beliefs. He began to debate with them, using logical arguments to show them the errors of their beliefs and to prove to them with clear proofs the existence of Hashem and His Oneness/Uniqueness; that He is separate from the physical universe and is not a force of that universe; and that He alone made the universe according to His Will. All of the wise men of his day disagreed with him, as is recorded in their books, which are quoted by Rambam z”l in Moreh Nevuchim. . . They argued that the sun is clearly very powerful, and he responded: “True, but it is only a tool, like an ax in the hands of a lumberjack.” Eventually, he persuaded a small number of them to accept the true faith, as our verse testifies and Onkelos explains. Wherever Avraham would travel, he would publicize these true beliefs, i.e., the belief in Creation, as it is written (Bereishit 21:33), “There he proclaimed the Name of Hashem, Kel of the Universe.” He proclaimed two important principles, principles that exceed all others in importance. The first: To know that Hashem necessarily exists, and that He is One/Unique. . . The second: To know that He created the world of His own Will. . . We do not find any hint that anyone before Avraham prayed to Hashem. Avraham did this to disabuse people of the belief that the world always existed, for prayer is of no use if the world was not created. . . Prayer is only useful if one believes in a Creator who has the power to respond to prayer and alter the course of nature. . . This is what our Sages mean when they say that Avraham was the first to call Hashem “Master.” (Minchat Kenaot ch.11)

“It was in the days of Amraphel, king of Shinar; Aryoch, king of Ellasar; Kedarla’omer, king of Elam; and Tid’al, king of Goyim. They made war on Bera, king of S’dom; Birsha, king of Amorah; Shinav, king of Admah; Shem’ever, king of Tzevoyim; and the king of Bela, which is Tzo’ar.” (14:2)

What is the larger significance of this event? R' Shlomo Goren z"l (1917-1994; Chief Rabbi of Israel) explains: It is apparent from the Torah that this war was Kedarla'omer's fight, and the other three kings were merely his allies. We read, for example (14:17), "The king of S'dom went out to meet [Avraham] after his return from defeating Kedarla'omer and the kings who were with him." Our Sages say that "Amraphel" was Nimrod, the most powerful king in the world, yet Kedarla'omer is singled out by the verse as the primary figure. That could only be because he instigated the war.

Why did he do that? We read (Devarim 32:8), "When the Supreme One gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the children of man, He set the borders of the peoples according to the number of Bnei Yisrael." This teaches that, when Hashem separated the nations after the Flood and the building of the Tower of Babel, He divided the world among the 70 nations and assigned territories to each. Eretz Yisrael was assigned to the descendants of Shem, son of Noach (see Rashi to Bereishit 12:6). Thus, we find that Malki Tzeddek, king of Shalem--i.e., Yerushalayim--was none other than Shem. (see Rashi to 14:18).

However, the Canaanites, descendants of Cham, son of Noach, conquered Eretz Yisrael from the sons of Shem (see Rashi to 12:6), all the way to the cities mentioned in our verse: S'dom, Amorah, Admah and Tzevoyim (see 10:19). Kedarla'omer was a descendant of Shem; he was king of Elam, named for a son of Shem (see 10:22). Therefore, specifically Kedarla'omer went to war to regain the land from the descendants of Cham.

Why then does the Torah portray Kedarla'omer as an aggressor? Because Kedarla'omer had no business fighting that battle. Hashem had already promised Avraham (13:15), "For all the land that you see, I will give it to you, and to your descendants forever." Once Avraham arrived in Eretz Yisrael, the Land no longer belonged to all the descendants of Shem, but only to the descendants of one--Avraham. (Torat Ha'mikra)

"But also the nation that they shall serve, dan Anochi / I [shall] judge . . ." (15:14)

R' David Hanaggid z"l (1224-1300; grandson of Rambam z"l) writes: According to the rules of grammar, G-d should have said, "adun," rather than "dan." However, "dan" alludes to the Ten Plagues--the dalet alludes to the first plague, "dam" / "blood," while the nun alludes to the last plague, which the Torah (Shmot 11:1) refers to as a "nega" (literally, "plague"). (Midrash Rabbi David Hanaggid al Haggadah Shel Pesach p.2)

A Torah Tour of the Holy Land

Is Eretz Yisrael holy because of the Mitzvot that apply there, or does it have inherent Kedushah / holiness?

This question was debated in the early 20th century in the context of the Hetter Mechirah / selling Eretz Yisrael to a non-Jew for the Shemittah year to avoid the restrictions associated with that year. In opposing the sale, which supporters said was necessary to preserve the viability of the then-nascent Yishuv / settlement, R' Yaakov David Willowsky z"l (1845-1913; rabbi in Poland, Chicago and Tzefat; know as "Ridvaz") argued that it makes no sense to sell Eretz Yisrael for that purpose, because the Kedushah / holiness of the Land would be nullified by the sale, in which case there would be no reason to preserve the Yishuv. Once the Land is sold to a non-Jew, Ridvaz argued, the agricultural Mitzvot no longer apply, and it is no longer the "Holy Land."

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; rabbi of Yafo; later the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) disagreed, and he wrote to Ridvaz: While it is true that Eretz Yisrael has added Kedushah because of the agricultural Mitzvot that apply there and nowhere else, Eretz Yisrael also has inherent Kedushah that is independent of the Mitzvot. Indeed, our Sages say that the Mitzvah of settling Eretz Yisrael is equivalent to all other commandments combined. This would be illogical if the Mitzvah of settling Eretz Yisrael existed only to facilitate the performance of other Mitzvot. (Both the views of Ridvaz and R' Kook are found in the latter's Shabbat Ha'aretz p.61 and Mishpat Kohen No. 63)

R' Avraham Bornstein z"l (1838-1910; rabbi, rosh yeshiva and chassidic rebbe in Sochatchov, Poland) writes: Midrash Rabbah states that Yaakov was afraid of Esav because the latter had lived in Eretz Yisrael while Yaakov had lived abroad with Lavan. Surely Esav was not performing the agricultural Mitzvot. Yet, Yaakov feared the merit that Esav had amassed by living in Eretz Yisrael. This indicates that living in Eretz Yisrael has value in its own right. (She'eilot U'teshuvot Avnei Nezer: Y.D. 454:32)