

THE ORDEAL OF DEPARTURE

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Before Abraham could be deemed worthy of becoming the Patriarch of the Jewish people, Hashem put him through ten ordeals to probe the depth of his devotion - all of which he passed brilliantly. The last and most familiar is, of course, the Akeidah, when Hashem commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, only to stay his hand at the very last moment. This week's parshah describes one of the earlier ordeals, Hashem's command to Abraham to leave Mesopotamia and settle in a different land.

The Midrash considers this ordeal comparable to the Akeidah as a test of Abraham's devotion. But how can these two situations be compared? On the one hand, we have the tragic image of an old man blessed with an only son at the age of one hundred and now being asked to bind him hand and foot and place him on the altar as a sacrificial lamb. Not only would he be left childless and devastated, but for his remaining age-dimmed years, during his every waking moment, he would think of nothing else but what he had done to his son. What a shattering ordeal! An ordinary man could not possibly have withstood it. On the other hand, we have the image of a man in vigorous middle age being told to relocate to a different land. Granted, relocation is an unpleasant experience. But tragic? Harrowing? Shattering?

Furthermore, let us take a closer look at the wording of the command. "Go away from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land I will show you." (Bereishis 12:1) Logically, it would seem, an emigrant first leaves the house of his father, then the city of his birth and, finally, his country. Yet here, Hashem tells Abraham to make his exits in the reverse order. Why is this so?

The answer lies in a deeper understanding of the command of departure. Hashem was not merely telling Abraham to relocate geographically a few hundred miles to the west. He was telling Abraham to make a complete break with the culture in which he had grown up and spent all of his life. Abraham had indeed recognized his Creator at a very young age and was completely free of pagan ideology, but he was still connected by cultural ties to the pagan society in which he lived. The style of his home, the clothes he wore, his modes of language, the cultural timber of his daily existence were all Mesopotamian. As long as he remained thus connected to the corrupt society of his ancestors he would never be able to reach the highest levels of prophecy and attachment to his Creator. The only choice was to break away and move to a different land. In a strange land, even a corrupt pagan one, he could remain totally detached from his cultural surroundings. Standing alone

in Canaan in his stalwart purity and righteousness, he could penetrate to the highest spheres of Heaven. But not in the land of his fathers.

Therefore, Hashem commanded him to sever all his cultural umbilical cords in a logical progression. First, his attachment to the country in general. Then his closer attachment to his birthplace. Finally, his attachment to the very household in which he was born. When this final detachment was accomplished, he could begin his spiritual journey toward prophecy and the establishment of the Jewish nation.

This departure, therefore, was a most difficult ordeal indeed. Abraham was required to purge himself every cultural vestige of his entire life, to penetrate every hidden crevice of his heart and soul, search out every hidden crumb of Mesopotamian culture and sweep it out. Perhaps this ordeal was not as frightening and tragic as the Akeidah, but in pure difficulty it may have surpassed it.

We all live in our own Mesopotamia, and no one can deny that the sinister tendrils of the surrounding culture insinuate themselves into the innermost crevices of our own hearts. We are not Abrahams, of course, and we cannot be expected to extricate ourselves completely from these entanglements. However, we can at least recognize them for what they are and try to keep them at arm's length so that we can grow spiritually even as we live in such an environment. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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