

AVRAHAM'S STRANGE REACTION

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And [G-d] took [Avraham] outside, and said to him, 'Please look up into the heavens, and count the stars if you can,' and He said, 'So will be your descendants.' And he trusted in HaShem, and he considered it for him as Tzedakah." [16:5-6]

G-d promises to *Avraham* that he will have a son to inherit him, and a multitude of descendants. And then, the *Torah* says, *Avraham* "trusted in *HaShem*." *Rashi* explains that here he did not ask G-d for a sign or signal, which he did request when G-d promised the land of Canaan to his descendants forever.

The next phrase is truly perplexing - "and he considered it for him as *Tzedakah*." *Rashi* says that G-d considered *Avraham's* trust to be meritorious, and to demonstrate righteousness (*Tzedakah*). The *Ramban* (Nachmanides) challenges this explanation - how could *Avraham*, a prophet of G-d, who talked to G-d and recognized Him as all-powerful, fail to trust G-d? Especially when *Avraham* demonstrates his faith by going through a series of trials, and is even willing to destroy his life's work (and contradict all he knew about the nature of G-d) by slaughtering his only son - how could this same *Avraham* fail to trust in G-d for a good thing such as this?

Therefore the *Ramban* offers an entirely different explanation of the phrase, saying that *Avraham* is the subject in both parts of the verse: he trusted in G-d, and considered the promise to be benevolence (*Tzedakah*). *Avraham* did not conclude that he was receiving this promise as a reward based on his merits, even though he had been told that they were very great - rather, he attributed it to G-d's kindness.

In my mind, *Avraham's* greatness can be seen in this alone. Even after being told by none less than G-d Himself how great his merits were, *Avraham* still attributed a great promise such as this to G-d's kindness. How often do we think that we "deserve better," and wonder why G-d has not given us more? *Avraham* teaches us to recognize what we find in the prayers for Shabbos morning: "If our mouths were filled with song like the sea... and our legs light as the deer, we would be incapable of thanking You... for one of the thousands upon thousands of thousands... of the kindnesses which You have bestowed upon our forefathers and upon us."

The *Ramban* points out that a reward for merit can be withdrawn, if at a later time the honoree no

longer deserves the honor. An unconditional promise from G-d, on the other hand, is eternal. And so it is: we are called "the Eternal Nation." Almost 2000 years of exile have been unable to blot the children of Avraham from the map. We will still be here in 200 years - not because of continuity commissions, not because of new studies, boards, and councils, not because of "our own might and the strength of our hands" but because G-d promised **Avraham** that it will be so.

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