

NOT ALL METHODS OF SERVING HASHEM ARE CREATED EQUAL

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Not All Methods of Serving Hashem Are Created Equal¹

"Avraham obeyed My voice, and observed My safeguards, My commandments, My decrees, and My Toros." Most of us intuitively consider this *pasuk* synonymous with the message that the Avos observed the Torah before it was formally given to Man at Sinai. The *pasuk*, however, makes mention only of Avraham, but not the others. While the premise is certainly correct, it is significant that the Torah makes the statement explicit only in regard to Avraham.

This is not the only anomaly linked to Avraham. He seems to be the only one of the Avos who was put through the paces of a series of *nisyonos*². Why should this be? Why weren't the other Avos tested in the same fashion? Moreover, the Torah takes less for granted when referencing Avraham's spiritual level. For example, when Avraham turns to Soroh, saying, "Now I know that you are an attractive woman," in effect the Torah tells us volumes about the general modesty both of them practiced. Surely, the level of the other Avos was also beyond our comprehension. Why, then, does the Torah casually assume it in its discourse only in regard to Avraham?

The Zohar enriches our understanding of one of the themes in the lives of the Avos. Wells keep showing up in each of their stories. Just why are they so important? The Zohar relates Avraham's wells to his mission in life. Digging those wells means uncovering the existence of HKBH, and then sharing belief in it with the rest of the world. With Avraham's death, the Plishtim reverted to their idolatry, thus covering up the well, or blocking the continuing flow of Avraham's teaching. Yitzchok's subsequent uncovering of his father's wells means that he began instructing the world once more in the lessons with which his father had distinguished himself.

This approach is certainly enlightening. But it creates new questions in its wake. Why was the digging and redigging of wells important to only Avraham and Yitzchok, but not to Yaakov?

The explanation is as follows. The wells represent the specific *midah*, the approach to serving Hashem, that each of the Avos specialized in. Avraham's well was a source of *chesed* and *ahavah*; Yitzchok's brought forth *din* and *gevurah*. Yaakov is associated with Tiferes, an amalgam of *chesed* and *gevurah*. It did not reveal a new facet of Hashem for people to relate to, but combined the teachings concerning two *midos* that were by this time already known to others. Yaakov did not discover and reveal a new *midah*, so much as reengineer two older ones. It makes perfect sense that Yaakov does not dig wells of his own!

Once we accept this approach, we quickly comprehend why it was only Avraham's wells that were vandalized, while no one rose to undo the work Yitzchok put into his restoration of wells. The spiritual effort we expend in changing our inner selves sometimes brings only temporary gain. The lessons we learn, the *madregos* we achieve, are often fleeting accomplishments. This is not universally true, however. Some of our investments are secured. The spiritual effort that we put into establishing the very basis of our service of Hashem - the core belief that there is a Din and there is a Dayan (that there is judgment, and there is a Judge) - does not dissipate, is not spoiled and perverted in the course of time by the machinations of the *Sitra Achra*³. More simply put, *yiras ha-onesh*, the fundamental awareness that there are always consequences of our actions, cannot be changed into something less deserving. There is no nearby competitor with which to confuse this awareness.

By contrast, the same cannot be assumed regarding *ahavas Hashem*, the love of Hashem. Ahavah, while it is the higher *madregah*, is often redirected to improper objects, creating an *ahavah* "fallen" from its lofty perch, leaving in its place a misshapen, distorted caricature of the original. The Plishtim could easily undo, counteract the teaching of Avraham; they had no recourse against the teaching of Yitzchok. (We understand why the Zohar cautions that the first step we take in our service of Hashem must be *yirah*, even though it is not as elevated an approach as is *ahavah*.)

Things begin to fall into place. *Nisyonos* are meant to test the mettle of our accomplishments. Ahavah's gains can be temporary or illusory. To be important, they need to withstand the tests that are put to it. Avraham served Hashem through the *midah* of *ahavah*; therefore he needed to be tested. Yitzchok, who served Hashem with *yirah* (as well as Yaakov who incorporated *yirah* in his mixed- *midah* approach) required no *nisyonos*! His *yirah* was not open to interpretation or faulty revision.

At the pinnacle of Avraham's success, he needed to borrow from territory not as familiar to him. At the Akeidah, Hashem says about him, "Now I know that you are one who fears Hashem." How did the ultimate test of Avraham's love for Hashem morph into a demonstration of Avraham's *yiras Hashem*? Our discussion above provides the answer. Because Avraham specialized in *ahavah*, he recognized how the precariousness of his accomplishment. He girded himself for the Akeidah by drawing deeply from *yirah* to help him through the event. Hashem took note of that *yirah*. Because Avraham was so involved with *ahavah*, he alone required *nisyonos*, and he alone required the protection of the full gamut of observance - "My safeguards, My commandments, My decrees, and My Toros" - for his method of Divine service to remain pure and intact.

Thus, all the details of the parshah lead to the same conclusion - the absolute imperative to build our avodah on a firm platform of *yiras Hashem*.

¹ Based on *Nesivos Shalom* pgs. 165-166

² *See, however, Maharal, Derech Chaim, pg 222*

³ *A synonym for the cosmic force of evil*

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