

SMARTER BUT NOT WISER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Chevron . . . (Bereishis 23:2)

On one hand we are told that the "actions of the fathers are a sign for the children," meaning that we can learn about life and the service of God just by paying close attention to how our Forefathers lived. On the other hand we are told that our Forefathers lived such elevated lives that we can't really compare ourselves to them, no matter how similar they may have seemed to us.

Therefore, when Sarah mistreated Hagar because of the latter's arrogance it was on a higher spiritual level than we are on today. Likewise, when sibling rivalry tore Ya'akov's family apart, it wasn't, we are told, sibling rivalry on the level that we might know. It was something else altogether.

It's a little confusing. If our ancient ancestors lived on an entirely different spiritual plane than we do now, then how can we apply the lessons of their lives to our own? If they did not, then how can we excuse their behavior when it seems that they acted below par even by our standards?

There is an interesting gemora that is a good place to start the answer to this question. It goes like this:

In the college of Rav Ashi the lecture [one day] ended at [the discussion of the] "Three Kings." He said, "Tomorrow we will begin [the lesson] with our 'colleagues'."

[That night King] Menashe came and appeared to him in a dream. "You called us your colleagues and the colleagues of your father? If so, from what part [of the bread] is [the piece for reciting] the blessing taken?"

"I do not know," he answered.

"You have not learned this," he chided, "and yet you call us your colleagues!"

"Teach it to me," he pleaded, "and tomorrow I will teach it in your name at the session."

He answered, "From the part that is baked into a crust."

He asked him, "Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols?"

He replied, "Had you been there [in my time], you would have picked up the hem of your garment and run after me [to worship them as well]."

The next day [Rav Ashi] told his students: "We will begin [today's session] with our 'teachers'." (Sanhedrin 102b)

Rav Ashi was one of the main compilers of the Babylonian Talmud, otherwise known as Talmud

Bavli. He lived around 500 CE. Menashe, on the other hand, was the son of Chizkiah HaMelech, and the king who turned the Jewish nation to idol worship around 533 BCE. It was understandable that the former would think as he did about the latter.

What Rav Ashi found out through his dream was not that Menashe had not worshipped idols as history recorded. Rather, what he found out was that Menashe, in spite of his terrible sin of leading the entire nation to one of the worst sins possible, had still been a talmid chacham, someone to be respected. This requires an explanation. The answer comes from Menashe's response: "Had you been there [in my time], you would have picked up the hem of your garment and run after me." Why? What was different about Menashe's time that would have drawn Rav Ashi to sin in a way that he would never even consider doing in his own time?

The answer to that question comes from elsewhere in the Talmud:

Woe, woe, it is [the yetzer hara] who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us! You have surely given him to us so that we may receive reward through him. We want neither him, nor the reward through him! After that a tablet fell down from Heaven for them, upon which was written the word "Truth" . . . They ordered a fast of three days and three nights, after which [the yetzer hara] was surrendered to them. He came out from the Holy of Holies like a young fiery lion. (Yoma 69b)

Once upon a time there was a very strong drive for idol worship. As a result, people were very drawn to it and stumbled in this sin terribly. The time of the Tannaim was a special time historically, evident by the amount of miracles recorded in the Talmud that happened then. One such miracle was the story mentioned above.

Thus at the time of Menashe, the draw towards idol worship was so powerful that it drew great people after it. By the time Rav Ashi lived, it had been disposed of, for all intents and purposes. Without the yetzer hara for something it is very hard to intellectually and emotionally appreciate what others had to endure while fighting against it.

A son may cry over the loss of his favorite chocolate bar, while the father may ask him, "What's the big deal? It was only a chocolate bar!" Later that day the same father may sulk over the fact that he lost a championship match, to which his wife may say, "What's the big deal? It was only a game!" Personal challenge is always a matter of what has to be overcome to succeed.

The Torah wants us to be able to learn from our ancestors in every generation, so it tells its stories in ways that a person in any generation can make a comparison to his or her own life. Their responses to their crises may be similar to our own, but the circumstances in which they occurred were very different. The spiritual challenges they faced in their times were far greater than the ones we face today, relatively-speaking.

It's like watching someone come out of a meeting in a huff and saying to him, "Why are you so

angry?" only to hear something that would have made you twice as angry. With a single explanation you go from doubting the person's self-control to being impressed by it.

It is hard to know all the spiritual forces that had been at play during the time of the Avos. The Torah only provides the "roshei perakim," which amounts to only a brief overview of just the important facts. Even the many midrashim do not really tell us what they had to fight against to accomplish they did. This is why it is so easy to think, mistakenly, that the world has not changed much since their times.

Understanding how it was different comes from appreciating what was at stake. Again, by way of analogy, it can be compared to a child who does not heed his parent's advice to save his money. They tried to impress upon him the importance of "saving for a rainy day." However, all he knows, at his current age, is that a penny earned is having a penny to spend on having fun with his friends.

Eventually the young man grows up, graduates, and gets married. After years of renting he and his wife decide they want to own a house of their own. After finding one, they head to the bank for a loan. Unfortunately, though, the amount of money they need to borrow is more than the bank is willing to lend. This is in spite of the collateral he has mustered between his parents, his in-laws, and himself. Dejected, they leave the bank, and as they drive home in disappointment, he says to his wife, "This must be the rainy day my parents told me about when I was younger." "What?" she says, confused.

He explains, "When I was younger I made some good money, and my parents used to always tell me to save some of it for a rainy day. I realize now that they meant for occasions like this one. Oh how I wish I had that money now!"

His wife smiles a knowing smile. "My parents used to say the same thing to me. They came from Europe and were always poor. I just thought they were being overprotective because of their past. Oh how I wish I had that money now too. Between the two of us we probably could have paid down the balance of the house."

"Well, at least we had good times growing up," he says to his wife as consolation. "Given the choice now," his wife tells him, "I'd gladly change those good times for a house, and years of good times ahead in it."

The rabbis teach:

Who is a wise person? One who sees what is being born. (Tamid 32a)

This means, of course, that a wise person is someone who can project how his or her current decisions can lead to specific consequences in the future, either good or bad. It means understanding in the present how detrimental the results of a current decision can be in the future, or just the opposite. It means appreciating what is at stake when we make our decisions, at least to

the best degree possible. As the Ramchal points out in Derech Hashem, the period of the Forefathers was a unique one in history, what he calls "The Period of Roots." The people who lived at that time were the ancestors of all future nations, not just physically but spiritually as well. What they became, what they made of themselves could for the first and last time be transferred to their descendants all the way down to the end of history.

This may not have been known to many living at that time other than Avraham and Sarah. They knew the stakes. They knew what they were building and what it entailed. They understood how they would impact generations to come, not just the next couple of generations, but all the way to the end of history as we know it. When they took a step in the world, they did it with every single descendent in mind.

We don't do that. We don't have the ability to do that. Even the greatest leaders of our people, since the end of prophecy, have had difficulty making decisions for generations. How could they? It's hard enough just making good decisions for a current generation, and even that requires Heavenly help on top of incredible breadth and depth of learning and personal genius.

So, though on the surface of it, the actions of our Forefathers may seem similar to ours, and even worthy of criticism from us, that is only true to a certain extent. The greatest physicist today, unless he happens to also be a great Kabbalist as well, has little or no idea what all of Creation is really about. Through his microscope and his telescope he can see many aspects of the World of Asiyah, but he reminds blind to the worlds of Yetzirah, Beriyah, Atzilus, and certainly Adam Kadmon, the Kabbalistic names for the higher spiritual dimensions.

Avraham Avinu, on the other hand, more than likely authored Sefer Yetzirah, one of the foremost Kabbalistic works of all history. He may not have understood a simple lightbulb, but he had an incredible grasp of worlds far beyond all that any lightbulb could ever illuminate. At the end of the day, with what he knew, Avraham could have continued on just fine to the end of history without all of our technology.

In fact that is the main point of technology. It helps us to compensate physically for what we lack spiritually. This is one of the reasons why many today in the Torah world are wary of all technology, from a spiritual point of view. We would be better off honing our spiritual strengths, they argue, rather than becoming dependent upon technology to shore up our spiritual weaknesses.

In hindsight, and given the direction of mankind today, they have a very good point. Somewhat of a safeguard against the ills of all of our technological advancement is realizing that, though we may be smarter in many ways than previous generations, we are wiser than them in no ways. This is certainly the case when it comes to the world of Torah.

We need to learn what we can from the greats of our past. At the same time, we need to maintain perspective regarding who they really were.

Text

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