

STRAIGHTER THAN STRAIGHT

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Avram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had acquired, and the souls they had acquired in Charan . . . (Bereishis 12:5)

The issue of yashrus, personal integrity, spoken about last week, is more fundamental than many think. It is really the goal of character development and Tikun Olam—World Rectification. The world exists because of it, and is destroyed when there is a great lack of it.

In fact, Noach was probably saved because of his yashrus. The Ohr HaChaim says, at the end of Parashas Bereishis, in explaining the concept of “chayn,” that there are some things that man does that matter more than others to God. These are the things that really give man “chayn” in the eyes of his Creator.

Of course, God doesn't tell us what those things are. If He did, we would end up focusing only on those matters and ignore other lesser but also important issues and acts. For example, some people focus on certain areas of learning which seem most important, but at the cost of others which are also important, and at times, even more important.

Besides, we're the ones who are supposed to figure out what matters most to God. It's part of learning how to think like God, which learning Torah is supposed to make possible. As Rashi explains, Noach learned Torah so he was able to come to understand what God values most, achieve it to whatever degree he could, and earn chayn in the eyes of God as a result. Noach may not have been the most yashar person in history, but in such a crooked generation, his yashrus went a long way.

This is what the Talmud means to teach when it says that anyone who has yiras Hashem—fear of God—must, by definition, exhibit chayn as well (Succah 49b). There is something about integrity, which is a strict commitment to truth, God's truth, that earns the respect of others. Even in a place as corrupt as Egypt, Yosef's adherence to the truth gave him chayn in the eyes of all those who knew him.

This is when, as the verse states, a tzaddik becomes the “foundation” of the world (Mishlei 10:25). The world literally exists because of him, because of his yashrus, without which God loses interest in man and destroys the world.

Though Noach had yashrus, it was Avraham who WAS yashrus itself. This is why the Talmud says

that Sefer Bereishis is called "Sefer HaYashar," literally the "Book of the Upright," because of the Avos (Avodah Zarah 25a). It was Avraham, not Noach, who recognized the reality of God at age 3. It was Avraham, not Noach, who broke idols and tried to convince others to do the same. It was Avraham, and not Noach, who was prepared to burn to death rather than to submit to the threats of the evil king of his day.

This, of course, begs the question. If Avraham was so yashar, why did he move to Egypt because there was a famine in the land. According to the Ramban, he should have stayed and trusted in God for his sustenance. Did God bring him all the way to Eretz Yisroel just to force him out again? This is why, the Ramban says, the Jewish people had to later go down into Egyptian exile. It was because of Avraham's "sin."

Furthermore, if Avraham was so yashar, how could he lie first to Pharaoh, and later to Avimelech, about his wife just to save his own life? Wouldn't the yashar thing have been to keep to the truth and trust God for the results? Yashrus goes out the window once a person finds wiggle-room to escape negative consequences. That is the very basis of most sins.

What about Ya'akov Avinu, who is even called "Ish Emes," the "Man of Truth"? He deceived his father to take a blessing intended for Eisav! Even if his mother commanded him to do it, it was still his father he had to deceive, a halachic problem for sure. Where was the "emes" in that?

It had to be somewhere, because we never stopped calling Ya'akov Avinu "Ish Emes." Other than the Ramban, no one faults Avraham for going to Egypt because of the famine in Canaan, and cite other reasons for the future Egyptian exile. In fact, it may have been Avraham's initiative that paved the way for Jewish survival in Egypt later on in history. As Rashi explains in this week's parsha, Avraham was constantly doing things in his time to spiritually assist his descendants in the future.

We also see in both instances that God did not take exception with Avraham's decision to distort the truth about his relationship to his wife. On the contrary, Avraham's relationship to God only became stronger with each passing day and experience.

The answer has to do with the definition of yashrus itself. It is not, as many might think, doing that which seems to be the obvious truth at the moment. Even shalom bayis, peace between people, can be a justification for a veiling of the truth. God Himself will teach us this at the beginning of next week's parsha, as Rashi explains regarding Sarah's remark about her husband's age.

Sometimes, the truth can even kill, and has. Eli HaKohen died when he found out that the Aron HaKodesh had been captured by the Philistines. The shock caused him to fall backwards and break his neck, a tragic end to such an illustrious career as Kohen Gadol and leader of the Jewish people. Similar results must have occurred to others numerous times throughout history.

Once upon a time, back in the Garden of Eden and before history was turned upside down on its head, the truth was straight as an arrow. It was the era of Truth and Falsehood, and not yet of Good

and Evil. The former is absolute, while the latter can be very subjective. Wars are fought between enemies who each claim to be right. Hitler, ysv"z, claimed to be doing mankind a favor by exterminating the Jewish people.

Life outside the Garden is rarely so yashar:

When Rav Yosef, the son of Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi was sick, his soul left him and then it returned and he recovered. His father asked him, "What did you see?"

He answered him, "I saw an upside down world, where what was up (Rashi: those who are important in this world) was down, and what was down was up!"

"My son," he answered, "you saw a correct world . . ." (Pesachim 50a)

Sometimes people do not even know at the moment if what they are doing is the right thing for the moment, or forever. The road to Gehinom is paved with good intention means that though people mean to do the yashar thing, somehow it ends up making the situation more crooked.

This is why God gave the Jewish people Torah. Life is not only "a corridor to the World-to-Come" (Pirkei Avos 4:16), it is an intellectual maze to the next world. Torah is meant to help man navigate that maze, so that he not get trapped within it and die, at least spiritually.

The trouble is, Torah is most effective at its intended purpose when it has been well-learned, both in quantity and quality. Until a person reaches such a point in their learning, they have already be tested many times with respect to their yashrus. Some people won't even have the opportunity to reach such a level of Torah learning and understanding. What are they supposed to do? Live a crooked life?

The answer has to do with a revised and expanded definition of the concept of yashrus, spoken about here in the Talmud:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: "A man should always occupy himself with Torah and the commandments even if not for their own sake. By [occupying himself with them] not for their own sake, he comes to do so for their own sake." (Sotah 47a)

This is called "Torah Lishmah." Literally, it means learning Torah and performing mitzvos for their own sake, not for any personal gain. It means living an altruistic existence, in a way that you serve life, not the other way around. It means living your life as a partner of God in the process of world rectification, not as a reason for its rectification in the first place. This is true yashrus in the ultimate sense.

Not only is this the intellectual ingredient necessary to know what is yashar in a crooked world, it invokes Heavenly help when a person's ability to do so fall short. This is why even unlearned people can end up doing the yashar thing without sufficient learning while learned people can end up doing the crooked thing with much Torah background. It has to do with a person's yashar approach to life.

This is also why Gedolei HaTorah can relate to reality on levels we can't even fathom. Their decisions may look crooked to us, but that is only because we lack the totality of Torah they have, or the Heavenly help they enjoy to go above and beyond normal human abilities. This is also what made the Avos so unique. Their devotion to God's truth and purpose of Creation gave them the ability to know, when others could not, when the "truth" was falsehood, and what seemed to be like "falsehood," was really the truth.