

# LOVE AND SACRIFICE

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

In this week's Haftorah Avraham received the singular honor of being called, "the one who loved G-d." No one else in the Tanach, not even Moshe Rabbeinu, ever received that accolade. Why? What was unique about Avraham that he is known as "the one who loved Me?"

Three times a day we say in Shema, "and you should love G-d your G-d." The Rambam explains that the Mitzvah of Loving G-d is fulfilled through studying G-d's world and actions. With a greater awareness and understanding of G-d's unfaltering benevolence comes a deepening love for G-d.

This explanation of the Mitzvah of Loving G-d is consistent with the Torah's understanding of love and intimacy. In reference to Adam and Chava it says, (4:1) "and Adam knew Chava his wife." The Torah's choice of the word "knew" to describe the physical intimacy between Adam and Chava indicated that true love and intimacy between a husband and wife should transcend physical attraction and desire. It is, and should be, a product of our ever-increasing knowledge of each other and ourselves.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos 5:3 states, "Avraham received the reward that all of the previous twenty generations would have otherwise received." The reward referred to by the Mishnah is the closeness and intimacy that results from an ever-increasing knowledge of G-d. Through the study of Torah, the teaching of Torah, and the doing of Mitzvos we increase our understanding of G-d. Therefore, our love for Him also increases. Only the children of Avraham and Sarah were given the Torah and granted the opportunity of having with G-d the most intimate and loving relationship possible. This is what the Mishnah in Avos meant when it stated, "Avraham received the reward that all of the previous twenty generations would have otherwise received." This is what is meant by the title, "The Chosen People."

The concept of "closeness" is often misunderstood. What does it mean that the Jews are the only nation gifted with the opportunity of developing the most intimate relationship with G-d? Granted that the Torah was "given" to the children of Avraham and Sarah; however, once the Torah was given shouldn't the means for comprehending G-d and learning to love G-d be available to everyone?

The Rambam in the beginning of his introduction to the Mishnah Torah explains that Torah consists of two parts, the Written Law and the Oral law. Both parts were given by G-d to Moshe on Har Sinai. The Written Law, the Five Books of the Torah, is at best an outline of G-d's commandments. It is the Oral Law, the Mishnah and the Talmud, which explains the details and the nuance of how to

understand and love G-d. The Written Law, the Bible, is available to all the nations. However, the Oral Law is unique to the children of Avraham and Sarah.

In the Shacharis Amidah (morning prayers) for Shabbos, we express our appreciation for the gift of Shabbos. "You did not give it (Shabbos) to the nations of the landsâ€¦" Shabbos is a weekly moment of unique celebration between G-d and His Chosen People. It is a day set aside for prayer and study. It is a day for the Jew to revel in his closeness. It is a celebration of intimacy involving an awareness of His love for us, and our expressed love for Him.

Was Avraham the only man in his generation to "know" G-d? If there were others, was Avraham considered the most knowledgeable? Avraham's uniqueness was not that he was the only one to know G-d. He was not. Avraham's uniqueness was not that he was the most knowledgeable. He was not. Avraham's uniqueness was that he loved G-d more than anyone else did in his generation or the previous 19 generations. At first glance, this seems to be a contradiction. If knowledge motivates love, and there were others who were more knowledgeable than Avraham, then there must have been others who loved G-d more than Avraham! Why then is Avraham called, "the one who loved Me"?

Fundamental to our belief in G-d is the acceptance that to "know" G-d requires a teacher. Although, like Avraham, someone might recognize that there is a Creator; nevertheless, to understand G-d and His expectations for the universe demands a teacher. G-d first taught Adam and Chava and they in turn taught their three sons. Subsequent generations either chose to pass on the knowledge of G-d's existence and His commandments or they did not. That is the reality of free will. However, there were always individuals such as Shes, Chanoch, Mesushelach, Noach, Shem, and Ever, who believed in G-d, received, and then transmitted the knowledge of G-d to the next generations. Granted, there were but a mere handful of such righteous individuals; however, a prophet was always available to help the "seeker" find the truth.

During the time of Avraham, at least three great Tzadikim were alive: Noach, Shem, and Ever. All three were great-grandfathers of Avraham, and were his teachers. After coming to the self-realization that there must be a Creator, Avraham sought out these three great teachers who confirmed his realization and taught him how to further his search for understanding. Noach, Shem, and Ever lived their lives devoted to revealing G-d's actuality within nature and extrapolating His expectations for humanity and the universe. Each was a confirmed prophet, and each possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of G-d. Avraham spent many formidable years drinking from the fountains of their wisdom and seeking their guidance. However, Avraham was different. Whereas they waited for the very few to seek them out Avraham sought out the multitudes who did not even know that there was something to seek.

Reaching out to others, developing personal relationships, and teaching, takes time and effort. Studying G-d's universe and revealing the secrets of His intentions takes time and effort. In the

beginning of this week's Parsha, the Torah relates that at the age of 75, Avraham traveled to Canaan with his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and the "souls that they had made in Charan." Rashi explains that these "souls" were to the people that they had converted to believing in G-d and keeping the seven Mitzvos commanded at that time. The Medresh suggests that there were hundreds, possibly thousands of individuals whom Avraham and Sarah had influenced.

According to one Medresh, Avraham was 3 years old when he realized the existence of the Creator. According to another, he was 40 years old when he recognized G-d's existence. Regardless of how old Avraham was, he had already lived a full, involved, and exciting life by the time he was 75. During that time, he also spent quality time studying beneath the great scholars in the academy of Noach, Shem, and Ever. How many years could he have possibly devoted to the study of G-d's actuality and also touch the lives of the "souls they had made in Charan?"

Noach lived to be 950. Shem lived to be 600. Ever lived to be 464. When Avraham was born in 1948, Noach was 892 years old, Shem was 390 years old, and Ever was already 225. In fact, both Shem and Ever would live long enough to teach Avraham's grandson Yaakov! These men devoted all of their time to the study of G-d, the pursuit of knowledge, and the realization of truth. Each one was a prophet. It is impossible to suggest that Avraham knew more than they did about G-d. Therefore, it must be that they also loved G-d more than Avraham did! Why then is Avraham the only one in all of history to earn the title, "the one who loved G-d?"

As we already explained, Avraham's uniqueness was his teaching. Avraham and Sarah are known as the paradigms of Chesed. Their drive and passion to serve G-d was manifest in their singular devotion to teach the world about G-d. They fulfilled the ideal of "learning for the sake of teaching." Their home was a teaching laboratory and their entire lives were committed to spreading the knowledge of G-d. However, there are degrees of Chesed. The wealthy philanthropist who generously gives of his finances is deserving of honor. The philanthropist who gives selflessly of his money and his time is even more admirable. However, the philanthropist who devotes his entire life to charitable causes and acts of Chesed, so that his financial success is treated as a tool in his personal mission to better the world, is by far the most deserving of them all. Such an individual sacrifices far more than just his money or time. Such a person is giving his heart and soul to doing Chesed.

Avraham's greatest passion was to know G-d. Nothing gave him greater personal pleasure and fulfillment. The Talmud related how the Rabbis criticized the great Ben Zoma for not having married. Ben Zoma answered, "I accept your criticism, but what can I do, my soul craves Torah! I am helplessly addicted to the study of Torah and knowing G-d!" If Ben Zoma was so passionately attracted to the study of G-d's word that he could not spend the time to do anything else, how much more so must Avraham's passion have been!

In Psalm 27, Dovid Hamelech sings forth his most passionate request. "Only one thing do I request

from G-d! Allow me to sit in the house of G-d all the days of my life!" If King David's single request was to sit in the House of G-d and drink of the wisdom and knowledge that is the Torah, how much more so must have been Avraham's singular desire to study G-d's world and extrapolate His expectations!

Yet, Avraham willingly sacrificed what had to have been his greatest desire and passion so that he could teach others to believe in G-d. Such was his Chesed. Such was his love. Therefore, more so than Noach, Shem, or Ever, Avraham, Sarah and their children were rewarded with the gift of Torah, the gift of knowledge, the gift of G-d's intimate love.

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The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.

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