

SPIRITUAL YICHUS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

There appears to be three events that had to happen before Sarah could give birth to Yitzchak in next week's Parsha:

1. The names Avram and Sarai had to be changed to Avraham and Sara.
2. Avraham had to have a Bris Milah (circumcision).
3. Avraham and Sarah had to engage in the Chesed (kindness) of welcoming the "Three Angels" into their home.

The first two events tangibly changed Avraham and Sara from who they were to who they became. The third event, welcoming the "Three Angels," was not a tangible change in the beings of Avraham and Sarah; instead, it was a qualitative change in how they did Chesed. It reflected the profound changes that the first two tangible events had on the souls of Avraham and Sarah.

Do physical, environmental, and or social changes affect the essence of our souls? Are the changes that take place "in our souls" passed on to our children?

Intelligent people understand that the nature vs. nurture debate is at best academic. Practically speaking, external and genetic factors profoundly affect an individual's thinking and behavior. However, do the external changes affect the essence of the soul, or does the soul remain as pure and pristine as it was? Can external factors affect the genetic orientation of a person's personality?

The verse in Tehilim (61:12), "G-d, create in me a pure heart." is followed by the statement, "and G-d, renew in me a steadfast spirit." It is important to define the terms "heart" and "spirit."

The commentaries, (Ibin Ezra, Metzudos Tzion and Dovid) do not distinguish between the pure heart and the steadfast spirit. They understand the verse as King David's stirring supplication for Divine aid in combating the Evil Inclination. However, that does not restrict us from seeking further possible insight.

Among the first essays published in Rav Dessler's Michtav M'Eliyahu is a lengthy discourse on the relationship between justice and mercy. In the course of explaining how justice and mercy are not mutually exclusive, Rav Dessler explains the fundamental principle of "Zechus Avos - The merits of our Forefathers."

(The reason I call Zechus Avos a fundamental principle is because much of our relationship with G-d is predicated on the merits of our ancestors since Avraham and Sarah until this day. Israel is ours

because starting in this Parsha G-d promised "the land" to the Avos and the Imahos. Our Amidah (silent Tefilah) begins by referencing the Avos. Many of the Tefilos recited during Selichos and the Yomim Noraim make direct reference to the merits of our Forefathers. We are told that the greatest Tana, the famed Rabbi Akiva, was never appointed Supreme Justice of the Sanhedrin because his ancestry stemmed from converts to Judaism. As such, he was no less the Jew; however, when assuming the office of Supreme Justice of the Sanhedrin no one person can expect to successfully lead the Jewish people without the added support of the Zechus Avos stretching back to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov.)

Rav Dessler explains that the benefit of Zechus Avos is not that we are the recipients of G-d's favoritism because we are the children of the Avos and Imahos. True, Hashem really loved the Avos and the Imahos more so than anyone else! As the Verse in this week's Haftorah (Yishayah 41:8) states, "My servant Yakov, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Avraham, who loved Me." However, nepotism, partiality, and preferential treatment are not the ways of G-d's justice. The Zechus Avos that are so profoundly important to our relationship with G-d are the unique Midos (characteristics), spiritual strengths, and abilities that we inherited from our ancestors.

Rav Dessler references the Medrashik story of Avraham being thrown into the fiery furnace. Rav Dessler points out that throughout history our nation has proven its ability to die "Al Kiddush Hashem (for the sanctification of G-d)." Even Jews who are distant from daily observances and Mitzvos have found the inner strength and fortitude to accept death rather than deny G-d or His Torah. Where does that spiritual strength and courage come from? We can understand that a person with the singular determination and belief of Avraham would be willing to "be thrown into the fiery furnace;" however, why should someone without the years of belief, love, and practice be willing to die for G-d?

Rav Dessler explains that the innate ability to make that ultimate sacrifice was imprinted in the spiritual psyche of the Jewish nation by the actions of Avraham Avinu. The same is true with the Akeida as well as with all the many moments of supreme sacrifice and devotion performed by the generations preceding us. Those are the Zechus Avos that make us who and what we are. Those are the fundamental building blocks of our nation and individual spiritual personalities.

When we pull out the "Zechus Avos card" we are not asking for favoritism or special treatment. We are reminding G-d and ourselves that it is worthwhile for G-d to grant us another chance (Teshuvah) because who we are and what we are is the stuff of our Avos and Imahos. Reinvesting in us is a reinvestment in the basic goodness that we inherited from Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov.

The "pure heart" that King David prayed for was the Zechus Avos granted to all the children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov. The renewal of a "steadfast spirit" was King David requesting Divine help in using those special merits to better serve G-d and his nation.

Before Avram and Sarai could give birth to the next generation of Jews G-d had to make sure that

they possessed the necessary spiritual merits to pass on to their children. G-d knew that those merits would be the salvation and redemption of the Jews throughout history. Without them, the nation would be lost. Therefore, G-d insisted on three events before the conception of Yitzchak.

G-d first changed Avraham's name from Avram to Avraham. By adding the letter "Hay" to his name G-d converted Avraham's soul to be the progenitor of "many nations." It was this "change" that allows all subsequent converts to Judaism to associate themselves with Avraham and Sarah. Through the conversion process they "become like a newborn child." (See Rambam, Bikurim 1:4) The name Avraham reflected his spiritual readiness to assume the role of Father Of The Nation. As such he was altered in a way that allowed for his spiritual strength and greatness to be genetically transmitted to his son Yitzchak and all the many generations that would follow.

G-d then changed Avraham physically. Just as there was a spiritual change in Avraham so too there had to be a physical one as well. Just as spiritual change and growth demands willful desire and work on the part of the individual to change and grow, so too the physical changes must be done by the willful act of an individual. If the father is devoted to the spiritual growth of his son the father will make sure that his son is circumcised. However, if the father does not do the Mitzvah for his son, the son will have to take care of it when he becomes an adult.

Sarai's name was then changed to Sarah to reflect her spiritual readiness in assuming the role of Mother Of The Nation. As such she was altered in a way that allowed for her spiritual strength and greatness to be genetically transmitted to her son Yitzchak and all the many generations that would follow.

Lastly, G-d created the setting wherein which Avraham and Sarah would put into practice their newfound spiritual strength and greatness. The setting would involve kindness to three angels, the destiny of a family, the creation of a nation, and the future of the world.

(To be continued.)

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