

# THE LESSON OF AVRAHAM

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

In spite of the detailed description devoted to the life and accomplishments of our father Avraham, he remains an enigmatic figure to us. How did one human being, without an army, a government, a publicity apparatus, change the face of his generation and of all later generations? What was his secret strength that allowed him not only to stand alone against the pagan, violent society of his time but also to actually gain the respect and eventually influence that very society?

I do not pretend to have any particular new insight into this matter, nevertheless I think that the Torah itself casts light on this issue. It describes Avraham as a person whose influence flowed from his personality and his behavior rather than from public pronouncements or ideological statements. By feeding the hungry, befriending the lonely, remaining loyal to those who were no longer really worthy of his loyalty, he "called out the name of the Lord" wherever he was. People saw in him a special person, a unique figure, a hero of spirit and action. Eventually people saw godliness in him. And finally, people saw God Himself, so to speak, through Avraham's eyes and faith. All of this through Avraham's behavior, demeanor and public reputation.

It is interesting that this lesson of Avraham was meant to be an example for all later generations, especially those of his descendants. The view of Judaism regarding the description of the lives of Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, Sarah, Rivka, Leah and Rochel, is that this description was meant as a "sign" - an instructive lesson of how to live and behave - to their generations. Jews were to ask themselves: "When will my actions equal those of my forbearers?" The lives, attitudes and behavior of the founders of Judaism were to be the everlasting standard by which all generations of Jews would measure themselves. Thus the Torah really does not describe Avraham to us as much as it sets out a program for our lives and aspirations.

I have mentioned many times before in these columns that Western society, post-modern and essentially rootless, pursuing pleasure and individual gratification at almost all cost, unwilling to sacrifice for the future or for others, suffers from a lack of heroes and role models. Sports stars, movie actors and actresses, princesses and politicians, all have proven to be poor objects of emulation and imitation. Having no standard by which to measure ourselves, we are unhappy in our narcissism and mediocrity. We do not realize the cost to ourselves and our world of remaining ignorant of Torah and Jewish tradition, of not attempting to reach out and touch the hem of our father Avraham, of being smug and self-righteous in our prosperity and selfishness.

Having no memory any longer even of our grandparents, let alone of Avraham, modern American

Jews facing self-induced extinction, blissfully whistle past the graveyard and espouse causes and struggles that can only further dim the Jewish spark still remaining within us. We were meant to represent godliness, morality, goodness, tradition, loyalty, and family in the world. These were the prime beliefs of Avraham and through his behavior, the rest of humanity came to recognize and even adopt these values. Does the non-Jewish world see these traits and life-style in the Jewish community today? Are we interested in "calling out to the name of the Lord" in today's world? Are we proud to be the children and people of Avraham, or do we feel the whole matter to be superfluous and irrelevant to us and our families in today's world? These are the crucial questions that face Jews today - not pluralism, peace processes, continuity and other manufactured sloganeering. Let us be the children of Avraham in deed as in name!

Shabat Shalom.

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