

# ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARD

*by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig*

*"And it occurred, as he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai..." (12:11)*

As they approached Mitzrayim, Avraham asked Sarah to claim that she was his sister. This was to protect him from the Egyptians who might lust after Sarah, and kill him if they were to know that he was her husband.<sup>1</sup>

Why is it necessary for us to know that this discussion transpired as Avraham and Sarah drew close to their destination? Why, in fact, was an issue of such gravity not discussed prior to their departure from Eretz Canaan? The Midrash explains that as they neared their destination, Avraham became aware of Sarah's exceptional beauty.<sup>2</sup> Why is this the juncture where Avraham becomes aware of his wife's beauty?

Mitzrayim was a country notorious for the immoral and lascivious behavior of its inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> Generally, an individual living in such a society would be affected, even if he himself would not indulge in any perverse behavior. Perhaps the Torah is teaching us that although a tzaddik of Avraham's caliber would not be dragged down by the immorality of the society where he lives, the influence of the society does have a subtle effect on him. In Avraham's case, this manifested itself in his becoming aware of his wife's beauty.

*1.12:11 2.Tanchuma 5 3.20:15*

## It's Not The Thought That Counts

*"Then there came the fugitive and told Avram..." (14:13)*

Chazal identify the "fugitive" as Og, the king of Bashan, who had escaped the onslaught of the four kings and fled to Avraham to inform him that his nephew Lot had been captured.<sup>1</sup> The Midrash relates that for this deed, Og was blessed with longevity. At the same time, the Midrash reveals that Og's true intentions were malevolent; he hoped that Avraham would pursue Lot's captors and be killed, allowing him to marry Sarah.<sup>2</sup>

In Parshas Chukas, we find that Hashem reassures Moshe, telling him not to fear, for Bnei Yisroel will successfully defeat Og and his nation.<sup>3</sup> The Midrash explains that Moshe feared that the merit of

Og's service to Avraham would protect him against Bnei Yisroel.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to understand Moshe's fear, in light of the evil intent which was the impetus for Og's actions.

Human nature is such, that we find it difficult to express gratitude for benefits we have received from others. One technique we employ to avoid expressing gratitude, is to focus on the intent of the benefactor. We rationalize that if the intent of the benefactor was a selfish one, then the act was done for his benefit and not ours. Therefore, we are exempt from showing gratitude. Chazal are teaching us that "hakaras hatov" - acknowledging the benefit we have received, is not dependent upon the intent of the benefactor, rather the benefit which has been provided. The lesson can be especially helpful in the relationship between a child and his parents. The child should focus on the benefit he has received from his parents, the gift of life being the ultimate benefit, and not on their motivations.

1. Bereishis Rabbah 42:8 2. Ibid 3. Bamidbar 32:33 4. Tanchuma ibid.

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## Badge Of Honor

*"if so much as a thread to a shoe strap; nor shall I take anything of yours! So you shall not say 'It is I who made Avram rich.'"*(14:23)

After Avraham defeated the largest army ever amassed and recaptured all the spoils and captives from the four kings,<sup>1</sup> the Torah records a dialogue between Avraham and the king of Sodom in which the king offered to divide the spoils with Avraham; Avraham would take the possessions, while the king of Sodom would receive the freed captives. Avraham rejected this proposal with the statement, "If so much as a thread to a shoe strap; nor shall I take anything of yours! So you shall not say 'It is I who made Avram rich.'"<sup>2</sup> The Talmud teaches that for having refused to accept even a thread or a shoe strap, Avraham's children merited to receive two precepts, Tzitzis for the thread and Tefillin for the strap.<sup>3</sup> Aside from the obvious play on words, how is Avraham's reward commensurate with his actions?

Rashi explains that Avraham's actions were particularly meritorious, for he did not want to benefit from stolen property.<sup>4</sup> The Maharsha questions the claim that this was stolen property, for halachically the spoils of war are the legal possession of the victor.<sup>5</sup>

Although Avraham was legally entitled to the spoils, it is clear that this was not the king of Sodom's perception. The mere fact that he offered to divide the bounty with Avraham implies that he felt he had rights over these possessions, and that he was making a magnanimous gesture. What the Sages find meritorious in Avraham's actions is the fact that he dealt with the king of Sodom within the

context of the king's perception. According to the king's perception, if Avraham were to take everything by force, he would be a gazlan, a thief. As Hashem's representative, Avraham could not allow for the perception that he had either stolen his fortune or that the money had been given to him as a mortal's magnanimous act, for this would detract from Hashem's honor. Avraham showed that in order to protect Hashem's honor, he was willing to deal with people based upon the reality which they had created for themselves, even though the basis for their position was unfounded.

This characteristic is rewarded with Tzitzis and Tefillin for the following reason: The same section in the Talmud that teaches that Avraham was rewarded with the mitzva of Tefillin, explains that when a Jew wears Tefillin, he instills awe in all who see him.<sup>6</sup> This is not because they fear the person himself, rather they sense the presence of a Higher Authority who is being represented by this individual. We could compare this to a policeman who wears a badge; one does not fear the man himself, rather the institution which he represents. Tefillin are the badge that represents Hashem's presence. It is interesting to note that the Tefillin are worn on areas generally designated for displaying a badge, the sleeve and the cap. Concerning Tzitzis, the Talmud teaches a similar concept. A Jew wearing Tzitzis is akin to a slave who wears the insignia of his master on his garment.<sup>7</sup> These two mitzvos reflect the Jew's designation as Hashem's representative and facilitate the perception of Hashem's presence in this world.

Avraham showed the ability to accept someone else's perception of reality. Therefore, he was a fitting candidate for the precepts which allow Hashem's presence to be perceived. The reason is as follows: Egocentricity prevents a person from seeing a differing point of view. Avraham displayed a complete lack of egocentricity, which is the cornerstone for the acceptance of Hashem. All too often we require that others live within our reality, especially if we consider their position to be incorrect. Although it meant giving up that which was rightly his, Avraham dealt with the king of Sodom within the king's own reality, in order to preserve Hashem's honor in this world.

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