

AVRAHAM AND THE ESROG TREE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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The Relationship Between Avrohom and the Esrog Tree

At the beginning of Parshas Vayeira, Avraham looked up and noticed three people standing on the road. Avraham ran to greet them. [Bereishis 18:2]. The pasuk [verse] repeats the word 'Va-yar' (and he saw) twice. First it says "He looked up and he saw..."; and then it repeats "...and he saw and he ran toward them". What was this second "seeing"?

The Mikdash Mordechai, Rav Mordechai Ilan, gives an interesting interpretation. He explains that there are many occasions when a situation arouses "enthusiasm of the moment". Our initial impulse is to rush in and do the mitzvah or good deed. But, with the passage of time, rational thought often overcomes emotion and the enthusiasm dissipates.

This was not the case with our Patriarch Avraham. The pasuk is telling us that Avrohom was not merely the type of person who rushed into something on the spur of the moment. His enthusiasm maintained itself beyond the stage of the knee-jerk reaction. Even upon reevaluation -- giving the situation a second look, so to speak -- he remained determined to offer kindness and hospitality. His attribute of kindness emerged not only from emotion (the first sighting) but from rational consideration, as well (the second sighting).

The Sages speak of this consistency regarding Avraham's attribute of Chessed. It was his hallmark. The Toras Kohanim comments that the expression "fruit of a beautiful tree (Pri Etz Hadar)" [Vayikra 23:40] refers to Avrohom Avinu.

What is the analogy between Avrohom Avinu and the Esrog (which the Torah refers to as a Pri Etz Hadar)?

The Talmud [Succah 35a] says that the comparison of Avrohom to an Esrog is based on an alternate translation of the phrase "Pri Etz Hadar". Literally, Pri Etz Hadar means, "fruit of a beautiful tree".

However, the Talmud says that by switching the vowels, "Hadar" (beautiful) can be read "Hador" (that dwells). Therefore, the pasuk can be translated, "fruit of a tree that dwells". This refers to the fact that the Esrog, unlike other fruits, does not just grow, blossom, and fall off the tree within three months. The Esrog lives on its tree from year to year. It has a consistency that is not found in any other fruit.

That was the attribute of Avrohom. He did not just have momentary enthusiasm that inspired kindness. When guests came, Avrohom was not only excited on the first day. What about guests that stayed three days? What about guests that stayed for a week? Avrohom did not tire of offering hospitality. Avrohom was consistent, just like the Esrog that is consistent on the tree from year to year.

A verse regarding the Akeida [the sacrifice of Isaac] says, "On the third day Avraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from a distance" [22:4]. The Medrash Tanchuma asks why G-d waited until the third day, and did not show the place to Avraham on the first or second day. The Medrash answers: The purpose of waiting three days was so that the nations should not think that Avraham was seized by a momentary frenzy, in which he was overcome by emotion and did not have time to reflect on what he was doing.

Avrohom Avinu had plenty of time to think about the Akeida. For three days he walked and thought it over. But that was Avrohom. He was not a flighty man of emotion whose spirit grabbed him for the moment. He was the consistent one, like the Esrog - dwelling on the tree from year to year.

The Maharal in the Nesivos Olam brings an unbelievable Medrash:

Ben Zoma says that we find an all-encompassing pasuk in the Torah -- "Hear Oh Israel, the L-rd Our G-d, the L-rd is One" [Devarim 6:4]. Ben Nannos states that there is an even more important pasuk in the Torah than that of Shma Yisrael. What is that? "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Vayikra 19:18]. Shimon ben Pazzai comes and says there is a pasuk that is even more significant and more meaningful and more inclusive than either of these two pasukim [verses]. What could that pasuk be? "And the one lamb you shall make in the morning..." [Shemos 29:39].

The Maharal explains ben Pazzai's seemingly strange choice. This verse refers to the Korban Tamid (the Continuous Daily Sacrifice). The pasuk is referring to consistency, the ability of man to serve G-d with total devotion. The day-in/day-out service is significant. Tamid -- Consistency day-in/day-out, year-in/year-out -- This is the great principle of the Torah.

The Talmud records a number of occasions when disciples asked different Amoraim [Talmudic Rabbis] the following question: "By what merit did you live so long?"

One Amora answered, "I never took a shortcut through the Beis HaMedrash" [Study Hall]. One answered, "I never called a person by a nickname". Many answers are given, but there does not appear to be a common thread as to what provided the merit for longevity.

I once heard that there is, in fact, a common thread. Each Amora answered "I NEVER..." (mei'olam

lo...). The key is NEVER -- day-in/day-out, consistency. The key is the dwelling on the tree from year to year. The choice of the mitzva is not the central thread. The central thread is Temidiyus -- consistency. "The one lamb shall be offered each morning..."

The True Disciple of Avrohom Avinu

The pasuk writes, "And Avrohom arose early to the place where he had previously stood..." [Bereishis 19:27]. After Avrohom's dialogue with G-d about Sodom in which Avrohom was unsuccessful in his petition to save the city, the pasuk tells us that Avrohom went back to the place where he originally petitioned G-d.

The Talmud learns from this [Brochos 6b] that "Whoever establishes a fixed place for prayer, the G-d of Avrohom will help him." The Talmud learns the importance of a fixed place for prayers from Avrohom. The Talmud states that one who does pray in a fixed place will not only be answered by the G-d of Avrohom, but when he dies, people will say about him "such a modest person, such a pious person, a true disciple of Avrohom Avinu".

The question can be asked: granted it is a nice idea to pray in the same place, but why does the Torah place such great emphasis on this concept?

I saw a wonderful interpretation from Rav Bergman in the Sha'arei Orah. The Mishneh [Avos 5:19] contrasts the disciples of Avrohom with the disciples of Bilaam: "One who has these three attributes is a disciple of Avrohom Avinu; one who has three other attributes is a disciple of the wicked Bilaam. A person who is generous, humble and not haughty, he is a disciple of Avrohom Avinu; but one who is stingy, arrogant, and haughty is a disciple of Bilaam the wicked." That is the contrast between an Avrohom and a Bilaam.

Bilaam also prayed. When Balak asked Bilaam to curse the Jewish people, Bilaam traveled to a certain location and he prayed and offered sacrifices, but he was not successful. G-d did not allow Bilaam to curse the Jewish people. Bilaam had to bless them.

What was Bilaam's immediate reaction? Bilaam changed the location. "Let's go to a different place and pray." They went to a new place. They built new altars, and they brought new sacrifices.

What happened when Bilaam tried again? He failed again. What was his reaction? "Change the place again!" Bilaam went to a third location and started the same procedure all over again... Again Bilaam was unsuccessful...

What do we find by Avrohom? Avrohom pleaded with G-d for Sodom. But when Avrohom was not successful, what did he do? He went back to pray again at the exact same location where he originally prayed.

What is the significance of the fact that Avrohom went back to the same place and Bilaam changed places? The difference between Bilaam and Avrohom is haughtiness.

Bilaam is haughty. A haughty person can not accept "It's my fault!" A haughty person must rationalize, "If my prayers were not successful, there must be something wrong with the location. There must be some kind of extraneous factor. It couldn't be me. Nothing could be my fault." When a Bilaam is not successful in his prayers, he goes to another place, because he cannot accept the fact that he may be responsible for his own failure.

However, when an Avrohom Avinu is not successful with his prayers, he says, "It's my fault; I am not worthy enough; I didn't pray well enough." It has nothing to do with the place. That is a feeble excuse. An Avrohom Avinu, who has a humble and modest spirit can own up and say the words "It's my fault."

When our Rabbis say, "He who establishes a fixed place for his prayers, the G-d of Avrohom will help him..." they are not only referring to a person who always prays in the same place in the same synagogue all his years. Our Rabbis are speaking of a person whose ego is healthy enough to say, "It is my fault; it is my lack; I will not look for extraneous places or things to blame it on." If a person has this attitude throughout his life and his behavior reflects this, then we can truly say at his eulogy, "There goes a pious person, there goes a humble person, he is a true disciple of Avrohom Avinu."

Glossary

Akeida-- Binding (of Yitzchak)

Sources and Personalities

Rav Mordechai Ilan-- author of Mikdash Mordechai, contemporary, Israel.

Rav Bergman -- (1849-1932)author of Sha'arei Orah, contemporary, Israel

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