

LEGACY OF AVRAHAM AND OF YITZCHAK

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 213, Is Lying Ever Permitted? Good Shabbos!

The Legacy of Avrohom and the Legacy of Yitzchak

This week's parsha contains the famous story of the Akeidas Yitzchak [Binding of Yitzchak]. I would like to relate two insights on the topic of the Akeida.

Rav Chaim Volozhiner, in his commentary to Pirkei Avos (Ruach Chaim), says that over the centuries, there have been many causes for which Jews have become martyrs - giving up their lives in order to sanctify the name of G-d. Many of the extraordinary character traits that Jews have exhibited, Rav Chaim Volozhiner writes, are actually legacies that we inherited from our Avos [Patriarchs]. Throughout the centuries, Jews have had the strength to go to their deaths sanctifying G-d's Name because our father Avraham did so first.

The principle of "Ma'aseh Avos Siman l'Banim" teaches us that everything that the Avos experienced, happened -- or will happen -- to their descendants. Rav Chaim Volozhiner explains that in addition to the simple interpretation that the actions of the Avos are a historical blueprint of the future, the actions of the Avos are also a personality blueprint of the future. The Avos foreshadow our character legacy. If we have within ourselves the spiritual capability to go to martyrdom for the sake of Torah and Mitzvos, it is only because we have received this character trait as a legacy from our distant ancestors.

Rav Chaim Volozhiner writes, specifically, that throughout the ages Jews endured tremendous self-sacrifice in order to fulfill the mitzvah of living in Eretz Yisroel [the Land of Israel]. Today it is relatively simple to live in Eretz Yisroel. However, a hundred years ago it literally involved risking one's life -- just to travel to Eretz Yisroel. To live in Eretz Yisroel was a constant danger to life. Nonetheless, Jews did it by the thousands. Where did they get that ability? What allowed them to put their lives on the line for the sake of this mitzvah? Rav Chaim Volozhiner answers that Avrohom Avinu was the trailblazer. Avrohom, by following the command of G-d (Lech Lecha m'artzecha [Bereishis 12:1]) to

forsake everything and journey to Eretz Yisroel, paved the way for the rest of us.

There is a concept in Jewish thought called Emunas Chachamim [Trust in our Wise Ones]. We must trust our leaders, even if their advice sometimes flies in the face of what we consider the right approach. From where do Jews get this ability to "blindly" listen to the Chachamim?

I once heard an explanation in the name of the Chasam Sofer. Yitzchak's test was, in a sense, even greater than the test faced by Avraham. Avraham heard from G-d Himself, that he was to sacrifice Yitzchak. But who told Yitzchak that he was to be a sacrifice? Yitzchak must have considered it awfully strange that G-d, who values life, wants a human sacrifice. Such ritual, after all, is an anathema to all that Torah stands for. But Yitzchak listened to the Chacham of his day. He had belief in the "Wise Ones".

This act on Yitzchak's part -- to trust in his Chacham -- is the original source of the character trait passed down by legacy to later generations of Jews -- to have Emunas Chachamim, even in the face of apparent illogical reasoning.

At times, blindly following the advice of our Chachamim is no less a test than "Lech Lecha" [Go forth from your land]. But just as we received the power to withstand the trials of "Lech Lecha" from Avraham, we received the power to withstand the trials of "Emunas Chachamim" from Yitzchak.

The Name of The Game is Hishtadlus [Making the Effort]

For the second insight on the Akeida, I would like to quote a letter that Rav Yitzchak Hutner, zt"l, sent to Rav Moshe Sherer, zt"l. Rav Sherer wrote that in 1971 Agudath Israel of America, of which he was President, suffered a terrible setback. For years they worked on trying to pass legislation that would permit governmental aid to private education. Finally, after many years, they were able to pass a law that they felt met the constitutional requirements for preserving the separation of Church and State. However, the United States Supreme Court struck down this law in the summer of 1971. Literally years of work and money went down the drain with one decision.

Rav Sherer wrote that he received a letter that summer from Rav Hutner. Rav Hutner wrote, "When I heard the negative ruling of the Supreme Court, I saw an image of you and how you must have felt when you received that decision."

Rav Hutner quoted an insight from Reb Yisroel Salanter: When it comes to Community work, one must accept upon himself 3 resolutions: Never lose one's temper; never get tired; and never want to win.

Contrary to what the 'immortal Vince Lombardi' would have us believe (Winning isn't everything - winning is the Only thing), Reb Yisrael Salanter says that the truth is just the opposite. When it comes to communal work, a person should not expect or even want to win -- he just has to try!

Rav Hutner wrote, "I've seen you over the years and have noticed that in the face of adversity you

haven't gotten angry. Over the 40 years that you've been in communal service, you have never gotten tired either. But now you must try to pass the most difficult of tests in communal endeavors. You have to learn that it is not crucial to win -- it is only crucial to try."

Rav Hutner continued, "How do we see that this is a Jewish trait? Every single Rosh HaShannah we ask G-d for Mercy and invoke the memory of Akeidas Yitzchak. But what happened at Akeidas Yitzchak? It never happened. The Akeida was 'aborted' in the middle of the mission. Avraham never killed Yitzchak! True, the mission was never accomplished -- but Avraham received credit for trying! In this merit we seek Mercy every year. The clear lesson is that the importance lies not in seeing the final victory. The importance lies in putting forth the effort."

Success is for the football field, but for community efforts and 'holy work' the only thing that truly matters is 'how you play the game' -- and the intensity and sincerity of the effort invested.

Sources and Personalities

Rav Chaim of Volozhin (1749-1821); Lithuania

Chasam Sofer (1762-1839) [Rav Moshe Sofer/Schreiber]; Hungary [Bratislava]

Rav Yitzchak Hutner (1907-1980); New York [Yeshivas Chaim Berlin]

Rav Moshe Sherer (1921-1998), President of Agudath Israel of America

Rav Yisroel (Lipkin) of Salant (1809-1883); Founder of the Mussar Movement

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.

Technical Assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#); Yerushalayim.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Vayeira are provided below:

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