

THE INVERTED SEQUENCE OF THE PATRIARCHS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bechukosai

The Inverted Sequence of the Patriarchs

Towards the end of the Tochacha [chastisement], the Torah says, "And I will remember My Covenant with Yaakov and even my Covenant with Yitzchak, and even My Covenant with Avraham will I remember, and the Land I will remember" [Vayikra 26:42]. Rashi comments on the inverted chronological order of the Patriarchs. Rashi explains: "Yaakov by himself would be worthy of this merit (that I will remember and redeem you), and if he is not worthy, adding Yitzchak's merit will tip the balance, and if that is not sufficient, Avraham's merit will be added to the combination."

Rav Meir Shapiro addresses this same question with a different insight. Chazal teach us that each of the three Patriarchs symbolized a certain character trait. Avraham's attribute is Chesed [kindness]. Yitzchak personifies the attribute of Avodah [Divine Service]. Yaakov Avinu represents Torah. Rav Meir Shapiro noted that there was a time that Jews, despite the exile and its distractions, were meticulous not only in kindness and not only in prayer, but they were meticulous in Torah study as well. The study houses were full of learning.

The Torah is teaching that when the Jews are in exile, G-d will remember that they perpetuate the attribute of Yaakov Avinu -- they cling to Torah study; it is learned and it is spread throughout the nation. If in such a historical period, G-d will be ready to redeem us then our redemption will come in the merit of Yaakov Avinu -- the zechus of Torah.

But as the exile has persisted, Torah study has become less and less a factor in the lives of Klal Yisrael. Fewer and fewer people learn. The burden of persecution and the toil of everyday living precluded Torah education beyond a very tender age. People went to Cheder until Bar Mitzvah and then had to leave school and make a living to help the family make ends meet. Only the select few continued on beyond "Yeshiva Ketana" [elementary school]. But even in such a period, where Torah was not widely learned, Jews still always davened. Avodah persisted with much deeper roots than the intellectually challenging dedication to Torah study. If redemption were to take place in such an era, then it would be credited to the merit of the Patriarch Yitzchak.

And then, continued, Rav Meir Shapiro, the exile persisted such that Torah learning was weakened

and even shul attendance diminished. But there still remained an attribute amongst the Jewish people that would stay with them forever -- the characteristic of the Patriarch Avraham -- the attribute of Chessed.

We see there are Jews who have no connection to Torah or to Avodah. They are never seen in the Beis Medrash [study hall] or even the Beis Kenesses [synagogue]. But they do take leadership roles in establishing hospitals, orphanages, and all kinds of social welfare organizations.

This, Rav Meir Shapiro says, is the interpretation of the pasuk [verse] in Parshas Bechukosai: I hope to redeem Klal Yisrael for the merit of their Torah study (the attribute of Yaakov); if not that then for the merit of their dedication to prayer (the attribute of Yitzchak); but if not that then at least I will redeem them for their dedication to Chessed (the attribute of Avraham).

Rav Ruderman, the late Ner Israel Rosh Yeshiva, once quoted to me a teaching from Rav Elchanan Wasserman. The Talmud [Pesachim 107b] expounds on the pasuk at the beginning of Parshas Lech Lecha: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you and I will magnify your name and you will be a blessing." [Bereishis 12:2]. The Gemara explains: "I will make you a great nation" -- this refers to the fact that we say "G-d of Avraham". "I will bless you" -- this refers to the fact that we say "G-d of Yitzchak". "I will magnify your name" -- this refers to the fact that we say "G-d of Yaakov."

The Gemara continues: "I might think that we should mention all of them in the conclusion of the Blessing?" (Magen Avraham, Yitzchak, v'Yaakov). To counter this notion, the pasuk concludes "and you will be a blessing" -- meaning with your name (Avraham) they will conclude, not with a combination of all the names.

Rav Elchanan interprets the words of the Talmud "becha chosmim" (with you will be the conclusion) homiletically: At the end of time, at the conclusion of all generations of history, the final redemption will not come about through Torah or through Avodah but "becha chosmim" - with your attribute of Chessed will your children merit their final redemption.

For Deeds Surpassing Wisdom, Have Faith

The following insight is found in the sefer Moser Derech on the Haftorah of Parshas Bechukosai.

Rav Elazar ben Azariah states [Avos 3:17]: "One whose wisdom exceeds his deeds can be compared to a tree with many branches and few roots. Such a tree is easily uprooted by the wind." The Mishna supports this statement by quoting a pasuk from our Haftorah: "He will be like a lone tree in the wilderness and will not see when goodness comes" [Yirmiyahu 17:6].

The Mishna continues, "However, one whose deeds exceed his wisdom may be compared to a tree with few branches and many roots. Even all the winds in the world will not topple such a tree. As it is written, 'He will be like a tree that is planted near water, which will spread its roots alongside brooks, and will not see when heat comes, whose foliage will be ever fresh, who will not worry in years of drought and will never stop producing fruit.'" (another metaphor from our Haftorah) [Yirmiyahu 17:8].

In the context of the chapter in Yirmiyahu, these two pasukim refer to neither wisdom nor deeds. The context is set in the 5th pasuk: "So says Hashem - 'Cursed is the man who trusts in people and makes mortals his strength, and turns his heart away from Hashem.'" The prophet chastises the people and warns that adversity will strike the man who trusts in man. It is such a person who is like "a solitary man in the wilderness".

Then in the 7th pasuk, the prophet issues the contrasting statement: "Blessed is the man who trusts in Hashem and in Hashem he places his trust." It is such a person who is compared in the next pasuk to the tree planted by the water.

Why then does Rav Elazar ben Azariah marshal the pasuk in Yirmiyah to support his teachings regarding one whose wisdom is superior or inferior to his deeds? There seems to be no connection, based on the context of the pasukim in the Haftarah?

Rabbeinu Yonah in Avos asks a simple question: How is it possible for a person's deeds exceed his learning? If one has never learned and does not know what to do, on what basis is he able to perform meritorious deeds?

Rabbeinu Yonah answers that if a person accepts upon himself to do mitzvos, he gets credit as if he has done already them. There is an analogy to this in connection with the acceptance of Torah at Sinai. When Klal Yisrael uttered the famous words "We will do and we will hear" (na'aseh v'nishma), they received credit as if they already fulfilled the entire Torah. Such people's deeds surpass their knowledge. They do not know anything yet. Nevertheless, they are credited with having done great deeds.

The nations of the world mocked the Jews as a hasty people (amma peziza). But the Jews answered that they have faith in the Almighty. "If He commands it, it must be worth observing. We know that He will not give us more than we can handle." When one has that implicit faith in the Almighty, one is willing to accept.

This is the connection between the teaching of Rav Elazar ben Azariah and the pasukim in Yirmiyahu that speak about one who has faith in Hashem. Bitachon [faith in the Almighty] equates with one whose deeds exceed his wisdom.

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