

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAIRNESS / THE EFFECT OF A NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENT

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: #961 – Tying Shoes - Not As Simple As You Think. Good Shabbos!

If It's Not Fair, G-d Doesn't Do It

Parshas Lech Lecha begins with one of the tests of the Patriarch *Avraham*. "Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." [Bereshis 12:1] We have commented many times in the past as to why the Torah does not explicitly mention that which many *Rishonim* say was the first test of *Avraham Avinu* – namely being thrown into the "Fiery Pit" (*Kivshan HaEish*) in Ur Kasdim. Obviously, jumping into a fiery pit because of one's belief is a bigger test of one's devotion than needing to pick up and move to a new land.

However, we can ask an even more troublesome question. When the Torah begins the story of *Avraham Avinu*, he is already 75 years old! [Bereshis 12:4]. What happened during those first 75 formative years of his life? The Torah does not say anything about how *Avraham* came to the realization of the *Ribono shel Olam* [Hashem/G-d]. The Torah never explicitly mentions the whole matter of breaking his father's idols, being thrown into the fiery pit, and miraculously escaping. Why does the Torah not mention the story of Ur Kasdim at all?

The Ramban addresses this and teaches a great lesson. The Ramban writes that the annals of the history of the nations of the world from that time do not mention the story of *Avraham Avinu* jumping into the fiery pit. Does such an incident not deserve a place in the history books? The reason history ignored this story is because the general population disagreed with Avraham. Therefore, they felt that his emergence from the fiery pit was some kind of magical trick. They did not attribute it to the power of One G-d. As we see throughout the Torah, magic was prevalent in those days.

The observers of the time much preferred to attribute the miracle to magic rather than to give credence to *Avraham's* monotheistic belief in a Creator of the Universe. "For this reason," the Ramban states, "the Torah does not record this miracle." Since the general population denied it, the

Torah does not mention it, because it would have also been necessary to mention the skeptical opinion of those who denied the miracle (as was the case when the Torah records the rebuttal of the Egyptian magicians to the miracles Moshe performed at the beginning of his mission to Pharaoh). In *Mitzrayim*, the magicians eventually came around to see Moshe's viewpoint. However, Hashem never miraculously proved the theological correctness of *Avraham's* position beyond any doubt in the eyes of those skeptics. The dispute remained a stalemate for the rest of *Avraham's* life. Therefore, the Torah chose not to give any credence to the unrefuted views of the heretics who questioned the miracle of the Fiery Pit, by not mentioning the entire narrative rather than recording an unresolved dispute regarding how to interpret what happened.

L'Havdil, do the New York Times, the Washington Post, or our own beloved Baltimore Sun always report "both sides of the story"? Do they always give "equal time and equal opinion" to responsible spokesmen of opposing viewpoints? So why should this concern the *Ribono Shel Olam*? He knows the Truth. The Truth is that *Avraham Avinu* was right. Why write the other side of the story? The second side of the story is null and void (*devarim beteilim*). So, what does the Ramban mean?

Rav Simcha Zissel Broide, zt"l, (the Chevron Rosh Yeshiva) says that we see from this Ramban – as Rav Simcha Zissel points out throughout Sefer Bereshis – why the Book of Bereshis is called *Sefer HaYashar* ('Book of the Straight People' – i.e. -- the righteous). The message is that the *Ribono shel Olam* is always fair. If it is not fair, the *Ribono shel Olam* won't do it. First and foremost, (as we say in *Shiras Ha'Azinu*) *Tzadik v'Yashar Hu* (He is Righteous and Straight) [Devorim 32:4]. It is not 'yashar' [fair] to give only one side of a story, in spite of the fact that the other side of the story is false.

The *Ribono shel Olam* has a bigger agenda in Sefer Bereshis. That agenda is to teach us be straight and fair, to be honest, to be upstanding, and to do the right thing. The right thing is NOT to report only one side of a story. This is such an important concept to the *Ribono shel Olam* that He is willing to only obliquely refer to the miracle of Ur Kasdim and to leave it as part of the oral tradition, rather than to explicitly record the story in the Torah in an "unfair" manner.

What Was Really Going On In The Dialog Between the Angel and Hagar?

The following observation is from Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv (1824-1898), the Alter from Kelm (not to be confused with Rav Simcha Zissel Broide (1912-2000) quoted above who was named for and was the great-grandson of the brother of the Alter from Kelm).

The Torah describes [Bereshis 16:6-9] the story of Sarah and Hagar. Sarah was not able to have children so she suggested to her husband, *Avraham*, that he should marry Hagar. When Hagar sees that she became pregnant, she begins treating her mistress, Sarah, with disrespect. Sarah demands that *Avraham* do something about this situation and *Avraham* responds that Sarah can do with Hagar

whatever she pleases.

Sarah treats her harshly and Hagar runs away from her. "An Angel of Hashem" finds Hagar in the wilderness and asks her: "Where are you coming from and where are you going?" Hagar responds that she is running away from Sarah. The angel then tells her to return to her mistress and suffer under her hand no matter how miserably she may be treated.

What is this dialog? The *Seforno* elaborates on the nature of the conversation between Hagar and the angel. Rav Simcha Zissel quotes the *Seforno*: The *Malach* tells Hagar – Just think for a minute. From who are you running away? You are running away from the house of *Avraham*. Do you know what a *zechus* [merit] it is to be from the house of *Avraham*? Do you know what type of better person you are by virtue of living in the house of *Avraham*? You were in an environment of holiness and purity and now you are headed to a place 'outside the Land' towards evil people.

Hagar responds, "I am simply fleeing. I cannot take it anymore; it is too painful. I am not headed towards anyplace in particular; I am just leaving an intolerable situation." The *Malach* tells her "Go back anyway, no matter how bad it is." This – according to the commentary of the *Seforno* – is the dialog between the angel and Hagar.

Rav Simcha Zissel explains that there is another level to the dialog as well: Hagar responded to the *Malach*, "You do not have to worry about me. Since I have been living in the house of *Avraham*, I am now immune to negative influences. I have reached this level of holiness from the years I have spent in *Avraham's* holy environment, so no nothing bad can happen to me. I will not be corrupted."

To which, the angel responds: "Hagar, you're dead wrong. It does not matter that you spent many years in the House of *Avraham*. Such an environment will negatively affect you. A person's current environment always has an effect on them." Today, your belief system and your value system may be straight and pristine; but no one can say I am immune and I can go live on my own and be unaffected by my new environment. Rav Simcha Zissel continues: the best proof of this phenomenon is Lot. Look what happened to *Avraham's* nephew who faithfully followed him from Charan to Canaan and then to Egypt and then back to Canaan. Avraham was his guardian; Avraham took care of him; he nurtured him; he taught him about *Chessed* and living a proper lifestyle. Yet when Lot ran off and headed to Sodom, his belief and value system totally turned around. In the words of *Chazal*, Lot said, "I no longer desire either *Avraham* or his G-d." The Alter from Kelm says that Lot never really said those words. *Chazal* are teaching that one who says, "I can leave the house of Avraham and I can go live in Sodom and it won't affect me is in effect saying, "I don't need you and I don't need your G-d."

No person is immune from his environment. People are social animals. They are affected by their peers. They are affected by their neighbors. A person who says, "I am strong. It won't affect me." is whistling past the graveyard. It will affect you! This is what the *Malach* told Hagar: "Go back, anyway; no matter how miserable it is. For if you don't, you will be headed down a very slippery

slope."

So many times in life, we experience tests and temptations. Opportunities tempt us that will perhaps take us to places that are not the best of environments. We tell ourselves, "Listen, I can handle it. I am strong enough." Everyone needs a good environment.

Rav Chatzkel Levenstein once offered a thought on the famous Mishna [Pirkei Avos 6:9]: Rabbi Yose ben Kisma said: Once I was walking on the road, when a certain man met me. He greeted me and I returned his greeting. He said to me, "Rabbi, from what place are you?" I said to him, "I am from a great city of scholars and sages." He said to me, "Rabbi, would you be willing to live with us in our place? I would give you thousands upon thousands of golden dinars, precious stones and pearls." I replied, "Even if you were to give me all the silver and gold, precious stones and pearls in the world, I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah."

The question is as follows. The person who made the offer to Rabbi Yose ben Kisma must have been a person of great means. Why did the person not move to the city of Rav Yose ben Kisma? Let him take his hundreds of millions of dollars and relocate to the city of great sages and scholars, which is a place of Torah? Rav Chatzkel Levenstein answers that he must have earned his livelihood in the city where he lived. It must be that he was not willing to forsake his livelihood to move to a *makom Torah*. The person told himself "I can survive here; I will do alright. I will bring in a Rav Yose ben Kisma; I will bring in a Yeshiva." That is a mistake. Neither Hagar, nor Lot, nor anyone else is immune from their environment.

This was the story of Noach and the Flood. We saw the effect that an environment has, not only on people but on animals as well. *Chazal* say that even the animals were engaged in improper behavior. *Chazal* say that the waters of the flood washed the first few inches of the surface of the Earth away because the corrosive effect of the corrupt environment that existed at that time. It was like a toxic waste site. Merely removing the factory that produces the toxic waste is not sufficient. The toxic effect creeps into the soil and creeps into the water because of the negative environment.

No one is immune from corrupting influences. This is the lesson of the dialog between Hagar and the *Malach*.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Lech Lecha is provided below:

- # 028 - Conversion (Geirus)
- # 070 - Bris Milah: The Metzizah Controversy
- # 119 - Conversion for Ulterior Motives
- # 166 - The Childless Couple in Halacha
- # 212 - Non-Jews and the Mitzvah of Kibbud Av
- # 256 - Mohel and Baby: Who Goes to Whom
- # 302 - The Mitzvah of Yishuv Eretz Yisroel
- # 346 - Trading Terrorists for Hostages
- # 390 - Geirus -- Mitzvah, Reshus, or Issur?
- # 434 - Anesthesia During Milah
- # 478 - Sandik -- Can You Change Your Mind?
- # 522 - Calling Avraham, Avrum
- # 566 - Learning Vs. Saving A Life
- # 610 - The Widow & the Divorcee: How Long Must they wait to remarry
- # 654 - Sonei Matonos Yichye - Refusing Gifts
- # 698 - Did the Avos Keep the Torah?
- # 742 - Can You Change Your Mazel?
- # 786 - The On-Time vs. the Delayed Bris
- # 830 - Standing for A Chosen and Kallah At The Chupah
- # 874 - Saving Some-One's Soul- How Far Must You Go?
- # 918 - Hidur Mitzvah - How Important?
- # 961 - Tying Shoes - Not As Simple As You Think
- #1005 - Inviting People to a Bris - Good Idea or Bad?
- #1049 - Honoring Your Wife
- #1092 - The Baal Teshuva Who Wants To Convert His Non-Jewish Girlfriend
- #1135 - "Schar Pe'sios" - Should You Walk Or Drive To Shul (on weekdays)
- #1178 - Shabbos Milah of A Child Whose Parents Are Not Shomrei Shabbos
- #1222 - Milah For The Son of a Jewish Father and a Non Jewish Mother

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