



Ashreinu | אשרינו

ENHANCING YOUR STUDY OF THE WEEKLY TORAH PORTION

PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL DNA

RABBI DOVID KIMCHE

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ASHIRA MEYEROWITZ ('21)

ADIN BLUMOF ('21)

AKIVA ROSENTHAL ('20)

LEORA COHN ('20)

This week's parsha introduces us to the first Jew, the great Avraham Avinu. It is fascinating to point out that the Torah tells us precious little about who Avraham was, his life story, and why he merited direct contact with

Hashem and all the blessings which followed. Rambam, in his Mishnah Torah, fills in some of the backstory: Avraham, through his own reasoning and deduction, came to monotheism, and the conclusion that there must be only one God. This idea, at the time, was a deeply radical one. He had to argue and debate with all the theologians of his time, at times literally putting his life on the line with those who considered his views heretical.

Avraham is referred to in Rabbinic literature as Avraham Avinu -- Avraham our Father. Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov occupy special places in Jewish History -- they are

our forefathers. What is the meaning of this term? Why are they celebrated more than others who preceded them or came after them?

The answer to this question sheds much light on these great individuals, their often arduous lives, and the nature of challenges in our lives.

Rabbi Chaim Volozhin (1749-1821), the great disciple of the Vilna Gaon, makes a remarkable comment to a mishna in Pirkei Avot. The mishna (5:2) writes,

“עֲשָׂרָה דוֹרוֹת מֵנֹחַ וְעַד אַבְרָהָם”

“There are ten generations from Noach to Avraham.” The very next mishna writes,

“עֲשָׂרָה נִסְיוֹנוֹת נִתְּנָה אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוּ”

“Ten tests were given to Avraham our Father.” Why, asks Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, does the first mishna call Avraham simply by his name, while in the next mishna he is referred to as “Avraham Avinu, Avraham our Father”?

He answers that it was precisely the seminal ten tests which Avraham Avinu went through that made him into Avinu, our father. This means that he only became “our father” once he experiences the trials of those ten tests.

He goes on to explain that by passing the tests presented to him, Avraham deeply affected and molded his own character. Not only that, but so formidable were the tests and so great his success, that he was able to instill these qualities into himself to such a degree that he was able to pass on these qualities to his descendants too. There is a certain spiritual DNA which Avraham created within himself, and we, his descendants, have inherited these qualities too.

Reb Chaim goes on to provide the following remarkable observation: he says that he sees in his own time period (18/19th century) individuals who are otherwise less-than-perfect in their observance of mitzvot, yet make tremendous sacrifices to go to live in Israel. What is the source of this strength? He answers that these individuals have inherited the spiritual DNA of our forefather Avraham. He sacrificed everything he had to move to Canaan on Hashem's command, and that decision of his has forever been burned into the neshamot of his descendants, giving them this particular strength - to make superhuman sacrifices for the Land of Israel.

This is the meaning of the term "forefathers." These three individuals, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, perfected themselves to such a degree, that their qualities are carried forward in us -- their descendants -- and formed the bedrock of the Jewish soul, the Jewish neshama. They not only are our physical fathers, but our spiritual fathers, too.

So too, each of us in our lives, the sacrifices which we make and the character which we form, has an effect not only on us, but reverberates onwards, into our children and our children's children.

TALENTED STARS

ASHIRA MEYEROWITZ ('21)

In Parshat Lech Lecha, Hashem tells Avraham, the first Jew: "Gaze, now, toward the heavens and count the stars...so shall your offspring be" (Bereishit 15:5). Rashi explains that Hashem took Avram outside and showed him the stars, in order to encourage him to abandon his belief in astrological calculations. According to the stars, Avram was destined to not bear a son, however Hashem changed the names of Avram to Avraham and Sarai to Sarah for a better outcome. With the help of Hashem, what may be written in the stars or seem impossible can change, as it does with Avraham and Sarah.

The simple meaning of this verse also implies that childless Avraham would have as many descendants as the amount of stars in the sky. However, why would Hashem give Avraham an impossible task of counting all the stars in the sky, as no human can possibly count the vast number of stars? Rabbi Meir Shapiro explains that Hashem will bless Avraham's descendants with talents that are above human comprehension. A student was once late to morning davening and explained to Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, "I'm only human! People are not angels!" The Rav responded, "Correct, they are not, however they are greater."

The talents Hashem granted us are often hidden to us as well as to others, however we must strive to discover them and utilize them to benefit others. Throughout history, Jews have had many great accomplishments, including our survival through exile, all while maintaining our identity -- shining brighter than the stars in the sky.

A LEAP OF FAITH

ADIN BLUMOFF ('21)

Avram, a true up-and-comer in the great ancient city of Ur, begins his day like most days. He leaves the house early, headed for the bustling bazaars which dominate the merchant districts of the city. Avram was heading across the giant market on his way to his father's shop, a family business started by his grandfather. This business brought his family a significant reputation and fortune. His family's affluence was to such a degree that they earned a place among the upper echelons of Samaritan society. As he traversed the market, he embraced the smells and allure of the morning incense that the Samaritan priests were laying out for one god or another.

When he finally got to his father's shop, he found that his father had decided to sleep in, and so he had to open the shop for business, all on his own. Avram was there by himself, alone with the ornate idols that his father sold. The rest of the city was still asleep, silent, leaving him time to think, with the objects in this shop being the only stimulus and guide for his thoughts. Avram started to ponder, "If this is god, how come I can pick it up and destroy it? Is this god so weak that a mere human can master control over it; if so, wouldn't that mean it is not a god at all? For a god must be able to exceed humans, if it truly created them. How could there be more than one god? Why would something so mighty intentionally give up control and share control with other gods?"

These thoughts led Avram along a particular train of thought, until he came to the most important epiphany in human history. Avram's mind then became overwhelmed with the inevitable conclusion to these questions -- the rocks that his father and grandfather sold, and that his entire world around him prayed to, are as strong and as weak as the materials that compose them.

Avram was a man who believed in his convictions, in order to stand against what he knew was wrong. He proceeded to smash his father's idols that littered the store. This act alone was punishable by death. When the king of Ur discovered the actions that Avram had committed, he sentenced Avram to stand trial where he would be liable and most certainly sentenced to death. But the king, upon Avram's sentencing, offered him a pardon in exchange for his public reneging of his actions and statements concerning the worthlessness of the idols. Instead of taking the pardon and abandoning the truth that he alone understood, he opted to die for that truth; it is better to be buried 6 feet under the ground, than to live 6 feet under lies and betrayal of God. Because of his refusal to admit being wrong, he was sentenced to be thrown into the fiery furnace. Hashem saw the faith that Avram had and saved him.

This parsha tell the story of Avraham and one of the greatest leaps of faith ever taken in history. To abandon the beliefs of the whole world and to be willing to sacrifice everything for a complete belief in the oneness of Hashem, even willing to die for it, took unrivaled emunah. As a result of his leap of faith, Avram found his calling, his footing in a possible new world. A world trail blazed by him. His actions fundamentally and irreversibly changed the face of the earth and human history. The political, social, economic, and cultural history of the world for the past 4,000 years was completely altered and contingent upon the actions of Avraham.

GO FOR YOURSELF

AKIVA ROSENTHAL ('20)

The parsha begins,

“לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך”

“Go for yourself, from your land, from your family, and from your father's house” (12:1). Hashem commands Avram to go to an unknown land and live a life devoted to an unknown religion. Avram simply does as he is told. This pasuk shows the ambiguity of Hashem's request, which makes Avram's commitment that much more meaningful.

What gave Avraham the ability to leave his entire life behind and blindly trust in Hashem when nobody else did?

At this point in his life, Avraham had already surmised that there had to be only one God that constantly impacted every aspect of the world. He was searching for a religion outside that of his parents, community, and all of mankind. When Hashem speaks to him, His message is not simply meant as a test for Avraham, but as advice for him. He is telling Avraham the way to fulfill his great potential. Avraham understands this because he has been searching for a purpose his entire life. Hashem commands Avraham to move to Israel and live in the image of God in order to influence as many people as he can, which is why Avraham is known for his *bein adam l'chaveiro*.

But if Avraham's original commitment to Hashem was voluntary, his choice, why would God then assign him mitzvot that he is obligated to fulfill? One example of this would be the mitzvah of brit milah. It's nice that Avraham opted in to Judaism, but is it fair of God to then ask Avraham to do something exceedingly difficult?

R' Menachem Baker explains that the mitzvah of brit milah is not just a commandment but is Hashem's commitment to Avraham. The word brit means covenant, which requires both Hashem and Avraham to agree. The commandments themselves establish an agreement, one similar to the agreement the Jews had with Hashem at Har Sinai when they accepted the full Torah. Hashem commands Avraham because he knows Avraham will complete his task and will therefore deepen their relationship. May we all see Hashem's mitzvot as His belief in us and a way of allowing us to strengthen our relationship.

CHOOSING A NEW PATH

LEORA COHN ('20)

Parshat Lech Lecha opens with Avraham's first test: Hashem telling him to pick up and leave his land, supportive family, and everything he knows and travel on a long journey to a new, foreign land.

Staff

The first lesson we can learn is seen from the way Avraham acts in response to his call to action. According to the Zohar, Hashem called out “lech lecha,” to the whole world, but Avraham was the only person who took it to heart. After Avraham answers the call, he gets up with zerizut -- alacrity -- and leaves his house immediately. “When you run to do My will, you are expressing your appreciation for the importance of following me” (Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, My Father My King p. 220).

Later in the parsha, when the mitzvah of brit milah is given, Avraham performs a circumcision on himself and his son the very day the commandment was presented. Rashi explains that the reason the Torah says “that day” (Bereshit 17:23) is because Avraham did it in the daylight, when people were around. Therefore, none of his adversaries would be able to say that they otherwise would have stopped him from fulfilling the will of Hashem.

The midrash in Bereishit Rabbah states that when Hashem said “lech lecha” He was telling Avraham, “be on one side while all the rest of the world is on the other.” Avraham was to be the voice of morality and ethics of Judaism, even though the society around him was knocking him down. This is exactly what Avraham did, fulfilled the words of “lech lecha,” and became the Avraham we all know today.



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