

The Path To Follow

Lech Lecha

415

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Why Didn't Abraham Fear A Neglect of Torah Study?

It is written, "Abram heard that his brother had been captured, and he armed his disciples who had been born in his house, 318, and pursued them as far as Dan. He with his servants deployed against them at night and struck them. He pursued them as far as Hovah, which is to the left of Damascus" (*Bereshith* 14:14-15). This is absolutely amazing: How could our father Abraham have imagined taking the disciples of his home away from learning Torah in order to save his nephew Lot? After all, we can assume that Abraham, the greatest among the people, had faith that G-d would help him in battle. He could have therefore gone out to fight his enemies alone! Why then did he take 318 of his disciples with him?

We also have to wonder about what our Sages have said in the Midrash: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham: 'You have killed My enemies from midnight until morning. By your life, I will descend to kill the enemies of your descendants from midnight until morning' " (*Yilamdeinu Bereshith* 71). Were the four kings who took Lot captive G-d's only enemies? Lot himself had left our father Abraham and denied G-d, saying: "I want neither Abraham nor his G-d!" (*Bereshith Rabba* 41:7).

Profaning G-d's Name

It seems to me that we may say that Abraham only went out to fight against the four kings in order to prevent a desecration of Hashem's Name in the world. In fact when these kings captured Lot, they thought they had captured Abraham because they greatly resembled one another (*Yilamdeinu Bereshith* 70). As such, our father Abraham feared that G-d's Name would be profaned, and that the nations would say: "In the past, his G-d saved him from Nimrod, but now his G-d has grown weaker and allowed him to be captured by the king of Sodom. They have no strength, neither him nor his G-d." This is why Abraham hurried, at the cost of removing his disciples from their learning, to sanctify G-d's Name in the world. He knew that forgiveness exists in this world for a neglect of Torah study, but profaning G-d's Name can only be atoned by death, a much graver sin. Since Abraham went out to fight for G-d's honor, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Just as you went out to war and killed My enemies – for if My Name had been profaned, these would have become My enemies – by your life, I will save your descendants from the hand of their enemies in the future!" This is Hashem's great promise to Abraham, that He would immediately deliver his descendants from Egypt at midnight.

Earlier, Abraham's shepherds and Lot's shepherds had been quarreling with one another, for the latter had brought their animals to graze in the fields of the former, who protested against them (*Bereshith Rabba* 41:5). Abraham then said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between me and you, and between my shepherds and your shepherds, for we

are brothers" (*Bereshith* 13:8). Our Sages have explained that they resembled one another (*Bereshith Rabba* 41:6), and that anyone who saw Lot's animals grazing in the fields of others thought to himself, "Abraham lets his animals graze in the fields of others," and the Name of Heaven was profaned. Lot immediately separated from him.

What Proof is That?

According to all this, we can clearly understand the beginning of this week's *parsha*, where it is said that our father Abraham's first trial occurred when Hashem said to him, "Go from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house" (*Bereshith* 12:1). Rashi explains this to mean: "For your benefit and for your good." It is difficult to understand what Rashi is adding by this. Furthermore, our father Abraham completely humbled himself before Hashem and said, "I am but dust and ashes" (*Bereshith* 18:27). Therefore how can we assume that it was difficult for Abraham to fulfill Hashem's order, and how can we say that it was a trial for him?

The answer is that although Abraham fulfilled Hashem's orders in all times and places – just as a servant fulfills the orders of his master – this particular order still constituted a trial for him. How so? It was because Abraham was afraid that Hashem's Name would be profaned and that people would say, "How can leaving be for his benefit and his good?" Hashem therefore told Abraham not to fear a desecration of His Name, and thus Abraham overcame this trial when he left his country and birthplace to fulfill Hashem's word. This is why Rashi explained that it was "for your benefit and for your good," teaching us that this constituted the essence of his trial: Our father Abraham was afraid that Hashem's honor would be profaned.

Moshe's Consolation

Moshe Rabbeinu as well, when he stood in prayer before Hashem to ask Him for mercy on Israel after the sin of the golden calf, mentioned this merit, saying: "Why should the Egyptians speak and say, 'With an evil intention He took them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? ... Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Yourself and told them, 'I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven' " (*Shemot* 32:12-13).

As such, Moshe told G-d: Remember the deeds of the Patriarchs, who devoted their entire lives to preventing a desecration of Your Name. If you destroy Israel, Your Name will be profaned among the peoples.

Once Moshe said this, it is immediately written: "Hashem repented of the evil that He declared He would do to His people" (v.14).



How the Patriarchs Observed Shabbat

Our father Abraham, says the Gemara, fulfilled the entire Torah even before it was given, even regarding the details of the *eruvei tavshilin* (Yoma 28b). The author of *Parashat Derachim* asks whether the Patriarchs were no longer considered Noahides before the giving of the Torah, but were already fully Jewish. The Acharonim have looked into the question of how the Patriarchs observed Shabbat before the giving of the Torah. In fact if the Patriarchs had the status of Jews, then they were obligated to observe Shabbat. However if they had the status of Noahides, then they were forbidden to observe Shabbat because the Gemara teaches that a non-Jew who observes Shabbat is liable to death (*Sanhedrin* 58b).

The Arachonim respond to this with a few examples. The book *Panim Yafot* states that before the giving of the Torah, the Patriarchs abstained from all work on Shabbat, from one evening to the other, and began to work again at the end of Shabbat. As such, they were exempt from punishment in any case: If they had the status of Jews, they observed Shabbat; and if they had the status of Noahides, for whom nighttime follow daytime (according to “day and night shall not cease” – *Bereshith* 8:22), then by acting as they did at the end of Shabbat (meaning during the night that followed the day), they profaned what for them was Shabbat, and therefore they were not liable to death.

The book *Binyan Tzion* explains that Noahides are forbidden from performing laborious work on Shabbat, not the 39 forms of work as defined by the Sages. Hence we may say that the Patriarchs abstained from these 39 forms of work on Shabbat, but carried heavy loads in the private domain, meaning that they did laborious work (which is not among the 39 forms of work). Therefore if they had the status of Jews, they observed Shabbat; and if they had the status of Noahides, they worked.

We find another explanation in the book *Minchat Chinuch* based on what the Rambam states in *Hilchot Melachim*, namely that the concept of a *shiur* (minimum quantity) does not apply to Noahides. In other words, a Noahide violates Shabbat by doing just half a *shiur* of work on that day. We may therefore say that the Patriarchs performed half a *shiur* of work on Shabbat, meaning that if they had the status of Jews, they did not violate Shabbat, for they did not do a minimum amount of work. However if they had the status of Noahides, then they violated Shabbat because there is no concept of a minimum amount of work, since any amount of work on Shabbat is forbidden to Noahides. Even according to those who say that the work which the Torah prohibits on Shabbat applies to even half a *shiur*, if one performs half a *shiur* of work for a *mitzvah*, it is not prohibited at all. According to this view, the main reason for prohibiting half a *shiur* of work on Shabbat is the fear that doing such work will eventually lead to doing a full *shiur* of work, which is clearly prohibited. Yet in this case, more work was definitely not done, since the half *shiur* of work was only done to fulfill a *mitzvah*.

Wearing Tzitzit on Shabbat

In *Responsa Cheshek Shlomo*, we find that the Patriarchs wore *tallit* with *tzitzit* and went into the public domain with them on Shabbat. Therefore if they had the status of Jews, and thus obligated to wear *tzitzit* with their garments, they were not considered to

be carrying their *tzitzit*, for being a sign of the *mitzvot*, they are considered part of the garment itself. However if the Patriarchs had the status of Noahides, who are exempt from wearing *tzitzit*, they were therefore violating Shabbat by going into the public domain on that day carrying these *tzitzit*. Hence they were not Noahides who observed Shabbat.

Another explanation is given in the book *Pardes Yosef*, based upon the statement in the Gemara that a Jew who takes out wood from an “Ashera” on Shabbat is not liable to punishment (*Shabbat* 75b). This applies to everything that Jews are forbidden to benefit from, since these consist of repulsive things that Jews are allowed to destroy. We may therefore say that on Shabbat, the Patriarchs took out things that they were forbidden to benefit from. Thus if the Patriarchs had the status of Jews, they did not violate Shabbat. However if they had the status of Noahides, then they carried things outside which they were not forbidden to benefit from, meaning that they worked on Shabbat.

They Observed Shabbat in All Its Details

Another insightful concept appears in *Beit HaOtzar* 1:14, which explains why a Noahide who observes Shabbat is liable to death. The reason is that when a Noahide takes it upon himself to observe Shabbat, it becomes an obligation for him just as it is for a Jew, which is why he is also punished like a Jew for profaning it. Now for a Noahide, it is very difficult to observe Shabbat without violating it, even unintentionally. Therefore if he transgresses Shabbat, even by mistake, he becomes liable to death because a Noahide is liable for both an intentional and an unintentional sin. It is therefore said that a Noahide who observes Shabbat is liable to death, for he obviously cannot be so careful that he will never end up doing the smallest degree of work, even unintentionally. He will thus be liable to death. All this concerns a regular Noahide who observes Shabbat. However when we are speaking about the holy Patriarchs, they obviously observed Shabbat in all its details, and so it is clear that they had the right to observe Shabbat.

Consolation

It is written, “Go from your land and from your birthplace” (*Bereshith* 12:1).

Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl put a great effort into fulfilling the *mitzvah* of redeeming captives. He would go collecting money for *tzeddakah*, money that he then gave to bureaucrats who were in a position to help free Jewish prisoners being held unjustly.

One day Rabbi Nachum was in Zhitomir, where some non-Jews hatched a plot against him that resulted in his imprisonment. While in prison, one of the *tzaddikim* revealed himself to Rabbi Nachum and consoled him, saying: “Our father Abraham practiced great hospitality, exerting a tremendous effort into showing warm hospitality to his guests. He constantly tried, throughout his life, to improve his ability to better serve guests, doing so in ways that he had never done before. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: ‘Go from your land’ – leave and become a guest yourself, for then you will know exactly what a guest needs.”

The *tzaddik* added, “You as well, you have put a great effort into redeeming captives, and now Heaven has given you an opportunity to experience all that an imprisoned Jew feels among non-Jews, and how quickly he must be rescued.”

Upon hearing this, Rabbi Nachum was consoled.

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The Power of the Tongue

It is written, “My soul will live *biglalech* [because of you]” (*Bereshith* 12:13).

In his book *Peninei Daniel*, Rabbi Daniel Palvani *Shlita* writes: “Here we find an allusion to what the Sages have said, ‘Death and life are in the power of the tongue.’ In fact the term *biglalech* has the same numerical value as *peh* (“mouth”). This means that a person merits life because of what he says, just as Abraham told Sarah that his life now depended on what she would say: ‘My soul will live because of you.’ ”

Not the Strength of My Hand

It is written, “I lift up my hand to Hashem...if [I take] so much as a thread to a shoestrap, or if I take anything of yours, so that you should not say, ‘I have made Abram rich’ ” (*Bereshith* 14:22-23).

Here the Midrash (*Bereshith Rabba* 59:5) cites the verse, “He who has clean hands” (*Tehillim* 24:4) and relates it to what Abraham told the king of Sodom: “if [I take] so much as a thread to a shoestrap.” It is difficult to understand what the concept of “clean hands” (which denotes honesty) is doing here. Abraham himself explained the reasons behind his words: So that the king of Sodom should not say, “I have made Abram rich.”

The book *Chemdat Shlomo* explains that Abraham raised his hand to heaven and promised the king of Sodom that he would take absolutely nothing from him, as it is written: “I lift up my hand to Hashem.” Next, Abraham looked at his hand and said, “that you [my hand] should not say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’ ” In other words, his hand would not be able to grow proud and say, “My power and [my] strength...have made me this wealth” (*Devarim* 8:17), for everything came to him solely from Hashem. Hence the Midrash relates the verse “He who has clean hands” to Abraham, for he was exceedingly honest and never took anything for himself.

Teaching Torah

It is written, “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, did not bear to him [children]” (*Bereshith* 16:1).

“To him” she did not bear children, notes Rabbi Yechiel of Melitz *Zatzal*, but for herself she already bore many children. When did she do this? It was when she converted the women, for the Sages have taught: “One who teaches Torah to the son of his fellow, Scripture considers him to have begotten him” (*Sanhedrin* 19b).

The Tzaddik Decrees

It is written, “Sarai said to Abram, ‘*Chamasi* [My injustice] is upon you’ ” (*Bereshith* 16:5).

Concerning Rashi’s commentary, according to which the term *chamasi* comes from *chamas*, the *gaon* Rabbi Elazar Menachem Man Shach *Zatzal* explains that just as injustice (*chamas*) can occur in regards to money, injustice also occurs when we prevent some good from occurring. Our mother Sarah was certain that Abraham’s prayers were answered, for “the *tzaddik* decrees and the Holy One, blessed be He, executes.” Hence she attributed her barrenness to him, for he had not prayed enough for her. Therefore “My injustice is upon you” – for you have prevented me from receiving this good by not praying enough, and one who prevents good from occurring is called a worker of iniquity.

Both Sides Must Agree

It is written, “Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised” (*Bereshith* 17:24).

The commentators raise a question here: Why did our father Abraham not fulfill the *mitzvah* of circumcision before receiving the order to do so, as he did in regards to all other *mitzvot*?

Concerning this question, Rabbi Yitzchak Soloveitchik of Brisk *Zatzal* explains that this *mitzvah* is described as a *brit milah* (“covenant of circumcision”). Now two parties must agree to the terms of a covenant before it can be sealed. This is why Abraham did not fulfill the *mitzvah* of circumcision before being commanded, for it would not have represented a covenant between himself and the Holy One, blessed be He. Abraham therefore waited to receive the command from G-d, at which point he fulfilled the *mitzvah* of entering a covenant with the Holy One, blessed be He.

In the Light of the Parsha

The Greatness of a Tzaddik in the World to Come

It is written, “They will serve them, and they will oppress them four hundred years...and afterwards they shall leave with great wealth” (*Bereshith* 15:13-14).

Regarding the verse, “*Na* [Please] speak in the ears of the people: Let each man request of his fellow and each woman of her fellow vessels of silver and vessels of gold” (*Shemot* 11:2), the Sages have said: “The word *na* [please] always indicates a request. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: ‘Please, go and tell Israel: Please borrow from the Egyptians vessels of silver and vessels of gold, so that this *tzaddik* [Abraham] should not say, ‘He kept His word concerning ‘they will enslave them, and they will oppress them’ [*Bereshith* 15:13], but He did not keep His word that ‘afterwards they will leave with great wealth’ [v.14]” ’ (*Berachot* 9ab).

We may explain this according to a teaching of the Sages: “One who has disciples, he is called ‘Rabbi.’ When his disciples are forgotten, he is called ‘Rabban.’ When everyone is forgotten, he is called by his name” (*Tosaphot, Eduyot* 3:4). The Rambam (in his introduction to *Zeraim*) writes, “This divides the people mentioned in the Mishnah, who number 128, into three levels. Whoever appears at an extremely honorable level, he is called by his name. For example, we say Hillel, Shammai, Shemaya, Avtalyon. This demonstrates their greatness and importance, for it is impossible to find a title that befits their honor, just as the prophets had no title. However the Sages who were slightly lower than this level, we call them Rabban, such as Rabban Gamliel and Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai. Those who seem slightly lower than this level, we call them Rabbi, such as Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehudah.” It follows that the greater a person is, the less titles he is given. The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore called Abraham “this *tzaddik*,” without mentioning his name, on account of his lofty level in the World Above. In fact he was so great that he could not even be designated by his own name!

A Life of Torah

We can see how much importance the great men of Torah placed on using their time as effectively as possible in order to learn Torah from an incredible account given by the *gaon* Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, the Rosh Yeshiva of Ponevezh. For three years, Rabbi Yosef was the *chavruta* of the *gaon* Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman in the *Kollel Kodashim* of Radin, which was founded by the Chafetz Chaim. Rabbi Yosef felt that he could declare before the Celestial Court that no neglect of Torah study occurred during those years.

During this period of joint Torah study, which lasted almost 18 hours a day, Rabbi Elchanan received a letter informing him that his wife was ill and that he must travel to his father-in-law's home in Salant to support her.

Rabbi Elchanan went to the Chafetz Chaim and asked him what he should do: Should he travel to Salant or not? The Chafetz Chaim replied with a question: "Are you a doctor?" From this reply, Rabbi Elchanan concluded that he did not need to leave, and therefore he remained learning at the yeshiva.

On another occasion, while they were learning together, Rabbi Elchanan was brought a telegram announcing the birth of his son. When they finished their regular study session, Rabbi Elchanan went to see the Chafetz Chaim to ask if he should return home for the circumcision of his son. The Chafetz Chaim replied with great surprise, "Do you know how to perform a circumcision? A *mohel* will obviously be called, and the circumcision will take place even without you. You have no reason to go and neglect the study of Torah!"

Thus Rabbi Elchanan did not return home, but remained in Radin until the time of Passover, and only then did he return to his family.

My Heart Worries Within Me

In the testament of the *gaon* Rabbi Haim Falagi *Zatzal*, the Rav of Izmir, he wrote to his son: "I call heaven and earth to testify that from the age when I could control my faculties until I was 20, I devoted myself single-mindedly to Torah study, day and night, with no wasted time. I had no involvement with worldly matters. From the age of 20 to 40, when my children were dependent on me, I dealt with worldly matters as a broker. Nevertheless, whenever I had no work, I did not turn to frivolity or wasteful things, but rather I returned to my studies.

"At the age of 40, I was appointed as a rabbinical judge and teacher, responsible also for matters of public concern, until this day. My heart worries within me that I do not spend sufficient time studying. I therefore force myself to use the limited time that I have for studying, and may others see me and do the same. May they learn from me that when distractions come along, whether they come from public or private matters – for one's eyes and heart search for a spare moment – that such spare time should not be wasted when it comes. If one lives in this way, his Torah learning will be blessed."

In his testament, Rabbi Haim Falagi continues with a promise to everyone heeding his advice: "As long as you have a deep desire for Torah – as long as you do not turn from it in vain, and you cleave to the hours and minutes so as not to lose them – you will receive the help of the Almighty, giving you time for your desire to study and accomplish much."

In fact Rabbi Haim merited, despite his numerous endeavors

for the community, to see blessings in his Torah learning. In his writings, he gives a short explanation for all his occupations: "I managed year after year to carry the very heavy burden of working for the community, for I had no rest from all the complaints and needs of the city's community and the surrounding areas. I had no opportunity to sit down without being disturbed for even a single day, not even at night, nor on Shabbat and the holidays."

A Rich and Magnificent Crop of Torah

Despite all this, he loved Torah so much that he succeeded in writing numerous books that have enriched the Jewish library: New interpretations on most tractates of the Talmud, new interpretations on Halachah and Aggadah, on the four parts of the Rambam, and the four parts of the *Shulchan Aruch*. He wrote thousands of responsa, as well as books on the *parshiot* and more than 100 sermons. He composed 14 volumes of commentaries on the entire Tanach, a book on the subject of the *dayanut*, as well as books on the laws of offerings, on teaching and education, on *Smicha*, on *Pirkei Avoth*, on the Passover Haggadah, on the holy Zohar and the Zohar Chadash, and on and on. A literal crop of Torah that is blessed according to every opinion!

He published 72 books, not including the 54 that remained in manuscript form when they were destroyed in the great fire of Izmir. In his book *The Testament of Haim*, he writes: "All these works, which I wrote through His great goodness, were written only with the help of my Rock and my Shield. It happened in a supernatural way, for even to me it seemed like something extraordinary."

Using Time as Effectively as Possible

The relatives of Rabbi Aharon Kotler *Zatzal*, the Rosh Yeshiva of Lakewood, who lived close to him, never forgot just how much he feared the loss of even a single minute of Torah learning, or the feeling of being disconnected from Hashem. His eyes were constantly reading an open book on the table, and he always had a *Mishnah Berurah* in hand wherever he went. Even when he was occupied with matters of life and death, during times of tremendous stress, even then he used the smallest degree of every minute. For example, from the time that the telephone rang until the conversation started, he used that brief period to reflect upon Torah matters.

In the "Beth Medrash Govoha" of Lakewood, it was common to see Rabbi Aharon sitting down with a telephone in one hand – speaking to a donor about a new building that was being constructed for the yeshiva – and a pen in the other hand composing Torah commentaries. Or he would have a financial statement detailing the yeshiva's budgetary shortfall in one hand, and a Torah book in the other from which he was studying. He not only possessed a phenomenal mind, able to deal with several subjects at the time, this was also part of his nature, for he devoted every ounce of his strength to learning Torah and cleaving to Hashem.

Guard Your Tongue!

Nothing to Fear

If we perceive that someone wants to harm us, either physically or financially, even if up to now people have not said anything about him, then for the sake of protection we are permitted to inform ourselves about any plans he may have to harm us in one way or another. There is nothing to fear in regards to being the cause of others speaking ill of him.

– Chafetz Chaim