

The Path To Follow

Vayeira

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Abraham the Hebrew

It is written, “The fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew” (Bereshith 14:13).

The term Ivri (“Hebrew”) is one of the names which designates a member of the Jewish people. We find this name in the Torah in connection with Potiphar’s wife, who said: “He brought us a Hebrew man” (Bereshith 39:14), as well as in connection with Joseph, who said: “For indeed I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews” (ibid. 40:15).

In regards to the verse, “The fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew,” the Midrash states: “Rabbi Yehudah said, ‘The whole world was on one side [ever] while he was on the other side.’ Rabbi Nehemiah said, ‘He descended from Ever.’ The Sages said, ‘It means that he came from the other side of the river, and also that he spoke in the language of the dwellers from the other side of the river’” (Bereshith Rabba 42:8).

The Ramban also writes: “Abraham, the head of the lineage, was called Abraham ‘the Hebrew’ because he came from the other side of the Euphrates and he was honored among the nations, for in him was fulfilled the blessing: ‘I will make your name great’ [Bereshith 12:2]. It is for this reason that all his descendants are called Ivrim [Hebrews]. They retain this name in order not to intermingle with the various peoples in the Canaanite lands, and this name has been established as the name for all of Israel’s descendants forever” (Ramban on Bereshith 40:15).

For those who explain the term Ivri as referring to a descendant of Ever, it is clear that their intention is to point out that he followed the right path, that of his ancestors Shem and Ever. In fact Shem and Ever represented the first man and the path of Hashem, which Abraham followed. That is why he is called an Ivri. Likewise, the interpretation which states that the entire world was on one side (ever), while he was on the other, underlines the greatness of our father Abraham, who by himself was as important as the rest of the world. However why did some Sages link this term to the fact that Abraham came from the other side (ever) of the Euphrates, for why mention his birthplace and thus record it for eternity, since his birthplace was not a source of praise, but rather a place of idolatry? In that case, better to mention where Abraham was going – not where he was coming from – namely Eretz Israel. Why did the Sages explain the term Ivri in this manner? Even Rashi and the Ramban only mention this interpretation for the term. This requires an explanation.

It seems that the Torah is teaching us something extremely important here, something comparable to giving life-giving water to a parched soul: Everyone can rise to the greatest of heights, ones that our father Abraham reached. In fact if Abraham – who came from the other side of the river, from a family like that of Terah and Nahor, from a world of denial and disbelief – could attain great heights, to the point of counterbalancing the entire world by himself, then we can do the same.

Our Sages mention this in stating, “Every Jew is obligated to say: ‘When will my deeds reach the level of the deeds of my forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?’” (Tanna D’vei Eliyahu 25). This means that every Jew can climb to tremendous heights. The explanation given by Rav Bunim of Peshischa is well-known: We note that it does not say, “Every Jew is obligated to reach the level,” but rather “Every Jew is obligated to say, ‘When will my deeds reach the level...’” This means that everyone must yearn for his deeds to be like those of his forefathers. In fact if Abraham was able to reach such great levels despite his immediate family, friends, and the evil society that surrounded him, then everyone can.

This is what the Torah is teaching us by describing Abraham as “the Hebrew.” It is telling us that if Abraham, who came from the other side of the river, was able to reach such heights, then the same applies to you, me, and every other Jew.

We’ll now recount the incredible story of Rabbi Akiva, for although it is well-known, it can strengthen and encourage anyone who thinks about it, enabling people to courageously advance in the ways of Torah: “Rabbi Akiva was a shepherd of Ben Kalba Savua. The latter’s daughter, seeing how modest and noble he was, said to him, ‘Were I to betroth you, would you go away to [study at] a yeshiva?’ ‘Yes,’ he replied. She then secretly betrothed him and sent him away. When her father heard, he drove her from his house and prohibited her by a vow to benefit from any of his estate. [Rabbi Akiva] departed and spent 12 years at a yeshiva. When he returned, he brought with him 12,000 disciples. He heard an old man saying to her, ‘How long will you lead the life of a living widow?’ She replied, ‘If he would listen to me, he would go [learn for] another 12 years.’ [Rabbi Akiva] said, ‘It is with her consent that I am acting,’ and he again left and spent another 12 years at a yeshiva. When he finally returned, he brought with him 24,000 disciples. His wife heard and went out to meet him, and her neighbors said to her: ‘Borrow some respectable clothes and put them on.’ She replied, ‘The tzaddik knows the soul of his animal. [Mishlei 12:10].’ On approaching him, she fell upon her face and kissed his feet. His attendants were about to push her aside, but he cried out to them: ‘Leave her alone. Mine and yours are hers.’ Upon hearing that a great man had come to town, her father said: ‘I shall go to him. Perhaps he will annul my vow.’ When he came to him, [Rabbi Akiva] asked: ‘Would you have made your vow had you known that he was a great man?’ The other replied, ‘[Not even for] a single chapter or a single halachah.’ He then said to him, ‘I am the man.’ [Ben Kalba Savua] fell upon his face and kissed his feet, and he also gave him half of his wealth” (Ketubot 62b-63a).

Here Tosaphot explain that it is forbidden to annul a vow by using the excuse that a new situation has arisen. What exactly does “new” mean? It refers to something that does not fall within everyday norms, something that, logically speaking, should not happen. This would mean, for example, that someone makes a vow about a certain person, and that person dies. That being said, how could Rabbi Akiva have annulled Ben Kalba Savua’s vow, for when the latter disinherited his daughter, Rabbi Akiva did not know a single chapter or halachah? In fact he was an uneducated shepherd, a man who suddenly became the spiritual leader of the generation and the teacher of 24,000 students! Could there be a situation more novel than this?

The explanation given by Tosaphot is very impressive: This is not a “novelty.” Rather, “The normal result of someone who goes to learn is that he becomes great.”

We may draw a powerful lesson from this: Even Rabbi Akiva, who only started learning at the age of 40, became a great man in Israel. Even for him – someone who began as an uneducated shepherd, so unlearned that he did not even know a solitary halachah or a single letter from the alphabet – it was not unnatural to become the greatest among his generation! This is the way – the natural order of things – that one who goes to study Torah becomes a great man. That being the case, all we have to do is to be among those who “go and study”! As soon as we advance and head towards a yeshiva, a place of study, we can be certain that these steps will lead us, after a certain time, to becoming a “great man.”

Thus if “Abram the Hebrew” became Abraham the father of a multitude of nations (av hamon goyim), and if the shepherd Akiva the son of Yosef became a man through whom the Torah could have been given, then everyone can do the same!

Not in Haste

It is written, "Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre" (Bereshith 18:1).

Rashi states, "In the plains of Mamre. He advised him regarding the circumcision. Therefore He appeared to him [Avraham] in his [Mamre's] territory."

In reality, why did Abraham need to seek advice for his circumcision? Was there any doubt in his heart as to whether or not he was fulfilling G-d's word?

The Maharal explains that Abraham certainly harbored no doubts as to whether or not he should circumcise himself. The fact that he sought advice from Mamre was solely to prevent doubters from claiming that he had acted hastily, without thinking. They would have claimed that if Abraham had waited and taken advice from other people, he certainly would not have circumcised himself. This is why Abraham asked Mamre for advice, and only then – after having heard what he had to say – did he circumcise himself. Thus no one can contest his actions, for we can reply that Abraham did think about it, did get advice from others, and still decided to circumcise himself.

This is also why, says the Maharal, Abraham took three days after leaving his home to reach the place of the Akeidah. It was in order to prevent those who heard of it from saying that Hashem suddenly revealed Himself to Abraham and shocked him into acting in haste. The journey took him three days so we could know that he had enough time to think about his actions, and yet still carried them out.

Trusting in G-d

It is written, "For they have come under the shelter of my roof" (Bereshith 19:8).

"From the Torah we learn," writes the Chafetz Chaim, "just how great is the virtue of trusting in G-d. We learn this from what Lot did for the two angels who came to his home: When the inhabitants of Sodom gathered at his door and wanted to stone them, Lot went out and asked them not to harm them in any way, 'for they have come under the shelter of my roof.' In other words, 'Since they trusted in me to save them from your hands, I ask you to let this be their reward: That they be protected from all harm.'

"Now Lot was not an honest man, and yet he believed that because they had trusted in him, they deserved to be protected."

The Chafetz Chaim continues by saying, "We learn a great principle from here: How much more will the Holy One, blessed be He – Who is the source of mercy and compassion – certainly help a man who sincerely trusts in Him to be saved from all harm!"

Ancestry and Progeny

It is written, "I am but dust and ash" (Bereshith 18:27).

It was not without reason that Abraham mentioned these two things when he wanted to annul himself and make himself tiny before G-d. Dust possesses a virtue through its progeny, since everything comes from dust. It also possesses a defect, the absence of an ancestry, since it originates from the primordial chaos. This is contrary to ash, whose virtue is its ancestry, the good things that have turned to ash, and whose defect is its progeny, since ash serves almost no purpose.

This is why, explains the Beit HaLevi, when Abraham asked for the lives of the inhabitants of Sodom to be spared, he declared that he was not asking by the merit of his ancestry or his progeny, but only because of Hashem's compassion. Hence he said, "I am but dust and ash" – dust on account of my ancestry, and ash on account of my progeny.

Without the Fear of G-d...

It is written, "There is but no [rak ein] fear of G-d in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife" (Bereshith 20:11).

It was the beginning of the Nazi regime in Germany, a time when the gaon Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman was invited to speak to the students at Berlin's rabbinical seminary. Among them was Rav Pinchas Biberfeld, who recounted some of his remarks:

"The expression rak ein is surprising, suggesting that other things were acceptable and good. This teaches us, however, that Abraham saw many beautiful things in that land, advanced education, culture, and very developed arts. There was only one thing missing: The 'fear of G-d.' However when there is no fear of G-d, all other values are completely worthless. Indeed, there is every reason to fear that 'they will kill me.'"

Where Hashem Is

It is written, "Fear not, for G-d has heard the cry of the boy where he is" (Bereshith 21:17).

Why did G-d hear "the cry of the boy," but not that of his mother Hagar, was also raising her voice in tears?

A beautiful idea is mentioned in the name of Rabbi Itzele of Volozhin:

The Gemara states that the Shechinah rests above the head of the sick, and Ishmael was sick at the time (as Rashi mentions). Hence Hashem heard the cry of the boy "where he is" – meaning where Hashem is – above the head of Ishmael.

Materiality

It is written, "Abraham rose early in the morning and he saddled his donkey" (Bereshith 22:3).

In the book Akedat Yitzchak, Rabbi Yitzchak ben Arema comments on this verse in a figurative way:

Since this was how Abraham conquered his instincts and annulled the power of materiality, the Sages interpreted the phrase "he saddled his donkey [chamoro]" to mean that he reined in materiality (chomer) and his instincts, such that he was able to go "to the place of which G-d had spoken to him."

In the Light of the Parsha

Respecting Your Agreement and Your Word

A long time ago, when I was young, I heard a marvelous question from the gaon Rabbi Gershon Liebman Zatzal, who asked why Abraham made a covenant with Avimelech, who was not Jewish. Why did Abraham feel the need to enter into a covenant with a non-Jew?

I would say that Abraham wanted to teach us a lesson in regards to entering agreements with non-Jews. Even the best of non-Jews, even if we believe that he is good, polite, and worthy – and even if he is a king, a leader, or a governor – is nevertheless a non-Jew, and his words have no value, and neither do the agreements that we can make with him!

As the Torah testifies in Parsha Toldot (Bereshith 26:15), Avimelech broke this covenant with Abraham, for the Philistines plugged the wells that Abraham had dug. Furthermore, Avimelech chased Isaac away when he became wealthy.

From this, Abraham wanted to teach us how a Jew should respect an agreement that he has made, as well as the value that he should place on his own words and promises: "According to all that comes from his mouth, he shall do" (Bamidbar 30:3). This is contrary to the behavior of non-Jews, who easily break their agreements.

In fact in all things, a Jew must have respect for every word that comes from his mouth, for the verse states: "Man became a living soul" (Bereshith 2:7). The Targum translates this as "a speaking soul," which means that it is through speech that man is recognized as a living soul. Therefore if a person does not respect his word – if he does not pay attention to every word that comes from his mouth, to each promise that he makes, and to every agreement that he enters – he denigrates both himself and the image of G-d that is in him, the "speaking soul" that was placed in him.

It is not without reason that we find, among the statements of the Sages, a curse upon anyone who does not keep his word, as it is written: "He who punished the generation of the flood and the generation of the dispersion will take vengeance upon one who does not stand by his word" (Bava Metzia 44a). The word of man is what distinguishes him from all other living beings. Therefore if he does not keep his word, if he lies and deceives others, fails to keep his promises, and speaks Lashon Harah and Rechilus, he instantly degrades the image of G-d that is in him.

To Save a Few Jewish Souls

The Rav of Zlotchov was a Jew completely detached from the concerns of this world, studying Torah both day and night, and the residents of the city greatly respected and appreciated him. Such was not the case, however, for Shabtai the butcher, a man who was proud, wealthy, and insolent, and who never concealed his disdain for the Rav. Shabtai claimed that a Rav should be someone who was well-versed in the ways of this world, and skilled in laws pertaining to business. The Rav of Zlotchov, however, was in a completely different world.

The Rav heard these scornful remarks, but did not respond to them. The residents of the city, who found it hard to tolerate the brutal and insolent ways of the butcher, were nevertheless afraid to directly confront him and put him in his place. This situation lasted a long time, until one day Heaven had mercy on the Rav: Shabtai the butcher left town and moved to the city of Brody. The residents of Zlotchov could finally breathe easy, reciting a blessing on being able to say good riddance!

The Rav of Zlotchov was among the chassidim of Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov, and every now and then he would spend Shabbat with him. Thus one fine Shabbat, sitting at the other end of Rabbi Moshe Leib's table, directly in front of the Rav of Zlotchov, was Shabtai the butcher. He was sitting quietly, both him and his two sons, who were as "refined" as their father.

The Rav of Zlotchov was even more stunned to Rabbi Moshe Leib demonstrating great respect for the butcher of Brody. In fact the tzaddik gave him the shirayim first, followed by personally giving some shirayim to his two sons! The Rav was stunned to see this, as well as other sympathetic gestures.

At the end of Shabbat, the Rav of Zlotchov saw Shabtai standing before the tzaddik, asking him for a blessing: "Rebbe," he said with a tone of authority, "after an unsuccessful stay in Brody, I'm ready to return to Zlotchov. I would therefore like a blessing for success."

The Rav of Zlotchov felt ill. After an entire Shabbat in which this wicked man enjoyed the close company of the tzaddik, he was now asking for his blessing to return to Zlotchov! Imagine his amazement, then, as the tzaddik of Sassov affectionately held the hand of the butcher and inundated him with blessings for success! The butcher nodded his head with satisfaction, and then he left.

The Rav of Zlotchov did not argue with what his Rebbe had done, though he had a hard time digesting it. In his distress, he addressed the tzaddik: "Rebbe, teach me why you blessed this man, whose arrogance and trickery, both in Zlotchov and beyond, are known by all!"

The tzaddik gazed at the Rav with a kind and compassionate look, and then he said: "Everything that happens in the world of the Holy One, blessed be He, occurs through individual providence. If such a Jew wants to return to Zlotchov, it means that Zlotchov needs him no less than he needs her."

The butcher put his words into action and returned to Zlotchov, where Jews welcomed him unenthusiastically, with a cold shoulder.

Shabtai paid no attention to their feelings. In returning to Zlotchov, he immersed himself in his work and quickly returned to the way of life that he was used to. The Rav and the community also returned to their old habits, and they began to sense his aggressiveness, which had not diminished in the least.

One Shabbat, at a time when most of the Jews in Zlotchov were gathered in synagogue for prayer, a man suddenly burst inside and shouted that a band of army recruiters were scouring the city and taking away young Jewish men to serve in the army. Great commotion immediately broke out in synagogue, and there was tremendous anxiety among the men, as well as weeping and moaning among the women.

In the meantime, some of the faithful recovered from this shocking news, and a few courageous men went out to look for these recruiters so they could chase them from the city. The recruiters were found in a street not far from there, and the faithful began to chase them. Some hotheads among the faithful went even further, for they climbed atop the roof of a nearby home and began to throw heavy objects upon the heads of the recruiters. Some of them lost consciousness and died.

The authorities reacted to this by imprisoning the Rav of Zlotchov and all the community leaders. Then began a long period of questioning and interrogation, for the authorities hoped to extract from these prisoners the names of those who had killed the army recruiters. The prisoners vehemently refused to name the people involved. A few days later, the authorities announced that if, in a week, the names of the guilty parties were not provided, the Rav of Zlotchov and everyone with him would be executed.

The Rav forbid the community from naming the individuals involved in this incident. During that whole entire week, the residents of Zlotchov gathered in synagogue to pray and beseech G-d to annul this evil decree.

The last day of the week arrived, and tension was at its height. All of a sudden, word spread through the troubled city that the prisoners had been freed. From what people understood, the governor of the city had told the leaders of the community that on that morning, a resident of Zlotchov had come forward to say that he was the one they were looking for. He took all responsibility for everything which had happened on that Shabbat, revealing that he was the one who had thrown deadly objects upon the army recruits. Once his words were verified, the governor had him executed.

The Jew who had "admitted" to this act was none other than our old friend, Shabtai the butcher. Everyone knew that he had nothing to do with the incident, and that he had, in fact, given his life for the Rav and the leaders of the community. He was buried on that same day, and engraved on his tombstone were the words: "Here lies the holy Rabbi Shabtai, the son of Reb Yossef, who gave his life to save a few Jewish souls."

At that point the Rav of Zlotchov understood the attitude of Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov in regards to Shabtai the butcher, as well as his words: "Zlotchov needs him no less than he needs her."

Guard Your Tongue!

It Will Be Discovered Anyways

Know that even if we do not explicitly mention the name of the person who has spoken Lashon Harah, but simply recount what he said, if that person's name will automatically emerge from the story itself – or the fact that we have spoken about him, or what happened to him – this too is forbidden.

– Chafetz Chaim

The weekly Torah sections in Sefer Bereshith, as well as the words of the Sages in the Midrash that cast the oral Torah's light on its verses and on what the written Torah briefly mentions, captures everyone's imagination in terms of the power of Creation, the emergence of the universe, and the marvels of the Creator, who established the principles of human conduct in Creation.

After the sin of the first man, nature and the good reserved in Creation changed to the point that they were no longer recognizable. This is because the first man obeyed his wife, contrary to what G-d had commanded him: "Because you...ate from the tree about which I commanded you [not to eat from]...cursed is the ground for your sake" (Bereshith 3:17).

The Yalkut Shimoni gives us a glimpse into what life was like in the past: People sowed once every 40 years. They would travel from one end of the world to the other in an instant, and pick the cedars of Lebanon as they went along. Lions and tigers were regarded as troublesome pests, and the air was as pure as from Pesach to Shavuot.

In a later time, the era of Enoch, men were again punished, the mountains became stony, the face of men became apelike, and other unpleasant events took place. The worst was during the time of the flood, when all living things deviated from their nature: "Because they perverted their ways, the Holy One, blessed be He, changed the works of Creation and made the constellation of Pleiades rise at daybreak and took two stars from Pleiades and brought a flood upon the world" (Rosh Hashanah 11b).

In commenting on the verse, "The One Who created Pleiades and Orion, Who turns blackness to morning and darkens the day into night, Who summons the waters of the sea and pours them upon the face of the earth" (Amos 5:8), the Malbim wrote: "Hashem fixed the laws at Creation in the greatest and most effective way by making Pleiades and Orion. Pleiades contains the constellations that govern cold and water, and Orion governs heat and dryness. As our Sages have said, without Orion's star, the world could not endure because of the cold of Pleiades. Furthermore, the Holy One, blessed be He, took two stars from Pleiades in order to bring the flood upon the world. Orion protects the order of Creation, preventing water from returning to flood the world."

The Bermuda Triangle

A more thorough look into rabbinic literature allows us to clarify one of the greatest mysteries to plague North America for decades, namely a supernatural phenomenon that has claimed many victims: The Bermuda Triangle. As we have said, it is found hidden within the midrashim of the Sages, which reveals a small glimpse into their profound wisdom.

Off the southeast coast of the United States, from Bermuda in the north to the southerly tip of Florida, and past the Bahamas to Porto-Rico, extends a large region that forms a triangle, from where this dangerous region derives its name. It has also received other, less kind names, including "the Port of Missing Ships," "the Triangle of Death," and others.

This is how the American Coast Guard describes the mystery in an official statement:

"The Bermuda Triangle is a conceptual region that extends not far from the Atlantic southeast coastline of the United States. It is characterized by inexplicable disappearances of ships, small boats, and planes. The endpoints of the triangle are generally considered as being Bermuda, Miami, and Porto-Rico."

One person who has explored the mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle is the late Charles Berlitz, who came up with a number of theories to explain what happens in the region. On such theory posits that underground

earthquakes create violent underwater storms, resulting in the sudden appearance of rogue waves. The sea, which is calm one minute, becomes a tempest in the next, followed by a deathly silence.

Experienced pilots, who know in advance which places are most likely to experience storms, also know how to avoid the most dangerous air pockets. However what occurs above the Bermuda Triangle cannot be foreseen. Oftentimes, pilots have reported "clear skies and bright stars," when suddenly a violent storm arises in an atmosphere without winds or rain, the result being that a plane loses control and passengers are thrown to the top of the cabin as it drops towards the sea like a stone. An American author, Mr. Vincent Gaddis, describes a flight around the time of the Second World War that ended with the loss of five aircraft! Two people survived, one of whom recounted: "Our instruments stopped working. We lost our bearings and were terrified by the turbulence, and the plane began to dive. It was only as we got very close to the water that I managed to bring the plane up and glide her out of the dangerous region."

In fact the most famous story concerning the numerous aircraft lost in this way involves American Navy "Flight 19." This story confirmed to those with any doubts as to whether there was reason to fear this region. The disappearance of a lone plane does not raise many questions, for pilot error or a lack of fuel may be at play, resulting in aircraft crashing into the sea. However when a squadron of combat planes leaves no traces, that's a little too much.

It was Dec 5, 1945 [Tevet 1, 5706], right after the end of the Second World War. An entire squadron of Avenger bomber aircraft had gone out on a routine training mission. All of a sudden, following radio transmission problems, all contact with them was lost. From that point on, they were never heard from again, and no trace of debris has ever been found.

Vanished Without a Trace

From a story taken from an Israeli newspaper:

Sailors from the Israel ship Massada, which vanished one Sunday when the ship was lost in the Bermuda Triangle, are among the thousands of victims who have died over the last 35 years as dozens of ships and planes have disappeared in this very dangerous and mysterious region.

This focus on the Bermuda Triangle became particularly intense at the end of the Second World War. On December 5, 1945, five American bombers were flying above the Bermuda Triangle. Two hours after takeoff, contact with them was lost. The planes disappeared without a trace, and a rescue plane sent into the region to search for them also disappeared, along with 13 pilots and engineers aboard (Adar 4, 5741).

From the same newspaper, two years later:

Mystery: Contact Lost with Air Force Plane Above the Bermuda Triangle

A drama unfolded in the flight cabin of a Boeing airplane that was flying an emergency crew to Mexico after an earthquake. "All the instruments mysteriously began to go haywire in the area where dozens of aircraft and ships have disappeared," reported an air force newspaper.

All flight and communication instruments aboard the military plane, which was flying to Mexico in September in order to help earthquake victims, stopped working in the mysterious region as the plane flew above the Bermuda Triangle, where ships and planes have disappeared for decades. Nobody understands the nature of this phenomenon.

(To be Continued)