

THE PATH TO FOLLOW



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LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY FOR YOUR OWN GOOD (FROM RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, "And the L-RD said to Abram, 'Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" (Genesis 12:1). Commenting on this in the name of the Sages, Rashi says that it means: "For your own benefit, for your own good. It is there that I will make you into a great nation, whereas here you will not merit having children. Also, I will make your character known to the world" (Bereshith Rabba 39:2).

We see here that G-d promised great favors to Abraham, contrary to the ordeal of Isaac's sacrifice when G-d told him, "Take your son, your only one, whom you love..." (Genesis 22:2) without promising him anything in return. We should therefore understand the meaning of this trial to "Go ... from your land."

The following questions come to the fore:

1. Why did G-d command Abraham to leave Haran, since there "he succeeded in converting people, in bringing them to a knowledge of G-d" (Bereshith Rabba 39: 21)? Moreover it is written, "and he proclaimed there the Name of the L-RD, G-d of the Universe" (Genesis 21:33), concerning which our Sages have said: "Do not read vayikra [and he proclaimed] but vayakri [and he made others proclaim]" (Sotah 10b). Hence if such was the case, why did Abraham have to abandon his religious activities? If it was in order to receive his reward in Eretz Israel, we cannot say that it was trial, since that would have been for his own benefit.

2. Why, furthermore, is the narrative not in chronological order? It should have first stated "from your father's house," followed by "from your relatives," and then "from your land." The commentators have already noted this inversion.

To explain this reversal in the logical order of the passage, the Sages have said: "If a person feels an uncontrollable urge to sin, let him go to a place where he is not known, wear black clothing, and do what he desires there" (Kiddushin 40a). Concerning this, commentators have stated: "One must not be mistaken and think that he will

sin elsewhere, but rather that his black clothes will bring him to restrain his desires and repent" (Tosaphot in the name of Rabbeinu Chananel). The fact is that he will not be bothered in a place where nobody knows him, and he will then be capable of repenting and correcting himself, for no one will come to remind him of his past sins. It was the same for Abraham when G-d told him: "Go for yourself from your land," for elsewhere – where no one knows you – you can progress better in your service of G-d, which is not the case here, near the perverted King Nimrod and his entourage. You will not be able to serve G-d in the house of your father either, for there you are prevented from doing so. And even if you manage to overcome the pressure of these heretics, they will never come to appreciate your deeds.

Abraham did not hesitate for a moment. He immediately assembled all his family and "the souls they made in Haran" (Genesis 12:5) – meaning all his followers – and they quickly left in accordance with G-d's command. Thus it is written, "So Abram went as the L-RD had spoken to him" (v.4), for G-d's word constitutes a command.

From here we learn of Abraham's great piety and humility. In fact, he could have remained pious, even among those heretics. He could have overcome their influence and pressure for his entire life, especially since all his deeds were motivated solely by his love for G-d and he did not seek out publicity or renown. He could have therefore told himself that in spite of the opposition of his surroundings, he was going to stay in his land without deviating from his chosen path. Yet Abraham didn't ask any questions after G-d spoke to him. He immediately left Haran and headed in the direction of Eretz Israel, for he knew that if G-d commanded him leave his land and his father's house, He had His reasons for it.

The First Reason: Abraham knew that he had no reason to fear that he himself would be influenced by his wicked environment, however all the people that he and his wife Sarah had converted were not yet at that level – they were not yet at the point of being able to overcome the

trials of their surroundings and that era – and they risked returning to their wicked ways if they stayed. He feared this for good reason.

The Second Reason: Abraham understood that his role was not to serve G-d secretly and in private, but on the contrary, in broad daylight – in plain view and full knowledge of all – so that everyone would witness his deeds. In fact this is exactly what he did, as the Rambam states: “His sole aim was to correct people from the error of their ways and to make them understand there is but one Creator. It was to bring them to a knowledge of G-d” (Hilchot Akum 2:2-3).

And yet, Abraham asked himself some questions: In a new land, would he also be able to convince people to believe in G-d, as he had done in Haran, especially since he didn't know which land G-d would bring him to? This was a great trial for someone who, during his entire life, had fought for G-d in spite of the opposition he faced along the way. One must not forget that this was the era of the Tower of Babel, the time when peoples were dispersed as a punishment for having separated themselves from G-d and practiced idolatry. Yet Abraham withstood this trial because he knew that it was his duty at the time.

Certainly G-d knew what Abraham felt in his heart, how difficult it was for him to leave his land, and that Abraham was ready to renounce fame to continue his sacred mission. In addition, he feared that the voyage would make him lose his followers, in the way evoked by the passage that states: “the status of one who travels diminishes” (Bamidbar Rabba 11:4), thus diminishing G-d's renown in the world. Yet to put him to the test, to greatly reward him, G-d commanded that he leave his house and overcome all these difficulties.

It was therefore a test for Abraham to leave his land, and for him it constituted neither a kindness nor a benefit. He had succeeded in Haran, but would he succeed in another land? What kindness or benefit would he gain in a strange land? However Abraham withstood this test, and if G-d says, “For your own benefit, for your own good,” one must do what G-d commands.

And in fact, after having withstood this test and departed from Haran, Abraham realized just how beneficial it was, for as soon as he arrived in the land of Canaan he felt the holiness of that land which G-d had promised to him and to his descendants, as it is written: “The L-RD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land’ ” (Genesis 12:7). Abraham then realized how faithful were G-d's words when He previously said that he should leave his land “for your own benefit, for your own good,” since there is no greater pleasure for the heart and soul than experiencing the holiness of a place. Hence all the more reason why a person is rewarded for every step he takes in Eretz Israel, a land that surpasses all others in holiness.

More than anything, Abraham rejoiced when G-d told him, “Raise now your eyes and look out from where you are: Northward, southward, eastward and westward. For all the land that you see, to you will I give it, and to your descendants forever” (Genesis 13:14-15). For having withstood his trial, G-d promised Abraham: Your “springs will spread outwards” (Proverbs 5:16), and here also you will succeed in bringing people closer to Me. Because of you everyone will know that the world has a Creator, and “all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you” (Genesis 12:3). You are mistaken in thinking that you will not succeed here as you did in Haran. Here too everything that you do will succeed, and you will even be able to increase your work.

We now understand the order of the words in the verse (“from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house”). This order arises because Abraham was busier outside the house than inside it, in the sense evoked by the statement: “Not study, but practice is the essential thing” (Perkei Avoth 1:17). Abraham was outside for the majority of his time. He was interacting with people, speaking to them; his house had but secondary importance. This is why G-d told him at first “your land,” since being outside in the land was essential to him. The phrase “your father's house” was mentioned last because it was secondary for him. Without a doubt, that was the reason why this trial was so difficult, for he was attached to that place, to that land, and he wondered if he could ever succeed in a new land. Yet he withstood this trial, and G-d promised him that he could continue his work in his new land.

Abraham was the first to bring people closer to G-d. He proclaimed the greatness of the Creator everywhere he went: “The L-RD, He is G-d! There is none beside Him!” (Deuteronomy 4:35). For future generations as well (since the deeds of the forefathers serve as examples for their offspring), the earth would be purified, as it is written: “I will remove ... the spirit of impurity from the land” (Zechariah 13:2). At that time the gentiles will learn from Jews and they will also know G-d, as it is written: “It shall be that at every New Moon and on every Sabbath, all mankind will come to prostrate themselves before Me, says the L-RD” (Isaiah 66:23). It is then that the following prophecies will be fulfilled: “Many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek out the L-RD, the Master of Legions, in Jerusalem” (Zechariah 8:22), “They will come and relate His righteousness” (Psalms 22:32), and “Many nations will join themselves to the L-RD on that day, and they will become a people unto Me” (Zechariah 2:15). Amen, may it be so.

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADDIKIM

RABBI AVRAHAM AVELI GOMBINER – THE MAGEN AVRAHAM

Rabbi Avraham Aveli Gombiner was one of our greatest Poskim, known by the name of his famous book on the Shulchan Aruch, Orach Haim, Magen Avraham. The son of the holy Rabbi Chaim Segal Halevi, Rabbi Avraham Aveli was born in 5397 (1637) in the town of Gombin, close to Kalish in Russian Poland.

As a child, little Avremeleh was weak and sickly. His mother, who recognized his exceptional character, was very worried for his health and protected him like the pupil of her eye. Early in the morning each day, she remained in the woman's section of the synagogue and recited a short prayer in Yiddish: "Dear G-d of mercy. I cannot stay long, for I have to return home and prepare breakfast for my Avremeleh so he can have the strength to study Your holy Torah. Goodbye my Father in Heaven."

When Rabbi Avraham was 10 years old, he left his hometown of Gombin to go to Lissa, where he studied Torah with his countryman and close relative, Rabbi Yaakov Gombiner, who was the Rav of the city. By chance he learned that there were Torah greats in Kalish, and since he greatly yearned to find himself in such an environment, he left Lissa and traveled there. In Kalish the young man found a life that suited him. He studied Torah day and night, and his immense diligence allowed him to greatly elevate himself, to the point that he eventually became prominently known.

During that time, he got married with a young girl by the name of Dina. At the beginning, Rabbi Avraham was content to teach the children of the Beit Midrash, and his friends knew him by the name of "Rabbi Aveli the Melamed" He showed great discretion with regards to his Torah knowledge and wisdom. He was a humble man, one who worked hard to earn a living in difficult circumstances. In Kalish, people used to point out the cave where the Gaon, this man who authored Magen Avraham, lived. They said that he wrote his comments on the walls with a piece of charcoal, for he had neither pencil nor paper. In fact, he earned so little money each month that he didn't have enough to buy paper, and he had to wait to get paper before copying down what he had written on the walls. They also say that from time to time he traveled to Pozna on foot in order to consult books that could not be found in Kalish.

After several years, people found out by chance that Rabbi Avraham Aveli was great in Torah and Halachah. It happened as follows: One day, the Gaon Rabbi Shabtai Cohen (author of the Shach) traveled to Kalish. As was the norm during that time, the leaders of the community asked him to speak at the local synagogue. During his discourse to the sages of the town, the Shach raised a very difficult question that nobody could answer. Yet among his listeners was a young man who studied with Rabbi Avraham Aveli, and after hearing the question he went and repeated it to him. Rabbi Avraham then resolved the difficulty in a satisfactory manner, and when the Shach learned of it, he immediately sent for Rabbi Aveli "the Melamed" (as people in Kalish called him) and spent a long time speaking of Torah with him. From that moment on, his fame spread as a great Talmid Chacham.

There was another incident that occurred to Rabbi Avraham Aveli, one after which was he appointed as Dayan. Not long after the holiday of Passover, the Rav of the city was presented with a serious question concerning chametz, yet he was unable to solve it. He sent for the scholars of the city, among whom was Rabbi Avraham, so that together they could reflect upon the proper course of action to take. Rabbi Avraham put forward a suggestion that pleased the Rav and everyone else, and they implored him to take on the responsibility for decisions pertaining to the Halachot of Orach Chaim. When the position of one of the Dayanim in the city became vacant, he was appointed as a Dayan of Kalish.

Even though he suffered tremendously during his entire life from all sorts of ills, he nevertheless managed to write his great work Magen Avraham. The book consisted of a commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, which encompasses the life of every Jew – from the time he wakes up in the morning until the time he goes to sleep at night – during the week, the holidays, and Shabbat. The work experienced several mishaps before being published, and if it were not for his only son, Rabbi Chaim Gombiner, who knows if we would have seen the light of Rabbi Avraham Aveli's Torah!

Rabbi Avraham began the work in 5425 (1665) and finished in 5433 (1673), and he obtained the support of the greatest Gaonim of Poland. His brother Rabbi Yehudah, who was a prominent figure in Krakow, went to Amsterdam to publish the book there. However Rabbi Yehudah died while preparing to print it, and a great deal of time elapsed while the manuscript was being passed from one hand to the next. Rabbi Avraham himself also died during that time, and the work remained in the hands of strangers. His son Rabbi Chaim knew no rest before taking over possession of the manuscript from these strangers and bringing it to the printer and bibliographer Rabbi Shabtai Meshorer Bass, the author of Siftei Chachamim on Rashi.

Rabbi Bass printed Magen Avraham, together with Turei Zahav by Rabbi David Halevi (the son of Rabbi Shemuel Halevi), around the text of the Shulchan Aruch. This work was published in the city of Dyhernfurth in 5452 (1692), becoming known by its generic name Magenim Eretz.

Rabbi Avraham was known throughout the Diaspora as an authority in matters of Halachah, and students everywhere formed groups to study the Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, along with Magen Avraham. People have based themselves on its authority in order to render decisions that are even at variance with those of the Taz and other Poskim. The Gaon Rabbi Zalman of Volozhin once said, "In my eyes, the Magen Avraham merits the same respect as the Poskim of earlier times."

Rabbi Avraham's purity of heart and upstanding moral character are reflected in many areas. In paragraph 156 of Magen Avraham he writes, "It is a mitzvah for all men to love each Jew as himself, as it is written, 'You shall love your fellow as yourself' [Leviticus 19:18], and whoever hates a Jew in his heart transgresses a prohibition, for it is said, 'You shall not hate your brother in your heart' [v.17]. When someone sins against his fellow, he should not keep a grudge in silence, but he should say, 'Why did you do this to me?' and he should not speak to him harshly, to the point of shaming him, but reprimand him in private, calmly, and with soft language."

The story goes that when the Maggid of Koznitz was young, he arranged to study Magen Avraham with a friend every day in the early morning. After the first session, their hearts were aflame even more than usual in their service of G-d, to that point that they were overcome by extreme enthusiasm. The Maggid decided to go to his Rav, Rabbi Shmelke of Nickelsburg, and ask him from where this great light came. When he went to see his Rav, as soon as he crossed the threshold of his home Rabbi Shmelke said to him, "Israel, I can see on your face that you studied Magen Avraham. That book generates a great light in the heart of the wise."

Rabbi Avraham wrote several other books other than Magen Avraham, the best known being Zayit Ra'anani (a commentary on Yalkut Shimoni). Rabbi Avraham did not live long, dying sometime around 5443 (1683) at about the age of 46. His grave is located in Kalish, and it carries the following inscription: "Here lies Rabbi Avraham Aveli Halevi, the author of Magen Avraham and Zayit Ra'anani." The location of his grave was held in great reverence, and many people went there to pray and beseech G-d during times of distress.

THE STORY OF THE WEEK THE DIAGNOSIS OF THE CHAZON ISH

A man who showed serious symptoms of illness underwent 12 medical examinations, followed by which doctors decided that he had to immediately have an operation in order to remove a stomach tumor. Naturally, the man's entire family was worried by the diagnosis, and a cousin of the patient when to see the Chazon Ish with a note bearing the patient's name. The cousin explained everything to the Chazon Ish, after which the latter replied, "No, it is not cancer, but only an ulcer. If he is vomiting, it is because the ulcer is located between the large and small intestines."

The patient's cousin was not satisfied with this answer, and so he said, "But they took 12 x-rays of him, and all the doctors have said that it's cancer. How can the Rav say that it's only an ulcer?"

The Chazon Ish once again looked at the name of the sick man and responded, "I see nothing other than an ulcer."

The cousin, hardly convinced, continued: "But the doctors say it's cancer!"

The Chazon Ish replied, "Happy are the Chassidim." What he meant was that the Chassidim listen to what their Rebbe says without asking questions.

Be that as it may, the Chazon Ish said that the sick man had to be taken out of the hospital he was in and transferred to another hospital where a physician by the name of Dr. Nathan worked. There the sick man was to be operated on, and even if Dr. Nathan didn't want to perform the operation, it was only necessary for him to be present when it takes place.

The next day the cousin went to the family and joyfully recounted what the Chazon Ish had told him. He immediately went to find Dr. Nathan and told him everything that the Chazon Ish had said. The doctor asked if the Rav had seen the patient, and he was told that this was a Rav who didn't need to see him. The doctor shrugged his shoulders and said, "A Rav who saw nothing but thinks that he knows?!"

In the meantime, the patient had been transferred to the other hospital and the date for his operation had been set. When that day arrived, the doctor went into the operating room with his students, while the family remained outside. The operation lasted two hours, at the end of which time the doctor came out and immediately asked to speak with the cousin who had come to see him at first. The doctor went with him into a room and said, "I want to meet your Rav, for it was exactly as he had said. It wasn't cancerous, but rather an ulcer that was located between the small and large intestine."

The cousin asked the doctor if it was he himself who performed the operation, and he replied that it wasn't. He explained that he had wanted to perform it, but in arriving at the hospital he felt fearful. He was nevertheless present for the entire operation and followed everything that had transpired. The patient's cousin then told the doctor, "The Rav told me this as well, that you wouldn't perform the operation, but that you would be present."

THE MORAL OF THE STORY FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

It is written, "So Abram went as the L-RD had spoken to him, and Lot went ito [with him]" (Genesis 12:4).

The Midrash comments: "Abram went" and Lot was subordinate to him.

Apparently, this remark brings us nothing new with respect to the verse. It probably pertains to the words "with him" [Note that there are two ways of writing "with him" in Hebrew: imo and ito. The Maggid of Dubno's explanation pertains to the difference between the two]. Why is it not written, "Lot went imo [with him]"? It is this nuance that makes the Midrash assert that "Lot was subordinate to him."

To understand this, let us illustrate with a parable:

A merchant had to travel to a certain town for business. He was told, "So and so is also going there for business!" Since it sometimes happens that one doesn't travel alone because the costs of doing so don't outweigh the profits involved, a person will often join up with another who is traveling in the same direction. This is called traveling imo [with him]. However concerning the servant who accompanies his master, it is said that he is traveling ito. The Hebrew word ito actually denotes a secondary and subordinate relationship, whereas imo designates a relationship based on an equal footing. Since the servant's movements only have meaning with respect to his master's travels, the servant is thus subordinate to him.

It was to Abraham that the Holy One, blessed be He, issued the command to go to Eretz Israel, and with him Lot went as well. Let us not think that Lot wanted to go to Eretz Israel on his own, and that since by himself he was incapable of doing so, he tagged along with Abraham to simplify matters. Rather, Lot went ito [with him – in a subordinate role], without a specific goal, solely because Abraham departed and Lot didn't want to leave him. Because it is written, "So Abram went as the L-RD had spoken to him," it was he who undertook this voyage by the directive of the Holy One, blessed be He, and Lot was subordinate to him. Abraham simply brought him along, as the verse itself states: "Abram took his wife Sarai and Lot, his brother's son" (Genesis 12:5).