

THE PATH TO FOLLOW



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PROTECTING THE HOLINESS OF THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT

(FROM RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, "The L-RD appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw: And behold! Three men were standing over him. He perceived, so he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent and bowed toward the ground" (Genesis 18:1-2).

Let us present a few questions at the outset in order to better understand these verses:

1. The Sages say, "It was the third day after Abraham's circumcision, and G-d visited him as one visits the sick" (Sotah 14a). If Abraham was sick, from where did he find the strength to get up and run to those passing by, especially since he was in great pain?

2. It is written, "Since it is stated, 'while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent,' this tells us that Abraham wanted to get up, but G-d told him: Remain seated; I am standing. This will be a sign for your offspring, as it is written, 'G-d stands in the Divine assembly' [Psalms 82:1]" (Bereshith Rabba 48:7). The question arises: If Abraham wanted to rise out of respect for the Divine Presence (yet G-d asked him to remain sitting), what indication is there in this for Abraham's children that G-d would be standing among them when they would be seated? Moreover, what is this sign?

3. Above all, how could Abraham leave the Divine Presence to go and run after guests passing by?

When the sacred imprint of circumcision perfected Abraham, he also became the vehicle for the Divine Presence, as the Sages themselves have said: "The Patriarchs constitute the Divine Chariot" (Bereshith Rabba 82:6). At that point he resembled G-d in all his attributes. Concerning the statement, "The L-RD appeared to him," the Ohr HaChayim writes: "The Torah wants to show that the Divine Presence enveloped him and that he became its vehicle." After circumcision, the yud of the sacred imprint was engraved in his flesh, concerning which the Zohar states, "The Divine Presence is with the one who is marked by the sacred imprint" (Zohar I:95a). At that moment, Abraham felt tremendous new strength, and even though he served G-d before with uncommon zeal, an impulse was now born in

him that erased all physical pain. When he saw travelers standing in front of him, he dashed toward them and invited them to his home.

This teaches us that whoever undermines this sacred sign, or is not even circumcised, cannot properly serve G-d, for he has not entered into His Covenant. Yet as soon as he corrects this lack and receives the blessings during the circumcision ceremony – blessings that, as we know, refer to Abraham, G-d's beloved, who was chosen and sanctified by Him from conception (see Tosaphot Menachot 53b) – it is self-evident that what is awakened and revealed in him, in everyone, is new strength and impetus to serve G-d (which was main thrust of Abraham's zeal). When someone feels a lack of enthusiasm in serving G-d, it is certainly because he has undermined the sign of the covenant and must rectify it. His zeal will then be restored to him, and he will be able to serve G-d with renewed strength.

After his circumcision, Abraham was imbued with energy that he had not known up to then; he was no longer the same man. His body now functioned with extra diligence, for he dominated the 248 members and 365 tendons of his body, as the Sages have said: "At first he was called Abram, for he dominated only the 243 members of his body, and in the end he was called Abraham, as it is written: 'And your name shall no more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham' [Genesis 17:5], for he dominated all 248 members of his body" (Nedarim 32b). Note that the letter hei that was added to his name has a numerical value of 5. He thus took full possession of all his strength. When his eyes saw people passing by, his legs began to run towards them with all the kindness that G-d desired.

We can now understand the sign that G-d gave to Abraham for his children when He told him: "Remain seated; I am standing. This will be a sign for your offspring." In effect, if G-d invited him to remain seated, there had to be a reason for this. It is possible that G-d took Abraham's acute pain caused by the circumcision into account. Yet when he saw three people standing opposite him, he had no doubt that G-d wanted him to run and welcome them, even though just before He had told him to remain seated. Through

his own initiative, Abraham merited overcoming his pain and expressing his great love for G-d precisely by the fact that he didn't remain seated, but rather hastened toward these passing guests. Since G-d was in agreement with his actions, from here we learn that "hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence" (Shabbat 127a). Only a man who has attained perfection can discern that G-d's real intention is not for him to remain seated, but rather that he should hasten to welcome those passing by.

Such was the reply that G-d gave him: "Remain seated; I am standing. This will be a sign for your offspring." G-d indicated to him that his children would guard the sign of the covenant and reach a state of perfection, for "the deeds of the fathers are a sign for their children" (see Sotah 34a). They will seat themselves in the Presence of G-d, and they too will know when it is appropriate to get up and run and welcome guests, for they will dominate the 248 members and 365 tendons of their bodies. They inherited this from their forefather, and if they conduct themselves as he did, G-d will be present among them and they will know when it is possible and necessary to get up and help their fellow man, as did Abraham.

We now understand why the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to Abraham on the third day following his circumcision.

Concerning the statement, "The L-RD appeared to him," we must note that in Hebrew the phrase is literally: "And appeared to him the L-RD." With regards to this, the Ohr HaChayim writes: We must understand why the Torah changes the order of the phrase and mentions the subject (the one who sees – Abraham) before the object (the one who is seen – G-d), as well as what G-d told Abraham during this prophetic vision. The Sages teach that G-d came to visit him three days after his circumcision, as when one visits the sick (Tanhuma Vayera 2), even though the text does not indicate this. It seems that the Torah's intent is to make us realize that G-d's Presence was with him and that he had become its vehicle, which is why the expression "to him" precedes the mention of G-d. This is meant to indicate that the Divine Presence revealed itself to him, something that we would not have known if the grammatical order of the phrase had not been inversed. (The Aramean translations of this verse – those of Onkelos and Yonatan – render it as: "He showed Himself – He revealed Himself," to indicate that this consisted of a prophecy).

Abraham prayed that his offspring would follow G-d's ways and remain connected to the soul of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He also prayed that they would have the merit of themselves being a vehicle for the Divine Presence. As it is written in holy books, "Reading the accounts of the lives of pious men [with the desire of being like them and emulating their ways] is like contemplating Divine knowledge." In other words, whoever models his behavior on the deeds of the Patriarchs connects himself to the knowledge of G-d, and "by the

awakening that he produces below, he causes an awakening in the worlds above," as the Talmud discusses at length (Hagigah 13a, 14b). Each person can, according to his abilities, reach this level thanks to the faith that he has in pious men and their influence on him.

This also allows us to understand what is written in the section dealing with the sacrifice of Isaac: "An angel of the L-RD called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham'" (Genesis 22:11). Why is Abraham's name called out twice? It is because "Repeating a person's name is a sign of love" (Bereshith Rabba 56:7).

The Midrash adds: "When the angel told him, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad' [Genesis 22:12], Abraham did not listen, and he even wanted to spill a little blood (in sacrifice). Hence the angel added, 'nor do anything to him'" (Bereshith Rabba ad loc.).

This is difficult to understand. How could Abraham have wanted to transgress G-d's commandment, for in the final analysis, if Abraham had done so he would have been committing murder. Can we even imagine such a thing?

Abraham knew that by sacrificing his son as G-d had commanded him, his obedience would have obtained great merit for him and his descendants, and from that day on G-d would favorably remember and forgive Jews for their sins until the end of time. That is what the Sages have explained concerning the verse that states, "And Abraham called the name of that site 'the L-RD will see'" (Genesis 22:14), for "G-d will remember (what could have happened to) the ashes of Isaac, united and destined to secure forgiveness for all generations" (Yerushalmi Ta'anith 2:4). Abraham desired to express his love for G-d just as G-d had expressed His love to him by calling out "Abraham, Abraham," and His love for his children when He would teach them the 13 attributes of Divine mercy, as it is written: "The L-RD, the L-RD, G-d, compassionate and gracious ..." (Exodus 34:6).

Concerning what is written near the end of our parsha: "I shall surely bless you and greatly increase your offspring" (Genesis 22:17), the Sages have explained, "A blessing for the father and a blessing for his son" (Bereshith Rabba 56:11). Abraham was blessed for his infinite love for G-d, and G-d rewards measure for measure (Shabbat 105b). Abraham knew that he was G-d's beloved, for G-d only puts those whom He loves to the test, as it is written: "The L-RD admonishes the one He loves" (Proverbs 3:12). Abraham wanted to win G-d's love for his children after him – "A blessing for the father and a blessing for his son" – and in the same way that G-d loved him and called to him "Abraham, Abraham," so too would G-d love his children and have mercy on them, for He is "compassionate and gracious."

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADDIKIM RABBI AVRAHAM AZOULAY

Rabbi Avraham Azoulay was born in the town of Fez, Morocco in 5330 (1569). His father, Rabbi Mordechai, descended from a great line of sages among the Jews of Spain, and the Azoulay family was one of the most dignified and honorable in all of Spain. Rabbi Avraham the Elder (the father of Rabbi Mordechai) was one of Spain's greatest rabbis.

Rabbi Avraham Azoulay's parents and grandparents left Spain during the inquisition, on the ninth of Av 5252 (1492). The Gaon Rabbi Avraham the Elder was among those Jews expelled from Spain, and it was then that he embarked for Morocco with his entire family. During that time the king of Morocco was merciful and lenient toward Jews. He welcomed them with joy, knowing that they would be useful for the expansion of his kingdom, with their true value consisting of their abilities. Their innate talent for commerce, their skill in crafts and the sciences, their knowledge in numerous fields, and their wisdom would be judiciously used. A great number of exiles settled in Morocco and contributed to the expansion of the country. Some were eminent physicians, while others were counselors to the royal court or emissaries to foreign countries, such as Turkey, Holland, England, and a host of others. Thanks to their linguistic abilities and competence in political matters, Jews were called upon to exercise roles as ambassadors abroad.

Rabbi Avraham the Elder settled with his entire family in the town of Fez. All the residents of the town, Jew and non-Jew alike, esteemed him not only for his great scholarship in the revealed and hidden aspects of Torah, but also for his reputation as a worker of miracles, which always followed his blessings.

As a child, the grandson of Rabbi Avraham the Elder (who was named Avraham after him) set himself apart from the other children of his age by his great intelligence. Everyone saw in him a child prodigy who exploited his extraordinary talents solely for the study of the holy Torah. His reputation as a Gaon in the revealed and hidden Torah spread throughout the entire town and to its surroundings, yet despite this great reputation his behavior was marked by great humility. He addressed himself to everyone as an equal, and he never felt that he was as grateful as he should be toward others.

In 5360 (1599), the situation for Jews in Morocco deteriorated. Rabbi Avraham was 30 years old when the town of Fez, where he had lived and experienced peace and calm up to that day, was transformed into a city of destruction. In addition to the civil war that began, famine and pestilence added to the devastation of the Jews. Faced with all this suffering, Rabbi Avraham decided to leave Morocco and settle in Israel. He hoped to be able to devote himself to Torah study and find refuge among the holy Rabbis there, namely the wise disciples of the saintly Arizal.

Rabbi Avraham arrived in the land of Israel in 5370 (1609) and settled in Hebron. He yearned to live in peace, yet Heaven had decided otherwise. Having barely arrived in Hebron, an epidemic broke out and Rabbi Avraham was forced to leave the city and settle in Jerusalem, then in Gaza. In the introduction to his book *Chesed l'Avraham*, he describes his misfortunes and wanderings.

It was in the town of Gaza that Rabbi Avraham would write his commentary on the Tanach entitled *Baal Brit Avraham*, a book based on Pshat and Kabbalah. He would also write *Chesed l'Avraham* in Gaza.

A mystery surrounds the death of the Tzaddik. The story goes as follows:

One day, the Grand Vizier of Constantinople decided to make a pilgrimage to the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, which was also a holy place for Muslims. When the Vizier arrived at the entrance to the tomb and knelt down, his sword fell to the bottom of the cave. He ordered one of his servants to go down into the cave and bring back the sword, and so one servant was attached to a rope and lowered down. When the rope was hoisted back up, the servant was dead. The Vizier ordered other servants to go down, yet one after the other came back up dead. The furious Vizier decided to call upon the Rabbi of Hebron, Rabbi Eliezer Archa, and told him: "I'm giving you 48 hours to get my sword back from the bottom of the cave, and if it's not returned to me by that time, I'll order the execution of all the Jews in the city."

All the Jews of Hebron assembled in its synagogues and recited prayers of penitence and lamentation, imploring the Creator of the world to save them from this tragedy. Rabbi Eliezer decided to draw lots, and the one chosen would go down into the cave of the Patriarchs to bring back the Vizier's sword.

As soon as morning prayers were completed, Rabbi Eliezer proceeded to draw lots in front of the whole community. The name of Rabbi Avraham Azoulay was drawn.

Rabbi Avraham immediately began to prepare himself with great, deep reverence. He immersed himself in the mikveh, donned white clothes, and began to study the secrets of Torah. The Kabbalists of the city accompanied Rabbi Avraham Azoulay to the entrance of the cave and blessed him so that Hashem would make him succeed in his undertaking without any harm coming to him. In the synagogues of Hebron, Jews united with prayers, tears, and moaning that tore Heaven apart.

Rabbi Avraham Azoulay was let down with a rope, and a few minutes afterwards the Vizier's sword shot back up attached to the cord, but without Rabbi Avraham. Several hours passed. Finally, the voice of Rabbi Avraham could be heard, and he was lifted out of the cave, his face beaming with great joy.

"I encountered the Patriarchs," he whispered to his close friends, deeply moved by the event. He also said that the time of his departure from this world had been revealed to him, and that the next day he was to render his soul to His Creator.

During the night, he instructed the secrets of Torah to his students and friends. He had the appearance of an angel of G-d.

As soon as daybreak occurred, he immersed himself in the mikveh and dressed himself entirely in white. After prayers he recited *Shema Israel*, his face radiating with a light that was no longer of this world. One hour later, he rendered his soul to his Creator. It was the eve of Shabbat, Heshvan 24, in the year 5404 (1643).

Rabbi Avraham left behind a son and two daughters. His son Rabbi Itzhak, who was also a great teacher of the generation, was the father of the Gaon Rabbi Chaim Yossef David Azoulay (the author of *Shem Hagedolim*), who was known as the Chida.

In his book, the Chida evokes his grandfather, Rabbi Avraham, with great fear and respect. Up to our days, the name of Rabbi Avraham Azoulay is praised by all those who have the merit of tasting the delicate flavors that emerge from his holy books.

THE STORY OF THE WEEK FOR I WILL NOT ABANDON YOU

The Tzaddik Rabbi Mendel of Viznitz recounts that a chassid once came to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev to tell him of his troubles. Actually, he was in a very bad situation. He owed his creditors a great amount of money, yet because he had been rich up to that point, people were not aware that he was so greatly in need. At present he had lost all his money on some bad business ventures, and nobody had yet heard of this catastrophe that had struck him.

The saintly Rabbi told him, "I am of the opinion that you should buy a lottery ticket, and G-d willing this will save you." The chassid responded, "I certainly don't mean to put the Rav's words in doubt; his word will certainly come true. But who knows when it will happen? Sometimes several years pass before someone wins at the lottery, yet in the meantime my creditors will begin to come after me, and I also have a daughter who is at the age of marriage and I need money for her!" Rabbi Levi Yitzchak assured him that the Holy One, blessed be He, would quickly send him money, even before he wins at the lottery. Naturally, the chassid went along with the Rabbi's advice and bought a lottery ticket. On his way back home, he stopped by an inn where he intended to spend the night. Now during that night a prominent figure, a government minister in fact, was traveling by in his coach, and he also decided to spend the night at the inn. During that night, the minister dreamed that at that very moment in that very same inn there was a Jew who owned a lucky lottery ticket, and that he should make every effort to try and exchange a lottery ticket that he himself owned with that of the Jew's. To him, the Jew's lottery ticket would certainly win, whereas his own ticket was worthless. The minister got up and realized that it was a dream, yet he once again dreamed of the same thing when he went back to bed. He then got up and ordered his servant to find out if there was a foreign Jew staying at the inn. If such was the case, the servant was told to bring him to the minister. The servant found the Jew and brought him before the minister, who asked him if he owned a lottery ticket. He responded in the affirmative. "I too have a similar lottery ticket. Let's switch tickets, and I'll even add some gold coins to you in exchange." The Jew refused and said, "Even if you give me a great quantity of gold, I will not switch tickets with you." The minister went as far as offering him 1,000 gold coins, as long as the two exchanged tickets, yet the Jew continued to refuse. The minister then became enraged and ordered his servant to take the lottery ticket from the Jew by force. The servant did as he was told: He attacked the Jew and took the ticket from him by force, then gave it to the minister. The latter said to the Jew, "All the same, I don't want to steal it from you, which is why I'm giving you the 1,000 pieces of gold, as I proposed, as well as my lottery ticket in exchange." In spite of himself, the chassid accepted the minister's money and his lottery ticket, thinking "this too is for the good." Not long afterwards, the lottery ticket that the minister had left the Jew won a great amount of money, and the chassid went to Berdichev to see his Rav.

The Tzaddik told him, "I saw that your luck had fallen to the ground, so I sent the master of dreams to suggest to the minister to exchange his ticket for yours. The 1,000 pieces of gold that he added to you were because you had told me that you

needed to marry off your daughter right away. That is why you had some luck right away and your great deliverance occurred afterwards."

The chassid arrived back home, and he became richer than ever before.

When the Tzaddik of Viznitz finished his story, he said, "This is the meaning of what the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Jacob: 'I will not leave you until I have done that which I spoke to you' [Genesis 28:15]. This seems difficult to understand. What is the meaning of 'until I have done'? Is it that after having performed His promise, G-d would leave him? How could this be, since we cannot exist for even a moment without His Providence! Rather, this is what it means: Even before salvation arrives, even then I will not abandon you, and in the meantime you shall have smaller, less important deliverances."

When Jacob arrived in Haran, the Torah describes for us at length his encounter and discussion with the shepherds there. Now the Torah does not normally prolong accounts of things that are not very important. The Ramban sensed this problem here, and he resolved it as follows: "The text details this story at length in order to tell us that those who hope in G-d will renew their strength, and that His fear will invigorate them. For there in the story, Jacob was coming from a journey and was tired, yet he rolled away a boulder that normally required the strength of all the shepherds. Now around the well were three flocks lying about, along with many shepherds and caretakers, and yet together they still could not move the boulder."

THE MORAL OF THE STORY FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

It is written, "Behold, now, I desired to speak to my L-rd, although I am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27).

The Midrash states: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham, 'Because you think of yourself as dust and ashes, I will give your descendants two mitzvot for atonement: The ashes of the red heifer and the dust of the Sotah.'" (Note that in both cases, a return to original purity takes place).

Using a parable, let us try to concretize the connection between Abraham's words and the fact that he was given these two mitzvot:

Someone once held a great banquet and invited, among others, a man who was upright, honest, just and respected. He gave this man a prominent seat, one located at the head of the table. Yet since he was extremely modest, this man chose to sit in an out-of-the-way place. The master of the house, who wanted to honor him, decided to have all the prominent guests sit next to him, this in order to show his respect for the man who had abased himself by sitting far from a place of honor.

Because Abraham in his modesty believed himself to be insignificant, he said, "I am but dust and ashes." And since Hashem wanted that this upright man, who was dear to Him, should be honored, He replied: "From dust and ashes I will make objects of fundamental splendor and importance," or in the words of the Midrash: "I will give your descendants two mitzvot for atonement."