

PARSHA

LECH LECHA

NOVEMBER 1ST 2014
HESHVAN 8 5775

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The Path to Follow

SPEAK WELL AND ACT CORRECTLY

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "So Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maidservant – after ten years of Abram's dwelling in the land of Canaan – and gave her to Abram her husband, to him as a wife" (Bereshith 16:3).

Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh. In fact Rashi recounts that when Pharaoh saw the great miracles that Abraham experienced at Ur Kasdim, as well as perceiving the greatness of Sarah, he declared: "Better that my daughter be a servant in the house of Abraham than a mistress in another house."

Hagar was not an ordinary woman; indeed, she possessed merit. She was certainly a person of great importance for having cleaved to the sacred body of Abraham. Furthermore, our Sages have commented on her name Keturah, stating that her deeds were as pleasing as incense (ketoret), which is why she was bound to Abraham. In reality, the very fact of having been accepted as a maidservant was a sign of her self-sacrifice and complete submission. She could have been a queen, but since she understood the greatness of Abraham's house, she disdained honor and royalty. Instead, she preferred the life of a maidservant in the home of a tzaddik to a palatial existence filled with pleasure in the house of Pharaoh.

We should add that the numerical value of the name Hagar, plus one for the name itself, is equal to that of the term *acher* ("other"), namely 209. This means that after realizing the greatness of Abraham and Sarah, she decided to renounce her own personal status and royalty, and thus merited to become "other," meaning different. It sometimes happens that the term *acher* is used in a negative sense, as with Elisha ben Abuyah, the teacher of Rabbi Meir, when he renounced his faith in G-d. However in the case of Hagar, this term has a sacred meaning because Hagar yielded to a tzaddik and thus transformed herself into something "other." Likewise for Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who in the episode of the spies is said to have been motivated by "a different [*acheret*] spirit" (Bamidbar 14:24).

It is very surprising that only Hagar cleaved to Abraham after realizing his greatness. Why was Pharaoh – who was aware of the miracle that Abraham experienced in the furnace of Ur Kasdim, who had lived through the incredible "rescue" of Sarah in Egypt, and had decided to send his daughter with Abraham after having appreciated his greatness – not moved to repentance, but instead remained mired in sinfulness?

In truth, the evil inclination is very good at inciting people to "speak well but act badly." The evil inclination encourages us to preach to others, and yet persist in our sinful ways and deeds. It even fills us with the illusion of being righteous...since after all, we're encouraging others to repent! All the same, we still fail to work on ourselves. Pharaoh thought that since he had encouraged his daughter to follow Abraham, and since he had pushed her to admire the nobility of his

household, he had no further need to change! Hence he persisted in his evil ways and did not try to repent.

Every person must constantly reflect upon his own conduct. It is not enough to listen to words of Mus-sar or the reprimands of others. We must internalize ethical teachings and learn how to undertake our own spiritual accounting in order to become a different person. Furthermore, we know of ordinary people who have reached great spiritual heights due to such spiritual accounting. For example, the maidservant of Rabbeinu HaKodesh once saw a man committing a transgression and excommunicated him. Even after the man died, Rabban Gamliel did not annul the ban of excommunication. Why not? According to the Rosh, Rabban Gamliel considered this maidservant to be at a higher level than himself, meaning that he was afraid to annul her decision.

How could Rabban Gamliel have thought that this woman was at a higher level, since she was just a maidservant? Why exactly did he feel this way? He concluded that the maidservant had reflected upon the greatness of G-d and thus transformed herself into a person of great value, despite the simple work and ordinary household tasks that constituted her daily life. Despite all this, she had been stirred by the transgression of the man in question and demonstrated her zealotry for G-d by excommunicating him. Rabban Gamliel therefore did not wish to annul the ban pronounced by this woman, for although she was a simple maidservant, she had elevated herself and become an "other" woman. As for Lavan the Aramean, he provides us with the opposite example of the right attitude. Despite witnessing the piety of Jacob and knowing the complete truth, he still failed to repent. Furthermore, he pursued Jacob with the aim of killing him! Nevertheless, Lavan realized that he had grown wealthy ever since Jacob began to live in his home, and he knew that all his endeavors were crowned with success and his possession were blessed on Jacob's account. In fact Lavan detained Jacob for numerous years so that blessings could continue to rest on his home. Nevertheless, he still failed to repent and he remained with his idols. How can we explain such behavior? The answer is that it is not enough to meditate upon the greatness of the Creator and be momentarily awe-inspired. We must constantly be aware of our spiritual condition and keep a watchful eye on our own conduct. It is only by reflecting upon our deeds and behavior that we can improve them. Why did Lavan not experience any desire to repent? It would seem that he was missing the foundation, since he failed to commit himself to the path of Torah. Now it is impossible to construct a solid building without a sound foundation. Having not studied or benefited from a foundation of Torah, Lavan did not commit himself to improving his character traits, but remained mired in his sins.



Publication of
HEVRAT PINTO

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Don't Rely on Those Kinds of Friends

It is written, "Hashem said to Abram, 'Go from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Bereshith 12:1).

We must examine this verse very carefully, for it seems not to follow the natural order of things. Normally, a person first leaves his father's house, then his birthplace, and only then his country. That being said, why does our verse reverse this order?

The book Sha'arei Yeshua provides us with a marvelous explanation, one that accords with what the Sages state in the Midrash: "Rabbi Yitzchak commenced his discourse with, 'Hear, O daughter, and see, and incline your ear; forget your people and your father's house' [Tehillim 45:11]" (Bereshith Rabba 39:1). Since this passage is speaking about Abraham, everything can be explained. The term "go" signifies that Abraham was to forget and leave his birthplace and his father's house. Generally speaking, when someone has relatives that live far away and are not often seen, he forgets them more quickly than relatives who live nearby. People also forget distant relatives more quickly than their immediate household. Hence it is written: "Go from your land."

That is, forget the inhabitants of your land first, followed by those of your birthplace, and only then should you forget those of your father's house. As such, Abraham could venture towards the Holy Land to do the will of his Father in Heaven, thus cleaving to Hashem and His ways.

A parable illustrates this nicely. A man had three friends: The first he saw once a week, the second once a day, and the third was with him day and night.

One day, this man was accused of a crime and summoned to court. He went to see his first friend and asked that he accompany him to court, but he responded: "I can only accompany you to the end of the street where you live, not further."

He then left and went to see his second friend. When he recounted everything that had happened to him and asked that he accompany him to court, his second friend replied: "I can only accompany you to the end of my yard, not further."

When he went to find his third friend and explained what had happened to him, he replied: "I'm not leaving this spot!"

The man was now in great distress, sighing and weeping from his plight. He thought, "These are the friends – the ones in whom I trusted? The ones with whom I spent most of my time? Now that everything has gone bad, they've abandoned me!"

I Will Defend You

As he was weeping, someone he knew but didn't see very often approached him and said: "My dear friend, tell me why you're crying! What happened to you?"

He explained his misfortune to the man, telling him that he had been falsely accused of a crime and summoned to court. He told him of his fears, as well as the great pain that he experienced due to the reaction of his three friends. The man replied, "Don't worry. I'll accompany you to court and will defend you before the judges."

The man was astounded. His three friends had not agreed to go with

him, having sent him away empty-handed, whereas this man – whom he didn't even consider a friend – was prepared to go with him and even offered to defend him!

What we learn from this parable is that a person has three kinds of friends in life: The first are his acquaintances, whom he sometimes sees. The second are his wife and children, who are with him every day. The third is his money, which goes before him and protects him day and night. When the time comes to render his soul to his Creator, none of these "friends" can accompany him to the Celestial Court. He is therefore distraught, for the three with whom he spent his life cannot do anything for him.

However he has another friend, one that he doesn't even consider as such because he rarely sees him. This friend is the mitzvot, tzedakah, and good deeds that he sometimes accomplished in life, when he had the chance, though without seeking them outright. Although he never considered them his friends, they are actually the ones who will rescue him in the world above, as it is written: "Your righteousness [tsidkecha] will precede you" (Isaiah 58:8). The mitzvot precede him, light the way before him, and argue in favor of his merits.

Let Him Cleave to Torah and Good Deeds

This is alluded to in our verse: "Hashem said to Abram" – which is the soul; "Go from your land" – don't waste your time with bad friends from your own land; "from your birthplace" – this is your wife and children, the children being what come from you, while your wife brings you progeny; "and from your father's house" – this is your money, the inheritance of your father's house.

Because it is not fitting to excessively cleave to these three "friends," man does not primarily come into the world for them, but rather for the Holy Land, which is Torah. He should therefore cleave to good deeds and tzedakah, which will act in his favor in the future, the reward for which will be: "I will make of you a great nation" (Bereshith 12:2). As we know, angels are created by mitzvot, which carry the name of their author. This is the meaning of, "I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing" (ibid.).

The word beracha ("blessing") has the same numerical value as zachar ("male"), meaning that by your merit, I will pour out My abundance upon the world, as a male who pours out his influence upon the female. Thus all abundance that descends into the world will occur through your merit.

Guard Your Tongue

Lashon Harah in Writing

Furthermore, understand that there is no difference in regards to the prohibition against Lashon Harah, whether it is expressed verbally or in writing. It is the same whether you tell someone verbally that So-and-so said something negative about him or his merchandise, or whether you tell him in writing. In either case, you instill hatred in his heart for the person in question.

– Chafetz Chaim

The Power of Genuine Concern

On the expression found in this week's parsha, "the souls they made in Haran" (Bereshith 12:5), the Sages explain that it refers to the work of spiritual expansion performed by Abraham and his wife Sarah, who brought people under the wings of the Shechinah. Abraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women, the verse considering them as having "made" these converts.

As the Gemara explains, "He who teaches Torah to his neighbor's son is regarded by Scripture as though he had fashioned him, as it is written: 'and the souls they made in Haran'" (Sanhedrin 99b).

In this context, what follows are two stories that deal with the power of genuine concern for others, and the power that such concern can exert for all time.

The first story concerns a boy who was enrolled in a yeshiva ketana, a boy whose family was experiencing tremendous difficulties. The state of the boy himself aroused pity, for he knew nothing about the Gemara and was forced to work in the yeshiva's kitchen. The gaon Rabbi Mikhel Yehudah Lefkowitz Zatzal devoted a great deal of time to this boy, even keeping him in the yeshiva for an extra year. Many people were surprised and asked why he invested so much time and energy into this boy, who didn't appear to have any chance of making it. How could Rabbi Mikhel Yehudah not despair or leave the boy alone?

The father of the boy, who was not interested in having his son study in yeshiva, constantly went to see Rabbi Mikhel Yehudah to inquire about the boy and see if there was any use in leaving him in yeshiva. Rabbi Mikhel Yehudah replied that his dear son was progressing in his studies. It was for this reason alone that the man was prepared, whether he liked it or not, to let his son continue learning.

The boy grew older and entered the yeshiva gedola, when suddenly he abandoned his studies and went to serve in the military, which naturally disappointed Rabbi Mikhel Yehudah a great deal. Yet to everyone's dismay, at the end of his military service the young man returned to the yeshiva and studied Torah with great enthusiasm, recalling the happy times that he had spent with his Rav. He eventually went on to establish a fine home founded on Torah.

It was only then that people could see the fruits of all the time and energy that Rabbi Mikhel Yehudah had invested in him. He had thus saved him, him and all the generations to come, all by the power of genuine concern, the power of a good deed and a good word!

Our second story concerns a fatherless youngster by the name of Yaakov. He had been born into an observant home, but in his time the spirit of the reform movement was very strong, and little by little he was led into abandoning the observance of Torah and mitzvot.

One morning, he awoke and remembered that it was the anniversary of his father's passing. Now before his passing, his father had asked him to recite Kaddish on his yahrtzeit for the elevation of his soul.

In the place where he lived, the German town of Wirtzburg, he had never entered a synagogue. He therefore went through the streets of the town looking for one. After a long while, he arrived before a magnificent synagogue and entered to recite Kaddish for his father. He waited patiently for the end of the prayer service, and then recited Kaddish with a strong voice for the elevation of his departed father's soul.

Once finished, he wanted to slip out of the synagogue without being seen. However a Jew with a friendly, smiling face approached him, introducing himself as the Rav of the town, Rabbi Yitzchak Dov Halevi Bamberger Zatzal.

"Shalom Aleichem," said the Rav to Yaakov. He then asked the youngster how he was, inquiring about his life with such genuine sincerity and warmth that it could open a heart of stone. The Rav expressed his astonishment and great appreciation for the fact that, despite the influence of the reform movement that was leading young people to completely detach themselves from Torah and mitzvot, he had not allowed himself to be carried away by

this flood. Instead, he had faithfully observed the traditions of Judaism and retained his connection to mitzvot.

Yaakov stood there petrified, his throat constrained by emotion. Tears stung his eyes, tears of relief and longing for the pure and upright world that he had left. He left the synagogue inundated with feelings of regret. At that point a spirit of purity came over him, and he began to return to his Father in Heaven.

Two years after reciting Kaddish, Yaakov stood beneath the chuppah as a young, G-d fearing man who observed Torah in all its details, along with a fiancée from a good orthodox family who also observed mitzvot, and together they built a true Jewish home. Years passed, and 13 children were born to them, all of whom followed the path of Torah and mitzvot.

Today, 150 years after reciting that Kaddish, one of his descendants, who observes the entire Torah, said the following: "Imagine if Rav Bamberger had not decided to approach that youngster and ask him how he was, and to express his appreciation to him? Who knows what would have happened? What an influence a good word can have for all time!"

In the Light of the Parsha

Characterized by Humility and Self-Effacement before G-d

It is written, "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth" (Bereshith 13:16).

We need to ask why the verse says "as the dust of the earth," rather than "as the sand of the sea" or "as the stars of the heaven." We can explain it as follows: In this verse, Abraham was told that just as he overcame his trials, all his descendants would also overcome their trials without weakening. Although their enemies tell them, "Renounce your faith or die," they would rather die than deny their faith. Abraham overcame his trials due to his humility, becoming like the dust of the earth, as it is written: "I am but dust and ash" (Bereshith 18:27). Now dust does not grow proud, for everyone treads on it. This was Abraham's distinguishing feature, as the Mishnah reports: "The disciples of our father Abraham possess a good eye, a humble spirit, and a self-effacing soul" (Pirkei Avot 5:19). As a result, the Jewish people also possess the features of humility and self-effacement before G-d. And just as Abraham annulled himself before G-d, the Jewish people feel like dust before G-d and overcome their trials. Generally speaking, no trial is insurmountable to anyone who possesses humility and self-effacement, for such a person annuls himself before G-d and does all that He commands without protest. Hashem therefore told Avraham, "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth." This teaches us that the Jewish people are as humble and self-effacing as he was, worthy of overcoming trials on account of these features. That is why Abraham was punished afterwards, when he interrupted the Torah study of his disciples in order to send them out to fight in the war of the kings (Bereshith 14:14). In reality, Abraham knew that he would not fall in war, nor could any king defeat him, for G-d had already given him the promise of "Lech Lecha" when he left Haran. The Baal HaTurim notes that this expression has a numerical value of 100, meaning that Abraham was told that he would live for another 100 years. That being the case, he had no right to interrupt the Torah study of his disciples. Although he did so for the needs of a mitzvah, he had already received G-d's promise that he would not die in war, and therefore he could have gone out alone without having to disturb his disciples. Furthermore, our Sages say (Tanhuma, Lech 9) that everything which happened to Abraham would also happen to his descendants. In that case, his descendants would learn to neglect their Torah studies from him, which is why he was punished. Not that Abraham's action constituted a sin, for he disturbed his disciples only for the sake of a mitzvah, and furthermore Hashem helped him in battle. Hence it could not have been an actual sin.

However this would constitute an example for the generations to come, who had to remain immersed in their studies unless an urgent need arose. As the Sages say, "Schoolchildren may not be made to neglect [their Torah studies] even for the building of the Temple" (Shabbat 119b). Here, because Abraham could have gone out into battle by himself, he should not have interrupted the Torah study of his disciples.

Blessing First

It is written, “I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse” (Bereshith 12:3).

In the first clause of this verse (“I will bless those who bless you”), why does the act of blessing come before mentioning the one who blesses? In the second clause (“and him who curses you I will curse”), the act of cursing comes after mentioning the one who curses. In his book *Chomat Anach*, the Chida responds according to the concept that the Holy One, blessed be He, combines good intentions with deeds, but does not combine bad intentions with deeds (Kiddushin 40a). Hence when He blessed Abraham, He gave him the blessing that anyone with even the thought of blessing him would already be blessed by G-d Himself, the blessing coming first for those who bless Abraham. Such is not the case for those who curse Abraham, those for whom G-d does not combine thought with deeds. Hashem’s curse will not come upon a person who has cursed Abraham in thought alone, not having put it into action.

Women Have Precedence

It is written, “From there he relocated to the mountain east of Bethel and pitched his tent” (Bereshith 12:8).

The Midrash notes that the verse states *ahaloh*, with the letter *hei*, as if to say “her tent” (Bereshith Rabba 39:15). This teaches us that Abraham first pitched the tent of his wife Sarah, and only then did he pitch his own tent.

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin Zatzal, the author of *Oznayim LaTorah*, points out that Abraham had already tried to teach a great lesson to the generations to come, generations that would be immersed in chaos and among which unbelief would be common. The lesson is that the “tent of Sarah,” to convert women, was greater than the “tent of Abraham,” to convert men. Indeed, the tent of Sarah has precedence over the tent of Abraham, for we know that women are more inclined towards faith than men are. This means that anyone who tries to implant faith in the heart of women first, followed by trying to implant faith in the heart of men, is moving from the simpler to the more difficult, which is the suggested way to proceed in teaching. Afterwards, women influence men by their faith.

This is also what Hashem told Moshe (Shemot 19:3) when he was to prepare the Jewish people for receiving the Torah: “So shall you say to the House of Jacob” – these being the women; “and relate to the Children of Israel” – these being the men.

The Power of the Tongue

It is written, “That I may live on account of you” (Bereshith 12:13).

In his book *Peninei Daniel*, Rabbi Daniel Flavni Shlita writes that here we see an allusion to a teaching from the Sages, namely that “life and death are in the power of the tongue.” In fact the term *biglalech* (“on account of you”) has the same numerical value as the word *peh* (“mouth”). This means that a person merits to live on account of the mouth, something that Abraham also told Sarah, meaning that his life now depended on exactly how she would speak.

Like Water Under Pressure

It is written, “There was *riv* [quarreling] between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock” (Bereshith 13:7).

In the following verse we read, “Abram said to lot: ‘Please let there be no *meriva* [strife] between me and you.’”

At first the subject is *riv* (quarreling), but afterwards it is *meriva* (strife).

Rabbi Moshe Alsheich cites our Sages in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 7a) in stating that disputes are like water under pressure, which seeks to escape

and inundate everyone who creates the smallest opening for it.

This is the nature of a dispute: It begins with something small, but grows into something enormous.

Hence Abraham told Lot that there had only been a dispute between their herdsmen, not themselves, up until that point. And even among their herdsmen, there had not really been a dispute – designated by the feminine term *meriva*, meaning something that gives birth like a woman, extending itself and proliferating. Rather, it had only been a conflict – designated by the masculine term *riv*, meaning something that does not become a *meriva* by giving birth and proliferating, and eventually develops “between me and you.”

Through the Merit of his Wife

It is written, “Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me for your sake, and that I may live on account of you” (Bereshith 12:13).

Rabbi Elazar said, “This is very strange. Can we believe that a G-d-fearing man like Abram should speak like this to his wife in order that he may be well-treated?”

“The truth is, however, that Abram relied on the merit of his wife, not on his own merit, to procure for him the money of the heathen, for a man obtains money through the merit of his wife, as it is written: ‘House and riches are an inheritance from fathers, but a prudent wife is from Hashem’ [Mishlei 29:14].

“Furthermore, he saw an angel going before her, who said to him: ‘Fear not, Abram. G-d sent me to procure for her the money of the heathen and to protect her from all harm.’ Hence Abram did not fear for his wife but for himself, since he saw the angel with her but not with himself. Therefore he said to her: ‘Please say that you are my sister – that he [the angel] may do good to me in this world, and that my soul may live in the next world for your sake, if you don’t refrain from the right path, for otherwise death awaits me in this world.’” – Zohar III:52a

Men of Faith

The Thief’s Head Remains Suspended

In the era of Rabbi Haim Pinto, may his merit protect us, an astonishing incident occurred, one that filled the conversation of everyone in town. It occurred in the home of a particularly pious and holy member of the Pinto family, a *rav* who was accustomed to miracles. One night during the holidays, while everyone was at home, a non-Jew suddenly entered his home with the intention of stealing.

When the wife of the holy *rav* saw the thief, she immediately called out to her husband: “Come quickly! A goy is in the house and wants to kill us!” The *tzaddik* raised his eyes, saw the non-Jew, and began to recite verses and sacred Names.

Before even finishing these verses, the non-Jew died on the spot. However his head remained suspended to the ceiling by a rope.

May all Your enemies perish in the same way, Hashem.

The home in which that miracle took place is still standing in the *mellah* [walled Jewish quarters] of Marrakesh. Many residents of the city go there to see it with their own eyes, lighting candles in the house and praying by the merit of the *tzaddik*.

A well-known and extraordinary fact is that even today, the head of the thief remains suspended to the ceiling. Many people travel to Marrakesh and ask about this house, where they can see the power of the *tzaddikim* with their own eyes.

This incredible story was recounted by the Rebbetzin Mazal, the wife of the *tzaddik* Rabbi Moshe Aharon Pinto, who went into this house and saw the head still suspended to the ceiling.