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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

Who was Avraham?
By Rav Yair Kahn

1. Why was Avram Chosen?

Although the documentation of events in the life of Avraham is relatively detailed, we are nonetheless confronted with a number of basic questions: Who actually was Avraham? Why was he chosen? What is the nature of the legacy that he passed on to the entire Jewish nation? How should this affect our lives?

When I attempt to paint the portrait of Avraham, I find myself faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, I imagine Avraham as an iconoclastic philosopher, rejecting all of society's assumptions and values in an uncompromising search for truth. This picture is fueled by all the *midrashim* which describe Avram's early years, discovering the light of monotheistic truth within the gloomy darkness of a pagan world. According to this view, Avram then proceeded to publicize his discovery to the ignorant masses, mocking and ridiculing their foolish beliefs.

In fact, this is the way the Rambam described Avraham:

As the years passed, God's glorious and awesome name was forgotten by the entire population, from their speech and thought; and they no longer knew Him. Thus, all the common people, the women, and the children would know only the image of wood or stone and the stone temples to which they were trained from their childhood to bow down and serve, and in whose name they swore. The wise men among them... would think there is no god other than the stars and spheres...

The world continued in this fashion until the pillar of the world, our Patriarch Avraham, was born.

After this embodiment of strength was weaned, he began to explore and think, though a child, and would think day and night, wondering: How is it possible for this sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it?

... He was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters.

... Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one God...

... When he recognized and knew Him, he began to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them they were not following a proper path. He broke their idols and began to teach

the people that it is fitting to serve only the God of the world. To Him it is fitting to bow down, sacrifice, and offer libations, so that the future generations would recognize Him. (*Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* 1:2-3)

On the other hand, Avraham is considered the paradigm of *chessed*. Kindness and sensitivity are his calling card. The prophet exclaimed: "*Titein... chessed le-Avraham*" (*Mikha* 7:20) - let *chessed* be presented to Avraham. He prays for the lives of his ideological enemies, the inhabitants of Sodom. His tent is open to any and every wanderer. His own illness and personal discomfort are of no concern, as he gazes down the road in the heat of day waiting to help some lonely passerby. His actions are not motivated by missionary zeal, but by love of man and sensitivity to human suffering.

Who was Avraham? "*Ish Ha-Chessed*" or "*Ish Ha-Emuna*," altruistic humanitarian or knight of faith?

Of course, these two portraits are not irreconcilable if we assume there is no contradiction between faith and *chessed*. Nevertheless, it would be instructive to attempt to determine the relationship between these seemingly unrelated characteristics.

One option is that Avraham was basically a philosopher who discovered God. However, he did not only discover the creator of the cosmos, but a loving, caring God as well. The revelation attained by Avraham was of "Hashem Hashem *Kel rachum ve-channun*." He therefore altered his behavior, and chose the path of *chessed*. "*Ma hu rachum, af atta heyei rachum*." He imitated the attributes of Hashem, and changed the course of his life. In fact, the philosophical portrait is typical of the description of Avram's early years. His attribute of *chessed* expresses itself only later on.

2. The Centrality of Ethical Sensitivity

However, there are a number of indications that *chessed* was an inherent characteristic of Avraham, and not just a learned trait. In *Hilkhot Teshuva* (2:10), the Rambam considers human sensitivity to be a basic Jewish characteristic:

It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and refuse to be appeased. Rather, he should be easily pacified, but hard to anger. When the person who wronged him asks for forgiveness, he should forgive him with a complete heart and a willing spirit. Even if he aggravated and wronged him severely, he should not seek revenge or bear a grudge.

This is the path of the seed of Israel and their upright spirit. In contrast, the insensitive gentiles do not act in this manner. Rather, their wrath is preserved forever.

This sentiment is echoed in *Hilkhot Matanot Aniyim* (10:1):

We are obligated to be careful in the *mitzva* of charity, to a greater extent than all other positive

commandments, for charity is the mark of a righteous person, a descendent of Avraham our Patriarch.

This same idea appears once again in *Hilkhot Avadim* (9:8), with the added point that these qualities are also characteristic of Hashem, as it were:

Cruelty and arrogance are found only among the idol-worshipping gentiles. By contrast, the descendents of Avraham our Patriarch, the Jews – whom the Holy One, blessed be He, granted the Torah and commanded to observe righteous statutes and precepts – are merciful to all.

And similarly, with regard to the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He, which He commanded us to emulate. It is written, "His mercies are upon all His works."

In *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'a* (19:17), the Rambam goes even a step further, questioning the Jewishness of anyone who acts with insensitivity and cruelty.

Similarly, whenever a person is characterized by insolence and cruelty, hating people and not showing kindness to them, we suspect that he is a Givonite. For the distinguishing signs of the holy nation of Israel is that they are meek, merciful, and kind.

I am unaware of any similar statements made about faith. Do we question the Jewishness of those who unfortunately fail to believe in the Torah? Do we suggest that they may not be descendents of Avraham? Usually, we prefer to apply the dictum "*Yisrael, af al pi she-chata, Yisrael hu*" (a Jew, even if he sins, remains a Jew). Apparently, ethical awareness and sensitivity are inherent Jewish characteristics inherited from our founding father Avraham.

3. Avraham and Lot

We can support our position by studying Avraham from the perspective of those who surrounded him and were inspired by him. Let us take Lot as a case in point. He separated himself from Avraham and his teachings, preferring instead the lucrative opportunities afforded to him in Sodom. Blinded by the fertility and richness of the Jordan valley, he ignored the presence of immorality and evil.

East – And the Aggadic interpretation: he removed himself from the Originator of the world. He said: I do not want Avram or his God. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 13:11)

Nevertheless, despite the loss of faith and his unethical surroundings, Lot retained his moral sensitivities. The Torah intentionally compares Lot's behavior to that of Avraham with respect to *hachnasat orchim*.

It is noteworthy that the rejection of Ammon and Moav, the descendents of Lot, is a result of the fact that this ethical message was eventually lost:

Because they did not meet you with bread and water on your journey after you left Egypt. (*Devarim* 23:5)

Furthermore, Rut's acceptance to the Jewish community, despite being a Moavite, is within the context of a beautiful and

touching story containing a vivid description of her devotion and sympathy towards Naomi.

Be blessed of God, my daughter! Your latest kindness is greater than the first. (*Rut* 3:10)

Chazal understood that the legacy that Lot received from Avraham was still alive. However, it was only transmitted through the daughters of Ammon and Moav:

Because they did not meet you with bread and water; it is customary for a man to meet [travelers], it is not customary for a woman to meet [them]. (*Yevamot* 76b)

Within this context, it is also instructive to take a glance at the method Eliezer, Avraham's faithful servant, used to secure a suitable bride for Yitzchak. Eliezer was aware that the future of the entire covenantal community was entrusted to him. He was sent to a foreign land in order to find a girl blessed with the qualities required to continue the community. Many have noted that Eliezer did not ask for an arbitrary divine sign. The omen had content and was indicative of qualities befitting the daughter-in-law of Avraham, human sensitivity and kindness. However, it is shocking that the religious element is totally ignored. Although paganism was widespread, Eliezer did not concern himself with the issue of faith. The focus of Eliezer's test exhausts itself on the plane of human sensitivity. His search was for the girl of *chessed*.

We therefore submit that the starting point of Avraham was not necessarily faith. According to *Chazal*, there were other monotheists in his generation who shared Avraham's religious convictions. Among them, however, Avraham was unique due to his moral sensitivity. He was a religious philosopher who was granted revelation as a result of his *chessed* characteristics.

4. Avraham's Quest

If our premise, that *chessed* is an integral aspect of Avraham's character, is adopted, we can put forward an additional possibility regarding the relationship between Avraham's morality and his discovery of monotheism. Accordingly, Avraham's rejection of idolatry was not only the result of philosophical musing. As an *Ish Ha-Chessed*, he couldn't accept pagan doctrine. Paganism responds to a world replete with contradictions by developing a complex system of competing forces. There are forces of good wrestling with the forces of evil; a god of love as well as a god of war. According to this fragmented view of the world, man is vulnerable to whims of powers greater than himself. It is a world void of justice. It is a world that is no more acceptable to the "*Ish Ha-Chessed*" than one based upon cold, mechanical causality.

Avraham the "*Ish Ha-Chessed*" gazed at the stars, searching the cosmos for the source of *chessed*, the single force, which stands alone as the force of creation.

For I said, "The world is built on kindness." (*Tehillim* 89:3)

His search for God was not only a philosophical one, but a moral one as well. Avraham's quest for truth did not take place solely in the ivory towers of intellectual scholarship, and his discovery was not limited to the abstract world of philosophic speculation. He found faith in the real-life world, full of promise

and disappointment, of suffering and joy. Therefore, he discovered not only Hashem, but justice and morality as well.

From this perspective, the significance of the *Akeida* should be reevaluated. According to our thesis, Avraham was asked to do more than sacrifice his beloved son or destroy all his dreams with his own two hands. The divine imperative demanded that Avraham forfeit the achievement to which he had sanctified his entire life. He was asked to surrender his discovery of a merciful God to whom human sacrifice is an abomination (*Devarim* 18:12). He was asked to submit, as a profound expression of faith. Of course, after he passes the "test" of the *akeida*, Avraham is prohibited from sacrificing Yitzchak. Ultimately, the truth of Hashem's kindness is reaffirmed and merger of faith and morality is restored.

In summary, it was to Avram the "*Ish Ha-Chessed*" that Hashem revealed himself. It was Avraham who was selected to head the covenantal community. It was the "*Ish Ha-Chessed*" who was chosen in order to pass on to his children the divine path of justice and kindness, the legacy of faith and morality.

For I know him, so that he will command his children and his household after him to keep the way of God, to do righteousness and justice. (*Bereishit* 18:19)

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