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On Being a Jewish Parent

Britain's Former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

The most influential man who ever lived does not appear on any list I have seen of the hundred most influential men who ever lived. He ruled no empire, commanded no army, engaged in no spectacular acts of heroism on the battlefield, performed no miracles, proclaimed no prophecy, led no vast throng of followers, and had no disciples other than his own child. Yet today more than half of the 6 billion people alive on the face of the planet identify themselves as his heirs.

His name, of course, is Abraham, held as the founder of faith by the three great monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He fits no conventional stereotype. He is not, like Noah, described as unique in his generation. The Torah tells us no tales of his childhood as it does in the case of Moses. We know next to nothing about his early life. When God calls on him, as He does at the beginning of this week's parsha, to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house, we have no idea why he was singled out.

Yet never was a promise more richly fulfilled than the words of God to him when He changed his name from Abram to Abraham:

"For I have made you father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5).

There are today 56 Islamic nations, more than 80 Christian ones, and the Jewish state. Truly Abraham became the father of many nations. But who and what was Abraham? Why was he chosen for this exemplary role?

There are three famous portraits of Abraham. The first is the one we learned as children. Abraham, left alone with his father's idols, breaks them with a hammer, which he leaves in the hand of the biggest of the idols. His father Terach comes in, sees the devastation, asks who has caused it, and the young Abraham replies, "Can you not see? The hammer is in the hands of the

largest idol. It must have been him." Terach replies, "But an idol is mere of wood and stone." Abraham replies, "Then, father, how can you worship them?"¹ This is Abraham the iconoclast, the breaker of images, the man who while still young rebelled against the pagan, polytheistic world of demigods and demons, superstition and magic.

The second is more haunting and is enigmatic. Abraham, says the midrash, is like a man travelling on a journey when he sees a palace in flames.

He wondered, "Is it possible that the palace lacks an owner?" The owner of the palace looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." So Abraham our father said, "Is it possible that the world lacks a ruler?" God looked out and said to him, "I am the ruler, the Sovereign of the universe."²

This is an extraordinary passage. Abraham sees the order of nature, the elegant design of the universe. It's like a palace. It must have been made by someone for someone. But the palace is on fire. How can this be? Surely the owner should be putting out the flames. You don't leave a palace empty and unguarded. Yet the owner of the palace calls out to him, as God called to Abraham, asking him to help fight the fire.

God needs us to fight the destructive instinct in the human heart. This is Abraham, the fighter against injustice, the man who sees the beauty of the natural universe being disfigured by the sufferings inflicted by man on man.

Finally comes a third image, this time by Moses Maimonides:

After he was weaned, while still an infant, Abraham's mind began to reflect. Day and night, he thought and wondered, "How is it possible that this celestial sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn, for it cannot be that it turns itself?" He had no teacher, no one to instruct him in anything. He was surrounded, in Ur of the Chaldees, by foolish idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshipped idols, and he worshipped with them. But his mind was constantly active and reflective, until he had attained the way of truth, found the correct line of thought, and knew that there is one God, He that guides the celestial spheres and created everything, and that among all that exists, there is no God beside Him.

This is Abraham the philosopher, anticipating Aristotle, using metaphysical argument to prove the existence of God.

Three images of Abraham; three versions, perhaps, of what it is to be a Jew. The first sees Jews as iconoclasts, challenging the idols of the age. Even secular Jews who had cut themselves adrift from Judaism were among the most revolutionary modern thinkers, most famously Spinoza, Marx and Freud. Thorstein Veblen said in an essay on "the intellectual pre-eminence of Jews," that the Jew becomes "a disturber of the intellectual peace . . . a wanderer in the intellectuals' no-man's-land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon."

The second sees Jewish identity in terms of tzedek u-mishpat, a commitment to the just society. Albert Einstein spoke of the "almost fanatical love of justice" as one of "the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it."

The third reminds us that the Greek thinkers Theophrastus and Clearchus, disciples of Aristotle, speak of the Jews as a nation of philosophers.

So these views are all true and profound. They share only one shortcoming. There is no evidence for them whatsoever in the Torah. Joshua speaks of Abraham's father Terach as an idolater (Josh. 24:2), but this is not mentioned in Bereishit. The story of the palace in flames is perhaps based on Abraham's challenge to God about the proposed destruction of Sodom and the cities of the plain: "Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?" As for Abraham-as-Aristotle, that is based on an ancient tradition that the Greek philosophers (especially Pythagoras) derived their wisdom from the Jews, but this too is nowhere hinted in the Torah.

What then does the Torah say about Abraham? The answer is unexpected and very moving. Abraham was chosen simply to be a father. The "Av" in Avram/Avraham means "father". In the only verse in which the Torah explains the choice of Abraham, it says: For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the

Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him.” (Gen. 18:19)

The great scenes in Abraham’s life – waiting for a child, the birth of Ishmael, the tension between Sarah and Hagar, the birth of Isaac, and the binding – are all about his role as a father (next week I will write about the troubling episode of the binding).

Judaism, more than any other faith, sees parenthood as the highest challenge of all. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah – the anniversary of creation – we read of two mothers, Sarah and Hannah and the births of their sons, as if to say: Every life is a universe. Therefore if you wish to understand the creation of the universe, think about the birth of a child.

Abraham, the hero of faith, is simply a father. Stephen Hawking famously wrote at the end of *A Brief History of Time* that if we had a Unified Field Theory, a scientific “theory of everything”, we would “know the mind of God.” We believe otherwise. To know the mind of God we do not need theoretical physics. We simply need to know what it is to be a parent. The miracle of childbirth is as close as we come to understanding the love that brings new life into the world that is God’s creativity.

There is a fascinating passage in Yossi Klein Halevi’s book on Christians and Muslims in the land of Israel, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*. Visiting a convent, he is told by a nun, Maria Teresa:

“I watch the families who visit here on weekends. How the parents behave toward their children, speaking to them with patience and encouraging them to ask intelligent questions. It’s an example to the whole world. The strength of this people is the love of parents for their children. Not just the mothers but also the fathers. A Jewish child has two mothers.”

Judaism takes what is natural and sanctifies it; what is physical and invests it with spirituality; what is elsewhere considered normal and sees it as a miracle. What Darwin saw as the urge to reproduce, what Richard Dawkins calls “the selfish gene”, is for Judaism high religious art, full of drama and beauty. Abraham the father, and Sarah the mother, are our enduring role models of parenthood as God’s gift and our highest vocation.

1 Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 38:13

2 Ibid., 39:1

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Good and Bad Reasons for Changing Customs

Posted by: R. Gidon Rothstein

in Posts, Responsa Nov 11, 16 0 10 Cheshvan: R. Hayyim David HaLevy on Good and Bad Reasons for Changing Customs

The putative question in *Aseh Lecha Rav* 4:37 has to do with how many Torah scrolls we take out to dance with on Simchat Torah, but for R.

Hayyim David Halevy it becomes a discussion of when rabbis should or shouldn’t try to change communities’ practices.

He’s responding to a letter dated tenth of Cheshvan, from the new rabbi of a shul. Simchat Torah night he was told that they only took out half the Torah scrolls at night and half the next day. He politely didn’t make a fuss of it at the time, and later found out that the previous rabbi instituted this, because the population of the shul had dwindled, especially of those young enough to dance holding a Torah for an extended time. By taking out only nine sifrei Torah at a time (of a total of eighteen), the dancing could go on longer.

In *Orach Chayyim* 669, though, Rema reported the custom to take out all the sifrei Torah. R. Halevy’s correspondent thinks this shows his predecessor was wrong. He wanted to change the custom back, and was soliciting R. Halevy’s support (in case the community resisted).

Simchat Torah in Bucharest

R. Halevy compliments his concern with observance of customs, and agrees with the general proposition that we should avoid changing them. In this case, however, since matters have already gone the other way for several years, he advises against trying to restore it.

That’s especially true because a 19th Century Rishon Le-Tzion (Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel), R. Ya’akov Shaul Elissar, known as Yisa Berachah (the phrase means “shall bear blessing,” a nickname Wikipedia says his stepfather gave him at his Bar-Mitzvah, based on his initials, Yis”a; there is a beit Knesset on Jabotinsky St. in Rechavia that says it was where he prayed), had been asked a similar question by the Jews of Bucharest. His answer gave reason to think this rabbi should not oppose the practice in his new shul.

In Bucharest, the important and respected people had ceased taking turns dancing with the Torah, leaving it to the masses and younger people, who weren’t acting with the proper respect. This rabbi therefore wanted to take out only a third of the sifrei Torah at a time, for night, morning, and Mincha (as those who have had the merit to be at the Kotel on a Simchat Torah afternoon know, some have the custom to do hakafot then as well). He, too, had met opposition to his altering the original practice, and turned to the Yis”a Berachah for advice.

R. Elissar agreed that Rema’s saying we take out all the Torahs at night and in the day meant all, and didn’t think that left much room to do otherwise. [This is not the first time I’ve seen Sephardic rabbis cite Ashkenazic rulings on matters of custom; it’s an interesting phenomenon, because I could have imagined R. Halevy saying we Sephardim don’t have to worry about Rema’s view of the customs of Simchat Torah; but he doesn’t].

More, he showed the custom’s roots in R. Hai Gaon’s view, and went on at length—in R. Halevy’s characterization—about not annulling customs that have a basis in an halachic authority’s writings.

When Practice Has Already Changed

Despite that, he offered some room for this rabbi in Bucharest to adapt to the conditions he faced. He had that an earlier rabbi, Mekor Baruch [whom I couldn’t quickly find] had been dealing with the practice to say pesukei dezimrah at the home of a groom on the Shabbat before his wedding, and then escort the groom to the synagogue.

However, people didn’t always gather on time, forcing the people at the groom’s house to send messengers after Baruch She-Amar, to find people to round out the minyan. A certain rabbi had been bothered by this interruption of the prayers, so he reconfigured the custom, saying that the escort would leave with the groom at Baruch She-Amar instead (getting rid of the need for a minyan and of the significance of an interruption, since it’s after Baruch She-Amar that the issue is significant).

Another rabbi was bothered by the change and wanted to restore it to how it had been. Mekor Baruch agreed with the first rabbi, however, since his suggestion had been accepted, and had made these events run more smoothly.

Based on that, R. Elissar said that indeed it would have been preferable not to change the custom. Once done, however, with the community’s accession to its rabbi’s idea of taking out the sifrei Torah over the course of Simchat Torah rather than all at once, and the rabbi’s clear motivation being to improve the honor of the Torah [that few enough Torahs be out to allow for proper supervision, I think], it would be better to leave it as is.

Back To R. Hayyim David HaLevy’s Time

Yis”a Bracha seems to have ratified a change in custom for a community whose main problem was the apathy of its leaders, without evidence the rabbi had tried, first, to educate those leaders about the importance of taking out the sifrei Torah, and the proper way to treat those Torahs. If so, change is more clearly allowed in the case brought to R. Halevy, since the rabbi who made that change didn’t have that possibility. He had to choose between hakafot brief enough for his members to be able to hold the Torahs, or take out fewer sifrei Torah.

Given his options and motives, and the communal acceptance of the change, R. Halevy sees no room to put it back, especially since the shul still doesn’t have enough people to carry all those sifrei Torah. While R. Halevy, too, is opposed to changing practices, his understanding is that that’s mostly to avoid rancor and dispute; if, in this community, the change has been accepted, there’s no reason to try to turn it back.

He closes with a blessing that the man should succeed in spreading Torah well, in rejuvenating the community such that they'll have plenty of people to carry the sifrei Torah, so that, in future years, they can perform hakafot in the traditional way, with all the scrolls coming out of the Aron at each prayer.

Rabbi Dr. Gidon Rothstein is the author of *We're Missing the Point: What's Wrong with the Orthodox Jewish Community and How to Fix It*, *Educating a People: An Haftarah Companion as a Source for a Theology of Judaism*, and two works of Jewishly-themed fiction, *Murderer in the Mikdash* and *Cassandra Misreads the Book of Samuel*.

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Lech Lecha
Rabbi Berel Wein

Our father Avraham is an inveterate wanderer. For a great deal of his life he is a traveller, always an immigrant in a new and alien society. Though he is recognized and respected as being a prince of God and a special person, an asset to any society in which he chooses to dwell, he still remains the eternal "outsider." He constantly hears, reverberating in his mind, God's original instruction to him to go forth, to travel to a destination that is as yet unknown to him.

In spreading the message and idea of monotheism throughout the world, his mission drives him to journey. He is not a nomad in any sense of that word, for he has a purpose and a goal and his journeys are a means to achieve his end. But being a traveller automatically shapes his life and is itself one of the major challenges that he faces in his lifetime.

In this respect, he is the accurate forerunner of the fate that will befall the Jewish people, his beloved descendants, throughout its long and difficult history. The Jewish people have wandered the face of this earth and have brought blessing and enriching achievement to every society it visited and settled in. Yet, again like their father Avraham, the Jews remained "outsiders" even though they were part of a particular society for centuries and felt themselves comfortable and perfectly integrated. In fact, and in inexplicable irony, the more integrated they were in a society, history shows us, the stronger was the reaction to treat them as "outsiders." And many times in our history this has ended very badly for all concerned.

Part of the lesson of the life of Avraham is that Jews must at one and the same time be a part – a loyal and contributing part – of the general society where they reside and somehow remain distinct, unique and special. Again, as history has shown us, this is no easy task, not for any individual, let alone for an entire group of people numbering in the millions. Bilaam, the intellectual champion of the non-Jewish world, would wonder in amazement that Israel "dwells alone and is not reckoned with the other nations of the world" and yet it plays such a dominant and disproportionate role in the affairs of the general world society.

In this it mirrors accurately the life and role of Avraham during his long and productive lifetime. To be the "outsider" and yet to be the cog that drives the engine of progress in civilization is one of the greatest achievements of the Jewish people over the ages. The non-Jewish world begrudgingly realizes this but, as in the case of Abraham and his society, this in no way softens their attitude or behavior towards the Jewish society and nation.

Whether there is anything that we can do to improve this situation is a difficult question to answer. But, as in the case of Avraham, our task is to persevere and remain constant to our goals, mission and eventual destination.

Shabbat shalom

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Ohr Somayach Torah Weekly Parshat Lech Lecha
by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com
For the week ending 12 November 2016 / 11 Heshvan 5777
Insights

You'll Always Be My Baby

"...he (Avram) armed his disciples who were born in his house..." (14-14)

However many the grey hairs that appear on the heads of our offspring, or however many the lines that appear on their faces, they will never cease to be our "babies."

Obviously the relationship of a parent to a child traverses many phases. You can't compare diapering your son to discussing with him a moot point in Jewish law, but there is always an unchanging fixed point in that relationship.

And maybe that fact should teach something: Bringing up children doesn't end at their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. It doesn't end when they get engaged or married. It's a lifetime duty to be there for them. And as they grow and mature, so do their needs become more sophisticated.

"...he (Avram) armed his disciples who were born in his house..."

Rashi comments that "his disciples" refers to Eliezer, whom Avraham initiated into the performance of mitzvot. The concept of chinuch (often translated as "education") implies the initiation of a person or, for that matter, a tool or implement, into the service that it will eventually continue to fulfill as – says Rashi - "in the case of the chinuch of children."

If a father teaches his son Torah in his younger years, but doesn't give sufficient care to his son's continuing development as a Torah Jew, that cannot really be called chinuch.

It's clear from Rashi that we can only say that we have truly 'educated' our children if they continue to fulfill the instruction they received in their early years.

Source: based on Rabbi Meir Shapira of Lublin in *Mayana Shel Torah* © 2016 *Ohr Somayach International*

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OU Torah
Lech Lecha: Solidarity or Separation?
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

What is a family to do when one member abandons its norms and traditions? This problem has confounded families since the beginning of time. How does a family handle its prodigal son, or sons?

Curiously, the term "prodigal son" is associated in the popular consciousness with a wayward son who is welcomed back into the family hearth. This association is based upon a story found in the Christian Bible. However, the word "prodigal" originates in the old French *prodigere*, which means "to drive forth or away," not to "welcome or bring close."

Entire societies, even nations, have historically been confronted with this problem. How are internal schisms to be dealt with? The choice is clear. One can attempt to retain solidarity by keeping the rebellious group in the fold. Although much is to be gained by such an approach there are risks. The group challenging the status quo is likely to influence others, eventually diluting their commitment and endangering time-honored beliefs and practices

The alternative is rejection. Expel the dissidents from group membership and demarcate them as "outside the camp." Let them go their own way. This

approach aims to maintain the status quo and hopes to insulate the “loyal” from ideological “contamination.”

The Jewish people have faced this dilemma numerous times in our history. Moses himself had to deal with contentious subgroups that “left the camp,” one even retreating to Egypt.

Much more recently, but already a century and a half ago, the rise of the Reform movement in Central Europe posed this very dilemma to the Orthodox communities there. Two great rabbinic figures, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch of Frankfurt and Rabbi Seligmann Baer Bamberger of Wurtzburg feuded heatedly over this issue. Should the Orthodox community take advantage of the Austrittsgesetz of 1876 and secede from the general Jewish community, now dominated by the reformers, or should unity be preserved, at almost any cost?

In our own times, young Orthodox rabbinical students face this dilemma. Should they pursue positions in traditional synagogues, thereby protecting self and family from exposure to those ignorant of or hostile to Orthodox religious ideals? Or, connect to those with lifestyles and ideologies antithetical to their own in the interests of Jewish unity? Should they thus follow the approach of the kiruv (outreach) movement, but thereby possibly compromise their own faith commitments and risk the religious development of their families?

A verse in this week’s Torah portion, Parshat Lech Lecha (Genesis, 12:1-17:27) provides us with food for further thought about this critical question. In this week’s parsha, we learn of the very first schism in Jewish history, one which occurred in the family of the patriarch Abraham.

From the time we were first introduced to him in last week’s Torah portion Abraham’s name has been linked with that of his nephew, Lot. They travel together to Canaan. A dispute ensues between Abraham’s shepherds and Lot’s shepherds, leading to a separation between the two. We then read:

“And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him, ‘Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the North and South, the East and West, for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever.’” (Genesis 13:14-15)

Rashi focuses upon the first several words of this passage. He notes that the Almighty postponed speaking with Abram and did not notify him of a most magnificent promise until after Lot parted from him. From Rashi’s perspective, Abraham’s long association with Lot was displeasing to the Almighty. Only after he had rid himself of Lot was the Almighty willing to directly address Abraham again. Rashi clearly endorses the separatist approach to the dilemma we have been discussing.

But not all rabbinic authorities agree with Rashi. Note the dispute between two Talmudic sages recorded in Midrash Rabbah on our verse:

“Rabbi Yehudah says, the Lord was angry with our father Abraham when he permitted Lot, his dear nephew, to separate from him. The Holy One, Blessed Be He said, ‘He tolerates everyone, and his own brother Lot he cannot tolerate?’ Rabbi Nehemiah disagreed, and said, the Lord was angry with our father Abraham when he permitted Lot to join him in the first place. The Holy One, Blessed Be He said, ‘I promised you that I would give this land to your own children, and yet you go and join with your nephew Lot, as if you intend to bequeath the land to him!’”

Rashi apparently sides with Rabbi Nehemiah in this dispute. For them, Abraham was acting meritoriously when he allowed Lot to depart from him. His association with Lot brought upon him nothing less than God’s own wrath. Rabbi Yehudah, on the other hand, forcefully represents the totally opposite view. Abraham should have done all that he could to prevent Lot’s departure. Separatism is not the way to go. Unity and solidarity must be preserved. For Rabbi Yehudah, Abraham’s ability to reach out to others was his greatest strength, and he displeases God when he does not use that ability to reach out to his own kin.

This dispute between these scholars of old is preserved for us by the Midrash for good reason. There is no simple answer to the dilemma of solidarity versus separatism. There are times and circumstances which

require the strength of resolve advocated by Rashi, in the footsteps of Rabbi Nehemiah. But there are other times, and different circumstances, which require the outreach approach that Abraham epitomized by his life example.

Personally, I find it helpful to reflect upon the end of the story. Abraham and Lot do separate in the passage we have been studying. But Abraham does not abandon Lot. As the narrative develops, we learn that Abraham came to Lot’s rescue and engaged in battle in order to redeem him from captivity.

Much later on in the Biblical narrative, we learn of Lot’s grandson Moab, whose descendant Ruth rejoined Abraham’s descendants. That ultimate reunion culminated in the birth of King David, Ruth’s great-grandson and the forebear of the Messiah. It would seem, then, that whereas separation is sometimes unavoidable and even necessary, it is solidarity and unity that hasten the arrival of the Messiah.

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Parsha Parables By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

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Parshas Lech Lecha
Drasha - Case Closed
Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Though this week’s portion is packed with messages and moral examples that we can garner from our forefather, Avram, there is, however, a small lesson I’d like to share learned from none other than the ancient Egyptian customs agents.

Avram is forced to leave Canaan due to a famine and travel the only country that has food, Egypt.

The Torah tells us that Avram was afraid. His wife Sora was beautiful, and he feared that she would be taken to Pharaoh as a wife or concubine. Avram would be killed. So Avram devised a ploy to spare his life from certain harm.

But that was not his first strategy. The Torah tells us, “And it was when Avram came to Egypt, and the Egyptians saw the woman that she was very beautiful (Braishis 12:14). Rashi quotes the Medrash’s question. Why doesn’t the Torah say, “And it was when they came to Egypt?” After all, Sora came too?

The Medrash Yalkut Shimoni (12:67) explains that Avram actually arrived alone at the border. Sora was hidden in a crate.

It chronicles the account: Avram arrived, and the customs agents stare at the large crate and demand, “Pay a duty! You are carrying a crate of utensils! Avram gladly agreed. Seeing Avram’s acquiescence, the agents were not pleased. “You must be importing expensive silk garments,” they declared. Avram once again agreed to pay the tax on a crate of silk garments. Again they became suspicious. You are carrying a crate of jewels! Pay tax on jewels!” And again Avram readily accepted the enormous financial burden. At that point the agents expressed their skepticism and pried the crate open. The Medrash continues to tell us that a great light illuminated Egypt. What they found was Sora, hidden in the box.

Now, I am not sure of the procedures of customs agents. But from the Medrash it surely seems that they lost out on the biggest booty they could possibly have snared. Avram was willing to pay tax on a crate of jewels, the most valuable entity that the agents had known. Why open the box and risk finding a box filled with pebbles?

Financier J.P. Morgan wanted to give his wife a gift, so he called a jeweler and asked him to send a beautiful jeweled ring for his wife.

“Send the ring to me,” he barked, “put the bill in the package, and I’ll send you out a check immediately.”

Two days later a box arrived. Mr. Morgan inspected the contents and found a beautifully crafted ring with an enormous diamond in the center. Along with it came an equally enormous bill for \$25,000. Morgan stared in

disbelief, as he removed the stone and wrote a check. Then he thought for a moment and re-wrapped the gift box with ornate, monogrammed gift-paper and sealed it with his inimitable JP Morgan cachet. He sent it back to the jeweler with a check and instructions.

“Dear Friend,

“The ring was magnificent, however your bill was exorbitant. Enclosed please find a check for \$12,000, which I hope, will meet your approval. If it does, please return the gift, untouched, in its personalized gift-wrap and seal. Then you may cash the check. If my amount does not suffice, please rip-up my check and return it at once. Feel free to remove the stone and keep the wrapping as a token for your good intentions.

J.P. Morgan.”

The jeweler was incensed at the amount on the check. He ripped up the \$12,000 check and mailed the shreds back to Morgan. He then proceeded to carefully remove the ornate gift-wrapping that ensconced his precious jewel box. He walked toward his safe and opened the gift box and was about to put the ring into his safe when he was startled.

The ring was not in the box. In its stead was a small rock. Around the rock a check was wrapped. It was signed by Mr. J.P. Morgan — for \$25,000.

Even the repartee between Avram and the customs agents can teach us a lesson. There can be something even more valuable than what is found in one’s imagination. And as the item in question is under wrap and seal, you never know its true value. Because the contents of simple crate can never be estimated. You may even fantasize that it is filled with jewels, and you will still be underestimating.

Good Shabbos

Dedicated by Mark & Deedee Honigsfeld and family in memory of Joseph Gross and Bluma Honigsfeld — ob’m

The author is the Associate Dean of the Yeshiva of South Shore.

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Torah.org

Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Lech Lecha

The Importance of Fairness & The Effect of a Negative Environment

The Importance of Fairness / The Effect of a Negative Environment

If It’s Not Fair, G-d Doesn’t Do It

Parshas Lech Lecha begins with one of the tests of the Patriarch Avraham. “Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” [Bereshis 12:1] We have commented many times in the past as to why the Torah does not explicitly mention that which many Rishonim say was the first test of Avraham Avinu – namely being thrown into the “Fiery Pit” (Kivshan HaEish) in Ur Kasdim. Obviously, jumping into a fiery pit because of one’s belief is a bigger test of one’s devotion than needing to pick up and move to a new land.

However, we can ask an even more troublesome question. When the Torah begins the story of Avraham Avinu, he is already 75 years old! [Bereshis 12:4]. What happened during those first 75 formative years of his life? The Torah does not say anything about how Avraham came to the realization of the Ribono shel Olam [Hashem/G-d]. The Torah never explicitly mentions the whole matter of breaking his father’s idols, being thrown into the fiery pit, and miraculously escaping. Why does the Torah not mention the story of Ur Kasdim at all?

The Ramban addresses this and teaches a great lesson. The Ramban writes that the annals of the history of the nations of the world from that time do not mention the story of Avraham Avinu jumping into the fiery pit. Does

such an incident not deserve a place in the history books? The reason history ignored this story is because the general population disagreed with Avraham. Therefore, they felt that his emergence from the fiery pit was some kind of magical trick. They did not attribute it to the power of One G-d. As we see throughout the Torah, magic was prevalent in those days.

The observers of the time much preferred to attribute the miracle to magic rather than to give credence to Avraham’s monotheistic belief in a Creator of the Universe. “For this reason,” the Ramban states, “the Torah does not record this miracle.” Since the general population denied it, the Torah does not mention it, because it would have also been necessary to mention the skeptical opinion of those who denied the miracle (as was the case when the Torah records the rebuttal of the Egyptian magicians to the miracles Moshe performed at the beginning of his mission to Pharaoh). In Mitzrayim, the magicians eventually came around to see Moshe’s viewpoint. However, Hashem never miraculously proved the theological correctness of Avraham’s position beyond any doubt in the eyes of those skeptics. The dispute remained a stalemate for the rest of Avraham’s life. Therefore, the Torah chose not to give any credence to the unrefuted views of the heretics who questioned the miracle of the Fiery Pit, by not mentioning the entire narrative rather than recording an unresolved dispute regarding how to interpret what happened.

L’Havdil, do the New York Times, the Washington Post, or our own beloved Baltimore Sun always report “both sides of the story”? Do they always give “equal time and equal opinion” to responsible spokesmen of opposing viewpoints? So why should this concern the Ribono Shel Olam? He knows the Truth. The Truth is that Avraham Avinu was right. Why write the other side of the story? The second side of the story is null and void (devarim beteilim). So, what does the Ramban mean?

Rav Simcha Zissel Broide, zt”l, (the Chevron Rosh Yeshiva) says that we see from this Ramban – as Rav Simcha Zissel points out throughout Sefer Bereshis – why the Book of Bereshis is called Sefer HaYashar (‘Book of the Straight People’ – i.e. — the righteous). The message is that the Ribono shel Olam is always fair. If it is not fair, the Ribono shel Olam won’t do it. First and foremost, (as we say in Shiras Ha’Azinu) Tzadik v’Yashar Hu (He is Righteous and Straight) [Devorim 32:4]. It is not ‘yashar’ [fair] to give only one side of a story, in spite of the fact that the other side of the story is false.

The Ribono shel Olam has a bigger agenda in Sefer Bereshis. That agenda is to teach us be straight and fair, to be honest, to be upstanding, and to do the right thing. The right thing is NOT to report only one side of a story. This is such an important concept to the Ribono shel Olam that He is willing to only obliquely refer to the miracle of Ur Kasdim and to leave it as part of the oral tradition, rather than to explicitly record the story in the Torah in an “unfair” manner.

What Was Really Going On In The Dialog Between the Angel and Hagar?

The following observation is from Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv (1824-1898), the Alter from Kelm (not to be confused with Rav Simcha Zissel Broide (1912-2000) quoted above who was named for and was the great-grandson of the brother of the Alter from Kelm).

The Torah describes [Bereshis 16:6-9] the story of Sarah and Hagar. Sarah was not able to have children so she suggested to her husband, Avraham, that he should marry Hagar. When Hagar sees that she became pregnant, she begins treating her mistress, Sarah, with disrespect. Sarah demands that Avraham do something about this situation and Avraham responds that Sarah can do with Hagar whatever she pleases.

Sarah treats her harshly and Hagar runs away from her. “An Angel of Hashem” finds Hagar in the wilderness and asks her: “Where are you coming from and where are you going?” Hagar responds that she is running away from Sarah. The angel then tells her to return to her mistress and suffer under her hand no matter how miserably she may be treated.

What is this dialog? The Seforno elaborates on the nature of the conversation between Hagar and the angel. Rav Simcha Zissel quotes the Seforno: The Malach tells Hagar – Just think for a minute. From who are you running away? You are running away from the house of Avraham. Do you know what a zechus [merit] it is to be from the house of Avraham? Do you know what type of better person you are by virtue of living in the house of Avraham? You were in an environment of holiness and purity and now you are headed to a place ‘outside the Land’ towards evil people.

Hagar responds, “I am simply fleeing. I cannot take it anymore; it is too painful. I am not headed towards anyplace in particular; I am just leaving an intolerable situation.” The Malach tells her “Go back anyway, no matter how bad it is.” This – according to the commentary of the Seforno – is the dialog between the angel and Hagar.

Rav Simcha Zissel explains that there is another level to the dialog as well: Hagar responded to the Malach, “You do not have to worry about me. Since I have been living in the house of Avraham, I am now immune to negative influences. I have reached this level of holiness from the years I have spent in Avraham’s holy environment, so no nothing bad can happen to me. I will not be corrupted.”

To which, the angel responds: “Hagar, you’re dead wrong. It does not matter that you spent many years in the House of Avraham. Such an environment will negatively affect you. A person’s current environment always has an effect on them.” Today, your belief system and your value system may be straight and pristine; but no one can say I am immune and I can go live on my own and be unaffected by my new environment. Rav Simcha Zissel continues: the best proof of this phenomenon is Lot. Look what happened to Avraham’s nephew who faithfully followed him from Charan to Canaan and then to Egypt and then back to Canaan. Avraham was his guardian; Avraham took care of him; he nurtured him; he taught him about Chessed and living a proper lifestyle. Yet when Lot ran off and headed to Sodom, his belief and value system totally turned around. In the words of Chazal, Lot said, “I no longer desire either Avraham or his G-d.” The Alter from Kelm says that Lot never really said those words. Chazal are teaching that one who says, “I can leave the house of Avraham and I can go live in Sodom and it won’t affect me is in effect saying, “I don’t need you and I don’t need your G-d.”

No person is immune from his environment. People are social animals. They are affected by their peers. They are affected by their neighbors. A person who says, “I am strong. It won’t affect me.” is whistling past the graveyard. It will affect you! This is what the Malach told Hagar: “Go back, anyway; no matter how miserable it is. For if you don’t, you will be headed down a very slippery slope.”

So many times in life, we experience tests and temptations. Opportunities tempt us that will perhaps take us to places that are not the best of environments. We tell ourselves, “Listen, I can handle it. I am strong enough.” Everyone needs a good environment.

Rav Chatzkel Levenstein once offered a thought on the famous Mishna [Pirkei Avos 6:9]: Rabbi Yose ben Kisma said: Once I was walking on the road, when a certain man met me. He greeted me and I returned his greeting. He said to me, “Rabbi, from what place are you?” I said to him, “I am from a great city of scholars and sages.” He said to me, “Rabbi, would you be willing to live with us in our place? I would give you thousands upon thousands of golden dinars, precious stones and pearls.” I replied, “Even if you were to give me all the silver and gold, precious stones and pearls in the world, I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah.”

The question is as follows. The person who made the offer to Rabbi Yose ben Kisma must have been a person of great means. Why did the person not move to the city of Rav Yose ben Kisma? Let him take his hundreds of millions of dollars and relocate to the city of great sages and scholars, which is a place of Torah? Rav Chatzkel Levenstein answers that he must have earned his livelihood in the city where he lived. It must be that he was not willing to forsake his livelihood to move to a makom Torah. The person told

himself “I can survive here; I will do alright. I will bring in a Rav Yose ben Kisma; I will bring in a Yeshiva.” That is a mistake. Neither Hagar, nor Lot, nor anyone else is immune from their environment.

This was the story of Noach and the Flood. We saw the effect that an environment has, not only on people but on animals as well. Chazal say that even the animals were engaged in improper behavior. Chazal say that the waters of the flood washed the first few inches of the surface of the Earth away because the corrosive effect of the corrupt environment that existed at that time. It was like a toxic waste site. Merely removing the factory that produces the toxic waste is not sufficient. The toxic effect creeps into the soil and creeps into the water because of the negative environment.

No one is immune from corrupting influences. This is the lesson of the dialog between Hagar and the Malach.

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The Blogs :: Ben-Tzion Spitz

Lech Lecha: Abraham the Individualist

Not armies, not nations, have advanced the race; but here and there, in the course of ages, an individual has stood up and cast his shadow over the world. - Edwin Hubbell Chapin

In the very first recorded conversation between God and Abraham, God commands Abraham “Lech Lecha” which can be translated as “go for you” or “go to you.” Rabbi Hirsch on Genesis 12:1 explains that it is a command to “go your own way” or “follow your unique path.”

Rabbi Hirsch elaborates that one of the prominent beliefs during Abraham’s time was the primacy of the communal over the individual and the priority of centralization of authority rather than individual decision-making. It engendered the “tyranny of the majority” (a phrase originally seen in the writing of John Adams, and subsequently popularized by Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill).

Abraham, by leaving his country, his birthplace and his people, by demonstrating an unyielding belief in one God, by standing up to the entirety of the rest of the polytheistic world, indeed carved his own path. He demonstrated an unflinching capacity to do his own thing, to go his own way, to be his own person, to do what he knew to be correct though the entire planet thought otherwise. He is a model of the Individual, of the non-conformist, of the person who will take a stand for what is right though it is unpopular. His is the lesson that even if the majority believes in something or says something, it doesn’t necessarily make it right.

May we hold steadfast in our positive and unique paths.

Shabbat Shalom

Dedication - To the global Shabbat Project and especially to those organizing it and celebrating it in their own unique ways in Uruguay.

<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/>

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

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The Jerusalem Post

Parashat Lech Lecha: Abraham, monotheism – and what next?

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

November 10, 2016 Thursday 9 Heshvan 5777

Was Abraham the first monotheist? Apparently not.

In this week’s parasha of Lech Lecha, Abraham is chosen by God to be the first patriarch of the Jewish nation, at the age of 75. Why was he chosen? What do we actually know about Abraham our Patriarch? Jewish tradition

tells us about a boy who gazed up at the sky, looked at the stars and asked himself, "Who made all this?" Later, he looked at people and asked himself, "What is the right way to behave?" He saw people suffering, and their pain touched his heart, so he asked "Why?" He was a child searching for answers to every question.

But the environment in which Abraham was raised did not provide him with the answers he was looking for. He got answers full of myths about gods battling one another; he was told that many powers administer the world, and therefore he should not search for justice anywhere. Abraham was not persuaded.

One day, he experienced enlightenment: There is one, omnipotent God Who leads the entire world.

He understood this essence, internalized it, and never abandoned it for a moment. He also taught it to his friends, which threatened the local rulers.

"One day," they feared, "people will stop believing that the rulers' power is divine." This threat led them to throwing Abraham into a furnace. God saved him, and he escaped with his family to another city, and there he was given a mission: "Go forth from your land... to the land that I will show you.... And I will make you into a great nation...." (Genesis 12:1-2).

Was Abraham the first monotheist? Apparently not.

He was indeed considered the father of monotheism, but he was not the first. Our sages told of people who preceded Abraham who also believed in one god.

Archeological research also proves the existence of faith in one god among the nations of the region. And yet, only Abraham merited being considered the founder of monotheism. Why is this? In what way was he unique? Abraham took this one step further. He understood that only one God exists. And he understood that this one God has a clear path. He understood that if God has a specific path, this must hold some message for us humans. He understood that faith demands action, as the Torah describes: "...because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the Lord to perform righteousness and justice" (ibid. 18:19).

Abraham discovered the secret that made faith influential on the life of man. After years of searching, trial and error, he understood that faith that does not obligate proper behavior is empty. Faith obligates a human message, not tremendous monuments or glorious structures but a message that can be passed on, something that can be done by hand, a word that can be spoken, a smile.

Abraham understood that man is a significant creature with the power to change the world. He believed in this and, wherever he went, he called out in God's name, taught and spread the message, with complete faith that every small human act carries great significance.

Abraham walked among idol worshipers and slowly gathered around him those who felt that idol worship was insufficient for their souls. He found people who agreed with the concept of monotheism. But he remained alone in his belief in the power of action.

One day, God promised, you will have a son. And from that son, an entire nation will come that will walk in your path. And Abraham? "And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him as righteousness" (ibid. 15:6). And Abraham continued to believe.

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subject: Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Peninim on the Torah

Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Parshas Lech Lecha

Hashem said to Avram, "Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's home. (12:1)

Although the Torah relates the birth of Avraham Avinu at the end of Parashas Noach, we are introduced to the Patriarch in Parashas Lech Lecha. In Derech Hashem, the Maharal explains that originally the plan of Creation was that all human beings would share equally in fulfilling the Divine mission and that the Torah would be given to all mankind. Twenty generations of failure from Adam to Noach to Avraham precluded this reality from occurring. Thus, the title of Hashem's Chosen People was given to the nation that earned it: Avraham, followed by his progeny. They would receive the Torah; they would carry out its mitzvos and moral/ethical mandates; they would be the ones to lead the world community to perfection by serving as the example of how a human being should act; they would bring all people to accept Hashem's sovereignty.

Avraham Avinu earned his position as Patriarch of our nation after passing the Asarah Nisyonos, Ten Trials, which not only proved his own personal greatness, but also demonstrated his unequivocal commitment and devotion to Hashem. How did Avraham achieve this status? How did he discover Hashem? Chazal teach that Avraham was three years old when he realized that the world had a Creator. Although he had been raised in a home steeped in idolatry, lived in an environment replete with idolaters, his own home a center for paganism, he analyzed the world and came to the realization that there had to be Someone, some entity, that not only created the world, but continues to guide every facet of it. All at the age of three, he discovered the greatest verity: the world has a Creator. All of this occurred because he delved into the world around him.

Do we delve into Creation? Do we try to understand Creation? In today's technology-filled world there is very little room for us to see Hashem, unless we are misbonein, delve into wisdom, try to understand. Horav Shraga Feivel Medlowitz, zl, once told his talmidim, students, that, in the large cities that have skyscrapers, these edifices cover up Hashem. The huge building conceals His Presence. What does this mean? Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, explains that, when one is in a city in which every building was built by man, where one hardly sees grass, trees, mountains, hills, seas or rivers, which were all created by Hashem, one loses perspective on what is taking place in the world. A person must attempt to understand Creation. This is why we were given the power of binah, the ability to understand.

Rav Shraga Feivel would quote the Kotzker Rebbe, zl, who said, "Hashem wrote a composition, which is the Torah. The explanation for the composition is the world. When the Zohar teaches that Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world, it means that the Torah is the blueprint for the creation of the world. Alternatively, since Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world, we may understand the Torah by looking at the world. Creation gives meaning to the Torah. Rav Shraga Feivel would recognize Hashem's ways from His creations. He was always so impressed with the glory of Creation and the beauty of the universe which are Hashem's handiwork. He saw Hashem's love for His creations by delving into the glory of the universe.

Rav Moshe Aharon relates that a group of students of the Chafetz Chaim wanted to observe their revered rebbe on the manner in which he conducts himself. One Rosh Hashanah they made a point to observe him closely to see what this holy saint did on the holy day. He davened with the yeshiva and then went home to eat the meal. Following his meal, he took a walk outside. The students followed very carefully -- from a distance. He walked outside of the city and sat down to observe the scenery. At this point, the students "caught up" with him. They did not have to ask him why he was there. He was their mentor and, understandably, they wanted to learn from his every nuance. He explained that the Rambam says that, when one delves into Creation, he increases his love for Hashem. The Chafetz Chaim felt that he was deficient in this area. He could love Hashem more. Therefore, on Rosh Hashanah, he walked outside of the city to ponder the surrounding scenery, so that he could increase his love of Hashem.

We are neither Rav Shraga Feivel nor the Chafetz Chaim. This, however, does not preclude our ability to ponder the beauty and sheer brilliance of the world around us. We see a technological marvel, and we are amazed at the genius of the man who created it. Do we stop to give Hashem the "credit" due Him? The person's genius is a gift from Hashem. The surgeon's skill is a gift from Hashem. Everything that we mortals achieve is a gift from Hashem. Yet, we tend to applaud the agent and ignore the Benefactor.

And he trusted in Hashem, and He reckoned with it to him as righteous. (15:6)

On a recent trip to an area, which was completely foreign to me, I was forced to rely totally on my GPS to guide me, literally every step of the way. I did not know when a turn was coming up, when I should just go straight. I was at the mercy of my GPS. As Jews, we, too, have a GPS system that guides us through life. It is called emunah, faith. Without emunah, we do not function; we are unable to function. It is our lodestar, our beacon of light, our guide which takes us by the hand and helps us navigate around and over the many obstacles and challenges that are present in our path. The Jew whose faith is deficient is in serious trouble. He not only does not know where he is going, he also does not know what to do when he arrives at his destination. Perhaps, the following vignette will elucidate this idea:

Horav Yonasan Eibyshutz, zl, was walking on the street when he was met by the mayor of Prague. The mayor asked the Rav, "Where are you going?" Rav Yonasan

replied, "I do not know." The mayor became enraged with this insolent answer. A man as distinguished as the city's Rav does not just walk around without purpose. Certainly, he knew where he was going. He called for his guards to incarcerate the Rav. This was life in the big city centuries ago. If a Jew offended a gentile, even if a gentile just perceived that the Jew was offending him, it was cause for serious repercussion; in this case, it was incarceration in the city's dungeon.

After a few days passed, the mayor, who had heretofore been friendly with the Rav, had a change of heart. He summoned the guards and had them bring Rav Yonasan to him. When Rav Yonasan arrived, the mayor had his chains removed. After all, Rav Yonasan was not a common thief. He then asked him, "Rabbi, tell me, does a person walk and not know where he is going? Why did you respond so insolently to me?"

The Rav replied, "If the mayor would have asked, 'where are you planning on going?' I would have responded, 'I plan on going to the bais hamedrash to learn.' Instead you asked me, 'Where are you going?' I thus replied, 'I do not know.' Veritably, that was the truth. I had planned on going to the bais hamedrash; instead, I ended up in prison!"

This powerful response defines the life of a Jew. Do we really know where we are going? Do we have any idea where we will end up at the end of the day? We make plans - but do they materialize in accordance with our intentions? We must follow our GPS/emunah and rely on where Hashem Yisborach leads us, because that is where we are going - plans or not.

Horav Mordechai, zl, m'Lechowitz, says, "Without Hakadosh Baruch Hu, one cannot cross the threshold of his house. With Hashem, one can split the sea." It is so true. Yet, we try to convince ourselves that we can do it alone. One does not discover Hashem by probing, but by believing. Indeed, as the well-known dictum goes, 'For the believer, there are no questions; for the non-believer, there are no answers.' To him who questions G-d, who has difficulty serving a G-d whose ways are incomprehensible, we respond with the words of the Kotzker Rebbe, "I would definitely not want to serve a G-d whose ways are compensable to the minds of human beings."

While we may assume that Klal Yisrael is a nation of believers, whose emunah in Hashem is part of their "Jewishness"; at times, this emunah may be selective. We believe when it is convenient, and when it is not, we find an excuse to justify our indifference. We believe in Hashem when we have exhausted all other beliefs; after we have seen how ineffective they are, we then turn back to Hashem. One should believe in Hashem first and all the way through, even when life appears bleak. We believe that if the results differ from our hopes, it is Hashem's decree, and it is for the best.

There is also limited belief. Horav Bunim, zl, m'Peshischa, asks how, on Motzoei Yom Kippur, after a complete day of fasting and intense prayer, we recite in Shemoneh Esrai the prayer, Selach lanu Avinu ki chatanu, "Forgive us our Father, for we have sinned!" When did we have the opportunity to sin? All day long was spent in prayer. Immediately following Neilah, the closing prayer of Yom Kippur, we commence with Maariv. When did we have the opportunity to sin? What are we asking Hashem to forgive?

The Rebbe explains that we ask forgiveness for our lack of belief that Hashem really forgave us. The fellow feels that he is still the same sinner that he was before Yom Kippur. We believe in Hashem, but we do not believe that Hashem

believes in us! To believe in Hashem is to believe totally in Him, to give ourselves over to Him with complete trust and faith. We do not limit our belief.

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Rav Kook Torah
Lech Lecha: Great Like the Stars
Stars and Sand

When Abraham complained to God that he was childless, God promised that his children would be as numerous as the stars in the sky:

"God took him outside and said, 'Look at the sky, and count the stars if you can! So will be your descendants.'" (Gen. 15:5)

On another occasion, God promised Abraham that his children would be like "the sand on the seashore" (Gen. 22:17). Why are the Jewish people compared to both stars and grains of sand?

Greatness at Mount Sinai

The Sages took note that God's promise uses the uncommon word 'koh' (????) - "So [koh] will be your descendants." They explained that this word

alludes to the Jewish people's future greatness at Mount Sinai, where the word 'koh' also appears: "So [koh] shall you say to the House of Jacob" (Ex. 19:3). What does the state of the Jewish people at Mount Sinai have to do with being likened to stars?

In general, we need to understand the metaphor of the star. The psalmist wrote that God gave each star a name (Psalms 147:4). Why do stars need names?

Personal and Collective Missions

What is in a name? A name reflects an entity's inner essence. It defines the nature of its existence and indicates its fundamental purpose. Stars are wonderful, powerful creations. Each star has a unique function for which it was created, and each star has a unique name corresponding to its special purpose.

The comparison of Abraham's descendants to stars indicates the importance and greatness of every individual member of the Jewish people. Every soul is a universe unto itself, as the Sages wrote: "One who saves a single soul of Israel, it is as if he has saved an entire world" (Sanhedrin 37a).

But the Jewish people also have a collective mission, as indicated by their comparison to sand. A single grain of sand is of no particular consequence; but together, these grains of sand form a border against the ocean, establishing dry land and enabling life to exist. Israel's collective purpose is to bring about the world's spiritual advance, as it says, "This people I have created for Me [so that] they will proclaim My praise" (Isaiah 43:21).

It is logical for God to first establish the collective mission of the Jewish people, and only afterwards adjoin their individual goals. Thus, upon leaving Egypt, Israel was formed into a people with a unique collective purpose. This collective mission is an integral part of their very essence, regardless of any individual merits. The collective aspect of the Jewish people was valid even though the Israelites lacked personal merits and good deeds when they left Egypt, as it says, "I have made you [Israel] numerous like the plants of the field, and you have increased and grown... yet you were naked and bare" (Ezekiel 16:7).

Like the Stars

The prominence of the stars, on the other hand, is indicative of the special mission of each individual. This metaphor refers to the potential for greatness that each member of the Jewish people acquired at Mount Sinai.

These special goals are a function of each individual's efforts, deeds, and Torah study. This level is based on the revelation of Torah and mitzvot at Mount Sinai. The Midrash teaches that when Israel promised to obey the laws of the Torah, the angels tied two crowns to the head of every Jew. These spiritual crowns reflected the greatness of each individual; every Jew was a prince, bearing his own unique crown of holiness.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 110-121) See also: The Inner Will of the Universe

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Ohr Somayach :: Insights into Halacha
Fish with Legs?!

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz
For the week ending 5 November 2011 / 7 Heshvan 5772

In last week's parsha, Parshas Noach, we read about how G-d brought the Great Flood and destroyed all living creatures, save for those inside Noah's Ark[1]. The fish in the oceans were spared as well[2]. It would be fascinating to find out on which side of the Ark a "fish with legs" would have been. Would it have been considered a fish or an animal? Far from being a theoretical question, this actually happened almost 400 years ago, when a certain Rabbi Aharon Rofei (perhaps Rabbi Dr.?) placed such a fish, known as a Stincus Marinus, in front of the then-Av Beis Din of Vienna, the famed Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller, author of such essential works as the

Tosafos Yom Tov, Toras HaAsham and Maadanei Yom Tov, and asked for his opinion as to the kashrus status of such a “fish”, unknowingly sparking a halachic controversy.

What is a (Kosher) Fish?

It is well known that a kosher fish must have both fins and scales[3]. This “fish” actually has scales, but legs rather than fins. Yet, that alone would not make it non-kosher, as Chazal set down a general rule that “Whatever has scales has fins as well[4]”, and is presumed to be kosher. This means that if one should find a piece of fish that has scales noticeably present, one may assume that since it has scales, it must therefore have fins as well, and is consequently considered kosher. This ruling is codified as halacha by the Rambam, as well as the Tur and Shulchan Aruch[5].

As for our Stincus Marinus, which had scales but legs instead of fins, the Tosafos Yom Tov[6] opined that this “fish” cannot be considered kosher, as the above-mentioned ruling was referring exclusively to fish and not sea creatures. Since the Stincus Marinus has legs instead of fins it could not be considered a fish, and must therefore be non-kosher. Many authorities agreed with this ruling and considered the Stincus Marinus an aquatic creature and not a true fish and decidedly non-kosher[7]. This is similar to the words of the Rambam[8] that “anything that doesn’t look like a fish, such as the sea lion, the dolphin, the frog and such - is not a fish, kosher or otherwise.”

However, the Pri Chadash[9] rejects the opinion of the Maadanei Yom Tov and maintains that Chazal’s rule that “whatever has scales also has fins, and is presumed kosher” applies to all sea creatures, not just fish, and actually rules that the Stincus Marinus is kosher, whether or not it is considered a true fish.

The Bechor Shor[10] offers an alternate interpretation, that although it would be considered a sea creature, the Stincus Marinus should still indeed be considered kosher. Even though this “fish” has no true fins, still, its feet are equivalent to fins, and accordingly, it fits the halachic definition of a fish! Rule of Thumb

Rav Yonason Eibeshutz[11], although agreeing in theory with the Pri Chadash that Chazal’s rule meant to include all aquatic life and not just fish, conjectured that possibly said rule was not meant to be absolute; rather it was meant as a generality. Generally, if a fish has scales one may assume it will also have fins. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of someday finding a fish which does not. According to this understanding, apparently the Stincus Marinus would be considered such an exception to the rule and therefore non-kosher.

In contrast to this understanding of Chazal’s statement, the Taz[12] declared, “No fish in the world has scales but no fins”, meaning that Chazal’s rule was meant to be unconditional, and, consequently, by definition there cannot be an exception. Most authorities agree to this understanding, with many of them ruling accordingly that the Stincus Marinus is indeed kosher based on this, since it did actually have scales[13]. Scientifically Speaking

A scientific study published in 1840 by Rabbi Avraham Zutra of Muenster identified the Stincus Marinus as a terrestrial creature, related to a poisonous toad[14]. Similarly, the Chasam Sofer[15] wrote that he accepted the findings of “expert scientists” who confirmed that the Stincus Marinus is not actually a sea creature at all. Rather, it lives on the shore and occasionally jumps into the water, as does the frog. According to both of these Gedolim our “fish” is most definitely not a fish, rather a sheretz (non-kosher crawling land animal), thereby making the entire preceding halachic discussion irrelevant, as the Stincus Marinus would not fall under the category of Chazal’s statement, and would thereby be 100% non-kosher. The Kozeglover Gaon[16] actually uses this “fish” as testimony to the Divinity of the Torah, as the only known exception to Chazal’s rule turned out to be not a fish at all, but rather a lizard[17]!

On the other hand, not only does the Darchei Teshuva[18] not accept Rabbi Avraham Zutra’s scientific study, but even writes a scathing response

that he does not understand how one can place these findings from non-halachic sources between teshuvos haGeonim without a clear proof from Chazal or Poskim “sherak mipeehem unu chayim”. Accordingly, this opinion of the Darchei Teshuva would also invalidate the conclusion of the Chasam Sofer, for although the Chasam Sofer agreed with the Maadanei Yom Tov’s conclusion that the Stincus Marinus is not kosher, his claim that it is not a true sea creature is based on “scientific experts”. Therefore, this scientific analysis that the Stincus Marinus be considered a toad or lizard may not actually be accepted by all.

So was the strange looking sea creature swimming in the ocean outside the Ark or was it found within? It seems like we probably will never know the answer, although it certainly is fascinating that it depends on how it is classified halachically!

The author would like to acknowledge the article which appeared in the Kolmus (Pesach 5769 - Fish Story) by R’ Eliezer Eisikovits, which served as the impetus for my interest and research for this article.

[1] Bereishis (Noach) Ch.7:21 - 23.

[2] Midrash Bereishis Rabbah 32, 9; Rashi on Noach Ch. 7: 22, s.v. asher.

[3] Vayikra (Shmini) Ch.11:9 - 13; Devarim (Re’eh) Ch. 14: 9 - 10.

[4] Mishna Nida 51b, Gemara Chullin 66b.

[5] Rambam Hilchos Maachalos Asuros Ch. 1, 24; Tur/Shulchan Aruch Y”D 83, 3.

[6] Maadanei Yom Tov on Chullin 66b, 5.

[7] Including the Mahar”I Chagiz (Shu”t Halachos Ketanos vol. 1, 255, and vol 2, 5; cited in Shiyurei Bracha 83,

1), the Knesses HaGedolah (Y”D 83, Haghos on Tur 6), Rav Yaakov Emden (Siddur Yaavetz, Migdal Oz, Dinei Dagim 8 & 9; quoted in the Darchei Teshuva 83, 27 - 28), the Malbim (Parshas Shmini, 80; that a sea creature with four legs is not considered a fish, rather a non-kosher “Chai HaYam”), and the Aruch Hashulchan (83, 10).

[8] Rambam Hilchos Maachalos Assuros Ch. 1, 24.

[9] Pri Chadash Y”D 83, 4.

[10] Bechor Shor, in his commentary to Chullin 66b, cited in the Darchei Teshuva above. He actually wrote that the whole disagreement was a colossal misunderstanding, and all opinions would agree with this.

[11] Kreisi U’Pleisi 83, 3. This is also the understanding of several other authorities including the Yeshuos Yaakov (Y”D 83, 2), the Shoel U’Meishiv (Shu”t, first edition, vol 3, 54) and HaKsav V’HaKabbala (Vayikra 11:9, cited in Kolmus - Pesach 5769 - Fish Story by R’ Eliezer Eisikovits).

[12] Taz Y”D 83, 3.

[13] Including the Pri Chadash (cited above), the Chida (Machazik Bracha Y”D 83, 7 and Shiyurei Bracha Y”D 83, 1), and the Kaf HaChaim Y”D 83, 6 and 15). The Pri Megadim (Y”D 83 M.Z. 2; see however Mishmeres Shalom Be”d Show he attempts to answer the Pri Megadim) and the Maharam Shick (in his commentary on the Mitzvos, Mitzva 157, brought in Darchei Teshuva above) maintain this way as well, however they do not definitively rule on the kashrus status of this “fish”. The Aruch Hashulchan (Y”D 83, 5) and his son the Torah Temima (Shmini Ch. 11: 9, 32) also held this way, that this rule is Halacha from Sinai, yet the Aruch Hashulchan himself still ruled that it is non-kosher, as he considered it a sea creature, not a fish, like the Rambam. The Eretz Tzvi (see footnote 16) as well, although maintaining that it is not kosher for a different reason, writes very strongly that this rule of Chazal is absolute, and is testimony to the Divinity of the Torah.

[14] Shomer Tzion HaNe’eman vol. 91, pg 182, cited in Darchei Teshuva above without quoting the author, as well as cited in Kolmus (Pesach 5769 - Fish Story by R’ Eliezer Eisikovits) without citing the source.

[15] Chasam Sofer, in his commentary to Chullin daf 66b s.v. shuv.

[16] Eretz Tzvi on Moadim, Yalkut HaEmuna, Maamar Sheini, Inyan Sheini ppg. 251 - 252.

[17] Scientifically, it appears that the Stincus Marinus is a misnomer, as it is deemed a lizard from the skink family, known as a Scincus Scincus, or a Sandfish Lizard. Although non-aquatic, it has been proven in the prestigious Science journal (vol. 325, July 17, 2009, in a published study by Daniel I. Goldman, “Undulatory Swimming in Sand: Subsurface Locomotion of the Sandfish Lizard”) via high speed X-ray imaging that below the surface, it no longer uses limbs for propulsion but “generates thrust to overcome drag by propagating an undulatory traveling wave down the body”; in other words it “swims” through the sand beneath the surface. See related article on ZooTorah.com titled “The Secret of the Stincus”.

[18] Darchei Teshuva 83, 28.

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomos / sources, please email the author: yspitz@ohr.edu

Disclaimer: These are just a few basic guidelines and overview of the Halacha discussed in this article. This is by no means a complete comprehensive authoritative guide, but rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issue. One should not compare similar cases in order to rules in any real case, but should refer his questions to a competent Halachic authority.

Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

L’iltiy Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R’ Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov

Yeshaya ben R’ Boruch Yehuda, and l’zchus for Shira Yaffa bas Rochel Miriam and her children for a yeshua teikef u’miyad!

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In dedication of Mr. Emilio Goldstein ז"ל