

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

לע"נ הרה"ה ר' יעקב נחמיה בן ר' חיים צבי ע"ה
ע"י נכדו הרה"ה ר' אברהם שלמה יאקאבאוויטש הי"ו

Vayeira 5770

And Avraham woke up early in the morning, and he saddled up his donkey, and he took his two servants with him, and Yitzchok his son; and he chopped wood for the burnt offering, and he got up and went to the place that G-d had told him. (22:3)

The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 55:8) says, "In reward for the two chops that Avraham Avinu chopped, the sea split before the Children of Israel." Rabbi Aharon Rokeach, the Belzer Rebbe (1877-1957) explained this based on the story brought in Midrash Tanchuma (Vayeira 22) and at the beginning of Midrash Vayosha. When Avraham set out to sacrifice Yitzchok, the Satan met them on the way and tried to stop him. Appearing to him as an old man, he said, "Where are you going?" Avraham answered, "To pray." The Satan said, "And why does one who goes to pray need fire and a knife in his hand and wood on his shoulder?" Avraham said, "Perhaps we will stay for a day or two and we will need to slaughter and bake and eat."

Then the Satan said, "You old man, didn't the Satan tell you to sacrifice your son? A sage like you will go and kill a son given to him at hundred years old? You will be punished for this." Avraham said, "It was not the Satan, but the Holy One, blessed is He Himself who commanded me to do this."

Seeing that he was unsuccessful in talking to Avraham, the Satan took the form of a young man and argued with Yitzchok, saying, "How many times your mother fasted and prayed to have you! And now this old man has gone crazy and is going to slaughter you." But Yitzchok said, "I will not go against the will of my Creator and the command of my father."

The Midrash goes on to describe how the Satan took the form of a deep river, but that too did not stop Avraham. Finally he said to Avraham, "I heard from behind G-d's partition that the burnt offering will be a sheep, not Yitzchok." Avraham replied, "That is the liar's punishment: even when he tells the truth, he is not believed. I will do as Hashem commanded me."

When the Jewish people stood at the shores of the sea and the Egyptian army closed in on them, a similar exchange took place. Hashem said to Moshe, "Speak to the Children of Israel and let them march into the sea." The Satan came and tried to dissuade them. "To jump into the sea is suicide!" he said. "Throwing away one's life is a terrible sin. Better to fight with the Egyptians; then at least some will survive." But they marched into the sea, paying no attention to the Satan's arguments. Had Avraham Avinu not implanted into the Jewish people the trait of being able to obey Hashem's command even when it contradicts common sense, they would not have been able to withstand this test. This, said the Belzer Rebbe, is the meaning of the Midrash: Because Avraham chopped the wood and went unquestioningly to the Akeidah, the Children of Israel went unquestioningly into the sea and it split for them (Kol Yaakov p. 79, in the name of Rabbi Chananya Cohen, who heard the above from the Belzer Rebbe when he was in Budapest in 1943).

Avraham's words, that the liar is not believed even when he tells the truth, seem to be out of place. When a liar tells the truth, such as in the fable of the boy who cried wolf, people really should listen to him and save the sheep. The only problem is that they don't believe him. But in this case Avraham was saying, "Even if you are telling the truth, I will not listen to you, because Hashem commanded me otherwise." Similarly in the case of the sea, although logically speaking the Satan was correct that fighting the Egyptians would make more sense, they did as Hashem commanded them.

The answer is that sometimes it is hard to tell whether a given idea emanates from the Satan or not. Is the person offering the idea a messenger of the Satan or a messenger of Hashem? The only way to know is by looking at the messenger's previous record, just as we disbelieve a liar based on his previous record. Avraham Avinu knew that this old man had been trying to convince him not to obey Hashem; thus he knew that it must be the Satan and whatever he was saying now, even if it were true, could not be the right thing to do.

After overcoming the Satan, Avraham "lifted up his eyes and saw the Place from afar." The Place was Mount Moriah, the future site of the Beis Hamikdash. On the word "afar" Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 56:2) comment that the Place would one day be distanced from its owners, during the exile when Jews would be far from the site of the Beis Hamikdash and Eretz Yisroel. Until when will that exile last? The Midrash finds the answer in the following verse: "And Avraham said to his young men: Sit here with the donkey..." Sit here in exile until the coming of moshiach, who will be riding on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).

Rabbi Yitzchok Weiss, the Spinker Rebbe (1875-1944), quotes this Midrash and comments: "We must not force the end, arise on our own and seek power; nor may we take the Holy Land, emigrate to it and rule over it until the king moshiach comes, for this is included in the prohibition on forcing the end, as the Ahavas Yonasan says on the Haftorah of Parshas Vaeschanan – see his beautiful words there. This is what Avraham Avinu commanded us. When he saw that the Place would one day be distanced from its owners and the Jewish people would be in exile, he was afraid that they might want to arise on their own; therefore 'Avraham said to his young men' – a reference to the Jewish people, as it says, 'For Israel is a young man and I love him' (Hoshea 11:1) – 'sit here' – in exile, and do not go up except 'with the donkey' – with the king moshiach, who will come and gather in the Jewish people from exile." (Chakal Yitzchok, Vayeira)

It is no coincidence that these two verses - about Avraham chopping the wood and implanting the trait of unquestioning obedience to Hashem into the Jewish people, and about the exile and the prohibition on arising from it – are written one after the other. Avraham Avinu foresaw that there would come a time when his descendents in exile would once again face the arguments of messengers of the Satan. First these messengers introduced the idea of leaving exile and ruling over the Holy Land, and most of the loyal Torah Jews of the world, under the leadership of their rabbis, rejected them. But now that things have progressed to the point where almost half of the world's Jews live in the Holy Land under the leadership of these messengers, they come again to us and argue that it would be foolish to give up statehood and power at this point. Avraham Avinu taught us that the only way to overcome these arguments is to look at the previous record of these messengers and realize that this too is nothing but a ploy of the Satan. We must remain faithful to Hashem and keep His decree of exile unquestioningly until moshaich comes.

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