

Yad Avraham Institute
WEEKLY TORAH COMMENTARIES SERIES
The Portion of
Vayeira

October 25, 2007

Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Yad Avraham Institute
New York
October 25, 2007

B"H

Vayeira

Presented by

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*

Dean

1. The Importance of Understanding G'd's Ways

The Torah states that before G'd destroyed Sodom He said, **"Shall I conceal from Avraham what I do, now that Avraham is surely to become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves through him?..."** Sforno explains that G'd wanted to inform Avraham of the impending destruction of Sodom as part of his orientation. G'd said, "I will not withhold from Avraham the attribute of My Goodness." Meaning, if there were righteous (tzaddikim) to be found among the evil of Sodom, there would be a chance for the evil to repent and change their ways. However, if there was no representation of good amongst them, then they would have no possibility of repenting. As long as there are tzaddikim among the evil G'd will not destroy them because there is a context for them to make a choice.

The verse identifies Avraham as a person with great acclaim. The value of this information is to give us an understanding of what is needed to impact upon people to cause them to repent. Avraham, being a person with great stature was the most effective model of goodness and was therefore, the most qualified to impact upon the world regarding monotheism.

The Torah states, **"You shall not taunt or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the term "stranger" is referring to a convert. A Jew is not permitted to cause pain or aggrieve a convert by reminding him of his past. The Gemara tells us that this prohibition extends for ten generations. However, we find that very often Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe, is referred to in the Torah as **"Kohen Midian** – high priest of Midian." Although this was after his conversion to monotheism, he is continuously referred to in this seemingly pejorative manner. If one is not permitted to remind another of his negative past, then why does the Torah repeatedly

emphasize and reiterate the fact that Yisro was the priest of Midian?

In this particular context when the Torah is referring to Yisro as the high priest of Midian it is not egregious or pejorative, but rather it is something that is praiseworthy and beneficial to Yisro himself. Since Yisro initially was renowned as the High Priest of Midian and subsequently rejected all that he had stood for to embrace monotheism, his presence in the eyes of the world was now noticed and acknowledged. When an individual who originally was proficient in all aspects of paganism chooses to abandon it for monotheism, monotheism becomes a credible entity. Therefore, the Torah identifies Yisro as Kohen Midian not in a pejorative manner, but rather to indicate that he has the capability to have a greater impact on the world. An ordinary pagan converting to monotheism would have not been noticed. Identically Avraham, being a figure of world acclaim would have the greatest level of influence upon all existence.

It is interesting to note that at the beginning of the Portion of Netzavim when Moshe said to the Jewish people that they were entering into a covenant with G'd regarding communal responsibility *"areivus"*. He delineated every segment of the Jewish population – **"leaders, elders, officers, men of Israel, small children, women, converts, wood choppers, water drawers..."** Why must Moshe identify every segment of Jewish society? Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that the purpose of this delineation was to communicate to them that every individual, based on his own sphere of influence, assumes that level of responsibility. The leaders, who have the greatest sphere of influence, are more culpable because they are able to affect greater numbers and many echelons of society. If a member of one's immediate family fails, when the father could have intervened and prevented the wrong but did not, he is then held accountable. The Gemara in Tractate Shevuos states, "whoever has the ability to protest/intervene and does not, he is held liable."

It was imperative for G'd to reveal to Avraham His attribute of Goodness by informing him that He does not out of hand destroy the evil unless there is no hope that they will repent. Avraham subsequently, because of this principle, began supplicating G'd to spare communities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Jew must be a role model who reflects G'd's Will so that the entire world could be affected and inspired by him.

2. Meriting G'd's Response

The Midrash states, "G'd said to the Jewish people, 'You should be careful regarding tefillah (prayer) because there is nothing more special than tefillah.' From where do we see that this is so? The Prophet Isaiah writes before the destruction of the Temple, 'G'd said to the Jewish people: Why do I need your abundant offerings?... Do not bring for Me your worthless meal offering, your abominable incense offerings, and your holidays I despise...and even when you come before Me and you supplicate me, I am not interested in it...' We see from here that tefillah is even greater than sacrifices. Even if one is not worthy that G'd should respond to his supplication if one prays and supplicates Him to a great degree, He will respond to his tefillah and do kindness to him. As it states, 'All the ways of G'd are kindness and truth...' Meaning, although based on truth/justice the individual is undeserving of G'd's kindness, nevertheless since we see His characteristic of kindness precedes truth, G'd will respond to his supplications.

The Midrash continues, "The verse states, 'Charity (tzedeq) and justice (mishpat) to all of Your people....' We see again that charity precedes justice. Reb Simlai states, 'You must know that all the ways of G'd are Kindness. As we see the Torah begins with demonstrating G'd's Kindness. He adorned the bride. He formed Chava to be the appropriate wife for Adam so that she should be his helpmate. The Torah closes with an act of kindness as we see that G'd buried Moshe. In the middle of the Torah we also see G'd's kindness. After Avraham had circumcised himself, G'd and His retinue of angels visited him when he was recovering.'" What importance does this observation regarding G'd's Kindness have to us? What are we able to learn from this?

Chazal teach us that even if one is truly not worthy of G'd's response, if he were to supplicate G'd greatly, He will nevertheless respond to his tefillah. Although the Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that "the Signet of G'd is Truth", nevertheless the verse cited by Chazal

indicates that G'd's Kindness precedes His Justice/Truth. As we find, King David writes in Psalms, "The world was created out of kindness (chesed)." The basis for creation was purely out of the Kindness of G'd. There was no one who was deserving prior to its creation.

One must understand that the unworthy one who supplicates G'd as one who recognizes that he is truly in need of His assistance, will merit a response as a result of that recognition.

3. Reflecting Upon the Structure of the Amidah

We mention every day in the Amidah (Silent Prayer) that G'd remembers the kindness (*zocher chasdei avos*) of the Patriarchs. It is only in the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov that we are able to supplicate G'd for our needs and advance our spiritually, despite our own level of unworthiness. The Patriarchs are the foundation of the Jewish people as the Midrash cites a verse from Proverbs, "A three-ply thread does not tear" These three spiritual pillars together encompass all existence. As it states in Ethics of Our Fathers, "The world stands on three principles- Torah, the service of G'd, and acts of kindness." Avraham was an embodiment of kindness (*chesed*). Yitzchak represents the service of G'd (*avodah*) because he was considered to be the "unblemished offering" that was brought at the Akeidah. Yaakov represents Torah study because his life was fully invested in that pursuit, as the Torah states, "**Yaakov, the perfect person, who dwelt in the tent (of Torah)...**"

The Midrash asks, "Why are there eighteen blessings in the Amidah?" One opinion is that since Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov are mentioned together eighteen times in the Torah, the Men of the Great Assembly authored eighteen blessings in the Amidah to correspond to this fact. By having eighteen blessings, in the Amidah, one's supplication to G'd would be within the profile and context of the Patriarchs that are mentioned eighteen times in the Torah. Why must this number be reflected in the structure of the Amidah?

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that in order for a blessing to be considered valid, it must contain within it, the Name of G'd and identify Him as "King (Melech)." If one were to recite a blessing with omitting Him as "King..." it is not valid. The Gemara asks, "If this is so then why is the first blessing of the Amidah considered to be a valid blessing when it does not refer to G'd as 'King'?" The blessing only refers to G'd as "The G'd of Avraham, the G'd of Yitzchak, and the G'd of

Yaakov...” The Gemara answers that by identifying G’d as The G’d of Avraham, the G’d of Yitzchak, and the G’d of Yaakov...” it is the equivalent of referring to Him as “King of the Universe.” If factually, G’d is not referred to as “King” why is this blessing valid?

Before Avraham came into existence and dedicated his life to the espousal of monotheism, G’d was referred to as “G’d of the heavens.” His existence was unknown to the world because it had totally embraced paganism. The Midrash tells us that after Avraham had come into being, G’d became known as “G’d of heaven and earth” because all humanity was exposed to his monotheistic teachings. Thus when one says “The G’d of Avraham” in the Amidah it is the equivalent of saying “G’d, King of the Universe” because it was Avraham who had identified Him as the Creator and the Master who continuously Wills existence. The same is true regarding Yitzchak and Yaakov. The Patriarchs, through their service of G’d and personal spiritual accomplishments coronated Him as “King.”

When a Jew takes three steps forwards to begin the Amidah, he is actually entering into an audience with G’d. This privilege is only possible because of the merits of the Patriarchs. Thus, every aspect and supplication of the Amidah reflects the merits of the Patriarchs. Therefore, when the men of the Great Assembly authored the Amidah, they did so with eighteen blessings to correspond to the eighteen times that the Patriarchs are mentioned in the Torah. This structure makes one cognizant of the fact that his prayer only has value because of the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

Another opinion given in the Midrash as to why the Amidah contains eighteen blessings is to correspond to the eighteen vertebrae in the human spinal column. Every blessing of the Amidah corresponds to one of the vertebrae. What is the correlation between the spinal column of the human being and the number of blessings in the Amidah?

Jewish law dictates that when one bows in the Amidah one must bow from the waist to the point that his vertebrae separate. This is the degree to which one must submit himself to G’d. As it is stated in the Gemara in Tractate Berachos “One should bend like a rod and rise like a snake.” Bowing at the waist to the point that one’s vertebrae separate is an acknowledgement that one is totally subservient and dependant upon G’d for all that he possesses and receives. One must understand and internalize the fact that all that he has is an endowment from G’d.

The human being was only created with a spinal column made of separate vertebrae so that he could bow before G’d to express his submission to Him. The Amidah, which is a supplication of G’d, must be recited in a manner that reflects one’s submission to His Will. As it states in the Gemara, regarding one’s mindset when one enters into the Amidah- “You should be like a needy person asking for charity.” Since this mindset is a prerequisite for one’s prayer to be effective, the Men of the Great Assembly authored eighteen blessings to correspond to the vertebrae of the human being.

The Midrash cites another opinion, “Reb Yochanan says, ‘It is to correspond to the eighteen times that Moshe is commanded by G’d to build the various aspects of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). As it states, “**As G’d commanded Moshe.**” Since the Torah mentions the command to Moshe eighteen times regarding the Mishkan, the Men of the Great Assembly chose the number eighteen to be the number of blessings in the Amidah. What is the correlation between Moshe being commanded by G’d to build the Mishkan and the numerical profile of the Amidah?

The Torah states regarding the mitzvah of building the Mishkan, “**Build for Me a Mishkan so that I may dwell in your midst.**” Chazal explain that the Torah states, “in your midst” and not in “its midst.” Meaning, the Mishkan was the medium through which G’d dwells within every Jew. Without the Mishkan as the medium, G’d’s Presence would be removed from existence. We would not be able to relate to G’d on an intimate level. When a Jew enters into the Amidah which is the equivalent of an audience with G’d, it is only because G’d established a special relationship between Himself and the Jew at the time of the building of the Mishkan. Therefore the Men of the Great Assembly structured the Amidah to reflect this special relationship between G’d and the Jewish people in order to give them an understanding of their relevance to G’d.

4. The All-Encompassing Characteristic of the Patriarchs

Netziv in his work *Haamik Davar*, writes in his introduction to the Book of Bereishis that the first book of the Torah is referred to in the Book of Joshua as the “Sefer Ha’Yashar (The Book of the Straight Ones).” The Gemara in Tractate Avodah Zorah explains that this is because the Patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov were “*yesharim* (straight).” The Book of Bereishis is primarily devoted to the lives of the Patriarchs.

Netziv explains that there are three classifications of righteous people – devout (tzaddik), devoutly pious (chasid), and straight (yashar). A tzaddik is one who meticulously observes all of the mitzvos without deviation. A chasid is one who not only meticulously adheres to the Dictates of the Torah but also goes beyond his basic obligation. One who is considered to be “straight (yashar)” is an individual who maintains his objectivity in all situations and does not allow any personal conflict of interest to interfere. He thus is able to perform as a servant of G’d on a unique level.

Avraham, our Patriarch demonstrated his characteristic of “yashar” when he had pleaded and supplicated G’d on behalf of Sodom. He had devoted his entire life to the espousal of monotheism and to dispel pagan beliefs from society. One would think that when he was informed by G’d that Sodom was going to be destroyed he would have rejoiced because G’d was openly displaying His Wrath upon evil. However, this was not so. He pleaded on their behalf in the most intense manner to the point that he had to ask forgiveness from G’d for his directness with Him. One who is a tzaddik or a chasid would have not reacted as Avraham had. However, Avraham had done so because he was a “yashar.”

We find that Yitzchak, our Patriarch also exemplified the characteristic of “yashar.” Although he had been castigated and driven out of G’or by the Philistine king, Avimelech, when he was later approached to enter into a covenant with him, he agreed. He could have shunned him, because of his prior abuse by Avimelech; nevertheless, he did not allow that negative feeling to interfere. He agreed to be bound by the covenant. Yaakov, our Patriarch, although he was endlessly victimized by his father-in-law Lavan who was evil, he did not reveal any of these events to his wives – Rachel and Leah, the daughters of Lavan. It was only at the end of his twenty-year stay with his father-in-law, when G’d had told him to leave Lavan and return to his father’s home, did he share the true nature of the events between himself and Lavan to his wives.

During the Second Temple period, the Jewish people were divided into two sects - the Sadducees and the Pharosies. The Sadducees rejected the authenticity of the Oral Law and only accepted the Written Law as being Divine. The Pharosies were those who believed in the Divine authenticity of the Oral Law. Netziv explains that towards the end of the Second Temple period, when there was a disagreement among rabbis concerning a halachic issue, if they were not able to concur, each party would

accuse the other of being of the Sadducee sect because they had rejected truth. Rather than understanding that the opposing position may have a valid basis in the interpretation of the text, they chose to categorize the opposition as a Sadducee. This brought about a fractionalization in the community, which generated hate. Although their intent was for the sake of G’d however in fact it was baseless hatred. Since the negative perception of the other party was not based in fact but rather on conflict of interest, the hate that was generated because of this level of disagreement was classified as “baseless hatred” (sinaas chinam). If they had possessed the characteristic of “yashar” they would have appreciated and understood the intent of the opposing party.

Seemingly, the example cited by Netziv regarding Avraham’s display of “yashar” is difficult to understand. The Torah states that before G’d informed Avraham of the imminent destruction of Sodom He said, “**Shall I conceal from Avraham what I do...**” Rashi cites Chazal who explain, “G’d said, ‘It is not appropriate that I destroy Sodom without first informing Avraham. I gave him this Land which contains these five communities. Sodom and Gomorrah are part of his inheritance... He has been designated as the father of all nations. Shall I destroy his children without informing their father, who is My beloved?’” Based on this Chazal, we understand that the reason Avraham supplicated G’d on behalf of Sodom was because of his relationship to them. He was the equivalent of a father pleading on behalf of his child. Regardless of the degree of evil of the child, the father is obligated to come to his defense. Thus, Avraham’s not rejoicing upon hearing about the destruction of Sodom is not attributed to his characteristic of “yashar” but rather to his responsibility as the “father of all nations.” A more compelling example of Avraham’s characteristic of “yashar” was his unwavering commitment to Lot, his nephew. Regardless of Lot’s demonstration of evil, Avraham was committed and dedicated to assist and protect him at all costs. It was because of Avraham’s debt of gratitude that he was bound to him. Had Avraham not possessed the characteristic of “yashar” his conflict of interest (his repulsion towards evil) would have not allowed him to act as he had, because in fact Lot deserved to be punished for his evil ways.

5. Avraham’s Victory Over the Four Pagan Kings (from Lech Lecha)

The Torah tells us that when Lot was taken captive by the Four Mighty Kings, Avraham, our Patriarch went to battle against them in order to rescue his nephew. The

Midrash tells us that it was only because Avraham merited great miracles that he was able to single-handedly defeat these mighty kings. Had it not been for Divine intervention, Avraham would not have been victorious. Why was Avraham worthy of such exceptional miracles? One would think that since Avraham was the pillar of kindness (chesed) and espoused G'd's existence to the world, he was deserving. However the Midrash explains it differently.

The Midrash states, "Reb Shimon Ben Lakish said, 'A convert is especially loved by G'd. He is more beloved to Him than the multitudes who stood at Sinai.' Why is that so? 'If the people who had stood under the mountain would not have seen the fires, heard the mountain rumbling, or heard the sound of the great shofar, they would not have accepted upon themselves the yoke of heaven. However, the convert who did not experience any of these awesome events only feels complete if he is with G'd, by accepting upon himself the yoke of heaven. Is there anyone who should be more beloved than he?'"

The Midrash continues, "G'd says, 'I love the convert. I see that these evil kings are coming to destroy the father of all converts, Avraham. I cannot allow this to occur. I must therefore rescue him with great miracles.'" Avraham, our Patriarch, was the role model and father of all converts. He alone, through his own quest for truth, came upon G'd. After internalizing this truth, he dedicated his life to espousing monotheism and purging the world of paganism. As it states in the verse, "**Avraham took his wife Sarah...and the souls that they made in Haran; and left to go to the land of Canaan.**" Rashi cites Chazal who explain, that Avraham converted the men, while Sarah his wife converted the women and "brought them under the wings of the Divine Presence." Avraham, therefore merited extraordinary Divine Assistance.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos states, "At the level where the repentant (baalei teshuvah) stand, even the devoutly righteous (tzaddik) do not stand." Meaning, that a repentant who achieves the same level of righteousness as a tzaddik who was always righteous, is greater than that tzaddik. Rambam explains that the reason for this is that the tzaddik, who has always been righteous, does not need to contend with a deviant past. He is conditioned from the beginning of his life to do the Will of G'd. In contrast, the repentant, although he is fully committed to truth, he must contend with his past which is comprised of transgression and sin. He thus needs to continuously struggle with his past lusts and desires. This is based on the principle stated in the Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin: "According to one's struggle/anguish is his reward."

When a Jew performs a mitzvah, he does so because he was born as a Jew who is obligated to adhere to the Torah that was given at Sinai. He understands that he will be culpable if he should transgress. The convert, on the other hand, is coming from a circumstance that is very different from the Jew. Initially, he was only bound by the seven Noahide laws- and no more. Despite his limited level of obligation, the convert chooses, because of his love for G'd, to ascend to a level of obligation which causes his life to be bound up with G'd- the 613 commandments of the Torah. Why would one bring upon himself such a level of culpability if he should fail? It is only because of his sense of inadequacy and void that he finds within himself without G'd. He therefore chooses to convert and become part of the Chosen People.

Although the pagan who was converted to become the monotheist is not comparable to the convert of post-Sinai, who chooses to become a Jew; nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between a pagan and a monotheist. A pagan chooses to follow his own path of choice following whatever deity he feels will accommodate his needs to the best degree. However, monotheism is something that the individual does not dictate and determine, but rather, truth is the determinate factor- which is G'd Himself. The monotheist, in essence, is subjugating himself to G'd.

YAD AVRAHAM DAILY CLASS SCHEDULE

Monday Through Friday

5:50- 6:00 am	Chumash with Rashi
6:00- 6:15 am	Pirkei Avos (Maharal)
6:15- 6:30 am	Mishna Berurah
6:30 -6:45 am	Mussar – Derech Hashem
6:45 -7:25 am	Talmud—Chulin
7:25 - 8:20 am	Davening Followed by Breakfast
8:20 - 8:45 am	Mishna - Rabbi Rovner
9:00 -10:00 am	Daf Yomi
2:00pm	Mincha

Special Weekday Classes

Monday

11:30 – 12:30pm **Talmud: Megilah**
Location: Sunrise Capital 641 Lexington (25th FL.)
Enter on 54th Street

Tuesday

12:10 - 1:10pm **Torah Insight Based on the Parsha**
Location: Yad Avraham

Wednesday

11:30 – 12:30 pm **Talmud: Megilah**
Location: Sunrise Capital 641 Lexington (25th FL.)
Enter on 54th Street

1:00—2:00 pm **Daas Tevunos**

Location: Yad Avraham

Thursday

10:30 –11:30am **Duties of the Heart**

Location: Yad Avraham

12:00 – 1:00 pm **Talmud: Megilah** Sunrise Capital 641 Lexington (25th FL)