

**Yad Avraham Institute**  
**Weekly Torah Commentaries Series**  
*The Portion of*  
**Vayeira**

November 13, 2008

**Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita**

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**About the Yad Avraham Institut**

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**B"H**

## Vayeira

*Presented by*

**Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita**

**Dean**

### ***1. The Standard to Which Avraham was Held***

The Midrash Tanchuma at the beginning of the portion of Lech Lecha discusses the obligation of bringing a burnt offering (*korban olah*). Rebbe Yishmael states that one brings a burnt offering in order to atone for the non-performance of a Positive Commandment and for transgressing a Negative Commandment. Reb Shimon Bar Yochai states that the burnt offering atones for "*hirhur haleiv* – inappropriate thoughts," which are issues and concerns that are not verbalized.

The Gemara in Tractate Zevachim tells us that although when one violates a Positive Commandment, repentance alone is sufficient to bring about full atonement, in order to be reinstated in the good graces of G'd, one must bring a burnt offering. It is equated to bringing a gift to the Master.

The Torah states after Avraham had miraculously defeated the four mighty kings, G'd said to Avraham, **"Fear not Avram I am a shield for you; your reward is very great."** The Midrash Tanchuma states, "After miraculously defeating the four mighty kings, Avraham reflected upon and questioned the Attribute of Justice (Midas HaDin). What did he say? Reb Levy says, 'Avraham had said in his heart, 'I am concerned that perhaps I have received all of my reward in this world. G'd has assisted me in defeating the kings and rescued me from the fiery kiln. Perhaps I have been rewarded in this world, and will not be rewarded in the world to come. G'd said to Avraham, 'Because you have reflected (and thus had concern) upon My actions, you must bring a burnt offering. You must bring your son, your only beloved son (Yitzchak), as an olah.'" Thus, the most difficult of the ten tests that Avraham faced was precipitated by a slight spiritual failing. Why was Avraham's concern considered a claim against him? Factually, since Avraham had merited the many miracles that G'd had performed on his

behalf, Avraham's concern seems to be valid. Nevertheless, the Akeidah was necessary to atone for this inappropriate thought.

One who truly reveres and esteems G'd and serves him with dedication must do so without concern about the consequences or result of his actions. One should only be concerned regarding the quality of his service to the Master. As it states in Ethics of our Fathers, "Be as servants who serve the Master not to receive reward." For someone of Avraham's caliber of spirituality, although he was not motivated by compensation, his concern post facto regarding his merits was considered inappropriate.

Avraham needed to correct his "*hirhur haleiv*" (thoughts of the heart). That correction was facilitated through the Akeidah, which was to bring his special son Yitzchak as a burnt offering. This was the most difficult of the tests because G'd had previously promised him that Yitzchak's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the dust on the earth. If in fact that would be so, how could G'd ask him to sacrifice Yitzchak as a burnt offering? The two statements are irreconcilable. However, this contradiction did not deter or affect Avraham to any degree. As it states in the Torah, **"He rose early in the morning"** to go to the Akeidah. He did not reflect upon the question for an instant. He followed G'd's command with zeal and alacrity. This act of self-negation was considered the ultimate correction for his earlier failing regarding his inappropriate concern.

The Satan, the prosecutor of the Jewish people, is silenced on Rosh Hashanah because of the merit of the Akeidah, which came about as a result of Avraham's negation of himself to adhere to G'd's request. Because he did not hesitate and question G'd for a moment, the merit of the Akeidah will protect the Jewish people until the end of time. Why when one acts without any level of computation and with total negation on behalf of the Master, is it considered the ultimate accomplishment? King Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes, "G'd made man

straight, and they have sought out many computations..." G'd endowed man with the ability to follow His Will without question. It is only because of one's own conflict of interest that causes one to do differently. Avraham, through his level of self-negation at the Akeidah restored the "straightness" of man.

## 2. *The Patriarchs, The Jew's Link to G'd*

The Midrash at the beginning of the Portion of Vayeira states, "How many blessings does one recite every day. Our Rabbis teach us that every day one must recite eighteen blessings (*shemoneh esrei*) – Amidah (silent prayer) What is the basis for reciting eighteen blessings? Reb Shmuel bar Nachman says, 'To correspond to the eighteen times our holy Patriarchs are mentioned in the Torah. However, we find that the holy Patriarchs are mentioned nineteen times and not eighteen times...The reason there is no nineteenth blessing to correspond to this additional mention of the Patriarchs is because the Torah only mentions two of the Patriarchs - *Elokei Avraham and Elokei Yitzchak* (G'd of Avraham and Yitzchak). It does not include Elokei Yaakov - as the other instances when the Torah mentions all of the three Patriarchs - *Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzchak, Elokei Yaakov* (G'd of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov)."

The Torah states, "**You shall serve G'd with all of your heart...**" The Gemara in Tractate Berachos asks, "What is service of the heart? It is prayer (tefillah)." The purpose of prayer is to acknowledge G'd and beseech Him for our needs. By articulating all of one's needs within the context of the Amidah, one is acknowledging the fact that all that one has emanates from G'd's Kindness. There is nothing that is happenstance, rather it is because G'd Wills it to be. One's health, financial predicament, and every aspect of one's life is endowed by G'd, independent and unrelated to one's own initiative.

The first blessing of the Amidah states, "...Who recalls the kindness of the Patriarchs..." It is only because of the merit of the Patriarchs that the Jew has the privilege to having an audience with G'd to supplicate Him for his needs. The Jewish people are beneficiaries of G'd's Kindness only because of the merit of the holy Patriarchs. Despite, the lack of one's worthiness, the merits of the Patriarchs activate the Attribute of Mercy. Every aspect of our supplication through the Amidah reflects the basis for G'd having mercy upon us. This is reflected through the eighteen blessings which signify the eighteen times the holy Patriarchs are mentioned in the Torah.

The Torah tells us that the only species that qualify as an offering are the ox (*shor*), sheep (*kesev*), and goat (*eiz*). It is through the sacrifices of these species that the Mercy of G'd is evoked. Chazal explain that the ox was chosen to be one of the species qualified to be an offering in the merit of Avraham, our Patriarch. As the verse states, "**Avraham ran to the cattle...**" Thus, Avraham is associated with the ox. The sheep (*kesev*) was chosen to be an offering in the merit of Yitzchak. As the verse states regarding the Akeidah (binding of Yitzchak), "**And Avraham looked up and saw- behold a ram – after it had been caught in the thicket...**" The goat (*eiz*) was chosen to be an offering in the merit of Yaakov. As the Torah states regarding Rivka, our Matriarch, telling her son Yaakov to take the blessing from his father Yitzchak, "**So now, my son, heed my voice to that which I command you. Go now to the flock and fetch from there two good goats...**" These goats were meant to be prepared by Rivka as delicacies through which Yaakov would receive the blessings from Yitzchak. Thus, all of the species that activate the Attribute of Mercy, were chosen in the merit of our Patriarchs.

The Midrash continues, "Even if one is not worthy that G'd should respond to his supplication; nevertheless, if he prays and supplicates Him abundantly, He will respond to his tefillah and do kindness to him. As it states, 'All the ways of G'd are kindness and truth...' As G'd says, 'I have placed kindness before truth. The verse states, 'Righteousness (*tzedek*) and justice (*mishpat*) to all of Your people....' We see again that righteousness precedes justice. Reb Simlae states, 'You must know that all the ways of G'd are Kindness. As we see the Torah begins with a demonstration of 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." Meaning, that although G'd can invoke justice, He chooses to do kindness before the institution of Justice. Although G'd wants to invoke His Attribute of Mercy/Kindness upon the Jewish people; it nevertheless, needs to be initiated through the eighteen blessings of the Amidah which reflect the merit of the holy Patriarchs.

## 3. *Avraham's Unique Ability to Impact Upon Humanity*

The Torah describes the unique level of Avraham's hospitality. He had hosted the three wayfarers

in a manner that was befitting for a king. Chazal tell us, "The righteous say little but perform in abundance." The Torah states regarding Avraham's hospitality, **"I will fetch a morsel of bread...."** Although it seems from Avraham's words that he was going to host his guests on the most minimal level, the Gemara in Tractate Bava Metzia tells us that the meal that Avraham had presented before them was the equivalent of a banquet that was offered by King Solomon at the height of his reign.

The Torah then describes how Avraham ran to inform his wife Sarah and his household to begin preparing the feast. The Torah states, **"So Avraham hastened to the tent to Sarah and said, 'Hurry! Three se'ahs of meal, fine flour! Knead and make cakes!'"** Chazal tell us that although Sarah, at the time was eighty-nine years old she hastened to knead the equivalent of 300 lbs. of dough. The Torah continues, **"Then Avraham ran to the cattle...and gave it to the youth who hurried to prepare it."** Why did Avraham need to hasten to mobilize his entire household to prepare a feast for these wayfarers? Why did he not host them in a more leisurely manner? In addition, why were the guests worthy of such an elaborate feast?

Avraham's hospitality was more than an expression of his kindness. His chesed was implemented as a vehicle through which he brought humanity to monotheism. It was not doing kindness for its own sake, but rather, it was utilized as means to a spiritual end. The Midrash tells us that Avraham was always successful in his objective of dispelling and refuting pagan beliefs from his guests. He had convinced them beyond any doubt that there is only One Omnipotent G'd who is continuously involved in every aspect of existence. After he would conclude the elaborate feast the guests would say, "Thank you master Avraham for the food you provided." He would then respond, "I am not the master you should thank. There is but One Almighty Master who provides everything." This was the beginning of the dialogue that Avraham would engage in with his guests to bring them to monotheistic beliefs. Since Avraham's hospitality was only a means to glorify the Name of G'd through the espousal of monotheism, he understood and appreciated the value of the means to bring about the end. This was demonstrated through his urgency to perform the kindness without delay. Every moment was an opportunity to dispel pagan beliefs and bring the individual under the wings of the Divine Presence, thereby meeting the objective of Creation, which is "for My Glory I have Created it."

There is an argument in the Midrash regarding the stature of the three wayfarers. One opinion is that they

appeared as lowly Arabs while another says that were actually princes. Regardless of their stature, Avraham ran towards them, prostrated himself, and urged them to accept his hospitality. At this time, Avraham had enormous wealth and was renowned throughout the world. Why would he prostrate himself before his guests? Even if the guests had been princes, nevertheless, Avraham's status had superseded their stature because he had been established as the "father of all nations." Seemingly, this level of negation demonstrated by Avraham is out of character for a man of his renown. Based on the opinion that they were Arabs, Avraham's prostration and zeal is even more difficult to understand. After all of the hastening and preparation, Avraham himself was the one to serve his guests the feast. What is the value of this level of hospitality? Why did he need to negate himself to such a degree before his guests?

Since Avraham's hospitality was only a vehicle to bring people to monotheism, every nuance of his involvement was crucial to bring about the result. Whenever one approaches another with a proposition, the initial response of that individual is to be cautious and wary. He will ponder, "Is this truly in my best interest? Why is this person interacting with me in such a manner?" If the individual who is being approached is hosted in an unusually elaborate manner, he will be suspect that there is an ulterior motive that may not be in his best interest or even to his detriment. As a result of this level of caution, one will subconsciously create a wall not to be susceptible to this individual's influence. He will establish a mental block so as not to be vulnerable to this individual's presentation. It was clear to the world that Avraham wanted and needed nothing from anyone. Whatever concern that could be considered had no relevance to one's interaction with Avraham. He had enormous wealth and thus did not seek to enrich himself through his generous hospitality. He was known as the "father of all nations" and thus did not need to gain renown by hosting his guests. He did not need to gain protection from anyone because it was known that he had defeated the four mightiest kings. Why then did Avraham host his guest so elaborately with the greatest level of reverence?

It became evident to Avraham's guests, because of this truth, that the motivating factor for his selfless concern for their needs was only for their own benefit. Avraham's negation, through prostration before his guests, communicated to them that they were truly special in his eyes. By acting in this manner, he immediately gained their trust. Once the individual believed that Avraham's motive was only in his best interest, they were completely open and attentive to whatever he presented before them.

Thus, the cogency and truthfulness of monotheism was fully absorbed.

Avraham was only able to negate himself and serve his guest selflessly, despite the level of his renown and accomplishments because he was one of the most humble people to every live. He is quantified through his statement to G'd when he had said, **"I am only dust and ash."** If Avraham did not possess this unique level of humility, he would not have been able to conduct himself as he did. His sense of ego would have interfered with his objective. Avraham did not perceive his prostration and level of service to his guests as a denigration, but rather as a valuable privilege to serve G'd.

#### ***4. Appreciating the Profoundness of Avraham's Expression of Humility***

The Torah tells us that before G'd destroyed Sodom He informed Avraham of His intention. Avraham immediately beseeched G'd on their behalf in the merit of the righteous people in their midst. The Torah states, **"What if there should be fifty righteous people in the midst of the city?...G'd responded, 'If I find in Sodom fifty righteous ...then I would spare the entire place on their account.'** Avraham then said, **'Behold, now, I desired to speak to my Lord although I am but dust and ash. What if the fifty righteous people should lack five?'**" Rashi in his commentary explains the words of Avraham to mean, "I would already have been reduced to dust by the kings, and to ash by Nimrod, were it not for Your Mercy that stood by me." Seemingly, Avraham's statement is not in the correct chronological order. He had first been rescued by G'd from the fiery kiln of Kasdim before he had experienced the miracles of defeating the four mighty kings. If so, Avraham should have said to G'd, "I am but ash and dust." Why then did Avraham allude to the miraculous victory over the kings before mentioning G'd's saving him from the kiln?

The Torah tells us in the Portion of Lech Lecha that after Avraham had been victorious over the four mightiest kings, he was concerned that he had depleted all of his merits. It was only through miraculous means that Avraham could have been victorious. G'd responded to Avraham, **"Fear not Avram I am a shield for you; your reward is very great."** The Midrash Tanchuma states, "After miraculously defeating the four mighty kings, Avraham reflected upon and questioned the Attribute of Justice (Midas HaDin). What did he say? Reb Levy says, 'Avraham had said in his heart, 'I am concerned that perhaps I have received all of my reward in this world. G'd

has assisted me in defeating the kings and rescued me from the fiery kiln. Perhaps I have been rewarded in this world, and will not be rewarded in the world to come....'" Once again we see that Avraham mentioned the miracle of the four kings before his miraculous rescue from the fiery kiln, which is not sequentially correct.

The Midrash tells us that after G'd had commanded Avraham to circumcise himself he consulted with Aneir, Eshkol and Mamre. The Midrash states, "Aneir and Eshkol advised Avraham against circumcising himself...Mamre advised him to obey the command of G'd saying, 'G'd had taken you out of the fiery kiln of Kasdim and performed great miracles to help you defeat the kings... Should you now hesitate regarding His commandment to circumcise yourself?' Accordingly, Avraham did as G'd had commanded..." We see that when Mamre recounted the miraculous events that Avraham had experienced he does so in their sequential order. Why then does Avraham continuously invert the order by mentioning first the victory over the kings before the incident of the kiln?

When Avraham had been given the ultimatum by Nimrod to either bow to the idol or be thrown into the fiery kiln, he chose to give his life rather than bow to the idol. Avraham willingly entered into the kiln knowing that he would die, thus giving his life to sanctify G'd's Name. G'd interceded and rescued Avraham because he was willing to sacrifice himself for His Glory. In contrast, when Avraham went to do battle against the four mighty kings, he did so knowing that he would be victorious so that he would rescue his nephew Lot. He did not enter into battle believing for a moment that he would die. He knew that because of his merits, G'd would intercede on his behalf and allow him to be victorious. In order for Avraham to experience the miracle of victory over the four kings, he needed to have a greater degree of G'd's Mercy than being saved from the kiln. Regarding the kiln, Avraham was rescued because he entered into the fire to die to sanctify G'd's Name. However, regarding entering into battle against the four mightiest kings, which was not obviously for the sanctification of His Name, for Avraham to merit a miracle it was only because of G'd's unlimited Kindness. Therefore, the miracles regarding the defeat of the kings were more humbling to Avraham than that of the kiln.

When Avraham expressed his humility to G'd, he does so by saying, **"I am but dust and ash,"** which first alludes to the miraculous victory against the kings, then alluding to the miracle of the kiln. Mamre, on the other hand, was consulted regarding G'd's dictate to Avraham to circumcise himself because of its danger. He therefore

responded based on the chronological events from which Avraham had benefited. Meaning, that just as G'd had saved him from the kiln and the four kings, He would certainly protect him from any negative consequences of the circumcision. Mamre's response to Avraham established him as a tzaddik (righteous).

### 5. Avraham's Role as a Debtor (from Lech Lecha)

There is an argument in Chazal as to what age did Avraham come upon G'd. One opinion is that he recognized G'd at the age of three. The other opinion is that he recognized G'd at the age of fifty-two. Regardless, of his age, Avraham was the only individual in existence to come upon G'd through his own initiative. What characteristic did Avraham possess that allowed him to come upon His Maker?

One may say that perhaps Avraham was the most astute and perception individual of his generation and was thus able to come upon monotheism through his superior intellect. However this position is unfounded. The pagans of his generation were no less astute and fierce in their pursuit of intellectualism than he was. What characteristic did Avraham possess that motivated him to continuously seek out the truth and reject the false positions of his time?

The Midrash describes Avraham's quest for G'd with an allegory, "Reb Yitzchak says, 'There was a traveler who had come upon a magnificent citadel that was fully illuminated. The traveler asked, 'Is it possible that this magnificent, illuminated, citadel has no master? Who is the master of this great citadel?' The traveler continued to ask the question many times until the master of the citadel heard and said – 'I am the master of the citadel.' Similarly, Avraham looked at the world as something of a magnificent dimension. He had wondered Who is the Maser of the universe? He had rejected all the contemporary theories regarding its Master/masters. Avraham had no answer until G'd Himself came to him and said, 'I am the Master of the citadel.'" Avraham was not willing to accept any position that was not fully truthful and consistent with his observation and understanding of the world. He was willing to remain with his question rather than succumb to a position where truth had been compromised. Avraham did not come upon G'd, but rather He came upon Avraham.

G'd created man with the ability to be able to recognize the good that he had received (*maakir tova*) and consequently to reciprocate. This is characteristic that is innate in every human being to some degree. Avraham

recognized that he had been the beneficiary of unlimited goodness. Whether it was his intelligence, ability, his own existence, or the world at large, he felt an unlimited debt of gratitude. The depth of Avraham's gratitude was all-consuming. His quest was to find his benefactor in order to pay the debt by dedicating himself to serving him. Avraham had rejected all the possibilities that were presented to him because he believed that they were not the source of the good that he received. He was not willing to pay the ultimate price of lifelong dedication unless his benefactor was proven to him without any doubt.

Despite the fact that Adam had been the handiwork of G'd and possessed a level of clarity that was unequalled, he nevertheless chose to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. After he had eaten G'd asked Adam, "**Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?**" Adam responded, "**The woman whom You gave to be with me – she gave me of the tree...**" Chazal tell us that because of Adam's response, G'd categorized him as "an ingrate (*kafui tovah*)."<sup>1</sup> Rather than appreciating the good that G'd had done for him by providing him with a helpmate that would assist him in actualizing his spiritual potential, Adam blamed his failing on G'd. Adam, being the father of humanity, had ingrained the negative characteristic of ingratitude in all of mankind. It was not until Avraham had come upon G'd, his benefactor, that he corrected this deficiency within himself and consequently within the Jewish people.

It was because Avraham carried a debt of gratitude to all those from whom he had benefited, that the test of "Lech Lecha" that was presented to him was truly a test. Although he had been victimized by his father, family, and community and considered a pariah, he nevertheless had difficulty abandoning them and not attempting to bring them to the truth of monotheism. His debt of gratitude to his father emanated from the fact that he had brought Avraham into existence. As the Mishna in Tractate Bava Metzia tells us that one must return the lost article of one's father before that of a stranger because it is one's father that had brought him into existence. If not for Avraham's deep sense of gratitude, leaving his homeland and his father's household would not have been a test at all.

Avraham had risked his life in order to rescue his nephew Lot, who was evil. He did so even at the risk of forfeiting his merits because he felt a debt of gratitude to Lot's father, Haran who had sanctified G'd's Name by giving his life in the fiery kiln. Avraham's guiding and driving force that directed his life was his deep sense of gratitude to those from whom he had benefited.