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Avraham Avinu began to declare ethical monotheism to the world at around the same time – according to one opinion, in exactly the same year – that people started building a tower to the sky. This can be described as a time of grand projects, an era of bold aspirations: one to physically reach the heavens and the other to advance an enduring insight that could uplift humanity. Comparing these simultaneous ambitions can allow us to better understand their motive forces and underlying character, examine how they impacted on one another and see how they would independently unfold. In so doing, we can discern a key inflection point of Avraham’s colossal spiritual insights – namely, his conviction and insistence that the *derech Hashem*, the way of God, is to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat*.

The Beliefs Underlying the Tower of Bavel

The verse in *Bereishis* 11:1 introduces the events leading up to the Tower of *Bavel* by stating that the people of *Shin’ar* had a “single language” (*safah echas*) and “common words” (*devarim achadim*). Rashi focuses on the second, seemingly redundant, term as revealing three different ways of understanding the true purpose and aims of the people of *Shin’ar* in building the tower.

Rashi’s first explanation is simply the plain translation of the term “*devarim achadim*,” meaning that they had a common plan. In this case, their aim was to conquer the heights. The verses in *Bereishis* 11:2-3 describe how this group of people had created a technology to make bricks in order to construct a city even though their area had no quarries. As a result of this technology, they were able to settle a region that could not otherwise have been developed because it had no readily available building materials. Juxtaposing this to the verse in *Bereishis* 11:1, Rashi implies that the people’s common aspiration – the “*devarim achadim*” – was, having overcome the earth, to strive to dominate the sky. So, they started to work on a tower to the heavens

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in order to wage a battle against God. According to this approach, the translation of “*devarim achadim*” is simply that they had a unified goal.

This interpretation of the phrase assumes that the word “*achadim*” is an adjective that modifies the word “*devarim*.” Yet, it is also possible to read the word “*achadim*” as a noun for “singleness” or “oneness,” suggesting that the people of *Shin’ar* were interested in, and were discussing with each other, “words of oneness” or various types of oneness, and, in particular, about the singularity of God in the world.

Hence, Rashi’s second explanation of the people’s shared purpose is that they desired not only to physically dominate the heavens, but also to spiritually challenge the oneness of God. They acknowledged God, but they could not countenance His exclusivity and transcendence. Like the Russian cosmonauts who, when reaching space for the first time, are reported to have remarked sardonically that they reached the heavens but did not see God there, the people of *Shin’ar* strove to climb to the sky in order to invade what they thought of as God’s exclusive domain. According to this second approach, the translation of “*devarim achadim*” is that they had formulated a plan against the unique One of the universe, i.e., God.

These first two of Rashi’s explanations account for the word “*achadim*,” but, as the Maharshal emphasizes, they do not explain why the verse uses the plural term “*devarim achadim*” instead of the singular “*davar echad*,” which would be a more precise formulation. Rashi therefore offers a third interpretation that accounts for the plural usage: the phrase “*devarim achadim*” is tantamount to the term “*devarim chadim*,” which means sharp or cutting words. Knowing about Noah’s flood, the people at that time believed that every 1,656 years the sky would fall, and they started building a comprehensive system of towers that could act as buttresses and supports to hold up the sky. Their words were “cutting” because they attributed the flood to happenstance as opposed to attributing it to God.

These three explanations have something in common. In each of them, the people’s shared purpose derived from their belief that God was an adversary to be conquered physically or spiritually, or else that He was completely absent and that the sky was going to crash down on them if they did not endeavor to hold it up. According to Rashi’s three interpretations of this verse, the theological premise of the Tower of *Bavel* was that God was either an adversary or else entirely absent.

The Resulting Moral and Social Implosion in *Shin’ar*

This viewpoint led to moral and social collapse of the people of *Shin’ar* who subsequently came to be called the dispersed or fragmented generation (*Dor Haflaga*).

People emulate God in accordance with their understanding, or their lack thereof, and are impacted by their understanding of ultimate causes in the universe. In this way, the imperative to emulate the Divine (*imitatio dei*) – and the precept of “*vehalachta bederachav*” (see *Devarim* 28:9; *Rambam Sefer haMitzvos*, Asei 8) – is not only a *halachic* obligation but also is a natural phenomenon. The people of *Shin’ar* viewed God as uninterested, contemptuous, or adversarial toward them and they, likewise, ended up treating one another in that manner.

The *midrash* (*Pirke deRabbi Eliezer* 24:7) describes their fraying of normal empathy and states that the builders of the tower would carry bricks up on one side and would come down on the other side. If a man fell off of the tower and died, no attention was paid to him. But if one brick fell down, they would sit and weep and say: “Woe betide us! When will another one be hauled up in its place?”

Even worse, their main technology for construction was the furnace to harden the bricks, “*venisrefa lesraifa*” (*Bereishis* 11:3). Rashi says that Nimrod originated the plan to build the Tower of *Bavel* (*Bereishis* 10:8) and also that Nimrod was called “*Amrafel*” (which is a contraction of “*amar pol*”) because he told Avraham “plunge into the fiery furnace” (*Bereishis* 14:1). This is an allusion to the *midrash*, also quoted by Rashi, which says that Avraham smashed Terach’s idols and Terach denounced him to Nimrod, who cast Avraham into the fiery furnace (*Bereishis* 11:28, 18:27). Rashi further comments that “*Ur Kasdim*,” where Avraham was from, was so named because “*ur*” means fire and they would cast individuals into the fiery furnace (*Bereishis* 11:28).¹

Thus, the fiery furnace that was used to make bricks to build a city and then to construct the tower of *Bavel* also came to be used to cruelly punish anyone who spoke with a dissenting or independent voice. The technology that was developed to build cities became transformed into an instrument of cruelty and oppression. The *Dor Haflaga* who had lived by the conviction that God was antagonistic or absent, over the course of time, imitated their own erroneous impression of the Divine and, as a result, they became uncaring and cruel toward other people.

Avraham’s Countervailing Conviction

Avraham had the directly opposite belief. The verse in *Bereishis* 18:19 describes Avraham’s firm conviction that the way of God – the “*derech Hashem*” – is to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat*. The verse states:

¹ Indeed, the verse specifies that Hashem described Himself to Avraham as having taken him out from *Ur Kasdim* (*Bereishis* 15:7), which has even more poignant meaning in view of this *midrash* that Hashem delivered Avraham from the actual furnace for which *Ur Kasdim* had been named.

כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט למען הביא ה' על אברהם את אשר דבר עליו.

Onkelos translates this to mean: “For it is revealed before me that he will command his children and his household after him and they will guard proper ways before Hashem to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat*[.]”² The implication of this translation is that the *tzedaka* and *mishpat* referenced by the verse are actions that the children and household of Avraham would take in the future. According to this understanding, the phrase “to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat*” primarily modifies the word “and they will guard” (*ve-shamru*), with the subject of both being “his children and household.” According to this translation, the verse tells nothing specific about the nature of Hashem. It only states that Avraham will instruct his children and household how to act before Hashem.

The Rambam in *Hilchos Matnos Ani'im* 10:1 takes the same approach of connecting the *tzedaka* and *mishpat* in this verse to the actions of people, and states:

חייבין אנו להזהר במצוות צדקה יתר מכל מצוות עשה שהצדקה סימן לצדיקי זרע אברהם אבינו שני כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה וכו'.

We have to be more careful about the commandment of charity [tzedaka] than every other positive commandment because charity [tzedaka] is a sign for the righteous [tzedikei] of the descendants of Avraham our forefather [zera Avraham Avinu]³ as the verse states: “Because I know that he will command ...”

Thus, like Onkelos, the Rambam understands the *tzedaka* and *mishpat* in this verse to refer to the actions of Avraham and his descendants, rather than to a theological statement about the essential nature of Hashem.⁴

Rashi, however, gives an alternate interpretation of the verse. He writes that “*ki yedativ*” is not simply to know cognitively, but is “*lashon chiba*” – a term of affection – and that the reason for Hashem’s affection toward Avraham is expressly stated in the verse: “*lema’an asher yetzave*,” which Rashi explains as “*lefi she-hu metzave es banav alai lishmor darki*,” “because he commands his children about Me to guard My way.” This interpretation of “*derech Hashem*” as “*darki*” – “My way,” in the first person – reflects the understanding of the verse that *tzedaka* and *mishpat* are essential to Hashem’s nature. Rashi explains:

2 The Ramban cites a text of Rashi that quotes a variant of Onkelos’s translation as being “[f]or I have known him.”

3 This might be a reference by the Rambam to the verse “*ki beYitzchak yikarei lecha zera*,” that the Abrahamic line proceeds through Yitzchak.

4 See also *Moreh Nevuchim* III:53.

כי ידעתיו. לשון חבה כמו מודע לאישה (רות ב:א) הלא בועז מודעתנו (שם ג:ב) ואדעך בשם (שמות לג:ז). ואמנם עיקר לשון כולם אינו אלא לשון ידיעה שהמחבב את האדם מקרבו אצלו ויודעו ומכירו. ולמה ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה לפי שהוא מצוה את בניו עלי לשמור דרכי. ואם תפרשהו כתרגמו יודע אני בו שיצוה את בניו וגו' אין למען נופל על הלשון.

“For I have cherished him.” It is an expression of affection like “moda” in “an intimate of her husband (Rus 2:1) and like “modatanu” in “[i]s not Boaz our intimate?” (Rus 3:2) and like “vaeidacha” in And I have become familiar with you by name” (Shemos 33:17). However, the essential meaning of all of them is nothing but the meaning “knowing,” for one who cherishes a person draws him close to him and knows him and becomes familiar with him. The verse means: And why have I cherished him? “lema’an asher yetzave” – i.e., because he commands his children about Me to adhere to My way. But if you will explain it according to its simple translation “I know of him that he will command his children etc.,” the word “lema’an” does fit the language of the verse.

Hence, the phrase “lema’an asher” in the verse means “so that” according to Onkelos and “because” according to Rashi, who translates it as “lefi.” Also, the word “yetzave” is future tense according to Onkelos and present tense according to Rashi (*Bereishis* 18:19 s.v. *yetzave*). The verse as understood by Onkelos is action oriented, with the goal being for Avraham to instruct his children and household to practice *tzedaka* and *mishpat*. The verse as explained by Rashi is inner-oriented. Hashem’s discussion with Avraham about Sodom was not so that he would take a specific action but, rather, it resulted from the fact that he had correctly grasped that the way of Hashem is characterized by principled righteousness and justice, and that he had continually sought to model and to impress this theological insight upon his children and household.⁵

In short, Onkelos and the Rambam interpret the verse as describing the way Avraham will instruct his children to act, while Rashi interprets it as describing a key

⁵ In *Parashas Chayeh Sara*, the *eved Avraham* reaches part of this realization during the time he seeks a wife for Yitzchak on Avraham’s behalf. He starts off recognizing that Hashem does *chesed* but, nevertheless, he views it as being a haphazard quality rather than being an enduring and principled trait. In *Bereishis* 24:12, he asks Hashem to do *chesed* with Avraham, but he also says in the same verse “*hakrei na lefanai hayom*,” which hedges and wrongly attributes the Divine *chesed* to happenstance (“*hakrei*”). After the events by the well, however, he thanks Hashem in *Bereishis* 24:26 for not withholding “*chasdo ve-amiso*” from Avraham. The *eved Avraham*, at that point, correlates Hashem’s lovingkindness to His essential character, i.e., “His truth,” which establishes that this Divine *chesed* is an enduring and principled way that Hashem relates to the world. Indeed, this statement in the verse by the *eved Avraham* is the first time the word “*emes*” is used anywhere in the Torah.

Divine attribute of Hashem. According to Onkelos and the Rambam, people act with *tzedaka* and *mishpat* as a way of following along the path toward Hashem. According to Rashi, people first come to understand that *tzedaka* and *mishpat* constitute an essential aspect of Hashem's nature. Their resulting actions of *tzedaka* and *mishpat* derive, not only as acts they take out of respect for the Divine, but also from their striving to emulate some aspect of Hashem's essential character.⁶ By paraphrasing the verse's use of "*derech Hashem*" (the way of God) to write "*darki*" (My way), Rashi emphasizes that the phrase "to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat*" is descriptive of Hashem.

Thus, according to Rashi, the verse includes something exceedingly rare in *Chumash*: a statement of theology that describes the way of God. This perhaps also explains why Rashi interprets "*ki yedativ*" as "*lashon chiba*," i.e., an expression of affection. Avraham managed to grasp – and Hashem revealed to Avraham and enabled him to glimpse – this aspect of the way of Hashem. Just as Avraham understood a bona fide insight into the character of the Divine personality, *kavyachol*, Hashem responded to Avraham not only and purely through action but also with personal affection (*chiba*).⁷

Indeed, this is the first time in the Torah that Hashem consults a person about His actions and is concerned with the opinion and thought of humanity. The purpose of "*hamechase Ani meiAvraham*" (shall I conceal from Avraham) is not to affect the outcome with regard to Sodom or for Avraham to do anything, because the outcome did not change and Avraham was not charged to do anything beyond the discussion itself. Yet, this is the first time that Hashem consults with humanity. It is the only time until that point that Hashem had checked with an individual about His actions or had expressed concern with the individual's opinion of the Divine course.

Parashas Vayera conveys that, in addition to the fact that Hashem was Avraham's protector and benefactor: *Anochi magen lach, secharcha harbei me'od* (Bereishis 15:1), Avraham also had become an intimate of Hashem: *ki yedativ* (Bereishis 18:19), and that this resulted from his understanding and dedicated instruction to his children and household that the way of Hashem is to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat* (Bereishis 18:19).

⁶ Both of these approaches are expressed in the eleventh *bracha* of *Shemone Esrei* which, based on *Tehillim* 33:5, refers to Hashem during most of the year as the King who loves *tezdaka* and *mishpat* (reflecting His love for these actions by people) but then, during the ten days leading up to Yom Kippur, refers to Hashem as *HaMelech HaMishpat* (reflecting our awareness of this as part of His essential nature).

⁷ Rashi's approach might explain the observation of the Abarbanel that the Torah does not include a comparable introductory reflection and statement of intention before Hashem tells Noach about the Flood. The purpose there was simply to instruct Noach to build an ark. The purpose here was not action oriented but instead was simply communication between Hashem and Avraham based on Avraham's insight into unique attributes of Hashem, which reflects and conveys a "*lashon chiba*."

Avraham's Consequent Concern for People's Individual Wellbeing

Avraham, accordingly, developed a different aspiration than the *Dor Haflaga*. This was grounded in his conviction of Hashem's principled righteousness and justice, and in his consequent belief of the worth and inherent value of each individual. The Torah records only a few stories about Avraham's conduct, but it describes extensive detail about how he cared even for complete strangers.

Indeed, *Parashas Vayera* starts with Avraham sitting outside even though it was excruciatingly hot. Rashi explains that Avraham was waiting there to see whether there were travelers he could invite into his home (*Bereishis* 18:1). The *gemara* (*Bava Metzia* 86b) further emphasizes that this appears immediately after the portion about Avraham's *bris mila* and underscores that the sick (in this case, Avraham, recuperating from his *bris mila*) usually remain indoors to rest but, nevertheless, Avraham went outside to personally see if he could invite wayfarers. When the three guests saw that Avraham was adjusting his bandages, they tried to draw away from him because they did not want to trouble him. But he ran toward them, exerting great energy and alacrity to invite them into his home (*ibid.*).

Moreover, even though Hashem had appeared to him – which surely was a great privilege and an exquisite moment for Avraham Avinu – Rashi quotes the *gemara* (*Shavuos* 35b, *Shabbos* 127a) stating that Avraham asked Hashem to wait while he went to invite the travelers into his home (*Bereishis* 18:3). In the meantime, he ran to the cattle (while he was still recovering physically), and Rashi emphasizes that he personally took three calves so that he could serve his guests tongue in mustard which was a delicacy (*Bereishis* 18:7). Thus, Avraham demonstrated great care and concern toward complete strangers who, as Rashi emphasizes, in fact were idolaters (*Bereishis* 18:4).

Avraham's concern extended not only to these travelers but even to the people of Sodom whose ways “were exceedingly wicked and sinful to Hashem” (*Bereishis* 13:13) and who, by that time, had caused human suffering to such an extent that their actions had become completely intolerable to Hashem (*Bereishis* 18:20). Yet, even then, Avraham showed concern for the inherent and potential worth of the people who dwelt in Sodom. He stepped forward, asserting to Hashem that perhaps there was enough goodness in the city to render it redeemable (*Bereishis* 18:23). Avraham acknowledged during his argument with Hashem that the overwhelming majority of the residents of Sodom were completely wicked. But his contention was that a cadre of righteous individuals, combined with the presence and force of Hashem, could salvage the city (*Bereishis* 18:28), and that it would violate Divine justice to sweep away all of these individuals collectively (*Bereishis* 18:25).

The point here is that Avraham cared about the individuals who lived in Sodom and might be decent notwithstanding that the overall society had offended every principle and core ethic that he held dear and sacred. Even in that circumstance, Avraham maintained that the people had individualized and unique value, and that, if there was even a minyan of uncorrupted citizens of Sodom, they might be able to redeem the metropolis as a whole (*Bereishis* 18:32).

Avraham's visceral understanding that the way of Hashem is to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat* and his conviction about the individual value of each person are connected. Indeed, the verse in which Hashem attests to the correctness of Avraham's knowledge of the way of Hashem (*Bereishis* 18:19) is a direct prologue to Avraham's advocacy for the residents of Sodom (*Bereishis* 18:23) and of his belief that ten worthy individuals, even in that corrupted culture, could transform the city as a whole (*Bereishis* 18:32). Thus, Avraham persisted in his respectful argument with Hashem, and Hashem appreciated Avraham's concern and effort even for the people of Sodom.⁸

How Avraham Reached His Belief

The Torah does not specify how Avraham reached his conclusion that the way of Hashem is to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat*. But the question about how old Avraham was when he recognized his Creator gives some indication.

The *Ra'avad* quotes the *gemara* in *Nedarim* 32a (see also *Bereishis Rabba* 95:3) that Avraham was three years old when he recognized his Creator. This is based on the fact that the verse (*Bereishis* 26:5) uses the word "*eikev*" when referencing the fact that Avraham heard Hashem's voice and the *gematria* of "*eikev*" is 172 and Avraham lived until 175 (*Bereishis* 25:7). If Avraham recognized Hashem at the age of three, either he must have attended the Yeshiva of Shem veEver (see, e.g., Rashi *Bereishis* 14:18 that Malki Tzedek the king of Shalem was Shem ben Noach), or else he had an intuitive and innate understanding about Hashem that emerged when he became old enough for basic cognition.⁹

The Rambam (*Hilchos Avoda Zara* 1:3) states that Avraham was forty years old when he came to this understanding. He describes how Avraham arrived at an awareness of Hashem:

⁸ See *Mizrachi Bereishis* 18:33.

⁹ Rav Shmuel Nachum suggests the first of these explanations to explain how Avraham could have been three years old when he discovered Hashem. However, the *Kesef Mishne* notes that Shem veEver were in *Eretz Canaan* while Avraham was in *Bavel*. The second possibility is reflected generally (although not with reference to Avraham specifically) by *Rabbenu Bachya's* introduction to the tenth chapter of *Chovos Halevavos*.

כיון שנגמל איתן זה התחיל לשוטט בדעתו והוא קטן והתחיל לחשוב ביום ובלילה והיה תמיה היאך אפשר שיהיה הגלגל הזה נוהג תמיד ולא יהיה לו מנהיג ומי יסבב אותו, כי אי אפשר שיסבב את עצמו, ולא היה לו מלמד ולא מודיע דבר אלא מושקע באור כשדים בין עובדי כוכבים הטפשים ואביו ואמו וכל העם עובדי כוכבים והוא עובד עמהם ולבו משוטט ומבין עד שהשיג דרך האמת והבין קו הצדק מתבוננתו הנכונה, וידע שיש שם אלוה אחד והוא מנהיג הגלגל והוא ברא הכל ואין בכל הנמצא אלוה חוץ ממנו, וידע שכל העולם טועים ודבר שגרם להם לטעות זה שעובדים את הכוכבים ואת הצורות עד שאבד האמת מדעתם, ובן ארבעים שנה הכיר אברהם את בוראו.

After Avraham was weaned, while still a youth, his mind began to reflect. By day and by night he was thinking and wondering: "How is it possible for the sphere to continue to move without having anyone move it? And who turns it? Is it possible for it to turn itself?" And he had no teacher and nobody to inform him. Rather, he was sunken in Ur Kasdim among foolish idolaters. And his father and mother and the entire nation served idols and he would worship with them. But his mind was always reflecting and understanding until he ascertained the correct way and understood the path of tzedek from his correct comprehension, and he knew that there is only one God and He is the one who controls the celestial spheres and He created everything and there is no other deity besides Him. And he knew that the entire nation had erred and that the thing that had caused them to make this mistake was that they served the stars and the images until the truth was lost from their consciousness. And Avraham was forty years old when he recognized Creator.

The *midrash* brings a third approach that Avraham was 48 years old (*Bereishis Rabba* 30:8, 64:4, 95:3).¹⁰ Avraham was born in the year 1948 from the creation of the world. Thus, according to the *midrash*, Avraham recognized Hashem in 1996, which was the same year that Nimrod and the *Dor Haflaga* built the Tower of Bavel (*Rashi Bereishis* 10:25; see also *Bereishis Rabba* 26:3).

The question, then, is how Avraham arrived at this awareness of Hashem when he was 48 years old. The *midrash* (*Bereishis Rabba* 39:1), through a parable, addresses generally how Avraham came to recognize Hashem:

אמר רבי יצחק משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום, וראה בירה אחת דולקת
אמר תאמר שהבירה זו בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו בעל הבירה, אמר לו אני הוא בעל

¹⁰ The *Hagahos Maimuniyos* states, based on these *midrashic* sources, that this is actually the position of the Rambam and that the proper text of the *Mishne Torah* is that Avraham was 48 years old when he recognized his Creator (compare *Kesef Mishne ad loc.*).

הבירה, כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו הקב"ה ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם.

Rabi Yitzchak said [it is explained through] a parable of someone who wandered from place to place and saw a certain palace lit up [i.e., a "bira dolekes"]. He said: "Will you say that this palace has no master?" The owner of the palace looked out at him and said to him: "I am he, the owner of the palace." So it was that our forefather Avraham said: "Will you say that this world has no master?" The Holy One Blessed be He One looked out at him and said to him: "I am He, the owner of the world."

So, the *midrash* says that Avraham saw a lit up palace and went to find of its owner. There are two ways to understand the metaphor in this *midrash*. One is that the palace was beautifully adorned with bright chandeliers. In this sense, the analogue is that Avraham saw the stunning order of the cosmos and became inspired to recognize the Creator who had fashioned the Universe.

However, there is another possibility that the palace in the metaphor was lit up because it was on fire and was burning down. The traveler in the story went to find the owner because he could not believe that such a beautiful palace could be burning and there is nobody who cares.

If so, the analogue is that Avraham saw the atrocities of the *Dor Haflaga* who had lost all sense of human empathy and, worse, threw people who spoke out against them into the fiery furnace as fuel to make more bricks, which is why the area became called *Ur Kasdim* (Rashi *Bereishis* 11:28). Indeed, they threw Avraham into this furnace for questioning their belief system (Rashi *Bereishis* 11:28, 14:1, 18:27; see also *Bereishis Rabba* 38:13). And monstrosly it was Terach, Avraham's father, who delivered him to Nimrod (*ibid.*).

Thus, the proverbial palace was ablaze. It was being destroyed. Rather than approaching this terrible outcome as an inevitability, Avraham went to find the "owner of the palace" with the firm conviction that there must be a *ba'al ha-bira* who fundamentally transcends the human cruelty that had come to characterize the *Dor Haflaga*.

The *gemara* (*Avoda Zara* 19a) emphasizes that Avraham specifically separated himself from the *Dor Haflaga*. The members of the *Dor Haflaga* were overwhelmingly engaged in one project and Avraham in another, as underscored by the juxtaposition in the verses between the Tower of *Bavel* and the generations leading up to the birth of Avraham. In this context, Avraham's firm belief and established conviction that the

way of Hashem is to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat* resulted from his categorical rejection of the theological postulates of that society which had believed that God either was antagonistic to them or else was entirely absent from them.

Accordingly, while the *Ra'avad* suggests that Avraham's great insight resulted from his indigenous awareness of Hashem (and, therefore, Avraham could recognize his Creator at the age of three) and the Rambam suggests that it was a consequence of his logical deduction (and, therefore, Avraham needed the mature mind of forty, as stated in the *mishna* in *Pirkei Avos* 5:21), the *midrash* which states that Avraham was 48 years old when he recognized his Creator suggests that his belief was fueled by his revulsion against the cruel culture that the *Dor Haflaga* had become. Avraham's enduring spiritual insight was less of a calculation and more of a concentrated force of conscience.

Conclusion

Avraham's great understanding of the Divine was not only his belief that there is one God but also his conviction that the way of Hashem is to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat*. The society of the *Dor Haflaga* which endeavored to build the Tower of *Bavel* and to conquer the heights had been based on the mistaken belief that the sky was falling and that God is antagonistic to people and indifferent to their inherent worth. They modeled their own behavior after their erroneous view of the Divine character and this led to their social and moral collapse. Yet, Avraham knew that the way of Hashem is to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat*, and that his monotheistic belief in Hashem's principled righteousness and justice would prevail over the *Dor Haflaga's* monolithic obliviousness of and apathy toward the value of individual human beings.

Indeed, the important thing is not specifically how Avraham came to recognize his Creator (and the Torah does not tell us that), but that Hashem directed His attention and concern toward him – i.e., the single individual out of the vast cosmos. This was a newfound value of the individual made manifest by the care and concern of the one God toward Avraham, resulting from Avraham's insight that the way of Hashem is to do *tzedaka* and *mishpat* (*Bereishis* 18:19). In the momentous year 1996 after Creation, Avraham understood – and ultimately shared with the world – what the people of *Shin'ar* could not then understand: that by grasping intellectually that *tzedaka* and *mishpat* are essential to Hashem's nature, real world consequences flow and both societies and individuals flourish.