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## Lech Lecha 5781

### The Shield Of Abraham

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered November 11, 1967)

In the very first revelation to Abraham, God promises the patriarch: "And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great, and be thou a blessing."

The Talmud (Pes. 117b) identified the four elements in this verse in a most unusual yet familiar way. The benediction, they said, refers to the Shemoneh Esreh prayer, and the promise was that henceforth and for all time the Name of God was to be linked with Abraham, with his son, and with his grandson. So the Rabbis said: *ve'e'skha le'goy gadol, zehu she'omrim Elokei Avraham*, "And I will make of thee a great nation" refers to the expression, "The God of Abraham." *Va-averekhekha, zehu she'omrim Elokei Yitzhak* "And I will make thee" refers to the expression, "The God of Isaac." And *va-agadlah shemekha*, "I will make thy name great," refers to the expression *Elokei Yaakov*, "The God of Jacob." Thus it is that in the very beginning of our Shemoneh Esreh we bless God Who is *Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzhak, and Elokei Yaakov* -- God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.

However, there is yet a fourth element in that promise, the final one, namely: *ve'heyeh berakhah*, "And be thou a blessing." What does this mean? To this the Talmud gave the following answer: *Veyakhol yihu hotmin be'khulan*, one might think that because the Name of God is linked to all three patriarchs, that therefore the climax of the blessing, its hatimah or seal, would similarly include all three patriarchs. Therefore God says to Abraham, *ve'heyeh berakhah*, "Be thou a blessing," to indicate that *bekha hotmin*, the seal or climax of the blessing would mention only the name of Abraham and not the name of his son Isaac or his grandson Jacob. Thus it is that the seal of the first blessing of the nineteen of the Shemoneh Esreh is: *magen Avraham*, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Shield of Abraham."

What a strange remark! We can understand Abraham's

joy at knowing that his child and grandchild would, like him, be bound up with the divine Name. Who of us would not give all he has if he could be assured that his children and grandchildren would follow in his footsteps of loyalty to God? But what is astonishing is the implication that Abraham does not want to share the limelight with his own progeny, that he wishes to reserve the choicest part exclusively for himself-- only his name will be present in the hatimah or seal of the blessing, not that of Isaac and Jacob. Does this mean that Abraham was a spiritual egotist? Did not our Rabbis teach us that *ein ha-av mitkanei bi'veno, v'ein ha-rav mitkanei be'talmido*, that a father is not jealous of the achievements of his son and a teacher does not envy the attainments of his students?

An answer to this question is offered by the great Rabbi of Kotzk, who reinterprets the entire Talmudic passage. He maintains that it does not at all refer to the living personalities of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but rather to the values which they symbolize in the Jewish tradition. Abraham has always been the symbol of hessed, of charity or love. It is he who prays even for the wicked men of Sodom; it is he who demonstrates noble generosity towards Lot; it is he who extends himself for Hagar. Isaac symbolizes avodah, service. This term comprehends both sacrifices and prayer; and Isaac was the sacrifice in the great Akedah, and it was he whom his bride Rebecca first met whilst he was praying. Finally, Jacob is representative of the quality of Torah, for he is described as *yoshev ohalim*, one who dwells in the tents-- and our tradition has identified these tents as the tents of Torah, the schools.

Therefore, when we say in our Shemoneh Esreh that we praise God Who is *Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzhak, v'Elokei Yaakov* -- the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob-- we are offering a symbolic affirmation of the Mishna which tells

us that *al shelosha devarim ha-olam omed*, that the world rests on three great principles: *al ha-torah al ha-avodah v'al gemillat hasadim*, on that of the study of Torah, on service, and on the doing of good deeds. These represent, in reverse order, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

Yet, and this is the climax of the blessing according to the interpretation of the Kotzker, the greatest of all these qualities, the most preeminent of these three sublime Jewish principles, the one which alone can lead us out of exile into ge'ulah and is therefore the most redemptive of all, is -- *gemillat hasadim*, the doing of good deeds, the act of *hessed*, symbolized by Abraham. Thus, when the Rabbis quote God as saying to Abraham *bekha hotmin*, that only he, Abraham, would be present in the seal of blessing, they meant that good deeds of kindness are superior to study and to prayer (service) as Jewish qualities. Hence, when we bless God Who is *magen Avraham*, "the Shield of Abraham," we affirm in the form of prayer that *hessed* is greater than study or prayer.

Now, this is a beautiful and satisfying explanation-- but not satisfying enough. For to assert that *gemillat hasadim* is accorded greater value in the Jewish tradition than either Torah or *avodah* is to violate the spirit of the Mishnah which tells us clearly that *al shelosha devarim ha-olam omed*, that the world rests on three principles, a statement which implies the equality of all three values. A world, like a tripod table, is unstable and wobbly if one leg is longer than the other two.

I would therefore venture the following modification of the Kotzker's interpretation of the Talmudic passage. All three values are equal in essence, in content. However-- and this is the whole point of the Agadah-- each of these three must be expressed and effectuated in a manner of *hessed*. It is possible to practice Torah and *avodah* and *gemillat hasadim* in a manner that is crude and undistinguished and ungracious; and it is possible to endow the same three acts with the seal of *hessed*, with love and with warmth.

When, therefore, we mention only the name of Abraham in the seal of the blessing, as *magen Avraham*, what we are saying is that all three qualities, represented by the three patriarchs, must find their final form or expression, their *hatimah* or seal, in the manner symbolized by Abraham: *hessed*.

Take *avodah*, or prayer, for instance. It is possible to offer up our service in a very ordinary manner: dry, desiccated, formal, and deadly boring. But it is also possible to express

*avodah* in the form of *hessed*, to seal our prayer with love and charm, by offering up our inner participation, our warmth, our passion.

An English poet once wrote that prayer must be  
The motion of a hidden fire  
That trembles in the breast.  
Prayer is the burden of a sigh,  
The falling of a tear,  
The upward glancing of an eye  
When none but God is near.

I think that helps us define what is meant by *avodah* expressed as *hessed*. I do not believe that this kind of loving service, this kind of prayer with charm, can possibly survive in an atmosphere of spiritual discourtesy where neighborly conversation takes precedence over the dialogue with God, where prayer is punctuated by the exchange of information about fashions, about the stock market, or about real estate deals.

I know very well that there are those who are irritated with such admonitions from the pulpit. They maintain that a dose of whispering and conversation is important in order to preserve the quality they refer to as "*heimishkeit*." But let us make it clear: there are two kinds of "*heimishkeit*"-- one, when you bring your home into the synagogue, when you introduce into the sanctuary the spirit of the dining room and the living room and the office; and the second, when you take the spirit of the House of God and bring it into your own apartment and residence and place of business. The first kind we can certainly do without. It develops into rudeness and crudeness. It is the second which is truly "*heimishkeit*," and which brings with it the possibilities of *avodah* in the form or seal of *hessed*. To practice the first kind of "*heimishkeit*" is to strip the service of any kind of *hessed*, and in effect to break to smithereens the *magen Avraham*.

Torah, too, can be expressed with or without the quality of *hessed*. How unfortunate when the principles of Torah, its *halakhot*, are dispensed as if they were programmed in a computer within the cranium and can be effected merely by pushing a mental button without regard for those to whom it is directed. Torah taught in such a manner, decisions of *halakhah* offered in such a spirit, are a violation of the principle of *gemillat hasadim*. The Torah itself is described in the Torah as *be'fikha u-vi'levavekha la-asoto*, "it is in thy mouth and in thy heart to do it." If we of the Torah community want Torah to be practiced in real

life, *la-asoto*, then we must make sure that we know how to articulate it graciously *be'fikha*, and that we know how to apply it charitably, taking into consideration the fears and the aspirations and the hopes and the sensitivities of *bi'levavekha*, the heart of each and every one of those to whom we speak. A teaching of Torah is often rejected if it is presented in an authoritarian manner, with negativism and obvious unconcern for people. Yet the same principle when enunciated with hessed, with warmth and humility and compassion, will not only be accepted but even admired.

And this is true not only of a proclamation of Torah, but also of the response to it by people of Torah. If sometimes we are unhappy with a decision, and we have good reason to oppose it, let us do so--but always charitably, graciously, with hessed. One of our problems is that in our Orthodox communal controversies-- and there is nothing wrong with controversy as such-- the level of our debate has not been high enough. We must get rid of the strident accents of our public discourse. We must do away with the bellicose posturing and the ubiquitous belligerence that have tended to corrupt serious dialogue within the Orthodox community. Our expression of our opinions of Torah must be done with a healthy dose of gemillat hassadim.

(Thus, in commenting on the verse in Proverbs *torat hessed al leshona'ah*, the Rabbis ask:

Is there, then, a Torah of hessed and a *torah she'edah shel hessed*, a Torah without hessed? And they answer: Yes, a *torah she'edah shel hessed* is the Torah one studies but does not teach, whereas a Torah of hessed is when one is successful both in *li'lmod* and *u-le'lamed*, in learning and teaching. What they meant is that one can become a great scholar even without hessed but without this "seal" he never can be successful in transmitting what he knows to others, for they will never accept it: *ein ha-kapdan melamed*, a man who is stingy and strict and ungenerous can never be a teacher. It is only when one has the quality of hessed that he can be successful in imparting his knowledge and in persuading others to accept the point of view and the whole spirit of Torah.)

This holds true not only for Torah in its formal religious sense, but for any principle to which we are deeply committed. In our times, for instance, our country is split down the middle in very serious dissent on questions of life and death, questions of war and peace, questions of poverty and wealth, questions of civil rights and their

absence. The entire population is polarized as it has rarely been before in the living memory of most of us. Now, dissent is not bad for a democracy; it may even be very good. Only a short while ago we were complaining that the college population seemed to be asleep and insensitive to the great issues of the day. But dissent, too, must be performed in an atmosphere of hessed. When dissent becomes unruly and crude, then it reflects unworthily on the principle of dissent itself. When college students wish to make their opinions known in opposition to the Administration, that is a healthy sign of a vigorous democracy. But when their dissent is expressed in discourtesy to a Secretary of State or a Secretary of Defense, if there is no gemillat hassadim in their soul, no respect for the right of the so-called Establishment to have its own opinions, then the dissent becomes dangerous and reprehensible.

Finally, the most interesting of this interpretation is the conclusion that gemillat hassadim itself must be expressed in the form of gemillat hassadim! Even kindness must be effected in a kind manner. One can give alms to the poor in such a manner that he sustains the body and destroys the soul of the poor man by humiliation. It is possible to lend a man money, and thus perform a true gemillat hassadim, not taking any interest-- but taking a part of his heart away from him, for there is no hessed in such good deeds.

In our own society it is not unusual for the donor to give his contribution directly to the recipient. It is usually done through an agency or an institution for which other individuals solicit gifts. No wonder the Rabbis say that the *ma'aseh*, the solicitor, performs a greater mitzvah than the *oseh*, the contributor-- for all too often, alas, the solicitor is met with an attitude which is most discouraging. If I give, whether I give him much or little, even if I do not give at all, at least I must do so in a manner of hessed, with grace and with charm. The solicitor is here to help me perform a mitzvah; he should not be the butt of my resentment. If I only give, that reveals an intellectual decision; but if I give with hessed, it reveals my character and personality. Merely to give, but to do so gruffly, means that I am more of a gomel than one who practices hassadim. Both are necessary-- at all times.

Let us therefore learn how to express all three great values, those of Torah and avodah and gemillat hassadim, in the way that Abraham would have wished: in the way of hessed, as has been taught to him by Almighty God, the

Magen Avraham.

Having learned this, we shall then be able to turn to the Almighty Himself and ask of Him not only that He deal with us kindly, but that this kindness itself be expressed in a form of graciousness; not only that He be a gomel

hasadim to His people Israel, but that He be a gomel hassadim tovim l'amo Yisrael -- that He perform good acts of kindness towards His people Israel.

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## Judaism is a Different Type of Religion

*Rabbi Moshe Taragin*

**F**or approximately two thousand years, humanity was lost in theological confusion and moral mayhem. Finally, one great man uncovered the Creator of the universe and journeyed to the supernatural land of Divine presence. Avraham's selection dramatically revolutionizes the history of religion.

The man chosen to revamp religious history was a legendary personality who had single handedly discovered G-d, while displaying fearless courage in defending his beliefs. In the past, humankind had persistently assumed that our vast and teeming world of boundless diversity was fashioned by multiple creators. Avraham debunked this folly and discerned a One G-d who he introduced to his generation. This discovery was remarkable, given that Avraham's own father was a pagan notable who ultimately ratted out his own 'heretic' son, condemning Avraham to death by fire. Miraculously, through Divine intervention, Avraham survived this blazing inferno. Avraham was a revolutionary philosopher and defiant hero- in short- the perfect candidate to launch the history of G-d's chosen people.

Yet, surprisingly, the details of Avraham's past are repressed. The Torah introduces Avraham without providing the important background details which warranted his selection. Shouldn't this great man be introduced along with his heroic credentials? Why is this information confidential?

Nachmanides asserts that Avraham's past is suppressed to avoid expounding upon contemporary pagan religions. Detailing Avraham's religious discovery would have mandated equal "air time" for the parallel religions which he discarded. Omitting the details of Avraham's background enables the Torah to sidestep any mention of these erroneous religious systems and to present the rise of Avraham in an untainted fashion.

This decision to exclude any mention of alternate religious views isn't just stylistic- to create a neater portrait

of Avraham. By highlighting Divine revelation to

Avraham without juxtaposing other religions, the Torah stresses the contrast between Judaism and other religions. Introducing Judaism alongside contemporary religions might have implied "equivalency". Presenting the evolution of Judaism in a "vacuum" emphasizes the unique and singular nature of Judaism.

The Modern Era of enlightenment and religious tolerance demands a nuanced and complex view of other religions. Without question, we value all varieties of religious experience which assist Man in his search for the Other. Religion highlights the dependency of Man upon a higher being – a recognition which is inherently valuable. Additionally, religion conditions people to cardinal virtues such as morality, family, social consciousness, and character improvement. One of the great triumphs of the past century was the convincing defeat of Communism- a system which sought to craft a society absent of religion. A religious world of paganism – as corrupt and barbaric as it may be– is certainly preferable to a world of atheism. Likewise, the modern state of world religion dominated by monotheistic systems, is far preferable to the idolatrous world of our ancestors.

We don't just value alternate religious lifestyles, but also acknowledge important similarities between our own religious experience and the experiences of what many people refer to as our "co-religionists". We form collaborative alliances with members of various religions, jointly struggling to uphold common religious values in a rapidly secularizing world. We are legitimately inspired by lives devoted to religious values, and we are even enriched by studying the religious thoughts of sincerely religious writers from other religions. Religious people share much in common and the advent of religious tolerance has allowed us to bridge across religious communities.

However, the age of religious enlightenment can also blur differences between Judaism and other religions

or create a false sense of equivalence. Judaism is fundamentally different from other religions – both in content as well as in its transmission. All religions were conceived by human intellect and human imagination. Human constructs can establish language for religious experience and approximations of G-d, but they are utterly incapable of conceiving of the essence of G-d. Avraham also studied and also discovered G-d through human analysis and inquiry. According to one version he assessed all religions until he

discovered his Creator at the age of forty eight. However, his “discovery” would have been partial and inaccurate had G-d not answered Avraham’s with direct revelation coupled with direct religious instructions. This experience of direct Divine revelation launched the unique religious history of the Jews – the nation of supernatural revelation. The process begun in Genesis climaxed at Har Sinai with “mass revelation”. No religion has ever staked this audacious claim of mass revelation and none ever will. The assertion that three and half million people directly encountered the unmediated voice of G-d is the sole province of Judaism. Despite the numerous parallels with other religions, Judaism is fundamentally distinct, and for this reason the contemporary religions of Avraham’s era are textually “ignored”, even at the cost of withholding Avraham’s past heroics. To avoid any sense of equivalency, the launch of Judaism is spotlighted in “a vacuum” without mentioning other religions and without implying any comparison.

## To Feel Is To Be

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

**P**arshas Lech-Licha: the journey of one man that launched a nation. In the ten generations from Noach to Avraham, mankind forgot about G-d and reverted back to their pagan ways. As the Sages teach (Avos 5:2): *עֲשָׂרָה דורות מנח ועד אברהם, להודיע כמה ארך אפנים; (Avos 5:2) לְפָנָיו, שְׁכַל הַדורות היו מְכַעֲסִין וּבְאִין, עַד שֶׁבָא אֲבְרָהָם וְקָבַל עָלָיו שִׁכְר כָּלָם.*

*There were ten generations from Noach to Avraham, in order to make known what long-suffering is His (G-d is slow to anger); for all those generations kept on provoking Him, until Avraham, came and received the reward of all of them.*

Parshas Lech Licha: the journey from foreign lands to our homeland. Lech Licha: the journey from Avram

We are grateful that the modern era of religious tolerance has rescued Jews from centuries of religious persecution. It is both enriching and reinforcing to acknowledge the common interests and experiences we share with members of other religions. Despite these similarities, we mustn’t assume equivalence between our own customs and mores and those of other religions. Avraham was chosen for direct revelation and hundreds of years later G-d directly spoke to his children. This process has only occurred once in history and is fundamentally different from the manner by which other religions were formed.

### Afterword

The venerable 19th century leader Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk would consistently walk by the estate of a non-Jewish nobleman well known for his moral and pious lifestyle. He was asked about this strange decision- to constantly stroll alongside the home of a non-Jew. He explained that when reciting the blessing of “shelo asani goy” – thanking G-d for selecting us as Jews, he wasn’t grateful to be selected from drunk or vile Gentiles. Instead, he wanted to celebrate his selection from ideal or outstanding Gentiles whose lives reflected honorable values. His evaluation of his Jewishness wasn’t based on the degradation of others but rather the celebration of his unique calling. Our unique Jewish identity isn’t built on dismissing the value of non-Jewish lives. However, our “pluralism” in validating different lifestyles cannot erode the pride of our unique Jewish religious experience.

to Avraham Avinu, the father and founder of the Umah Yisraelis.

*ויאמר ה' אל-אברהם, לך-לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך, אל-ארצך, and Hashem said to Avram: go for yourself from your land, and from your birth place, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you; and I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, and you will be for a blessing... וילך אברהם, כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי ה', - וילך אתו, לוֹט; וְאַבְרָם, בֶּן-חַמֶּשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה, בְּצִאתוֹ, מִחָרָר - and Avram went just like Hashem spoke to him, and Lot went with him, and Avram was seventy-five years old when he left Charan (Bereishis 12:1-4).*

“אל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶה” - *(Journey) to the land that I will show you,*” Rashi comments: אשר אראך. לא גלה לו הָאָרֶץ מִיָּד; כִּי עָלָה בּוֹ, אֶת כָּדֵי לְחַבְּבָהּ בְּעֵינָיו, וְלָתֵת לּוֹ שָׂכָר עַל כָּל דְּבָר וּדְבָר; כִּי עָלָה בּוֹ, אֶת בְּנֵי אֶת יִחִידֶךָ אֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֶּתָּ אֶת יִצְחָק (ברא' כ"ב), כִּי עָלָה בּוֹ עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים, וְכִי ב' וְקָרָא אֵלָיָהּ אֶת הַקְּרִיאָה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי (יונה ג' - *Hashem did not reveal the land to him immediately, in order to make it precious in his eyes, and to give him reward for each and every statement (about his journey to the land). Similarly to this we find (in regard to Akeidas Yitzchak), 'your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzchak'. Similar to this, we find, 'upon one of the mountains which I shall tell you' ...*

Here, Rashi connects the command to Avraham to leave his homeland with the command to take Yitzchak as a sacrifice. In both instances, the command was not explicit; rather, the final destination or end goal was alluded to in stages, to give Avraham merit for each statement.

On this Rashi, R' Dr. Abraham J. Twerski writes, “R' Henech Lebovitz (d.2008) cites the Medrash that says that when Avraham put Yitzchak on the altar, Avraham wept profusely. Although Avraham arose early in the day and was most diligent to carry out the Divine command joyously, he nevertheless felt pain that he was going to lose his beloved son.

“The Altar of Slabodka (R' Nosson Tzvi Finkel zt'l, 1849-1927) asked, why did Avraham not use his enormous powers of self-mastery to suppress his feelings for Yitzchak? He answered that it is not the Divine wish that a person be devoid of natural emotions, but rather that one must overcome them in order to fulfill the Divine will.”

R' Dr. Twerski relates the following vignette about his great-grandfather, R' Motele of Hornosteipel, who had a wonderful and precious library that contained rare manuscripts which were destroyed in a fire. Noting his deep anguish over the fire and lost manuscripts, his chassidim wondered about his emotional reaction. R' Motele explained to them, “The Gemara says that one must praise G-d for the bad that one experiences as well as for the good. If I had come into a fortune, you no doubt would have asked to celebrate with a l'chaim. You should do so now, as well.”

Hearing this, one of the chassidim asked, “But why was the Rebbe in such obvious anguish over the loss of the library?” Reb Motele replied, “When G-d causes a person to experience adversity, one must feel the pain associated with it. G-d does not wish us to be devoid of normal emotions. It is just that after one has felt the pain,

one must have faith that everything that G-d does is for an ultimate good.”

R' Dr. Twerski concludes and writes, “When reading about the greatness of tzadikim, some people say that they cannot seek to emulate them, because they were spiritual angels rather than mere mortals like us. It is important to know that our tzadikim were extraordinarily great human beings, but they never lost their humanity. G-d sought to intensify Avraham's love for Yitzchak, and Avraham wept at the very moment that he was joyous that he would fulfill the Divine command.

“G-d does not ask us to abandon our humanity and emotions, but to dignify them by being masters over our emotions rather than subject to them” (*Twerski on Chumash*, p.37-38).

In our world of turbulence, man feels a wide range of emotions in response to the different experiences of life. בְּשִׂמְחָה חֲדוּתָא חֲדוּתָא בְּשִׂמְחָה אֲבֵלָא אֲבֵלָא, in a time of rejoicing, we rejoice and are glad, and in a time of mourning, we mourn and are sad (cf. Rashi to Gen.6:6). Hashem does not want man to suppress, deny or negate the emotions that we feel. The RS”O created us as feeling, thinking, emotional human beings. Avodas Hashem is not to say we don't feel and everything Hashem does is for the good. It is, rather, to say we DO feel, and still, we know and believe that everything Hashem does is for the good.

Throughout Sefer Bereishis, the Torah narrates the powerful emotions of our patriarchs and matriarchs. Including, but not limited to, we learn of Sarah's frustration towards Hagar and Avraham (16:5), Rivka's confusion and despair over her (twin) pregnancy (25:22), Leah's tender eyes from crying (29:17), Rachel's distress over her barrenness (30:1), and Yosef's repeated weeping (42:24, 43:30, 45:2).

The Torah is the blueprint as to how we must live our lives and navigate the world in which we live. To feel is human; to accept our lives as ovdei Hashem is exalted and noble.

May we merit the ultimate redemption, when Hashem will swallow up death forever, and wipe away tears from upon every face (Is.25:8), and our mouths will be filled with only laughter and our tongues with song (Ps.126:2).

# Spiritual Gratitude

*Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman*

If my friend is gracious enough to give me a twenty-dollar bill as a present, my gratitude would appropriately be directed at him. Yet, if I happen to find a twenty-dollar bill on the street, to whom should I direct my gratitude?

For those who aren't particularly spiritual or religious, finding money on the street may engender positive emotions, but gratitude would likely be absent, as there is nobody to thank. For those who have a belief in G-d, however, such fortunate experiences could lend themselves to being grateful to G-d. The fact that a religious individual has more opportunities to feel and express gratitude is one of the reasons Dr. David Rosmarin and colleagues hypothesized, tested, and found that religious individuals would reap the positive benefits associated with gratitude—such as increased well-being—above and beyond the advantages associated with general gratitude.

Taking the twenty-dollar bill example one step further, we can add an additional layer of reflection. From a religious perspective, even if my friend gives me a twenty-dollar bill, my gratitude to him should be supplemented with an additional gratitude towards G-d. Meaning, every benefit accrued socially should also be attributed to G-d's providence and beneficence. The question becomes, who to thank first: your friend or G-d?

After Avram helped the five kings defeat the four kings, Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, who was also the “priest of G-d Most High,” brings out bread and water for Avram and his soldiers (Bereishit 14:18). As an expression of gratitude, Malki-Tzedek blesses Avram to G-d Most High, Creator of heaven and earth (14:19) and afterwards blesses G-d, “Who has delivered your foes into your hand” (14:20). The Gemara (Nedarim 32b) critiques his

priorities. He should have blessed G-d before he blessed Avram as first one blesses the Master, and only afterwards the servant. As a result of his error, G-d removed the privilege of priesthood from Malki-Tzedek and bestowed it upon Avram.

Ibn Ezra provides an alternative approach and suggests that Malki-Tzedek's order of blessing is appropriate: First he should bless Avram, acknowledging that he saved the captives, and only afterwards bless Hashem, who aided Avram in his quest. Rabbi Soloveitchik adds a fascinating approach to explain Malki-Tzedek's reasoning. G-d, as it were, requires man's assistance in revealing His presence in the world. Avram's job was to spread G-d's message in a world where He was obscured by idol-worship. It is specifically through Avram's success that G-d would be blessed. The blessing to Avram also functioned as a blessing to G-d.

While the different approaches may disagree on who should be blessed first, the resonating message is important in either case. There is a purposefully blurred line between gratitude to others and gratitude to G-d. When others do us a kindness, we should not limit our gratitude to the interpersonal realm. We must expand our expression of gratitude to G-d as well. The person doing the chesed is acting as an emissary of G-d, making His name great and revealed in this world. In addition, we must acknowledge that it is G-d's providence that allowed for the kindness to happen.

By transforming all our interpersonal gratitude experiences to incorporate a Divine element, may we merit additional spiritual and psychological well-being, above and beyond what is generally associated with being grateful people.

## Why Avraham?

*Rabbi Chaim Metzger*

Avraham is chosen by G-d at the age of seventy-five to go on a journey and become the father of G-d's people. But why did G-d choose Avraham? What made Avraham special?

In the text of the Torah, we see Avraham marrying Sarah, taking in his orphaned niece. But that doesn't make

Avraham any better than his brother Nachor, who also married his orphaned niece, Milkah. And Avraham did go along with his father Terach to Charan, but is that really enough of a reason for G-d to choose Avraham?

A midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 38:13) fills in gaps about Avraham's life before Parshat Lech Lecha. After discovering

G-d on his own, Avraham destroys his father's idols with an axe, and then places the axe in the hands of the largest idol, telling his father that the idol did it. Terach then takes Avraham before Nimrod, who was the king of Ur Kasdim where they lived. Nimrod throws Avraham in fire as punishment for refusing to bow down to fire, but Avraham survives due to Divine protection. These two incidents demonstrate Avraham's belief in G-d, against the zeitgeist of the times and against the dominant powers that could have killed him.

But this is odd; similar stories occurred to Avraham's descendants. In Shoftim (Chapter 6), Gideon is visited by an angel and told to smash his father's altar of the Baal deity and to cut down the idolatrous asheirah, and to build instead an altar to G-d and offer a sacrifice upon it. When this is discovered and accused by the townspeople the next morning, Gideon's father says that Baal and Asherah should come fight for themselves.

Along the same lines, that midrash describes Avraham surviving being thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to bow – and a similar event takes place with Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah. (Daniel 3)

Why are two of the formative stories of young Avraham similar to those of Gideon and Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah?

Ramban writes that the actions of our forefathers affect the future of their children; for example, Avraham and Sarah walked about the land, and so would their descendants. (Commentary to Bereishit 12:6) Some explain this mystically, as Ramban does; others understand this to mean that our ancestors taught us proper conduct. Here, our sages appear to be utilizing this mechanism in reverse, suggesting that whatever the descendants did must have been influenced by the deeds of their forefathers.

Our midrashim anchor these stories that occurred to subsequent generations on hints in the text about Avraham. For example, G-d says He “took Avraham from Ur Kasdim” (Bereishit 15:7), and “Ur Kasdim” can be translated to “fire in Chaldea” or “a fire that occurred in Chaldea”. This midrash is strengthened by the fact that “taking Avraham from Ur Kasdim” cannot refer to the Divine call of “Lech lecha,” as that seems to have happened when Avraham was already out of Ur Kasdim, in Charan.

Avraham is seen as living the stories of Gideon and Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah because if they did this, it was inspired by Avraham's actions.

This may also grant insight into the dispute of at what

age, and how, Avraham discovered G-d. Reish Lakish says that Avraham was three years old, while Rabbi Yochanan posits that he was 48. (Nedarim 32a, Bereishit Rabbah 30:8) Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu places Avraham at 52. (Avodah Zarah 9a) The Rambam says he was forty. (Hilchot Avodah Zarah 1:3)

It seems that according to Reish Lakish, Avraham discovered G-d in the simple, pure manner a child would. While according to the others, Avraham reached this conclusion from a more mature worldview, from a more reasoned philosophical standpoint.

Perhaps these different views provide a valuable lesson. Avraham served as an inspiration not just for biblical figures, but for everyone on their respective journeys in discovering and coming closer to G-d. Wherever and however our challenges manifest themselves, we can find ourselves in Avraham, the forefather whose deeds foretell our own. As Rabbi Yochanan concludes regarding Avraham's discovery of G-d at age 48, “Avraham was ready to guide the whole world to return to Hashem.” (Bereishit Rabbah 30:8)