



PASSING THE TORCH AND SPREADING THE LIGHT

Avraham's debut in the Torah's narrative begins with G-d commanding, "Lech Lecha..." — leave everything you are familiar with and go to the land I will show you. The mandate ends with the directive, "*venivrechu becha kol mishpehot ha'adamah*" — you will be a source of blessing to the world. There is a dichotomy presented here. On the one hand, Avraham must separate from his surroundings, while at the same time he is instructed to be a source of blessing for the world. The challenge of the Jewish people lies in the two-part nature of this mandate. On the one hand, we as Jews must separate ourselves from society around us to prevent assimilation and maintain our Jewish identity, while at the same time, we must be engaged in the world around us and contribute to it.

We know Avraham is called an *Ivri*, and we are named Ivrim or Hebrews/

Jews after him. The first time Avraham is called Avraham HaIvri is in the fourteenth perek of Sefer Bereishit. Four powerful kings go to battle against five kings and they overcome the five kings and take their citizens captive. A refugee from the war escapes and runs to Avraham HaIvri to inform him about the capture. Avraham gathers his men (or man, according to Rashi), enters the war and frees all those prisoners taken captive, including his nephew Lot:

וַיָּבֹא הַפְלִיט וַיֹּגֶד לְאַבְרָם הַעֲבָרִי וְהֵא שָׁכַן בְּאֶלְנִי
מִמְּרָא הַאֲמֹרִי אֶחָיו אַשְׁכָּל וְאֶחָיו עַנְרָ וְהֵם בַּעַלִי
בְּרִית אֶבְרָם.

Then there came the fugitive and told Avram the Ivri who dwelt in the plains of Mamre the Amorite, the brother of Eshkol and the brother of Avner, these being Avram's allies.

Bereishit 14:13

Rashi explains that Avram is called *Ivri* here because he came *me'ever*

lanahar, from the other side of the river. Commentaries on Rashi explain that this can mean that Avram came from a different place, not just literally from the other side of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, but that Avram is coming from a different place figuratively, with a different set of values. Why then is this phrase introduced specifically here? Shouldn't it be introduced at the beginning of the parsha when Avram is chosen by G-d to leave his surroundings and go to the land of Canaan?

Perhaps this story is where Avram's values are highlighted most strongly. The fugitive came specifically to Avram because he was looking for someone to get involved to help, and he knew that Avram is the only person who cares enough to get involved. He is, after all, Avram HaIvri, a man coming from a different place with different values, and the fugitive knows he is a man who cares enough to help. Avram is living at

peace with his neighbors as we see from the end of the passuk. He does not need to get involved in a war that does not affect him. Yet he gets involved because he cares and is compelled to right the injustice that has occurred. With Avram as our patriarch and role model, we are mandated to follow his lead and care about our fellow man and take action when needed.

In the next parsha (Vayera), three angels come to tell Avram and Sara that they will have a baby. The perek concludes with Avram arguing with G-d about the destruction of Sodom. There are three pesukim in the middle of that chapter (Bereishit 18) in which G-d explains why he is going to reveal to Avram that he is going to destroy Sodom. *Hamechaseh Ani MeAvraham asher Ani oseh — should I hide from Avraham what I'm about to do?* Hashem asks rhetorically. Hashem answers:

אֶבְרָהָם הִיֵּה יְהִי לְגֹוי גָּדוֹל וְעַצּוֹם וְנִבְרָכוּ בָּו כָּל
גּוֹיִי הָאָرֶץ. כִּי יַדְעַתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְחָזֶה אֶת בְּנֵי
וְאֶת בֵּיתֵךְ אֶחָרְיוֹ וְשִׁמְרוּ דָּרָךְ ה' לְעַשְׂתָּה צְדָקָה
וּמְשֻׁפְטָה לְמַעַן הַבְּיאָה ה' עַל אֶבְרָהָם אֶת אֲשֶׁר דָּבָר
לְלִילָּה.

And Avraham will surely become a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the world will be blessed through him. Because I know him, because he commands his children and his households after him that they keep the way of Hashem doing charity and justice in order that Hashem might bring upon Avraham that which He had spoken of him.

Bereishit 18:18-19

Hashem is explaining to us, the descendants of Avraham, why He chose Avraham to be the father of the Jewish people. "I know him," God says, according to Rashi, in an endearing way. I know that he will teach his children and children's children to follow in my ways and follow justice. God tells Avraham about Sodom's destruction because He knows Avraham will argue with Him on behalf of the people of

Sodom, and He wants us, Avraham's children, to see Avraham's values of concern for others, and for justice, in action so that we can learn from him and model those values. Rashi explains, why does Hashem know (love) Avraham? Because he commands his children about Me to follow My ways.

These pesukim act as the transition between the first and last parts of the perek. They explain the correlation between the two seemingly disconnected stories. The child promised in the beginning of the perek will be taught to follow in God's footsteps and show care for people and fight injustice, a model set by Avram as demonstrated in the second part of the perek in his argument to G-d on behalf of the people of Sodom.

As the children of Avraham chosen by God, we are mandated to embrace the values that Avraham has taught us by example and follow the ways of Hashem by caring about people and practicing *tzedek* and *mishpat*. We need to emulate Avraham HaIvri by fighting injustice, caring about our fellow man, and living and disseminating those values.

These core Torah values are the foundation of Yeshiva University. It is these values that compelled my peers and I back in the 1990s, after the fall of communism, to start a program called YUSSR, Yeshiva University Students for the Spiritual Revival of Soviet Jews. We sent groups of YU students to various places throughout the former Soviet Union to spread Torah values and bring our fellow Jews who were removed from Torah as a result of living under communist rule, back to their Jewish roots. We ran summer camps in several cities in Ukraine including Kherson, Odessa, Kiev and Kharkov to teach Jewish children about their Jewish heritage and bring them closer to God and to Torah. I personally ran programs both in the summer and then

during the chagim in Kherson, where my cohort and I paired up with the local Chabad shaliach there, Rabbi Avraham Wolff, to run Torah programs for both children and adults, and help strengthen their Jewish identity which had long ago been forgotten. One summer we ran a leadership training program in Israel for young Jewish adults from throughout the former Soviet Union so they could then run their own programs in their respective cities. We rented a boat in Odessa to get the 30 students who participated in our program to Israel, and called our program Teyvat Tikva. When the program ended, the participants returned and became Jewish leaders in their respective cities. Our initiatives throughout the former Soviet Union, and particularly Ukraine, were driven by the core Torah values that Yeshiva University imbued in us and the leadership skills that YU had empowered us to be a source of blessing to the world.

Thirty years later, my son, Yedidya, a junior at Yeshiva College, had the incredible opportunity to express his values and help Ukrainian Jews after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Under the leadership of Dr. Erica Brown and the Sacks Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership, Yedidya travelled to Vienna along with 25 other Yeshiva University students, to help care for Ukrainian Jewish refugees who had fled from their homes with nothing but the clothing they wore, and to celebrate the holiday of Purim with them. The students brought tremendous joy to the refugees as well as games and toys for the kids. The trip enabled our students to express the core Torah values of Yeshiva University and live those values by caring for others in need. For me, it was particularly meaningful that my son had this experience after my experiences with Ukrainian Jews so many years ago. This trip was an embodiment of *לְמַעַן יִצְחָזֶה אֶת בְּנֵי וְאֶת בֵּיתֵךְ אֶחָרְיוֹ וְשִׁמְרוּ*

דרך ה' יושמת זדקה ומשפעה (because he commands his children and his households after him that they keep the way of Hashem doing charity and justice), the passing on of the *mesorah*, tradition, the values to our children. The values that YU imbued in us years ago are still being passed on to students years later. The values that our parents imbued in us, we are passing down to our children as well.

Rabbi Avraham Wolff, the Chabad

shaliach we had partnered with years ago in Kherson, is now the chief rabbi of Odessa, where he returned to lead his community after returning after taking hundreds of orphans and students across Europe to safety. My son and his group had the opportunity to Zoom with Rabbi Wolff while Odessa was under fierce attack by the Russians. Rabbi Wolff expressed his admiration for Yeshiva University, whose students continue to live their values and reach out to others in need.

Just as my involvement with the Ukrainian Jews post-communism was transformative for me in my life, so too was my son's involvement with the Ukrainian refugees transformative for him. I am so grateful and indebted to the leadership of Yeshiva University for encouraging their students, including my son and me so many years apart, to take initiatives and to offer opportunities to experience and to demonstrate our values in action.

REFLECTIONS ON YU'S MISSION TO VIENNA

Yedidya Schechter YC '24

Growing up with the bedtime stories of my mother's real life pivotal chessed missions ringing in my ears, I was in a constant humble astonishment as to how much of an impact an individual can have on countless numbers of people. Whether it was her trips sneaking chumashim and siddurim into communist Russia in high school, going with friends to make a beautiful shabbos with Refuseniks in Russia as part of the YUSSR program she helped run, or organizing and traveling on an Israel bound ship filled with Jews living in Odessa, Vilna, and Kherson. As meaningful and massively helpful these expeditions were, they seemed as if fictional or distant. Until earlier this year.

After watching and reading the terrible news of the desperate story unfolding in Ukraine in early March, Yeshiva University, consistent with its Torah values, took initiative to do its part and aid to the best of their ability. Dr. Erica Brown of the Sacks Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership, organized a mission to Vienna to help the Ukrainian refugees there, both physically and emotionally. When I heard about this relief mission, the echoes of my mother's stories rushed to the front of my thoughts, and I immediately signed up.

I proceeded to spend a week, including Purim, this



past year in the city of Vienna, Austria. The Jewish community had taken in hundreds of Jewish refugees from families fleeing Ukraine. Our group included 26 Yeshiva University students, Rabbi Josh Blass, Dr. Erica Brown, the Herenstein family, and President Ari Berman and family. While we were there, we assisted many Jewish families through babysitting, folding towels and sheets in the multiple hotels they were put up in, playing with their kids, bringing joy and support, and sitting with these amazing families at dinner and shmoozing with them and communicating in either broken English, Hebrew, Russian, or German. At times, we just sat with them in silence just being present and showing that they are cared about and loved and part of our family and community despite living 4,000 miles apart. The days leading up to Purim we gathered together the

Vienna Jewish community and distributed hundreds of costumes, shtick, Judaica, toys, games, books, stuffed animals, arts and crafts and so many fun items to the refugee families in a show of love and support. These gifts may seem trivial or insignificant to most people, but when families are forced to flee their homes and to take everything they own in one or two bags, these seemingly insignificant items deeply impact the recipients who have barely any possessions with them. The toys and gifts were a way to help the despondent kids and their parents get through these trying times.

On the night of Purim, there was a gala party with hundreds of refugees, hundreds of Viennese Jews, and all the YU students and staff, all united under one roof. When we danced with the Ukrainian kids it was incredibly emotional watching them get so excited and get lost in the moment, just being happy and momentarily forgetting their pain and fear. The ability we had to spread wide smiles over the faces of the refugees, despite just being kicked out of their homes, and despite many kids I met, still having fathers and older brothers fighting in the horrific warzone for the Ukrainian army, was an experience I will never forget. Putting a smile on these kids' faces and showing that we care, was the underlying goal of the mission, and in that I believe we succeeded. Watching on the sidelines as the kids jumping up and down with joy, picking out from hundreds of our Purim costumes, dancing on our shoulders, or doing an arts and crafts project together was a formative, inspiring experience. I was particularly emotional when one individual woman who I saw was literally in tears of joy videoing her kid finding the perfect astronaut costume, trying it on, and dancing in it, all while her husband was not present since he was back on the front lines fighting in Ukraine.

This entire experience made me realize three fundamental ideas. The first is the idea of *ve'ahavta liraicha kamocha* (love your neighbor like yourself) tied



together with *mikabal es kol ha'adam bsever panim yafos* (greet each person with a cheerful expression). It is so simple yet so impactful for one to bring joy or to uplift someone, even those whom one is around all the time. By showing love and care, we can make ourselves and others around us happier

The second epiphany I had was realizing how much my mother's experiences and lessons have affected me and the impact that value driven parenting has on a child.

The third point which made this trip so formative, and ties into the two above, is how proud I am to be part of the Yeshiva University community and to be part of an institution that stands for values which I try to learn from, and which impacts the world around us. Creating a program within 24 hours for YU students to run to the aid of fellow Jews thousands of miles away, accompanied by the president of the university himself, demonstrates how value driven this flagship Jewish institution is. By imbuing my mother with core Torah values of showing sensitivity and care to our fellow Jews and embracing our brethren no matter where they are or what their background is, and giving her the unforgettable opportunities to express these values, directly affected not just her but me as well. And now years later, as a proud YU student, I see those values reinforced on a daily basis through the values-driven experiences and growth-oriented learning that take place on our campus and make up the mission of Yeshiva University.



The author, second from left, bottom row