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Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

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## Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Vayeira

# ONE MAN AGAINST THE WORLD

### Payment of Debt, Regardless of Cost

The *Torah* tells us that after *Avraham* was informed that *Lot* his nephew was taken captive by the four mightiest kings of the world, he immediately went to battle to rescue his nephew. *Avraham*, our Patriarch defeated the Four Mighty Kings and saved his nephew *Lot* and recovered all of the possessions that they had taken.

The *Torah* states after *Avraham* had emerged victorious from battle, "The Word of *Hashem* came to *Avram* in a vision, saying, 'Fear not, *Avram*, I am a shield for you; your reward is very great.'" *Rashi* cites *Chazal* who explain that since *Avraham's* victory was only able to come about through miracles, he was concerned that he may have depleted his merits to bring about the victory. G-d assured *Avraham* that he was not diminished due to the miracles that were performed on his behalf, but to the contrary, his reward would be great for vanquishing evil.

The *Torah* tells us that when *Lot* had returned from Egypt together with *Avraham* his uncle, he also possessed great wealth. Upon their return to *Canaan*, a quarrel ensued between the shepherds of *Lot* and those of *Avraham*. The shepherds of *Lot* were grazing their flocks in fields that were not theirs. They were in fact stealing pasture land from others.

When *Avraham* became aware of the dispute between his shepherds and those of his nephew, the *Torah* states, "So *Avraham* said to *Lot*, 'Please let there be no strife between me and you...for we are kinsman (brothers)...Please separate from me: If you go left I will go right...'" Although *Lot* had demonstrated to *Avraham* that he had no integrity, which was the basis for the separation between them; nevertheless, *Avraham* pledged to come to his aid if he should be in need of him. This was because he regarded *Lot* as his "brother" (although he was his nephew).

The *Torah* alludes that when *Lot* separated from his uncle *Avraham*, he rejected all that *Avraham* valued, including his beliefs. In addition, *Lot* chose to settle in a community that is identified as the most wicked. As it states, “Now the people of *Sodom* were wicked and sinful towards *Hashem*, exceedingly...” Despite the display of *Lot*’s negativity and evil, when *Avraham* was informed that he was taken captive, he immediately went to battle in order to rescue his nephew.

If *Avraham* initially understood that in order for an individual with and small group of men to defeat the four mightiest kings of the world would require miracles which could only come about through one’s exceptional merits, why would he choose to expend that degree of merit on behalf of *Lot*, understanding the personal cost factor? In addition, since *Lot* had chosen to become evil, why would *Avraham* relinquish all that he had accomplished for such an individual?

Before *Avraham* had left *Kasdim*, *Nimrod*, the king, had given him an ultimatum to either bow to the idol or be thrown into the fiery kiln. *Avraham* chose to die rather than bow to the idol. He emerged from the fire miraculously unscathed. *Haran*, *Avraham*’s brother, the father of *Lot*, was also given the same ultimatum to bow or be thrown into the fire. He had initially decided that if his brother *Avraham* emerged alive from the fire then he would not bow and go into the fire.

When *Avraham* had come out alive, *Haran* chose not to bow and was thus cast into the kiln. *Haran* perished in the fire. Although *Haran*’s entering into the fire was not for the sake of dying for G-d, as *Avraham*’s intent was, nevertheless because he died as a result of not bowing to the idol, his death is considered a sanctification of G-d’s Name. In fact, he gave his life rather than bow to the idol. *Avraham* felt that he had a debt of gratitude to his brother for bringing about such a sanctification of G-d’s Name. He thus took upon himself the responsibility to raise, care for, and protect his nephew *Lot*. He saw him as an extension of his brother *Haran*. This is the reason *Avraham* initially used the terminology “we are brothers” when he committed himself to help *Lot*.

There is a principle, “A *mitzvah* brings about another *mitzvah* (*mitzvah goreret mitzvah*).” If one does a good deed, it will generate a positive energy to enable him to be able to continue to do even more good. Initially *Avraham* went to battle against the Four Mighty Kings

despite the cost factor of his merits, because of his debt of gratitude to his brother who died as a sanctification of G-d’s Name. A debt is not satisfied until one satisfies it regardless of the cost factor. Even though it meant depleting all of his merits to make payment on his debt, the result was the victory over the four kings and the vanquishing of evil.

As a result of the victory, *Avraham* was coronated by the nations of the world as “the father of all nations.” The one who had dedicated his life to the espousal of monotheism was coronated by the world. This acknowledgement of *Avraham* was the ultimate sanctification of G-d’s Name. Because *Avraham*’s initial commitment to *Lot* was due to his brother *Haran*’s sanctification of G-d’s Name, *Avraham*’s payment of the debt caused the greatest sanctification of G-d’s Name. We see that if one assumes a level of responsibility within the realm of spirituality, due to a sense of indebtedness, G-d will provide an opportunity for that individual to bring about a result that will far surpass the initial investment of debt.

## **Avraham’s Choice, the Attribute of Kindness**

Each of the holy Patriarchs chose to emulate a particular Attribute of G-d and perfect that characteristic within themselves. *Avraham* our Patriarch chose to emulate G-d’s Attribute Kindness (*Chesed*). *Yitzchak* chose to emulate G-d’s Attribute of Justice by being exacting in every aspect of his service. *Yaakov* our Patriarch, chose to emulate G-d’s Attribute of Mercy. Why did *Avraham* choose to emulate the Attribute of Kindness?

The *Torah* states, “...He (*Avraham*) was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day.” *Rashi* cites *Chazal* who explain that *Avraham* was sitting at the entrance of his tent, because he was seeking wayfarers in order to offer them his hospitality. Since it was the third day after *Avraham*’s circumcision, which is the most difficult day of recovery, G-d wanted to give him a respite from hosting guests. G-d, thus took the sun out of its sheath, in order to make it the hottest day in existence so that no wayfarers should disturb *Avraham*’s recuperation. Rather than being relieved from the burden of guests, *Avraham* was pained that he had no guests to host.



The Prophet states, “For My (G-d) Glory, I created it (existence).” G-d is in need of nothing, because He is perfect on an absolute level. He is not deficient or lacking in any way. He does not have a need to be glorified. Rather, G-d brought about existence to give mankind the opportunity to recognize His Mastership and Kindness for the sake that man will dedicate himself to His Glory. By living in this context, man will merit to be the ultimate beneficiary of good, which is to have a relationship with the source of all good, which is G-d Himself. *Avraham* saw himself as the beneficiary of G-d’s Kindness and Goodness and therefore was overwhelmed with a debt of gratitude. He thus needed to reveal G-d’s Glory.

King David writes in Psalms, “The world was created with Kindness (*Olam chesed yibaneh*)...” Meaning, the basis for the Creation of Existence was His Attribute of Kindness. Before G-d brought existence into being, there was no need to create it, other than doing Kindness. Prior to Creation, because nothing existed, there was no being that was worthy of reward. Thus there was nothing compelling G-d to bring about existence other than His Infinite Kindness. G-d wanted to create a setting that would allow man to have the opportunity to make choices. If he should choose correctly, he would be worthy of the ultimate Goodness, which is cleaving to G-d Who is the source of all Good.

Since *Avraham* was the first person to introduce G-d to mankind, his era was the equivalent of the beginning of Creation. This was the first opportunity for man to again make a choice to believe in G-d or not. Therefore, *Avraham*, following the sequence of existence, chose to emulate the Attribute of Kindness, which was G-d’s first expression of Himself to mankind.

*Avraham* was pained when he did not have guests to host, because he understood that the objective of existence was only for the sake of G-d’s Glory. As long as there were pagans, who did not believe in the Omnipotent One who continuously Wills existence, the objective of Creation cannot be fulfilled. *Avraham* appreciated his own ability to convert pagans to monotheism. Whoever engaged in dialogue with *Avraham* would be convinced that there is only One G-d. If there were no wayfarers for *Avraham* to host, the falsehood of paganism would continue.

*Avraham*’s hospitality and kindness was utilized as a vehicle to communicate to mankind that they are all beneficiaries of G-d’s unending Providence and kindness. If humanity would address and fulfill the purpose of Creation, they would be the beneficiaries of the ultimate Good. Thus, when *Avraham* was denied (by the heat of the day) to host guests, he was greatly pained. G-d, seeing his pain, sent him the most special guests to be hosted, which were angels.

## **The Innate Value of Offering One’s Kindness to Another**

The *Torah* tells us that on the third day of *Avraham*’s circumcision (at the age of 99) which is the most difficult day of recovery, he saw three men approaching from a distance. He ran towards them to offer his hospitality. The *Gemara* in Tractate *Bava Metzia* tells us that G-d valued every aspect of *Avraham*’s hospitality that he had afforded the wayfarers (who were angels).

The Jewish people were beneficiaries of *Avraham*’s special act of hospitality during their 40-year trek in the desert. In the merit of *Avraham*’s offering the shade of his tree, the Jewish people merited to be protected by the Clouds of Glory. In the merit of offering the water to the wayfarers, the Jewish people were provided with the wellspring of *Miriam* which traveled with them in the desert. In the merit of offering them bread, the Jewish people merited to have the Manna.

One would think that the value of the act of hospitality is determined by the level of benefit that is received by the beneficiary of that kindness. Seemingly, if there is no benefit to the recipient, it is not classified as an act of kindness. Nevertheless, we see that the hospitality that *Avraham* offered the angels had unlimited value although the angels had not need for food or drink.

The *Midrash* states, “How great is the reward for one who does kindness (*chesed*) with the one who does not need kindness. *Avraham* had done kindness with the angels (although they had no need for it)... See what G-d has paid to his children– the Manna, the wellspring, the quail, and the Clouds of Glory that surrounded them. From this, we are able to draw a profound lesson based on logic. If one who does kindness to one who does not need kindness, and we see how great is his reward, how much more so is one deserving of reward when one does kindness with one who is truly in need of it.

What is the punishment for one who does not do kindness for the one who is not in need of kindness? Who were those who denied kindness to those who were not in need of it? It was the Ammonites and Moabites who did not offer their bread and water to the Jewish people. When the Jewish people were in the desert they did not need the bread and water of the Ammonites and Moabites, because G-d had provided them with the Manna and the wellspring of *Miriam*.

What was the punishment for not offering the Jewish people bread and water? The Ammonites and Moabites will never be allowed to intermarry with the Jewish people forever. How much more severe is the punishment for the one who denies kindness from the one who is truly in need of it." If in fact the Jewish people were not in need of the bread and water of the Ammonites and Moabites, why were these nations condemned forever for withholding their kindness from the Jewish people?

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Yevamos* tells us that there are three characteristics that are unique to the Jewish people. The Jewish people possess the innate characteristics of "Mercy, shame (conscience), and the propensity to do acts of kindness." These characteristics are innate in every Jew, because they are part of the spiritual make up which they have inherited from the holy Patriarchs, *Avraham*, *Yitzchak*, and *Yaakov*. If one does not possess these three characteristics, his pedigree is in question.

An act of kindness is not necessarily limited to providing one with food, drink, or any kind of material amenity. It is also understanding and sensing the needs of another, although it may not be material. The Jewish people had been wandering in the desert for forty years. The offer of bread and water by the Ammonites and Moabites was not an end unto itself, but rather, it would have been a context for them to indicate that they acknowledge and welcome the Jewish people through their hospitality. By withholding their bread and water, it is a clear confirmation that the Ammonites and Moabites do not possess the sensitivity that one needs to appreciate the more advanced level of kindness. It is to be able to put oneself in another's position and sense what he is lacking.

*Avraham's* standard of loving kindness, was at the most advanced level. If the Ammonites and Moabites would have been allowed to intermarry into the Jewish

people, it would have diluted the standard of kindness that the Jewish people inherited from *Avraham*. They were therefore condemned forever for not providing for one who is not in need. Therefore, when one does kindness to the one who is truly in need of it, one must appreciate the value of that act, because he will bear its exceptional fruits.

## **The Consequence of Measure for Measure**

The *Torah* describes in detail the hospitality that *Avraham* had provided for the three wayfarers, who were angels in the form of men. The *Torah* describes how he had offered the shade of his tree and water for them to wash their feet. He also offered them his bread and had calves slaughtered on their behalf.

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Bava Metzia* tells us that for every aspect of his hospitality, the Jewish people in the future were paid in kind, measure for measure. In the merit of the shade of his tree, the Jewish people merited the Clouds of Glory in the desert that provided them all levels of protection. In the merit of the bread, they merited the Manna. In the merit of the meat that was provided, they merited the quail. In the merit of the water that he provided for the angels, the Jewish people merited the wellspring of *Miriam* that traveled with them throughout their forty-year trek in the desert.

The *Midrash* tells us that whatever aspect of hospitality that *Avraham* provided to the angels himself, the reward that G-d provided to the Jewish people came directly from Him (without any level of human intervention). However, the hospitality that was offered through an intermediary, G-d provided the reward through an intermediary in the desert, based on the principle of measure for measure.

Since the water that was offered to the angels was delegated through a third party, the water from the wellspring only came forth through the intervention of an intermediary. *Moshe* needed to strike the rock in order to extract water from it. Had *Avraham* provided the water himself to the angels the setting in which *Moshe* struck the rock rather than speaking to it would not have come about. *Moshe* would not have been denied entry into the Promised Land had he not struck the rock. However, *Chazal* do not indicate that there is a claim against *Avraham* because he offered the water to the angels through an intermediary.

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Kiddushin* tells us that whenever a *mitzvah* is presented to an individual it is better that he perform the *mitzvah* himself than to delegate it through a third party. The simple understanding would be, a Jew is sanctified and spiritualized through the performance of *mitzvos*. As we say in the blessing, “You (G-d) have sanctified us through Your *mitzvos*...” If one performs a *mitzvah* himself, rather than delegating it, he has greater relevance to the sanctity that is generated by its performance, despite the fact that there is a principle “the act of the agent is attributed to the one who had delegated him.”

The *Mishna* in Tractate *Sotah* tells us that everything that G-d does is measure for measure, for the good and for the bad. If one performs a *mitzvah* himself rather than delegating it, the reward that one will receive will be directly from G-d Himself (rather than through an intermediary), since the individual himself initiated the *mitzvah*. Therefore, Chazal prescribe that a *mitzvah* has greater value when one performs a *mitzvah* himself rather than delegating it.

## **Reestablishing the Equilibrium of Existence (from *Lech Lecha*)**

*Ramban* in his commentary on the Portion of *Bo* explains that under normal circumstances G-d does not perform revealed miracles, because it would undermine the context of free choice. If one were to witness revealed miracles on a continuous basis, one would be compelled to follow the path of good. The *Torah* tells us that G-d brought ten plagues upon Egypt, which were all revealed miracles. The revealed miracles of the exodus such as the splitting of the Sea, overshadowed all the miracles that had transpired in Egypt.

*Ramban* explains that since the world had become overwhelmed with paganism and the Jewish people themselves became idolaters, G-d’s Presence in existence had become forgotten. Free choice only exists within a framework of being able to see the alternative and thus making the correct choice. Mankind believed that G-d no longer had any relevance to the ongoing maintenance of existence. Therefore, in order to reinstate free choice, G-d needed to reveal Himself to mankind in an irrefutable manner in order to reestablish Himself as the Omnipotent Being.

Through the revealed miracles of Egypt, mankind became aware of G-d and His participation in existence. Even the natural order was revealed to be the Hand of G-d. Nature in its essence is a concealed miracle that continues on an ongoing basis. There are multiple *mitzvos* that are linked to the remembering of the redemption from Egypt. This is because remembering the redemption from Egypt will cause the Jewish people to continuously remember that G-d is constantly involved with every aspect of existence. Nature is no less the Hand of G-d than the splitting of the Sea. If it were not for this continuous reminder that G-d took the Jewish people out of Egypt, the world would regress and return to paganism, leaving them without the ability to choose. G-d would no longer be an alternative.

The *Torah* tells us that the first of the ten commandments is, “I am *Hashem*, your G-d, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt...” If G-d is the Creator of the world, why did He choose to be identified as the One who has taken the Jewish people out of the land of Egypt rather than as the Creator? It is because G-d had only made Himself known as the Omnipotent All-Encompassing Being who maintains and controls existence through the revealed miracles of Egypt. Although mankind may have believed that G-d created existence; however, He had transferred the control of existence to the hosts of heaven.

*Avraham* our Patriarch was born into a pagan world that was devoid of G-d. The *Gemara* in Tractate *Berachos* tells us that *Avraham* was the first human being to recognize G-d as “Master (*Adni*).” *Avraham* was the one who reintroduced G-d to existence and thus established a context of free choice.

The *Midrash* tells us that the value of the test that was presented by G-d to *Avraham* was to make known to the world the “deeds of that *tzaddik*.” Through the ten tests, *Avraham* would be established as G-d’s dedicated servant and thus all the good that would be bestowed upon him, would be due to the Universal Being, G-d Himself. This would thus establish an alternative to paganism.

The *Torah* tells us that after G-d promised *Avraham* that he would have children and they would inherit the Land of *Canaan* he asked (an inappropriate) a question to G-d, “How will I know that my children will inherit it?” The *Gemara* in Tractate *Nidarim* tells us that it

was because *Avraham* had asked this question, which was a demonstration of a lack of faith in G-d, that the Jewish people needed to be subject to bondage for 400 years as the verse states, "G-d said to *Avraham*... Your children will be strangers in a land that is not their own for four hundred years..."

Because of *Avraham's* question, the Jewish people were exiled to Egypt where they ultimately became pagans. In the 210th year of the bondage, G-d brought about revealed miracles which demonstrated to all that He was the Master of existence.

As *Avraham*, our Patriarch reintroduced G-d into existence by espousing monotheism to all mankind. It was only because of *Avraham's* espousal of monotheism and his passing of the ten tests that the context of choice to believe in G-d was established in existence. Despite *Avraham's* greatness, he failed by asking G-d the question "How will I know..."

As a result of the bondage of Egypt, the Jewish people and the world once again became pagan and the context of choice no longer existed. It was due to *Avraham's* failure that G-d ultimately reestablished Himself through the revealed miracles of Egypt. The context of choice was established once again at an irrefutable level. *Avraham* had initially brought about the context of choice through nature while the revealed miracles of Egypt were supernatural. Thus, the parameters of choice were more profound.



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