

Parashat Lech Lecha, 5775, 2014:

*In Appreciation of Avraham Avinu – the Servant and Friend of Hashem*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

The vast majority of Torah commentators worked vigorously against any notion of anthropomorphizing G-d. Onkelos (c.35-120 CE) and the Rambam (1135-1204) are particularly well known for their efforts to reinterpret any reference to the Almighty in human terms. For them, and many other *meforshim* (Torah commentators), the idea of G-d sharing human emotions was something unthinkable and a diminution of His glory.

At the end of Parashat Noach, however, we encounter a verse that seems to squarely place *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) within the purview of human emotions: “And the L-rd regretted (*vayinachem*) that He had made man upon the earth, and He became grieved in His heart (*vayitatzav el libo*).” (*Sefer Bereishit* 6:6, this and most Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Regret and grief, or “pained to the core” as Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal* translates, are indisputably human emotions.

The first instance wherein Hashem was likely “pained to the core” with man’s inability to follow His dictates appears in Parashat Bereishit. *Chazal* (our Sages) teach us in many sources that even Moshe “barely reached Adam’s ankle” in regards to the latter’s spiritual heights. Unfortunately, as great as *Adam harishon* (Adam, the first man) surely was, he

failed to live up to what was expected of him and ate from the *eitz pri hada'at* (the Tree of knowledge): “And the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and the tree was desirable to make one wise; so she took of its fruit, and she ate, and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.” (3:6)

Noach, as well, failed to meet Hashem’s expectations. He is twice referred to as a *tzaddik* (a truly righteous individual) in *Sefer Bereishit*: “... Noah was a righteous man, he was perfect in his generations...” (6:9) “And the L-rd said to Noah, ‘Come into the ark, you and all your household, for it is you that I have seen as a righteous man before Me in this generation,’” (7:1) However, he was tragically unable to actualize his potential. His transition from *kodesh* (holiness) to *chol* (profane) is poignantly depicted in *Sefer Bereishit* 9:20-21: “And Noah began to be a master of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent.” Once again, Noach’s actions must have been a singular disappointment to the Almighty.

It is precisely from the vantage point of the failures of Adam, the Generation of the Flood, and of Noach, that we are able to appreciate the uniqueness of *Avraham Avinu* (Our Father Abraham). His promise and potential began to be revealed from his earliest days, when he courageously stood alone against the polytheistic worship and culture of his time:

Once Abraham was weaned, he, as a child, began contemplating and thinking day and night, and wondered how a sphere could follow a fixed path without being directed. If so, who directed it? Surely it would be impossible for it to rotate on its own! Abraham did not have a mentor, but was immersed amongst the foolish idolaters of Ur Casdim, where everyone, including his mother and father, served idols, as did he. In his heart, however, he continued to contemplate, until he realized the way of truth and understood the ways of righteousness from nature, and knew that there is a G-d who directs the spheres, created the world, and besides whom there is none other. He also knew that the whole

world was erring, and knew that what caused the mistake was that they [had] worshipped the stars and figures for so long that the truth had vanished.  
(Maimonides, *Hilchot Hilchot Avodat Kochavim* (Laws of Idolatry), translation, O'Levy, <http://www.panix.com/~jjbaker/MadaAkum.html>)

Avraham's spiritual "classroom" was Nature and the Cosmos, and his teacher was G-d Himself. His flawless logic and extraordinary intellectual acumen led him to rediscover the forgotten truth of Hashem's existence. Therefore, he was able to comprehend that it was the Holy One Blessed be He, and none other, who created the world and continues to guide it according to the dictates of His Divine will. Moreover, Avraham was an authentic religious revolutionary who repudiated both the underlying philosophical axioms and the practical behavioral results of the twisted and perverted culture in which he lived. Hashem and His Divine will, rather than idolatry and moral relativism, would now be the brilliant light that would penetrate the spiritual darkness of his time. Clearly, Avraham recognized, as Isaiah would say so many years later, that: "*shehame mishtachavim l'hevel v'rik, u'mitpallim el ale lo yoshiyah*" (For they bow to vanity and emptiness and pray to a G-d which helps not, *Sefer Yeshiyahu* 45:20, translation, *Artscroll Tanach*). Maimonides summarizes this idea in the following manner:

Once he achieved this, [i.e. complete knowledge of G-d] he began to reason with the inhabitants of Ur Casdim and to argue with them, saying that by serving idols they were not following the way of truth. He broke their images, and began to proclaim that it is not fitting to serve anyone other than G-d, and to Him it is fitting to bow down and to offer libations and sacrifices, so that all Creation will recognize Him. Abraham also proclaimed that it was fitting to break and destroy all the figures, so that nobody would err on account of them, like those who imagined that there is no G-d except for their idols ... He reached the land of Canaan, where he continued his proclamations, as it is written, "...and called there on the name of the L-rd, the everlasting G-d." Since agnostics were coming to him with questions about this matter, he would answer each person [in a way] so that they would return to the way of truth, until thousands and tens of thousands came to him. These were the people of the house of Abraham.

Avraham transformed the world by presenting and representing the one true G-d to mankind. This singular individual radically altered the history of mankind. As such, he was, and is, every Jew's religious guide and mentor.

Avraham's entrance onto the grand stage of world history was a great comfort for Hashem. He was the first person to faithfully rise above each trial he encountered, while worshipping G-d in ultimate love and heartfelt devotion. Therefore, he was simultaneously *Avraham avdi* (Avraham My servant, *Sefer Bereishit* 26:24), and *Avraham ohavi* (Avraham My beloved friend, *Sefer Yeshiyahu* 41:8). At long last, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* was no longer "pained to the core," for He now had a beloved friend who loved and served Him, and thereby publicized His presence before all mankind.

With the Almighty's help, may we emulate *Avraham Avinu* so that we, too, may sanctify His name through our words and deeds, and thereby proclaim His glory to the entire world. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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