

Parashat Vayera, 5775, 2014:

Avraham's Ultimate Legacy

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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 penultimate *pasuk* (verse) of the *Akeidat Yitzhak* (Binding of Isaac) narrative contains the concluding words of Hashem's blessing to Avraham: "And through your children shall be blessed all the nations of the world, because you hearkened to My voice." (*Sefer Bereishit* 22:18, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Ostensibly, this *bracha* (blessing) is part of the reward for Avraham having successfully risen to the greatest trial and challenge of his life, the offering of his beloved son, Yitzhak, on the sacrificial altar. Beyond a doubt, the direct reading of the chapter supports this interpretation.

In contrast, the celebrated *meforash* (Torah commentator) and halachist, Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (1270-1340), known as the "Ba'al HaTurim" after the name of his Torah commentary, takes a different approach to our *pasuk*. He focuses upon the final letters of the concluding Hebrew words of our above-cited verse: "*eikev asher sha'mata b'koli*" ("because you hearkened to My voice") and notes that the *bet*, *reish*, *yud*, and *tav* spell the word "*brit*" (covenant), the first part of the word *brit milah* (ritual circumcision). Thus, in the Ba'al HaTurim's view, the nations of the world will be blessed precisely because Avraham followed G-d's command to give himself and all future male progeny a

brit milah. Therefore, in some mysterious and mystical way, Avraham's physically and spiritually transformative act positively changed the world for all time.

Rabbinic literature contains a variety of sources that teach us that Avraham fulfilled the entire Torah, up to and including Rabbinic decrees and enactments, many generations before it was given at Mount Sinai. By way of illustration:

Rab said: "Our father Abraham kept the whole Torah, as it is said: 'Because Abraham hearkened to My voice [kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws].'" (*Sefer Bereishi* 26:5) R. Shimi b. Hiyya said to Rab: "Say, perhaps, that this refers to the seven laws (*sheva mitzvot b'nai Noach*)?" – "Surely there was also that of circumcision!" "Then say that it refers to the seven laws and circumcision [and not to the whole Torah]?" — "If that were so, why does Scripture say: 'My commandments and My laws'" Raba or R. Ashi said: "Abraham, our father, kept even the law concerning the *eruv tavshilin* (eruv of the dishes), as it is said: 'My Torahs': one being the Written Torah, the other the Oral Torah." (*Talmud Bavli, Yoma* 28b, translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations to enhance clarity)

The second Bobover Rebbe, HaRav Ben-Zion Halberstam *zatzal* (1874-1941), known as the "Kedushat Tzion" after the name of his Torah commentary, quotes the insight of the Ba'al HaTurim on our *pasuk*, followed by a well-known question and answer that may be derived from our Gemara. Allow me to summarize his presentation: Since *Avraham Avinu* fulfilled the entire Torah prior to its having been commanded, why did he not follow suit in the case of *brit milah*? In other words, why did Avraham uncharacteristically wait for the following explicit statement of the *mitzvah*?

This is My covenant, which you shall observe between Me and between you and between your seed after you, that every male among you be circumcised. And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be as the sign of a covenant between Me and between you. And at the age of eight days, every male shall be circumcised to you throughout your generations... (*Sefer Bereishit* 17:10-12)

HaRav Ben Zion Halberstam *zatzal* responds that *Avraham Avinu* wanted to perform *brit milah* solely as a *mitzvah*, rather than as a volitional yet to be commanded act, in line

with the Talmudic dictum (*Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 31a*): “*gadol hametzuveh v’oseh m’me she’aino metzuveh v’oseh*” (“The one who performs a *mitzvah* because he is commanded to do so is on a higher level than one who performs the self-same commandment but is not commanded to do so”). This is the case regarding *brit milah* more so than any other *mitzvah*, since an individual has but one opportunity to perform the act on his physical person in its mandated form, whereas if one elects to perform some other *mitzvah* today, he or she may potentially implement it in the future as a normatively commanded action.

The Kedushat Tzion opines that Avraham “did everything in a proper and fitting manner - in its time and with logic and reason,” and suggests that this is why the Ba’al HaTurim states that “*eikev asher sha’mata b’koli*” must refer to *brit milah*. In addition, since Avraham patiently waited for the command to perform this *mitzvah*, his reward was magnified to the point of a *metzuveh v’oseh* (one who performs a *mitzvah* because he is commanded to do so) and far exceeded that of a *she’aino metzuveh v’oseh* (one who performs the self-same commandment but is not commanded to do so).

The results of Avraham’s actions have echoed throughout the annals of Jewish and world history. As such, we longingly wait for the ultimate fulfillment of our verse: “And through your children shall be blessed all the nations of the world, because you hearkened to My voice.” With Hashem’s help, may this time come soon and in our days.

V’chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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