

Parashat Vayera, 5779, 2018:

On Being Abraham's Children

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, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the many famous topics in our *parasha* is the destruction of the thoroughly wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. As the entire Land of Israel would one day belong to Abraham's inhabitants, the Almighty sought to inform him of this impending devastation:

And the L-rd said, "Shall I conceal from Abraham what I am doing? ... For I have known him (*yedativ*) because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the L-rd to perform righteousness and justice, in order that the L-rd bring upon Abraham that which He spoke concerning him." (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:17&19, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The word, "*yedativ*," is difficult to translate, since this is the sole instance in *Tanach* wherein it appears. Rashi (1040-1105) suggests two interpretations of the term in his *Commentary on the Torah*, namely, "beloved" and "knowing":

Yedativ, an expression of love...But, in fact, the primary meaning of them all is none other than an expression of knowing [on the emotional level], for if one loves a person, he draws him near to himself and knows him and is familiar with him. (Brackets my own)

Initially, the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), in his *Commentary on the Torah*, cites Rashi's complete explanation of *yedativ*. He proceeds to reject it, however, and offers his own explication of the term:

In my estimation, the correct meaning of this expression is actual knowledge (*sh'he yediyah mammash*). *Yedativ* alludes to this idea, since Hashem's knowledge (*yediyat Hashem*) refers to His Divine Providence (*hashgacha*) in the lower world, which is limited to the protection of general categories of beings [i.e. plants, animals etc.]. This includes mankind who is subject to various occurrences [within the Laws of Nature] that take place at their own time. (This and the following passage, translation my own)

For the Ramban, the world at large, including mankind, is protected by general Divine Providence. In contrast, there is category of people who are individually shielded by the Almighty's *hashgacha*, namely, His virtuous followers:

But, in the case of one of His righteous ones (*chasidav*), Hashem pays direct and immediate attention to him, to know him as an individual (*hashgacha pratit*) so that His protection will permanently cleave to him. Moreover, this [level] of Divine Providence and recognition will never depart from him...As the verse says: "Behold the eye of the L-rd is to those who hold Him in awe, to those who hope for His kindness." (*Sefer Tehillim* 33:18, emendation my own)

In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher (1255-1340) references the Ramban's interpretation of *yedativ*, and expands upon it in such a manner as to make it accessible to all. He suggests that there are actually two types of *hashgacha pratit*. On the first level, Hashem knows all people's actions and thoughts. The second level includes the first, and adds, as well, Hashem's protection of an individual from harm. It is crucial to note that level one includes all people, as the verses state:

The L-rd looked from heaven; He saw all the sons of men. From His dwelling place He oversees all the inhabitants of the earth. He Who forms their hearts together, Who understands all their deeds. (*Sefer Tehillim* 33:13-15)

The second level, according to Rabbeinu Bachya, excludes most people of the world, Jew and gentile alike, and only includes the *tzaddikim* – the manifestly righteous:

The Holy One blessed be He saves the *tzaddikim* from the natural occurrences of the world to which the rest of mankind is subject. Moreover, He never rejects His righteous ones and never removes His "eye" from them, rather, His Divine Providence is always with the *tzaddik*, and will never depart from him. This, then, is the explanation of, "for I have known him (yedativ)," namely, that His providence is upon the *tzaddik* individually, and the *tzaddikim* as a category – in order to save them from the trials and tribulations that affect the rest of mankind... (Translation my own)

Based upon Rabbeinu Bachya's deep insights into the Ramban's explanation of "*yedativ*," we are in a much better position to understand how, and why, the Holy One blessed be He

treats *tzaddikim*, such as Abraham, with *hashgacha pratit*. In a very real sense, these exceptional individuals have reached the level that *Dovid HaMelech* (King David) describes in *Ashrei*, as:

The L-rd is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him with sincerity. He does the will of those who fear Him, and He hears their cry and saves them. The L-rd guards all who love Him, and He destroys all the wicked. (*Sefer Tehillim* 145:18-20)

Beyond a doubt, people have changed little from the time of Abraham, and the vast majority of us are not *tzaddikim*. Nonetheless, if we honestly do our best to “keep the way of the L-rd to perform righteousness and justice,” (18:19) then we will be worthy of the name, “*b’nai Avraham*” (“the children of Abraham”), and, for this alone, deserving of Hashem’s Divine Providence. With the Almighty’s help and our fervent desire, may this be so. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.