

Parashat Vayera 5783, 2022:

V'Anochi Afar v'Afer

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yeziel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains the first instance in history wherein an individual encounters the Almighty in an attempt to nullify a *gezarah* (verdict) of destruction promulgated against others. The exchange begins when the Holy One Blessed be He informs *Avraham Avinu* of His intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their abject evil:

And Hashem said, “Since the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah has become great, and since their sin has become very grave, I will descend now and see, whether according to her cry, which has come to Me, they have done; [I will wreak] destruction [upon them]; and if not, I will know.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:20-21, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations)

Avraham Avinu responds swiftly with a plea for their salvation. In so doing, he holds the Almighty to universal standards of justice:

And Avraham approached and said, “Will You even destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous men in the midst of the city; will You even destroy and not forgive the place for the sake of the fifty righteous men who are in its midst? Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?” (18:23-25)

Hashem responds favorably to Avraham’s supplication and declares, “...If I find in Sodom fifty righteous men within the city, I will forgive the entire place for their sake.” (18:26) At this juncture, Avraham realizes that his petition may well sound like unbridled boldness. Therefore,

before continuing his appeal, he entreats Hashem with these famous words: “Behold now I have begun to speak to Hashem, although I am dust and ashes (*v’anochi afar v’ofer*).” (18:27)

There are multiple ways that Avraham could have described himself in order to appear humble before the Master of the Universe. Why, then, did he choose the unusual expression “*v’anochi afar v’ofer*?” Moreover, if Avraham stated that he was *afar* (dust), why did he add that he was *ofer* (ashes)? The Beit HaLevi *zatzal* (Rabbi Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik, 1820-1892) addresses these questions in his analysis of our phrase:

He [Avraham] lowered himself in two polar opposite ways: *Afar* [is something] that has never had a significant shape, and it is only a possibility that it will obtain an important form; as there is a chance that seeds could be sewn therein, and it could grow any manner of plants, or it could be fashioned into an important vessel. [In contrast,] *ofer* at some point had a meaningful form, yet at this time it is impossible to make anything from it. [For in stark contrast to *afar*,] it can neither be used as a *bar gibul* (a solid whose parts are joined by liquid into one body to create something of import), nor can it be used to grow plants. As such, he described himself in this manner to declare to the Almighty that he has never been anyone of significance, nor would anyone of any value or merit issue forth from him. (*Sefer Beit HaLevi, Sefer Bereishit* 18:27, translation, brackets and underlining my own)

The Beit HaLevi’s keen interpretation of *v’anochi afar v’ofer* is congruent with an aggadic passage found in *Talmud Bavli, Chullin* 89a:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to the Jewish people: “I delight in you, since even at a time that I bestow greatness upon you, you diminish (i.e., humble), yourselves before Me. I granted greatness to Abraham, (yet) he said before Me: “And I am but dust and ashes.” (Genesis 18:27) I granted greatness to Moses and Aaron, yet (Moses) said (of the two of them): “And what are we?” (Exodus 16:7) (I granted greatness) to David, (yet) he said: “But I am a worm, and no man.” (Psalms 22:7, Talmud translation, *The Davidson Talmud*, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz *zatzal*, editor, with my emendations)

In my estimation, the attribute described in this passage is one of the key *middot* (ethical characteristics) of authentic *gedolei* Torah; namely, they are at one and the same time consummate Torah scholars and truly humble individuals. With Hashem’s help and our heartfelt efforts, may

we follow their example and emulate the *anavah* (humility) of Avraham, Moshe and Aharon, and *Dovid HaMelech*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** 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: [The Rav](#)