

A Thought on Parashas Chayei Soroh

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



The Talmud, in Avodoh Zoroh 25a, has an alternative name for Sefer Bereishis: ספר הישר - 'Sefer HaYashar.' This name, states Rabbi Yochanan, refers to the book of Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, because they were called 'ישרים.' What is the meaning of 'Yashar?' What does it mean to say that the Avos were 'Yesharim?' 'Yashar' has been translated many ways: 'straightforwardness,' 'righteousness,' 'integrity,' 'honesty,' 'decency.' In his sefer, 'HoEmek Dovor,' the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudoh Berlin) explains that, in addition to their lofty spiritual relationship with Hashem, the Avos acted with decency, integrity and respect towards the non-Jewish people around them, even the most extreme of idolaters. As Rabbi Isaac Bernstein put it: "The Netziv says, the definition of a 'Yashar' is a person who is well-disposed towards humanity, who recognises that there is a value and intrinsic worth in every human being, and one must always act in a manner which conveys the feeling that every human being is worthy of our respect and our concern."

The Netziv goes on to explain that הקב"ה cannot bear tzaddikim who, despite the way they perform so many wonderful mitzvos, do not have a positive attitude towards other people. This, continues the Netziv, is the praise of the Avos. Even though they were tzaddikim and chassidim to the highest degree possible, they were also 'yesharim,' they had a positive attitude to everyone, Jew and non-Jew. They went out of their way to seek the welfare of every person with whom they came into contact. Avrohom prayed for the people of Sedom and Amoro, even though he hated them because of their wickedness. In Rabbi Bernstein's words: "How could he stand idly by, and watch part of humanity die? And therefore he does not find it in any way self-contradictory *to hate what they do, and to love what they are.*"

The purpose of Sefer Bereishis is to train us in 'straight middos,' through exposure to the 'yashar' lives of the Avos, in preparation for receiving the Torah in Sefer Shemos. Bereishis makes us into people who are equipped to properly integrate the practice of mitzvos in our own lives. This is the principle, "דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה" - "Derech Eretz - decent behaviour - is a prerequisite for Torah." Rav Dessler writes: "One who does not appreciate the obligation to respect others lacks the attributes required for success in Torah [learning]." (Michtav Me'Elياهو Vol. 4, P. 248).

Now, if, indeed, we are to learn Derech Eretz from Bereishis as a foundation for effectively adopting the Torah, then it follows that we need to be able to correctly interpret the deeds of our Avos and Imahos. This can only be properly achieved by filtering their actions through the teachings of חז"ל, our Sages, of blessed memory. Individual actions of the Avos do not always provide clear and immediate guidance for life; superficial insights, perhaps, but not lessons of the depth afforded by viewing them through the prism of Rabbinic wisdom and interpretation. Moreover, wise Rabbinic interpretation also saves us from misunderstanding the actions of the Avos, and enables us to see detail that would otherwise be invisible to the naked eye.

Among the great Torah interpreters were the Ba'alei Mussar. These masters of Torah Thought made it their mission to peel back obscuring layers and shine a bright torch on the truth beneath the surface. Rabbi Mordechai Miller was a great talmid of the legendary Rabbi E. E. Dessler.

In a beautiful essay on this week's parashah, Rabbi Miller provides us with an insight into the nature of Avrohom Ovinu, which we may not otherwise have discerned.

Rabbi Miller (in 'Sabbath Shiurim,' vol.3) points us to a story that raises an odd difficulty in respect of Avrohom Ovinu's spiritual level:

After a long journey, Rabbi Pinchos Ben Yo'ir stayed at an inn. His donkey was provided with grain, yet it refused to eat its food. They sifted and ground the grain, but to no avail; the food remained untouched. Rabbi Pinchos then inquired as to whether or not the required tithes had been separated from the grain. The innkeeper obligingly separated tithes, whereupon the donkey partook of the proffered food. (Chullin 7a)

In view of the fact that Avrohom Ovinu found it necessary to muzzle his animals so that they would not eat in other people's fields (Rashi, Bereishis 24:10), the Ramban asks if it could be possible that Avrohom was on a lower spiritual level than Rabbi Pinchos ben Yo'ir, whose animal naturally restrained itself, with no need for a muzzle. Expounding ideas in 'Mesillas Yeshorim,' Rav Miller explains that Avrohom's insistence that his cattle be muzzled in fact reflected his elevated spiritual level, at which he possessed a superior level of זְהִירוּת, caution and watchfulness. In this, Avrohom demonstrated that he was indeed on a higher spiritual level than Rabbi Pinchos Ben Yo'ir. Avrohom did not muzzle his cattle because of fear that they were less likely to behave as properly as Rabbi Pinchos ben Yo'ir's animals, but rather because of Avrohom's own deeper Middoh of זְהִירוּת.

While Bereishis is the manual for character development and perfection as vital foundations for a life of Torah and Mitzvos, the תורה שבעל פה, including Talmud, Midrash and Rabbinic commentary, is as crucial for drawing out the lessons for life in Sefer Bereishis as it is for correctly interpreting הלכה in Shemos and the subsequent seforim.



Wishing everyone a Good Shabbos,

Jeremy