

A Thought on Parashat Chayei Sarah 'Eternal Lessons'

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 Avodah Zarah 25a, discusses an alternative name for Sefer Bereishit: ספר הישר - 'Sefer HaYashar.' This name, states Rabbi Yochanan, refers to the book of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, because they were called 'ישרים':

מאי ספר הישר א"ר חייא בר אבא א"ר יוחנן זה ספר אברהם יצחק ויעקב שנקראו ישרים
(במדבר כג, י) תמות נפשי מות ישרים (עבודה זרה כה עמוד א')

What is the book of Yashar? Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba says that Rabbi Yoḥanan says: This is Bereishit, which is the book of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, who were called righteous (yesharim), as it is stated (in the words of Bilaam): "Let me die the death of the righteous [yesharim]" (Bamidbar 23:10).

(Gemara, Bavli: Avodah Zarah 25a)

What is the meaning of 'Yashar?' What does it mean to say that the Avot were 'Yesharim?' 'Yashar' has been translated many ways: 'straightforwardness,' 'righteousness,' 'integrity,' 'honesty,' 'decency, or simply to be a 'mentsch.' In his introduction to his sefer, 'Ha'Amek Davar,' the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin) explains that, in addition to their lofty spiritual relationship with Hashem, the Avot 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 an 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."

(Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, Audio Shiurim, Series 1: Parashat Vayeira)

The Netziv goes on to explain that הקב"ה can not bear tzaddikim who, despite the way they perform so many wonderful mitzvot, do not have a positive attitude towards other people. This, continues the Netziv, is the praise of the Avot. 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 single

person with whom they came in contact.” (Ibid.) Avraham prayed for the people of Sedom and Amora, continues the Netziv, 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...* they are reshaim (wicked people), but they are humanity.” (Ibid.)

The purpose of Sefer Bereishit is to train us in 'straight middot,' through exposure to the 'yashar' lives of the Avot, in preparation for receiving the Torah in Sefer Shemot. Bereishit makes us into people who are equipped to properly integrate the practice of mitzvot 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'Eliyahu Vol. 4, P. 248).

Now, if, indeed, we are to learn Derech Eretz from Bereishit as a foundation for effectively adopting the Torah, then it follows that we need to be able to correctly interpret the deeds of our Avot and Imahot. This can only be properly achieved by filtering their actions through the teachings of הו"ל, our Sages, of blessed memory. Individual actions of the Avot 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 Avot, and enables us to see and appreciate 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 master of Mussar, Rabbi E. E. Dessler. In a beautiful essay on this week’s parashah, Rabbi Miller provides us with an insight into the nature of Avraham Avinu, 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 Avraham Avinu’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 Avraham Avinu found it necessary to muzzle his animals so that they would not eat in other people's fields (Rashi, Bereishit 24:10), the Ramban asks if it could be possible that Avraham was on a lower spiritual level than Rabbi Pinchas ben Ya'ir, whose animal naturally restrained itself, with no need for a muzzle. Expounding teachings in 'Mesillat Yesharim,' Rav Miller explains that Avraham's insistence that his cattle be muzzled in fact reflected his elevated spiritual level, at which he possessed a superior measure of זְהִירוּת, which is 'caution' and 'watchfulness.' In exercising this middah, this trait, therefore, Avraham demonstrated that he was indeed on a higher spiritual level than Rabbi Pinchas Ben Ya'ir. Avraham did not muzzle his cattle because of fear that they were less likely to behave as properly as Rabbi Pinchas ben Ya'ir's animals, but rather because of his own deeper Middah of זְהִירוּת.

Sefer Bereishit is the first book of the תּוֹרָה שְׁבֻכְתָּב (the *Written Torah*), and her beautiful narratives constitute a manual of eternal lessons in character development and self-perfection as vital foundations for a life of Torah and Mitzvot. However, the תּוֹרָה שְׁבֻעַל פֶּה (the *Oral Torah*), including Midrash, Talmud and Rabbinic commentary, is as indispensable for identifying and drawing out the lessons for life in Bereishit as it is for interpreting and teaching הַלְכָה (Jewish Law) found in Shemot and the subsequent books.



Wishing everyone a Good Shabbos,

Jeremy