



NEFESH SHIMSHON

DIVREI TORAH ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA AND HOLIDAYS FROM
THE TEACHINGS OF **RABBEINU SHIMSHON DOVID PINCUS ZT"l**

THIS PUBLICATION IS DEDICATED TO THE HATZLACHAH AND ZECHUS OF נחמה ויעקב בן רחל נחמה.
MAY THEY GROW TO BE TALMIDEI CHACHAMIM AND OVDEI HASHEM.

PEARLS OF WISDOM FROM THE PARSHAH

It Starts by Leaving It all Behind

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ. (בראשית יב, א)

Hashem said to Avram, "You shall go away from your land." (Bereishis 12:1)

What was the great *niyason* that *Avraham Avinu* faced when he was told to go away from his land? Many people need to pick themselves up and emigrate to a new country. It's not such an unusual experience; millions have done it and it did not make them into *Avraham Avinu*.

It seems that the test was not whether Avraham will agree to leave his place. It was whether he will feel painfully severed from his place by doing so. It's a question of identity, of what is important to you. It shows what you are attached to and what you are ready and willing to leave behind because it doesn't mean anything to you. The *nisayon* clarified whether Avraham was attached to his father's house and his homeland, or whether he was attached to *Hashem* alone, in which case leaving everything behind is not such a painful severing, after all.

The first three *parshiyos* of the Torah deal with three subjects. *Bereishis* deals with G-d. It tells us

that G-d created the world and everything in it.

Noach deals with humanity in general. It tells the story of how the human race as we know it today came to be. All human beings alive today are descended from Noach.

And *Lech Lecha* deals with the beginnings of Judaism, which is *Avraham Avinu*. Avraham was the first Jew. He demonstrated the principles of *Yiddishkeit* in everything he did. He kept *mitzvos*, even *eruv tavshilin*.

Our *parshah* emphasizes that the beginning of all Judaism is לך לך, which signifies leaving it all behind. This is the great principle on which everything else stands. Because you can't be in two places at the same time. Either you are attached to this world, to material, physical life, or you are attached to spirituality, to *Hashem*. Disconnecting oneself from this-worldly matters, "leaving them behind," is the ABCs of Judaism. ●

Wish Good on Everyone

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם כִּי נִשְׁבָּה אָחִיו וַיִּרְק אֶת חֲנִיכָיו וַיְלִידֵי בֵיתוֹ שְׁמֹנֶה עָשָׂר וּשְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת וַיִּרְדֹּף
עַד דָּן: (בראשית יד, יד)

Avram heard that his relative was taken captive. He armed his trainees, born in his home, of whom there were three hundred and eighteen, and he pursued until Dan. (Bereishis 14:13)

When Lot was taken captive and Avram went to his rescue, Avram could have launched a pinpointed attack to save Lot alone, leaving the rest of the Sedomites in captivity. But he didn't do that. He saved all of them, as well as their personal property.

Avraham saved the Sedomites even though they were his true enemies. They were the people he couldn't tolerate. Avraham stood for *chesed*. He was known for his exceptional *hachnasas orchim*. The Sedomites abolished *chesed* from their land. In Sedom, giving a slice of bread to a pauper was punishable by death. But Avraham saved them anyway.

Avraham did the same when *Hashem* wanted to overturn Sedom. Avraham prayed long and strong, arguing repeatedly that Sedom should be spared. These were his worst enemies, the people he can't stand, the wicked of Sedom.

Let's compare this behavior to someone else's. Bilaam the *rasha* destroyed Moav by means of a curse he placed on them out of greed for personal gain. Then took upon himself the "greater" mission of uprooting the entire Jewish people, *chas v'shalom*, although they had done nothing at all to hurt him or disturb him.

This is not the way. *Tzaddikim* do just the opposite:

גַּם עֲנוּשׁ לְצַדִּיק לֹא טוֹב – Causing punishment is not good for a *tzaddik*.¹

Chazal tell many stories about *tzaddikim* who had the opportunity to bring well-deserved punishment upon *resha'im*, but did not. Instead, they prayed for the wellbeing of these *resha'im*. And if the *resha'im* were punished by Heaven nevertheless, the *tzaddikim* were very pained over this. So said *David Hamelech* regarding his great enemies Do'eg and Achitofel:

וְאֲנִי בַחֲלוֹתָם לְבוּשֵׁי שֵׁק עָנִיתִי בַצּוּם נַפְשִׁי
– When they fell sick, I garbed myself in sackcloth; I afflicted my soul by fasting.²

He would fast and *daven* for the health those who hunted him to kill him.

The Torah tells us about all this because we should follow in the ways of *Avraham Avinu* and *David Hamelech*. We should be *talmidei Avraham Avinu*, and not *talmidei Bilaam Harasha*.³ Sometimes a person aggravates us, or even causes us a financial loss, and we might feel that we have every right

1 *Mishlei* 17:26.

2 *Tehillim* 35:13.

3 *Pirkei Avos* 5:19.

לְעִילּוֹי נִשְׁמָת

מִוִּהָרַד מוֹשֶׁה בֶּן אֱלִיעֶזֶר הַמְבוֹרָגַד ז"ל

וּמִוִּהָרַד בְּרוּךְ זָאב בֶּן נַפְתָּלִי קְרָאוּס ז"ל

נִדְבַת נְבִידֵיהֶם ~ עֲטַרֵת זְקֵנִים בְּנֵי בָנִים וְהַפְאֵרַת בָּנִים אֲבוֹתָם

to swallow them alive. But this is not the way of *tzaddikim*.

Someone once came to a well-known *Gadol*, and commented as follows about so-and-so, whom he was having troubles with: “He is a *rasha* – it’s a *mitzvah* to bury him.”

The *Gadol* replied that this does not fit with the Torah. The Torah tells us that the Jewish people needed the *mitzvah* of *korban Pesach* and the *mitzvah* of *Milah* in order to be redeemed from Egypt, because at that time, they were bereft of *mitzvos*. However, this was right after the plague of darkness, during which the *resha'im* among the Jewish people died since they did not wish to leave Egypt. They were buried by their more righteous brethren.

Why wasn’t the *mitzvah* of burying all those *resha'im* enough of a merit for the redemption to

take place?

The answer is, said the *Gadol*, that the “*mitzvah* to bury a Jew” is not such a great *mitzvah* after all...

The way of *tzaddikim*, the way of *talmidei Avraham Avinu*, is always to be happy for the good of every person. If we see people doing wrong, we should pray for them to do *teshuvah*.

Indeed, we are obligated to object firmly to wrongdoing, but we must not be happy over the downfall of *resha'im*. We must not wish on them misfortune. We should always have a good eye toward everyone, and in this way, we will merit the fulfillment of the verse:

טוב עין הוא יברך – He who has a good eye will be blessed.⁴●

4 *Mishlei* 22:9.

PARSHAH TOPIC

Doing Chesed to Hashem

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָה:
(בראשית יב, א)

Hashem said to Avram, “You shall go away from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” (*Bereishis* 12:1)

“You shall go away” – For your benefit and for your good. (*Rashi*)

Go For Your Own Good

Hashem commanded *Avraham Avinu* to leave his land for his own benefit and his own good. And it says:

וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי ה' – Avraham went, as *Hashem* spoke to him.¹

Some explain this to mean that Avraham did not

actually do what he was commanded. He was told to go for his own good, but he went “as *Hashem* spoke to him,” in other words, he did it only because he was commanded to. He did not actually go for his own good.

This is a nice idea, but I don’t think it is correct. It doesn’t make sense that Avraham did other than what he was commanded.

On the contrary, the verse emphasizes that “Avraham went as *Hashem* spoke to him,” implying

1 *Bereishis* 12:4.

that he did just as he was told. That would mean he went for his own good and his own benefit, as *Hashem* said.

Accordingly, what is the Torah coming to teach us here? The fact that Avraham did as commanded is not exactly a new idea.

In order to understand the point, first we need to know that when a person does an act of *chesed* – for instance, he gives a coin to a poor person – there are two parts to his act. The first part is the improvement that he makes in the world. He gives something of value to the poor person, who previously did not have enough to eat, and now does.

The second part is the improvement that he makes in himself. He turns himself into a *baal chesed*.

Which part is more important? The improvement in the world, or the improvement in himself?

This is what the *pasuk* comes to teach us. ךָ לָךְ – “You shall go away’ – For your benefit and for your good.” The main thing is the benefit to yourself. You build your own soul, you improve your own self.

Why is this part more important?

Avraham Avinu was a man of *chesed*. A person who does *chesed* regularly is called a “*chasid*,” and *Chazal* say:

Who is a *chasid*? He who does *chesed* for his Maker.²

True *chesed* is the *chesed* we do for *Hashem*, so to speak. This point calls for explanation. Obviously, *Hashem* is perfect in every way and has no lackings. Everything is His and belongs to Him. So how could *Hashem* be a recipient of *chesed*, implying someone else filled His lack, gave Him what He was in need of? In what way could *Hashem* be considered a recipient of *chesed*?

True *chesed* is when we give something that the recipient doesn’t have and can’t get on his own.

Let’s say I give someone a candy. If he has a bag of candies in his pocket, I still did him a *chesed* by giving him one more, but this is not the ultimate

chesed. If he has no candy and no way to get candy, and he really needs a candy for some reason, and I give him one, this is true *chesed*.

Chazal ask, who is a “*chasid*”? How can one do true *chesed*? The answer is by giving to *Hashem*. There is one thing that, so to speak, *Hashem* doesn’t have and has no way to get. Only a human being can give it to Him.

This thing is the perfection a person brings about in his own self. When a person improves himself, when he makes himself into a better person, this is something *Hashem* cannot do *Himself*, so to speak.

Because if *Hashem* would improve the person, then the person would not truly be improved. He could become a perfect robot, or turn into an angel, but he cannot become a perfected human being unless he does it himself. This is the only thing *Hashem* doesn’t have, and only we can give it to Him. Self-perfection is the ultimate *chesed*.

This is the message of ךָ לָךְ – “You shall go away’ – For your benefit and for your good.” Avraham was commanded to go, but *Hashem*’s intention in the command was for Avraham to build himself up. *Hashem* needs nothing else than that.

What about bringing the world to *teshuvah*? *Hashem* can do that on His own. *Hachnasas orchim*? *Hashem* can supply people with everything they need, so they won’t even need to go looking for someone else’s hospitality.

Avraham still needed to do all the good deeds for which he is so famous. Had he not done them, he would not have built himself up to become the *Avraham Avinu* we know. But the beauty of all these good deeds, the point in them that *Hashem* most desires, is that a person should build himself. In other words, the main thing is not the impact you have on the world; it is that you thereby build yourself.

For the Common Good?

This point marked the fundamental difference between *Avraham Avinu* and his greatest adversaries, namely, the people who built the Tower of Bavel and

² Zohar, *Mishpatim* 112b.

the people of Sedom.

The people who built the Tower of Bavel had a certain ideology that nowadays we might describe as “Communist”. They sought to create a great collective of all property and all people. No more private possessions. Land, factories, vehicles – everything belongs to the public, to the collective, not to private persons.

Chazal say that they built their giant tower specifically from bricks, manufactured by man, and not from stones.

And if someone was standing high up, building the tower, and a brick fell from his hands and smashed on the ground, they held a national day of mourning for the tragedy that took place.

All of humanity mourned for the fallen brick. They felt that each and every brick that broke was an irreplaceable loss.

Indeed, it was so, because even if they manufacture a new brick, it won't be the one that broke. It will be a new brick.

But if a person would fall and die, they would not even bury him. No one even cared. Furthermore, if they were missing a brick during the construction work, they would put in a child, in place of a brick.

There was a reason for this cruelty, but it wasn't the same reason that motivated Pharaoh when he used Jewish children as building bricks.

Pharaoh put in a child from the people he sought to oppress, whereas they put in one of their own. Why did they do this? Because they viewed the brick as more important than the child.

This was their outlook. The world exists for the sake of humanity at large, and everything in the world is to serve this ultimate purpose. A brick helps build the tower, which serves all humanity. Every brick, every apple, every slice of bread, is there to serve the collective human race.

Now, there is one thing in the world that doesn't serve humanity, and that is the individual. There are plenty of ordinary people in the world. There are more than enough. If society would be relieved of excess individuals, everyone would be better off. The

individual just uses up food, water and other valuable resources. He takes from collective humanity.

A brick “contributes” to the collective resources, while individuals take from the collective resources. So when a brick falls and breaks, they are pained and in mourning. When a person dies, they are happy to be rid of this burden on the community. If there is one person less, it is better for everyone else.

This is reminiscent of Communism. The Communists turned out to be the cruelest people in the history of the world. They spoke of brotherhood, equality and other lofty values, but in reality, they perpetrated the greatest brutality of all.

Hitler of accursed memory killed six million Jews because he hated them and despised them. He had a goal: to rid the world of a certain race of people. But Stalin outdid him. He killed twenty million people. Not because he hated them, not because he thought the world would be a better place without them, but just because he saw them as totally worthless.

He sent thousands after thousands to Siberian work camps, where the temperature was 50 degrees below zero, wearing just a thin shirt. Not even a sweater. They were subjected to forced labor, day and night, and fed a slice of bread baked from flour and sawdust.

Such incredible cruelty stemmed from his utter contempt for the value of the individual. In his eyes, a human being was wastable, without even thinking twice about it. The goal is not the individual, the goal is to build the world. If a person contributes to the collective good, then he has a right to live, but if he deviates from the ways of collective humanity, there is no need for him. This is how Stalin viewed Jews.

They have their own ways, they don't do what the majority do, so a Jew is like a rotten apple and needs to be eliminated. He is detrimental to the common good.

That's Communism, and so it was in the society of the Tower of Bavel.

Avraham's ideology was the diametric opposite of all this. *Avraham Avinu* reasoned like this: *Hashem*

doesn't need me to build the world. He can build the world Himself. He doesn't need me to feed the poor. He can feed the poor on His own. There is only one thing I can do that *Hashem* can't, which is to make myself a better person.

Consequently, Avraham considered every person he met to be the goal of the whole world. If he met a lowly vagrant, he treated him with full human dignity. Because the individual is capable of giving *Hashem* what He can't take for Himself. This was Avraham's outlook on life.

And how did the people of Sedom look at things? They, too, belittled the individual. "We have our own community to take care of. If a stranger comes around and wants to sponge off us, we tell him to get out of here, don't you dare cross our municipal boundaries, you public nuisance!"

The policy of the government of the United States is not so different. Without a visa you can't even set foot on American soil. You might avail yourself of local resources, you might take away opportunities from citizens, you might cost taxpayers money. Just stay where you are and don't even come here.

As the World Develops, the Individual Declines

Nowadays we see how the world is developing and progressing. But the more the world as a whole progresses, the more the individual declines.

Once I came for a visit to America and I met someone who seemed to think I had never been there before. He decided to take me on a tour and he showed me a relatively new city that did not spring up spontaneously but was built according to plan.

One of the things he showed me was a forty-story building that had a beautiful view. He said to me, "Take a look at our building." I used to live in New

York City and I am used to tall buildings, so I was not very impressed.

But there was one thing that did impress me. New York City is very dirty. The streets are full of filth and stench. At least that's the way it was back then. But here, everything was new and shiny and clean.

The buildings were constructed of steel and glass, the corridors were lined with marble, all the streets were wide and conveniently designed for pedestrians. This was indeed impressive. I stood and looked around, with appreciation for what I saw.

After I finished looking at the buildings and streets, I started to wonder who lives here?

I started to notice the people themselves, and when I saw what they looked like, I was shocked. They were so below par, they were barely human in their appearance.

I looked again at the buildings, and then at the people, and I was astounded by the contrast. How does this fit? How can people on such an inferior level build such fine buildings? The gap between the people and the place was so vast.

But that's how it is with humanity as a whole. On the one hand, they put a man on the moon, they build advanced computers, and cellular phones that by pressing one button you can hold the whole world in your hand.

But the person himself just goes down and down. The edifice that humanity erects is at the expense of building their own selves.

In a certain way, this phenomenon plagues the Torah world as well. There is a vast gap between what we do and what we are. The average *ben Torah* learns Torah all day, does *chesed*, erects spiritual edifices. But what is he himself? Not what he does, but what he *is*? It's two different worlds. There never was such a gap between the person's deeds and the person's self. ●