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פרשת לך לך

The Power to Bless Others

By Sidney Eisenstein '22

In Parashat Lech-Lecha, Hashem blessed Avraham to be the forefather of a big nation, and promised to make his name great. There is an ambiguity with the next blessing Hashem gives to Avraham, which was that Avraham himself would be a blessing, as it is written in Beresheit 12:2, “וְאָבְרָחָם יִבְרַכְךָ וְאַגְדָּלְךָ וְשִׁמְךָ וְהָיָה בְרָכָה:”¹ It would make more sense for Hashem to bless Avraham with something, rather than promising Avraham that he would be a blessing. It is clear that Hashem is conveying that Avraham will prosper; but in what ways will Avraham prosper? What did Hashem mean when he commanded Avraham that he would be a blessing? Was Hashem’s promise that Avraham will be a blessing supposed to be understood as a blessing to Avraham, or a means by which Avraham can bless others?

To answer this question we will look no further than the Daat Zkenim, which is a compilation of commentary on the Torah from the writings of the Franco-German school in the 12th-13th centuries. The Daat Zkenim brings a few answers to the question of what it meant that Avraham was a blessing. Daat Zkenim suggests that Hashem gave Avraham the power and the honor to bless others. Up until this point, Hashem was the only one who could bless people. Now Hashem transferred this power to bless others to Avraham, and Avraham could bless whoever he saw fit. A proof that Avraham was given this power to bless others is that when Avraham wanted to bless his son Yitzchak, he was conflicted because he knew that Yitzchak’s son would be Esav. The Daat Zkenim tells a fable about Avraham’s conflict; a king left his friend a plant to water for him. The friend found that there were two plants; one growing fruit containing a deadly poison and one with a potion of life. The friend realized that it was impossible to water the plant containing the potion of life without watering the plant with the deadly poison due to their positioning. The friend was extremely conflicted and did not know if he should save the potion while simultaneously saving the deadly poison. So the friend decided to leave the plants alone until he would see the owner and then he would consult him about what to do. Similar to the fable, Avraham decided not to make an impulsive decision and to consult Hashem about what to do. In the end, Hashem made the decision to bless Yitzchak after Avraham passed away.

This teaching can be related to our own lives because we have human inclinations and are not perfect. In contrast, Hashem is omnipotent and is righteous to us. As humans we are vulnerable and are uncertain at times, but Hashem guides us in the right direction. People frequently become conflicted (like Avraham was) and do not know what to choose, yet Hashem helps to guide us and make the right decisions. People have free will, yet Hashem has a master plan for us all. Another answer that the Daat Zkenim brings is that the blessing Hashem gave is not to be understood as a blessing, but rather, as a command. The command was that Avraham should be the source of blessings. Wherever his journeys would take him, Avraham would spread his belief in Hashem and also bless everyone he met. When people did not adhere to Hashem’s laws after Av-

raham spread his beliefs, Hashem resorted to bringing a famine on that land. Hashem could have given Avraham something physical, like wealth, but instead Hashem gave him the honorable right to grant others with success. Being a blessing fits Avraham's character since being a blessing entails focusing on others, which is what Avraham is famously known for doing.

We learn from this that in our lives we should strive to focus on others and to be the source of blessings to others. This can be done by speaking words of Torah. As an example, each Friday night at the dinner table, you tell your family something relating to Judaism that you learned the past week and why it's interesting. In telling others about Jewish topics you have learned, you are fulfilling the obligation to spread Hashem's teachings. Additionally, every time we have a peer interaction we should be kind to that person and not be selfish. For example, in school, we should be friendly while interacting with others, and should try to think about the other person's situation rather than thinking about ourselves. If one is in a sour mood, he should not spread his unpleasant attitude to others, rather, he should deliberately choose to ask how another person's day is going. By doing this, you will have the ability to be the source of someone else's content disposition. It is significant to have a positive impact on your friend's experiences. In my life, I have a close friend who becomes stressed and frequently is in a gloomy mood. My friend recently told me that her day is always good when she is with me. After this experience, I always try to be kind to others because I know that I am capable of contributing to others' happiness. Furthermore, when we have an interaction with someone we should wish them well and pray for their successes.

Intangible Blessings

By Natanel Aiash '22

In Parashat Lech Lecha, Hashem tells Abraham to leave "from your land," a physical space where he lives; "and from your birthplace," where Avraham fits in and where his family lives; "and from your father's house," that was filled with his father's idolatrous teachings. All these requests Hashem makes to Abraham are tangible things. They are all actions that Abraham is told to take. Hashem tells Abraham that He will later on tell him where he is going, and will give him several blessings as a reward for his actions. What is so compelling to Avraham about the intangible things that Hashem offers to him that He's willing to listen to Hashem's words and give up the tangible things?

According to Radak, the reason why G-d did not offer inducements, like rich and fertile land, was to show us, the readers, the greatness of Avram's love for G-d. According to the Midrash, Avraham shows his love for G-d when Avraham jumps into the fire, proving his belief that Hashem will save him. Rambam asks why Avraham chose Hashem, as he writes, "After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Although he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering, until, as a result of his own correct understanding, he reached the truth (Laws of Idolatry, Chapter 1, Halacha 3)." Rambam explains that the reason Avraham chose G-d is because he began to think, and realized that there is a G-d above these idols. He realizes Hashem's compassionate righteousness and moral justice. Therefore, Avraham doesn't require materialistic rewards, and only wants closeness with Hashem.

A lesson we can take away from Parasha Lech Lecha and Abraham's behavior is that emunah is a powerful force. Abraham followed Hashem's command and left his home without knowing where he was going and without any materialistic rewards. His rewards ended up being immense, both physically and spiritually. We should not do mitzvot because that is what we are told, or for any material gain, but rather, because it's the right thing and out of faith in G-d. We should believe that at the end of the day there is a reason for things to happen and that Hashem will reward us not only in this

Freshmen Findings...

Why does Hashem tell Abraham that he is changing Sarai's name and doesn't tell Sarai herself?

When Lot chose his land, did he know the people in it were evil? Did he care?

Abraham requested a sign from Hashem to know that his descendants would have the Land of Canaan. If he really believed in Hashem, then why did he need this sign?

Laughter

By Emmet Ades '22

In this week's Parsha, Lech-Lecha, our patriarch Avraham falls on his face, laughs and jokingly asks whether "a child will be born to one who is a hundred years old, and will Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth?"

וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ הֲלֵבֶן מֵאָה-שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד וְאִם-שָׂרָה הַבַּת-תִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה תֵּלֵד
Bereshit (17:17).

Similarly, in Parshat Vayerah, our matriarch "Sarah laughed within herself, saying, 'After I have become worn out, will I have smooth flesh? And also, my master is old.'"

”וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִתִּי הֲיִתֵּה-לִּי עֵדֻנָּה וְאֲדֹנָי זָקֵן”
(Bereshit 18:12).

Hashem however, only looks at Sarah's, and not Abraham's laughter in a negative way: "And the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Is it really true that I will give birth, although I am old?"

”שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר הֲאֵף אֶמְנָם אֵלֶּךָ וְאֲנִי זָקֵנָה וְאֲדֹנָי זָקֵן וְאַתָּה אֵל-אֲבְרָהָם לְמָה זֶה צִחְקָה”

Why does Hashem only condemn Sarah's laughter and not also Avraham's? Avraham's laughter can also lead the reader to believe that he lacked faith in G-d's prophecy. Why did Hashem not reprimand him? Was Avraham's reaction irreverent?

The pshat leads us to believe that since Hashem didn't reprimand Avraham, he must have done nothing wrong. Still, however, the question of why Avraham laughed at Hashem's prophecy is left unanswered. Was this laughter of happiness, mockery, or a lack of Emunah in Hashem's prophecy?

Targum Onkelos is one of the sources that explains the reason for Avraham's response and laughter. When the pasuk says, " Avraham fell on his face, laughed and joked,

”וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק”

Onkelos translates the word וַיִּצְחַק to וַיִּשְׂמַח. וַיִּשְׂמַח means "And he rejoiced" and signifies joy. This translation shows us that Avraham had belief in Hashem and rejoiced in the fantastic news that Sarah was going to birth him a son.

The Or ha-Hayyim also deals with the question of Avraham's laughter and contrasts it to Sarah's laughter. He focuses on Hashem's different reactions between Abraham and Sarah, both of whom laughed. According to the Or ha-Hayyim, the timing of the laughter in each case elicits very different responses from Hashem. Avraham laughed immediately after he was told the prophecy about his child. Sarah however, laughed only once there were actual changes in her body that would allow her to bear a child. Avraham already had complete faith that Hashem would fulfill the prophecy, instantly upon hearing it. Avraham's immediate laughter illustrated his faith.

In contrast, Sarah only trusted the prophecy after the physical changes in her body occurred. In conclusion, I think we can apply this episode from Tanach to our own lives and our personal degrees of Emunah. We need to strive to be like our forefather Avraham who had complete and unconditional trust that Hashem would fulfill His word. Everyday we pray to Hashem and request things from Him. However, we may also have doubts that Hashem's blessings and prophecies (for instance, the survival of the State of Israel) will come to fruition. In such cases, we must preserve our faith in the absence of physical and immediate signs as our forefather, Avraham, was able to do.

This Week in Jewish History

November 4, 1995

The assassination of Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzchak Rabin

Cheshvan 11

The Yartzeit/Arayat of Rachel Immeinu

November 9, 1938

Kristallnacht, Night of Broken Glass—a pogrom against Jews carried out by German military and civilians

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