



Avraham Ohavi

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This week's parsha introduces us to the man who changed the world. Avram's story is far more than just a historical narrative, it is replete with lessons for life.

Born into an environment that was entirely unsupportive of his philosophical enquiry and his radical conclusions¹, Avram dedicates his life to that which he knows to be true many years before Hashem ever appears to him in a *nevuah*². During that time, Avram and Sarai expend every effort in making Hashem's name known to humanity³, risking their own lives in the process⁴.

Every schoolchild knows that Avraham is the first Jew, but most fail to explain why he deserves this honoured title. Obviously he is not the first person to know about Hashem, because Adam, Kayin, Hevel, Noach, Shem, Ever and others are all recorded as having meaningful interactions with the Ribbono shel Olam.

Yeshayahu HaNavi in this week's haftarah⁵ refers to Avraham as Ohavi, 'who loved me'. He is the first human being who realises that humans can have an individual relationship with a personal G-d. Like all relationships, a relationship with Hashem requires investment and brings with it reciprocation. The closer we move to Hashem, the closer Hashem moves to us⁶.

In the opening episode of our parsha, Avram is told to leave his current environment⁷, he leaves his nation and rather than joining another one, Hashem promises him that he will be the founder of a new nation. He renounces his *moledes*, homeland, but his prosperity does not suffer, rather Hashem blesses him with material wealth. He leaves his father's house, his father's reputation and communal standing to go it alone, and Hashem makes his name great⁸.

Avraham Avinu realises that the truth that he has discovered is both fundamental and universal. It is so important that humanity cannot continue without it. Motivated by love of Hashem which stemmed from his awareness of Hashem's unending goodness and kindness, Avraham sets the wheels in motion for a revolution that changed the world.

The Rambam therefore says⁹ "Our Sages also said that this mitzvah includes calling out to all mankind to serve G-d (exalted be He) and to believe in Him. This is because when you love a person, for example, you praise him and call out to others to draw close to him. So too, if you truly love G-d — through your understanding and realization of His true existence — you will certainly spread this true knowledge that you know to the ignorant and the foolish.

[We see that this mitzvah includes spreading love for G-d to others from] the Sifri: " 'You shall love G-d,' i.e. make Him beloved among the creatures as your father Avraham did, as it is written, 'The souls that he made in Charan.' "

The meaning of this Sifri: Avraham, as a result of his deep understanding of G-d, acquired love for G-d, as the verse testifies, "Avraham, who loved Me". This powerful love therefore caused him to call out to all mankind to believe in G-d. So too, you shall love Him to the extent that you draw others to Him."

This idea is further emphasised in the Rambam's definition and description of the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem¹⁰.

"This mitzvah requires us to publicise the true religion to the masses. This must be done without fear of retribution, to the extent that even if a powerful tyrant tries to force us to deny G-d (exalted be He), we may not obey him. We must rather unquestioningly submit to death, not even allowing him to think that we have denied G-d (exalted be He) [by outwardly denying Him], even if we still maintain belief in Him in our hearts."

Avraham's whole *raison d'être* was to bring mankind to an awareness of and a relationship with the truth. He was the one whose *mesirus nefesh* sowed the seeds for his descendants, *Klal Yisrael* to be the bearers of this truth and the mission that accompanies it¹¹. *Ahavas Hashem* and *Kiddush Hashem* go hand in hand as we seek to infuse the world with a sense of awareness of Hashem through our actions, testimony to the enduring dream and vision of a man whose greatness and dedication to the truth is simply beyond comprehension.

1 Rambam Hilchos Avodas Kochavim Chapter 1

2 See Sifsei Chaim Bereishis p 113

3 Bereishis 12:5 and Rashi

4 Bereishis Rabba 38:13

5 Yeshaya 41:8

6 Nefesh HaChayim 1:7

7 Bereishis 12:1-3

8 Rav Hirsch on pesukim 2-3

9 Sefer Hamitzvos, positive mitzvah 3.

10 Sefer Hamitzvos, positive mitzvah 9.

11 See Seforno Shemos 19:6

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divert it off course or block the water from flowing down to the ocean, it causes tension and the river becomes filled with rapids and currents. Rav Elya Meir says, in the same way that a river naturally flows downward to the ocean, so too our *neschama*, our soul, "flows" upward to Hashem. All things yearn to return to their source; when we try and stop that natural flow, the result is tension. Hashem created us with a *neschama*, a soul; He created us for the purpose of doing good in this world, fulfilling mitzvos and carrying responsibilities. Our soul naturally flows heavenward and wants to act in accordance with Hashem's will. Our very essence as human beings is fulfilled when we do mitzvos, when we accept responsibility, when we do good deeds and help others.

The great, strong river flowing towards the sea is at peace; its waters are tranquil even though it is flowing. But if ones tries to block it, there is tension - rapids, currents and all kinds of difficulties. So, too, with the human soul: when it flows in the direction for which it was created, there is tranquillity. When we do what we were created to do, we are at peace. But when we try and block it, when our goal is simply to get rid of stress and responsibility and we can't be bothered to do good deeds, we don't find any peace of mind. Paradoxically, we find disquiet; we become disturbed by the quiet, because that is not the purpose for which we were created.

This, says Rav Elya Meir, is the kind of *menucha* that Shabbos represents. Shabbos is not a day where we do

nothing. It's not just a "Jewish Sunday." Shabbos is filled with meaningful *mitzvos*, going to shul, spending time with family, enjoying the festive meals and the singing, sharing words of Torah around the Shabbos table and engaging with the community. It's a day filled with positive, productive things which bring inner tranquillity.

The message of Shabbos is that we attain inner tranquillity by doing those things for which we were created. We see this in the *davening* on Shabbos, in the *amida* prayer at *Mincha* time, which describes Shabbos as *menuchas ahava unedava*, "the rest of love and generosity." Rav Elya Meir asks, is it possible to achieve those things by doing nothing? Do love and generosity in relationships, in marriage and toward children come easily? Of course not; they require effort. It is not easy to be giving and kind to people. But there is a *menucha*, a tranquillity that comes from investing in these relationships. One gets a sense of inner peace, a feeling that we are doing something good in the world, and that is our natural calling.

The prayer further describes Shabbos as *menuchas emes ve'emuna* "the rest of truth and faith." Truth and faith, says Rav Elya Meir, also do not come easily. The study of Torah is all about truth. Delving into Torah study and putting mental and emotional effort into it is not easy. Faith in Hashem is also not acquired easily; it develops and deepens over a lifetime of experiences. Truth and faith require work and energy, and yet, they bring tranquillity. The message of this prayer is that through investing in these

worthwhile, productive mitzvah enterprises we actually find peace, tranquillity and happiness in life. And this is why the prayer continues with describing Shabbos as *menuchas shalom veshalva vehashket vaavetach*, "a rest which is filled with peace and tranquillity, calm and security." When we are doing what we are meant to be doing with our lives, we find the ultimate peace.

Shabbos represents the joy of a life lived as it should be, as a journey on the path of goodness. This is why the Gemara says that when we part from someone, we say, *lech leshalom* "go to peace," not *lech beshalom* "go in peace" because when it's toward peace, the implication is that the person is on a journey, constantly changing and growing and doing good things, being productive and creative and doing mitzvos. That is when we are at peace.

Now we can understand why Shabbos is so important: it defines our purpose on this earth. When we are in touch with who we are and what our purpose is, we can find inner peace and tranquillity. This is not to say that rest for the body and the mind is not important; of course it is necessary as part of functioning in life. We need to refresh ourselves physically and emotionally, which, of course, we also enjoy on Shabbos. But Shabbos goes so much further. Shabbos teaches us one of the Torah's foundational truths: in fulfilling our Hashem-given mission in life we will find peace of mind and, ultimately, true happiness.

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