

THE CHABAD WEEKLY

Abraham confronted G-d and said: "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? (18:23) The Zohar compares the actions of two righteous men, Noah and Abraham, when confronted with the knowledge that G-d intends to destroy their fellow human beings for their wickedness. Noah set about building an ark that would shelter the handful of righteous individuals remaining in a corrupt world. In addition, the Midrash describes how he tried to convince his generation to mend their ways and thus be saved from the Divine decree. But the Zohar faults Noah for not also praying for their sake, as Abraham did for the wicked inhabitants of Sodom.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that the fact that Noah did not pray for the wicked of his generation implies that, ultimately, it did not matter to him what became of them. Had he truly cared, he would not have sufficed with "doing his best" to bring them to repent, but would have implored the Almighty to repeal His decree of destruction--just as a person whose own life is in danger would never say, "Well, I did my best to save myself," and leave it at that, but would beseech G-d to help him. In other words, Noah's efforts on behalf of others derived solely from his sense of what he ought to do for them, as opposed to a true concern for their well-being. This was the extent of his "love"--his own need to do the right thing.

This also explains a curious aspect of Noah's efforts to reach out to his generation. When the Flood came, Noah and his family entered the ark--alone. His 120-year campaign yielded not a single baal teshuvah (repentant)! Perhaps public relations was never Noah's strong point, but how are we to explain the fact that, in all this time, he failed to win over a single individual?

But in order to influence others, the Rebbe explains, one's motives must be pure; in the words of our sages, "Words that come from the heart, enter the heart." Deep down, a person will always sense whether you truly have his interests at heart or you're filling a need of your own by seeking to change him. If your work to better your fellow stems from a desire to "do the right thing" and fulfill the mitzvah to "love your fellow as yourself," but without really caring about the result, your call will be met with scant response. The undercurrent of personal motive, be it the most laudable of personal motives, will be sensed, if only subconsciously, by those to whom you reach out, and will ultimately put them off.

Abraham, on the other hand, possessed a selfless love for his fellow man, as demonstrated by his daring intervention on behalf of the five sinful cities of the Sodom Valley. Abraham petitioned G-d on their behalf, using the strongest terms to demand of G-d that he spare these cities for the sake of the few righteous individuals they might contain. "It behooves You not to do such a thing!" he challenged G-d. "Shall the judge of the universe not act justly?!" Abraham was prepared to incur G-d's wrath upon himself for the sake of the most corrupt of sinners, giving precedence to their physical lives over his own spiritual integrity! And because people sensed that he had their own good, and only their own good, at heart--they responded. When Abraham and Sarah left Charan for the Holy Land, they were joined by the "souls which they had made in Charan"--the community of men and women who had rallied to their cause. Sixty-five years later Abraham was able to say to his servant Eliezer: "When G-d summoned me from the house of my father, he was G-d of the heavens but not of the earth: the inhabitants of the earth did not recognize Him and His name was not referred to in the land. But now that I have made His name familiar in the mouths of His creatures, He is G-d in both heaven and earth" (Genesis 24:7, as per Rashi on verse.)chabadonline.com

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And G-d revealed Himself to him... as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day (18:1) It was the third day from Abraham's circumcision, and G-d came to inquire after Abraham's health. G-d drew the sun out of its sheath, so that the righteous one should not be troubled with wayfarers. Abraham sent Eliezer out [to seek travelers], but he found none. Said Abraham, "I do not believe you," and himself went out, and saw G-d standing at the door. (Talmud, Bava Metzia 86b)

He raised his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him (18:2) Who were the three men? The angels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. Michael ("Who is like G-d?") came to bring the tidings to Sarah of Isaac's birth; Raphael ("Healing of G-d"), to heal Abraham; and Gabriel ("Might of G-d"), to overturn Sodom. But is it not written, "And there came the two angels to Sodom at evening"? Michael accompanied Gabriel to rescue Lot. (Talmud, Bava Metzia 86b)- chabadonline.com

WANT IT ALL

There's a story the Lubavitcher Rebbe liked to tell about a five year old child and a 99 year old man. The child was Rabbi Sholom DovBer Schneerson, born on the 20th of Cheshvan 5621 (1860), who served as the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe from 1882 until his passing in 1920. The 99-year old man lived 36 centuries earlier; his name was Abraham and he was the first Jew. The story goes like this: On the occasion of his fourth or fifth birthday, Rabbi Sholom DovBer visited his grandfather, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch. Upon entering his grandfather's room, the child burst into tears. His teacher in cheder had taught them that week's Torah reading, Vayeira (Genesis 18:1-22:24), which begins "And G-d revealed himself to Abraham..." "Why," wept the child, "doesn't G-d reveal Himself to me?" Rabbi Menachem Mendel replied: "When a Jew, a tzaddik, realizes at the age of 99 that he must circumcise himself--that he must continue to perfect himself--he is worthy that G-d should reveal Himself to him." The Rebbe must have told this story dozens of times. The story, followed by a discussion of the manifold meanings and lessons the Rebbe saw in it, was a regular feature of the farbrengens (Chassidic gatherings) he held each year on the anniversary of Rabbi Sholom DovBer's birthday, which often falls (as it does this year) on the Shabbat on which Vayeira--which begins with the account of G-d's revealing Himself to Abraham following Abraham's circumcision at age 99--is read.

I think I know why the Rebbe liked this story so much. The child's question and the grandfather's explanation express two extremes, whose contrast and synthesis are a hallmark of the Rebbe's approach to life. Imagine: a five year old weeping because G-d does not reveal Himself to Him! To "see" G-d--to attain a consummate vision of the Truth of Truths-- is the ultimate goal of every spiritual quest. It is a goal that takes the greatest of the great at least a lifetime to achieve. Yet here is a child--a very special child, but one who nonetheless is still at the very beginning of his spiritual journey-- who is disturbed, to the point of tears, by the fact that he has not yet attained this goal!

And on the other hand we have a man who has 99 years of the most extraordinary spiritual achievements behind him, who recognizes that he is still not perfect--that he must continue to change, grow and improve himself. The Rebbe saw these two prototypes not as conflicting visions of life, but as complimentary and indispensable to each other. To strive for the ultimate, yet never feel that one has arrived. To have huge aspirations, yet remain humble and unassuming. To say: I want to, and can, do it all--yet, no matter how much one has done, know that there is still more to do (By Yanki Tauber; based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe)

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BIRTH OF R. SHALOM DOVBER IN THE YEAR WHICH THE TZEMACH TZEDEK TERMED KITRA (1) ("CROWN") - 5621 (1860). HE WAS NAMED FOR THE MITTELER REBBE (2) AND HALF THE NAME OF THE TZEMACH TZEDEK'S FATHER. (3) EVERY YEAR MY FATHER DELIVERED A MAAMAR ON HIS BIRTHDAY, BUT HE DID SO SECRETLY EXCEPT WHEN IT COINCIDED WITH SHABBAT. ON HIS LAST BIRTHDAY HERE ON EARTH (4) HE SAID THE MAAMAR NATATA LIREI'ECHA NEISS... (5) WHEN HE CONCLUDED HE SAID TO ME, "ON ONE'S BIRTHDAY HE SHOULD SAY CHASSIDUS. MAY G-D GIVE YOU A GIFT THAT YOU MAY SAY CHASSIDUS ON YOUR BIRTHDAY, BUT IT SHOULD BE WITH KINDNESS AND MERCY." IT TOOK SEVEN YEARS FOR THIS TO HAPPEN. (6)

FOOTNOTES: 1. KITRA IS NUMERICALLY 5621. 2. R. DOVBER. 3. R. SHALOM SHACHNA. 4. 1919. 5. TEHILLIM 60:6. 6. THE FESTIVAL OF LIBERATION OF THE PREVIOUS REBBE (FROM SOVIET IMPRISONMENT FOR HIS SPREADING OF TORAH AND JUDAISM) OCCURRED ON HIS BIRTHDAY, THE 12TH OF TAMUZ, IN THE YEAR 5687 (1927) - DURING HIS SEVENTH YEAR AS REBBE. HE SUCCEEDED TO THE LEADERSHIP IN 5680 (1920) UPON HIS FATHER'S DEMISE. (FROM REBBE'S HAYOM YOM, CHESHVAN 20)

Faith is not the result of past experience. On the contrary, faith is an act that comes from within and creates experience. Things happen because you trust they will.

-Bringing Heaven Down to Earth