

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



Patriarchal Performance

To-I'dot

We Jews really love our Patriarchs and Matriarchs. That's why revisiting the Torah readings of B'reishit is so rewarding and so much fun every year. However, sometimes our veneration is a bit over the top. My affection for these ancestors triggers an urge to emulate these paragons, but when we make them infallible, it becomes nearly impossible to either identify with them or even attempt to model myself after them. We get a glimpse in this week's parsha into, perhaps, the most famous of those attempts at idolization of these wonderful forebears.

Let's begin with the famous verse: For Avraham heeded My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws (B'reishit 26:2). Rashi explains this list of examples of Avraham's allegiance and obedience to God by quoting the Midrash:

AND KEPT MY CHARGE - This refers to precautionary measures which are intended to make us avoid the infringement of Biblical prohibitions;

MY COMMANDMENTS - those matters which, had they not been written in the Torah, we would nevertheless hold that they are fitting matters to be the subject of a commandment, such as robbery and murder;

MY STATUTES - matters which our evil inclination and the heathen nations argue against the necessity of prohibiting - things for which there are no apparent reasons but which are the King's decrees and enactments imposed on His subjects;

AND MY LAWS - The plural serves to include the Oral Laws which were given by God to Moses from Sinai

(Yevamot 21a, Yoma 67b, Midrash Raba 64:4).

This idea that the Patriarchs kept the Torah completely, including later Rabbinic ordinances and customs ends up causing us many difficulties in understanding the flow of so many stories. The most famous example is that Yaakov married two sisters, clearly prohibited by the Torah. The Ramban eludes the difficulty by suggesting that the Patriarchs only kept the Torah in Eretz Yisrael. So, Yaakov could marry two sisters in Lavan's community outside the Land.

The Ohr HaChayim, on the other hand, explains that although the Avot

did indeed know and follow all the Mitzvot in the Torah, there could be exceptions, their observance wasn't absolute. If they saw an immediate need to accomplish a task not sanctioned by the Torah they had that option. He understood this as a form of HORA'AT SHA'A, temporary suspension of Torah law for an overriding purpose. The most famous example of that principle is the story of Eliyahu bringing an offering on Har Carmel, outside the Beit HaMikdash.

But there are other approaches. The Ramban himself presents another explanation, which he terms P'SHAT (the literal interpretation) for the four terms:

MY CHARGE means faith in the Deity, implying that Abraham believed in the unique Divine Name, differing thereby with the worshipers of idols, and calling by the name of the Eternal to bring many to His worship. **MY COMMANDMENTS** refers to all that God commanded Avraham: Go out of your land (12:1), and the bringing of his son as a burnt-offering. **MY STATUTES** refers to walking in the paths of God by being gracious and merciful, doing righteousness and judgment. and commanding his children and his household. And **MY LAWS** refers to the circumcision of Avraham himself and his sons and

servants, as well as all Commandments of the B'nei No'ach.

Rav Chaim Volozhin explains that when the Midrash claims that the AVOT kept all the Mitzvot this is not a simple reality, but a profound concept. He expounds this idea:

It is not that they were commanded and acted as they did from a legal perspective... They behaved only from the perspective of what they could intellectually intuit, in the purity of their rationality, of the awesome rectifications (TIKUNIM) that would be accomplished for each commandment, in the worlds and powers above and below, and the major defects, the ruin and destruction, God forbid, that they would cause if they didn't perform them... This also means that they grasped the matters of the heavenly and earthly powers and statutes; and the patterns of their behaviors, relationships in the context of human behavior. According to this pattern, each one of them chose to act according to the situation, because he grasped the lofty rectifications (TIKUNIM) according to the root of his NESHAMA (Nefesh HaChayim 1:21).

Reb Chayim is informing us that all the actions of our Patriarchs (at least the ones reported in the Torah) accomplished, for the benefit of this

world, exactly what Mitzva performance would have achieved. Their soul connection to God allowed them to intuit what their world needed for spiritual development at that very moment. Cool! But not the actual, technical performance of the individual Mitzvot.

The Sheim MiShmuel is in basic agreement with this concept. He concurs that commemorations of events, like the Exodus, that hadn't yet happened would be meaningless. However, he expressed the idea very differently. He said they kept the OHR, the light of the Mitzvot. They brought the light of Torah, also called ORAYATA (the light), into this world, which had been darkened by idolatrous practices.

We remain the beneficiaries of the remarkable activities of our beloved Avot, and so was their world. We try hard to emulate their efforts to bring Godliness to this realm. We do it with Mitzvot; they did it with the strength of their spiritual impact. So, I guess they did fulfill the Torah before it was given. 🙏