Rav Kook Torah



by Rabbi Chanan Morrison -
www.ravkooktorah.com

Yaakov Rescues Avraham

Summary: As a normative path for all times, we must adopt the path of gradual spiritual growth, exemplified by Yaakov's model of change through perseverance and diligence in Torah study.

According to an intriguing Midrash (Tanchuma Toldot 4), Avraham would not have made it out of his hometown of Ur Casdim alive were it not for the intervention of his grandson Yaakov. King Nimrod ordered Avraham to be thrown into a fiery furnace because of Avraham's rejection of idolatry. But Yaakov came to the rescue, as it says:

So said God to the House of Yaakov who redeemed Avraham: Yaakov will not be ashamed, nor will his face become pale. (Yishayahu 29:22)

The simple reading of the verse interprets the phrase "who redeemed Avraham" to refer back to God, not to Yaakov.

Even given the poetic license of Midrashic literature, Yaakov could not have literally rescued his grandfather in an incident that took place before Yaakov was born. Rather, the Sages wanted to teach us that Avraham was saved due to some special merit or quality his grandson Yaakov possessed. What was this quality?

Two Paths of Change

There are two paths of spiritual growth that one may take. The first path is one of sudden, radical change, usually the result of some external catalyst.

One example of such a transformation may be found in the story of King Sha'ul. The prophet Sh'muel informed Sha'ul that he would meet a band of prophets playing musical instruments. This encounter, the prophet told Sha'ul, will be a turning point in your life. "The spirit of God will suddenly come over you, and you will prophesy with them. And you will be transformed into a different person" (Sh'muel Alef 10:6).

The second path is one of slow, deliberate growth. We attain this gradual change through our own toil; it does not require an external stimulus and thus is always accessible.

But why are there two different paths of change available to us? If God provided us with two paths, then clearly both are needed. We should first prepare ourselves and advance as much as possible through our own efforts. After we have attained the

highest level that we are capable of reaching, we may then benefit from unexpected inspiration from the inner recesses of our soul.

Avraham was a spiritual revolutionary, initiating a revolt against the idolatry of his generation. Avraham is the archetype of radical change. The defining moments of his life were dramatic events of astonishing dedication and self-sacrifice, such as his brit mila at an advanced age, and the Akeida. In the merit of Avraham's far-reaching spiritual acts, his descendants inherited those soul-qualities which foster sudden transformation.

Future generations, however, cannot rely solely on Avraham's style of radical change. As a normative path for all times, we need the method of gradual spiritual growth. The model for this type of change is Yaakov. Unlike his grandfather, Yaakov never underwent sudden transformations of personality or direction. Rather, the Torah characterizes him as "a quiet, scholarly man, dwelling in tents" (B'reishit 25:27). Yaakov's place was in the tents of Torah. He worked on himself step by step, growing through perseverance and diligence in Torah study.

Two Names for Jerusalem

The Midrash teaches that the name Yerushalayim (Jerusalem) is a combination of two names, indicating that the holy city possesses qualities represented by both names. Avraham called the city YIREH, while Malki-Tzedek called it SHALEM. Not wanting to offend either of these righteous men, God combined both names together, naming the city Yeru-shalayim (B'reishit Rabba 56:10).

What does the name YIREH mean? The holy city, particularly the Temple, had a profound impact on all who experienced its unique sanctity. This profound spiritual encounter is described as a form of sublime perception – "Your eyes will see your Teacher" (Yishayahu 30:20). This elevated vision inspired visitors to reach beyond their ordinary spiritual capabilities. Due to the spiritual transformation effected by perceiving Jerusalem's holiness, Avraham named the city YIREH – "he will see."

Malki-Tzedek, on the other hand, referred to the city's qualities which assist those who seek to perfect themselves in a gradual fashion. Jerusalem is a place of Torah and ethical teachings, "For Torah shall go forth from Zion" (Yishayahu 2:3). Therefore, Malki-Tzedek named the city SHALEM (perfection), referring to this incremental approach towards achieving spiritual perfection.

Yaakov to the Rescue

Returning to our original question:

how did Yaakov rescue his grandfather from Nimrod's fiery furnace? In what way will Yaakov "not be ashamed"?

The Kabbalists explain that the goal of humanity – the reason why the soul is lowered into this world – is so that we may perfect ourselves through our own efforts. This way, we will not need to partake of NEHAMA D'KISUFA (the "bread of shame"), a metaphor for benefiting from that which we did not earn.

While this explanation fits the path of gradual change, it would appear that the path of radical transformation is an external gift that we do not deserve. Is this not the undesired NEHAMA D'KISUFA that we should avoid?

Not necessarily. If we are able to take this unexpected gift and use it to attain even greater levels of spiritual growth through our own efforts, then there is no shame in accepting it. We can compare this to a father who gave his son a large sum of money. If the son simply lives off the money until it is finished, then the father's gift is NEHAMA DEKISUFA, an embarrassment for the son, reflecting no credit upon him. If, however, the son uses the money to start a new business, and through his efforts doubles and triples the original investment, then the son has certainly pleased his father and brought honor to himself.

This is exactly the way that Yaakov "rescued" his grandfather Avraham. Left on his own, the most natural path for Avraham – whose revolutionary soul called for sudden, drastic change – would have been to achieve complete and absolute self-sacrifice in Nimrod's fiery furnace. It was Yaakov's trait of gradual change that saved Avraham from the fate of martyrdom. Avraham adopted the path of measured spiritual change which his grandson Yaakov exemplified. Avraham left the furnace, and over the years worked diligently to attain the spiritual elevation that he had relinquished inside Nimrod's furnace.

Why bother with the slower path? "Yaakov will not be ashamed." By growing slowly through our own efforts, the spiritual gifts of radical change are no longer an embarrassing NEHAMA DEKISUFA, but an honorable gift which we have utilized to the fullest.

Sapphire from the Land of Israel.
Adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 289-292