

QUALIFYING AS THE FOUNDING FATHER OF A CHOSEN PEOPLE



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How Weighty is The Debt of Gratitude

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1. G-d told *Avraham* to leave his homeland, birthplace, and family.
2. He separated himself from every member of his family including Lot.
3. Why did *Avraham* agree to take his nephew Lot with him?
4. When *Avraham* was told by Nimrod to bow to the idol or be thrown into the kiln– he chose to die.
5. Haran, Lot's father and *Avraham's* brother, stood by the sidelines thinking that if his brother came out unscathed, he would follow.
6. He entered and perished.
7. Haran was the first man to die to sanctify G-d's name.
8. *Avraham* believed that Lot, as Haran's son, was the exception to the family.
9. *Avraham* separated from Lot when it was revealed he was a thief.
10. Lot, with all of his possessions, moved to Sedom– the seat of all evil.
11. Before separating, *Avraham* made a pact with him to be there for him at all costs.
12. When Lot was taken captive by the four mightiest kings, *Avraham* miraculously saved him, regardless if it cost him his merits. Why?

A Metamorphosis To Begin A New Existence

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1. *Avraham* was told by G-d that He will make his name great.
2. *Rashi*: The letter Hey will be added to his name: *Avraham* is numerically 248, which is equal to the number of parts of the human body.
3. Before *Avraham* was circumcised he did not have full control over his physicality.
4. He fathered *Yitzchok* after he was circumcised and added Hey to his name.
5. *Gemara*: G-d created the world to come with the spirituality of the letter Yud and the physical world with the spirituality of letter Hey.
6. *Midrash*: Just as the letter "Hey" brought about all existence, when added to your name, it will cause a metamorphic change within you.
7. *Avraham* became a new creation; one that did not previously exist.
8. The innateness of the Jew is the equivalent of all existence.
9. *Midrash*: G-d said "I will make you into a great People, not one that will evolve into a great People."
10. The Jewish People coming into being is the equivalent of Ex nihilo.

Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Lech-Lecha

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Avraham's Recognition of G-d

Midrash: Avraham our Patriarch wanted to come upon the Master of the Universe. Avraham's quest can be explained with an allegory. "Reb Yitzchak says, 'There was a traveler who had come upon a magnificent citadel that had thousands of rooms that were fully illuminated. The traveler asked, 'Who is the master of this citadel?' 'Is it possible that this magnificent, illuminated, citadel has no master? He continued to repeat his question until finally, the master of the citadel emerged and said, 'I am the master of the citadel.'"

"Similarly, Avraham looked at existence as something unique, magnificent, and relatively speaking unlimited. He was overwhelmed by its unfathomable dimension. He unceasingly asked, 'Who is the master of this (magnificent) universe?' All the positions of theology that existed in the world were rejected by him. He would not succumb to the falsehood of paganism and continued to ask the gnawing question 'Who is the Master?' until G-d revealed Himself saying, 'I am the Master.' Thus, Avraham did not come upon G-d through his own initiative but rather because he was unwilling to compromise his standard of truth, G-d revealed Himself to Avraham."

After G-d revealed Himself to Avraham, he began to espouse monotheism to all mankind. Those who were converted to monotheism by Avraham and Sarah his wife, are referred to by the Torah as "the souls that they had made in Charan..."

Rashi citing *Chazal*: Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women.

Gemara in Tractate *Berachos*: Avraham was the first individual to refer to G-d as "Adni – My Master."

"*Tosafos*: "How could the *Gemara* say that Avraham was the first person to refer to G-d as "Master" when Adam did so prior to Avraham? Because Adam was the handiwork of G-d, and was placed in the Garden of Eden, where G-d's Presence was obvious to him. However, Avraham who was born into a pagan world that was devoid of G-d's Presence, came upon Him through his own quest for truth. He was thus the first human being to recognize G-d as Master through his own efforts."

If G-d had revealed Himself to Avraham by saying "I am the Master" why did Avraham not acknowledge Him as such until many years later after he was told that he

was going to have a son at the age of 99? Seemingly, knowing that G-d is the “Master (*Adni*)” is not sufficient to internalize Him as such. A subject of a master must be willing to dedicate every aspect of his being to the service of his master, otherwise the acknowledgement of “Master” is the equivalent of deception.

Chazal: Before *Avraham* circumcised himself he was not in full control of five parts of his body – his eyes, ears, and his reproductive organ. It was because he was uncircumcised. After he was circumcised G-d added the letter “*hey*” to his name, making him “*Avraham*.” This name has the numerical equivalent of 248, which is the number of the parts of the human body, indicating that he was fully in control of his total being. If *Avraham* was not in full control of his being, he could not truthfully acknowledge G-d as the Master because he could not be full subservient to Him.

It is interesting to note that we refer to G-d as “*Adni*” despite the fact that we are not fully negated to Him as *Avraham*. At Sinai, G-d chose the Jewish people to be His. He had said that they would be His people and He would be their G-d. Thus, He established the state of being of Master/subject between Himself and the Jewish people. It is not something that the Jew needs to come upon in order to assume that level of classification; but rather, it is already part of his spiritual make up to be the proper servant of G-d.

G-d's Relationship with His Fold

Torah: There was a war between the Four Kings and the Five mighty Kings. After the Four Kings had vanquished the Five Kings, they had taken *Avraham*'s nephew *Lot* as captive. When *Avraham* was informed that his nephew had been taken, he immediately summoned a small group of his own along with *Eliezer* to rescue *Lot* by doing battle with the Four Kings. Although, he would be greatly outnumbered he entered into battle against the mightiest forces in existence without hesitation.

Midrash: “*Reb Shimon Ben Lakosh* says, ‘Beloved is the convert to G-d. He is more beloved to G-d than the multitudes that stood at Sinai to receive the *Torah*.’ Why is this so? Had the multitudes not heard the sounds, seen the burning fires, the lightening, the trembling of the mountain, and the sound of the great *shofar* they would not have accepted the yoke of heaven upon themselves. It was only because G-d had provided them with the setting that was conducive to be receptive to His Word

did they accept His Word. However, the convert who did not experience any semblance of what took place at Sinai comes before G-d to accept the yoke of heaven on his own accord. Is there anyone more beloved than he? Therefore, the convert is even more beloved than the multitudes...”

Midrash: “G-d says, ‘I value the converts because they are beloved to Me. These evil people (the Four Kings) who come to do battle against *Avraham*, the father of all converts shall surely fall before him. *Avraham* who had made so many converts will easily defeat the evil kings. Woe to them.” G-d loves the convert because he chose to accept the yoke of heaven upon himself without needing to be placed into an awesome environment to encourage him.

With this, we can understand the positive commandment to “love a convert.” There is negative commandment to not afflict a convert because the *Torah* states, “do not afflict the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Meaning, because the Jewish people understood what it is to suffer as a “stranger” they should not cause another to suffer as they did. However, the positive commandment of loving the convert can also be understood within the context of “You shall walk in His Ways...”

Torah: When G-d had commanded *Noach* to gather the *kosher* and the non-*kosher* species into the Ark He referred to them as “the pure animals and the not pure animals.” The *Torah* does not use the term ‘contaminated’ regarding the non-*kosher* species but rather “not pure.” The *Torah* goes out of its way to add words to express itself in a more refined manner.

Gemara in Tractate *Pesachim*: Extrapolating from the verse regarding the non-*Kosher* species that “One must speak in a refined manner.”

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos*: Explaining regarding the *mitzvah* of emulating G-d, “Just as He is Merciful, you should be merciful. Just as He is Gracious, you should be gracious, etc.” Similarly, the reason the Jew must love the convert is because as the *Midrash* tells us G-d Himself loves him. By loving the convert, the Jew emulates G-d and reflects His Ways.

Midrash that discusses G-d's special love for the convert: We can extrapolate a lesson regarding G-d's love the one who returns as a repentant Jew. We can learn this from a logical reasoning of “*kal v'chomer*.” If G-d loves the

convert who accepts upon himself the yoke of heaven although he is not obligated to become a Jew, how much more so does G-d love the Jew who is obligated to adhere to the *Torah* and chooses to accept the yoke of heaven upon himself by returning to his observance.

The Jew who does not affiliate with *Torah* because he was not given the opportunity to be raised and educate in its ways, is the equivalent of a lost son to G-d. When this individual chooses to pursue his Judaism and advance himself within his spirituality, G-d considers it as if His son has returned to Him, which is an even more advanced level of love than what He has for the convert.

The Far-Reaching Ramifications of Avraham's Sacrifice

Midrash Tanchuma citing a verse from *Song of Songs (Shir HaShirim)*: "A young sister (*achos*) whose breasts have not yet developed..." To whom is this verse referring? It is referring to *Avraham* when he was cast into the fiery Kiln of *Kasdim* by *Nimrod*. The term 'young (*kitana*)' alludes to the fact that when *Avraham* went into the fire it was at a time that he had not yet experienced any of G-d's miracles. Why is *Avraham* referred to as "*achosa* – sister" in the verse? (*Eecha* in Hebrew means "to mend").

Avraham was the *achos* to the world because there was no tear that he could not mend. (There was no theological issue or question that *Avraham* could not address and respond to with absoluteness. He refuted and dispelled all the heretical positions of his time, thus mending the fabric of society as the expert tailor darns the torn fabric). Why is *Avraham* referred to as the one whose 'breasts had not yet developed?' Because at this time, *Avraham* did not yet have children."

Midrash: "*Avraham* is like a wall upon which I (G-d) will build upon it an elaborate edifice of silver. He is like a wall that stands secure and in place even after being battered by war. Since *Avraham* was willing to sacrifice his life to sanctify the Name of G-d, he merited to be the father of the Jewish people. *Avraham* was given the choice to be like the wall through self sacrifice or not....*Avraham* said to G-d, 'I am like the wall. I am willing to give my life for the sake of Your Name.'

"The verse continues: 'My breasts are like towers...' *Avraham* said to G-d, 'Not only am willing to sacrifice my life for Your sake but also my children and the children of my children will give their lives for You – *Chananya*,

Meshael, and *Azaria*, *Reb Chananya Ben Tradyon* and his associates (Ten Martyrs).'" Because of *Avraham*'s willingness to die for G-d he is the equivalent of the "wall that repels all attacks." How was *Avraham* certain that his descendents would also have the same inner conviction to give their lives for the sake of G-d's Name?

Reb Chaim of Volozhin in *Ruach Chaim* (commentary on *Ethics of Our Fathers*): The reason every Jew throughout history has the ability to give his life to sanctify G-d's Name is because *Avraham* had inculcated into his own spirituality the ability to sacrifice himself for the sake of G-d. The Jewish people, being *Avraham*'s spiritual heirs, are thus endowed with that same ability.

Gemara in Tractate *Yevamos*: That there are characteristics that are unique to the Jewish people because they descend from the holy Patriarchs. The Jew possesses the characteristics of "Compassion, shame (conscience), and the propensity to do acts of kindness" only because he inherited them from his spiritual predecessors.

Gemara: If a Jew does not possess these characteristics his pedigree must be investigated.

Chazal: The Ten Martyrs, who were the ten most special *Torah* sages (who had lived in the same generation since the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai), were killed by the Romans in the most cruel way to atone for the sin of the selling of *Yosef* into slavery by his ten brothers. Had *Avraham* not been willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of G-d, then in the future there would not have been ten unique *Torah* sages who would sacrifice themselves for the sake of G-d.

If the Ten Martyrs would not have been sacrificed, then the sin of *Yosef*'s brothers would not have ever been atoned, thus tainting and diminishing the spirituality of the Jewish people forever. Therefore, the ramifications of *Avraham* and the fiery kiln went far beyond his own personal spiritual achievement. Its value was more than making *Avraham* the equivalent of a "wall that will repel the enemy" but rather it brought about a wall that protects the Jewish people until the end of time.

Avraham, the Lone Individual

Torah: *Avraham*'s nephew, *Lot*, was taken captive by the Four mightiest Kings (who had defeated the Five Kings in battle).

Torah: “Then there came the fugitive and told *Avraham*, *ha’lvri*, ...And when *Avraham* heard that his kinsman was taken captive, (he went to battle).” In this context, the *Torah* refers to *Avraham* as “*Ha’lvri*.”

Chazal: He was referred to as “*Ha’lvri* in order to quantify him as a single individual against the entire world. Although the world was pagan, he nevertheless rose to the challenge to introduce monotheism to all humanity, regardless of the overwhelming odds that were against him. As *Chazal* state, “He stood on one side (*eiver echad*) and the world stood on the other side (*eiver hasheini*).” *Avraham* engaged in this objective, even if it was at the risk of his life. He was renowned for espousing the existence of an Omnipotent Being Who was the Master of the Universe. Why in this particular context, when he is being informed that his nephew *Lot* was taken captive is he identified as “*Ha’lvri*?”

The reason the Four Kings had taken *Lot* captive was to draw *Avraham* into battle to ultimately kill him. The “fugitive” who had informed *Avraham*, was *Og* the giant and king of *Bashan*. His only interest in informing *Avraham* was so that he should go to battle and be killed so that he could take *Sarah* as his wife. How were the Four Kings and *Og* convinced that *Avraham* would respond and risk his life by engaging in an impossible task?

It was only because *Avraham* was the “*lvri*” They understood him to be an individual who was irrational and fanatical. Thus, he would enter into battle and be killed without hesitation. However, *Og* and the Four Kings did not understand or realize the spiritual dimension of *Avraham*. Physical odds had no relevance to his dimension of being. He thus vanquished the Four Kings and was proclaimed as the victor.

One of the kings that had been initially taken captive by the Four Kings was the king of *Sodom*. He had approached *Avraham* with a demand. He had said, “Give me the people and the possessions shall be yours.” *Avraham*’s response to the King of *Sodom* was, “I will not take from you as much as a thread or a bootstrap.”

Seemingly, the proposal of the King of *Sodom* was at the height of absurdity. How is it possible that a person who is a captive and only a chattel of the victor able to dictate such terms? Nevertheless, because of his insolence and essence of evil, he believed that he could negotiate with *Avraham*. *Avraham* rejected out of hand his offer. He wanted nothing from him or his community that was a personification of evil. He did not want the spoils or

the people because of their association with evil. This is similar to an idolatrous city in the Land of Israel, in which the majority of its inhabitants worshiped idolatry.

Torah: All of *Sodom*’s possessions, even those who did not participate in idolatry must be burned because they were exposed to the spiritual contamination of idolatry.

Gemara in Tractate *Chullin*: Because *Avraham* had refused to take even a thread or bootstrap from the spoils of *Sodom*, the Jewish people merited two *mitzvos*. In the merit of the “thread” they received the *mitzvah* of *tzitzis* which corresponds to the 613 *mitzvos* of the *Torah*. In the merit of the “bootstrap” they had merited *tefillin*, which is a “sign between them and G-d.”

Torah: When *Avraham* hosted the three angels, he was personally involved in every aspect of the hospitality that was offered to them. However, when he had offered them water to wash their feet, he delegated this task to a third party. *Avraham* had offered water to wash their feet because he had suspected that they may be pagans who worship the dust of the earth. He thus he did not want the idolatrous dust to be tracked into his home. *Avraham*’s revulsion towards idolatry was so great that he did not want any association with it. He thus divorced himself from giving the water to the angels, but rather, he delegated it.

Chazal: Every aspect of hospitality that *Avraham* performed himself, the Jewish people received directly from G-d during their forty-year trek in the desert. However, regarding the act of hospitality that was performed by *Avraham* through an intermediary, it was given through an intermediary in the desert. Consequently, the Manna, Clouds of Glory, and quail came directly from G-d without any human initiative. However, the water came to the Jewish people only through *Moshe* striking the rock.

The Depth of *Avraham*’s Gratitude

Torah: When *Lot* had returned from Egypt together with *Avraham*, he possessed great wealth. There was a quarrel between his shepherds and those of *Avraham*. The shepherds of *Lot* were grazing their flocks in fields that were not theirs. They were in fact stealing from others. When *Avraham* became aware of the dispute between his shepherds and those of his nephew, the *Torah* states, “So *Avraham* said to *Lot*, ‘Please let there be no strife between me and you... for we are kinsman...

Please separate from me: If you go left I will go right..." Although *Lot's* integrity was corrupt, *Avraham* pledged to come to his aid if he should be in need of him.

Torah: It alludes that when *Lot* separated from his uncle *Avraham*, he rejected all that *Avraham* valued, including his beliefs. *Lot* had become a heretic. In addition, *Lot* chose to settle in a community that is quantified as the most wicked, as it states, "Now the people of *Sodom* were wicked and sinful towards *Hashem*, exceedingly." Despite the fact that *Lot* has assumed a posture of evil, when *Avraham* was informed that he was taken captive by the Four Mighty Kings, he immediately went to battle with them in order to rescue his nephew. He needed to rely on many miracles in order to single-handedly defeat the mightiest kings in existence.

After *Avraham's* victory over the Four Kings, G-d came to him and said, "Do not be afraid, your reward is great..." *Avraham* was concerned that all of his merits had been depleted because they were needed to bring about the miracles that were necessary to defeat the Four Kings. G-d reassured *Avraham* that not only were his merits not depleted, but his reward is great for vanquishing these evil kingdoms. *Avraham* had risked his entire life's spiritual accomplishments in order to save *Lot*, although he was a corrupted and evil person. Why was *Avraham* committed to the safety and welfare of his nephew *Lot* at all costs?

It is interesting to note that when *Sarah*, the wife of *Avraham*, had told him that *Ishmael* needed to be driven from their home because his behavior was inappropriate, *Avraham* was pained and anguished. G-d told *Avraham*, "All that *Sarah* tells you, you should heed her voice." Meaning, *Avraham* should listen to the prophetic words of his wife, *Sarah*. It had been confirmed by G-d that *Ishmael* had assumed certain characteristics that represent the beginnings of evil behavior. *Avraham* had sent away *Ishmael*, with his mother *Hagar*, with a small amount of provisions to survive in the desert.

Midrash: The reason for this was, "*Avraham* hated his son *Ishmael* because of his despicable behavior." Why did *Avraham* not demonstrate concern for the welfare of his own son *Ishmael*, as he had for his nephew *Lot*?

Lot had demonstrated a level of evil that went beyond anything that *Avraham* had seen in *Ishmael*.

Before *Avraham* had left *Kasdim*, *Nimrod*, the king, had given him an ultimatum to either bow to the idol or be thrown into the fiery kiln. *Avraham* chose to die rather than bow to the idol. He emerged miraculously unscathed. *Haran*, *Avraham's* brother, the father of *Lot*, was also given the same ultimatum to bow or be thrown into the fire. He decided that if his brother *Avraham* emerged alive then he would not bow. Because *Avraham* had come out alive, *Haran* chose not to bow and thus was cast into the kiln. *Haran* perished in the fire.

Although *Haran's* entering into the fire was with the intent to come out alive, as his brother *Avraham* had, nevertheless because he perished as a result of not bowing to the idol, his death is considered a sanctification of G-d's Name. He chose to give his life rather than bow to the idol. *Avraham* felt that he had a debt of gratitude to his brother for bringing about such a sanctification of G-d's Name. He thus took upon himself the responsibility to raise and protect his nephew *Lot*.

Avraham had a personal debt of gratitude to *Lot* himself. *Torah* at the time of the destruction of *Sodom*: "And G-d had remembered *Avraham*."

Midrash: G-d had remembered that when *Avraham* was in Egypt with his wife and had presented her as his sister, *Lot* did not reveal her true identity. He remained silent. In the merit of that silence, he was "extricated" from the destruction of *Sodom*. Because of this exceptional accommodation, *Avraham* had a debt of gratitude to *Lot* himself. *Avraham* was committed to the safety of his nephew *Lot*, not as an indication of his goodness, but purely as a debt that had to be paid – regardless of *Lot's* evil status. *Avraham* was a debtor to *Lot* and his father *Haran*. Even if he needed to put his spiritual accomplishments of his life at risk, he was not deterred from his responsibility. However, regarding his own son *Ishmael*, he was not indebted. Therefore, when it was confirmed to him that his son had assumed certain evil characteristics, he drove him from his home with a minimal amount of provisions.



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