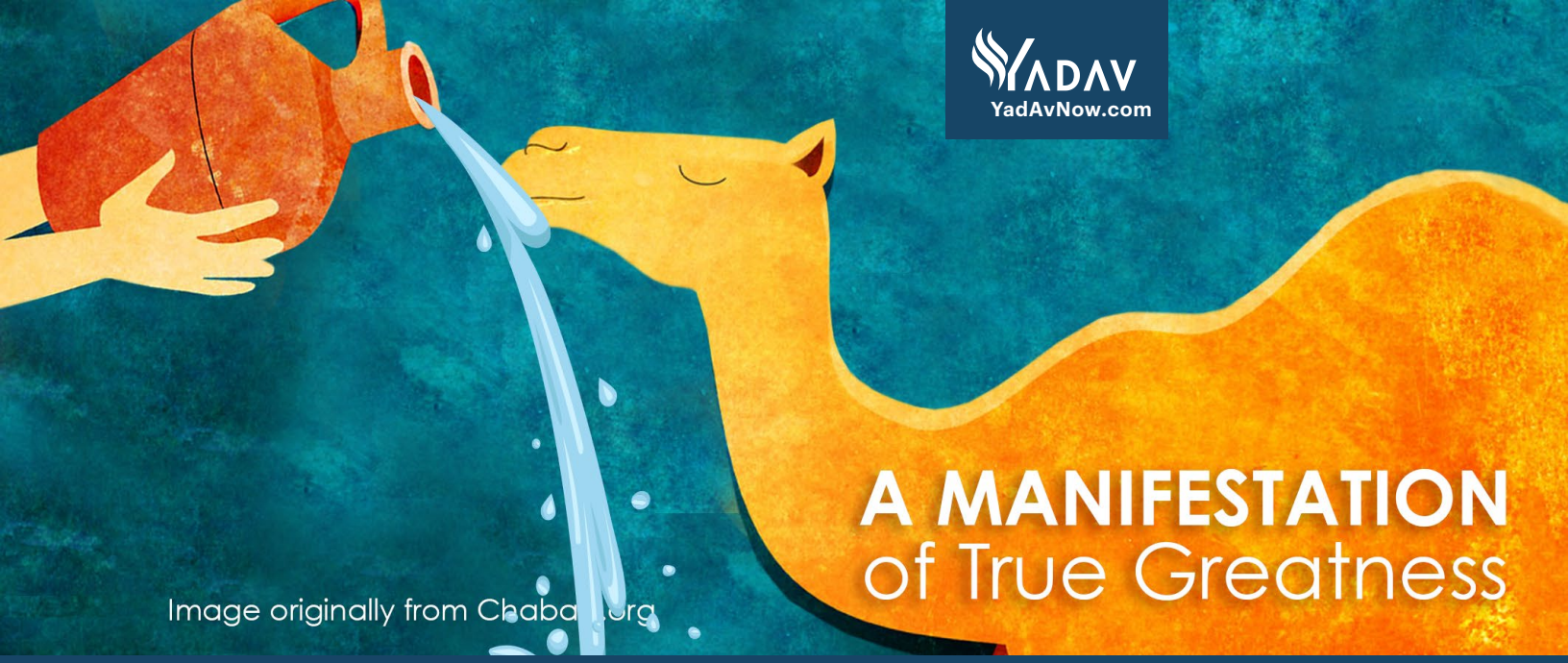

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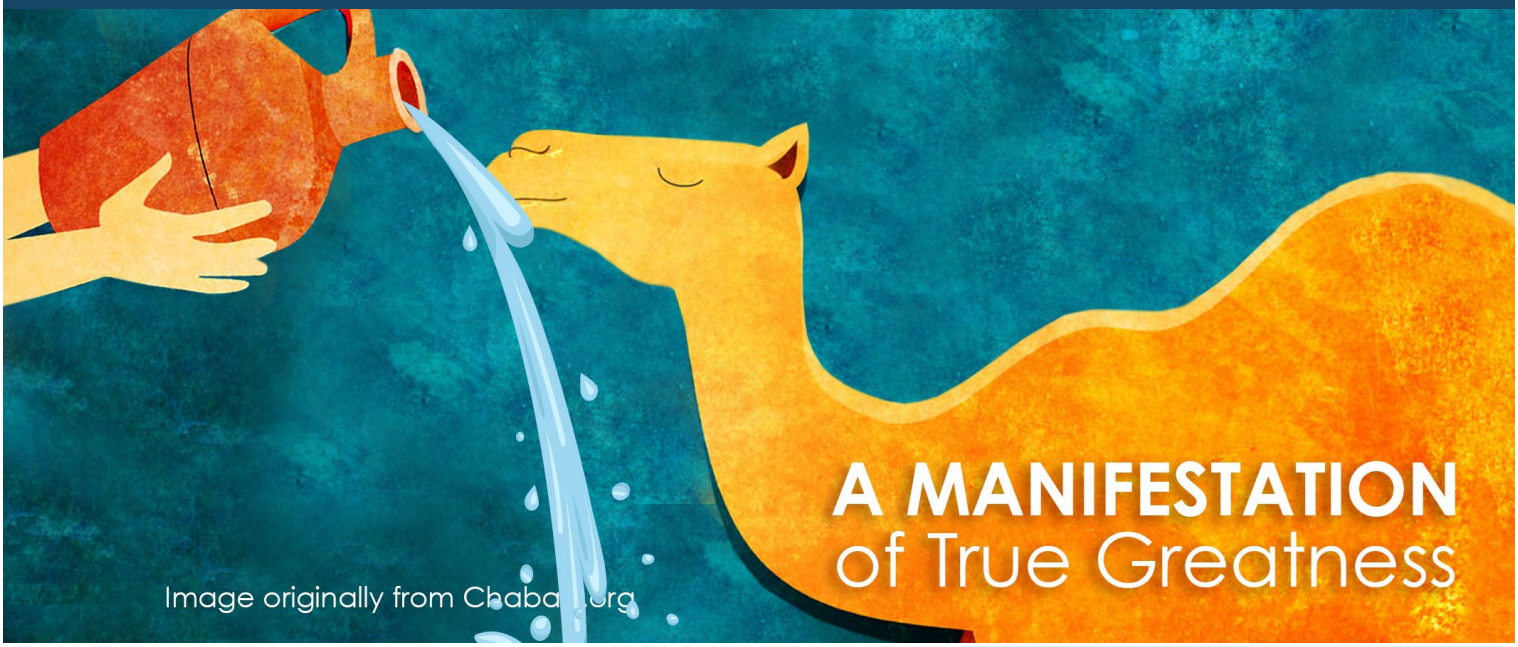

Achieving G-dliness Through Challenge

Torah: Regarding the *Akeidah*, which was the most difficult of the ten tests that G-d presented to *Avraham*, "And it happened after these things that G-d tested *Avraham*..."

Sforno: "Since *Avraham* had the potential to be the beloved of G-d, he should be seen as he was in potential. As a result of this, he will have a greater semblance to his Creator, Who is good to the world in actuality. The intent of the essence of man is to resemble his Creator to his best ability as the *Torah* attests regarding the creation of man, '(G-d said to the angels) Let us make man in our image and in our form...'" Thus, by presenting man with challenges and tests, man is able to emulate G-d. If man is able to succeed by meeting the test, he will have a greater commonality with Him. The objective of the test of the *Akeidah* was to actualize *Avraham*'s love for G-d and thus allow him to cleave to his Maker to a greater degree.

There is a positive commandment that a Jew must emulate G-d. As it states, "You shall walk in His ways..."

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos*: "Just as G-d is Merciful, you must be merciful. Just as G-d is Gracious, you must be gracious..." What is the value of emulating the characteristics of G-d? G-d gave man the ability to emulate Him in order to establish a commonality with his Creator. By doing so, man is able to attach himself to G-d to establish an intimate relationship with Him.

Ramchal: The reason man was given the power of choice was in order to allow man to possess G-d's characteristic of choice. Choice being the characteristic that discerns man from the unintelligible creature is a G-dly characteristic.

Maharal: The reason the original man was called "*Adam* (earth)" is because he was taken from the earth (*adamah*). Earth, if left fallow, is only a clump of earth with no intrinsic value; however, if one were to

address its potential and cultivate it then all life will emanate from it. Thus, the essence of the human being is reflected through "*Adam* (earth)." Just as earth has potential that can be actualized, so too is man's essence something that can be actualized by making correct and proper choices.

Sarah's Perceiving Goodness in All of Her Travails

Torah: "*Sarah*'s lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years these were the years of *Sarah*'s life." If *Sarah* had lived 127 years, it is obvious that these were the years of her life. Why does the verse conclude with the words "these were the years of *Sarah*'s life"?

Rashi citing *Chazal*: The conclusion of the verse to mean, "All of the years of *Sarah* were equally good." How is it possible to say that all the years of *Sarah*'s life were equally good when her life was fraught with difficulty, pain and trauma? Until she had reached the age of eighty-nine she was barren. She believed that she would never merit to be the Matriarch of the Jewish people.

When *Sarah* and *Avraham* were in the community of *Charan* they were regarded as pariahs. Her husband *Avraham* was taken by the evil king *Nimrod* to be thrown into the fiery kiln of *Kasdim* because he refused to bow to the idol. *Avraham* and *Sarah* had gone to *Canaan* as G-d had instructed them to do. However when they were confronted with a famine, they chose to go to Egypt. In Egypt *Sarah* was taken by Pharaoh and was nearly defiled by him, if it were not for G-d's intervention.

Later again, *Avraham* and *Sarah* journeyed to *Gerar* where she was nearly defiled by the Philistine king, *Avimelech*. After ten years of being in *Canaan*, *Sarah* told *Avraham* to take her maidservant as a wife because she was certain that she was barren, and would not have a child. *Hagar* bore a son to *Avraham*. This episode with *Hagar* caused *Sarah* great humiliation and was ultimately the cause of *Sarah*'s passing when she received the news of the *Akeidah*.

Gemara in Tractate *Rosh Hashanah*: When *Hagar* became pregnant, she treated her mistress with disrespect. *Sarah*, being upset said to *Avraham*, "Let G-d judge between me and you." Because she had summoned Divine Justice upon *Avraham*, she was subject to Divine Justice and thus she was not protected from the words of *Satan*, who informed her about the *Akeidah*, which was the cause of her passing.

Chazal: Despite all of these difficult moments and painful events, all of the years of *Sarah*'s life were equally good. Perhaps we can understand the words of *Chazal* with the concept of "*Gamzu la'tova* – it is all for the best."

Mishna in Tractate *Berachos*: "Just as one blesses for the good, one must bless for what is (perceived as) the bad." Ultimately, everything is in the best interest of the individual. Because of the level of trust that *Sarah* had in G-d, she envisioned her entire life for the good. However, it is difficult to say that this is what the *Torah* is communicating through these words. *Sarah*, our Matriarch, did not only believe that the years of her life were "good" despite their difficulty, she understood and perceived the goodness in every one of the events. She appreciated and understood that every event in her life was integral to her own spiritual growth and the future spiritual development of the Jewish people.

Although *Avraham* was thrown into the fiery kiln of *Kasdim*, when he had immerged, he was established as the founding father of the eternal people. When *Sarah* was taken by Pharaoh and not defiled as a result of her own initiative, which was through summoning an angel to strike Pharaoh, the ramifications of her initiative offered Divine Protection to the Jewish women during the period of bondage in Egypt for 210 years.

Chazal: There is a principle, "The actions/experiences of the Patriarchs are a sign for the children." Meaning, the actions of the Patriarchs set in motion and establish future events that the Jewish people will experience and of which they will be the beneficiaries.

Midrash: The Jewish women, who were in Egypt for a period of 210 years, were not defiled by their Egyptian masters. The Jewish women in Egypt remained pure in the merit of *Sarah* our Matriarch. *Sarah*, our Matriarch was taken by Pharaoh who wished to make her his queen. She could have succumbed to the allure of the prestige and glory of becoming the queen of the most advanced civilization. However, because of her dimension of devout piety, she would not consider it for a moment. Thus, the Jewish women in Egypt merited Divine Protection and therefore the pedigree of the Jewish people was not put in jeopardy.

Torah: As a result of the sin of *Baal Peor*, there 24,000 causalities that died in a plague. Because of this loss, G-d said that a census of the Jewish people must be taken to determine their number. When the *Torah* refers to the families of the tribes that were counted, it adds the letters "*hey*" and "*yud*" to their names.

Rashi citing *Chazal*: "The nations of the world were disgracing the families of the Jewish people. They had said, 'How could you deceive the world by claiming that you are pure? It is something that is obviously impossible. If the Egyptians controlled and dominated the bodies of the Jewish males in bondage, is it not logical to say that they defiled their women? G-d therefore associated His Name "*Yud* and *Hey*" with the tribes to attest to the fact that they are pure and were not fathered by their Egyptian masters."

It was because of this pedigree of the Jewish people that they were the only nation qualified to receive the *Torah* a Sinai. All this was only possible because *Sarah*, our Matriarch chose to not allow herself to be defiled. Despite the fact that being taken by Pharaoh was a difficult moment at the time in *Sarah*'s life, its consequence addressed and allowed the purpose of existence to be actualized, which was the receiving of the *Torah* at Sinai.

Before *Sarah*'s passing, she had perceived all of the goodness in her life. *Sarah* had requested of *Avraham* to take *Hagar* as a wife in order for her to merit children through her. Ultimately, *Hagar* and *Ishmael* were driven from *Avraham*'s home because of *Ishmael*'s subtle negative influence on *Yitzchak*. *Ishmael* fathered twelve tribes.

Chazal: The twelve tribes of *Ishmael* correspond to the twelve tribes of the Jewish people, who are quantified as "the tribes of G-d." Despite the fact that events surrounding *Hagar* and *Ishmael* were difficult and painful, *Sarah* understood and appreciated the necessity of having a counter balance to the Jewish people. *Sarah*'s faith in G-d went beyond trusting that is good, but rather she perceived the actual goodness that G-d had brought upon her.

The Obstacle to Spiritual Ascent

Chazal: The words of the *Torah* are concise and specific. Many fundamental laws are drawn from a single letter of a word that is contained within the *Torah*. Nevertheless, the narrative of *Eliezer*'s mission regarding locating the appropriate wife for *Yitzchak* is repeated multiple times.

Rashi citing the *Gemara* in Tractate *Sanhedrin*: "*Rav Acha* says, 'We learn from the repetition of the narrative of *Eliezer* that the ordinary speech of the servants of the Patriarchs are more beautiful (to G-d) then the *Torah* of the children.'" Evidently, since there is nothing that is superfluous in the *Torah*, there is a profound lesson to be learned and applied from the narrative of *Eliezer*. The *Torah* identifies *Eliezer*, the servant of *Avraham*, as "Damesek *Eliezer* – *Eliezer* from Damascus."

Gemara in Tractate *Yomah*: The *Torah* is not informing us of *Eliezer*'s origin, that he came from the city of Damascus, but rather the term "*Damesek*" is an acronym that connotes – "He drew from the wellspring of *Torah* of his master (*Avraham*)." Meaning, all the *Torah* that *Avraham* had learned was transmitted to his servant *Eliezer*. As a result of becoming a repository and disseminator of his master's teachings, *Eliezer* radiated a holiness that had a semblance of his master's.

Midrash: When *Eliezer* had arrived at the home of Besuel to negotiate for the hand of Rivka, on behalf of *Avraham*, they had mistakenly believed that he was *Avraham*. In addition to *Eliezer*'s spiritual dimension, *Avraham* had fully entrusted *Eliezer* with all of his wealth to be the guardian of his fortune. *Eliezer*'s dimension as a person in the spiritual and material realm was outstanding and unique.

Despite his dimension of being and capacity, *Eliezer*'s name, within the context of locating a wife for *Yitzchak*, is not mentioned. When *Eliezer* beseeched G-d to succeed in his mission of finding the appropriate wife for *Yitzchak*, it was only for the sake of kindness with his master of *Avraham*. As it states, "Do a kindness for my master *Avraham*." Although he possessed exceptional personal spiritual worth capability, he had no self-interest in succeeding.

All *Eliezer* wanted was to succeed for the sake of *Avraham*. When he presented himself to *Besuel*, the father of *Rivka*, he identified himself as "I am the servant of *Avraham*." He did not identify himself by name. Despite his level of accomplishment and renown, he was fully negated to his master *Avraham*. *Moshe* is never identified or quantified by the *Torah*

or *Chazal* as "the most devout or pious Jew" who ever lived, but rather, as "the most humble man on the face of the earth."

The basis for *Moshe*'s unparalleled dimension of spirituality was due to the fact that he was completely negated and nullified to G-d, his Master. He is identified by G-d as "*Moshe*, My servant," just as *Eliezer* had presented himself as "the servant of *Avraham*." It was because of this level of negation that *Moshe* merited that G-d should speak to him in a wakestate at a level of face to face. His total being was thus spiritualized. In order for one to appreciate and revere the *Torah* for its unlimited dimension of spirituality and to fulfill its mitzvos in the most meticulous manner, one must negate himself to G-d. This prerequisite is vital to succeed in the observance of the *Torah* and its acquisition.

This is the reason the narrative of *Eliezer* is repeated a number of times in the *Torah*. It is for us to understand how the subject of a master must negate himself to him, despite the individual's accomplishments and ability. Identically, in order to succeed in the service of G-d, one must negate himself to his Maker. Only then will he perform the *Torah* selflessly and meticulously. It is therefore sufficient for the laws of the *Torah* to be alluded to through inference and not necessarily being explicit.

Yitzchak, Encompassing the Destiny of the Jewish People

Torah: "Now *Avraham* was old, well on in years, and *Hashem* had blessed *Avraham* with everything (*ba kol*)."

Rashi citing *Chazal*: The numerical value of the word "*ba kol* – everything" is the equivalent numerical value of the word "*ben*- son." Meaning, the verse "*Hashem* had blessed *Avraham* with everything (*ba kol*)" is referring to *Yitzchak* his son. Despite the unparalleled spiritual accomplishments of *Avraham* and his great wealth and renown, his greatest achievement in life was the fathering of *Yitzchak*. Prior to *Yitzchak*, all of *Avraham*'s accomplishments were only a means to an end, qualifying him to father the future Patriarch of the Jewish people.

Torah: Regarding G-d's promise to *Avraham* that he will have a son, "...your wife *Sarah* will bear a son and you shall call him *Yitzchak*..."

Rashi citing the *Midrash*: The name *Yitzchak* is an acronym. The letter '*yud*' which has the numerical value of ten alludes to the ten tests that G-d presented to *Avraham*. The letter '*tzadi*' which has the numerical value of ninety corresponds to the age at which *Sarah* had given birth to *Yitzchak*. The letter '*koof*' which has the numerical value of 100, represents the age of *Avraham* when he father his son. The letter '*ches*' which has the numerical value of eight alludes to the fact that *Yitzchak* was circumcised eight days after he was born.

We are able to understand from the name that was chosen by G-d for *Yitzchak*, that the ten tests that were presented to *Avraham* have relevance to *Yitzchak*. Although *Avraham* himself advanced spiritually with every test, the true value of that spiritual growth was only as it related to *Yitzchak*, the future Patriarch of the Jewish people. The fact that *Avraham* and *Sarah* were barren until the age of 100 and 90, respectively, was only because it has relevance to the future potential of *Yitzchak*. Everything that *Avraham* our Patriarch and *Sarah* our Matriarch achieved in their lives was manifested in "*Yitzchak*." He truly encompassed everything that they had accomplished because he was the one to determine the future destiny of the Jewish people.

Since *Yitzchak* was to be the one who would address the objective of existence as a Patriarch of the Jewish people, then he surely needed the appropriate wife who would qualify to be the matriarch. *Avraham* was the only one who fully understood and appreciated what qualifications were needed for the future matriarch. Any deviation from the specific spiritual criteria that were required of the matriarch of the Jewish people would have negative ramifications regarding the destiny of existence.

Therefore, despite the fact that *Eliezer* was the dedicated servant of *Avraham* and a spiritual giant in his own right, *Avraham* bound him with an oath to ensure that he would carry out his mission of finding the appropriate wife exactly as *Avraham* had instructed him. If *Eliezer* were to deviate as much as an iota from *Avraham*'s prerequisites, he would forfeit his life in this world and his share in the world to come.

Although *Avraham* entrusted *Eliezer* with his entire material estate, he could not risk the future of existence

to anyone without binding them with an oath. This is because *Avraham* understood and appreciated that he was blessed with *Yitzchak* who encompassed "everything" as the future Patriarch.

Lot, the Antithesis of Avraham
(from Vayeira)

Torah: Although *Sodom* was destroyed by the wrath of G-d, *Lot*, *Avraham*'s nephew and his two daughters were spared from destruction. After they had escaped with their lives, *Lot* and his daughters sought refuge in a cave. The daughters of *Lot* believed that just as *Sodom* was destroyed, so too was the rest of existence. They believed that they and their father were the only survivors of humanity.

Torah: "The older one said to the younger, 'Our father is old and there is no man in the land to marry us in the usual manner. Come let us ply our father with wine and lay with him that he may give life to offspring... thus *Lot's* two daughters conceived from their father. The older daughter bore a son and she called him *Moav*...and the younger one bore a son and called his name *Ben-Ammi*, he is the ancestor of the children of *Ammon* until this day."

After *Lot's* father perished in the fiery kiln of *Kasdim*, *Avraham* had taken full responsibility for all his needs. When *Avraham* left *Charan* to go to *Canaan*, he had taken Lot along with him. They had traveled together to Egypt because of the famine that was in *Canaan*. As a result of *Lot's* association with his uncle *Avraham* in Egypt, Lot became extremely wealthy. When they returned together to *Canaan* with their great wealth and flocks, there was a dispute between the shepherds of Lot and those of *Avraham*. *Avraham* said to his nephew, "Because of our disagreement, we must part our ways. If you go to the right I will go to the left..."

After *Lot* had separated himself from his uncle, *Avraham* was informed that he had been taken captive at a later time. Despite *Lot's* spiritual shortcomings and evil ways, *Avraham* put at risk his life and all of his merits in order to rescue his nephew through miracles. After being the beneficiary of *Avraham*'s kindness and witnessing G-d's miracles that brought about *Avraham*'s victory, *Lot* decided to return to the evil community of *Sodom*. When G-d destroyed *Sodom*, *Lot* deserved to perish together with the community; however, he was only spared because of the merit of his righteous uncle *Avraham*.

It is obvious that *Lot* never acknowledged or appreciated his uncle's dedication and contribution to his life. He was the consummate ingrate. After *Sodom* was destroyed, *Lot's* daughters had only initiated their incestuous act with their father because they had believed that all humanity had been destroyed and they were the only survivors of existence. Just as at the beginning of creation G-d allowed *Cain* and *Abel* to procreate with their siblings for the sake of populating the world, so too did they believe that this was the beginning of a new existence. The fact that they had believed that the world was destroyed and their father was the only survivor, is a confirmation that *Lot* never shared with his children that he had a righteously devout uncle who was beloved by G-d. He never mentioned how he owed every aspect of his life to this special person.

Torah: Until the end of time a Moabite and an Ammonite is not permitted to intermarry with the Jewish people, even after conversion to Judaism. This is because in the fortieth year of the Jewish people's wandering in the desert they had come upon the Moabites and Ammonites and were denied their hospitality. As the *Torah* states, "They did not offer them their bread and water when they had left Egypt."

Ramban: The reason the Moabites and Ammonites are not permitted to intermarry into the Jewish people is because they should have shown their indebtedness to the Jewish people for what *Avraham* had done for their ancestor *Lot*. Had it not been for *Avraham*, they would not exist. Their expression of ingratitude was a reflection of the essence that was portrayed by their ancestor *Lot*. If one is able to repent and atone for one's spiritual failings, why should the Moabites and Ammonites not be given a chance to correct their ways? Why are they disqualified for eternity from intermarrying into the Jewish people?

Torah: After *Adam* had eaten from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, "G-d said to *Adam*, 'Have you eaten of the tree which I commanded you not to eat? *Adam* responded, 'The woman whom You gave me– she gave me of the tree, and I ate.'"

Chazal: *Adam* was an ingrate because he had blamed his sin upon G-d. He had stated that the cause of his

sin was the wife that G-d had provided for him. Rather than acknowledging that the woman was a blessing through which he could achieve spiritual perfection, he regarded her as the cause of his failing. *Chazal* thus quantify *Adam* as the ultimate ingrate "*Kafui tova* – one who perceives good as evil." *Adam* thus forfeited his spiritual stature as the one who would bring about the perfection of existence.

Avraham, our Patriarch, in contrast appreciated all the good that was bestowed upon himself and existence. His quest to identify his true benefactor allowed him to come upon G-d. *Avraham* wanted to demonstrate his thanks and dedicate his life to serving the One who provides for all existence. He had asked many times, "Who is the master of this great citadel that is illuminated? (Whom must I serve?)" Since the basis for *Avraham*'s coming upon G-d was rooted in his desire to reciprocate to his benefactor, he therefore corrected *Adam*'s deficiency of being an ingrate.

Avraham, by purging himself of this deficiency, was able to assume the stature and potential of the original human being that was meant to bring the world to spiritual perfection. Therefore, the Moabites and Ammonites, demonstrating their ingratitude by not reciprocating to the Jewish people, revealed that they are not qualified to become part of the Jewish people. The characteristic of indebtedness and appreciation of the Jewish people would have been put in jeopardy.

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