

Parashat Toldot, 5784, 2023:

Yedid Nefesh

Rabbi David Etengoff

ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו, כל בני ישראל בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

Our *parasha* contains a pivotal narrative in the lives of the *Avot*, namely, a famine in *Eretz Yisrael* coupled with Yitzchak's desire to travel to Egypt to avoid starvation. Unlike *Avraham Avinu* who faced the same scenario and traveled to Egypt, Hashem reveals himself to Yitzchak and commands him to remain in *Eretz Yisrael*: "And Hashem appeared to him, and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land that I will tell you.'" (*Sefer Bereishit* 26:2, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) In addition to Hashem's command to "dwell in the land that I will tell you," He informs Yitzchak he will have numerous offspring, and the *brit* made with Avraham will be fulfilled through him:

Sojourn in this land, and I [Hashem] will be with you, and I will bless you, for to you and to your children will I give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Avraham, your father. And I will multiply your children like the stars of the heavens, and I will give your children all these lands, and all the nations of the earth will bless themselves by your children. (26:3-4, emendations my own)

The Torah often refrains from providing a rationale for future events. In our case, however, Hashem explicitly tells Yitzchak the precise reason why he will receive these multiple *brachot*, "Because Avraham hearkened to My voice, and kept My charge (*mishmarti*), My commandments (*mitzvotai*), My statutes (*chuchotai*), and My instructions (*torotai*)." (26:5)

Rashi explains these terms in the following manner:

Mishmarti: [Referring to] decrees to distance [himself] from transgressing the warnings in the Torah, e.g. secondary prohibitions to prevent incest from occurring, and the Rabbinic decrees to safeguard the prohibitions of the Sabbath.

Mitzvotai: [Referring to] things, which, had they not been written, would have been fit to be commanded, e.g. [prohibitions against] robbery and bloodshed.

Chuchotai: [Referring to] things that the evil inclination and the nations of the world argue against, e.g. [the prohibitions against] eating pork and wearing garments of wool and linen for which no reason [is given], but [which are] the decree of the King and His statutes over His subjects.

Torotai: To include the Oral Law, the laws given to Moses from Sinai.

Rashi's analysis is based upon a variety of Rabbinic sources that maintain that Avraham fulfilled the entire Torah, up to and including Rabbinic decrees and enactments—many generations before it was given at Mount Sinai. By way of illustration:

Rab said: "Our father Avraham kept the entire Torah, as it is said: 'Because Avraham hearkened to My voice [kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My instructions].'" (*Sefer Bereishit* 26:5) ...Raba or R. Ashi said: "Avraham, our father, kept even the law concerning the *eruv tavshilin* as it is said: 'My Torahs:' one being the Written Torah, the other the Oral Torah." (*Talmud Bavli, Yoma* 28b, translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations to enhance clarity)

Why did Avraham fulfill the Torah if he was not commanded to do so? My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, guides us toward an answer:

In many respects, God was closer to Avraham than He was to Moses. An intangible feeling of tenderness lingers over the relationship of God to Avraham. There is the creative ardor, moving devotion and a lack of tension. All that God requests of Avraham is destined to promote the latter's happiness and greatness. (*The Emergence of Ethical Man*, Michael S. Berger, page 155)

The Rav further notes that Avraham acquired the moral law, and I believe, by extension, the Halacha, through "the *mahazeh*, the prophetic vision, not the royal decree [as in the case of Moses]." He continues this theme and suggests, "There is no imposition of divine authority... Only a bilateral covenant, which binds both man and God, was concluded." According to the Rav, Avraham was Hashem's friend; thus, once Avraham received his

divine prophetic visions, he did everything in his power to comply with the Almighty's every request:

God addresses Himself to Avraham not in the commanding, authoritative tone of the L-rd but in the comradely, friendly manner of a fellow wanderer. He [God] wants a covenant with him. God, as it were, is lonesome and He is anxious to find a companion. Fellowship between God and man is the motto of Avraham's life. (154-155, all brackets and underlining my own)

Rav Soloveitchik's statement that "God, as it were, is lonesome and He is anxious to find a companion" is a theological *tour de force*, teaching us that as much as we wish to encounter Hashem and draw close to Him, He, too, longs for the Jewish people's embrace. In many ways, this concept is reminiscent of the first stanza of the stirring liturgical poem, "Yedid Nefesh," that is often sung in Ashkenazi synagogues during *Kabbalat Shabbat*, and at *Shalosh Seudot*:

Beloved of the soul (*yedid nefesh*), Compassionate Father, draw Your servant to Your Will, then Your servant will hurry like a hart to bow before Your majesty; to him Your friendship will be sweeter than the dripping of the honeycomb and any taste.
(Translation, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yedid_Nefesh#Text)

May we ever strive to emulate *Avraham Avinu* as we reach out to Hashem, our *Yedid Nefesh*, with heartfelt *tefilot* and dedication to His holy Torah. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>.

Please contact me at rdbe718@gmail.com to be added to my weekly email list.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)