

WHAT MAKES A HERO?

The Zohar's story about Abraham, Rashi's story about Jacob, and the Rebbe's story about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. What do the stories have in common? And what was the common denominator which made them eternal Jewish heroes?

TEACHER'S MANUAL



JEWISH INSIGHTS

A TASTE OF THE REBBE'S TEACHINGS



PARSHAT VAYETZE

Book of Genesis / Bereshit

Dedicated by Marty & Kate Rifkin KMR Group Foundation

Vancouver, WA

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Shluchim Office International

816 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY 11213 718.221.0500

5782 - 2021

Founded in 2007 in memory of Rabbi Gabi and Rivky Holtzberg OB"M Shluchim of the Rebbe to Mumbai India

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The Rebbe makes a similar point in a different talk:
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Rabbi Shimon famously said that he could absolve the entire world of G-d's judgement (Source 8).

A. The Lost Glory6

But, the Rebbe asks, what purpose does that serve? The judgements are given for good reason!

The answer reflects the same point: Rabbi Shimon obviously didn't just make such broad sweeping absolutions. Rather, he taught people to change their ways — through studying the inner dimension of Torah — and thereby absolved them of G-d's judgment. In other words, Rabbi Shimon isn't to be understood as simply doing magical absolutions; rather, he made a genuine influence on people — and thereby achieved his goal.

Introduction:

In this week's lesson, we will read three different talks of the Rebbe which concern three different righteous Jewish people:

We begin with the story from this week's Torah portion: Jacob our forefather, living in Beersheba with his parents, leaves town to head for Haran. We are told that the city lost its glory — but what about his parents who were living there?

Noah: We are told that he would be considered unimpressive had he lived in Abraham's generation. But one second; he actually lived in Abraham's generation...

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: we are told that he could absolve all of their judgments for sins. But don't those judgments serve a purpose?

One answer resolves all three problems.

A. The Lost Glory

Source 1 Genesis 28:10

The Torah portion opens with the story of Jacob leaving Beer Sheba, heading to Haran to find a wife.

And Jacob left Beer Sheba, and he went to Haran.

וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּאֵר שָׁבַע וַיֵּלֵר חָרָנָה.

Source 2 Midrash Rabbah on the verse

And Jacob left: How can we say that only he left, if many mules and camels came along with him? Rabbi Azarya, in the name of Rabbi Yehudah the son of Rabbi Simon, learns from this choice of words that while the righteous man is in the city, he is its splendor and its majesty. When he departs from there, its splendor and its majesty has departed.

לֵיצֵא: וְכִי לֹא יָצָא מִשְׁם אֶלָּא הוּא? וַהְרֵי כַּמָּה חֲמָרִים וְכַמָּה גַּמָּלִים יָצְאוּ! וְאַתָּה אוֹמֵר: וַיֵּצֵא יַצְאוּ! וְאַתָּה אוֹמֵר: וַיֵּצֵא יַצְאוּ! וְאַתָּה בִּר סִימוֹן אָמַר: רַבִּי יְהוֹדָה בַּר סִימוֹן אָמַר: בַּיְמַן שֶׁהַצִּדִּיק בָּעִיר הוּא זִינָה הוּא הְדָרָה. יָצָא מִשָּׁם רַפַּנָה זִינָה פָּנָה הַדָרָה.

>> The Rebbe

What about Isaac and Rebecca?

Regarding Jacob's departure, Rashi writes: "Scripture had only to write that Jacob went to Haran. Why did it also mention his departure? This teaches that the departure of a righteous man from a place makes an impression, for while the righteous man is in the city, he is its beauty, he is its splendor, he is its majesty. When he departs from there, its beauty has

"ויצא יעקב גו": כותב רש"י
"לא היה צריך לכתוב אלא
וילך יעקב חרנה, ולמה הזכיר
יציאתו? אלא מגיד שיציאת
צדיק מן המקום עושה רושם,
שבזמן שהצדיק בעיר הוא
הודה הוא זיוה הוא הדרה, יצא

departed, its splendor has departed, its majesty has departed. And likewise, regarding the verse (Ruth 1:7): 'And she went forth from the place,' stated in reference to Naomi and Ruth." משם, פנה הודה פנה זיוה פנה הדרה. וכן ותצא¹ מן המקום האמור בנעמי ורות״.

Rashi focuses on the fact that the Torah makes specific mention of Jacob leaving Beer Sheba. Isn't the main point that he went to Haran? The Midrash — and Rashi — explains that the Torah wants to stress how a righteous man is the light and life of the city, and upon leaving, it makes a significant impact

The following question is asked by all the commentators: How can the city have been divested of its beauty, splendor and majesty — while his parents Isaac and Rebecca remained in the city?

וצריך להבין - קושיא ששואלים גם כל המפרשים שראיתי - כיצד שייך לומר שעל ידי יציאת יעקב מבאר שבע "פנה הודה פנה זיוה פנה הדרה", בה בשעה שיצחק ורבקה (הוריו ומחנכיו כו' של יעקב) נמצאים בעיר?!

Source 3 Midrash Rabbah on the verse

The Midrash mentioned earlier continues with a reference to the story of Ruth. As they left Moab to head for the Land of Israel, the verse similarly states that "they left the place." Why was that a necessary mention? Isn't the point of the story that they headed for Bethlehem? The answer is the same. When the righteous person leaves, the city loses its special glow.

But the Midrash follows with an important question: Ruth may have been the only righteous person in Moab, but was Jacob the only righteous person in his hometown? What about his parents?

They answer:

How can we compare Ruth, the only righteous one in her location, with Jacob – who left behind Isaac and Rebecca? Rabbi Azariah in the name of Rabbi Simon said: The merit of one righteous person is incomparable to two righteous people.

נִיחָא שָׁם (במגילת רות) לא הָיְתָה שָׁם אֶלָּא אוֹתָה הַצַּדֶּקֶת בִּלְבַד, אֲבָל כָּאן הָיוֹ יִצְחָק וְרִבְקָה? רַבִּי עֲזַרְיָה בְּשׁם רַבִּי סִימוֹן אָמַר: לא דוֹמָה זְכוּתוֹ שֶׁל צַדִיק אֶחָד לִזְכוּת שֶׁל שְׁנִי צַדִּיקִים.

>> The Rebbe

The Miraculous Cloud

The commentators cite the answer of the Midrash: "How can we compare Ruth, the only righteous one in her location, with Jacob – who left behind Isaac and Rebecca? ...The merit of one righteous person is incomparable to two righteous people." However, Rashi used different terminology. He said that "its beauty has departed, its splendor has departed, its majesty has departed." Not only has the departure of the one righteous person made an impression, but moreover, all the beauty, splendor and majesty have *departed*. Was that indeed the case?

ואף שהמפרשים מביאים את התירוץ שבמדרש: "ניחא דתמן (ברות) לא היתה שם אלא אותה הצדקת בלבד, אלא הכא דהוי יצחק ורבקה"², ומתרץ, "לא דומה זכותו של צדיק אחד לזכותו של שני צדיקים"³ הרי: לשון רש"י הוא "פנה הודה פנה זיוה פנה הדרה", הינו, לא רק כמו שכתוב בתחלת פירושו "שיציאת צדיק מן המקום עושה רושם", מכיון שיצא צדיק אחד, אלא יתירה מזה, "פנה הודה פנה זיוה פנה הדרה", שנסתלק פנה זיוה פנה הדרה", שנסתלק

B. Young and Involved

Isaac and Rebecca and the Local Community

We can explain Rashi's statement — that the city lost its beauty, splendor and majesty despite the presence of Isaac and Rebecca — in the following, straightforward manner:

In the continuation of the passage, during G-d's message to Jacob, He introduces Himself as "The G-d of Isaac." Rashi makes the following comment: "We do not find in Scripture that G-d associates His name with the *living* righteous by writing 'the G-d of so-and-so.' Nevertheless, here He associated His name with Isaac because his eyes had become dim and he was confined to his home, and he was like a dead person, the evil inclination having ceased from him."

והביאור הוא:

בהמשך הכתובים דענין
זה - שהבן חמש ממתין
עד לסיום הענין - נאמר
הלשון "אלקי יצחק"⁴,
ומפרש רש"י: "אף על
פי שלא מצינו במקרא
שייחד הקב"ה שמו על
הצדיקים בחייהם לכתוב
אלקי פלוני... כאן ייחד
שמו על יצחק, לפי שכהו
עיניו וכלוא בבית, והרי
הוא כמת, ויצר הרע פסק
ממנו".

When Jacob left Beer Sheba on his journey to Haran, he rested overnight and received a revelation from G-d in his dream, where G-d promised that the land of Israel (belonging then to the Canaanites) would be given to his descendants. When he talks to Jacob, G-d calls himself "I, the G-d of Abraham and Isaac."

These opening remarks startle Rashi, because we don't find anywhere else in Torah that G-d calls himself the "G-d of Abraham" or "Jacob" while they are still alive. Why then does G-d call himself the "G-d of Isaac" in this passage?

Rashi explains that G-d normally doesn't do so because there always remains a chance that the righteous person will not sustain his righteousness. However, Isaac was blind, sitting at home. His evil inclination was long gone.

Who Was on the Streets?

This being the case, the young Torah student will no longer question why Jacob's departure created this vacuum despite his father's presence. Isaac was confined to his home, unable to share his personality with the people of the city. With the absence of his presence in the streets of the city, he wasn't able to contribute to the city's reputation.

With regard to Rebecca: In addition to the Jewish traditions of modesty, she was constantly needed in Isaac's presence. Being that he was blind, he could not take care of himself and needed someone at his side at every moment. This role was filled by Rebecca, his devoted wife.

As a result, the only of the three righteous people (Isaac, Rebecca, and Jacob) who was present on the city streets (after Isaac's physical decline) was Jacob. As he went from his father's home to study Torah in the study hall of Shem and Ever and upon his return home, he passed through the city and naturally came into contact with the local population. He impacted them to the extent that, in Rashi's words, "he is its beauty, he is its splendor, he is its majesty" — Jacob alone. Therefore, upon his departure, the city's "beauty has departed, its splendor has departed, its majesty has departed."

ומכיון שכן, שוב לא קשה להבן-חמש היתכן שיציאת יעקב מן העיר גרמה ש"פנה הודה כו"', כשנשאר שם יצחק שהרי, לאחרי שיצחק "כלוא בבית", אינו בא במגע עם אנשי העיר שיוכל להקרין עליהם מאורו וזיוו כו', וגם לא ניתוסף כבוד על ידי ישיבתו בעיר, מכיון שלא רואים אותו להלך בחוצות העיר.

בנוגע לרבקה ז הרי, נוסף לכללות הענין ד"כל כבודה בת מלך פנימה"⁵, היתה צריכה להמצא במשך כל הזמן במחיצתו של יצחק, דמכיון ש"כהו עיניו", לא היה יכול להסתדר לבד, אלא הוצרך שמישהו יהיה במחיצתו על כל צעד ושעל, וזאת ז עשתה רבקה⁶, כחלק מתפקידה כאשה כשרה כו'.

ונמצא, שהיחידי מבין שלשת הצדיקים
(יצחק רבקה ויעקב) שהיה מתהלך גם
בעיר (לאחרי שכהו עיניו של יצחק) הוא יעקב, שבלכתו מבית אביו ללמוד
תורה בבית מדרשם של שם ועבר (וכן
מבית המדרש לבית אביו כו'), הוצרך
לעבור בתוך העיר, ובמילא, היה בא
במגע עם אנשי העיר, ופעל עליהם
כו', עד כדי כך, ש"הוא הודה הוא זיוה
הוא הדרה", הוא (יעקב) בלבד, ולכן,
כש"יצא משם" - "פנה הודה פנה זיוה
פנה הדרה", "פנה" דייקא, שנסתלק

משיחת שבת פרשת ויצא, ז' כסלו, ה'תשמ"ח. תורת מנחם ה'תשמ"ח ח"א ע' 955. While Isaac had the advantage of being absolutely holy and pure, to the extent that G-d associated His name with Isaac while he was alive, there was a negative element: Being that he wasn't involved with the people of the city, he had no influence on them. He wasn't the city's splendor, beauty, and majesty. While he excelled in being righteous, his greatness didn't leave his own four walls.

But Jacob, who walked in and out of the city and mingled with the laymen, made a powerful impact. When he left, the beauty, splendor and majesty went with him.

From here we see that even if a person can fit the slate for being very holy and righteous, if he cannot make an effect on the people of the city, he cannot be considered its beauty. Even a very righteous man must remain in contact with the people next door and bring positive change to them as well

C. Noah's Overlap

The Rebbe made a similar point in a different talk, from 1980, as we will see below.

Source 4 Genesis 6:9

The Torah's compliment to Noah:

These are the generations of Noah; Noah was a righteous man, he was perfect in his generations; Noah walked with G-d.

אֵלֶה תּוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיוּ אֶת־הָאֵלֹקִים הִתְהַלֶּרִינֹחַ:

Source 5 Zohar on the verse

The Zohar pulls back the compliment a bit.

He was perfect in his generations, but he was not considered perfect in later generations, such as in the generations of Abraham, Moses, and David. תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדוֹרוֹתְיו: אֲבָל בַּדוֹרוֹת הַמְאוּחָרִים אֵינוֹ נֶחֲשָׁב לִכְלוּם. כְּמוֹ דוֹרוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם, דוֹרוֹ שֶׁל משֶׁה וְדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל דָּוִד״.

Source 6 Rashi

Rashi is uncomfortable with the compliment as well.

In his generations: Compared to his generation he was righteous, but had he lived in Abraham's generation, he would not have been considered of any importance.

בדורותיו: לְפִי דוֹרוֹ הָיָה צַדִּיק וְאִלּוֹ הָיָה בְדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם לֹא הָיָה נֶחְשָׁב לִכְלוּם.

Source 7 Nitzutzei Zohar, Noach fn. 13

And then a commentator comes with a historic question:

This calls for explanation: why does he say, "Had he lived in Abraham's generation?" He actually lived in

ּוּקְצָת צָּרִיךְ עִיוּזְ, מָה שָׁנָּקְטוּ אִלְמָלֵי הָיָה בְּדוֹרוּ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם, הֲרֵי בָּאֲמֶת Abraham's generation! Noah passed away in Abrahams 58th year.

הָיָה בְּדוֹרוֹ ־ שֶׁנֹחַ מֵת בִּשְׁנַת נ״ח לְחֵיֵי אַבְרַהַם.

>> The Rebbe

The Simple Reason

An answer according to Torah's straightforward interpretation:

When G-d commanded Abraham to move to the Land of Israel, Rashi explained that it would be "for your own pleasure and wellbeing." G-d told him, "There, I will make You into a big nation, but if you remain here you will not merit children. Also, I will make you world-famous."

Clearly, before this incident with Abraham, the world didn't know of his greatness. During that era, the most famous righteous man was Noah. Obviously, we cannot suggest that during that period (before Abraham achieved worldwide fame) Noah "would not have been considered of any importance."

Only once Abraham's greatness became known far and wide could we suggest that in comparison to Abraham, Noah "would not have been considered of any importance."

Being that Abraham achieved fame only after he left his childhood home, when he was 75 years old (as stated explicitly in the verse), Rashi's statement is quite sensible

הביאור בזה על פי פשוטו של מקרא:

בתחילת פרשת לך לך מפרש רש"י: "לך לך - להנאתך ולטובתך, ושם אעשך לגוי גדול, וכאן אי אתה זוכה לבנים, ועוד שאודיע טבעך בעולם".

ועל פי זה מובן, שלפני שהיה ה"להודיע טבעך בעולם", העולם לא ידע מהגדלות של אברהם, ובאותו זמן ידעו שה"איש צדיק תמים" הוא ז נח, ובמילא אי אפשר לומר שבאותו מעמד ומצב (לפני שטבעו של אברהם נודע בעולם), נח "לא היה נחשב לכלום".

רק לאחר שהיה ה"להודיע טבעך בעולם", כשהתפרסם בעולם הגדולה של אברהם, אז אפשר לומר שלגבי הדרגה של אברהם, נח "לא היה נחשב לכלום",

וכיון שה"להודיע טבעך בעולם" קרה רק כשהתרחש "לך לך מארצך וממולדתך וגו" שזה קרה כשאברהם היה בן שבעים וחמש שנה, (כמו שכתוב "ואברהם בן חמש שנים ושבעים שנה בצאתו מחרן"), מובן — in Abraham's moment of fame, Noah "would not have been considered of any importance" — because that took place a number of years after Noah's passing. Noah passed away when Abraham was 58, and Abraham's name began to spread when he was 75.

This further concurs with the assertion in Chasidic teachings that Abraham's earlier outreach endeavors didn't make a long-lasting impact, and that his main, long-term influence was a result of his work after G-d spoke to him at age 75. Clearly, it was at that moment that "Abraham's generation" truly began.

Thus, in Abraham's generation — when Abraham was 75 — Noah would have been considered ordinary.

מה שרש"י אומר ש"אילו הי' בדורו של אברהם לא היה נחשב לכלום", כי ה"להודיע טבעך בעולם" היה כמה וכמה שנים לאחרי מיתת נח. כיון שאברהם היה בן חמישים ושמונה במות נוח, וה"להודיע טבעך בעולם" היה כשהוא היה בן שבעים וחמש שנה.

ובפרט על פי המבואר בחסידות בכמה מקומות, שעבודת אברהם בהיותו בחרן "ואת הנפש אשר עשו בחרן" לא היה לה קיום והמשך, ועיקר עבודת אברהם העבודה שהיה לה קיום והמשך, היא העבודה שהוא עשה לאחר שהוא נהיה בן שבעים וחמש שנה, שמזה מובן, שרק אז התחיל "דור אברהם".

ועל פי זה מובן מה שכתוב בזהר, שאילו נח היה ב"דור אברהם" כשהוא היה בן שבעים וחמש שנה, הוא "אינו נחשב לכלום".

משיחת מוצאי שבת קודש פרשת נח, ה'תשמ"א, הנחת השומעים בלתי מוגה שיחות קודש, תשמ"א, חלק א', עמוד 309

Here we see the same idea. When was the generation considered "his"? Only when he began to affectively reach out to the population. He may have always been righteous, but he wasn't a leader and it wasn't "his" generation until he started making an impact.

D. Sweeping Absolution?

This very point is also brought out in another talk from the same year, with regard to Rabbi Shimon har Yochai.

Source 8 Talmud, Tractate Sukkah 45b

The unusual declaration of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai:

Chizkiya said that Rabbi Yirmiya said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: I can absolve the entire world from judgment for sins. וְאָמֵר חִזְקִיָה אָמֵר רַבִּי יִרְמְיָה מִשׁוּם רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחַי: יָכוֹל אֲנִי לִפְטוֹר אֶת כל הָעוֹלֶם כּוּלוֹ מִן הַדִּיוָ.

>> The Rebbe

The Simple Reason

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said, "I can absolve the entire world from judgment for sins." Now, if people will remain unchanged after Rabbi Shimon absolves them of their sins, what favor has he done for them?

The Alter Rebbe writes in Tanya (and it is stated in many works of Jewish ethics) that the Torah is a Torah of kindness. Thus, even the punishments stated therein bring reward to those who experience them.

The Alter Rebbe compares the people receiving these punishments to the young son of king who has soiled himself — and the king wishes to clean him so that they will be able to be together.

רבי שמעון בר יוחאי אמר וגילה:
"יכולני לפטור את כל העולם מן
הדין". והנה, באם הציבור נשאר
בקלקולו חס ושלום לאחר שרבי
שמעון פוטר אותו מן הדין, רבי
שמעון בר יוחאי לא עושה להם טובה
בכך...

אדמו"ר הזקן מבאר בתניא, וכפי שגם כתוב בספרי מוסר, שמכיון שהעונש הוא על פי תורת חסד, מובן מאליו שעל ידי העונש מרוויחים הרבה יותר.

אדמו"ר הזקן באגרת הקודש ממשיל את המושג של עונש, לבן מלך שהתלכלך, והמלך רוצה לשטוף אותו ולנקות אותו, כדי שהוא יוכל לחזור ולהיות יחד עם המלך. To clean up the mess, cold water might suffice. However, hot water is sometimes necessary, and very hot water is sometimes necessary as well. At that moment, it might seem like a punishment, but obviously the ensuing benefit is far greater — the son, now clean, can reunite with his father.

This raises the question: if Rabbi Shimon can absolve the individual of his punishments, he also withholds from him the ensuing benefits — the opportunity to cleanse oneself and reunite with G-d. If so, what good is Rabbi Shimon's offer?

The explanation: When Rabbi Shimon declares that he has the ability to erase the punishments, he obviously means that he could cause the cleansing to occur in different ways — while avoiding pain and suffering. It's a special approach which only Rabbi Shimon knows to do.

This is expressed in the fact that Rabbi Shimon opened the wellsprings of the inner dimension of Torah. They spilled like rain from the heavens and rose up like the wellsprings of the earth. Today, even a young child on the street can study his teachings.

In his merit, and in the merit of his teachings, behavior and influence, he has made his path a reality for all people — he gave them the ability to transform their behavior.

בשביל לנקות את הלכלוך, לעתים מספיק מים קרים, לעתים מים חמים, ולפעמים צריך שטיפה במים יותר חמים... שבאותו רגע זה נראה כמו עונש, אך מובן בפשטות שהשכר שמגיע על ידי זה, הוא נעלה הרבה יותר. שהנסיך יכול לחזור להיות עם המלך באופן טהור וקדוש.

נשאלת השאלה: מכיון שרבי שמעון בר יוחאי אומר שהוא יכול למנוע את העונש, אז בעצם הוא גם מונע גם את מה שמרוויחים על ידי העונש - (הנקיון של הלכלוך, והאפשרות של איחוד עם הקב"ה). ובאם כן, במה מתבטאת הטובה שעושה רבי שמעון?

והביאור הוא: בשעה שרבי שמעון בר
יוחאי אומר שהוא יכול לפעול דבר גדול
לפטור את העולם ממדת הדין, מובן
שהנקיון שנפעל על ידי מדת הדין, יפעל
בצורה אחרת שלא על ידי עונש ולא על
ידי יסורים (כפי שאומרים בתפילה בכל
יום), אלא באופן שרבי שמעון בר יוחאי
עושה זאת...

רבי שמעון בר יוחאי פתח את מעיינות תהום רבה, וארובות השמים נפתחו, עד שרזי תורה נשפכו כמו גשם שנשפך מהשמים וממעיינות התהום, וזה פעל גם על התינוקות מהרחוב שגם הם ילמדו...

ועל ידי הזכות שלו, התורה שלו, ההנהגה שלו, וההשפעה שלו, הוא בדרך ממילא משנה את ההנהגה של הציבור מכאן ולהבא.

משיחת ל"ג בעומר ה'תש"מ, רשימת השומעים בלתי מוגה

שיחות קודש ה'תש"מ, חלק ג' עמוד 35