

TORAT HAR SHMUEL

by
TASHMA
harshmuel.com

sharabymail@gmail.com
972-54-2002882

THE MAKING OF A SOUL

It is interesting to note that the concept of “kiruv”, acquainting the spiritually lost within the ranks of the Jewish people to their heritage, is a concept that is almost four thousand years old. The first “kiruv Rebbi” was none other than our Father, Avrohom Avinu. The main difference of course is that his kiruv program was geared to the population of his day, none of whom were Jewish.

So how do we know that Avrohom served in this capacity? We have the famous verse, (Bereshis 6:5) that says that Avrohom left Choron to travel to a place unknown, taking, “Sarai, his wife, Lot, the son of his brother, all the belongings he had gathered, *and the souls he made in Choron.*” Rashi comments on the words, “He made in Choron”: “that he brought them under the wings of the Divine Presence. Avrohom *converted* the men and Sarah *converted* the women, and scripture credits them as though they *made* them”. When we think of Avrohom and Sarah, an image pops into our minds of a childless, elderly couple whose home was open to everyone. They are seen as not just the epitome of kindness personified, but as people who can speak to anyone from anywhere about anything, taking whatever topic they engage in and bringing it full circle where the main focal point is the existence of Hashem Yisborach. As correct as this image is, there is much more to it than what has been expressed so far. The real question is what goes into the making of the “kiruv Rav” par excel lance?

The first ingredient is that of intellectual brilliance!! How Avrohom arrived at his understanding of Hashem Yisborach is a magnificent study, in and of itself. Hundreds of pages have been published on this topic alone. Suffice it to say that after studying our world and the universe, Avrohom arrived at two conclusions. The first was that there had to be a single “Force” that created and continues to energize and direct the universe in which we live. Secondly, Hashem Yisborach is benevolent. He has an ongoing interest in the wellbeing of mankind and desires a personal relationship with each and every human being walking the face of the earth. The innovation that this all powerful, invisible Deity has an interest in us took the world by storm. They were so totally invested in a physically based idol worshipping system that the concept of an all-powerful, compassionate, invisible G-d caring for us was incomprehensible. Avrohom developed the spiritual wisdom to transform this difficult concept into a reality for those who were willing to listen and consider his philosophy. The admiration this deserves is something many of us can relate to. How many times have we encountered someone whose brilliance amazes us, but we cannot understand a word they’re trying to convey. Avrohom was able to bridge this gap. He took all of the wisdom he amassed and was able to break it up into classes ranging from introduction to advanced levels of the knowledge of Hashem. He was able to relate to everyone, but more importantly, everyone was able to understand and relate to him.

The second ingredient is that Avrohom had to be remarkably charismatic. He understood that one never has a second

chance to make a first impression. Avrohom knew that the first impression had to be understandable, powerful, persuasive and from a place of love and concern for all mankind. He had to have the teaching ability and personality substance to *maintain* their interest, intellectually and emotionally for the long term. The concept of a “one speech wonder” did not work here. Together with this was the fact that Avrohom and Sarah both knew that every move they made was being watched. The spiritual philosophy of Hashem they preached in the classroom had to walk hand in hand with the lifestyle they led and role modeled in their everyday lives. In other words, they had to be *real* 24/7 both in their speech and their actions.

The third ingredient necessary was the ability to be selfless. From the outset, Avrohom and Sarah knew this was not about them. It was totally about Hashem Yisborach. Whatever honor they acquired in the process of spreading the word was honor that was given to Hashem. Remember, this was the agenda!! It was about helping these lost people develop a relationship and cleave to their Heavenly Father, our Heavenly Father. Avrohom and Sarah were the educational means to achieve this spiritual goal. This relates directly to how souls are “made”. Avrohom and Sarah recognized the uniqueness inherent in every person. Part and parcel of their kiruv movement was the understanding that before their followers can relate to Hashem Yisborach, they have to acquire a thorough understanding of who they are, and how their uniqueness has the potential to better the world with this understanding of what having a Heavenly Father is all about. The end point is not just understanding what G-d is all about, but taking these priceless lessons and bettering the world through the individual capabilities that everyone’s uniqueness can achieve and share.

There is an interesting Rashi that proves this point. In Bereshis 14:13, Avrohom is identified for the first time as “Avrom Ha’Ivri”, Avrom the Hebrew. Why have we always been known as Hebrews? Rashi answers the question by defining the word as having come from the other side of the river. Jews have always been different, coming from the other side, in a perpetual state of isolation even though throughout the diaspora we have lived among the other nations. If Avrohom’s students were going to

achieve any success with their new identity, they had to intimately know themselves and be at peace with their new identity because the chances were great that at some point in their lives they would experience the same sense of isolation that Avrohom went through many times throughout his life.

The concept of heroics within Judaism is experienced in isolation. Avrohom and Yitzchak were by themselves during the Akeyda. Yaakov was alone when he wrestled with the angel and defeated him. The Torah states that Yosef was alone in the house with aishes Potifar when she seduced him. And the greatest battle all of us fight, the war against our own evil inclination, is fought in the privacy of our own minds. Isolation is also part of our national identity. When Bilaam *blesse*s the children of Israel, contrary to his desire, he states, “It is a nation that dwells in isolation...” (Bamidbar 23:9). This reflects that famous saying that when a Jew stops making Kiddush, the “goyim” make Havdalah. As long as we remain distinct, the nations will not just tolerate us, but respect us. When we forget who we are and express the desire to assimilate, the nations will remind us in a manner that threatens our very existence.

If Avrohom and Sarah’s students were going to succeed in this new philosophy and lifestyle they had to stand on their own feet, be comfortable within their own skin with this new identity, privately in front of Avinu She’ba’Shamayim. They had to have the tools available for them to understand that this was not only about following their teachers, but about coming to a point where independence could be achieved while living in the community of those dedicated to Hashem Yisborach. Avrohom knew they were successful when they saw their students become both teachers and role models, standing upright with knowledge and confidence in the service of Hashem. By knowing themselves, they came to appreciate their Father in Heaven, as the relationship flowed both ways.

It’s amazing how the challenges encountered by those working in Kiruv today are similar to those encountered by Avrohom and Sarah thousands of years ago. As much as society has changed over the millennia, the reality is that there are still challenges that have existed for thousands of years. Although the

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Torah provides little in the way of detail regarding those who Avrohom and Sarah impacted, please consider the following scenario that exemplifies the challenge our “parents” faced. Don’t understand this superficially!! Here we have a group of people who were looking for something real, beyond the stone idol nonsense of their day. Were these people part of the over seven hundred thousand who witnessed Avrohom being thrown into the furnace? Did they come from Ur Chasdim, Choron or both? Were they young adults, middle aged or elderly? The Torah does not tell us. One point we can conclude is that something happened that moved them to the point where they realized they wanted more. Avrohom and Sarah were teaching something that ‘rang true’ in their minds, moved them to a point where they consciously chose to act on it. They wanted to invest both their time and their very essence into these infinite teachings.

Avrohom is settled with his father and family in Choron, teaching, inspiring, doing the will of Hashem Yisborach. All is well until that night when, at the age of seventy five Hashem comes to Avrohom and tells him it’s time to move on, change locations, experience Aliyah!! His students have a difficult choice to make. Do they uproot themselves and follow Avrohom to a point *unknown*?? Remember, Hashem did *not* tell Avrohom where he was going, only to leave “his land, his birth place and his father’s home”. This was as much as a test for our parent’s students as it was for them. Let’s take this a step further. We have young adults who are inspired by Avrohom and Sarah. They approach their parents and tell them of their desire to follow them. The parents ask “to where” and they are forced to respond that not only do they not know, but Avrohom and Sarah don’t know as well. All they’re doing is following a man who was instructed by this invisible G-d to pack his things and move out. It’s no stretch to assume that there were parents who had a few words – not nice ones – for Avrohom and Sarah. Families were shattered, hearts were broken, and Avrohom and Sarah were required to carry the emotional burden this situation precipitated. At the end, Avrohom nor Sarah forced anyone to join them. Those that had the courage and confidence to follow did so at their own behest.

How many times have we encountered Ba’alei Teshuva

whose parents oppose the choices they are making? How many non-Kosher homes tolerate a separate set of pots, pans and dishes for their “wayward” child or children? What do they have to endure when a family’s Friday night plans are compromised because their child refuses to get into the car and join them? Is there really much of a difference between what happened thirty five hundred years ago and today? Not really!! Of greater importance is the fact that then and now, people are looking for something meaningful to define their lives, instill a strong sense of meaningfulness into their existence. Then, there was only Avrohom and Sarah and maybe a few of their “graduates” who were able to spread the holy understanding of Hashem Yisborach. Today we have much more: Aish HaTorah, NCSY, Chabad just to mention a few. Of greater importance is the reality that beyond these organizations, we all have a kiruv responsibility, the requirement to inspire others to discover their true selves through Hashem Yisborach and His Torah.

For a full understanding of the Torah text, we need to understand the word “nefesh”, soul. Avrohom and Sarah are credited as having made these souls, infusing new life into their followers. What is the definition of a “soul”? A ‘piece’ of Hashem that is loaned to us to manifest Hashem’s identity in this world through the uniqueness of our personality and character. The Midrash Rabbah as explained by the Eitz Yosef explains that the purpose behind the creation of mankind is not just life in this world, but more importantly, life in the world to come – Olam Habah. There are three partners in the creation of every child: The father, the mother and Hashem Yisborach. This partnership begins at the moment of conception, which is the foundation of our philosophy that while every child in within his/her mother’s womb, an angel teaches them the entire Torah. The neshama, the soul thereby develops with the fetus. The body and soul make up this single unit, the person, until that person passes on. At that point, everything physical disintegrates in the grave. The living soul returns to its source, Hashem’s abode in the next world. Where that soul lands in the next world is determined by how he/she spent her time in this world. As the physical body is cleansed in the grave, preparing for Techias Ha’Mayseem, resur-

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rection, so too is the soul 'cleansed' of the mistakes it made in this world before it reaches its ultimate reward: a level in heaven commensurate with everything that soul achieved while in this world. A person devoted to learning and living Torah, Mitzvot and Ma'asim Tovim enjoys a higher place in Hashem's abode than one who lets these opportunities pass without recognition. One is near the stage of the Shechina while, sadly, the other is relegated to the bleachers.

Avrohom and Sarah paved the way for those they influenced to find their rightful share in the world to come. In helping them discover their own souls, their own uniqueness vistas of eternal pleasure were opened to them. Dedication to Avrohom's philosophy here became their key to experience the warmth of the Shechina in the world to come.

Why so much focus on the soul? The reality is that our soul is what differentiates us from the animal world. There is a verse that we recite after the Akeyda every morning that reads, "And what more does an animal have than a person? 'Oyin', Nothing". The word oyin is spelled aleph, yud, nun. If our lives are lived in a state of total physicality, then indeed there is no difference between us and the animal world. On the other hand, if we apply our gifts of human intelligence and live the reality that as thinking people we can achieve great things, then 'oyin' no longer means nothing. We can rewrite the verse to say that the difference between us and the animal world remains 'oyin'. Instead of the word meaning 'nothing', the aleph stands for 'amira'-speaking, the yud stands for 'yediah' - knowledge and the nun stands for 'neshama' - soul. The ability to speak properly, the acquisition of knowledge and the understanding that the uniqueness of our species is in recognition that we have a soul puts us on an entirely different plane of existence than the animal world lives on.

It's amazing how neurologists have a wonderful understanding of the brain. They know which portion of the brain controls which function. One area controls speech, another is responsible sight, the ability to smell, our autonomic nervous system, etc. As much as they know about the 'brain', that's how little they know about the 'mind'. No one is capable of placing their finger on the very spot that is responsible for thinking great

thoughts. No one can identify that place where a person's thoughts are transformed into meaningful speech. No one can identify which part of the brain lights up when we sense that feeling of warmth and achievement having helped someone else. The fact is that this is because the 'mind' is much larger than the 'brain'. Functioning properly within us, does the mind have any limits? Hashem gave us the Torah 3,328 years ago. It included both the written law and the oral law. Even today, we continue to be "m'chadesh chidushim" - innovate new lines of thought and understanding in texts that are thousands of years old. Such minds can hardly be contained within the human skull. The reality is that Hashem has blessed all of mankind with the ability to recognize, energize and actualize an infinite mind within the confines of a finite person.

When we understand that Avrohom and Sarah provided their followers with this endless vista of spiritual potential, it becomes easy to understand how the gates of heaven were opened for them as well. It brings their existence as human beings full circle, maximizing their potential by helping them realize the ultimate truths upon which our universe is founded. Said truths begin with Hashem Yisborach, end with Hashem Yisborach, and find His Infinite Goodness from one end of that spectrum to the other. Infinity is as comfortable within us, the finite, as we permit it to be. These were the righteous and kind goals of Avrohom and Sarah, goals they dedicated their entire lives, every particle of their existence to.

This is what Kiruv is all about today. Ma'ase Avos, siman l'bonim. The actions of our Fathers is a sign for the children. Kiruv follows the model established by our first Patriarch and Matriarch. It behooves us to invest ourselves in this activity and support those who do. They are bringing back those who our lost to our family and helping them discover their *real* essence, their *real* identity, the 'pintele Yid' within.