



Lech Lecha



English version

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THE ART OF SOCIAL CHOICE

Probably the most sold self-help book of late is Atomic Habits, by James Clear. Here is a small part of his book, probably my favorite part. I adapted it and made it parsha-sheet appropriate:

Humans are herd animals. We want to fit in with the tribe, to bond with others, and to earn the respect and approval of our peers. The herd inclination is essential for our survival. Pioneers get slaughtered, settlers prosper. The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives. As a result, one of the deepest human desires is to belong.

We don't choose our earliest habits, we imitate them. We follow the script handed down by our friends, family, yeshiva, synagogue. Each herd has its own expectations and standards - when to get married, how many children to have, how much money to spend. The herd and the hype of the herd are the invisible rules that guide your behavior, each day. You're always keeping them in mind, even if they are not at the forefront of your thinking. Often, you follow the habits of your culture without thinking, without questioning, and sometimes, without remembering. Society sweeps us along. Everyone wants to belong. We imitate the habits of three groups in particular.

The close. Proximity has a powerful effect on our behavior. We pick up habits from the people around us. We copy our parents, peers, roommates, and coworkers. We automatically assume the body posture of the person we are connecting to in conversation, and we imitate the accent of the locals. The closer we are, the more likely we are to imitate. Your chances of becoming obese increase

by 57% if you have a friend who became obese. It works the other way, too. If your partner is losing weight, you would also slim down a third of the time. Our friends and family provide a sort of invisible peer pressure that pulls us in their direction. Peer pressure influences our life choices, goals and careers. One study found that even our IQ is affected by the people around us, as we soak up qualities and practices from those around us. One of the most effective things you can do to build better habits is to join a culture where your desired behavior is the normal behavior. Going with the group does not feel like a burden. Behaviors are attractive when they help us fit in. You rise together with your surroundings, as your culture is what sets your expectation for what is normal. If you want to grow in any area, look for people who are growing in that area, and join them.

The many. Whenever we are unsure how to act, we look to the group to guide our behavior. We are constantly scanning the environment and wondering, "What is everyone else doing?" We want to imitate the best buying, eating and travel habits. It's usually a smart strategy. There is evidence in the numbers. But, there can be a downside. The normal behavior of the tribe often overpowers the desired behavior of the individual. There is tremendous internal pressure to comply with the norms of the group. The reward of being accepted is often greater than the reward of winning an argument, looking smart, or finding truth. Most days, we'd rather be wrong with the crowd, than be right with ourselves.



The powerful. Humans everywhere pursue power, prestige, and status, to be acknowledged, recognized and praised. People with higher status have access to more resources. We are drawn to behaviors that earn us respect, approval, and admiration. Once we fit into the tribe, we start looking for ways to stand out. So, we try to mimic the successful people, the people we admire, because we desire success ourselves.

As great as this concept from James is, what about the person who is already successful? Already an influencer? Does he, also, have to fear the flock, the herd inclination? In his introduction to Parashat Lech Lecha, Rabbenu Bachye brings the words of King Solomon. הוֹלֵךְ אֶת חֲכָמִים יִתְקַם וְרֹעָה כְּסִילִים יְרוּעַ. The one who constantly goes with the wise, he will become smarter. And the one who hangs around with the fools, he will worsen his present status. The Torah is compared to a candle, as the light of wisdom is shared and given to others by the Wise, while the wise man, himself, does not lack wisdom, no matter how much he gives.

Who are the fools that a person should avoid, so he does not lose his status? People with bad Middot and character, people who are chasing material desires and people who are belittling true wisdom. Your social choice is so important that King David decided to begin his book of Psalms with precisely this: אֲשֶׁר־יִהְיֶה־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁרוֹ לֹא הִלֵּךְ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים וּבַגְּדֵרֶךְ חֲטָאִים לֹא עָמַד וּבַמּוֹשֵׁב לְצִידִים לֹא יֵשֵׁב.

This was the first commandment by G-d to the first Jew: G-d told Avraham to leave his homeland. This was also Avraham's first test, because it was hard to understand. Avraham would get influenced?! He didn't start off as a regular guy who built himself up. He was destined for greatness from his birth! His mother, Amatla Bat Carnevo, gave birth to him in a cave, as Nimrod, king of the world at the time, killed 70,000 babies, out of fear of what Nimrod's stargazers warned him: The person who will take you and your beliefs down will be born in the near future. So Amatla gave birth to Avraham in a cave, and he lit up the whole cave, with his natural light. "Better I should leave this baby boy here in the cave, alone, than take him with me and see him slaughtered by Nimrod!" G-d made a miracle, and Angel Gabriel came to prick Avraham's finger, causing milk to flow from it. Baby Avraham

nursed from his own finger! At ten days old, Avraham started to walk the land...(Midrash, brought in Shevet Mussar)

Avraham revealed to everyone the truth of who Nimrod's father was, as Nimrod claimed he was not born to parents. Avraham undid Nimrod's claims that fire is God, and he stood up to the challenge and miraculously survived being thrown into Nimrod's blazing fire – the fire that was so intense that Haran, Avraham's brother, had his intestines burned out, just from getting close to it! (Arizal tells us that Haran came back as a Gilgul in Aharon, as they share the same letters.) We are talking about very high neshamot, from birth!!! And after this miracle that the whole population of Ur Kasdim witnessed, Avraham and his wife Sarah become the kiruv king and queen, וְאֵת־הַנְּקִשׁ. אֲשֶׁר־עָשׂוּ בְּחֶרֶן. And (they took with them on their trip) the souls that they made in (the city) Haran. And still, G-d tells Avraham leave, so that you don't become influenced!!!

Lately, I have been teaching Sefer Hamitzvot of the Rambam, and to find the reason for each Mitzvah, I learn the Sefer Hachinuch. You would be shocked to see how many Negative Commandments are given *so that you do not learn from the wicked!* Even the reason why one cannot marry a gentile is so that the gentile spouse does not persuade you to serve his or her gods!!! The problem is that we think that we are smarter than that! We think that we are above that, and that we will not be influenced, we will not be persuaded - everything will be fine! One second: are you smarter than King Solomon, who thought he would not be persuaded? The Talmud tells us that a person should always live in the city of his rabbi, because the day that King Solomon did not live in the city of his rabbi, (Shimi Ben Gera) he made the mistake of his life, marrying Bat Pharaoh. (Berachot 8a) Shlomo Hamelech, the smartest of men, son of King David, was seemingly smart enough to make his own decision, but that decision is what brought the angel Gavriel to put a rod in the middle of the Mediterranean that eventually became the boot of Italy, the home of Rome, that destroyed our second Temple! (Shabbat 56b) He thought that if the Torah forbade having many wives because they can influence one's heart, that

he was smart enough *not* to be persuaded! (Gittin 58b) King Yoshiyahu, one of our best, most pious kings ever, and a possible candidate to be Mashiach, made the mistake of his life, going out to fight against Pharaoh, where he lost the battle and got killed. Why? Because he did not consult with the prophets, Eliyahu, or Elisha. (Melachim B;23:29) Hizkiyahu, also one of the greatest kings we have had and, also, a possible candidate to be the Mashiach, made one of the biggest mistakes of his life, by showing the Babylonian leaders all of his treasures. He did not consult with the prophet Yeshayahu, and G-d relayed to Hizkiyahu, through the prophet Yeshayahu, that his descendants would be slaves to these Babylonian “friends”. (Yeshayahu 39) It seems that the mistakes of social choices, who we bond with and who we don’t, are a lesson from history that repeats itself, and a lesson that we keep forgetting.

Avraham, himself, made this mistake. He made a treaty with Avimelech, without having consulted, first, with G-d, and because of it, Avraham’s descendants did not take over the Holy Land for 7 generations!!! (Messilat Yesharim chapter 4 brings the Midrash B”R) The Torah tells us, לֹא־תִכְרַת לָהֶם (Shemot 23;32) Don’t make any peace treaties with the seven nations of Canaan! So that you do not learn from them!

This does not mean to leave your bad friends in a way that is rude or insensitive! They were your friends until now, and you need to acknowledge that. Even Avraham, who had Lot with him, did not tell Lot, “You can’t come with me!” Avraham waited for the right excuse, for the dispute over Lot’s unmuzzled cattle, to tell him that they should go their separate ways! This is despite the fact that Avraham knew, all along, that having Lot in his company was preventing him from having G-d speak to him!

THE ART OF LIVING WITH G-D

I am so lucky to be a teacher of dikduk. Mastering the basics is the pathway to mastering the bookshelf and kavvana in prayer, on a whole new level. One of the questions that bothered me for years is, what is the difference between two words. עמו and איתו.

Most English speakers who learn and speak Hebrew don’t know that 80 percent of the time, the word אַת in Hebrew, doesn’t mean anything in English. Its purpose is to tell us which noun is the subject of the verb. תביא את הכסא Bring the chair. אַת serves as an arrow, alone, with no definition or meaning in English. Its sole purpose is to define the structure of the sentence.

15 percent of the time, the word אַת means “with”. (And 5 percent of the times, it means from.) Just recently, we had two adjacent pesukim, in one, אַת had no translation, and in the other, it meant “with”. אַת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ־נֹחַ: *With the Elokim, Noah went.* וַיֹּלֶד נֹחַ שְׁלֹשָׁה בָנִים אֶת־שֵׁם אֶת־חָם וַאֲשֶׁת־נֹחַ: *And Noah gave birth to three sons, Shem, Ham, and Yafet.*

This brings us to the difference between איתו and אִתּוֹ. The Vav at the end of the word, represents הוּא, or him/ it. Therefore, the word אִתּוֹ, means, *with him/it*, while the word אִתּוֹ means just *him/it*. Because the words אִתּוֹ and the word אִתּוֹ, as explained earlier, are derived from the word אַת, which means either *nothing*, or *with*.

This brings us back to the question, why make things confusing? Hebrew already has a word that means *with him* – עִמּוֹ !! As a Dikduk teacher, this seemingly unimportant question bothered me, for a very long time.

In this week’s Parasha, the Malbim solves this mystery. When Abraham left Charan for the unknown Promised Land, his nephew Lot joined him. וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי יְקֻזְק וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ לוֹט. But when Abraham returned from Egypt to Canaan, Lot joined him, again, with a different word. וַיַּעַל לוֹט אִתּוֹ מִמִּצְרַיִם הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־לּוֹ וְלוֹט עִמּוֹ הִגְגִּבָהּ The Malbim asks, why the difference?

The Malbim differentiates between the two. The word אִתּוֹ means *with him*, but *secondary* to him. The word עִמּוֹ also means with him, but in a way

that is *equally together* with him. When Lot was on his way to the Promised Land with Avraham, he felt secondary to Avraham. But when Lot came back from Egypt to Israel with Uncle Avraham, Lot felt equal to Avraham. At the outset, Lot was willing to learn from Avraham. (Zohar) He joined Avraham, so that Avraham would not be alone. (Ramban) Lot was accorded tremendous reward by G-d, because of it. But as time passed, Lot had a change of heart. He felt that he did not need to be secondary; he did not have to learn from Avraham, but he could make his own decisions as to how to live and how to run his livestock.

As long as Lot was secondary to Avraham, Avraham did not feel that he needed to disconnect from him, even though G-d commanded Avraham *וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ לֵךְ לְךָ* ... *Go from your father's home*, and Lot *was* from his father's home. But, once Lot broke away from being a follower, Avraham knew that he needed to separate from his nephew. *הִפְרֵד נָא מֵעָלַי*

So, I did a quick search on every *עמו* mentioned in Tanach. And he *וַיֹּאסֶר אֶת־רֶכֶבוֹ וְאֶת־עַמּוֹ לָקַח עִמּוֹ* (Pharaoh) tied his chariot, and he took his nation *with* him. The commentators explain that Pharaoh convinced all his people that he would share the booty with them, equally. "If you join me this last time, to capture the wandering Jews at Yam Suf, I won't be like other kings, that the king takes first pick. I will be *equal* to you in fighting, and in splitting the booty." How do the commentators know that this is what Pharaoh said? The answer is because, ordinarily, it should have said, *וְאֵת עַמּוֹ לָקַח* *איתו* The nation, who would join their king, would be secondary to him. From the fact that it says, *עמו* we learn, that it means equal to him.

כִּי־תִרְאֶה חֲמֹר שֶׁנֶּאֱדָר רֶבֶץ תַּחַת מִשְׁאוֹ וְהִדְלַת מֵעֵזֶב לּוֹ עֵזֶב לֹא־תִרְאֶה אֶת־חֲמֹר אֲחִידָה אֹר שׁוֹרֵי נֶפְלִים בְּדָרָד : *תֵּעֹזֵב עִמּוֹ* : *When you will see the donkey of your enemy collapsing under its load,...* Help *with* him! Our Rabbis learn from here that if the person who you are helping is not helping himself, if he just sits on the side and tells you, *You have a mitzvah to help, so I will watch you and tell you how you could help me,...* in that case, you do not have a mitzvah to help him! How do the Rabbis know this? Because if the Torah would have used the word *איתו*, with him, i.e., you are secondary to

him, that would mean that he can guide you, while you hustle and bustle, while he is manager. But the word used is *עמו*, with him, equal to him.

This explains, why, when it says, *אֶת־הָאֱלֹקִים* *וְהִתְהַלַּךְ־בְּנֹחַ*, with G-d, Noach went, our Rabbis explain it to mean, that Noach always needed G-d to support him in his belief and direct him to G-d. In contrast, the relationship of our Forefathers was a relationship of *עם*. As King Solomon prayed at the high point in the history of the Jewish Nation, the inauguration of the First Temple *יְהִי יְיָקֹנֵךְ* *May YKVK our G-d be with us, as He was with our Forefathers*. The relationship of David with G-d was one of *עמו* and not *איתו*. As he sang in Tehillim, *עִמּוֹ אִיתוֹ*. This is how King David was known from the beginning of his career, *הִנֵּה רָאִיתִי בֶן לְיִשָׁי בֵּית הַלְחָמִי*, *יָדַע נֶגְנוּ וַגְּבוּר חָלִיל וְאִישׁ מִלְחָמָה וַיְבֹנֶן דָּבָר וְאִישׁ תֹּאֵר וַיִּתְנַקֵּם* *וַיְהִי נִדְנָה לְכָל־דָּרָבּוֹ מִשְׁכִּיל וַיִּתְנַקֵּם* . *עמו* . *עמו*. This is what made him great. *וַיִּתְנַקֵּם אֱלֹקֵי צָבָא־וְעַמּוֹ*.

For his whole life, Shimon HaAmsuni toiled at discovering the meanings of the additional, seemingly unnecessary *אֵת* in the Torah. He was successful to find a meaning of inclusion in the addition of every *אֵת* in the Torah. But there was one *אֵת* that he could not figure out what it was coming to include. *אֶת־יִתְנַקֵּם אֱלֹהֶיךָ תִירָא*. YKVK your G-d you should fear. R' Akiva came and explained: this *אֵת* is coming to include fearing G-d fearing Torah scholars. (Pesachim 22b) How did R' Akiva arrive at the idea that this *אֵת* comes to inform us that we are to fear Torah scholars? Because *אֵת* also means "with and secondary to". The Torah Scholars live their lives connecting to, and making themselves secondary to, G-d.

When Yosef was in the house of Potiphar, it says that G-d was with Yosef... *וַיְהִי יְיָקֹנֵךְ אֶת־יֹסֵף וַיְהִי אִישׁ* *The Midrash tells us, that whatever Yosef would say, G-d would make happen. (See Tanchuma) How did the Midrash see that in the words? The choice of words, אֵת, that YKVK was with Yosef, and, as it were, secondary to, Yosef, means that G-d did whatever Yosef said. G-d allows Himself to be secondary, is it were, to those who overcome their instincts, and follows their every command, as it says, בְּיָמֵינוּ מְלָכִים וְמַלְכוּתוֹ* .

It is becoming easier and easier to make the decision to move to Israel from America. Even 7/11 is moving, with hundreds of stores, over the next three years! Since the destruction of the first Temple, it hasn't been this easy. In the very last passuk in Tanach, King Korash feels that G-d has given him all the kingdoms of the world, and he felt that G-d was commanding him to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Then, King Korash turns to the Jewish people, and says, מִי־בְכֶם מִכָּל־עַמּוֹ יִקְוֶה אֶל־יְיָ עִמּוֹ וְיַעַל אֶל־יְיָ עִמּוֹ וְיַעַל *Who among you, from all of His nation, that YKVK his G-d is with him, and he will*

UNDERSTOOD. RESPECTED. LIKED.

R Nissim Karelitz zt"l was once asked why some marriages are not blessed with tranquility. Is it a budgeting issue? A cultural issue? Technology? A deficiency in communication skills? Conflict of interests, beliefs personalities, levels of religion? Or, maybe all of the above?

He answered, *marriages that are not smooth sailing are those in which each one is looking for his or her own respect. If each person would be sensitive, looking out for the other's respect, they would have a beautiful time together. If they follow the rules of respect, closeness only brings people together. The reason for so much fighting in marriages is haughtiness. Humility will never lead to disagreement.*

Allow me to quote the Rambam and the Shlah regarding Shalom Bayit. The Rambam for men. And the Shlah for women.

For men only –The Rambam writes in Halacha the following: *Our Rabbis commanded a man to respect his wife more than he respects himself. If he has money, he should increase his goodness towards her, in accordance with the amount of money he has. He shall not cause her fear, anxiety, stress, and his words with her should be calm. He should not be sad, melancholy, sour, angry, full of sorrow or grief.* (See Rambam Ishut 15;9) Men, you are expected to be the anchor of all positivity, no matter what is going wrong.

For women only– The Shlah goes all the way. He writes the checklist for the woman that will give her total control over her husband. Here it is, word for word: *The Derech Eretz for a woman is to be*

go up to Jerusalem. Those who are willing to leave exile and go live in Jerusalem are a different level of a Jew. They are not just waiting for G-d to direct them. They are *with* G-d, even if it is uncomfortable, even if they have to sacrifice, even if they are going against their greatest fears. They are willing to give up community life, all their social and business networking, all they feel is normal and create and learn a new “normal”. Why? Because they are **with** G-d. G-d is their community. G-d is their network. G-d is Who defines normal.

giving in to her husband, listening to him, and when she speaks to him, she should speak with charm and with pleading, with respect, with a sense of being undeserving, with humility. And when she does, her voice will be heard, and her will shall be done. She should always show him that she is happy, and she should keep his meal times, make him his favorite foods, put her will aside, and instead, follow his will... even if in her eyes, she totally does not understand him or agree with him! (Shlah Shaar HaOtiot Dalet- Derech Eretz)

Although Sarah was greater than Avraham in prophecy, she almost never took a stand against all that Avraham did or asked. (See Rashi Bereshit 21;12) And, he asked a lot! Moving to who-knows-where, just following a cloud, putting herself in danger for him twice, taking her only son to *Akeidat Yitzhak!* Avraham said at Sarah's *Hesped*, *Her husband's heart trusted in her*, for when he told her to say that she was his sister, she obliged. *ושלל לא יחסר* *And spoils, he did not lack.* Because of Sarah, I became rich. As it says, *גמלתהו טוב ולא רע*. (Tanchuma)

לעולם יהא אדם זהיר בכבוד אשתו שאין ברכה מצויה בתוך ביתו של אדם אלא בשביל אשתו, שנאמר ולאברם הטיב בעבורה. והיינו דאמר להו רבא לבני מחוזא: אוקירו לנשייכו כי היכי דתתעתרו *A person should always be careful to respect his wife. For the blessing that is found in a man's house is only in the merit of his wife. As it says, And to Avraham "he" was good, for her sake. Rava would teach Bnei Mechuza - Respect your wives, so that you will become rich.* (Bava Batra 59a) As great as Avraham was, he did not deserve

goodness on his own. He needed Sarah's merit. This teaches that if you are rewarded with blessing, even though you might have merit, ultimately you got that blessing, because you have a wife at home.

Why is that so? Why is it that a man has blessing, only in the merit of his wife? לעולם יאכל אדם וישתה? פחות ממה שיש לו וילבש ויתכסה כמו שיש לו ויכבד אשתו ובניו יותר ממה שיש לו, שהן תלויין בו והוא תלוי במי שאמר (חולין פד') והיה העולם. *A person should always live within his budget regarding his level of food, drink and clothing, and he should spend on his wife and children more than his budget. Why? Because they are dependent on him, and he is dependent on the One who spoke, and the world came into being!* (Chullin 84)

As mentioned in Siftei Chaim- (Emunah A, page 33), a fundamental principle of Judaism is that we are just *Keilim*, tools, to bring out G-dliness and His good in this world. Avraham Avinu was great, because it says, והיה ברכה – you shall be a blessing. Our Rabbis teach that the word ברוך, on a deeper level means, to connect to a greater Source, (See Kad Hakemach Bracha 1) like the word הברכה regarding *Shemitta*. Avraham was blessed by G-d to be the link between G-d and humanity, to connect humanity to G-d. By teaching people to recite a blessing over their food, *and on a family level, to provide for his wife.*

Judaism invented this word called merit. Your success is not in *your* merit, but in the merit that you are a nice guy to your wife. That is all she wants from you, that you be a nice guy. And when you are a nice guy to your wife, you will have so much *Beracha*, you won't even know what to do with it. *Beracha* in spirituality, *Beracha* in physicality, *Beracha* that you will personify serenity.

R Akiva was so poor at the outset of his married life that he and his wife lived in a barn. But he was a source of optimism for Rachel. As he had to pick the hay out of his wife Rachel's hair, he promised her that when he would have the money, he would buy her an expensive piece of jewelry called, *Yerushalayim shel zahav*. (See Nedarim 50a) Although R' Akiva did not have the money for such a luxury, but out of respect to her, he told

her that she deserved it and he promised to give it to her when he could, something he later did.

As I was writing this story, I got a phone call from a client. This fellow learned in Kollal for a while, and now he is trying to support himself, working in sales. He is an amazing guy, but he is struggling to keep up. His wife asked him for 635 dollars, money he just did not have. He said, no problem. I will get you the money tonight. He had no idea where he would get that money from, but he knew that if his wife asked, he would somehow get it for her. A few minutes later, his boss calls him over and says, "Hey, you are doing an amazing job here at the office. I like the vibes you bring." Here is a tip. He pulls out 620 dollars from his wallet!!!!

In the classic *sefer* on Shalom Bayit, *Bayit UMenucha* from the Mashgiach of Kamenitz, Rav Moshe Aharon Stern zt"l writes the following:

“The Mitzvah to have children is on men alone, not on women. Women do not have the Mitzvah of פרו ורבו. Why not? Tosefot explains, because a woman who becomes pregnant is putting herself in the dangers of childbirth. R Meir Simcha explains, that the Torah does not ask a person to put themselves in danger.

Still, a woman is willing to get married. What more do you need to explain to the man that he owes his wife respect? Difficulty in bringing up children is a curse on women, for the sin of Chava, and raising children just gets harder in each generation. And if raising children alone is not hard enough, the woman becomes pregnant again and tries to be the best mom she can while she is not feeling herself! Hello men!!! All your wife wants from you is that you understand her, that you respect her, for just willing to be a Mom! All that she expects from you is that you can show her that you like her, even when she is wiped out, feeling horrible, and grumpy. (See Yevamot 63a)

R' Nissim Karelitz was once approached with a Halachic query by a man whose widowed mother was ill. She needed her married sons to take turns being with her, each night. But one of the daughters-in-law claimed it was too hard for her. R' Nissim ruled that although there is a Mitzvah of honoring parents, a man's commitment to be at his

wife's side comes first. After all, the husband is committed to her in his *Ketubah*, וזנא אפלה ואוקיר.

So how do I tap into the blessings through improving Shalom Bayit?

Here are the Selfie Steps.

Most of us want three things from the people we meet: to be *understood*, *respected*, and *liked*. This is parallel to the Triple A of Shalom Bayit: Attention, Affection and Appreciation.

1. By giving others our Attention... they feel Understood.

2. By displaying our Appreciation... they feel Respected.

3. When you communicate Affection... they feel Liked.

If these three are checked, your Shalom Bayit is surely off the charts!!!

FRAME IT!

I will never forget how, when my late great-grandfather, Will reached his 100th birthday. He received a happy birthday letter from President Clinton. He framed it. The card wasn't so important, but the person who gave the card was important. The president of the United States of America is like... the boss of all bosses.

I was worried by Biden's comment that he would end the Moslem ban on day one and have Moslem voices as part of his administration. My Rabbi said, "Don't worry – לבי מלך ביד יקנה על-כל אשר יחפץ – *A king's heart is ... in YKVK's hand; He does with it as He wishes.*" (Mishlei 21:1) The higher position a person has, the more he is bossed by G-d. Because G-d is the Boss of the boss of all bosses.

Imagine that each time you say "Baruch Hashem," you are framing that kindness from G-d that says that the Boss of all bosses LOVES YOU!!! I am so lucky that the Boss of all bosses has always taken care of me. He gave me a loving Mommy and Abba, who went through sleepless nights to change and burp me, when I was too small to change or burp myself. He clothed me, fed me, sheltered me, brought the sun for me each morning and lit my nights with the moon, sent me the most beautiful and unique people I have in my life. FRAME IT ALL WITH A "G-D LOVES YOU" FRAME!

People do so many things to prove that they are important, even if it is just to prove their significance to themselves. In Judaism, the very fact that you exist proves that you are important to G-d! There is no greater self-validation, no more

significant way for you to believe that you have value than recognizing the Boss' love for you.

From the time we begin growing up, we naturally think otherwise. We think in accordance with our fabricated story – that my life is independent of G-d. That I am either at the mercy of other people, or I control other people. That other people manipulate me, or I manipulate them. Unless you begin to contemplate, to think more in-depth.

G-d first tested Avraham with לך-לך מארצך וממולדתך – *Go to you from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.* This *passuk* seems strange. If you leave your land, you have already left your birthplace. If you left your birthplace, you have already left your father's home! And a second question. Didn't we learn at the end of *Parashat* Noach that Avraham had already left Ur Kasdim with his father and family, to go towards the Land of Canaan? Weren't they already in Haran?

The Malbim answers that the test that G-d gave Avraham, and is giving every one of us each day, is to leave our past behind, to live in the Now. You are not your childhood. בית אביך You are not your community. מולדתך You are not your culture. ארצך As you grow up, you form a mental image of who you are, based on your personal and cultural conditioning. We tend to derive a sense of self from our mind's content and activity, and we become addicted to our thinking. We identify with the thoughts we have from childhood.

The first Mitzvah is to go out of how we thought in our parents' home, how we naturally thought because of our community or our country. How so? You grow up thinking that your parents are boss. The king or queen of the class is boss. The boss at work is boss. The president of the United States is boss. Go more inward, לך לך, and you will be able to detach yourself from those people, places or things. To disconnect your story from so many different bosses.

Humans are reactors. We react to surroundings we experience and think/feel/believe accordingly. We react to the 'nouns,' the persons, places, or things around us. We think like the music we hear, like the views we see, like the food we eat. The background has more impact on our subconscious than we realize. We identify with childhood thought patterns even up to our 100th birthday!

Naturally, a person grows up thinking, that the way he/ she thinks is reality, normal, and we identify our identity with those subjective realities. G-d tested Avraham, and He challenges each of us to rise above the patterns of thinking acquired in our father's household, our community, our culture, and to adopt the way G-d shows us. *Go to the Land I will show you*, or the world, the way it really is, the world that I am the Master Orchestrator of. To the land of Kanaan, the land of humility, כנען from the root כנע. How does one achieve this?

There is a word that we say, about a hundred and one times a day, that Avraham Avinu invented. The word is *Ado-nai*. "R Shimon Ben Yochai said that from the day the HKBH created His world, there was no one who called HKBH Adon, until Avraham came and called Him Adon." Avraham used the word *Ado-nai* when asking G-d for a son. (15;2) When asking for a guarantee that his descendants inherit the Land of Canaan. (15;8) When asking G-d to excuse him, so that he could invite the Arab guests in the scorching heat. (18;3) And when he prayed for the people of Sodom, Avraham used the name *Ado-nai* four times. (18;27 , 18;30 , 18;31, 18;32)

The Noda Beyehuda explains. Until Abraham, people believed that it was not befitting for the world's Creator to run this lowly world Himself. People believed that G-d deals only with upper worlds, zodiacs, and the like. Avraham called out in the name of G-d, publicizing the belief that G-d is "Adon Olam." G-d runs everything in your life and is the Adon, the Boss, of all your bosses.

Each morning, we remind ourselves this when we say in *Elokay Neshama*, רבון כל המעשים אדון כל הנשמות. *Master of all actions, Boss of all the souls*. Ever notice that there are two times we refer to G-d in our daily prayers as אלקי! *My G-d!* at the beginning of a prayer? Before we make the blessing that G-d returns my *Neshama* to me each morning, and at the end of Amidah, before we ask G-d to prevent my mouth from speaking slander, my heart from arrogance. Why do we mention *My G-d!* before saying נשמה שנחת בי טהורה *the soul that you put in me is pure?* Why do we mention *My G-d!* before asking בצור לשוני מרע *prevent my tongue from speaking slander?* And another question: isn't it in *my* power, not to speak slander, or not to have haughtiness? Why are we asking this from G-d, anyway?

The word אלקי is short for אלוקים שלי—the ש ל ם drops in accordance with *Dikduk*. *Elokim* is the Name of G-d that represents His authority over nature. Both *Elokim* and *Teva* (nature) have a numerical value of 81. We ask G-d to make it *natural* for us to speak without slander and have a humble heart! G-d, allow me to surrender my free choice to You! When we praise G-d for the soul that He gives us, the *Neshama*, we mention that He is in charge of our nature. Why? Because the word *Neshama* is from the root of *Neshima*. There are two things I have no control over in my body: my breathing and my thoughts. If I decide not to breathe, I will faint, wake up again and breathe again, because G-d is doing constant CPR and breathing into me. ויפה באפיו נשמת היום And, if I decide not to think tomorrow, the first thing when I wake up, I think, *Today, I am not thinking*, and I already had my first thought. Thinking is also from the *Neshama*. I can't have an endless breath. And I

can't have an endless thought. (Likutei Maharil Emor) When we thank G-d for our *Neshama* each morning, we confirm that He is Boss of our nature. He is אלוהי! Without Him, I don't exist! I am a lifeless body, without a thinking self! Without my *Neshama*, I am just like an empty container, "the soul that you put *in* me" בּי and not "the soul that you gave *to* me" לּי. As the blessing ends, "...the One who returns souls to lifeless bodies".

My wife's grandmother "Nona", from Beirut, holds my babies on her lap and sings in French, *Ein Si Fo, Fo, Fo, Le Pettito Marrioneto*, which means, *move your hands, my little puppet*. From the minute we were born, we have just been moving our hands, like puppets.

Selfie Steps to rise above addictive thinking and let go of the past:

1. Sometimes we think that holding on makes us strong, but sometimes letting go is being even stronger. Sooner or later, we've all got to let go of our past. You have to know when it's time to turn the page.
2. Sometimes G-d wants us to let go of the life we've planned, so we can be ready to have the life that He has waiting for us.
3. Letting go of the past needs to be a conscious decision. It is not enough to merely know that the past is irrelevant.
4. Letting go of the past does not mean giving up. There is a fine line between letting go and giving up, although the ramifications are worlds apart. Holding on is believing that there is only a past; letting go is knowing that there's a future..

DEFINING CHINUCH

A unique feature of *Lashon haKodesh* (the Hebrew language) is that the deepest essence of each word is found in the first usage of that word in the Torah.

Let us take the words 'gadol'(large) and 'katan' (small) as examples. The first encounter we have with these words in the Torah is in reference to the sun as being "*haMaor haGadol*" while the moon is described as "*haMaor haKatan*" (*Bereishit* 1:16). The words 'big' and 'small' do not refer to size alone. In addition, *gadol* means *mashpia* (one that influences) as well. The sun is the *source* of light while the moon is a recipient of this light and affected by it. It is this ability to be a giver/an "influencer", as opposed to being *katan*, a taker or a receiver, which categorizes the sun as 'gadol' and the moon as 'katan'. The classification, '*Gadol haDor*', is not bestowed upon every generation's outstanding Torah scholars only on account of the prodigious amount of Torah one knows or based upon the number of one's followers. Rather the qualification of a *Gadol* is one's being a *mashpia*, a spiritual *source* of wisdom, guidance, advice, and new hope. Ironically, a person can be *gadol*, old in years, yet remain a *katan* by lacking what it takes to be *mashpia* upon others – one's community,

one's place of learning or working, or even upon one's family.

Having explored a paradigm of the depth of *Lashon haKodesh*, let us examine a word that describes a most ubiquitous topic in Jewish discussions: *Chinuch*. Commonly interpreted as education or childrearing, this word also encompasses a deeper, more precise translation. The first time we encounter the word, '*chinuch*', in the Torah is in our *parasha*, regarding the relationship between Avraham, the patriarch of our nation, and his servant, Eliezer: "וּיְרַק אֶת הַנִּיכִי", "*and he hurried his apprentice (Eliezer) who he trained*" (*Bereishit* 14:14). Rashi explains that the word, *chinuch*, "is training a person or item to be able to achieve its maximum performance in the future." Avraham had trained Eliezer to do *mitzvot* and *chessed* in a way that he will be self-motivated and knowledgeable exactly how to behave. Interestingly, R' Meir Shapiro from Lublin draws from these words of Rashi the following inference: *If the training does not achieve a long-term effect, then it is not proper chinuch/training.*

Chinuch does not mean to raise children. It means to raise adults. This sounds like common sense but

many parents somehow live with this misconception. Instead of bringing up, nurturing and cultivating a family, they try to maintain one. The efforts that go into that maintenance undermine the latent, deeply-rooted necessity to train our family members for future conduct. The ripple effect of this miscomprehension is that parents perceive their offspring as children sitting in the back seat of a car: in whichever direction we choose to go, they are to follow. R' Yisrael Salanter writes, "... as the carpenter steps on scraps of wood, and the glassblower on broken shards of glass, the mentor (or parent) similarly steps on the souls of those he mentors..." Naturally, a craftsman looks down on the unfinished, raw material of his trade. Likewise, a parent may relate to his/her child in the *childrearing mode*, and not as a separate independent being.

However, the Torah refers to *chinuch* as *training*. Training to do *mitzvot*. Training to live a Torah life. The concept of *child-rearing* conveys dealing with children in the most efficient manner possible for the duration that the child remains in the parental household, with minimum amount of involvement on the part of the parent. Training, unlike *childrearing*, connotes the act of constant guidance, modeling and mentoring.

This one difference has so many ramifications. *Childrearing* methods or institutionalized education can have some effect upon a child even when s/he is not engaged fully. Just throw him or her in the back seat and buckle up. Training, on the other hand, can never be accomplished when there is reluctance on the part of the recipient. Although a child manipulated by his/her parent through reward for good behavior or punishment for bad conduct can show successful short-term improvement, it works rarely in achieving positive, long-term results.

Besides creating an environment of love and warmth, proper *chinuch*/training can only be done where there is perceived trust – trust that the child feels important in the eyes of the parent (and mentor). Sincere listening to, validating of and empathizing with a child's feelings may be the most powerful tool to achieve this. One can just imagine how much damage in the *training relationship* can be caused by not listening with full attention to a child when s/he would like to share something with the parent. A parent can, at least, say, "Now is not a good time but I would like to hear you out in a short while." Listening, preferably ten minutes a day, strengthens the relationship of trust, resulting in a much better chance that the child will want to be trained by someone he now trusts.

The prerequisite to this first step in the actual training process is a parent's self-improvement. Often, my rabbi would be confronted by parents who came for counseling about dealing with adolescents. Always, he would advise, at the outset, that the parents try strengthening themselves in that particular issue or area of life or Judaism with which they discern their offspring struggling.

Although parents, sometimes, must direct the child with commands, usually borne out of sheer frustration, the ideal approach is to enable and guide a child to think for themselves and to decide correctly what is his/her best course of action in any situation. I have heard many parents ask, "Am I a good parent?" A more constructive question to pose, one that will cause better results is, "How can I train my child to do a certain *mitzvah* or behave in accordance with certain values?" Of course, there will be areas where the child will pick up your intent passively. However, in harder areas for the child, the parent needs to ask him/herself not how to get the child to perform the desired act but how should I train the child to want to do the act.

HOW RELIGIOUS IS SHE?



My rabbi once told me an interesting thought that has a lot to do with our Parasha. It used to be, when he was called by someone inquiring about a girl that learnt in his classes for a shidduch, the voice on the line would ask, "How is the yirat shamayim of the girl? How great is her fear of Heaven?" At first, my rabbi would answer this question about how much yirat shamayim other people have, by saying that he does not know how to answer it. He would explain that only after Avraham, our forefather, passed the tenth test, Akeidat Yitzchak, did G-d say "*Now I know that you are G-d fearing, for you did not withhold your son from me*". How, then, can I tell you if and how much the girl is G-d fearing?

My rabbi told me that this did not work. People thought that he was hiding or managing information about the girl and was not giving straight answers. So, instead, my rabbi would ask the person "What, specifically, about the Yirat Shamayim of the girl do you want to know ? "

In this week's parasha, parashat Lech Lecha, we start off with the first of the ten tests of Avraham brought in the Mishna in Avot (chapter 5). According to the Rambam, the ten tests were 1 – leave the land of your father, 2- accept the challenge of a famine in the new land, 3- deal with Sarah's being taken to Paroah's palace , 4- wage war with the four kings, 5- take Hagar to have children from her, after seeing no progress with Sarah, 6- circumcise, even at an advanced age, 7 – contend with Sarah's having been taken by Avimelech, 8- send Hagar away, 9- send Yishmael away, 10- sacrifice Yizchak – Akeidat Yitzchak. The Rambam does not include the episode with Nimrod in Ur Kasdim, when Avraham got thrown into a fire furnace due to his belief in G-d, in the ten tests . The reason for this is because the Torah does not mention this test. (The Ramban learns from here that the test of Ur Kasdim was not mentioned because the Torah does not want to include idol worshiper's claims and beliefs.) The

Bartenura, however, does include Ur Kasdim as one of the ten tests. We can deduce from the fact that G-d tested Avraham consecutively that each test related to a new, higher level of how much Yirat Shamayim Avraham had. If so, it would seem that the test at Ur Kasdim, when Avraham was being asked to give up his life for his belief, was less of a test on the "scale of Yirat Shamayim" than that in which G-d asked him to leave his father's land and go to a land where G-d would bless him. How could this test of leaving be a higher level than Ur Kasdim? Isn't giving up one's life for his religion the greatest sign that the person is G-d fearing?

The answer to this question is indeed a weighty one. As hard as it is for one to die to sanctify G-d's Name, it is much harder to live in a way that sanctifies G-d's Name! To live in a way that sanctifies G-d's Name could mean to be in shul a few minutes early, before prayers start. It could mean not to talk in shul – any number of things that we sometimes feel, as Orthodox Jews, that we should strive toward. It could well mean making significant changes in our *daily* lives, despite the fact that if there were to be an instance where we knew that we had to give up our lives for our religion, we would certainly do so. Many non observant Jews would prefer to die than give up their Jewish identity. ***But they will not give up their "everyday life" for their identity.*** The reason is because, somehow, it is harder to live like a Jew than to die like a Jew. Avraham was tested by being told to leave his father's home, to have faith that this was a smart move, and to start life in a new place. This was a new level of test that Avraham had to deal with: living according to G-d's command. even in the everyday.

When we question if we have Yirat Shamayim or we do not, or how much Yirat Shamayim we have, this thought should come to mind. It may very well change our lives. Our everyday lives.

THE SECRET MOTIVE TO PASS LIFE'S TESTS



We are all on this 120 year voyage through a world of tests and trials. One of Judaism's core beliefs is that we get rewarded for passing tests. Not always do we have access to that inner power to overcome the challenges and temptations that lie in our path. A client recently asked me for the secret to passing tests. At the time, I did not know what to answer. But in this week's parasha, the Midrash drops us a hint.

אברהם נבחן עשר פעמים על ידי ה' ויחשבה לו צדקה Avraham was tested by G-d ten times. But it was not for the mitzvah he did, or the sin he refrained from doing that he was rewarded. Rather, he was rewarded for his Emunah in Hashem. All that Avraham inherited in this world and the next, was only in the merit of his Emunah in Hashem. How do we know this? From the aforementioned passuk. *And he had faith in G-d, and this was considered for him for a merit.* (Mechilta B'shalah)

Every test has in it a factor of Emunah. If you really believe that G-d is watching, if you really believe that there is another world after this, if you really believe that everything we do has a price, punishment or reward, if you really believe that G-d doesn't miss a thought of a split second, if you really believe that G-d has the ability to reward you infinitely for your good deeds, if you really believe that G-d does not have to answer to anybody and is unstoppable, then the test that you are in takes on a new light. The problem is that most people do not factor this intensely real Emunah in G-d into the test, itself. A test is not for the test itself; i.e., did you cheat or did you not, did you look or did you not look, did you hear what was inappropriate or did you not, did you use your time wisely or did you not. No. That is not the test. The test is an underlying one: is G-d in your life, or is He not? When you have a crisis, is G-d part of the equation?

Religion is not merely about prayer and study, or adherence to the 613 commandments. Religion is much deeper than that. Someone recently taught this line that I can't get out of my head. "When you Daven, you are talking to G-d. When you learn

Torah, G-d is talking to you." Religion is about relationship with the Infinite.

I always wondered why our Rabbis teach that if you want to overcome the Yetzer Hara, you need to either pray or learn. Why? Because the Yetzer Hara is testing you to see if you really have G-d in your life. If you learn, you strengthen your awareness that G-d is around, because you have just heard what He has to say. If you just spoke to Him, you know He is wherever you decide to speak to Him. And once G-d is a central part of your decision, your thinking has more clarity to it. This is the inner secret for overcoming tests. Emunah.

I wondered why Avraham, who was the first person to discover G-d on his own, was tested so much with so many difficulties. I would have thought that a man like that, who was nice enough to discover G-d on his own and started the whole Jewish religion, should have been rewarded and never have had a difficulty in his life. But I believe that the answer is that Emunah is not a one-timer. It is a constant. Allow me to explain with a Mashal from the relationship of marriage.

There was once a couple who came to marriage counseling. The wife complained that the husband does not show enough affection; he never says to her, "I love you". The husband defended himself. "I told you at the wedding that I love you. And if anything changes, I will let you know."

What does that man not understand about love? That love is not a state of being. Love is a verb. It is a constant activeness, one that needs to be constantly restated, repeated, and reaffirmed. Emunah, your awareness of and relationship with G-d, is very similar. It is a constant. And G-d wants our relationship. It is not a one-time thing. **AND THIS IS THE REASON FOR ALL YOUR TESTS IN LIFE.**

He does not need our prayers to save us in hard times, rather he brings us hard times in order for us to pray. Because G-d wants you to constantly, actively, love Him. You express this, each test you pass that G-d puts in your life journey.



This Mechilta teaches us that the reward is for the relationship, for the Emunah. So the next time you find yourself in front of a test, teachers of change teach you to decelerate (antonym of accelerate). Slow down, don't move. Give yourself five minutes before you inch towards your temptation.

KING OF THE CLASS

According to Chassidut, the weeks of these Parashiot are weeks when we can ask ourselves the age old question, *When will my actions reach the actions of my Forefathers*. There is a special Hashpa'a during these weeks, when we can connect ourselves to Avraham Avinu, to his Emunah, to his Hessed and to his Greatness.

The first thing that Avraham ever heard from G-d was "Lech lecha". Go. Go through life, test after test, traveling towards your life goals. Go. Don't get stuck on what people have to say about you, what people want to do to you. Go, until I tell you to stop. Just keep on going.

I believe we can all tap into that message. For every Jew, the job in life is – to go! Not to get stuck. But to keep on growing, and growing and growing. Whenever something is bothering us in life, if we are jealous, if we are angry, if we are depressed, if we are insulted... there is only one real reason why. It is because we are not performing the mitzvah "Lech Lecha." We got stuck.

One of the greatest plies of the yetzer hara is to make a Jew forget what his Tafkaid in life is, why we came here and where we are going. What is important, and what is not. We all know that we were brought to the world with a Neshama, with a purpose. And just like the very first thing G-d told Avraham, the first Jew, was "Go", so too, every Neshama, before being sent down to this world, is told by G-d Lech Lecha. *Go wherever I send you. Go away from what is comfortable. Go for the challenges in life. Until I ask for your Neshama back.* לך אל הארץ אשר אראך, Go to the land which I will show you. How does G-d show us that land, in

Give yourself a chance, to pray to G-d that you won't fall. Try to get yourself involved in some words of Torah. Try to shed another sliver of your awareness of G-d onto your decision of what your next move is going to be.

our personal life? Your "אראך" – binoculars – is the Torah, a similar root. Growing in the ways of the Torah is the essence of Lech Lecha, the only way to "go" somewhere in this World. This is why Halachot are called Halachot, for they show you how to "go" in life. הליכות עולם לו – אל תקרי הליכות ילכו מהיל אל חיל יראה א-ל, אלא הליכות And, as it says, אליוקים The passuk that is the source of the Halacha that one must go from praying Shacharit, directly to learn Torah in the study hall. (Sh" A 155)

As one goes through life, each stage of life has its own "king". In kindergarten, the king of Gan is the child who bites the hardest. From first grade till fourth, the king of the class is, commonly, the kid who kicks the strongest. Fourth till High, the kid who has the strongest elbows or is best at sports may be considered king of the class. In Yeshiva Ketanna or high school, the one who knows best how to degrade the other, verbally, might be the king. And, in Yeshiva Gedollah, the one who can ask the question to challenge the Rosh Yeshiva's shiur is, in some way or other, king of the Yeshiva. From then on, political figures and the rich might be kings of society.

But each one of these examples is no more than a "fake king" – the king who everyone is scared of, but whom nobody sincerely admires or respects. There is only one real king, only one "genuine ruler". And he is the undercover king all along, who reigns from kindergarten till his last days on earth. Sometimes, the people of the world discover the identity of the real king only when he is a grandparent. And, sometimes, unfortunately, only from the eulogy at his funeral. The king is the one who is master over himself, over his desires and his



temptations. The one who allows his soul, his spirituality, to reign over his wants and wishes, desires and emotions. The real king, the Melech, rules from inside out. Not from outside in.

The letters מלך are really the ראשי תיבות, the first letters of the words מַה , לֵב , כֶּבֶד. In the מַה, our mind, we have our Neshama, our G-dliness. In our לֵב, our heart, rests our Ruach, and in our כֶּבֶד, liver, our Nefesh. The Ruach is the source of pride, anger, jealousy, and honor. The Nefesh is the source of physical temptations and materialistic drives. If we allow our Neshama to reign, and the letters are in the right order, allowing the Neshama to rule the other two, then we are the מלך, the genuine king. But if we switch around our priorities, allowing our כֶּבֶד (Nefesh), or our לֵב (Ruach) to rule the מַה (spiritual/intellect), then the letters are switched around, making the letters כַל(ו), nothing. When you feel emptiness in life, or you feel that your self esteem is very low, like a “nothing”, it is because you are “out of order”. You have allowed your feelings and desires to rule over your “hard drive”, your intellect and spirituality.

So, G-d tells the Neshama before its decent, Lech Lecha. ‘Just make certain that *the Neshama* is the

one who takes the initiative and chooses the **direction** through life, not letting the Nefesh or Ruach tell you where to go.’ The way that the Nefesh or the Ruach control the Neshama is by confusing the intellect into perceiving this world as a permanent place, not a place of Lech Lecha.

This lesson hit me as I put away the last board of my Succah. After shlepping my big Succah up 4 flights for only a seven day period, after being rained on the first night of Succot, after being woken up 3 out of 7 nights from the dew that dripped on me at 3 am, I was confronted by my anti religious neighbor, who topped it all off with his annual, annoying, anti-religious question. “So, was it worth all the hassle for just 7 days?” I did not answer. He asked me if I have an answer. I said I don’t, because it is not question. He agreed.

I did not lie to him. I did not have an answer *for him*, an atheist. I had a real question to ask, both to the atheist and to myself, but I decided not to ask him, preferring to keep my distance. *Is it worth it to invest so much in our career, in our homes, in our cars... if it is only for 120 years?*

We are not here to stay. We’re just in transit.

ALL YOU REALLY ARE

The Serenity Prayer is a prayer that is used by Alcoholics Anonymous. This is a prayer that has helped many people get out of various addictions. The prayer has a lot of wisdom to it. “G-d, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” The serenity question is, how many things in life can you change? And the question of choice, of exactly what is your locus of control, is a big focus in coaching.

What happens too often is that we naturally think that we can change everything in life. But many times, the only thing that we do not realize that we actually can change is the way we think. And, like in the Serenity Prayer, when focusing on what we

cannot change, we forget to focus on what we *can* change. The reason why you forget to focus on what you can change, is because you can focus on only one thing at a time.

Our Rabbis tell us very clearly what is in our hands and what is in the hands of G-d. “Everything is in the hands of G-d, except for fear of G-d.” The only area of life you have control over is fear of G-d, how much fear of Heaven you have. Fear of Heaven, of course, is as wide a spectrum as a spectrum could be. It affects every area of life.

Interestingly enough, Rashi in this week’s Parasha says that Avraham actually prayed that his son, Yishmael, have Fear of Heaven. (לו ישמעאל-ל יחיה) Rashi adds, 18 ;17) (ביראתך. The Siftei Chachamim asks, from the aforementioned



statement, “If everything is in the hands of G-d, except for fear of Heaven,” that means that Yishmael’s fear of Heaven is up to Yishmael, alone. How, then, would praying for Yishmael to have fear of Heaven be in any way effective?

The answer is, that our own Fear of Heaven is in our control, it is in our hands, by praying for it. R’ Ben Tzion Abba Shaul actually puts a spin on the words of our Rabbis and says, “Everything is in the hands of Heaven, i.e., it is up to G-d to say “no” to any one of your prayers or requests from Him. But when one prays for fear of Heaven, G-d never says no.

We pray for fear of Heaven when we say before Shema in the morning, **וְיַחַד לְבַבְנוּ לְאַהֲבָה וּלְיִרְאָה אֵת שְׁמֵךְ**, when we say, after U’va Letzion, **וְיִשִּׁים בְּלִבְנוּ אֶת הַרְחֵמֶן הוּא יִטַע**, and in Birkat Hamazon, **תּוֹרַתוֹ וְאַהֲבָתוֹ בְּלִבְנוּ וְתִהְיֶה יִרְאָתוֹ עַל פְּנֵינוּ לְבִלְתִּי נַחֲטָא**. The Chafetz Chaim prayed that he not engage in forbidden speech, that he would not see what he was not supposed to look at, and that he would not listen to what he was not supposed to hear. Even the Chafetz Chaim prayed for Fear of Heaven. Maybe that was how he became the Chafetz Chaim.

Avraham prayed for Yishmael to have Fear of Heaven, because the way that a child gets Fear of Heaven is by seeing how important Fear of Heaven is to the parent. Avraham was praying for his own Yirat Shamayim, that it be strong enough, that it would affect Yishmael.

Reb Moshe Bloy, when visiting America, spent Shabbat by a working fellow, who cried to him over his children who were not following the way of the Torah. Over his Shabbat stay, one of the children touched Muktzeh, and the father told him calmly that it is forbidden to touch Muktzeh on Shabbat. On Motzaei Shabbat, the child took the father’s money from his wallet, and was playing with it. The father screamed so furiously that the whole house shook.

Reb Moshe told him, “Now I know why the kids don’t keep Torah. They see that when it comes to issues of Halacha, you are very calm and reserved. But when it comes to your money, you scream!”

Think Lot. Lot was a man who had so much. But he wanted more. He let his animals graze in the fields of the Canaanites, without even considering asking their permission or thinking that he should pay them. Avraham asked him why. Lot said because the Land would belong to him anyway, because G-d gave the Land to Avraham, and when Avraham would die, childless, Lot, as Avraham’s nephew, would be the only inheritor. Avraham told Lot that they could not stay together. So Lot chose to go to Sedom. From here, Lot’s spirituality, Lot’s Fear of Heaven, went downhill.

Reb Reuven Karlshtein asked, why didn’t Avraham try to be “mekarev” his own nephew? Avraham was the Outreach King; couldn’t he change his own family member? The answer Reb Reuven gives is that when a person commits a sin with a logical justification, it is much harder to change his behavior than it is to influence a more neutral, random “Joe Shmoe”.

But, I believe that the reason why Avraham did not try to be mekarev his nephew was because Lot had “dollar signs” in his eyes. When someone is running after money, more money than he needs, Kiruv becomes very difficult. Because when a person is focusing on materialistic goals, if he believes that this is an area where G-d gives him ultimate control, there is absolutely no room in his agenda for anything spiritual.

It seems that this is what King Solomon, the wisest of men, meant when he said **סוֹף דְּבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמַע אֵת** All you are, at the end of the day, is the amount of Fear of Heaven you have. Because that is your only choice, and the only place where G-d gives you control.

IN THE MERIT OF EMUNAH



Last week, at the Shabbat meal, my son came back from shul and told us all this incredible story: There was a philanthropist from America who was very close to R' Elyashiv, and every time he came for a visit, he gave huge sums of money for the causes that R Elyashiv was passionate about. Once, when R Elyashiv had a heart attack, there was a certain Hatzalah fellow who saved the Rav's life. The wealthy man offered this Hatzalah member an astronomical amount of money – millions and millions of dollars – to buy the Olam Haba for his good deed of having saved the Rav's life. So, the Hatzalah member went to R Elyashiv to ask him what he thought about the offer. Should I sell my mitzvah for this tempting amount of money? “There are so many things I can do with this money....”

Gesturing with his hand, the Rav asked, three times, “You're going to sell a mitzvah for money? You're going to sell a mitzvah for money? You're going to sell a mitzvah for money?” There was no price tag on a mitzvah for Rav Elyashiv – there was no amount of money in the world that could reach the value of a mitzvah. It is Rav Elyashiv's perfection of emunah that made him so different from most of us.

How much is a mitzvah worth? How much is a davening worth? A thought of emunah? A spark of inspiration? All the material benefits of Olam Hazei do not come close to the Olam Haba of just one spark of inspiration! Even for one step to shul! And I will prove it.

Do you know why G-d rewarded Pharaoh, giving him a nation of Jewish slaves for 400 years? The Talmud, in Sotah (46b), tells us: It is because he escorted Avraham and Sarah 4 steps when he sent them away from Egypt!!!! Had Pharaoh known what reward he was getting, 100 years of a nation of slaves for every step, he would have walked Avraham all the way back home!!! Jews don't get rewarded like that. We don't get reward for

Mitzvot in this world, because all the reward of this world is nothing compared to one second of reward in Olam Haba. The more we internalize this, the more spiritual we will be.

The Rambam (סוף פי' משניות ברכות) writes that learning just one of the 13 Principles of Belief is more valuable than any other study. In his letters (אגרת תימן), the Rambam writes that anyone who fills his soul with good middot or works on correcting his middot and has the wisdom to put his trust in the Creator is definitely deserving of Olam Haba. And this is the underlying will of the whole Torah, and the main message of all the Mitzvot. To refine our middot and complete our trust in the Creator – to make our Emunah perfect. In the merit of our staying in this relationship, we ask G-d to save us. ותן שכר טוב לכל הבוטחים בשמך באמת... כי כך. The Midrash Tanchuma tells us how Avraham and Sarah prayed, when Pharaoh abducted Sarah. Avraham started crying and praying to G-d, saying, ‘Master of the World, is this the reward that I get for trusting in You?’ Now that they have taken her, please, for the sake of Your Mercy and Kindness, don't cause me shame because of my trust in You’. Sarah cried, and said, ‘Master of the World, I did not know anything, just that Avraham told me that You said to leave our hometown, and I believed You. And now, I am bereft of my father, my mother and my husband, and this wicked king is going to disgrace me? Please, act in the merit of Your Great Name and in the merit of my trust in Your words’. G-d told her, “Nothing will happen to you, or to your husband. And I will punish Pharaoh and his house”.

This Tanchuma amazes me. It shows us Avraham's and Sarah's relationship with G-d, in times of crisis. And it shows us the merit of faith. Because this ongoing relationship, the constant faith that we are never alone, that we are always cared for, is our most powerful resource in life.

HOW JERUSALEM GOT ITS NAME



Most people do not know how Jerusalem got its name. The Midrash on this week's parsha tells us that Malki Tzedek, the king of Shalem, who greeted Avraham after the first "world war" with bread and wine, was none other than Shem, the son of Noah. After the Flood, Shem was given the city of Yerushalayim by his father, and was granted kingship and priesthood, also inheriting the clothes of the Kohen Gadol. (Only a kohen can bring a sacrifice, and then the first born would merit kehuna, priesthood. Adam, the first firstborn who brought sacrifices, donned the clothes of the Kohen Gadol. Before he died, he passed over priesthood to worthy descendants. Noah inherited these clothes of the Kohen Gadol and offered up sacrifices. Noah gave these clothes to Shem. Bamidbar R. 4). At that time, Yerushalayim had a different name, given by Shem: he called it "Shalem". In Breishit Rabba, G-d said, If I call this holy place what Avraham called it at the Akeida, "Hashem Yirae", (a place where G-d will be seen in the future) then Shem, the tzaddik, will complain that he had previously given it the name Shalem. And if I call it Shalem, then Avraham will complain. So, I will call it the name that combines both names, "Yerushalem".

And, when Shem gave the bread and wine to Avraham, he blessed him and said, **ברוך אברם לא-ל, עליון קונה שמים וארץ. וברוך א-ל עליון אשר מגן צריך א-ל** *Blessed is Avram to the Supreme G-d (א-ל עליון) the Founder of the heavens and earth. And blessed is the Supreme G-d, Who handed over your enemies into your hands.* The Midrash Aggadda tells us that because of this statement, Shem had to surrender his rights of priesthood and kingship to Avraham. Although he did not say anything wrong, *how* he said it was not proper. He should *first* have blessed G-d *and then* blessed Avraham. For some reason, Shem switched the order, blessing Avraham before G-d. Either way, Shem was totally fine with handing over the priesthood to Avraham, for no other descendants of Shem were worthy of receiving it

This idea had an impact on me. I was with one foot out the door of shul when I was saying Aleinu

Leshabeach at the end of prayers. And then, I remembered what Shem lost because of the way he praised G-d. I stopped right then and there and walked back into shul. I tried much harder to praise G-d in Aleinu Leshabeach with the *way* it should be said. It felt like a different Aleinu Leshabeach. Shem lost so much because of the *how*. Later that night, a friend asked me which sefer mussar I recommend that he learn. I realized that this, too, is the lesson of Shem. I told him that it does not matter *what* he learns, it matters *how* he learns it. We can learn so much, halacha, mussar etc., and it can be on a whole new level if we put our minds into *how* we learn.

I wondered what it was that caused Shem to make such a mistake. But more than that, another question bothered me. We know that Avraham got all the credit for being the first Jew, and for introducing to mankind the idea that there is a Supreme and Almighty G-d. We also know that Avraham would encourage people to learn about his newfound religion, and that he opened a yeshiva. Didn't Shem precede him in this? We know that Shem had a yeshiva, and Yaakov learnt there on the way to the house of Lavan. (Commentators say that there, he learnt how to deal with Lavan and survive in his house.) So what was the big deal that Avraham introduced to the world? What was new in the yeshiva of Avraham that was not existent in the yeshiva of Shem?

R' Chaim Kaniefsky, shlit'a, explained that in Shem's yeshiva, the Noachide laws were taught. In Avraham's yeshiva, he learnt all the 613 mitzvot. Avraham knew the 613 mitzvot because he knew G-d. We say in the Blessings of the Torah each morning **ונהיה אנחנו וצאצאנו... כולנו יודעי שמך** *and, please G-d, may we and our children merit knowing Your Name and learning Your Torah.* What does learning Torah have to do with knowing the Name of G-d? Everything. The only way one can learn about G-d and get to know Him is through the Torah. Then, Avraham knew G-d through the Creation, so, in reverse, he knew the Torah. And this is what Avraham contributed to humanity: *that G-d is seen*



through the Creation. Just as Avraham called Jeruasalem Har Yirach – the mountain where G-d will be seen. And this sheds a new light on the word Yirat Shamayim. It does not only mean fear in a sense of panic. It means fear in the sense of seeing. When someone sees G-d in every part of Creation, he can't keep himself from being in awe. This was the new concept that Avraham introduced to the world. And studying it in his yeshiva, he was able to figure out all the 613 mitzvot. And this is why Shem blessed Avraham with such a blessing. This is because **קונה שמים וארץ** was Avraham's

motto. Avraham proved to the world that G-d is **קונה שמים וארץ**, Founder of heaven and earth. The word **קונה** has a few meanings. It means "owns", and it means "founded". But there is a deeper meaning of this word **קונה**. It means **של**, "of", or "belongs to", "in relationship to". All the things in the Universe show a relationship to G-d. This is what Avraham taught the world. And for this, he merited taking the priestly garments from Shem, who did not emphasize this basic fact truth to the world as Avraham did.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM AVRAHAM'S DEFENSE OF JUDAISM

"Street-smart" people know how to deal with sticky situations. Not all of us are blessed with their talents. Indeed, even *they* may not be aware of how they naturally behave. I would like to examine one of the techniques used by the "street-smart personality," and suggest that it may also serve the rest of us in certain situations. I will call it "defensive-to-offensive positioning." Ironically, we can learn the technique from none other than Nimrod, King of Ur Kasdim, and sworn enemy of our Patriarch Avraham. As we study the famous Midrash about Avraham smashing the idols – and its aftermath – we will notice the centrality of this technique in the first disputation Judaism ever experienced.

Let's consider a situation almost all of us encounter at one time or another: having to defend our religion, beliefs, and/or identity against the attacks of an anti-religious Jew. More often than not, the questions or attack of the critic are not rooted in a search for truth as much as they are rooted in self-defense. At some point in the argument, we usually have the following challenge thrown at us: "*Prove to me that G-d exists.*" And many people foolishly attempt to do so.

The attempt is foolish because a Jew who is in denial of G-d's existence – and is not looking to change as much as he is looking to defend himself – will not be willing to accept our beliefs unless he can feel, see, and hear G-d. The facts and

phenomena that point clearly in the direction of a Creator will be ignored. The harmony of creation will never be enough for such a person. Even if the religious Jew succeeds in defending his beliefs and his religion, the anti-religious critic will often avoid giving the subject any serious thought, and simply proclaim that he simply does not "buy it."

This is the place for the offense/defense technique. Every athlete or person who enjoys sports knows that it is better to be on the offense rather than on the defense. When on the offense, you never lose. You either gain a point or you do not. On the defense, however, you either lose a goal or save yourself from losing one. In every debate as well, one will always find himself either in the offensive or defensive position.

When you are defending Judaism against someone who is not really seeking the truth, he or she will never let you feel that you defended your religion or beliefs successfully.

What should you do? Stop defending, and go on the offensive. Turn the tables and say something like this: "*I challenge you to prove to me that G-d does not exist.*" This usually scares them off because this was something they attempted unsuccessfully throughout their lives. Such people may have convinced *themselves* about their proof against G-d's existence in order to avoid responsibilities. The non-believer defends his own



weak position by attacking you instead. The best way to deal with such a person is to defend yourself by quickly and smoothly shifting position and putting him on defense. By doing so you are in the “no-loss” position in this debate. The only defense the attacker has is to put *you* back into defense mode. Never let him do it.

In the following famous Midrash (Rabba 38), the “defensive-to-offensive positioning” technique is clearly seen throughout the debate between Avraham and Nimrod. Avraham Avinu’s father Terach was an idol manufacturer and retailer. Terach asked Avraham to manage the business while he was away. When the first customer walked in, Avraham asked him how old he was. The man responded that he was sixty, and immediately realized how foolish he was to bow to a one-day old idol. Needless to say, he left the shop with an empty shopping bag.

Later, a woman walked in with a bowl of soup which she left as an offering to the idols. When Terach returned, he was taken aback by the wreck in his shop. Avraham pointed an accusing finger at the big idol with a sword in his hand, and explained that the idols quarreled over the sacrifice. The big one had destroyed all the other smaller idols. Terach told Avraham that he does not believe the story because the idols cannot move. Avraham took this opportunity to question his father about believing in and promoting such a “god.”

Now, news of this episode reached the ears of the ruler of Ur Kasdim, Nimrod, and he was hardly willing to close his eyes to Avraham’s “apostasy.” He commanded Avraham to bow down to fire, his god. Nimrod believed in fire as almighty because fire can destroy anything on earth. Avraham responded by bravely pointing out to Nimrod that water is more powerful than fire because water extinguishes fire. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to bow down to rain clouds? Nimrod proceeded to command Avraham to bow down to the clouds. But Avraham challenged him again: Isn’t wind more powerful since it can push around the clouds? Perhaps it would be more appropriate to bow down to the wind? Nimrod then

commanded Avraham to bow to the wind. This went on a few more rounds until Avraham made it crystal clear to Nimrod that the most powerful force in the universe – and the Creator of fire, rain, wind, etc. – is an immortal Almighty G-d.

What was Nimrod’s response? Denial. Nimrod forced Avraham *to prove* the existence of his G-d. “I bow only to fire, and I will throw you into it! Let us see your G-d come and save you!”

At first glance, Nimrod’s response is rather hard to fathom. Didn’t Avraham prove to him that fire cannot be all-powerful? How did Nimrod stick to his belief in this public debate without first defending his position? The answer is that Nimrod just switched from defense to offense. By turning the tables and having Avraham and his G-d prove themselves, Nimrod avoided having to defend himself. This is what street-smart people do. They just go on the offensive instead of defending their shaky positions.

Of course, we *can* defend Judaism against any and all attacks, but we do not feel obliged to do us when challenged by people who are not seeking the truth.

Now, Avraham’s brother Haran was not sure if Avraham was right about his belief in G-d. As Avraham was thrown into the fire, Nimrod asked Haran if he agreed with his brother. After witnessing Avraham’s success in his disputation with Nimrod – capped by his brother’s miraculous salvation from the fire – he decided to answer in the affirmative, and was promptly tossed into the fire. But G-d did not make a miracle for Haran. Why not?

G-d was not willing to make a miracle because Judaism is not based on successfully defending ourselves in a debate or successfully exposing the fallacies of other religions. Judaism is about realizing – through the Book of Torah and the Book of Nature – that there is a Creator who wants us to serve Him and perform His Mitzvot. Judaism is about being an *Ivri* – one from the “other side.” The whole world may disagree with us, and stand



on the other side of the “river,” yet the authentic Jew, like our great Patriarch Avraham, will stand alone with his belief even if it looks like no one bought into his side of the debate. Haran was not willing to be that “lonely man” of faith. This essentially meant that Haran was not willing to be

AVRAHAM'S SHIELD / YOUR SHIELD

The first blessing in the Amidah is called Avot. Every word is a gem; concentration here is a must, three times a day, each day of your life. *G-d of Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov. The G-d Who is great, mighty and awesome, supreme G-d, Who bestows beneficent kindness and creates everything, Who remembers the kindness of our fathers, and brings a redeemer to their children's children for his Name's sake, with love. King, Helper, Savior, and Shield. Blessed are You G-d, Shield of Abraham.*

Two questions always bother me here. Why is everything in present tense **קונה הכל ... עוזר ומושיע** *creates everything, helper, savior and shield...* *G-d brings a redeemer* instead of **ויביא גואל....will bring** *a redeemer? Creates instead of created?* And why the shield of Abraham? Why not “shield of Yitzhak” or Yaakov? The Talmud (Pesachim 117b) says **והיה ברכה – בכך חותמים ואין חותמין בכולך** – *G-d blessed Avraham that the first blessing of the Amidah will be sealed, מגן אברהם*, Shield of Avraham. But what did Avraham do that was so special that he deserved being mentioned at the close of the first blessing of the Shemoneh Esrei more than Yitzhak and Yaakov?

When I found the answer, it changed the experience of prayer and shed a new light on religion. Allow me to share the answer with you.

This is it. A fundamental tenet of Jewish belief is that G-d knows the tests going on in your life right now. He is there, ready and wanting to save you, aid you and guide you. G-d is bringing a redeemer right now in your life, for your life's problems. He is helping **right now**, he is saving **right now**. We say “Blessed are You” all day, not “Blessed is He”, because we are talking directly to Him, all day.

Jewish. And this is a lesson for all of us about Judaism: We should develop our faith in G-d and His Torah to the point where we live as Jews even if everyone around us is telling us to worship the idols of money, pleasure, or anything else.

This is what Judaism is about. Faith in G-d that He is there with us, now, in our present life's battles, helping us reach our goals. What would happen to your life if you would live with that mindset? What a different day! What a different life! What a different Jew. The funny thing is that you can choose to live your life this way, constantly seeing and feeling G-d's guidance in every step you take. You just have to know the right meaning in your prayers, three times a day. You just have to pray with the awareness that He is, indeed, a constant, guiding companion. Judaism is so beautiful.

Who, of all the Forefathers, had to fight the most to achieve awareness, in order to have this type of life? Avraham. Of all the Forefathers, Avraham was the only one whose life was all about proving to the world that G-d exists, forever pervading the present, and also both eternal and immortal. Even before birth, Avraham was marked for death because of his belief in the One G-d. (*Nimrod, the most powerful king in the world at that time, was warned by his astrologers that a baby was being born, one who would challenge and refute the pagan beliefs governing the kingdom.. In frenzied fear, Nimrod killed about 70,000 baby boys. Avraham's mother, Amtelah Bat Karnevoch, whose husband, Terach, was Nimrod's top general, was feeling birth pangs, so she went into a cave. She gave birth to Avraham there, and the light on Avraham's face illumined the cave. She looked at her baby, Avraham, and said to him, **אוי לי שילדהיך, בוטח הזה**, *Woe is to me that I have given birth to you at such a time, when Nimrod killed 70,000 baby boys because of you. I fear that Nimrod will find you and kill you. It is better that I leave you here and you die in this cave, than that I take you out into the world, and you will be slaughtered by Nimrod. Baby Avraham, alone in the cave, had no**



one to nurse him, and he cried. And Hashem heard his voice, there in the cave, and G-d sent him the Angel Gavriel to sustain him. Avraham's right finger miraculously started to exude milk, and he sucked it. This continued until Avraham was ten days old. He then began to walk the land...) G-d shielded Avraham in the fire of Ur Kasdim, when he left his father's house, when Sarah was taken in Egypt, during the famine, at the war against the kings, when Sarah was taken by Avimelech, at Akeidat Yitzchak... G-d will shield us, as well, if we believe in Him with complete faith.

This is how we turn to G-d in the present tense, praying with faith that He can provide salvation for us, meeting our every need. He is, right now, saving your life, bringing about your **ישועה**, your salvation. Just believe. Three times a day. He knows your struggles, your battles. And right now, He is working things out for you, without your even knowing how. With one condition. As long as you are real about this belief thing. Not like Haran.

Avraham's brother, Haran, was not sure if Avraham was right about his belief in G-d. As Avraham was thrown into the fire in Ur Kasdim, Nimrod asked Haran if he agreed with his brother's anti-pagan beliefs. Haran was not sure if he should follow his brother Avraham into the fire for the sake of Judaism. He looked into the fire and saw that G-d came into the fire to save Avraham. After witnessing Avraham's success in his debate with Nimrod – *crowned by his brother's miraculous salvation from the fire* – he decided to answer in the affirmative, and was promptly tossed into the fire. *But G-d did not make a miracle for Haran.* (Midrash Tehillim 108) Why not?

The answer is one that can shake every Jew to the core. G-d was willing to make a miracle for

THE FIRST TIME

You know, Avraham Avinu, our holy grandfather Avraham Avinu – he prayed to G-d for the *first time*. You know, thank G-d, you and I have been praying all of our lives. But, did you ever taste *the first time*? (Shlomo Carlebach)

Avraham, alone, and not for Haran, because the kind of belief that brings miracles is an unwavering, unconditional belief – not one that is pulled out of the pocket as a document to assure passage through tough situations. Avraham had unshakable belief in G-d and was willing to die for it. Haran was not willing to die for the belief, but relied on his hope that the miracle performed for his brother would be performed for him, also. It was not a belief that he arrived at on his own. It was the same kind of belief that many “believers” have, a passive kind of just following the flock, without giving the subject much thought. Judaism is about realizing – through the Book of Torah and the Book of Nature – that there is a Creator Who wants us to serve Him and perform His Mitzvot. Judaism is about being an *Ivri* – one from the “other side.” The whole world may disagree with us and stand on the other side of the ideological “river”; yet, the authentic Jew, like our great Patriarch Avraham, will stand alone with his belief, through fire and water, even if it looks as if no one else is supporting his side of the debate. Haran was not willing to be that “lonely man” of faith, not willing to stand up for his belief. Therefore, G-d was not willing to stand up for him.

So, we start the Amidah with Avot, connecting to their beliefs, connecting to their lives. Avraham Avinu's way of believing is the way we believe, and the **way** we believe makes such a difference. It can be a matter of salvation or frustration. Life or death. When taking three steps back before Amidah, ask “Do I believe that G-d is listening right now, ready to help me? If I would only ask him with my whole heart! He is willing to grant my request, He just wants me to believe that he is there. Do I **really** believe?”.

I remember 10 years ago, praying at the Kotel, experiencing praying for the first time. There was a *baal teshuva* teenager, an extremely handsome American 17-year-old boy, standing there praying Amidah at 11:30 pm. As if he had all the time in the world, not keeping to any rules, because he did



not know them... With an English Siddur, he was talking to G-d, out loud, with passion – as one who speaks to G-d for the first time. *Blessed are You Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our Fathers, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac and the G-d of Jacob. The G-d, who is great, Almighty, and awesome...*

After he finished, I approached him to tell him how deeply he had inspired me. He had no idea what I was talking about. He was just praying to G-d. He knew no other way. It was his first time, and it was so sweet. So holy. So precious.

Fortunes are invested for the sole purpose of making advertisements stick in our memories. I can never forget the advertisement for a new flavor of Nestea: “מתי בפעם אחרונה עשית משהו בפעם הראשונה?” “When was the last time you tried something for the first time?” What is stopping us from praying like Avraham Avinu, from praying a “first-time” prayer? Is there a way that we can taste the taste of a first time, every time? What holds us back from being able to taste the first time?

The problem seems to be that we have gotten so used to knowing that G-d is always there for us, waiting for us to *daven* to Him. He gives us so much space, so much leeway; it brings about a certain haughtiness. The only way to be able to taste the first time in prayer is through humility. We actually remind ourselves, before each prayer, to be humble when talking to G-d. We even pray to G-d for permission to pray, for permission to move our lips. אֲדַבֵּר וְאֶפְתָּח פִּי וְאֶפְתָּח אֲפִיקוֹתַי. *My Master, open my lips, and my mouth will say your prayers.* Without G-d, I cannot even open my lips. Because the key to tasting the first time is humility.

Avraham Avinu not only prayed to G-d for the first time. Every time he prayed, he prayed for the first time. He felt that everything that happened to him was something he was not worthy of, but that G-d had bestowed upon him, in His kindness. Every time he got out of trouble, Avraham Avinu called out, והוא אלי וחי גואלי וצור הבלי ביום צרה – *And He is my G-d, my living Redeemer and Rock to save me from my pain in time of distress.* Every time he

went to sleep, every time he woke up, he said, בידו אפקיד רוחי בעת אישן ואעיר – *Into His hand I shall entrust my soul, when I go to sleep, and He restores it when I awake.* Whenever he was afraid, he said, ועם רוחי גייתי אדני לי ולא אירא – *And with my soul, my body. Hashem is with me, and I will not fear.* This is why we say *Adon Olam* – the prayer that was inaugurated by Avraham Avinu – in the *siddurim* before Shacharit. Because *Adon Olam* was the poem that Avraham Avinu lived by.

To live like this, to be like this, Avraham Avinu was willing to give up a lot. He was offered millions, but he turned them down, because he did not want the giver to think or say, “I made Avraham rich.” אִם-מָחוּט וְעַד שְׂרוּד-נָעַל וְאִם-אֶקַּח: מִכָּל-אֲשֶׁר-לָךְ וְלֹא תֹאמַר אֲנִי הִעֲשִׂיתִי אֶת-אֲבָרָם. After Avraham won the world war, all of Sodom, its people and booty were returned. So, the King of Sodom came to Avraham and said, “Give me the people, and take the booty for yourself.” Avraham then vowed to G-d that he would refrain from taking the booty: *...from a thread, to a shoelace, and will I take nothing that is yours, lest you say, I made Avraham rich* (Bereshit 14; 24).

Ever wonder why we wear *tallit* and *tefillin* only at *Shacharit*, and not for *Mincha*? According to the Meshech Chochma, this is learned from the words of the Talmud on the above *passuk*. The Talmud teaches that in the merit of the word “thread,” Avraham’s children merited the thread of *t’chelet*, the blue-dyed string of *tzitzit*. And in the merit of the word “shoelace,” we merited the mitzvah of *tefillin* (Hullin 88b). *Shacharit*, which Avraham inaugurated, needs *tallit* and *tefillin*. This is the reason we tie our left shoe first – because the Torah gives respect to the left hand in *tefillin*, something we merited because of Avraham’s refusal to accept even a shoelace (R’ Akiva Eiger).

But what was so powerful in these words that we merited *tallit* and *tefillin*? And in what way could the King of Sodom’s shoelace possibly make Avraham rich?

There is something on the clothing that you wear, and – most probably – you don’t know its name: A



flugelbinder, or an aglet. An aglet is a small sheath, often made of plastic or metal, used on each end of a shoelace. An aglet keeps the fibers of the lace or cord from unraveling. Probably, the most important article of your clothing is your flugelbinder. Why? Because if your flugelbinder falls off, then your shoelaces unravel. And if your shoelaces unravel, you can't tie your shoes properly. And if you can't tie your shoes, you are in big trouble because your shoes are more important than your home. לעולם ימכור אדם קורות ביתו ויקח מנעלים לרגליו – Better sell the pillars of your house than walk barefoot. (Shabbat 129a)

The morning blessing, ששעה לי כל צרכי, "...that He prepared for me all of my needs," was meant to be recited on the gift of shoes (Berachot 60b). On Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur, when we do not wear leather shoes, we are to skip this blessing. What? Why are shoes considered all that I need?

The Aboudraham writes that the reason we make this blessing is because as long as a person is barefoot, he cannot go out and make a living. Once he has shoes, he can get things done. This reminds me of the time one of my children threatened me that he wanted to leave home and never come back. I said, "No problem. But the only thing is, you cannot take your shoes with you. *I paid for the shoes, and if you take them, you are stealing my shoes.*" The child left the shoes at the door, but could not get too far from my house. I was able to settle things with this child, because the child realized how dependent a child is on his parents. Even for just being able to cross the street with

shoes. We need G-d to let us have shoes, and without them, we cannot even cross the street! How humbling!

The King of Sodom was so haughty that if he had given Avraham even a shoe lace, and if it had even any farfetched ramifications of helping Avraham become rich and famous, he would have believed Avraham's success was to his credit. This is why, specifically from the King of Sodom, who had just been saved by Avraham, Avraham did not want to take anything. But from Avimelech or Pharaoh, Avraham was willing to accept a lot of presents. What is the difference? Because when Avimelech gave and when Pharaoh gave, they gave out of humility, after having being plagued by G-d. But the King of Sodom gave out of haughtiness, so Avraham would not take even a shoelace!

If you ever did someone a favor, remember that it is not you who really helped him. The Chafetz Chaim in Ahavat Chessed (chapter 2) teaches that when you do someone a *chessed*, all of the outcome, for all generations, that is a result of that *chessed* is accredited to you. Still, it is not *because of you* that things worked out. Good intentions go far, but all they can ever be is good intentions. Without G-d, without His shoelaces, without His flugelbinders, we can't even cross the street!

How many times do we feel that our strength, wit, potential, family importance, looks, etc., etc., even something as miniscule as a shoelace, is what makes us successful? If we ever feel like we are praying a stale prayer, this is the reason why...

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM AVRAHAM'S DEFENSE OF JUDAISM

"Street-smart" people know how to deal with sticky situations. Not all of us are blessed with their talents. Indeed, even *they* may not be aware of how they naturally behave. I would like to examine one of the techniques used by the "street-smart personality," and suggest that it may also serve the rest of us in certain situations. I will call it "defensive-to-offensive positioning." Ironically, we can learn the technique from none other than

Nimrod, King of Ur Kasdim, and sworn enemy of our Patriarch Avraham. As we study the famous Midrash about Avraham smashing the idols – and its aftermath – we will notice the centrality of this technique in the first disputation Judaism ever experienced.

Let's consider a situation almost all of us encounter at one time or another: having to defend our religion, beliefs, and/or identity against the attacks



of an anti-religious Jew. More often than not, the questions or attack of the critic are not rooted in a search for truth as much as they are rooted in self-defense. At some point in the argument, we usually have the following challenge thrown at us: “*Prove to me that G-d exists.*” And many people foolishly attempt to do so.

The attempt is foolish because a Jew who is in denial of G-d’s existence – and is not looking to change as much as he is looking to defend himself – will not be willing to accept our beliefs unless he can feel, see, and hear G-d. The facts and phenomena that point clearly in the direction of a Creator will be ignored. The harmony of creation will never be enough for such a person. Even if the religious Jew succeeds in defending his beliefs and his religion, the anti-religious critic will often avoid giving the subject any serious thought, and simply proclaim that he simply does not “buy it.”

This is the place for the offense/defense technique. Every athlete or person who enjoys sports knows that it is better to be on the offense rather than on the defense. When on the offense, you never lose. You either gain a point or you do not. On the defense, however, you either lose a goal or save yourself from losing one. In every debate as well, one will always find himself either in the offensive or defensive position.

When you are defending Judaism against someone who is not really seeking the truth, he or she will never let you feel that you defended your religion or beliefs successfully.

What should you do? Stop defending, and go on the offensive. Turn the tables and say something like this: “*I challenge you to prove to me that G-d does not exist.*” This usually scares them off because this was something they attempted unsuccessfully throughout their lives. Such people may have convinced *themselves* about their proof against G-d’s existence in order to avoid responsibilities. The non-believer defends his own weak position by attacking you instead. The best way to deal with such a person is to defend yourself by quickly and smoothly shifting position

and putting him on defense. By doing so you are in the “no-loss” position in this debate. The only defense the attacker has is to put *you* back into defense mode. Never let him do it.

In the following famous Midrash (Rabba 38), the “defensive-to-offensive positioning” technique is clearly seen throughout the debate between Avraham and Nimrod. Avraham Avinu’s father Terach was an idol manufacturer and retailer. Terach asked Avraham to manage the business while he was away. When the first customer walked in, Avraham asked him how old he was. The man responded that he was sixty, and immediately realized how foolish he was to bow to a one-day old idol. Needless to say, he left the shop with an empty shopping bag.

Later, a woman walked in with a bowl of soup which she left as an offering to the idols. When Terach returned, he was taken aback by the wreck in his shop. Avraham pointed an accusing finger at the big idol with a sword in his hand, and explained that the idols quarreled over the sacrifice. The big one had destroyed all the other smaller idols. Terach told Avraham that he does not believe the story because the idols cannot move. Avraham took this opportunity to question his father about believing in and promoting such a “god.”

Now, news of this episode reached the ears of the ruler of UrKasdim, Nimrod, and he was hardly willing to close his eyes to Avraham’s “apostasy.” He commanded Avraham to bow down to fire, his god. Nimrod believed in fire as almighty because fire can destroy anything on earth. Avraham responded by bravely pointing out to Nimrod that water is more powerful than fire because water extinguishes fire. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to bow down to rain clouds? Nimrod proceeded to command Avraham to bow down to the clouds. But Avraham challenged him again: Isn’t wind more powerful since it can push around the clouds? Perhaps it would be more appropriate to bow down to the wind? Nimrod then commanded Avraham to bow to the wind. This



went on a few more rounds until Avraham made it crystal clear to Nimrod that the most powerful force in the universe – and the Creator of fire, rain, wind, etc. – is an immortal Almighty G-d.

What was Nimrod's response? Denial. Nimrod forced Avraham *to prove* the existence of his G-d. "I bow only to fire, and I will throw you into it! Let us see your G-d come and save you!"

At first glance, Nimrod's response is rather hard to fathom. Didn't Avraham prove to him that fire cannot be all-powerful? How did Nimrod stick to his belief in this public debate without first defending his position? The answer is that Nimrod just switched from defense to offense. By turning the tables and having Avraham and his G-d prove themselves, Nimrod avoided having to defend himself. This is what street-smart people do. They just go on the offensive instead of defending their shaky positions.

Of course, we *can* defend Judaism against any and all attacks, but we do not feel obliged to do so when challenged by people who are not seeking the truth.

Now, Avraham's brother Haran was not sure if Avraham was right about his belief in G-d. As Avraham was thrown into the fire, Nimrod asked

Haran if he agreed with his brother. After witnessing Avraham's success in his disputation with Nimrod – capped by his brother's miraculous salvation from the fire – he decided to answer in the affirmative, and was promptly tossed into the fire. But G-d did not make a miracle for Haran. Why not?

G-d was not willing to make a miracle because Judaism is not based on successfully defending ourselves in a debate or successfully exposing the fallacies of other religions. Judaism is about realizing – through the Book of Torah and the Book of Nature – that there is a Creator who wants us to serve Him and perform His Mitzvot. Judaism is about being an *Ivri* – one from the "other side." The whole world may disagree with us, and stand on the other side of the "river," yet the authentic Jew, like our great Patriarch Avraham, will stand alone with his belief even if it looks like no one bought into his side of the debate. Haran was not willing to be that "lonely man" of faith. This essentially meant that Haran was not willing to be Jewish. And this is a lesson for all of us about Judaism: We should develop our faith in G-d and His Torah to the point where we live as Jews even if everyone around us is telling us to worship the idols of money, pleasure, or anything else.

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF SONNY AND IRENE GINDI A"H

And Avraham Ben Mazal A"H

