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The Gift of Passion

Translated by Rabbi Moishy Goldman & Rabbi Eliezer Robbins

General Editor: Rabbi Eliezer Robbins | **Editor:** Rabbi Y. Eliezer Danzinger

Content Editor: Rabbi Zalmy Avtzon

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1.

GIFTS? NOW??

Before arriving in Egypt, Avraham told Sarah,¹ “And it will come to pass when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife,’ and they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister so that I may be treated well for your sake and that my soul may live because of you.” A well-known question is raised regarding this narrative: How could Avraham have placed Sarah in a situation where the Egyptians would abduct her so that **he** could be saved?²

Commentaries³ explain why, in doing so, Avraham did not sin. The *Zohar* states that Avraham was confident that Sarah’s merits would protect her and that the Egyptians would not touch her.⁴

Yet, Avraham’s conclusion — “so that **I may be treated well** for your sake” — is entirely unclear: Simply put, Avraham meant that by Sarah identifying herself as his sister, he would receive **gifts**.⁵ How could this plan of receiving gifts be considered when it involved a discussion of such a serious matter — placing Sarah in such a predicament (regardless {of the degree of risk}) to protect his own life? Moreover, the primary motive for Avraham’s suggestion was this {profit potential}: “Please say that you are my sister, **so** that I may be treated well for your sake”)?!)

¹ *Bereishis* 12:12-13.

² See *Abarbanel* {on these verses} (question 13); *Alshich*, loc. cit.; commentaries on Rashi on v. 13.

³ See *Panim Yafos* (verse 12); *Tiferes Yehonoson* (by Rabbi Yehonoson Eibeschutz), v. 13.

⁴ *Zohar*, “*Lech Lecha*,” 82a.

⁵ Rashi on this verse.

2.

HOW COULD HE SAY SUCH A THING?

Citing this verse, the *Zohar* asks:⁶

Was it possible that Avraham, who feared sin and loved Hashem, could propose such a thing to his wife so that the Egyptians would treat him well?

The *Zohar* answers that Avraham

did not rely upon his own merit and did not beseech the Holy One on account of his merit. Instead, Avraham relied upon his wife's merit. Because of Sarah, Avraham would acquire the wealth of other nations, for a person becomes wealthy in the merit of his wife.

(The passage continues to explicate how a person can “acquire everything” through a “wise woman.”) Then, the *Zohar* goes on to say:

He relied upon her merit {to protect her, so} that they would be unable to punish him and mock her. Therefore, he lost nothing⁷ by saying, “She is my sister.”

This also requires clarification: The *Zohar*'s question — “Was it possible that Avraham... could propose such a thing to his wife so that the Egyptians would treat him well?” — primarily challenges how Avraham placed his wife (Sarah) in such a {compromised} state “so that the **Egyptians would treat him well.**” The straightforward answer to this question is that it was **clear** to Avraham that “they would be unable... to mock her.” **Therefore**, “he lost nothing by saying, ‘She is my sister.’” As such, why does the *Zohar* say at length (and at the beginning of its explanation no less) that Avraham was confident that **because of Sarah**, he would acquire **wealth**, while the main point — that he was confident that they would be unable to harm her — is only stated at the end?

Moreover, the *Zohar* says at the beginning of its answer, “He did not rely upon his own merit and did not beseech the Holy One on account of his merit. Instead....” Seemingly, this has nothing to do with answering the question at

⁶ *Zohar*, vol. 3, 52a.

⁷ In *Aspaklariah HaMeirah* (a commentary on *Zohar*, Piurda, 5536), it corrects the *Zohar*'s text to read, “he feared nothing.”

hand: “Was it possible that Avraham... could propose such a thing to his wife so that the Egyptians would treat him well?!”

3.

REFINING THE SPARKS

The explanation of the above:

Since Hashem had told Avraham that “I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and I will make your name great”⁸ by {Avraham fulfilling the command to} “go for yourself from your land...”⁹ — and “I will bless you” refers to wealth — it was obvious to Avraham that Hashem (also) arranged things in such a way that Avraham had to leave the land of Israel (Hashem “advises him to leave it”)¹⁰ and descend to Egypt to actualize Hashem’s promise, “I will bless you,” which would come about by {Avraham fulfilling the command to} “go for yourself.”

Since Avraham foresaw a way to actualize the blessing of attaining wealth in Egypt through natural means — by Sarah claiming to be his sister¹¹ — he said, “Please say that you are my sister so that I may be treated well for your sake.” And in fact, this is the way it actually transpired: (Because Sarah had said this) “He treated Avram well for her sake, and Avraham acquired flocks and cattle and donkeys....”¹²

Just like it is on the level of *pshat*,¹³ so it is on a deeper level: By the command to “go for yourself,” Avraham was enjoined to ascend (“walking”) to loftier spiritual levels by refining and elevating the sparks of holiness within the

⁸ {*Bereishis* 12:2.}

⁹ *Bereishis* 12:1.

¹⁰ Rashi on *Bereishis* 12:10; in contrast to *Ramban*, loc. cit., who says that Avraham’s departure from the land due to the famine was a “transgression, by which he sinned”; see *Abarbanel* (et al.), who raises difficulties with *Ramban*’s explanation; however, see *Zohar*, “*Lech Lecha*,” 81b.

¹¹ See *Panim Yafos* and *Tzeidah LaDerech* on *Bereishis* 12:13.

¹² *Bereishis* 12:16.

¹³ {The plain meaning of Scripture; there are many levels of Torah interpretation.}

world. This was (also) the intention of his descent to Egypt — refining the sparks of holiness there.¹⁴

And since the mitzvos — by which the sparks of holiness within the world are refined — must generally be performed through natural means,¹⁵ Avraham said to Sarah, “Please say that you are my sister,” for by her saying this, the purpose of Avraham’s descent to Egypt (Avraham’s {spiritual} ascent by refining the sparks) would be accomplished by natural means — “so that I may be treated well for your sake.”

The *Zohar*’s question is: In the manner described above, it comes out that being “treated well” (the {spiritual} ascent achieved by refining the sparks) — “for them to treat **him** well” — applies to Avraham alone and not to Sarah. On the contrary, Sarah would be among the Egyptians (which actually happened — “the woman was taken to Pharaoh’s house”),¹⁶ even if they wouldn’t be able to harm her.

The question is: How can we possibly say that Avraham would cause **Sarah** such a great descent (to be in Pharaoh’s house) for the sake of **his** resultant ascent?¹⁷

However, it was clear to Avraham that the purpose of his descent to Egypt was for the sake of an ascent — “{so that} I may be treated well.” Nonetheless, Hashem has many ways {to achieve His ends}, and Avraham should have relied on Hashem achieving this outcome by other means without the need for Sarah’s descent.

The *Zohar* addresses this: Avraham “did not rely on his own merit.... Instead, he relied upon his wife’s merit that **because of Sarah**, Avraham would acquire {the} wealth..., for a person becomes wealthy in the merit of **his wife**.” A person merits to earn money through his wife. From here, it is clear that the same applies on a spiritual level: For an ascent to have come about by refining

¹⁴ See at length *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 5, p. 61 ff., and the sources cited there.

¹⁵ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 5, p. 80 ff., and the sources cited there.

¹⁶ *Bereishis* 12:15.

¹⁷ Just like we don’t tell a person to sin so that his colleague will benefit (*Shabbos* 4a).

the sparks in Egypt, **Avraham's descent** to Egypt would not suffice — he was unable to rely on his merits alone; he needed “the merit of his wife.” Specifically, by employing **his wife's descent** to “Pharaoh's palace,” the sparks could have been refined (“**because of Sarah**, Avraham would acquire the wealth of other nations”).

Since the goal of the descent was an ascent brought about through a “wise woman” — Sarah — it is clear that in her merit, “they would be unable to **punish him**” (this would not cause a descent for Avraham) “and **mock her**” (and it would not cause a descent for Sarah).

4.

TWO TYPES OF LOVE — TWO TYPES OF AVODAH

Just like all “deeds of the Fathers,” this is also “a sign for the Children”¹⁸ — a directive concerning a person's *avodah*¹⁹ — as it relates to the descent of the soul into the body generally (and the descent into exile specifically), for Avraham and Sarah allude to the levels of the soul and the body (as is explained at length in the *Zohar*).²⁰

Meaning, there are two general methods of *avodah* concerning Torah study, mitzvah observance, and refining sparks: (a) *avodah* performed (primarily) by the soul, although the body also feels it; and (b) *avodah* on and with the body: When engaging in *avodah*, a person is not detached and removed from material, worldly matters. On the contrary, he **descends** from his level and is “enclothed” in worldly affairs, which are “severe and evil; and the wicked prevail in it.”²¹ The person fulfills Torah and mitzvos and refines the sparks of holiness found there.

¹⁸ In the context of **our discussion**, see Ramban, *Alshich*, and *Tzror HaMor* on Bereishis 12:10; *Or HaTorah*, beg. of “*Lech Lecha*” (vol. 1); et al.

¹⁹ {Divine service.}

²⁰ *Zohar*, vol. 1, “*Sisrei Torah*,” 78b ff; *Midrash HaNe'elam* 122b ff; see there, 79b ff; et al.

²¹ *Eitz Chaim*, *shaar* 42, end of ch. 4, quoted in *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*” (end of 10b).

In general, this idea is similar to what is elucidated in the teachings of Chassidus²² concerning two methods of *avodah* — the *avodah* of “my sister” and the *avodah* of “my wife.” Two levels of love for Hashem are analogous to two types of worldly love — love between brother and sister and love between husband and wife.

Within every Jew, there is a concealed love {for Hashem} as a product of his G-dly soul. This love is part of the natural makeup of Jews inherent in them from birth, and this love cannot become tarnished. This love is similar to the love between brother and sister, which is natural and inherent in them from birth. For this love to cease is impossible (unlike the love between husband and wife, where the love can end in case of divorce).

Yet, on the other hand, for this very reason, since the love between brother and sister is natural, it is not a love that “thirsts” or is so intense that the “soul expires.” Also does not induce a complete union, as brother and sister are two separate bodies.

In contrast, the love aroused by the refinement of the body and the animalistic soul is similar to the love between husband and wife. True, such love can dissipate (because their love isn’t inborn, inherent in them from birth), but their love specifically “thirsts” and is intense to the point of the soul expiring. Also, the union that comes from this love is consummate to the extent that they become (like) one body.

This is the lesson we learn from Avraham’s approach, whose “livelihood” was acquired “in the merit of his wife”²³ Sarah: The summit of the soul’s ascent and its perfection is brought about when the soul is “dispatched.” The soul is sent to go down and be clothed in worldly matters. This descent resembles²⁴ {Sarah being sent to} Egypt and Pharaoh’s palace. Since the purpose of this

²² *Likkutei Torah*, beg. of “Behar” (end of 39c ff.); “*Shir HaShirim*” beg. of 29c; end of 34a; *Or HaTorah*, “*Emor*,” p. 149 ff.; *Maamar Veleachoso Habesulah* 5627 and 5629; et al.; *Hemshech* 5672, vol. 2, ch. 107-108 (cited in *Sefer HaArachim-Chabad*, vol. 1, pp. 259-260; pp. 395-6; pp. 507-8).

²³ See end of *Bava Metziah* 59a, which says that blessing is only found in a person’s house in the merit of his wife, as it says, “He treated Avram well for her sake.”

²⁴ See *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 37 (48a), which says that the descent of a soul into this world is “actual exile.”

descent is for an ascent (by refining the body, the animalistic soul, and everything in the sphere of the person's worldly influence), it is clear that "they would be unable to punish him." The soul will not experience any {true} descent and cannot be "mocked." The body doesn't, G-d forbid, sink into *kelipah*;²⁵ on the contrary, both body and soul ascend, one ascent after the other.

5.

REVEALING THE SUPERIORITY OF WOMAN

However, we need to clarify: All Torah matters are absolutely precise. {As such, we need to explain a discrepancy:} The *Zohar* stated that "because of Sarah, Avraham would acquire the wealth of other nations." Meaning, the refinement of the sparks and the {spiritual} elevation of Avraham were "in the merit of **his wife**." So how was it possible that (in fact) Avraham became wealthy specifically {by Sarah's apparent subterfuge} by fulfilling Avraham's request: "Please say that you are **my sister**"? As Avraham emphasized, "so that I may be treated well **for your sake**," namely, by Sarah identifying herself to the Egyptians as his **sister**?!

Similarly, when it comes to the spiritual *avodah* of the soul and body, the primary ascent is not achieved by *avodah* on the level of "my sister" — the *avodah* of the soul itself. Rather, it is specifically through *avodah* on the level of "wife" — *avodah* that is done with the body, as discussed above. As such, what is the advantage of the *avodah* of "my sister"? As explained in the teachings of Chassidus,²⁶ Avraham's intention in saying "my sister" refers to the **natural** love of the soul {for Hashem — why did he choose this mode of *avodah*?}.

To clarify this, we will preface with an explanation of the *Zohar* (at the beginning of the passage cited above):²⁷

²⁵ {Lit., "a shell" or "a peel." The term refers to anything that conceals and thus opposes G-dliness, just as a shell or a peel conceals the fruit within. *Kelipah* is often used to refer to evil or impurity.}

²⁶ See *Or HaTorah*, "Emor," p. 149 ff.; *Maamar Veleachoso Habesulah* 5626 and 5629.

²⁷ *Zohar*, vol. 3, 52a.

Rabbi Elazar went to see his father, and Rabbi Abba accompanied him. Rabbi Abba said: “Let us say words of Torah and depart.” Rabbi Elazar opened {his dissertation} and said: “*Please say that you are my sister* — this verse is perplexing....” (As cited above.)

In his notes on the *Zohar*, my father²⁸ explains:²⁹

He specifically began expounding upon this verse because this is what Avraham said when he was traveling to Egypt with Sarah. And Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Abba correspond to Avraham and Sarah, for Avraham and Sarah are “*abba*” {the *sefirah*³⁰ of *chochmah*}³¹ and “*eima*” {the *sefirah* of *binah*}³² ... and similarly, Rabbi Elazar is *chochmah* and Rabbi Abba is *binah*.... As such, their journey corresponds to the journey of Avraham and Sarah, during which Avraham said, “Please say that you are my sister.” That is why Rabbi Elazar also began expounding upon this verse.

The above explanation, which “came to teach is also found to teach something else”:³³ From the substance of this explanation about Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Abba — *abba* and *eima* (*chochmah* and *binah*) — we get a more detailed understanding of Avraham and Sarah — a soul in a body:

In the order of the *sefiros*, *binah* receives intellect and ideas from *chochmah*.³⁴ However, specifically by the idea descending to the level of *binah*, comprehension, and understanding, and by breaking the idea up into details, and details within details, the idea itself is amplified to encompass elements that were lacking when it was on the level of *chochmah*.

This is possible because the root of *binah* is higher than that of *chochmah* in the soul’s power of intellect. Therefore, through *binah*, a *chiddush* can be generated in *chochmah*.

²⁸ {The Rebbe’s father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneersohn.}

²⁹ *Likkutei Levi Yitzchak on the Zohar* (vol. 2), p. 275.

³⁰ {*Sefiros* are Divine emanations. There are ten *sefiros*, which are various phases in the manifestation of Divinity, generally categorized by intellectual and emotional faculties.}

³¹ {Lit., “wisdom,” the first of the ten *sefiros*.}

³² {Lit., “understanding,” the second of the ten *sefiros*.}

³³ {Wording from *Sanhedrin* 73a, cited in Rashi on *Devarim* 22:26: “כָּבֵד לְלֵמַד וְלִלְמַד וְלִגְזֹר וְלִפְדּוֹת לְמַד.”}

³⁴ For the foregoing, see *Torah Or*, beg. of “*Lech Lecha*”; *Toras Chaim* (81b ff.); *Or HaTorah* (vol. 4, 69ob ff; vol. 6, 1073a ff.); *Hemshech Matzah Zu 5640*, ch. 38; and see *Hemshech 5666*, pp. 78ff; *Maamar Maayan Ganim 5691* (*Sefer HaMaamarim Kuntreisim*, vol. 1, pp. 404 ff.); et al.

However, the boost that *binah* gives to *chochmah* is possible only after *binah* **receives** the idea from *chochmah*. The root of *binah*, which is higher than *chochmah*, is thereby revealed. This revelation engenders an ascent to the idea originating in *chochmah*.

Similarly, when it comes to a man and a woman — “a woman was granted more *binah* than a man.”³⁵ This is explained at length:³⁶ Despite conception coming about specifically by the input of the man’s seed, offspring are brought into being specifically by women. However, since this special endowment of women³⁷ is something innate and concealed, a woman can reveal it only after receiving her husband’s contribution.

This process reveals a supernal light from Above to the man, including the blessing that includes man and woman together: “Male and female He created them. Hashem blessed them and... said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’”³⁸

6.

REFINING THE SPARKS AND TORAH STUDY

There is a similar explanation of the above narrative involving Rabbi Abba and Rabbi Elazar:

Their journey was a **descent** to refine worldly matters. [And it is known that “**Torah** was the occupation”³⁹ of Rabbi Elazar, the son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and Rabbi Abba (a colleague of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai). They were detached from worldly matters, and their journey (even “to see his father”) was

³⁵ *Niddah* 45b.

³⁶ See beg. of *Maamar Sameach Tesamach* 5657; *Maamar Yom Tov Shel Rosh Hashanah* 5659 and *Maamar Yechayeinu* 5659; et passim; see *Hemshech* 5666, pp. 78ff; pp. 404 ff.; p. 527; et al.

³⁷ {I.e., the ability to give birth.}

³⁸ *Bereishis* 1:27-28.

³⁹ Regarding Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his colleagues, see *Shabbos* 11a; *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch* (and the Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*), “*Orach Chaim*,” end of sec. 106; Alter Rebbe’s *Hilchos Talmud Torah*, ch. 4, par. 4-5.

an interruption {in their Torah study} and a descent — and diminished **their** stature and position.]

It is (also) for this reason that Rabbi Abba said, “Let us say words of Torah,” because to influence the world positively, they needed to draw strength and support from the Torah of light.⁴⁰

[As we have mentioned several times,⁴¹ the ability of a businessperson to engage in the *avodah* of refining the world into a dwelling place for Hashem does not stem only from the Torah learned at the beginning of the day, when he goes from the synagogue to the study hall⁴² (and subsequently, conducts himself according to “the way of the world”⁴³ {by engaging in business}). Instead, while conducting business, the virtue of Torah study in him should be perceptible.⁴⁴ (This will also lead to him “stealing” time from his business for the sake of studying Torah.)]

This is why Rabbi Abba said to רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר, Rabbi **Elazar** — whose name alludes to the verse,⁴⁵ “כִּי אֶלֶּקִי אָבִי בָּעֶזְרִי, for the G-d of my father came to my aid” — that they needed **aid** from Above during the journey itself. This Divine assistance was evoked by saying “words of **Torah**” (even) during their journey.

In this way, by refining the sparks of worldly matters (walking on a journey) — transforming the world into a dwelling place for Hashem — the superiority of Torah study, in and of itself, is manifested.

⁴⁰ See also *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 8, pp. 190, 353.

⁴¹ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 8, pp. 109, 118; et passim.

⁴² *Berachos* 64a.

⁴³ *Berachos* 35b; see Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 155-156.

⁴⁴ In this way, his occupation is considered to be secondary {to Torah study}.

⁴⁵ *Shemos* 18:4.

BODY AND SOUL

In light of this, we can also learn something concerning Avraham and Sarah, and concerning the soul and the body:

When traveling on a journey, when descending into Egypt, into exile,⁴⁶ and also when the soul descends into the body, there is a need for Avraham's words (influence) to be communicated to Sarah. Words of the soul need to be communicated to the body.

This influence is expressed in the words, "Please say that you are my sister," so that the body feels the superiority of "my sister" — the loftiness of the *avodah* and revelation of the soul's luminosity.

In this way, the subsequent *avodah* of "wife" — {expressing} the superiority of the body itself, the root of which is higher than that of the soul — will be performed correctly. Thus, the level of "my wife" (*avodah* of the body) will be shown to have an advantage over the level of "my sister" (*avodah* of the soul).

This also brings about an ascent in the soul — "so that I will be treated well **for your sake.**" "Whoever merits a wise wife **merits** everything,"⁴⁷ including livelihood in his wife's merit.

Worded differently: The body itself is material, "which, in its corporeal aspects, is similar to the bodies of Gentiles."⁴⁸ Consequently, from the perspective of the material world — from Egypt, {referred to as} "the nakedness of the land"⁴⁹ — there might be a presumption that the body belongs to them (as was in the case of Sarah, "the woman was taken to Pharaoh's palace"). However,

⁴⁶ Egypt is the root of all future exiles, for all of the kingdoms {who exiled the Jews} are named for Egypt (*Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 16, sec. 4; beg. of *Maamar Kol Dodi 5709*).

⁴⁷ {*Zohar*, vol. 3, 52a.}

⁴⁸ *Tanya*, "Likkutei Amarim," ch. 49.

⁴⁹ {*Bereishis* 42:9.}

by the body being infused with the love and the light of the soul — the level of “my sister” — love {for Hashem} is then also created in the body and the animalistic soul. Hashem’s choice — rooted in His **essence** — specifically of the Jewish body,⁵⁰ is revealed by the process of the soul refining the body and by the body refining its divinely assigned worldly portion. Likewise, this {divine, essential choice of the Jewish body} becomes evident to the soul.

In the Future Era, this revelation will manifest clearly when the soul draws its nurture from the body.⁵¹

— From the talk delivered on Motzaei Shabbos *parshas Tazria-Metzora*, 5739 (1979)

⁵⁰ *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 49; *Toras Shalom*, pp. 120 ff.

⁵¹ See *Hemshech VeKacha 5637*, ch. 88 ff; *Hemshech 5666*, p. 528; et al.