

Vayeira: Forced Blessings

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

The *Gemara*,¹ citing the verse:² “He [Avraham] called there in the name of G-d, L-rd of the universe,” remarks: “Do not read ‘*Vayikra* — He called,’ rather, ‘*Vayakri* — He made others call.’

“This teaches us that Avraham caused G-d’s name to be called by all wayfarers. How? After they ate and drank, they would rise to bless him. He would say to them: ‘Have you eaten anything that is mine? You have eaten from that which belongs to the G-d of the universe. Praise, extol and bless He who spoke and [thereby] created the world.’ ”

The *Midrash*³ adds: Those who did not want to bless G-d after the meal were asked to pay a fortune for the food. Upon hearing the enormous sum being demanded of them, the wayfarers would bow to Avraham’s wishes and say: “Blessed is the L-rd of the universe, of whose food we have partaken.”

Obviously, the dissenters blessed G-d not out of any true desire to do so, but because they were left with no other option. So what benefit was there in their blessing, since they were merely paying lip-service? Moreover, how can this be considered making G-d’s name known to all, since these individuals lacked any true recognition of the Creator?

If the individuals had been Jews, then a ruling of the *Rambam*⁴ would apply, for he taught that even when a Jew is forced to perform a *mitzvah*, it is considered as if he had done it of his own volition.

The reason for this, as the *Rambam* states, is that “he desires to act as a Jew, longing to perform all the *mitzvos* and distance himself from sins. It is merely that his evil inclination has forced him [into acting in a contrary manner]. Once he is smitten to the extent that his evil inclination is weakened, and proclaims ‘I desire [to give a bill of divorce, for example],’ he does so of his own free will.”

In other words, every Jew has an innate desire to perform *mitzvos*; any expression to the contrary is merely external to his essence. Thus, being compelled to act properly serves to negate the opposition of his evil inclination. So when he says “I desire,” he does so because his true desire has been revealed.

Now, while this is true of all Jews, Avraham was dealing with an entirely different element.⁵ How did forcing them to acknowledge G-d result in a valid act of recognition?

In the *Rambam*’s example cited above, reference was made to an individual who will, because of being smitten, reveal the true nature of his soul, the part that always wants to perform G-d’s bidding.

Some people, however, are on an even lower plane; their coarseness and corporeality are such that the inner dimension of their soul is completely hidden and will not be revealed even by being smitten.⁶ However, even

such individuals can have their corporeality “broken” by having their coarseness smitten, even verbally, i.e., by being shown his truly low level. This at least makes him able to receive holiness.

This latter form of “smiting,” wherein the intent is not to reveal the illumination of a person’s soul, but rather to shatter his corporeality, extends to non-Jews as well. Such “smiting” removes the obstacles that hinder them from attaining the degree of spirituality of which they are capable.

This explains why Avraham exerted so much pressure on the wayfarers who ate at his table. Non-Jews are also capable of understanding that the universe possesses a Creator, for which reason Avraham occupied himself in making G-d known to all by providing them with various proofs and explanations of His existence.⁷

When some of them were — because of their coarseness and corporeality — unable to accept this concept, he would place them in an extremely uncomfortable situation by “smiting” them verbally. This removed some of their coarseness, and they were then able to accept Avraham’s explanations. As a result, they would willingly say: “Blessed is the L-rd of the universe, of whose food we have partaken.”

Based on *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. XV, pp. 122-127.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Sotah* end of 10a ff. See also *Bereishis Rabbah* end of ch. 54.
2. *Bereishis* 21:33.
3. *Bereishis Rabbah* 49:4.
4. End of ch. 2 of *Hilchos Geirushin*.
5. See *Kuntres HaHispa’alus* 49b; *Likkutei Bi’urim*, *ibid.* 48a.
6. See *Mishlei* 24:20. See also *Tanya*, end of ch. 11.
7. See *Rambam*, *Hilchos Avodah Zarah* 1:3; *Vayita Eishel* 5701, ch. 1, *et al.*

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