

Extorted Faith

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

"Abraham built an inn in Beer-Sheba and called out there in the Name of the L-rd...."

Genesis 21:33

What is the connection between establishing an inn and calling out in G-d's Name?

Our Sages¹ interpret the meaning of this verse and say, "Do not read 'He called out' but rather, 'He caused others to call out.'" At his inn in the harsh desert terrain of Beer-Sheba, Abraham would offer hospitality to weary travelers and there he would bring them to the belief in one G-d.

After providing lavishly for his guests, they would get up to thank their host and leave. Abraham would then say, "Was it of mine you have eaten? It is the G-d of the World of Whose you have eaten. Thank, praise and bless He who spoke and the world came into being." So would Abraham do with all of his guests, advancing the central aim of his life to publicize belief in G-d to the world.

What if, however, his guests did not wish to praise G-d in turn for the hospitality they had enjoyed? The Midrash² also explains how Abraham would deal with these cases.

If a guest would decline to recite the blessing as instructed, Abraham would present him with a bill from the inn. Quoting an exorbitant sum for each item, he would challenge the guest and say, "Who else gives you wine in the middle of a desert. Who gives you meat in a desert? Bread in the middle of a desert?" Faced with the prospect of massive debt, the guest would opt for Abraham's original offer and recite the blessing as told.

There is clearly something here that we must understand. Abraham's method of disseminating monotheism seems like — in a single word — extortion. It is thus difficult to see what real benefit there was to be had by obtaining momentary and external acquiescence to his demands. Those who did not wish to praise G-d would pretend to do so in Abraham's presence and be on their way. It would seem to have been a futile exercise.

Yet, the Midrash³ says concerning this very conduct at the inn in Beer-Sheba that G-d told Abraham, "My Name was not recognized by My creations. You caused my Name to be recognized by My creations and I thus consider it as if you had been a partner with Me in the world's creation." Apparently Abraham's methods had a very real effect, and on a grandiose scale at that.

But, if this practice was so successful, then how did it work? How could coercion produce anything but one time lip service? And, if indeed, the praises that Abraham forced his guest to offer to G-d were said in truth, how did his simply bullying them bring this about?

True Desire

If we were speaking of a Jew who is coerced to perform a mitzvah or refrain from a transgression, we could cite the ruling of Maimonides stated in his Laws of Divorce.⁴ If a man is obligated to divorce his wife but refuses to present her with a divorce document, the rabbinical court may physically compel him to consent — and the divorce is valid. As explained, even when a Jew is forced to do as Torah demands of him, he is considered to have acted of his own will. This despite the fact that, according to Jewish law, a bill of divorce is invalid if not given consensually.

There is a mystical basis to this ruling. The G-dly soul of a Jew, the *nefesh ha'elokit*, is driven by a singular desire — to serve G-d. It is this soul that comprises the underlying and most basic will of the Jew. At times this will is suppressed and one may be urged to disregard Torah law. This feeling, however, does not originate within the Jew and is rather the result of an external influence, namely, the Evil Inclination, which acts upon him.

In light of the above, we would be able to understand the spiritual mechanics behind Abraham's methods if he would have been enforcing Torah observance amongst Jews. This, however, was not the case. Abraham imposed the worship of G-d upon every gentile that would wander into his tent. He was not dealing with a dichotomy of inner and outer wills. If these gentiles said they did not wish to praise G-d, that is precisely what they meant and there would be no reason for them to make an external show.

We must say that Abraham truly motivated his guests to sincerely praise G-d. Otherwise, there would have been no point to his actions. So while he surely seemed to have been compelling his guests to abide by his command — and this is what we must understand — he was somehow winning them over to a sincere and newfound belief in G-d.

The Ugly Man and the Sage

A story is related in Talmud⁵ concerning the Mishnaic sage R' Elazar who once while traveling encountered a man who was "extremely ugly." Said R' Elazar to him "Oh, empty one! How ugly you are. Are all the people where you are from as ugly as you?" Taken aback, the man replied, "Go to the Craftsman who made me and tell Him, 'The vessel You have made is ugly.'"

We ask: Did R' Elazar not know before the man's answer that the body of a man is the work of G-d?

Further, how is it possible for a man of R' Elazar's stature to have allowed himself to speak in such an insensitive manner?

The story may be explained, however, in the following light. The man indeed was ugly; that, however, was not R' Elazar's concern. R' Elazar saw the man in spiritual terms and found him to be spiritually ugly, devoid of any merit, that is.⁶ In this condition, the man lacked even the sensitivity to recognize how serious his situation was and, due to his coarseness, would not have been able to appreciate any moral guidance or advice that R' Elazar could have offered. The sage thus intended to break through this coarseness with an attack to the man's ego.

And so it was. Surprised and hurt, the man searched his heart and promptly arrived at an answer, the only true answer, "Go to the Craftsman who made me and tell Him, 'The vessel You have made is ugly.'" At that moment, he was reminded of the G-d who created him and not only that, but a G-d that is a Craftsman and fashions His vessels with purpose and meaning.

The man had become poignantly aware of an idea that just a moment before he would not have been able to hear. In his moment of humiliation he regained a sensitivity that lifted him from his former ugliness and caused him to instantly intensify his relationship with G-d.

After their encounter, R' Elazar asked the man for forgiveness, to which the man responded, "I will forgive you only if you will not become *accustomed* to speaking this way." The vast majority of people — and even those who are "ugly" in their deeds and character — do not need to be scorned in order to arrive at a spiritual breakthrough. The man did not stipulate, however, that R' Elazar should never again speak this way, for as our story conveys, there are times — for certain people and in rare cases — when a spiritual ascent comes about only through the initial breakdown of callousness that is brought about at a moment of despair.

Request Denied

Along these lines, we may understand another story, an episode recounted about the fifth leader of Chabad, the Rebbe Rashab.

In the early years of the Rebbe's leadership, a Jew came to him and asked for his blessing in a serious matter. Answered the Rebbe, "There is nothing I can do for you. I cannot help." The startled man left the Rebbe's office and began to cry bitterly.

At the same moment, the Rebbe's older brother, R' Zalman Aharon, passed by and found the man in tears. R' Zalman asked the man why he wept so, and the man related to him the entire story including the Rebbe's terse reply.

R' Zalman entered the Rebbe's office and asked bluntly, "Is that the way it is? Somebody asks for your blessing and you tell him you cannot help until he cries endless tears of sorrow?"

The Rebbe put on his *gartel* — a special belt donned before prayer — and sent for the man to return. The man reentered the Rebbe's office, the Rebbe then blessed him and the blessing was fulfilled.

But why had the Rebbe refused to help the man at first — and in such a manner as he did? Supposing even that the Rebbe could not help him, he could have offered words of encouragement and comfort rather than flatly turning him away.

We may, however, understand this story in the same manner as we have explained the story of R' Elazar above.

The man had come to the Rebbe with a serious problem and commensurate to the dire nature of his situation, was in need of an extremely great blessing from on High. The Rebbe saw that in the man's present spiritual

stance, he was not worthy of such an extraordinary blessing. Indeed, no blessing could help him at that time, for the man was — in common Chassidic terminology — not a "vessel" for such a mighty effusion of Divine help. The Rebbe thus told the man truthfully that he could not help him.

This rejection, however, caused the man to become so anguished over his plight that he could do nothing but cry out to G-d with a broken heart. At that very moment, he was renewed and became a fit to receive G-d's blessing.

Abraham's Method

The idea expressed in both stories is a moment of distress that prompts a true and drastic breakthrough in spiritual development. The ugly man was not receptive to hear about living a life of purpose, thus, R' Elazar did not even begin to speak with him about that. The man who came to seek the aid of the Rebbe Rashab was unable to receive G-d's blessings and was therefore denied. Yet, after facing despair, each of these men was changed.

So too, Abraham did not present obstinate guests with a bill to blackmail them into praising G-d. The point was rather to create a situation in which the guests would become sharply aware of their helplessness. This would then break through the coarseness that prevented them from understanding the validity of Abraham's request on their own. We now may also understand the precise wording of the Midrash in saying, "When they would see how he was distressing them, they would say, 'Blessed is the G-d of the world of whose we have eaten.'" It was not coercion that made them repeat the words they were told. It was the circumstance of "distress" that jarred them from their callousness and propelled them to a new level of spirituality.

The level to which every non-Jew may aspire is that of a righteous gentile who observes the Seven Laws commanded to Noah, and is promised a share in the World to Come.⁷ One of these seven commandments is the belief in G-d. And being that a non-Jew is commanded to believe in G-d, he has the ability to do so.

Abraham would thus engage his guests with proofs and reasoning, ultimately persuading them to become true believers in G-d.⁸

When, however, he would confront an exceptionally obdurate guest, he would see that all of his explanations were of no effect. Abraham would then proceed to break through the unusual coarseness of this guest and in one carefully orchestrated moment of distress, the previous explanations would begin to penetrate and the guest would know the truth and exclaim, "Blessed is the G-d of the World of Whose we have eaten."⁹

FOOTNOTES

1. Sotah 10a-b. There are several sources in Midrash describing Abraham's method of publicizing monotheism through hospitality. This particular source is not from the Midrash proper but rather, as cited, from the Agadah — homiletical passages — of the Babylonian Talmud.
2. Bereishit Rabbah 49:4.
3. Ibid. 43:7.

4. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Divorce 2:20.
5. Taa'nit 20a-b.
6. See commentary of Iyun Yaakov on Ein Yaakov, Ta'anit, ibid.
7. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 8:11.
8. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry 1:3, offers a biography of Abraham's life in digest form. Regarding Abraham's work in Beer Sheva, he states that Abraham "would inculcate each individual according to their intellectual capacity and place them on the true path." See also Sefer HaMa'amorim 5711, "Ki Chelek" ch. 8 and Sefer HaMa'amorim 5700, "Lech L'cha" ch. 3 which describe the various philosophical proofs that led Abraham to a belief in G-d and which he in turn employed when convincing others.
9. Likutei Sichot vol. 15 p. 122-128.

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Culled by Rabbi Shais Taub from the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. This essay is taken from his upcoming book soon to be published by Sichos in English.

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