

Was Abraham Hungry for Riches?

By Yossi Ives

After Abraham won the war against the Four Kings and rescued his nephew Lot, G-d told him: "Fear not, Abram; I am your shield; your reward is exceedingly great."¹

Now, if someone is told not to be afraid, it is fair to assume that they are showing signs of fear. This is especially true when the speaker is G-d, Who is all-knowing and was surely aware of Abraham's state of mind.

Thus, Rashi comments that indeed Abraham worried that, "Perhaps I have already received reward for all my righteous deeds." G-d reassured him: "As for your concerns about receiving your reward, fear not, your reward is exceedingly great."

Why Did Abraham Care?

The idea that a person of Abraham's stature would be concerned about "what's in it for him" stretches credulity. We are told to "be like a servant who serves his master without being motivated by attaining reward."² We should act righteously because it is the right thing to do, not in order to receive recompense.

It is especially surprising to say that Abraham, of all people, was concerned about his reward, when Maimonides singles out Abraham as a paragon of serving G-d "purely out of love."³ Abraham, Maimonides says, was the perfect example of someone who "occupies himself in the study of Torah and fulfillment of mitzvot ... not for any extraneous thing in the world ... nor to inherit any benefits, but does what is true because it is true." Why, then, would Abraham be concerned about using up his reward?

It must be, the Rebbe suggests, that Abraham was not interested in the reward itself, but in something that the reward signified.

Wealthy Then Wise

To help us understand, the Rebbe analyzes a highly perplexing story found in the Zohar⁴ on our verse:

Rabbi Abba once announced that anyone seeking wealth in this world and long life in the World to Come should study Torah. A bachelor named Yossi declared, "I would like to toil in Torah so I may attain riches." Rabbi Abba agreed, and titled the man Rabbi Yossi, Master of Wealth and Honor. After a while, the man returned to Rabbi Abba, asking, "Where are my riches?" Rabbi Abba was most displeased and wanted to pray that the man die for pursuing Torah study for the wrong reasons, whereupon he heard a heavenly voice saying, "Don't punish him; one day he will become a great person."

The story continues with a wealthy man who approached Rabbi Abba, offering to share his wealth with someone who will learn Torah on his behalf. Rabbi Abba designated Rabbi Yossi for this purpose, and the man

gave him a cup of fine gold. Rabbi Yossi would toil over the Torah's rich and varied texts, and the benefactor made him wealthy.

Eventually, Rabbi Yossi became a sage and realized that the value of Torah is far greater than any material wealth. He wept that he had exchanged the merit of his Torah study for money. Rabbi Yossi summoned the wealthy benefactor and told him, "Take back your wealth and share it among the orphans and the poor."

The Questions

Many aspects of this story seem problematic. Firstly, why are we told that he was a bachelor? How is that relevant? Second, why does the fact that he would one day turn into a great man spare him punishment for his wrongdoing at the time? Does one get let off for bad behavior now because of potential good behavior in the future?

Conversely, what was so terrible about the young man's approach that his teacher wished to pray for his demise? Are we not taught that "A person should always study Torah and practice mitzvot even not for its own sake, because doing it for the wrong reason will lead him to do it for the right motivation."⁵ So, where is the problem?

Above all, what is most troubling is the criticism towards Rabbi Yossi for coming to study to gain wealth, when Rabbi Abba had clearly announced that anyone seeking wealth should come to study! It seems that Rabbi Abba was quite OK with Rabbi Yossi wanting riches, so much so that he nicknamed him Master of Wealth and Honor. Why, then, when he actually came looking for the wealth he had been promised did it cause such a backlash?

The Source of Success

The Rebbe explains that when Rabbi Abba promised riches in return for Torah study, he meant that G-d would send the wealth. He never considered that someone would demand it from him directly. It is not acceptable to use Torah as a self-serving tool, as a route to profit and personal gain – what the rabbis termed "as an axe with which to chop."⁶ When Rabbi Yossi first approached Rabbi Abba demanding to see his wealth, that was crossing a red line.

There is a key exception to this rule, and that is if a person uses their Torah knowledge to secure a job to provide for their family.⁷ But every other type of usage of the Torah for financial gain or other personal benefit is proscribed. That is why the Zohar points out that at the time Rabbi Yossi was a bachelor, making it clear that he had no family to support. His demand for payment from Rabbi Abba was thus wholly inappropriate.

So, where was this intense desire for wealth coming from?

Rabbi Abba thought it was because Rabbi Yossi was degenerate. But a heavenly voice informed him otherwise. He was told that Rabbi Yossi was destined for greatness, and that was the cause of the innate drive for success. The outer form that this potential for greatness assumed was a hunger for wealth, but what was really animating the desire for riches was his latent greatness.

Within his external motive of earthly riches was an instinct that he was supposed to achieve true spiritual greatness. It was coming out wrong, but it encapsulated something worthy and true. According to halacha, it is obligatory upon the community to ensure its leaders are affluent,⁸ such that Rabbi Yossi's appetite for wealth was in essence a reflection of his soul's urge to reach great leadership heights.

Reward as Recognition

Now, back to Abraham. He was not looking for reward because he sought the benefits of his good deeds, but because that was a key way for him to judge whether his life's work was worthwhile. Material success would serve as a tangible indication of his spiritual accomplishments.

He was looking for confirmation that his reward was still forthcoming as reassurance that he was doing something right. With both Rabbi Yossi and Abraham, it turns out it wasn't the reward itself that held appeal, but what getting the reward signified.

Had Abraham thought that his reward had been lost, he would have interpreted that as a condemnation of his life choices. Now that he was assured it was still intact, he received the validation he sought. It was not the recompense that held meaning for him, but what such recognition said about the virtue and correctness of his path.

Adapted from Likutei Sichot, vol. 20, Parshat Lech Lecha II.

FOOTNOTES

1. [Genesis 15:1](#).
2. Avot 1:3.
3. Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 10:2.
4. Zohar, volume 1 82a.
5. Pesachim 50b.
6. Avot 4:5.
7. Shulchan Aruch Harav, Hilchot Talmud Torah 4:14.
8. Shulchan Aruch Harav, Hilchot Talmud Torah 4:16.

By Yossi Ives

Yossi Ives is the rabbi of Cong. Ahavas Yisrael of Pomona, N.Y. He is founder and is Chief Executive of Tag International Development, a charitable organization that focuses on sharing Israeli expertise with developing countries. Yossi holds a PhD. in Coaching Psychology and is a qualified life coach who specializes in relationship coaching. He is the author of several books, mainly on mysticism and psychology.