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INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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13 CHESHVAN | PARSHAS LECH LECHA

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Charlotte Rohr, Sora bas R' Yeskusiel Yehuda. "May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

For Heaven Sake!

Avram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all their belongings, as well as the people they had made, and they left – heading toward Canaan (12:5).

Rashi (ad loc) explains that "*the people they had made*" refers to gathering them "under the wings of the Divine Presence." Rashi goes on to say that Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women, and that the Torah considers those conversions as if Avraham and Sarah had "made" them.

Rambam (*Yad Avodah Zara* 1:3) elaborates on this theme. He relates that once Avraham recognized Hashem he began to admonish the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim, telling them that they were not following the proper path. He went on to break their idols and to teach them that it is only fitting to serve the God of the world; to Him alone is it fitting to bow down and offer sacrifices and libations. All idols and images must be destroyed lest others err.

Raavad (ad loc) wonders why it is that only Avraham made it a point protest the idolatrous behavior of others and set about to destroy their idols? After all, there were others alive at that time, notably Shem and his grandson Ever, who knew the truth. They both recognized Hashem; why didn't they protest or make it their mission to destroy idols?

Raavad goes on to suggest that perhaps they did protest, and that the idolaters hid their idols. Avraham, however, had the opportunity to break his father's own idols. This is a difficult answer to accept as it presupposes facts about Shem and Ever for which we have no evidence.

Ramabam refers to Avraham as a "pillar of the world." Clearly, he stood out even when compared to the greatness of those before him. But what made Avraham so unique?

Rashi (24:7) explains Avraham's impact on the world: Prior to Avraham, Hashem was only the God of the heavens. However, once Avraham made everyone aware of the presence of Hashem, He became God of the earth as well. In other words, Avraham was different from all who preceded him in that he made it his mission to ensure everyone recognized Hashem as the one and only God. All the great men who preceded him were content to focus on the proper way to live as a subject of Hashem; they weren't, however, concerned with bringing Hashem down to the earthly realm.

This explains why Maimonides only credits Avraham Avinu with trying to convince others to his way of thinking and actively destroying idol worship. Avraham's mission was to bring the knowledge of Hashem to the rest of the world. This is his legacy and that of the Jewish people as well.

Remarkably, one of those great men – Shem (called Malki-Tzedek in this week's *parsha*; see *Rashi* 14:18) – is the first one who uses this appellation to describe Hashem (*"Possessor of Heaven and Earth"*) in his blessing to Avraham Avinu.

Avraham had just miraculously defeated the most powerful army on earth. Shem observed that Avraham had now shown the entire known world the dominance of Hashem, and that Hashem's active presence could now be felt on earth as well.

ישיבה וכולל בית משה חיים
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Teaching: Lessons for Life

And Avraham heard that his brother had been taken captive, and he mobilized his disciples (14:14).

Avraham was informed that Lot, his brother-in-law, had been taken captive by the army of the four kings. He quickly mobilized his fighting force of 318 men, soundly defeated the invaders, and brought back Lot and all the property that had been seized.

The word that the Torah uses to refer to students is "*chanichav*" – the root being *chinuch*, commonly translated as education. Rashi (ad loc) explains that this refers to those whom Avraham had "initiated" to *mitzvos*. Rashi goes on to explain why *chinuch* refers to education; "This is a language of beginning of the entry, of a person or a vessel to a future use that they will be destined to stay."

Therefore, the primary goal of *chinuch* is to initiate a student to the path on which he will stay. This understanding of *chinuch* is a big departure from how most of our education systems operate today. Most schools measure the success of their educational programs quantitatively: How much material did the students absorb? How does this compare with other schools? What is the average score of a given class on their standardized tests and how does this compare nationally?

In reality, these school administrators are asking all the wrong questions. Of course, it is important to have a metric for properly measuring outcomes of educational programs. But the questions they should be asking are: Have we instilled within our students a love for learning that will put them on the path for lifelong learning? Have we inspired within our students a love for Judaism and its core values so that they will **want** to make it a meaningful part of their lives long after they leave our school?

In other words, most schools miss the point. Though we can force students to learn information for a few years, if the knowledge acquired or the process of learning isn't inspiring, we can be assured that they will abandon it shortly after they leave our charge.

This is how American Jews lost a whole generation of students in the 1940's and 50's who went to *cheder* and other after school programs. These programs were almost always staffed with very knowledgeable but totally unrelatable (and elderly) European teachers. Their methods didn't speak to the American mentality and nearly all who attended those programs learned that Judaism isn't for the 20th century American. Sadly, they abandoned their heritage and most every vestige of Judaism. The devastation that this caused is obvious; more than half of Halachic Jews (those born to a Jewish mother) have nothing to do with Judaism and (sadly) will slowly disappear over the next few decades.

Unfortunately, we are, by and large, failing a significant portion of today's student population as well. In today's "exciting" world, our children have literally everything at their fingertips. Now, more than ever before, knowledge is a short Google query away. Yet, our schools' primary focus is mired in imparting information. Even when our students are successful in absorbing all the material, we usually fair poorly in making the material inspiring and uplifting.

We aren't training our teachers to inspire, we are simply giving them better methods for conveying information. Our schools have forgotten the key definition of *chinuch* is really the responsibility for setting students on the path that they are destined to be. No wonder so many of our students have "gone off the *derech*;" we never properly put them on the right path in the first place! In fact, as bad as the situation is, we should be thankful that it isn't worse. This isn't a situation that will repair itself, we need a paradigm shift, and quickly.

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