



RABBI AARON

Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

Bikush: Embrace the Struggle

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik once made a comparison between the personalities of Avraham and Moshe and asked: ‘Who was greater?’

Moshe is considered to have reached the most exalted spiritual level that one can possibly achieve. The Rambam’s principles of faith substantiates this claim: “I believe with complete faith...that Moshe was the father of all prophets - both those that preceded him and those who followed him.” (*Ani Maamin* #7, which appears in Siddurim). (*Ha’adam v’Olam*o, p. 77)

And yet, the Rav directs our attention to a unique quality in which Avraham appears to have excelled beyond Moshe. Avraham struggled in his search for God. He was privy to no miracles. He discovered God only after an arduous search and maintained his heroic faith while facing multiple adversities. Moshe’s experience was quite different. The Torah does not hint to any spiritual struggle nor a search for the Almighty. God simply appears to Moshe. God introduces Himself to him in an unprecedented act of revelation: “Moshe was shepherding the sheep of Yitro...He saw

and beheld the bush was burning...” (*Shemot* 3:1-2). (*HaAdam v’Olam*o, p.79)

The Rav suggested that the idea above helps to clarify the unique language employed at the start of the Amidah and helps to explain why only the names of the *Avot* are included in this paragraph.

The phrase *elokei Avraham* does not simply mean that we are praying to the God of Avraham, rather it means something more profound - Avraham had ‘acquired God’. He sought Him out and found Him, and took possession of Him. *Elokei Avraham* means ‘Avraham’s God’. (*Ibid.*, p. 77).

Avraham did not simply stumble on his acquisition of God. It was a search of many years and of extensive efforts - sleepless nights and courageous tenacity in the face of many detractors. Avraham was 75 years old when he first heard the word of God. This same kind of curiosity and steadfast pursuit of truth is expected of every Jew.

“How did Avraham discover God? As a young lad, when he was a shepherd, he used to spend the night in the fields. He could not sleep because he was restless. He could not understand the existence of the cosmos; the grandeur of the cosmic drama puzzled him. He particularly counted the stars. Indeed, Chaldea was the land where astronomy was born. They were the first to describe the skies and draw maps of the heavens. And Avraham discovered God with stars.” (*Abraham’s Journey*, pp. 39-40)

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The Rav cited the lyrical description of the Rambam, who emphasized Avraham's search: "After this mighty one, *eitan zeh*, was weaned he began to explore and think, *leshotet be-da'ato*. Although he was a child, he began to think incessantly throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without anyone controlling it?... His heart explored and gained understanding...Avraham was forty years old when he became aware of his Creator" (*Hilchot Avodat Kochavim* 1:3).

More than once does the Torah underscore the paradigm and primacy of *bikush* in a Jew's religious life: "For *inquire* now regarding the early days that precede you..." (*Devarim* 4:32) and the actual word, *bikush*, appears here: "*U'vikashtem misham*, From there you will seek Hashem, your God, and you will find Him, if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul" (*Devarim* 4: 29). There is one condition that is stipulated in the verse so that the search is successful - it must be done "with all your heart and all your soul" (*Ha'Adam v'Olam*., 78).

Bikush in Learning

The inherent value of the search and struggle in a Jew's religious life has a unique place in the domain of Torah learning. In the Soloveitchik tradition of study, one is never to be satisfied with merely repeating the teachings of others, even one's teacher. One must assess and reassess every idea in one's mind for themselves. This viewpoint was emphasized by a founding personality in the Soloveitchik family, Rabbi Chaim Volozhin. He writes that one must engage in a *milchemet mitzvah* (an obligatory battle)



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even with one's Rebbe (*Ruach Chaim* on *Avot*, 1:4). Rabbi Chaim Volozhin uniquely interprets the mishna in *Avot*: "Let your house be a meeting place for the Sages, sit (*mitabek*) in the dust if their feet...". Rabbi Chaim suggested that *mitabek* is the same word used by the Torah in the context of Yaakov wrestling with the angel. It therefore means the same here: 'Wrestle' with the words of Sages. "We have permission", he writes, 'to struggle and argue with our teachers in pursuit of the truth...although, needless to say, this must be done with humility and respect' (Ibid.).

Rabbi Norman Lamm z"l, an eminent student of the Rav, reminisced that this was a lesson which the students of Rabbi Soloveitchik imbibed daily in his talmud shiur. A story Rabbi Lamm tells : "I was a young student at the time when we were learning *Mesechet Moed Katan*, perek 'Elu Megalchin.' Over a span of three intense classes the Rav had elucidated a complex *Tosafot*. He had meticulously resolved its many difficulties. The next day, when the class began, the Rav turned to me and asked: 'What is the explanation of the *Tosafot*?' Naturally I answered, word for word, what the Rav had articulated a day earlier in class. Much to my surprise, suddenly, the Rav looked perturbed. He said: 'That explanation I already know...I just said that the other day. I do not want you to tell me what I said. I want to know what you say. If you wish to stay in this class you must think for yourself and not merely repeat what you have heard from others - you must consider and reconsider every idea in your own mind, for yourself.'"(*Halachot v'Halichot*, Lamm, pp. 18-19). ■

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