



ECHOES OF RASHI

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Maggid Shiur All Parsha and All Daf, OU.org

L'zecher Nishmat **Imma Morasi Shulamis bat HaRav Shmuel Tzvi Halevi a"h**

HUMILITY OF DUST AND ASHES

וַיַּעַן אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה נָא הוֹאֵלְתִּי לְדָבָר
אֶל אֲדֹנָי וְאֲנֹכִי עֹפֵר וְאָפֵר: (י"ח:כ"ז)

Avraham spoke up, saying, "Here I venture to speak to my Sovereign, and I am but dust and ashes....

רש"י: "וְאֲנֹכִי עֹפֵר וְאָפֵר" - וּבִכְבֹּר הֵייתִי
רְאוּי לְהִיּוֹת עֹפֵר עַל יְדֵי הַמְּלָכִים, וְאָפֵר עַל
יְדֵי נִמְרוֹד, לִוְיֵי רַחֲמֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר עָמְדוּ לִי....

"And I am but dust and ashes." – I would long ago have been reduced to dust by the kings and to ashes by Nimrod had it not been that Your mercies stood by me....

Avraham challenges HaKadosh Baruch Hu about divine justice toward the people of Sedom. There is much to discuss here, and at some point, we may contrast Avraham – who is portrayed favorably for questioning Hashem – with Iyov, who is not. But before comparisons, there is a more basic question.

What does it mean to challenge Hashem, and when is such a challenge legitimate? If a person never asks *how could this happen* and never struggles with divine justice, that does not necessarily reflect faith. It may reflect indifference to human suffering, or to *Am Yisrael*. Or it may reflect the belief that Hashem is arbitrary; that events are random and therefore not worth questioning.

When something like October 7 occurs and a person is genuinely shaken, the question is not *whether* to ask, but *how* to ask. If you do not care, you will not question. If you believe Hashem is arbitrary, you will also not question. But if you love *Am Yisrael* and believe that HaKadosh Baruch Hu acts with purpose and justice, then you are disturbed, and you struggle.

We are meant to be *mekabel ohl malchus Shamayim*. Hashem's ways are not our ways. So how does a person occupy the space between crying out to Hashem with questions and maintaining reverence? How do you ask *why* without crossing into – *chas v'shalom* – arrogance or disrespect?

Look at the *pasuk* itself. When Avraham presents his first request, to save Sedom for the sake of fifty righteous people – ten per city, a measured and reasonable number – Hashem responds that if fifty are found, the cities will be spared. Avraham then says: "*Hinei na ho'alti l'daber el Hashem, v'anochi afar va'efer.*" Despite

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his willingness to challenge divine justice, Avraham humbly describes himself as mere dust and ashes.

On the simple level, Avraham frames his plea with humility. He knows he is speaking to HaKadosh Baruch Hu and challenging a divine decision. Yet he remains deeply conscious of the distance between himself and Hashem. Avraham is saying: I am asking, but I know who I am and who You are. I am mortal. I am limited. You possess *chochmah elyonah*, wisdom beyond my reach. Even the greatest human being is still bound by time, partial vision, and moral blind spots. Even if a person were the Vilna Gaon, he would still be human. And we are not the Vilna Gaon. Our moral judgments are shaped by our experiences, by exposure to others, by compromise, and by values absorbed without noticing. That alone should generate humility.

Imagine if someone could see the full sweep of history. Imagine being sent back to Vienna in 1920 knowing exactly who Adolf Hitler would become. The moral calculus would look entirely different. But human beings never have that vantage point. Only HaKadosh Baruch Hu does. That is why Avraham's posture matters. He asks as *afar va'efer*, with the humility born of recognizing the limits of human understanding.

Rashi adds another layer. He asks: why these words? Why "*afar va'efer*" – dust and ashes? Why not describe himself as Dovid HaMelech does, "*anochi tola'as v'lo ish*"¹ – I am a worm and not a man?

Rashi explains that by conjuring the imagery of dust and ashes Avraham invokes two moments when he should have

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died. *Afar* – he should have been buried during the war of the kings, outnumbered and overpowered in a muddy, swamp-like battlefield where defeat meant being swallowed by the earth. *Efer* – he should have been reduced to ashes in Nimrod's furnace.

Avraham is not expressing abstract humility. He is grounding humility in remembered vulnerability. He is returning to moments when his existence was fragile, when survival was not guaranteed.

And here Rashi subtly shifts the meaning of the phrase. *Afar va'efer* is not only humility but also gratitude and identification. Avraham is saying: I once stood on the brink of destruction. You saved me. Please extend that same compassion to others.

That is why gratitude and humility are inseparable here. It is very difficult to be genuinely grateful without humility. A person who feels entitled does not thank; he expects. The more humble a person is, the more gratitude flows naturally. And the more gratitude a person cultivates, the more humility it generates. They are not separate traits; they are two expressions of the same inner posture. That is why *afar va'efer* works on two levels at once. It is humility born of gratitude.

Avraham chooses this language in this context, not at the *Akeidah*, not after

1. Tehillim 22:7.

blessing or victory, but specifically while davening for others. On a technical level, Avraham is saying: “You saved me, now save them.” But something deeper is happening. Avraham is not reminding Hashem of anything. Hashem does not need reminders. Avraham is shaping his own inner stance before davening.

When you daven for someone else, there are two ways to do it. You can daven from a place of distance. *Baruch Hashem*, I am healthy, secure, comfortable, and I will altruistically ask on behalf of someone who is suffering. That *tefillah* matters, but it is limited.

You can also daven from a place of identification. And that requires vulnerability.

Most people resist vulnerability. We prefer the quiet fantasy that life is stable, and that tragedy happens elsewhere, to other people. Vulnerability unsettles us because it exposes how thin the walls really are. That is why many people instinctively avoid contact with suffering.

You see this even in the world of *chesed*. There is easy *chesed* and there is hard *chesed*. Easy *chesed* matters: volunteering once a week, driving food for *tomchei Shabbos*, collecting *tzedakah*. But hard *chesed* is connecting with people whose lives expose fragility: the elderly, the sick, people

with special needs. These acts are harder because they force us to confront our own vulnerability and recognize how easily we could find ourselves in similar circumstances. In essence, it forces you to stare into your own frailty and mortality. Avraham does not avoid that confrontation. He deliberately returns to his most fragile moments. He remembers when he stood one step away from death. He remembers how close he came to becoming *afar* and *efer*. He says: I am comfortable now, but I was not always. And I could be there again.

That is how he connects to the people of Sedom. He does not say: I am different from them. He says: I was almost like them.

This move appears again with Moshe Rabbeinu, when Miriam is stricken with *tzara’as*². The Midrash³ comments that Moshe’s *tefillah* was especially heartfelt because he knew firsthand what *tzara’as* entailed. At his first encounter with Hashem at the burning bush, his hand had temporarily turned white. Moshe reaches back to the closest experience he has – however limited – to feel her pain, so that his *tefillah* is not abstract. He is not claiming equivalence; he is searching for proximity.

That is what Avraham is doing here.

When you daven for someone in a hospital, ask yourself: What would it take for our positions to switch? One diagnosis. One accident. When someone needs *tzedakah*, consider how easily you could find yourself in their position. Do not create distance between yourself and suffering; try to narrow the gap.

That is *afar va’efer*: the humility born of remembering our own vulnerability.

2. Bamidbar 12:13.

3. Devarim Rabbah 6:6.



Avraham draws upon his own experiences of suffering to identify with others, while recognizing the limits of his understanding as he questions divine justice.

That is Avraham's greatness, and why his *tefillah* is heard.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCRETION

וַיְהִי בַשָּׁחַת אֱלֹקִים אֶת עַרְי הַכֹּכַב וַיִּזְכֹּר
אֱלֹקִים אֶת אַבְרָהָם וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת לוֹט מִתּוֹךְ
הַהֶפְכָּה בְּהֶכֶף אֶת הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר יָשָׁב בָּהֶן לוֹט:
(י"ט:כ"ט)

Thus it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God remembered Avraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval.

רש"י: "וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹקִים אֶת אַבְרָהָם" - מֵהוּ
זְכִירָתוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם עַל לוֹט? נִזְכָּר שֶׁהָיָה
לוֹט יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁשָּׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם וְשָׁמַע
שֶׁאָמַר אַבְרָהָם בְּמַצָּרִים עַל שָׂרָה אָחוּתִי הִיא,
וְלֹא גָלָה הַדָּבָר, שֶׁהָיָה חָס עָלָיו, לְפִיכָךְ חָס
הַקָּב"ה עָלָיו (בְּרֵאשִׁית רַבָּה):

"God remembered Avraham."

– What bearing has God's remembering Avraham upon the rescue of Lot? He remembered that Lot knew that Sarah was Avraham's wife and that when he heard that Avraham said in Egypt regarding Sarah, "She is my sister," he did not betray him because he had sympathy on him. For this reason, God had mercy upon him (Lot).

After Lot is saved, the Torah concludes with a striking summary: "*Vayehi b'shaches Elokim es arei hakikar...vayizkor Elokim es Avraham, vayishalach es Lot*

mitoch hahafeichah."

Hashem remembers Avraham and saves Lot. On the surface, this seems simple. Lot is Avraham's nephew, so Avraham's merit protects him. But Rashi pushes further. He says that Lot himself possessed a specific *zechus* connected to Avraham – and that is why he was spared.

That itself is surprising. Lot is a deeply flawed figure. His choice to separate from Avraham and settle in Sedom, his moral blindness there, and later the disturbing episode with his daughters, makes him a very troubling character. What possible merit could outweigh all of that?

Rashi answers: Lot had one decisive *zechus*. When Avraham and Sarah descended to Mitzrayim and Avraham said that Sarah was his sister, Lot knew the truth, yet remained silent. He could have exposed Avraham instantly. He could have said, "She's not his sister, she's his wife." But he didn't. He kept Avraham's confidence. He was discreet.

Rashi reads the *pasuk* very precisely: When saving Lot, Hashem *kaviyachal* remembers Avraham, and remembers that Lot knew Sarah was Avraham's wife and did not reveal it.

This highlights an often-overlooked trait, and that is discretion. When we speak about *shemiras halashon*, people usually focus on tone: harsh language, sarcasm, aggression, negativity. But there is another dimension: what you choose *not* to say. Onkelos defines *tzelem Elokim* as *nefesh memalela* – the capacity for meaningful speech. We are the only creatures who can convey abstract ideas, emotions, and values. That gift defines us. And one of the ways we honor that gift is by knowing

when silence is the moral choice.

Not every misuse of speech is *lashon hara* in the technical sense. Sometimes it's simply unnecessary talk about people. A saying commonly attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt captures this well: "Small minds talk about people, average minds talk about events, and great minds talk about ideas." But beyond that, there is a more subtle test: private information. Not dramatic "secrets," but personal facts someone would not want broadcast. Someone confides in you. Do you protect that trust, or do you pass it along?

Why is it so tempting to share? Because information confers status. Being "in the know" elevates you. You become the source. People listen. But divulging information comes at someone else's expense. You gain attention by revealing personal information that someone trusted you to keep private.

Lot's silence in Mitzrayim reflects the opposite trait. He does not build himself up by exposing Avraham. He does not gain stature by revealing private truth. He steps back. He restrains himself. And that restraint becomes the one thread of merit that saves him.

Lot is far from being a *tzaddik*. But that single moment of discretion mattered. It mattered enough that when the cities are overturned, Hashem remembers it.

Sometimes the greatest moral acts are not what we do, but what we choose not to say.

KNOWING WHEN TO STOP

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל תְּשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ אֶל הַנֶּעַר וְאֶל תַּעֲשׂ
לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי עֲתָה יִדְעֵתִי כִּי יֵרָא אֱלֹקִים
אֵתָהּ וְלֹא חֲשַׁכְתָּ אֶת בְּנֵךְ אֶת יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי:

(כ"ב:י"ב)

He said, "Do not send your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."

רש"י: "אַל תְּשַׁלַּח" - לְשַׁחַט; אָמַר לוֹ
אִם כֵּן לְחַנּוּם בָּאתִי לְכָאן, אֶעֱשֶׂה בּוֹ חֲבִלָּה
וְאִוִּיצֵא מִמֶּנּוּ מַעֲט דָם, אָמַר לוֹ "וְאֵל תַּעֲשׂ
לוֹ מְאוּמָה". אֵל תַּעֲשׂ בּוֹ מוֹם:

"Do not send" – [your hand against the boy] to slay [him]. Then he (Avraham) said to God, "If this be so, I have come here for nothing; let me at least inflict a wound on him and draw some blood from him, God replied "Do not do anything to him. Do not cause any blemish (מום).

At the climax of the *Akeidah*, a *malach* calls out to Avraham and says: "*Al tishlach yadcha el hana'ar ve'al ta'as lo me'umah*" – "Do not send your hand against the boy, or do anything to him." The repetition is striking. If Avraham is already told not to *shecht* Yitzchak, what does "*ve'al ta'as lo me'umah*" add? Why does the Torah feel the need to say it twice?

Rashi, quoting Chazal, opens up the dialogue beneath the surface. "*Al tishlach*" – do not slaughter him. Avraham responds, almost instinctively: If so, "*lechinam bati l'kan*?" Did I really come all this way for nothing? I walked for three days. I summoned every ounce of faith, discipline, and devotion. I stood ready to give up everything. And now I am supposed to do nothing?

So, Avraham proposes a compromise. If I cannot sacrifice him, then "*e'eseh bo chavalah, ve'otzi mimenu me'at dam*" – let me at

least draw a little blood. Let me give some expression to this devotion.

Hashem responds through the *malach*: “*Ve'al ta'as lo me'umah*” – “Do not do anything to him at all.” Do not cause even the slightest injury. Rashi explains *me'umah* as *mum* – no blemish, no wound, no blood. Avraham shouldn't do anything at all.

This Rashi teaches two profound lessons. The first is obvious, but too important to overlook. The *Akeidah* is the Torah's unequivocal rejection of human sacrifice. Hashem brings Avraham to the brink of the most extreme religious act known in the ancient world not because He desires it, but precisely in order to abolish it forever. Judaism is not a religion of blood, nor a religion of suffering. Judaism does not sanctify death or suffering. Hashem is “*mechalek chayim b'chesed*”¹ – the giver and sustainer of life. The rejection of human sacrifice is so absolute that even Avraham's suggestion of drawing a small amount of blood is forbidden. Hashem does not want Yitzchak to suffer any injury, however minor.

But there is a second, subtler lesson in this Rashi, and in many ways, it is the harder one. Sometimes the challenge in religious life is to generate passion. We struggle with apathy, exhaustion, and distraction. We try to awaken commitment and urgency. But sometimes the greater challenge is not creating religious passion but knowing how to contain it.

Avraham has reached the peak of religious intensity. He has mobilized absolute obedience, absolute devotion, and absolute readiness. And now Hashem tells him to stop - to stand down and express nothing. Avraham wants an outlet: at least

let me draw blood. At least let something happen. Hashem says, “No, hold it inside.”

Which is harder – to climb the mountain prepared to sacrifice, or to descend without doing anything at all? Which demands more discipline – to act decisively, or to restrain yourself at the last moment? This is a challenge many religious people face, especially young people filled with sincerity and zeal. Passion that is not disciplined can become harsh, judgmental, absolutist, and insensitive. Religious energy must be guided, not merely unleashed. Sometimes *avodas Hashem* demands action, and sometimes it demands silence and restraint.

I once heard a story from Rav Aharon Lichtenstein that captures this beautifully. Rav Aharon was an *avel* at the time of his son Rav Moshe Lichtenstein's wedding. He sought a *heter* from Rav Shlomo Zalman to attend, but none was given. He came only briefly and did not participate in the celebration. Later, Rav Aharon reflected that he remembered feeling more love for his son that night because he had restrained himself than he would have had he expressed it freely. Repression, he explained, does not negate emotion. Sometimes it deepens it.

That is the final test of the *Akeidah*. Not only obedience, but restraint; not only readiness to act, but readiness to stop. Hashem tells Avraham: I see your faith. I do not need your blood. Hold your devotion, and live with it. That, too, is *avodas Hashem*. ■



Rabbi Moshe Taragin's latest sefer entitled: **Echoes of Rashi** is available at: taraginbooks.com.