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בס"ד

A Promise No One Else Hears

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On The Parsha

The Torah tells us that when Avrohom Avinu heard that Lot had been taken captive, "...he armed his trained men, those born in his house, three hundred and eighteen..." (Bereishis 14:14). The Gemara (Nedarim 32a) records that Shmuel interpreted the Hebrew word Vayarek not as "he armed," as translated above, but as "he made them shine with gold." Tosafos (Chullin 47b) and the Shitah Mekubetzes, citing the Midrash, explain that Avrohom gave his men gold and precious stones so that they would not be tempted by the spoils of war and would remain focused on rescuing Lot.

Rav Henoch Leibowitz ZT"L ("Rav Henoch") notes that, as students of Avrohom, these were righteous men engaged in a righteous mission. How could they have been distracted from the noble task of saving Lot by the prospect of obtaining gold and precious stones?

Rav Henoch answers that even righteous people can lose sight of their purpose in the heat of battle. The din and confusion of war can cause them to forget the very reason they are fighting. He illustrates a similar dynamic through the sons of Kehos (Bamidbar Rabbah 5:1), who merited to carry the sacred vessels of the Mishkan (the Tabernacle) during the travels of Bnei Yisrael. Because of their great love for carrying the Aron Kodesh (the Holy Ark), they argued over who would have that privilege. Their rivalry over carrying the Aron led to Kalus Rosh (flippancy) in their other duties, leaving the other sacred vessels without the attention needed for their transport. This caused a desecration of Hashem's Name, and they began to die as a consequence. We see that their excessive eagerness to perform a good deed and the ensuing quarreling, distracted them and they lost sight of the reason behind doing the good deed to begin with.

On a related matter, Rav Henoch turns to Avrohom at the Akeidah (the binding of Isaac). The Torah says that Avrohom saw a ram caught in the thicket "and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son" (Bereishis 22:13). Why does the Torah add the seemingly superfluous words "in place of his son"?

The Sforno explains that Avrohom offered the ram "in exchange for what had been in his heart—to slaughter his son—in the manner of 'V'dover Emes Bilvavo'" (Tehillim 15:2). Dover Emes Bilvavo means speaking truth in one's heart, or honoring a commitment made to oneself. Avrohom had fully resolved in his heart to bring an offering. When he was commanded not to sacrifice Yitzchak, he offered the ram "in place of his son," to honor the commitment he had made in his heart.

Strictly speaking, Avrohom had no obligation to offer the ram. His resolve had been to fulfill Hashem's command, and Hashem had now commanded him not to sacrifice Yitzchak. Nevertheless, on some level, failing to bring an offering would not have completely fulfilled the commitment that he made to himself, and he therefore felt compelled to act. Consider the intensity of that moment: the greatest test of his life had just ended, Yitzchak had been returned to him alive, and Heaven itself had declared, "Now I know that you fear G-d." Even then, Avrohom was not distracted from fully honoring the commitment in his heart. Rav Henoch concludes that a truly complete and righteous person does not become distracted or lose sight of any obligation, even a seemingly small one.

The Gemara (Makkos 24a) cites Rav Safra as the model of Dover Emes Bilvavo, and Rashi relates how that came to be. Rav Safra was reciting Krias Shema (the Shema Yisrael prayer) when a buyer approached him and offered a price for an item that he was selling. Rav Safra did not interrupt his prayer to respond. Taking his silence as a refusal, the buyer raised his offer. When Rav Safra finished, he insisted on accepting

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the first price that he had been offered because, in his heart, he had already agreed to it.

When we think of telling the truth, we typically have an outward focus: not deceiving a customer or misleading a friend. Dover Emes Bilvavo, however, is honesty when the only audience is oneself. People make quiet resolutions all the time: "Tomorrow I will call him back." "If this deal goes through, I will give more tzedakah." No one else knows that these resolutions were made, so no one else will know when they are broken. That is precisely why they are so easily abandoned.

Rav Henoch adds another point. A private promise is most easily excused during moments of high drama, when something large and absorbing—a wedding, a crisis, a major project, or even a great Mitzvah—fills the mind. With so much else happening, it seems natural to think that a small inner resolution no longer matters.

As we learned above, Avrohom's men needed to be given gold and precious stones so that they would not forget their purpose in battle, even though their mission to rescue Lot was perfectly clear. If focus can be lost during so urgent and obvious a mission, all the more so can it be lost when the task or obligation seems smaller.

It may not be a coincidence that, in the morning Davening, immediately after the passage of the Akeidah, the Siddur says: "A person should always fear Hashem in private and in public, acknowledge the truth, and speak truth in his heart (Dover Emes Bilvavo)." Perhaps the Siddur mentions the concept of Dover Emes Bilvavo immediately after the Akeidah because, as the Sforno understands it, the Akeidah concludes with precisely this ideal: Avrohom offered a ram "in place of his son," providing the perfect example of fidelity to a commitment made in one's heart.

Chizuk - Inspiration

The Maharsham, Rabbi Sholom Mordechai Hacohen Schwadron ZT"L, was the leading halachic authority (Posek) of his generation. He once wrote a responsum, later quoted in the Sdei Chemed, ruling that there was potentially more room for leniency regarding the prohibition of writing on Shabbos when using typeset print than when writing by hand. He supported his ruling with a responsum from Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah ben Kalonymos ZT"L, the Rokeach.

In 5670 (1910), a year before his passing, he received a letter from Rabbi Dov Behr Ritter ZT"L, Av Beis Din of Rotterdam. Rabbi Ritter respectfully pointed out a problem with the Maharsham's proof from the responsum: the Rokeach had lived several hundred years before Gutenberg invented printing, so he could not have been referring to typeset print. Accordingly, the Maharsham must have misunderstood what the Rokeach had written.

The Maharsham read the letter aloud. A promising young scholar was in the room to be tested for Semichah (rabbinical ordination) by the aged gaon. He suggested a way to save face: the Rav could blame the error on a misprint in his edition of the Rokeach.

The Maharsham was puzzled by the idea. He answered, "What will I gain by doing so? The truth is that I made a mistake, and Heaven forbid that I should try to save my honor by telling a lie! He who fails to admit his mistakes does not believe in Hashem, Who is Truth!"

He then wrote back to Rabbi Ritter, lavishly praising and thanking him for catching the error. He added a German saying: "Irren ist menschlich," meaning "To err is human." The leading Posek of his generation had a convenient excuse handed to him. He refused to use it because he believed that failing to admit a mistake was tantamount to denying Hashem.

"May I back out of a school carpool that I have already committed to?"
"Should I report a co-worker who is acting dishonestly?"

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