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# The Inner Light of Avraham Avinu

*Faith, Uncertainty, and the Radical Affirmation of Good*

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*Notes by a student*

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PROLOGUE

# The Avos Within Us

We are going to speak about Avraham Avinu, but for the sake of uncovering the inner light of Avraham that exists within each and every one of us.

The entire book of *Bereishis* is framed by the principle of *ma'aseh avos siman labanim*[1]: the events of the forefathers are a sign for the generations that follow. What these holy *tzaddikim* and *tzadkaniyos* went through—Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, and Leah—are not simply events we try to commemorate. They are the very bedrock of the formation of the Jewish self. Our very selfhood does not merely recall the events of our forefathers; it is composed of them. When we read about the *ma'asim* of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, we are not only speaking about a distant past. We are speaking about the very genetic, molecular shape of *Nishmas Yisrael*.

## *Touching the Avos*

Chazal teach that every person must ask himself: "When will my actions reach the actions of my forefathers?"[2] Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa notes the word they use for "reach": *magia*. Within it he hears *nogea*, "touch." Obviously, no one should assume they must reach the level of the forefathers; we can barely get it together! But one must come to a place of identification, of alignment, of touching the *Avos HaKedoshim*, even at their very lowest rung. And when we touch them, we draw their light down into our own consciousness.

That is what we are going to try to do together: to identify with the traits of Avraham Avinu, and to see everything that happens to him—the ups, the downs, and the in-betweens—as a reflection of the shape of the Jewish soul.

NOTES

1 Ramban, *Bereishis* 12:6, based on *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Lech Lecha* 9.

2 *Tanna d'Vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 25.

CHAPTER ONE

# The World Before Avraham

To find that light within ourselves, we have to begin where Avraham began: in a world overrun with darkness, concealment, and chaos.

## *A world shaped by trauma*

Consider the world he was born into. There was the trauma of Adam HaRishon being expelled from Gan Eden. There was the trauma of Kayin and Hevel, the overwhelming trauma of the *mabul*, the trauma of Noach surviving and losing himself in wine, and the trauma of Migdal Bavel. Each of these opened up the abysmal depths of the unknown.

The human being is born into a state of confusion and disunity. What emerges first in that space is a sense of chaos and terror, and then come the emotional responses: the trauma response, the anxiety response. The world had literally just been swallowed up.

## *Weighed, measured, and known*

Idolatry is the desire to have something that can be weighed, measured, packaged, and identified in some definitive way of knowing. As long as I know how much my idol weighs, how much it is worth, and exactly how it is defined, I can rest assured that I possess it. I own it. I understand it —meaning, I stand under it. I have full possession of the very thing I worship.

This all-too-human desire is understandable. A person is forced to recognize: "I don't know what tomorrow will bring. I don't know what the next moment will bring. I can't measure or weigh things with absolute certainty." To fight the anxiety of that groundlessness, one builds very measured structures, objects that ground one in a sense of security: "I know what this weighs. This idol represents that; this certainty represents that." It allows a person to rest in a self-created bubble of certainty that numbs the pain and fear of not knowing.

That was the world before Avraham, the world of the idols. The whole world was proficient in knowing. They had answers—limited answers, but answers. They knew exactly what their idols were capable of and what they could manage. There was no mystery in life. You could buy a god, bag it, tag it, and take it home from the store. The idolatrous impulse is to domesticate the

Infinite: to give it measure and shape, to identify its parameters, to define, determine, name, occupy, certify, and stabilize. It is the attempt to hold the Infinite in my pocket, as if I were bigger than it.

## *Something substantial*

Idolatry expresses itself in our generation as well: in ideologies, and more subtly in the search for *substance*. The desire for ground to stand upon is the desire for something substantial. It is not by chance that "substance" is also the word we use for the things people reach for to dull discomfort or pain. Reaching for something to numb the uncertainty is the same gesture, the same posture, as demanding certainty from a world whose uncertainty is too overwhelming.

This is also why habit is so comforting. When a person has a set of habituated behaviors, there is nothing more known than that. I know how I'm going to feel when I give in to it; I know how I'm going to feel after; I know I'm going to want it again. It is a cycle of repetition that offers a certain comfort, because at least I know. And it offers that endless mirage of relief we think certainty is going to provide.

## *Never satisfied*

But certainty never delivers what it promises. It keeps a person stuck in a certainty about what should rightly be a belief but has hardened into a fact. One becomes sedimented within this demand, and it paralyzes a person in every area of life.

In a relationship, if a person is seeking certainty, they will never be satisfied. In creativity, if a person is seeking certainty, they will never be satisfied. In their spiritual and religious life, if a person is seeking certainty, they will never be satisfied. Even in the search for security and safety, if it is certainty one is after, a dissatisfaction rests at the heart of all things.

Everything is contingent; nothing is absolute. The only thing that is absolute, essential, and necessary in its very origin is the Infinite itself, the *mechuyav hametzius*.[1] Everything else is cut through with an irreducible element of *safek*.

The response to this has always been repression. Cover it over, cover it over, cover it over. Bury it at the very foundation. Hide the fact that we don't know. Build idols; know everything with certainty.

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NOTES

1 The "necessarily existent"; see Rambam, *Moreh Nevuchim* 2:1.

CHAPTER TWO

# The Coming of Avraham

Avraham Avinu does not appear out of nowhere, as a sudden burst of light. He comes forth from within a thickened form of darkness itself. He is born in the house of Terach, which symbolizes the thickest denial of God in this world: idolatry, with its tendencies of control, power, and manipulation—the opposite of oneness. It is specifically from that place that the soul of Avraham Avinu emerges.

## *Purity from impurity*

*Mi yitein tahor mitamei, lo echad*—who can bring forth purity from impurity? Only the One.[1] Avraham is *echad*, as the *navi* says: *echad hayah Avraham*.[2] To draw Avraham out of Terach is to draw the *tahor* out of the *tamei*. As the Ramchal points out, Terach is the *chalal*, the vacated space of the *tzimtzum*, and Avram is the *kav*, the thread of *Ohr Ein Sof* that descends back down into that space. That is the paradox resting at the core of all things: how infinitude expresses itself within the finite.

## *Last in deed, first in thought*

The *pasuk* describing creation speaks of the heavens and the earth *b'hibaram*, "when they were created."[3] Chazal point out that *b'hibaram* has the same letters as Avraham:[4] the world was built for his sake. The very desire to create existence was rooted in the possibility of Avraham Avinu. He represents the transition out of chaos into a world of building.

As we say in *Lecha Dodi*: *sof ma'aseh b'machshavah techilah*—last in deed, first in thought. Looking at *Bereishis*, *Noach*, and *Lech Lecha*, Avraham appears at the end of the traumatic process. But what appears last is most essential, rooted in the original thought and the original plan.

## *From chaos to rectification*

The *sefarim* point out that the *parshiyos* of *Bereishis* and *Noach* still belong to the realm of chaos, and the Tzemach Tzedek implies that those weeks are often difficult ones for the Jewish people. Only with *Lech Lecha* do we enter the world of rectification, the purpose of creation: the soul of Avraham Avinu and *Nishmas Yisrael*. Until then, things simply happened to the world. Things

happened to Adam, to Kayin and Hevel, to Noach. They figured out how to manage the symptoms, but they never looked inward to ask what was really going on and where it came from. Avraham Avinu is the beginning of looking inward: stopping to look at the circumstances of a person's life, being willing to address the inner problem of thinking, and ultimately uncovering the true gift of thinking, which is *emunah*.

We can look at the breakdown that comes before the fixing as something that simply happened and needs to be erased. Or we can see the flood and all of its chaos as the necessary stepping stone through which Avraham Avinu's *neshamah* came down into this world.

## *A palace in flames*

Into this unsettled world, before any stability had appeared, Avraham Avinu arrives, and he encounters a world on fire.

The Midrash compares Avraham to a man who came upon a *birah doleikes* and reasoned that this palace must have an owner, an architect.[5] The usual reading is an illuminated palace, whose beautiful order bespeaks its maker. But we have seen the world Avraham Avinu was coming from, and there was nothing beautiful or lit up about it. Avraham himself had been thrown into the furnace of Ur Kasdim.

And so the commentators read the Midrash differently. He didn't see an illuminated palace; he saw a palace in flames. He saw a world that had lost its direction, where every person carried some mark of difficulty or struggle, where the wicked prospered and the righteous fell. The world appeared so chaotic, so unfair, so turned from its proper orientation, that he came to a place of deep questioning within himself:

> *How could it be that God could be so absent? How could it be that order is so distant? Why is there pain? Why am I in pain? Why am I left with a murmuring, a yearning, a thirst for something that can't arrive within the vessels of experience? What is it that keeps the soul up at night?*

These questions rested and rustled within Avraham until he was so uncomfortable that he could no longer live with the answers everyone around him had accepted.

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NOTES

1 *Iyov* 14:4; the Midrash reads it as Avraham from Terach (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:1).

2 *Yechezkel* 33:24.

3 *Bereishis* 2:4.

4 *Bereishis Rabbah* 12:9.

5 *Bereishis Rabbah* 39:1; see *Mei HaShiloach* I, *Lech Lecha*. The reading of *birah doleikes* as "a palace in flames" rather than "an illuminated palace" follows the commentators.

CHAPTER THREE

# The Question as the Birthplace of Faith

We tend to assume that the entry into spirituality is by way of revelation, clarity, refinement, and no questions being asked. We give precedence to the answer, because the answer provides a clear path forward. But prior to the answer, prior to any clarified revelation, there was the realm of the question.

The question appears to stand opposite the spiritual ideal, which is clarity. Yet if we dig deep enough into it, we come to understand that it is not only a fundamental place in *avodah* and in spiritual development; it is the very site of the formation of our souls. We don't begin with an answer; we begin with a question. To be human in a faithful way is to embrace the reality of questions.

Of course we want to arrive at answers, and to live with a certain sense of clarity. To have the answers laid out—"I know the answers from here until the end of time"—is a place of spiritual and psychological functionality, and a person feels good when things operate in a smooth and steady way. But murmuring beneath the stability of the apparent answers rests the rumbling of the endless question: the question that puts everything into question, the question of "What is this?"

## *The question that frightens the soul*

*Mi bara eileh*—who created these?[1] How is existence functioning the way it is, and why not differently?

Such questions destabilize the structured order of our ordinary outlook, and so they frighten the soul. At first glance, a question seeks to destroy the foundation. All questions are ultimately questions of origin: Where does this idea come from? How do I know that with certainty? Followed far enough, the path of questioning leads to a simple place: a big question mark.

Left to our own devices, we are cut through with questions, unanswered and unaddressed, which we hope to cover over by just being busy. But in the anxiety of the mind, or its boredom,

they begin to yawn within us, and a person begins to feel destabilized. This is typically how the spiritual identity goes: we push away the question in hopes of a neat and clarified answer.

## *"Who?"*

Avraham Avinu did the opposite. He opened his mind and said: "All I know is that there is more. *Mi bara eileh?* I don't know anything—but *who*?" He was beckoning toward a concealed source that reveals itself, suddenly, in the questioning itself.

Avraham Avinu encounters the secret that it is specifically when one embraces the ultimate *nekudah* of unknowability at the heart of faith that HaKadosh Baruch Hu can be found. I look up, I look inward, I close my eyes in whatever situation I find myself, and I say: "*Ribono shel Olam*, I don't know what is going on. I don't know what this world is. I know nothing but the fact that it comes from a place far greater than itself. It comes from You. And because I know that it comes from You, I can connect to You."

But how can I connect to You if I don't know You? HaKadosh Baruch Hu reveals Himself to Avraham specifically when Avraham asks *bamah eida*—"How will I know? Who are You? What is this?" It is the questioning spirit of Avraham Avinu that awakens him to the secret of faith.

To live the question is to live at the edge of reason, where a person has nothing to do but throw their words up to *Shamayim*, hoping to retrieve some element of an answer from beyond. Inherent within every true question is a certain hopelessness of an answer. If the question is asked from a place of real necessity, the mind must feel on some level that the answer is impossible. Only then, once a person has relinquished the natural desire for affirmative answers that clarify all things, can they begin to hear the echoes of a distant answer emerging from within the question itself.

This questioning, a quest willing to leave the stability of an answer and venture into the unknown of whatever comes after it, is the task of Avraham Avinu. Baffled by the insanity of it all, he came to realize that there has to be something bigger than this, some hidden order, some calming, unifying theory that holds all of this madness together. But first and foremost, it was his encounter with the question that set him on the path of faith.

## *He was bothered*

The Maharal asks: What was it about Avraham Avinu that made him deserving of the call of *Lech lecha*, and nobody else?[2]

The *Sfas Emes* answers that the call was not addressed to Avraham alone. It went out to the whole of existence, and it reverberates through existence at every moment. Avraham was simply

the first to bend his ear and listen.[3] And why was it Avraham who listened? The *tzaddikim* say it was very simply one thing: he was bothered.

> *I don't know what's going on here. This is insane. I thought I had certainty, and I don't. I don't know anything. I have to make a choice to believe, or I'm going to be swallowed up by the wilderness.*

That was the *emunah* of Avraham Avinu: there has to be something to rely upon. We are creatures; we are not self-begotten; by definition there has to be a Creator. That questioning spirit, which intuits from within itself that something is not right, is all that is necessary to come upon the secret of faith. When I am aware of what is missing, then somehow I access that very thing in its absence.

## *The noise inside*

A story is told about a *talmid* of the Maggid who was passing away. His *talmidim* came to him and asked, "Rebbe, how will we find a *tzaddik* to connect to after you leave?" He said, "I can't tell you how to find a *tzaddik*. But any *tzaddik* who tells you he knows how to get rid of *machshavos zaros*, of foreign thoughts—run away from him." To be a human being in this world is to live with an inner noise. Sometimes it feels good, sometimes it feels bad, sometimes it leaves us stuck. Avraham Avinu was the first to realize that the noise inside—the pain, the botheredness, the excitement, the sadness—is exactly where I need to find Hashem. Not on the outside of the world, but on the inside.

## *The Owner appeared within him*

One of the masters who most elevates this mindset—that the inner storm is itself the place where we encounter Godliness—is the *Mei HaShiloach*, Reb Mordechai Yosef of Izhbitz. His very name, Mordechai Yosef, is *roshei teivos Mi* (מי): the "Who?" of *mi bara eileh*, the self that asks a question of the higher realms rather than providing answers.

The Midrash concludes that the owner of the palace looked out at him: *heitzitz alav ba'al habirah*. The *Mei HaShiloach* notes the word *alav*, with an *ayin*, rather than *eilav*, with an *aleph*.[4] *Eilav* would mean "to him": an outside, objective relationship. *Alav* means the Owner appeared *within* him: an internal, subjective relationship.

This is how HaKadosh Baruch Hu responds to Avraham:

> *Look at yourself, Avraham. Don't look outside; look inside. Is anyone else in the world asking questions like you? Is anyone else bothered by this instability, this homesickness?*

> *Everyone is looking, but no one is paying attention. No one sets their heart to contemplate the nature of this world. Why is it wondrous in your eyes?*

The wonder that rises in the *neshamah*—its refusal to accept things as they appear, the heart's distress that it cannot discern where this world comes from or how God sustains and fills it—that itself is the proof of Godliness. Hashem reveals Himself to Avraham through Avraham himself, through the very questioning of his heart. Let the questioning of your soul be proof of a depth that cannot be seen.

As the *Mei HaShiloach* says, Hashem did not give Avraham an answer *b'chlal*. The only answer you will ever have is your question: the fact that you are dissatisfied, the fact that you have come to know that the question is higher than the answer, and that every answer leads to another question.

### *Asking about His absence reveals His presence*

Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin develops this into what is really a psychology of being. Whenever a person feels the absence of Godliness in some place, that feeling surfaces as anxiety and concern. If a person pauses long enough to notice why the anxiety is surging, they will find it is because they feel God is not present in this moment. And then, suddenly, the very God they feel is absent appears through their questioning. For who says I should be questioning God's absence at all? Questioning His absence already implies belief in His presence, and that belief is what reveals Godliness. If I am asking the question, I am already drawing down the revelation.

This is why Rebbe Nachman teaches that *kashya*, a question, shares its *roshei teivos* with *Shema Hashem koli ekra*.[5] Hidden within every question, however simple or complex, is a voice crying out: "Hashem, hear my voice. I just want to live with Your presence. I want *emunah*."

*Nafshi b'she'elasi*—my soul is most revealed in my questioning.[6] *Tefillah* itself is a work of questioning: asking of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, not necessarily receiving answers, but asking nonetheless. It means living in that suspended place without certainty, and resting assuredly in the hope of an eventual answer.

## Ayeka

The first question Hashem ever asks of man comes after the sin of the *Eitz HaDa'as*: *Ayeka*—where are you?[7] The whole experience of being human is being put into question. For so long we feel that the question has to be covered over by answers. But the truth is that we have to learn to ask new questions, stronger questions.

*Mah nishtanah halailah hazeh?* Redemption comes by way of the question. Even a person sitting alone on the night of the Seder must ask.[8] This is the light of Avraham Avinu: that Hashem appears to us specifically in the murmuring of our heart over His absence. "Where are You, Hashem?"

## *The first iconoclast*

Living with that question, Avraham Avinu said no to the idols. He came to dig away the repression, the dust and dirt we used to cover over the ultimate truth: that we do not know, that we have no power, and that we are merely creatures before a Creator so infinite that any attempt to lay claim to Him is impossible.

He was the iconoclast who shattered the false ceiling of perfection, revealing the profound possibility that lies within imperfection. He opened us up to what it means to come to terms with being a creature at the end of the day: *kedushasi l'ma'alah mikedushaschem*—My holiness is above yours.[9] I can try to know everything, and that has value, but only when my eye is perpetually on the realization that ultimately I know nothing at all.

This is the root of Avraham Avinu's impulse to shatter the idols. He reintroduces into the world the uncertainty that must be processed for a person to become a vulnerable human being: one who cultivates faith in a power greater than oneself, rather than knowledge and certainty in an idol lower than oneself.

Yes, it might be uncertain. Yes, it might be frightening. Yes, it might mean being thrown into a *kivshan ha'eish* with absolute faith in HaKadosh Baruch Hu. But embracing that world brings with it the necessary difficulty of leaning into uncertainty and facing it.

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NOTES

1 *Yeshayahu* 40:26.

2 Maharal, *Netzach Yisrael* 11.

3 *Sfas Emes*, *Lech Lecha* 5632, in the name of the *Zohar*.

4 *Mei HaShiloach* I, *Lech Lecha*, s.v. *Vayomer Hashem el Avram*.

5 *Likutei Moharan* II:46.

6 *Esther* 7:3.

7 *Bereishis* 3:9.

8 *Pesachim* 116a.

9 *Vayikra Rabbah* 24:9.

CHAPTER FOUR

# *Emunah*, a Certainty of Choice

Avraham has shattered the idols and lived inside the question. What carries him now is one thing: *emunah*.

*V'he'emin baShem vayachsheveha lo tzedakah*—he believed in Hashem, and it was considered for him as righteousness.[1]

Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin asks: Why is it specifically his *emunah* that Avraham Avinu is praised for? Avraham was wise beyond wisdom, with an intellect beyond intellect and a heart beyond the heart. He excelled in nearly every area: wealth, political thought, lovingkindness, compassion. As the *Zohar* says, he knew it all.[2] Yet it is his faith that HaKadosh Baruch Hu takes as the most significant thing, the marker that makes him the forefather of the Jewish people.

Rav Tzadok answers that wisdom was not Avraham's secret. Everybody had wisdom back then. Everybody wanted a grasp on something, and every idol was an attempt to grasp the Infinite and give it measure. The only *chiddush* of Avraham was his *emunah*: the recognition that I don't know, that I have no idea. Not an ignorance born of our failures, or of not being good enough, but of the simple fact that I am not God, and so I can never know God completely. His very question, *bamah eida*, was itself that admission.

Everything before Avraham was an answer to the questions. Avraham Avinu revealed the question to all of the answers. And the only way to move beyond the question that unsettles every answer is *emunah*.

*Emunah* is what we do when we recognize that no matter what answers emerge, there will always be a greater question: the invisibility and ungraspability of God, which exceeds all answers. The difference is that through faith, the question stops being a painful encounter with limitation and becomes the very site where we embrace Godliness. When a person has the singular answer of faith, there is no question that can disable them. But if a person lacks the answer beyond rationality, every question mark of existence will knock them down.

## *Avraham HaIvri*

This is the secret of Avraham Ha'ivri: the whole world stood on one side, and he stood on the other.[3] Everybody else lived with their certainties. Avraham Avinu was willing to cross the river, *mei'ever hanahar*—to leap beyond the possibility of answers into a faith beyond reason. He entered the place of *emunah l'ma'alah mita'am vada'as*. The whole world was addicted to knowing; only Avraham was willing to sacrifice knowledge for the sake of wonder, faith, and a questioning spirit in the face of the unknown.

## *Two kinds of certainty*

There is a perpetual questioning at the heart of Avraham Avinu, but it does not negate the simplicity of a faith that accepts the unknowability of all things. Rather, it adds to his faith. He is able to talk to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, to demand and even expect that things begin to work out, as long as this is held within the general framework of acceptance.

A person can accept that there is no external certainty while believing: "I can cultivate my own form of certainty, which is more certain than external certainty." External certainty is contingent; it rests on facts and evidence. Those are the idolatrous forms of certainty. Inner certainty is that inner *nekudah*, the point of my own resolve: "I have chosen this path of faith"—*derech emunah bacharti*.[4]

In the absence of a secure answer, one chooses. And choosing is a far deeper certainty than any answer could ever provide, even if a person must renew that choice again and again. This is the life of Avraham Avinu. All the uncertainty of my relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu, of where I am going and what I am walking toward, becomes part of a single gesture of faith.

From within that choice there emerges a certainty far beyond the possibility of certainty. This is the secret of the two kidneys that, Chazal say, taught Avraham Torah:[5] an intuition rising from within the body itself, deeper than reasoning. Avraham Avinu had the confidence to start a path. He trusted the steps where his feet were landing. He understood that he would never know, and he chose to dive into the secret of faith, and HaKadosh Baruch Hu revealed Himself in that very moment of letting go.

## *Go into imagination*

The *Bas Ayin* learned this on his own journey. A poor man came from Eretz Yisrael to Europe and told him that even the dust there shines like diamonds. The *Bas Ayin* was so stirred that he set out for Eretz Yisrael, eventually settling in Tzfas. But when he first arrived, he saw that the dust was just dust; it did not look very different from any other land. It took time for him to re-

fine his sight, to forget the Torah of *chutz la'aretz*, until he saw that every stone on the ground was a diamond: *even ma'asu habonim haysah l'rosh pinah*.[6]

What enables a person to refine the *bas ayin*, the apple of their eye, and see the land properly? The *Bas Ayin* says: *Lech lecha* means *lech l'chaf hadimyon*—go into the *kaf* of imagination.[7] The word *lecha* ends with *kaf*, the letter of comparison, of "as if." A person has to enter a space of imagination.

Imagination, as Rebbe Nachman teaches, is clarified into *emunah*.[8] Both *emunah* and imagination build something in the mind that cannot rest on rational, graspable knowledge. This is the radical *nekudah* that Avraham Avinu brought into the world: not knowing, *emunah*, and *dimyon* are the tools that draw down the light of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. Once those tools are in place, we can draw all the understanding and knowledge we want into them, so long as we remember *derech emunah bacharti*, that everything depends on *emunah*.

## *The* kaf *of* Anochi

The *Mei HaShiloach* asks why Hashem said *Anochi Hashem Elokecha* rather than *Ani*.[9] Because in *Anochi* there is a *kaf hadimyon*. *Anochi* is *Ani* with an added *kaf*. If it said *Ani*, it would become an idol, as if we knew. The *kaf* of likeness perpetually reminds us that we hold only a likeness. That is what Avraham Avinu grasped.

## *Faith as a gift*

Avraham Avinu recognized his *emunah* as a gift from HaKadosh Baruch Hu. This is the radical secret of thanking God for the very ability to have faith in Him. He whispers into our heart that the only way to grapple with the unknowability and chaos at the heart of all things—the place Avraham was taken out of in Ur Kasdim—is *emunah*. It is the only way forward: into the *kaf hadimyon*, into *Lech lecha*.

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NOTES

1 *Bereishis* 15:6.

2 See *Zohar* I:77b–78a.

3 *Bereishis Rabbah* 42:8.

4 *Tehillim* 119:30.

5 *Bereishis Rabbah* 61:1.

6 *Tehillim* 118:22.

7 *Bas Ayin*, *Lech Lecha*, s.v. *Vayomer Hashem el Avram*.

8 *Likutei Moharan* II:8:7–8.

9 *Mei HaShiloach* I, *Yisro*, s.v. *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*.

CHAPTER FIVE

# *Lech Lecha*, Into the Unknown

With the impulse to shatter the idols and re-embrace the invisibility of all things, and all the uncertainty that comes with it, comes the call. Avraham Avinu decides: "I will not live in a world of false certainty or immediate gratification, which suspends and erases my difficulties for but a moment." He is willing to lean into the discomfort, to embrace a faith of unknowability, a belief in something that cannot be proven.

And immediately he hears the voice of HaKadosh Baruch Hu: *Lech lecha*. Go for yourself. Leave your situatedness, your habituation, your perceptions.

## *Go to yourself*

The *Mei HaShiloach* reads it this way.[1] When Avraham Avinu began to search and dig for the source of his life, for the inner fount of his vitality, he came to realize that the desires of this world will not stand. He had seen the aftermath of the generation of the flood and the generation of the dispersion. All effort in this world is at best spent minimizing distractions and problems; a person will never find the satisfying answer outside of himself.

So Avraham hears: *Lech lecha*, *l'atzmecha*—stop looking outside yourself. Turn inward to discover the inner voice of God, because the outer world cannot truly be called life. The main source of life is the inner life. As the *pasuk* says, *v'atah tagil baShem*: you yourself, from within your own soul, will rejoice in Hashem.[2]

The *Zohar* reads it similarly. Rabbi Elazar says: *Lech lecha—l'garmach*, *l'askana garmach*. Go for yourself, to rectify yourself.[3] The *Ateres Tzvi* of Zidichov, emending the text, reads it: to rectify your level—to go and reveal the *middah* of Avraham, the *chesed* of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, in the world.

## *Awakening from below*

What awakened the call? The *Zohar* answers from the order of the *pesukim*.[4] First the family leaves Ur Kasdim, *laleches artzah Kena'an*, to go toward the land of Canaan. Only then is it written: *Vayomer Hashem el Avram, Lech lecha*. Avraham wanted to go, and because he wanted to go, HaKadosh Baruch Hu awakened within him the command to go. From here the *Zohar*

learns: *kol man d'is'ar l'isdachya, mesay'in lei*—whoever awakens himself to be purified is helped from above. As long as Avraham had not awakened, *Lech lecha* was not written.

This is the teaching of Reish Lakish: *ba l'taher, mesay'in oso*.[5] And Reish Lakish is the one to believe on this, because he was the *ba'al teshuvah*. He himself had an awakening from below and received a flow from above that carried him beyond his own capacity.

Rav Chaim Vital writes that nearly the entire wisdom of *pnimiyus haTorah* can be contained in two principles: *Mayin Nukvin* and *Mayin Duchrin*.[6] *Mayin Nukvin*, the feminine waters, is the awakening from below: the desire of that which has no light of its own, only a yearning to open itself to something more. *Mayin Duchrin*, the masculine waters, is the awakening from above: the flow that descends to illuminate what is below.

The awakening from below begins with the recognition of deficiency. I am a *ba'al chisaron*. My lack is not a symptom of something I have lost; it is inherent in being a creature. It is not a flaw in the machine but its very design. When I accept the lack, confront it, and raise it into something spiritually useful, it is no longer empty. It becomes a fullness that expresses itself through emptiness, much as HaKadosh Baruch Hu does through the *tzimtzum*. In the language of the *Mesillas Yesharim*, *techilaso hishtadlus v'sofo matanah*:[7] it begins as my effort and ends as a gift from above—a new recognition that *ein od milvado*, a new insight in which I look back on what I thought was dark and see the goodness in it.

And yet, as the students of the Rashash point out, these are not truly two stages. *Ha'Mahn ihu ha'Madd*: the yearning that rises is itself what comes down. Everything comes from HaKadosh Baruch Hu, even our awakening from below. Obviously Hashem does not need anything from us. But He loved Avraham Avinu so much—for letting go of the idolatrous need to know and choosing to live in *emunah*—that He gave the Jewish people this kingship: that our actions below would appear to awaken a response above, and that we would truly play a role.

## *The center that could not be grasped*

The *Zohar* continues with a remarkable picture.[8] HaKadosh Baruch Hu gave Avraham a *ruach d'chochmesa*, a spirit of wisdom. He knew the permutations of the letters, the inner workings of every civilization, the stars and constellations, and the heavenly ministers appointed over each land. He weighed each region on the scales of his understanding and grasped them all.

Then he came to the center point of the world, the *nekudah d'emtza'isa*, the *Even HaShesiyah* from which all the world was founded. He tried to grasp it and could not. He tried to identify the minister appointed over it and could not connect. He tried again and again. As Rav Chaim Vital explains, he could not grasp it because Hashem gave Eretz Yisrael to no heavenly minister; He oversees it Himself: *einei Hashem Elokecha bah*.[9]

And Avraham understood that just as every land comes from this center point, every power ruling every land comes from the infinite power resting here. He knew everything—and when he came to Eretz Yisrael, he did not know. And specifically from that awareness, from his inability to understand, *v'he'emin baShem*.[10] This is the *emunah* we spoke of, born at the very place where knowing ends. Once HaKadosh Baruch Hu saw him arrive at this place of not knowing, *miyad*, He revealed Himself and said: *Lech lecha*—I have come to help you know who you are.

## Miyad*: immediately*

The *Zohar* calls our consciousness in this world, with all its concealment, the darkened light, *n'hora ukma*. The unceasing revelation that descends from above, *Shema Yisrael* and *ein od milvado*, is the white light, *n'hora chivira*. The two do not unite until the darkened light awakens first.

And the *Zohar* repeats one word again and again in this passage: *miyad*, immediately. Once Avraham set out, *miyad*, Hashem said *Lech lecha*. Once the darkened light awakens below, *miyad*, the white light rests upon it. Once he could not grasp the land, *miyad*, Hashem revealed Himself.

The repetition collapses time. If the answer were a response to something other than the yearning, it could not be immediate. Within the desire is already the response; within the yearning is already the satisfaction. *Miyad*, from *yad*, means "already in hand": I only need to open my hand to find what is already there.

Avraham, as we saw, was the first to bend his ear to the call. That bending of the ear, that attunement to what is lacking, is itself the vessel that draws down the revelation. *Ohr* without a *kli* is always available, but it does not settle; a *kli* without *ohr* is empty. This is why the *pasuk* warns those who find themselves below: *hamazkirim es Hashem al domi lachem*—do not be silent.[11] Just as Hashem's light never stops for a second, we cannot stop yearning for even a second.

And the vessel is made of not knowing. *Lo yodea klum*, "he knows nothing at all," has the *roshei teivos kli*. When I realize that I don't know anything, I become a vessel for HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

## *Three departures*

*Lech lecha mei'artzecha u'mimoladetecha u'mibeis avicha.* The *Zohar* reads each departure as leaving a way of knowing he had mastered.

- *Mei'artzecha*, from your land: leave the place you were attached to, the need for identification and proof.

- *U'mimoladetecha*, from your birthplace: leave the wisdom of your stars, the hour and constellation under which you were born, all the things that feel so sturdy about yourself.
- *U'mibeis avicha*, from your father's house: leave the empty space of Terach. Don't dwell in the destruction of meaning; find the meaning hidden within hope and faith.

All of it was so that Avraham could enter the unknown completely.

## *A land perpetually shown*

Avraham Avinu is not told where he is going. *El ha'aretz asher ar'eka*—to the land that I will show you. He is not given a destination, and that is the destination: a place that is not a place, perpetually unfolding beneath a person's feet wherever they find themselves.

Why can't he be told? Because the innermost point of things cannot be shown in its totality. Only HaKadosh Baruch Hu is total. Whenever a person comes to the innermost point, it evades their grasp—not because we are unworthy, but because the evasion is the very point of connection. The moment you think it is something identifiable that will offer perfection, you have turned it back into an idol. So *ar'eka* is not a land once shown, but a land perpetually being shown. Whenever I feel I have grasped my root, I come to see that I have not even begun, and that my root is rooted in *Ein Sof* itself.

As Rebbe Nachman said, *kol makom she'ani holech, ani holech l'Eretz Yisrael*: wherever I walk, I am walking to the Land of Israel.[12] When I let go of a destination that will answer all my questions, I am suspended in the airiness of the journey, and I come to realize that every step is the destination. *Ufaratzta yamah vakeidmah v'tzafonah vanegbah*—the *nekudah* of Avraham spreads out everywhere, into every step of a person's experience.[13]

This is the power of Avraham: the power to find my home wherever I am. But it depends on relinquishing the need to feel at home. When I let go of the necessity of being grounded, I find the capacity to ground myself in groundlessness, to wander without destination, and to know that every step brings me closer to the *Ribono shel Olam*.

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NOTES

1 *Mei HaShiloach* I, *Lech Lecha*, s.v. *Vayomer Hashem el Avram*.
2 *Yeshayahu* 41:16.
3 *Zohar* I:78a.
4 *Zohar* I:77b.
5 *Shabbos* 104a.
6 *Mevo She'arim*.
7 *Mesillas Yesharim*, ch. 26.
8 *Zohar* I:77b–78a, with the commentary of Rav Chaim Vital.
9 *Devarim* 11:12.
10 *Bereishis* 15:6.
11 *Yeshayahu* 62:6.
12 *Chayei Moharan* §156.
13 *Bereishis* 28:14.

CHAPTER SIX

# Living with the Question

*Toras Hashem temimah meshivas nafesh*: the Torah restores the soul.[1] But only someone who has come into contact with the fact that something is missing needs the soul restored. And the world is populated with lost objects: lost memories, lost hopes, lost dreams, lost perspectives, lost assumptions, some good and some bad. Each and every person has lost something and is searching for something. As Rebbe Nachman says, even the *tzaddikim* are losing something and searching for something. He describes the *malachim* digging and digging, burrowing deeper into the ground in search of lost objects, to help each person retrieve what was lost.[2]

## *Digging wells*

Avraham Avinu represents this digging. Avraham dug wells. Reb Chaim Chaikel of Amdur, a student of the Maggid of Mezeritch, asks what he was digging for so persistently.[3] He was digging for that place in the mind. He was perpetually engraving furrows deeper and deeper into thought, into interiority, in search of the lost fount of *kedushah* where the mind itself becomes the resting place of the *Shechinah*, where I am given a power greater than myself that I did not have before the *bittul*.

It is like Dovid HaMelech, who dug and dug and would not stop until he found the place of the Beis HaMikdash.[4] It is like the *shamir*, eating through the stone. It is the insistence on breaking through whatever barrier stands in front of us, digging to the most interior point of the mind, where the mind becomes a fountain in which the light of the Infinite is revealed. There we learn to be okay in the moment. We find a moment of serenity, an all-rightness, with the belief that things are always getting better, that I can always begin again, that life is good, that the world is good, that God is good: *Baruch she'amar v'hayah ha'olam*.

Very often, as our *tzaddikim* point out, the deepest good imaginable is *savlanus*: the capacity of the mind to face reality as it is, and to have the vessels, strength, and confidence in our beliefs to stand steadily before all things and say, "*Im ani kan, hakol kan*. If I am here, all is here.[5] I have *emunah*. I'm okay."

## *Question, answer, question*

Avraham Avinu's journey has no conclusion. *Lech lecha* means: endlessly dig and reveal more. No matter what level of grasp you think you have reached, the next frontier will reveal that your prior grasp was minimal, and even this new revelation will pale before the coming moment.

In this way we live in a state of question, answer, question, answer. Every answer gives birth to a higher question. Yet we still benefit from living as if we have an answer. We are not destabilized; we are comfortable in our not knowing. Even when I come to a place of knowledge, a higher level of not knowing takes its place right after: endless ascents, endless questions, coming ever closer to God.

## *The penthouse of doubt*

Living with the question does not mean giving up on knowing. It is not an uncertainty that destroys any possibility of planning; there is planning, and there is engagement. But every ounce of engagement and planning must hold, carefully and gently, the secret that I don't know anything at all.

When the Chassidim brought this consciousness down into the world, the *Misnagdim* used to make fun of them: "They're not learning Torah anymore. Chassidim learn *nisht*." (Yiddish for "nothing.") When the Chozeh of Lublin heard this, he said, "They're absolutely right. Chassidim learn *nisht*. It's not that they aren't learning; they are learning *nisht*." Chassidus is about learning, over and over, the secret of *nisht*: I thought I knew, and I don't know. All I can do is hold on tight and realize that only Hashem knows.

We must build the buildings of certainty, but always with the penthouse: the realization that the very top of the building is the uncertainty that grounds the certainty. In the language of the *Zohar*, this is the *Reisha d'Lo Isyada*, the Head that is not known: the *safek pnimi*, the inner doubt at the summit of all things.[6] And with it comes the *sipuk pnimi*, the inner contentment that comes from acknowledging that I will never have absolute certainty.

That doubt can do one of two things. It can drive a person mad, craving the idols of the past simply to relieve the pain of not knowing. Or it can set a person on a new path of wonder and wandering, of expectation and anticipation, walking without destination.

## *Facing the fear*

Part of Avraham Avinu's decision to enter the path of faith is the willingness to confront the difficulty of this world. And the difficulty of this world awakens a certain fear, an anxiety that is very natural for a person who is trying to find the smooth path.

When Hashem reveals Himself to Avram at the *Bris Bein HaBesarim*, the covenant that awakens the path of *avodas Hashem*, we encounter a splitting. Animals that were once whole are split, and that is what enables Avraham Avinu to enter the service of God. Because entering into the service of God means, by definition, that a person is going to experience a certain tornness. There is the good option and there is the bad option; there is the light and there is the darkness. And it is a frightening thing.

In that moment Avraham Avinu is overwhelmed by a sense of terror: *eimah chasheichah gedolah*.[7] What is that fear about? Rashi says it is the darkness of the exile that is going to come. Avraham saw that to be a *Yid* in this world means walking a very delicate path, in the middle between two sides.

But the knight of faith faces that fear, and he chooses to enter into *emunah*, which is *mamtik* all of the fear. This is the *derech* of Avraham Avinu: facing the fear, and then finding a hidden path that is no longer afraid of those things that are reasonably fearful. If I am living a life of managing this concern or that concern, very often I am going to be overwhelmed, because any one thing will be able to knock me down. But if I choose the *derech hamelech*, which goes around all of the concerns and is higher than all of the fears, then I am able to engage in the battle.

## *Not afraid of anything*

The Ba'al Shem Tov HaKadosh teaches us one thing and one thing alone: not to be afraid of anything but Hashem. On his deathbed, his father gave him a *brachah*: "Yisroel, do not be afraid of anything."

The first mission the Ba'al Shem Tov encountered, he entered a dark forest at night to go out and find God. Suddenly, from amidst the darkness, he saw an illuminated palace. As he came closer, he began to feel a thickening darkness. Every experience of light in that palace made him feel darker and darker, until he came to its innermost center, and there he felt a darkness he never imagined he could feel. And suddenly he saw a table of demons. The demons turned to him and said, "Little boy, what are you doing here?"

The Ba'al Shem Tov said, "My father taught me not to be afraid of anything at all, only God."

The demons grew stronger. "Little orphan boy, haven't you heard the news? God has abandoned the earth."

And the Ba'al Shem Tov faced these demons and said, without blinking an eye: "*Yispardu kol po'alei aven*—all the evildoers shall be scattered."[8] Immediately the demons disappeared, the palace of light disappeared, and the Ba'al Shem Tov found himself once again in the forest, except now he was covered over with a soft light of confidence.

Avraham saw a palace in flames and discovered that its Owner was gazing out at him. The Ba'al Shem Tov saw a palace of light and discovered it was full of darkness. This is the secret of the faith of Avraham: not to avoid the darkness, but to see beyond the darkness, to laugh at the darkness, to affirm a faith that makes space for all of the darkness.

## *Leaping beyond*

Chazal tell us that Avraham Avinu has the ability to pull any *Yid* out of Gehinnom.[9] That means to say: whenever a *Yid* feels stuck in the darkness of this world, unable to make it through that thin passageway of *avodas Hashem*, we connect ourselves to Avraham. It is the radical affirmation of goodness that exceeds all fears. It is a *lechatchilah ariber* kind of attitude: "I can't make my way through all of the fears; I just have to jump beyond them."

Rebbe Nachman praised the *Ba'al Yesod V'Shoresh HaAvodah* very much. Why? Because on his deathbed he said one word: *iberghesprungen*—I leaped, *dilagti*, I jumped beyond this world. That is what a *Yid* has to do on the path of Avraham. We have to be able to say *iberghesprungen*: I leaped beyond all of it.

As Rebbe Nachman teaches, Avraham Avinu simply passes over the questions.[10] He flies with the question. He is not trying to answer the questions of the *shevirah*—the answerable questions of the traumas in our lives and in the world around us. Nor is he trying to answer the unanswerable questions of the *chalal hapanui*, the *tzimtzum*, the paradoxes of the world. He is *ma'avir* on them; he traverses them. He does not ignore the reality of the question. He simply realizes that rather than spending his time trying to answer it, the question can provide a far deeper spiritual and motivational space than any answer ever could.

## *The fiftieth gate*

A disciple of Reb Baruch of Mezhibuzh once came knocking loudly on his door in the middle of the night. When the Rebbe opened it, he saw a broken man. "Rebbe, I've been searching, and I searched too deep. I've come to a place where I have no more hope in my faith. I don't know what to do. I've reached the abyss. The void has focused its gaze on my soul."

Reb Baruch sat him down. "I know where you are. There are fifty gates of understanding. Each gate is a question and an answer: first comes a question, then an answer, and then you graduate to the next gate, with its new question and new answer. But in the fiftieth gate there is a question, and no answer comes after it. All a person can do there is embrace the quiet of that place—not trying to give answers, but being still in a place of faith and acceptance, like Avraham Avinu, who, without absolute knowledge and without any clarification, *v'he'emin baShem*."

Then Reb Baruch took his hand and whispered, "Come, let us traverse the abyss together."

This is the gift Avraham brings down into reality: a faith beyond reason, leaping beyond logic, embracing all the contradictions of life, and transforming every blocked space into a place of praising HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

## *The river of "perhaps"*

The only certainty in existence is a certainty that is still unfolding. *Vadai*, "certain," has the same numerical value as *Ehe-yeh*, "I will be"[11]—which the *Zohar* reads as "I am destined to be revealed." It is a certainty not yet fully certain, yet entirely within a space of unfolding certitude. It cannot be grasped except by way of the *Nahar Ulai*. Daniel saw his vision by the river Ulai in Shushan HaBirah,[12] and *ulai* means "perhaps." The only road to that certainty runs through the river of "perhaps."

That is the place of Purim, of *ad d'lo yada*,[13] of not knowing anything. And *Purim* has the same numerical value as *she'eilah*, question.[14] Avraham Avinu was the first expression of the Purim consciousness: a complete severance from the desire to know with absolute certainty, and an entrance into knowing that I don't know.

That is the birthplace of the Jewish imagination. That is the birthplace of *teshuvah*. It is the realization Shlomo HaMelech came to: *amarti echkamah v'hi rechokah mimeni*—I thought I would be wise, and it is far from me.[15] The Midrash places this cry of Shlomo's in the very passage that marvels at how Avraham could have come from Terach.

In that place of having no idea, HaKadosh Baruch Hu reveals Himself and says: "You understand the secret. The secret is to realize that you don't know." And from within that not knowing we cultivate the faith of Avraham Avinu, the *Magen Avraham*: the shield that protects us from all things, a radical belief in belief itself.[16]

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NOTES

1 *Tehillim* 19:8.

2 *Likutei Moharan* I:188.

3 *Chaim va'Chesed* §6.

4 *Sukkah* 53a; see *Tehillim* 132:4–5.

5 *Sukkah* 53a, Hillel at the *Simchas Beis HaSho'eivah*.

6 *Idra Zuta*, *Zohar* III:288b.

7 *Bereishis* 15:12, and Rashi there.

8 *Tehillim* 92:10.

9 *Eruvin* 19a.

10 *Likutei Moharan* I:64.

11 ודאי = 21 = אהי"ה.

12 *Daniel* 8:2, 16.

13 *Megillah* 7b.

14 פורים = 336 = שאלה.

15 *Koheles* 7:23; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:3, where Shlomo's words refer to the *parah adumah*; 19:1 reads *mi yitein tahor mitamei* as Avraham from Terach.

16 *Bereishis* 15:1; *Pesachim* 117b.

CHAPTER SEVEN

# The Radical Affirmation of Good

We have spoken about Avraham's willingness to let go of knowledge and enter the abyss of unknowing: to stand on the other side of existence, to relinquish the desire for control, and to embrace the endlessness of faith. On this level, Avraham is still someone choosing to enter a frightening place, a place devoid of order and structure, trusting that whatever happens, "I'll be okay." Avraham Avinu certainly contains that element of all-rightness and equanimity. But with the emergence of his faith, something new came into revelation that had never been revealed before.

Avraham embraced the world of unknowns; he embraced not knowing anything. But there was one thing Avraham Avinu did choose to know, and to give himself over for: that the world is good, Hashem is good, and the soul is good. This is not a return to the certainty he shattered. It is the inner certainty of choice we spoke of, *derech emunah bacharti*: not a claim about how things will turn out, but a decision about the ground that everything stands on.

Avraham Avinu revealed that at the core of all things there must be a radical affirmation of goodness. It is an unconditional affirmation of goodness as the bedrock of all existence and experience, so that no matter what happens after that foundation, one can always return to the fact that it must be good—it must be *tov*.

Avraham saw a world that had lost its luster, lost its *chein*; it had gone through too many traumas. But he chose not to listen to the post-traumatic cries of Migdal Bavel or the generation of the flood, not to be stuck in the tragedy of Kayin and Hevel, not even to be stuck in the expulsion from Gan Eden. He heard a more interior call: the affirmation of goodness that HaKadosh Baruch Hu announces into the world. *Ki tov*—it was good. *Tov me'od*—it was very good. HaKadosh Baruch Hu Himself placed a *haskamah* upon the world, affirming its radical goodness.

By the time Avraham came along, that voice had been so hidden, both by history and by the natural concealment of the *ohr haganuz*, that goodness was only a distant memory. Yet he believed in it. And the very fact that he believed in the vestige of goodness is the deepest evidence of a goodness that preceded it.

## Emunah *as a mechanism*

But how does one reattach oneself to a distant echo of hidden goodness that, by all appearances, seems to be fantasy, because the world is what it is? Avraham Avinu tried every method until he came to the final one: *emunah*.

*Emunah* is not simply faith in something unknown. It is not merely a last-ditch attempt to cultivate meaning in the absence of proof, though it is that too, with all the healthy psychological defenses that come with it. *Emunah* is also a *segulah*: the active way the mind negates itself before the infinite light within it, opening a portal for more of that light to flow back in. It is a real mechanism that HaKadosh Baruch Hu has planted in our minds and hearts. When we engage it, we awaken a chain of cause and effect beyond our consciousness. Every moment of *emunah* is not only comfort now; it opens the gates of *shefa* and vitality to re-enter the mind. *Emunah* is not a passive experience but an active verb. When I am in a state of *emunah*, I stand at a point of openness between the infinite light above me and the space in which I continue to function.

So Avraham was not simply choosing to enter the unknown. He had a foundational awareness of the inherent goodness he would find wherever he looked. This radical affirmation of existence is the first step a person must take in awakening the strength of Avraham within themselves.

## *Good eyes*

If a person lacks faith in the goodness of reality, then everywhere they look, they will assume that the way things appear is the way things truly are. If what appears is negative, they are making a final judgment about nature, existence, and reality.

This is part of the danger of *lashon hara*: the spiritual danger of making a final negative assessment about anything. Speaking only negatively about something implies that there is no spark of goodness there. If there is no spark of goodness, it is devoid of divine vitality, and if it is devoid of that vitality, it stands in stark opposition to the essence of reality. To speak negatively and with finality about anything is tantamount to denying the goodness that may be hidden there.

Avraham gazed out at the world, and in spite of seeing destruction, he chose to attach himself to a more ancient love: *Avraham ohavi*, Avraham My beloved.[1] As the Maggid of Mezeritch describes, Avraham opened up the world of love that HaKadosh Baruch Hu wants to reveal. Before Avraham, that love and goodness lay hidden, asleep. What emerged in its place was a world of fear, a world of "Am I fixing this or not? Am I doing this right or not?" And in a world of fear there is only distance. Avraham woke the world of love from its slumber: a world of *ahavah*, of

*yedidus*, where everything depends on love. When a person praises HaKadosh Baruch Hu and affirms this world, God is revealed with greater intensity. The *chesed* that Avraham practiced below is what drew Hashem's goodness out of concealment into revelation.

## Chok hatov l'heitiv

This does not mean Avraham saw good everywhere, or that his life was without difficulty, suffering, or pain. It means that the backdrop of all experience, before it and after it, is the affirmation of an ultimately good God who wants to bestow goodness on His creatures: *chok hatov l'heitiv*.[2] How do we know this? Only because our *tzaddikim* tell it to us. It is a *chok*; we do not know why Hashem chose to reveal Himself this way, but He did.

I have wondered why this principle became so central to *pnimiyus haTorah*. Other reasons for creation are offered as well, yet none of them became the bedrock of how we experience life, assuming by way of faith that everything is good. One possibility is this. Nearly everything we have, from the Ba'al Shem Tov and his students, the Gra and his students, the Rashash and the Ramchal, comes from the Arizal. And everything the Arizal had comes from Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who announced in the *Idra Rabba*: in earlier times they served through fear, *aval anan b'chavivusa talya milsa*—but with us, it all depends on love.[3]

Where did Rabbi Shimon get that from? From his teacher, Rabbi Akiva, who could proclaim the unity of Hashem in the darkest places and laugh at the destruction, because nothing is ultimately negative.[4] And where did Rabbi Akiva receive this? From his teacher, Nachum Ish Gamzu: *gam zu l'tovah*. Everything that crossed the threshold of his mind he saw through the shade of goodness. And the Gemara tells us that Nachum Ish Gamzu had the qualities of Avraham Avinu: just as Avraham turned dust into weapons when he battled the kings, so did Nachum Ish Gamzu.[5] It all comes back to Avraham's choice to see the good in the world, to believe in the *boker* of Avraham, the morning light of radical affirmation.[6] As the Komarna Rebbe taught his son, the essential principle of *pnimiyus haTorah* is *chok hatov l'heitiv*.

The two purposes we are given for creation—that Hashem wants to bestow the ultimate good, and that it is our task to find Him in the darkest places—turn out to be one and the same. The ultimate good Hashem reveals is our capacity to find Him where we thought He could not be found.

That goodness is sometimes invisible to us, that we still make a *brachah* on bad news,[7] does not negate it. It is a good so deep that it cannot be tasted or measured by the tools of human consciousness; it is a good beyond being. And what is that goodness? It is our very willingness to affirm goodness. The impulse toward affirming being, rather than negating it, is itself the goodness

Hashem has placed within us: the ability to have good eyes, to see the good in others and in ourselves, and to believe, in spite of all appearances, that everything will ultimately be revealed as the greatest good imaginable. As the Ramchal teaches, a person must say of his life that it has been the greatest good imaginable. We might not taste it yet, but there is an affirmation at the root of consciousness itself. That is the gift of Avraham.

This goodness is accessible only through faith, beyond reason. If we measure it against the metrics of reason, we lost the argument long ago; the world can be the ugliest place imaginable. Only an affirmation decided in advance—one that does not judge particular circumstances but judges the very ground upon which existence unfolds—is strong enough to stay steady at the heart of all that happens.

## *Not emptiness: the secret of* tzimtzum

Avraham could give this to the Jewish people, Rebbe Nachman explains, because he understood the secret of *tzimtzum*.[8] Taken on its own, the concealment of God would mean that God is absent, *chas v'shalom*; then the world is bad, and such thoughts are *machshavos ra'os*. But it is impossible for HaKadosh Baruch Hu to be absent, since His absence would mean the non-existence of that space. We cannot say the *tzimtzum* is literal, because there is no absence whatsoever. Nor can we claim it did not happen, because the world exists. We are caught in the paradox of being.

As we saw, only Avraham could traverse this paradox, by living with both sides of it. Of course the *tzimtzum* is not real; nothing exists but the light of Hashem. And at the same time, within that very place, there is the space of the world through which Hashem reveals Himself. Avraham was deeply engaged in this world, and yet above it he saw that there is no *tzimtzum*. And he understood that the way to break through the veil is *emunah*, and that *emunah* draws out this radical affirmation of goodness.

Someone who looks at the world without recognizing that the *tzimtzum* is not literal will see the world as unmanageable. They too may come to faith in something beyond nature, but what they believe in will be nothingness—not divine nothingness, but a void, an emptiness under everything. At best, they cultivate equanimity and non-judgment and learn to sit in the emptiness. That is the Eastern path, the pessimistic science: the half-names Avraham sent east.[9]

Avraham Avinu is not that. Avraham is not non-judgmental; he has a positivity bias to the *n*th degree. He is willing to see good in everything, to *daven* even for the most wicked, to affirm the goodness of HaKadosh Baruch Hu's world. That is the path of Avraham: the radical path of

affirmation, of saying *Baruch she'amar v'hayah ha'olam*, of saying yes to the world each and every morning.

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NOTES

1 *Yeshayahu* 41:8.

2 *Etz Chaim*, *Sha'ar HaKlalim* 1; *Derech Hashem* 1:2; Ramchal, *Da'as Tevunos* §18.

3 *Zohar* III:128a (*Idra Rabba*).

4 *Berachos* 61b; *Makkos* 24b.

5 *Ta'anis* 21a.

6 *Bereishis* 19:27, *vayashkem Avraham baboker*; *Berachos* 26b, where Avraham institutes *Shacharis*.

7 *Berachos* 54a, 60b: *chayav adam levarech al hara'ah k'shem shemevarech al hatovah*.

8 *Likutei Moharan* I:64.

9 An allusion to the gifts Avraham gave the sons of the concubines when sending them east (*Bereishis* 25:6; *Sanhedrin* 91a).

CHAPTER EIGHT

# Gehinnom into Gan Eden

We saw that Avraham Avinu has a unique capacity to save a person from Gehinnom.[1] He blocks its entrance, and he can pull a person out of it. This is a wondrous notion. Gehinnom represents all that is concealed, all that is hidden, all that is stuck, all that is difficult. If the light of Avraham Avinu can save us from that place, then there is more than cause for hope; there is a promise. If a person finds themselves in hell and can attach themselves to Avraham Avinu, they can be pulled out of it.

We are not speaking here about the Gehinnom that comes at the end of life, the refining a soul may go through after this world. *Avada*, in the time of *techiyah* the *neshamah* of Avraham Avinu will take every soul out of Gehinnom *mamash*. We are speaking about something the *tzaddikim* teach: that this world itself can be experienced as Gehinnom. Just as *Olam Haba* is available to us now if we draw it into consciousness—*olamcha tireh b'chayecha*, you will see your world in your lifetime[2]—so too a person can draw Gehinnom into the present through their own constriction.

Rebbe Nachman once said: "Everybody says there is this world and the next world. The next world, we believe in. And it's possible that in some other world there is something called 'this world.' Because here, it seems to be Gehinnom; everyone is filled with great suffering."[3] In moments of *katnus*, of concealment, this world can feel like Gehinnom itself.

## *What makes it hell*

The Maharal teaches, as a principle spread throughout his writings, that goodness is existence, and the opposite of goodness is non-existence. The ground of being is goodness, so whatever is truly devoid of good lacks true existence. That, says the Maharal, is Gehinnom: deficiency itself, *he'eder hametzius*, the dread of non-existence. That is why it is called *tzalmaves*, the shadow of death.[4]

Rav Dessler explains what this means for the soul.[5] Every person carries garments into each stage of growth: the attachments we form, the habits we develop, the mindsets we carry, the direction we orient ourselves in each day. If my deepest desire is for this-worldly gain, for certainty,

for perfection, for answers that end all questions, for everything that nourishes that wounded "I," then when truth is revealed I will still be carrying that baggage. I will stand in antagonism to the light, because I want something else. Hell is what happens when a person's innermost *ratzon* is directed at something other than *Elokus*, because only *Elokus* is infinite enough to fill the endless longing of the *neshamah*.

In this world, the ego can always relate to something outside itself: I see, I hear, I eat, I want, I acquire. But in the place of revelation there is only the illumination of oneness, and nothing there for the ego to take. The self that has only learned to take is left alone with itself. Rav Dessler brings an image. Even in the deepest silence there are faint sound waves we never notice. When scientists built a room completely empty of them, no one could bear being inside it for long; a terror fell on the person from that sense of isolation. And that is the loss of only one sense. Gehinnom is unrequited desire, a longing directed at something that can no longer satisfy it. The ego itself becomes the hell. It is the same idol of certainty we met at the beginning: the self that needs to weigh, to own, to hold everything in its pocket.

Rav Dessler offers three ways to judge a life. When a person is alone, what are they attached to? Do they give rather than take? Do they strive to be rather than to acquire? That is how we taste Gan Eden in this world. Gehinnom is the opposite: a life rooted desperately in this-worldly gratification. The more we can untether ourselves, the closer we come to waking up out of that nothingness, that inner silence that doesn't sing with the light of HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

## *Avraham chose exile*

The Midrash says that Avraham Avinu was given two options: the suffering of Gehinnom or the suffering of exile. He chose exile.[6] The Voledniker Rebbe, in *She'aris Yisrael*, explains what this means for us. HaKadosh Baruch Hu did us a great kindness: He gave us the difficulties and confusion of this world to play the role of Gehinnom. Nobody in this world really "has" this world.[7] In the worries of *parnassah*, in the need to work and try and beg, a person forgets all the other desires of this world. Everything hangs like mountains on a thread. And at some point a person is startled in their soul and says, "This is Gehinnom," and realizes, "I can't keep living stuck in my attachments to this world." One way or another, reality refines us. As the *Zohar* says, the soul goes into exile and is purified in its flames.

So when Avraham chose exile, he gave us a way out. When I realize that my experiences in this world—the work, the processing, all the *bilbulim*—are themselves the refining, I am already being pulled out of Gehinnom. The moment I recognize I am in Gehinnom, I have the option of entering back into Gan Eden. Avraham saw a *birah doleikes*, a world burning with something like the fire of Gehinnom, and he decided to work through it, to enter the work of *emunah*. In

that place, the *machshavah* is *mamtik* the *dinim*, and Gehinnom is transformed into Gan Eden. The work a person does is protected by *Magen Avraham*, because a person is always working their way out.

## *Hope pierces the ceiling*

The Ramchal says that only one thing can take a person out of Gehinnom, the only thing that can pierce its ceiling: hope.[8] Avraham Avinu was hope eternal. *B'hibaram*: he carried an awareness of the goodness at the core of existence, the radical affirmation at the heart of all things. That awareness, that *emunah*, is itself Gan Eden. When we attach ourselves to Avraham Avinu, he puts us back in the place of *gam ki eilech b'gei tzalmaves lo ira ra, ki Atah imadi*—even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I am not afraid, because You are with me.[9] And when You are with me, it is Gan Eden.

## *The laughter of redemption*

The *tzaddikim* say that Gehinnom itself is the only place large enough to hold the *seudas Livyasan*, the great revelation of the future, when all of Klal Yisrael will be able to point and say, "This is the God I have always lived with." *Samcheinu kimos inisanu*:[10] we will see the joy we brought HaKadosh Baruch Hu when we worked through this world, when we tried to refine ourselves even slightly. Every good desire, every yearning to get better, to fix, to *daven*, to be present—even the ones we never managed to fulfill—will be served back to us there, as if they had taken shape.

The Alter Rebbe says that the souls of the Chassidim are souls that were in Gehinnom. In Gehinnom a person cannot have what they truly want, which is *Elokus*, because they have not made the vessels for it. So when they come out, they want so much light; they want to drink it. And when the Chiddushei HaRim heard that Gehinnom has three openings, all he said was: "Ah. So there are openings there too."

Reb Moshe Leib of Sassov spent his life redeeming captives. At the end of his life he wanted to fulfill the *mitzvah* one more time. He went down into Gehinnom and refused to leave until the souls of Klal Yisrael began to come out with him.

When the Rebbe Reb Meilech passed away, the Kozhnitzer Maggid sat at his table laughing. His Chassidim had never seen such a thing, and they asked what was happening. He said: "I see them bringing the soul of the Rebbe Reb Meilech to the upper worlds. They ask him, 'Did you learn Torah?' He says, 'No.' 'Did you do good deeds?' He says, 'No.' How could anyone accomplish anything in this world? This world is Gehinnom. So they say, 'Then you must go to Gehinnom.' And they take him, and they place him in Gan Eden. And the Rebbe Reb Meilech looks

around and says: 'Look at the sweetness of our Creator! If this is His Gehinnom, imagine what His Gan Eden must be.'"

That is the laughter of the *tzaddik*: the laughter of Rabbi Akiva at the destruction, the *s'chok* of Yitzchak. It comes from knowing, *be'emes*, that this world, which is Gehinnom, is where we learn the secret of Gan Eden. Every moment of personal transformation expands the territory of Gan Eden in a person's life.

This is the light of Avraham Avinu: affirmation, saying yes to the world, seeing *simchah* in it, seeing it through the *emunah* of Avraham, which leads us back into Gan Eden.

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NOTES

1 *Bereishis Rabbah* 48:8.

2 *Berachos* 17a.

3 *Likutei Moharan* II:119.

4 Maharal, *Netzach Yisrael* 36.

5 *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* I, p. 302.

6 *Bereishis Rabbah* 44:21, according to one opinion.

7 *Koheles Rabbah* 1:13: *ein adam yotzei min ha'olam v'chatzi ta'avaso b'yado*.

8 Ramchal, *Derush Be'Inyan HaKivui*.

9 *Tehillim* 23:4.

10 *Tehillim* 90:15.

CHAPTER NINE

# Goodness Revealed

If goodness is at the root of everything, the question becomes how it comes down into the day we are actually living.

The Gemara asks a sage: How did you merit length of days? He answers: *vatran hayisi b'mamoni*—I was generous with my money.[1] Rebbe Nachman explains this through a teaching of the *Zohar*.[2] Each of the six days of creation has its own face, its own spiritual expression. But there is no day without goodness in it. Each day has guards at its gates, so that one who is not good cannot enter its goodness; to him they are the darkness covering the light, the serpents and scorpions that confuse the mind. But for one who is good, those same guards work for him. The accusation becomes praise, and they call out: "Open the gates!"—the gates of love, which are the gates of return.

So the question "How did you lengthen your days?" means: How did you enter into each day to draw down its light? And the answer: "I was generous." Generosity is *chesed*, the *middah* of Avraham Avinu, the gate of love that comes from the right side, where all confusion is quieted by a blinding white light. That is why it says of Avraham that he was *ba bayamim*,[3] he came with his days: each day was full, affirmed from the right side, and he was able to access the goodness of every one of them.

## Chesed d'yoma kulei yoma

Avraham is the beginning of the *middos*: Avraham is *chesed*, Yitzchak is *gevurah*, Yaakov is *tiferes*, followed by *netzach*, *hod*, and *yesod*. So it might seem that goodness is just one *middah* among others, belonging to the first day, while every other day has its own. But the *Zohar* teaches, especially in the *kavanos* of the *na'anu'im* on Sukkos, that there is a *chesed d'yoma kulei yoma*: a *chesed* that travels with each and every day.[4] Every day is really a casing for *chesed*. Every day is meant to convey a goodness of being. Monday has its kind of goodness, Tuesday its kind, but it is always good. The more we radically affirm this, the calmer we will be, and from that calm we can address the parts of the world that need fixing and make them better and better, which is exactly what Avraham Avinu tried to do.

## *Begin with what is right*

Rav Avraham HaMalach, the son of the Maggid of Mezeritch, once described the innovation of Chassidus with a *mashal* he drew from the Seven Years' War being fought in Europe in his day. In the past, battle was waged face to face. Two sides would line up on the battlefield, and one would try to overcome the other. There were casualties on both sides, and even when one side won, the victory was never enough to ensure that the other side wouldn't stand up again. Then came a new tactic: the ambush. Instead of meeting the enemy head-on, you would encircle it from a distance and move in closer and closer, until the enemy in the middle had nothing to do but surrender.

This, he said, is the *chiddush* of Chassidus. It used to be that a person would try to fix this *middah* or that *middah*. If I was struggling with fallen love, I would try to rectify that trait; if I was struggling with severity or anger, I would battle that place. But when a person battles face to face with any *middah*, not only do we get dirty in the process; very often, by hyperfocusing on our symptoms, we make them worse.

The new path is to surround the problem. Instead of confronting the symptom, you download a general sense of well-being. You run all the way up to the all-rightness that always lives within your soul, to the loftiest levels of divinity, to *ein od milvado*, to the knowledge that the enemy is not even really an enemy. From that place you can enter the battle, and you are protected; you are no longer liable to be defiled by it. Begin with what is right, with what is working and what is whole, and only then address the parts of the self that are broken. The opposite way is endless: who can ever say they have done enough work on what needs fixing? But if I start from the goodness that exists beyond my personality, I can go down and deal with the small parts that need repair.

This is the path of Avraham Avinu, and it has to be the starting point of every day. Before I get out of bed in the morning, before I meet the world of details and noise and problems, I tune into the innermost voice of Avraham Avinu, which is the *neshamah*, and it says: everything is fine. I'm fine, my place in this world is fine, I have what I need. Hashem is enough, I'm enough, the world is enough. Then I get out of bed and enter the world of other people, the noise, the ups and the downs, and I can deal with the actual details. When I start with what's right, then even when I fall back into the places that don't feel so good, I'm still safe, because I know I'm all right. And at the end of the day, I remind myself again that I'm all right.

*Echad hayah Avraham*:[5] be yourself; live quietly in your mind. Yes, other people occupy the world, but, as Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa taught, see them as trees of a forest, where the only thing that exists is God and the individual. When we quiet the noise and the negativity, very

often the negativity within our own minds, we uncover the hidden goodness Avraham was affirming.

## *From Avram to Avraham: the* hei

When Avram was Avram, without the *hei*, this *av*, this goodness, was still transcendent: *ram*, above. It was a notion rather than a lived experience, and it did not yet ease the burdens of this world. When HaKadosh Baruch Hu adds a *hei*, it becomes an applied science.

The Ba'al Shem Tov says that the world was created with the *hei* of Avraham: *b'hei bera'am*.[6] This world is created with a *hei*; the next world, with a *yud*. The *hei* of this world represents the five stages of nearly any experience.[7] From the bottom up:

1. Experiencing difficulty.
2. Accepting the difficulty.
3. Crying out to God from within it.
4. Recognizing that God has saved me from it.
5. Praising God and cultivating gratitude from within it.

The difficulties need not be great ones, *chas v'shalom*; they can be the simple question marks of day-to-day life.[8] But we always see ourselves emerging from darkness into light. And even in the light, we go on to a higher darkness, no longer so painful, but one that keeps reminding us that we don't know anything yet. In that way we grow endlessly like Avraham Avinu, radically affirming one thing alone: the goodness of HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

This is the movement from concealment to revelation. Avraham is not content to live only in the transcendent quiet of the mind; he brings it down through all five parts of the self to affirm the goodness that hides in plain sight. The purpose of this world is pleasure, *lehenos miziv haShechinah*: to benefit from the radiance of His presence.[9]

## Tov hanireh v'hanigla

It is our task not only to affirm a transcendent goodness, but, as the *tzaddikim* cry out, a *tov hanireh v'hanigla*: a good that is seen and revealed below ten *tefachim*. Not only to believe in the good, but to feel it, to see it even in the places of *tzimtzum*, in day-to-day experience. For sick people to feel better, for lost people to be found, for hungry people to be fed, for those who have plenty to share more and those in need to receive more. For all sickness to be healed, for the Torah to be revealed, for Klal Yisrael to pick themselves up, feel good about themselves, and be kind to one another.

Every person is an *olam malei*, carrying their own breakdowns and buildings, and every person needs a *yeshuah*. The needs of the Jewish people are endless. The true *tzaddikim* already know *chok hatov l'heitiv*; that is not what they ask for. What they demand of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, *kavyachol*, is a revealed goodness we can taste and see, undeniable, *ad bli dai*: *shefa*, well-being, *menuchas hanefesh*, vitality, and every good thing, revealed below ten *tefachim*. Every pain should be erased; every burden lifted from a person's shoulders.

## L'tovascha

This gives us a way to understand the first Rashi on *Lech lecha*.[10] *Lech lecha*—go, for what? *L'hana'ascha ul'tovascha*: for your pleasure and for your good. That is the motivation, Avraham! This is all about uncovering the goodness of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. That is the job of the *tzaddikim*—and *ameich kulam tzaddikim*—to affirm, affirm, affirm, no matter how chaotic it may seem, the radical goodness of HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

If you feel that the story is over, it is very possible to feel that it has a bad ending. And if it feels like a bad ending, the important thing is to realize that it hasn't ended yet, because all endings are good. Rabbi Akiva understood this secret when he laughed at the destruction; he had learned *gam zu l'tovah* from Nachum Ish Gamzu. The *tzaddikim* note that *gam zu l'tovah* is *roshei teivos gezel*, theft, because a person must steal this awareness from a place far beyond felt experience. That is the gift of Avraham, and that is why the first blessing of the Amidah concludes with him: *b'cha chosmin*, *Magen Avraham*.[11]

Avram fixed his mind on the lofty awareness of Av-ram: *kulam b'chochmah yisbareru*, all things are rectified in *chochmah*.[12] But we live where our minds are; the place in my mind is where I am. If a person thinks good and affirms being, does not negate the value of this world by calling it empty, and recognizes the secret of the *tzimtzum*, then we can experience the light and the love and the grace of Avraham Avinu.

## B'zchus Avraham Avinu

*B'zchus* Avraham Avinu, we should be *zocheh* to open up that place within our mind. We experience our fears, we experience the concerns, the *eimah chasheichah*, the growing darkness. But nevertheless there is a light we have the ability to tap into, a light that negates all darkness at its root. And it teaches us one thing and one thing alone: *olam chesed yibaneh*.[13] Hashem wants this to be a beautiful world, a good world, an enjoyable world, a world of calm.

The world may still look like a palace in flames. But like Avraham, we know now that its Owner is gazing out at us, from within.

That is the mission of Avraham Avinu, and of every one of us who carries his light: to fight through the darkness of this world and uncover the promise of goodness, calm, and light, *b'ezras Hashem*.

NOTES

1 *Megillah* 28a.

2 *Likutei Moharan* I:84, citing *Zohar*, *Nasso*, and *Tikkunei Zohar* 70.

3 *Bereishis* 24:1.

4 *Zohar* III:103a–b.

5 *Yechezkel* 33:24.

6 *Menachos* 29b.

7 *Ba'al Shem Tov al HaTorah*, *Bereishis* 88.

8 *Arachin* 16b: even one who reaches into his pocket for three coins and comes up with two has tasted *yissurim*.

9 *Mesillas Yesharim*, ch. 1; *Berachos* 17a.

10 Rashi, *Bereishis* 12:1. The reading follows the *Divrei Yisrael* of Modzitz.

11 *Pesachim* 117b.

12 *Zohar* II:254b; a foundational principle in the writings of the Arizal.

13 *Tehillim* 89:3.