

**LIGHT
FROM
THE
FUTURE
PARSHAS LECH LECHA**

BY

HESCHEL GREENBERG

**LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS LECH
LECHA**

**LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE
ESSAYS ON PARSHAS LECH LECHA**

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LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS LECH LECHA

**Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who,
more than any Jewish leader, has prepared us
for Moshiach and the imminent Redemption**

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INTRODUCTION

The following collection of essays on *parshas Lech Lecha* was taken from the weekly Torah messages that I have been sending to hundreds of individuals over the past 22 years.

These messages were written in the spirit of the talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Several of them are actually based on or adaptations of his essays and discourses on the parsha.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe declared that we are living in unique times. He applied the words of the Midrash to our day:

“The time of your Redemption has arrived.”

The Rebbe stated further that the straightforward way for us to bring about the actual Redemption is by learning what the Torah says about Moshiach and Redemption. While learning Torah in general has the capacity to change our mindset, learning about Moshiach and Redemption has the

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capacity to alter of exile-constrained way of thinking and cultivating a liberating manner of thinking.

In this spirit, each one of these messages concludes with an application of the Torah lesson of that week to our understanding of Moshiach and Redemption, as well as to help us prepare for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent Redemption.

It is my fervent hope that these essays will contribute to the process of changing our *galus/exile* mindset into a Moshiach mindset, which is effected by the study of these themes in Torah.. And may this effort contribute to the imminent Redemption through our righteous Moshiach. Amen.

The parsha Lech Lecha is obviously a fundamental parsha because it marks the beginning of the Jewish nation with the life of our first Patriarch, Abraham..

The ultimate journey—Lech Lecha—is the final journey into the Promised Land with our righteous Moshiach at our head!

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ESSAY ONE

GO FOR YOURSELF

There are two brands of reward.

The first is given s motivation.

The second is a consequence of one's actions.

**Reward demonstrates that good, naturally,
begets good.**

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ESSAY ONE

GO FOR YOURSELF

Passed with Flying Colors

Abraham the first Jew distinguished himself in many ways. In addition to his incredible faith and kindness, Abraham is credited as having scored 100% on the “Ten Tests” administered to him by G-d.

The first test recorded in the Torah in this week’s parsha was:

Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.

Abraham passes this test with flying colors. Despite the hardship in leaving familiar surroundings, separating from family and friends, to go to an unknown land, Abraham did not hesitate to follow G-d’s instructions to him.

Why a Reward?

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Abraham was a paragon of virtue. He was the ultimate Jew; altruistic and selfless. Abraham was known for his love and passion for G-d. And when true love is concerned, there is neither desire nor need for any reward.

If this premise is correct, then the question arises, why did G-d have to promise Abraham that he was sending him for his own sake; that he would be blessed with wealth, children and fame? The last person who would have to be promised rewards in this world would have been Abraham.

Two Forms of Reward

The answer to this question is that there are two forms of reward: One is the reward that G-d gives us as His expression of satisfaction with our behavior. This form of reward is intended to motivate the person to do good just as a threat of punishment is meant to dissuade someone from committing a crime.

There is, however, a second, totally different form of reward. A physical reward is the physical manifestation of the spiritual energy that we generate through our positive actions. When a positive experience remains

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in the spiritual realm, it is a sign that the experience is restricted to one domain; the spiritual domain. When a spiritual experience reverberates in the physical world, it is a sign that the spiritual achievement has reached a high point. It is an indication that the dichotomy between the spiritual and physical has been removed; the barrier between these two worlds has been penetrated.

This then is what G-d was telling Abraham. When you will meet the challenge and reach the greatest spiritual heights, it will change the world. Everyone will see how your devotion to G-d has found expression in all facets of your life. The blessings you will generate will be so powerful that they will affect your physical life as well.

The prospect of material benefits he would receive was not intended to entice Abraham to uproot himself and travel to an unknown destination. Rather, it was intended to tell Abraham that his mission to change the world by spreading the teaching of monotheism and righteousness will bear fruit. Indeed, it will become clear to all, even in his own lifetime, that G-d is good and that living G-dly is good on every level. There will be no

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need to see the realization of G-d's promise in another generation.

Going Down to Egypt

We can now gain some further insight into the next story recorded in this week's parsha. After Abraham follows G-d's instructions to him to go to a new land and he finally arrives at his destination, he is compelled to leave because of a famine. Abraham is thus forced to "go down" to Egypt and goes through much anxiety over the abduction of his wife Sarah.

Abraham, the commentator Rashi explains, could have said to G-d: "You promised me material blessings upon fulfillment of my mission to travel to the Promised Land, and yet, no sooner do I arrive in Canaan that I was forced to go to Egypt and subject myself and my wife to such indignity and danger!" Yet Abraham does not question G-d.

In light of our earlier analysis of the nature of reward promised to Abraham, this test assumes even greater significance.

If G-d had simply stated to Abraham, "Go!" without any promise of how his compliance

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with G-d's directive will yield positive physical consequences, the test would have been a relatively easy one for Abraham to withstand. After all, the Midrash tell us, Abraham was prepared to die for his faith; was thrown into a fiery furnace by Nimrod because he refused to bow to idols. It was no big deal for Abraham to endure hardship in the pursuit of the mission given to him by G-d.

In truth, this test was a formidable one. G-d did not only tell him that he would be rewarded, G-d made it clear to Abraham that in his case his spiritual journey will yield physical results as a sign of the exalted nature of his spiritual attainments. And now, Abraham is forced to “descend” to Egypt; the word “descend” is meant in all senses of the world. He was forced to go to a morally depraved country, where both his physical and spiritual life would be in jeopardy. It would even take him away from the place in which G-d had intended for him to live and fulfill his life's purpose.

How did it resolve in the end?

Sarah was not touched by Pharaoh. Abraham was compensated with great wealth. And,

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according to the Midrash, Pharaoh's daughter Hagar was given to Sarah as a handmaiden. Hagar eventually was given by Sarah to Abraham as a wife, so she could bear him a child. Sarah even felt that this would help her conceive. Of course, she did eventually bear a child, Isaac. (Of course, the connection between Abraham taking Hagar and Sarah bearing a child deserves further treatment, and will be discussed, G-d willing, at another occasion).

In other words, all of G-d's blessings to Abraham that he would be materially rewarded and that he would be a father of a nation and be able to influence the world grew out of his negative experience in Egypt. Abraham would eventually realize how G-d's promise to him that the spiritual would yield material blessings would come to fruition, and that his period in exile was the actual catalyst for that to come true.

Viewing our Experience in Exile

Abraham's experience is supposed to serve as a lesson and inspiration for us. One of the lessons that can be derived from this

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narrative relates to the way we should view our own experiences in exile.

Jewish history is divided into two distinct periods. One is called *Galus*-exile and the other *Geulah*-Redemption. Exile is usually a term used to describe the physical alienation from our land. Redemption thus is when we will ultimately be returned to our land. But there is deeper way of understanding what exile really represents and how it will be remedied in the age of Redemption.

Exile is a time and a state of being in which there is a dichotomy between the spiritual and physical; they do not necessarily work in tandem. Good actions could yield negative physical results in exile and vice versa. The promise to Abraham that his spiritual achievements will lead to all of the great material blessings is often not seen to be the case in exile. Exile is characterized by alienation and separation in many different phases and locations. It involves separation from our land, from our G-d, the spiritual from the physical and even our hearts from our minds, to name but a few examples.

When we pray for and anticipate the imminent Redemption by Moshiach, we are

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asking for a time of reunification in all of these areas.

G-d's promise to Abraham and to us will certainly take place soon. And then we will see, as Abraham did, that the exile experience, was actually a catalyst for the good that will occasion the age of Redemption.

ESSAY TWO

THE FIRST JEW

Abraham = Self-Transcendence

**Jew must live a transcendent life in an
ordinary and often corrupt world.**

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ESSAY TWO

THE FIRST JEW

Why not Noach

Abraham was the first Jew. But, many ask, what distinguished Abraham from all of his generation? Moreover, why do we consider Abraham to be the first Jew and not Noach? After all, the Torah itself testifies that he was a righteous person?

The classical answer to this question is that it was Abraham's circumcision, and the covenant that he entered with G-d as a result of the circumcision, that accorded him the appellation Jew.

The question, however, remains. Why did G-d choose to make this unique covenant with Abraham and not with any of his forebears? There must have been some qualitative difference between Abraham's righteousness and the righteousness of his predecessors.

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Self-Transcendence

One of the differences between Abraham and Noah was Abraham's ability to transcend himself.

From the time he was a child and recognized that all the other deities were false and that there must be one true G-d, Abraham went against convention. He was the true iconoclast in both the figurative, as well as, literal sense of the word.

Abraham's fighting was not only directed against the false beliefs and evil mores of society, but, he was also a crusader for all that was positive and good.

For one to fight evil, even with self-sacrifice does not prove that he or she is a self-transcending person. That dedication, while admirable, can be the product of one's nature.

For another to dedicate his or her life to helping others, although praiseworthy, is not necessarily an expression of self-transcendence.

When, however, the same person is able to fight evil with all his or her heart, soul and might, while simultaneously embracing G-d

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and his or her fellow with unmitigated love and kindness – that is self-transcendence.

Going Against Convention

Abraham, thus, personified what a Jew is all about. A Jew is prepared to go beyond convention, against the tide, even above one's own intellect.

This, in fact, is what the covenant of circumcision implies. The circumcised is prepared to give of himself to G-d and His teachings, even when they call for a commitment that goes beyond one's own understanding.

Circumcision is performed on an eight day old baby who has no understanding of what he is going through. This is to ensure that even when we mature and develop intellectual skills, our commitment to G-d must go beyond whatever level of understanding we have.

To be sure, Judaism calls for and encourages understanding. This is what Torah study is all about, but the foundation of study is the unconditional acceptance of G-d, Torah and its commandments.

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The Three Components of Circumcision

Circumcision actually contains the two opposite elements of negating evil and embracing the good, plus a third crucial component.

The great Talmudist, Rabbi Joseph Rosen, known as the Ragatchover genius, would divide the commandment of circumcision into three components:

The first is to remove the status of being uncircumcised.

The second is the positive act of being circumcised.

This approach echoes the two objectives of circumcision, as discussed by Maimonides and others: The first is to temper our sensual and hedonistic tendencies. The second is to create a covenant, a permanent attachment to G-d.

There is also a third element to circumcision. While the first two represent the result and objective of circumcision, the third element is the act of circumcision itself.

This personified Abraham who worked on all three fronts.

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As mentioned, he was a crusader against evil.

He was also an indefatigable activist for goodness and kindness.

But, perhaps, just as important, he was not a theoretician, who sits in his think tank and decides what is good and evil for society, and then writes a position paper calling for action by others.

Abraham was heavily involved in both areas, with his mind, heart and body.

Abraham bequeathed this legacy to all Jews.

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ESSAY THREE

ABRAHAM'S FIRST TEST

**Dying for a noble cause is not the highest
form of sacrifice.**

**Living with and for a higher purpose is the
most noble sacrifice.**

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ESSAY THREE

ABRAHAM'S FIRST TEST

First Test Omitted!

Abraham, our sages tell us, was tested by G-d. ten times The first time Abraham was tested, the Midrash relates, was when he defied the order of King Nimrod to bow down to an idol. Rather than submit to Nimrod's decree Abraham was thrown into a fiery furnace. Miraculously, Abraham was spared from a horrible death that he was prepared to endure for the sake of his firm belief in one G-d. This test is often referred to by the location where it occurred: *Ur Kasdim*.

Yet, incredible as it was for a young lad to be prepared to die for his faith, the Torah does not mention this test explicitly. The first test recounted by the Torah is one that is seemingly far less spectacular.

This week's Torah portion of *Lech Lecha* begins with G-d's command to Abraham to

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leave his country, his birth place and his father's home and go to an unknown destination. Abraham complied willingly.

The question that begs to be asked is why does the Torah not begin with what seems to be a far more dramatic display of faith and dedication: the test of Ur Kasdim? Isn't one's preparedness to die for a cause greater than one's agreement to depart from his homeland?

Paradigm for Descendants

By telling us about Abraham's tests, the Torah thereby instructs us how we ought to and can behave. Abraham's life is a paradigm for the lives of his descendants.

If the Torah would have highlighted Abraham's first and spectacular display of self-sacrifice, it would have instructed us to pursue a life of sacrifice and martyrdom. Abraham's example would have set the tone for a life of struggle and defiance. As noble and praiseworthy – and necessary – as these traits are, they do not represent Abraham's primary legacy to the Jewish people.

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Choose Life!

The Torah instructs us “*V’chai bahem*—and you shall live by them.” The Talmud observes, “You shall live by them and not die by them.” The primary objective of Judaism is to find ways of bringing the Divine plan to fruition by living a Jewish life to the maximum.

From the days of Abraham onward, the Jewish people have been charged with an immense responsibility. It is our task to make the world hospitable to G-d. Abraham did so by following G-d’s instructions as to where he should live, what he should do and so on.

Does living a Jewish life require self-sacrifice and martyrdom?

Occasionally yes? But, we should not confuse a one-time radical response to a tyrant who wishes to force people to betray their faith, with an ongoing need to implement Jewish values within the parameters of an otherwise secular world.

To be sure, Abraham was prepared – and every Jew should be prepared – to die for his or her religion. But, the goal and objective of our efforts should not be martyrdom and death, but bringing the full extent of

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Judaism's philosophy of life to the widest possible audience.

Abraham is known for his hospitality, his kindness, his concern for others and his love for G-d. We too, must emulate Abraham's example of living with Judaism and enabling Judaism to enliven us.

The Jewish religion's belief that Torah and life are not incompatible is dramatized by Judaism's belief that in the ultimate stage of the Messianic Age, we will live forever, body and soul. If dying for a cause was our goal, the ultimate experience of the future would be for the soul without a body. The fact that the ultimate reward will be for a reconstituted body proves that all along our objective was to live as a Jew.

Those who died as Jews are held in high esteem because these individuals enabled and empowered us to live as Jews.

And where did this thrust for life all begin?

It began with Abraham who started this process, of demonstrating how to live with faith and kindness by going to extremes in making life righteous and G-dly.

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Abraham's pioneering work in this direction was institutionalized and legislated at Sinai with the giving of the Torah. This even created the framework for implementing a system that would synthesize the spiritual and the physical.

The Messianic Age is when all of the ideals of the Torah will be concretized. Then we will experience the fusion of the spiritual and physical without compromising either. Indeed, we will experience unprecedented G-dly energy within the framework of a totally physical existence.

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ESSAY FOUR

GENERATION GAP

**Going against the grain and breaking out of
one's own cocoon is what made Abraham
worthy of being the first Jew.**

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ESSAY FOUR

GENERATION GAP

Abraham the First Jew

Abraham, whom tradition regards as the first Jew, was not the first righteous person to have lived. Noah is described in the Torah as a *tzadik tamim*, a perfectly righteous person. Methuselah, Chanoch, Noah's son Shem, Shem's grandson Ever and others were also righteous people.

When we reflect on the fact that we are all descendants of all these righteous people we confront an interesting question:

Why do we single out Abraham as the first Jew? Why do we trace ourselves back to Abraham and no further? What unique contribution did he make to society that placed him head and shoulders above all the other righteous people who came before him?

The same question can be asked in yet another way. In this week's Torah portion, *Lech Lecha*,

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G-d makes two covenants with Abraham. In making these covenants, G-d promises to establish a special relationship with Abraham and his descendants. Again, the question must be asked why did G-d not make the same covenant with earlier righteous people. What was so unique about Abraham that warranted G-d's special relationship with him?

Bending His Will

One special quality that Abraham possessed is illustrated by the opening verses of our Parshah. G-d told Abraham to uproot his entire family and move to Israel. The word for “your land” in Hebrew – *me'artsecha* – can also be translated “from your will.” Abraham's uniqueness is exemplified by his total and selfless compliance with G-d's will – to the extent that he was ready to alter his entire way of life for G-d.

By doing so, Abraham earned himself the distinction of being the first Jew. Abraham epitomized the character that is the hallmark of the Jewish people; the ability to go against our grain to conform to that which G-d wants.

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The reason Abraham is also called *Ivri*-Hebrew which derives from the term “the other side,” our Sages tell us is that Abraham stood on one side of the world and everyone else on the other side.

Being Jewish implies that we are capable of standing faithful to our beliefs and practices no matter how unpopular they may be.

Internalizing Judaism

One may challenge this assertion that it was his ability to stand his ground despite universal opposition that earned him the title of the first Jew. Wasn't Noach (and some members of his immediate family) the only righteous person in his generation? What distinguished Abraham from Noach in that regard?

The Torah seems to have addressed this question when it describes Noach as one “who followed in G-d's way.” Rashi observes that the Torah uses a similar form of going in G-d's way with respect to Abraham with one significant difference. While Noach had to be pushed in that direction by G-d, Abraham would go on his own.

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Being a Jew is not just standing firm in the face of opposition it requires an inner conviction that need not be reinforced by an outside influence. As Jews, our Judaism is internalized and we can draw on the inspiration from within.

A Light to the Nations

Abraham also possessed another uniquely Jewish trait. Abraham was not content with his own dedication to G-d, he inspires others as well. Upon hearing that G-d is planning to destroy the wicked city of Sodom, Abraham intercedes on their behalf.

This selfless concern for others is one more basic characteristic of the Jewish nation who are concerned for one another and who serve as a “light unto the nations.”

Abraham’s uniqueness actually began much earlier in his life before he was commanded by G-d to move to Israel. Abraham did not inherit his knowledge of G-d’s existence. His parents, peers and neighbors were all pagans who had no sense of what G-d was and what He wanted.

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The Generation Gap

Abraham was a descendant of several righteous people, who were still alive when Abraham was born. Even Noah lived in Abraham's time. According to the Ibn Ezra, Abraham was 58 years old when Noah died. (Interestingly, as the Ibn Ezra points out, the word Noah, numerically, adds up to 58. Abraham was thus "Noah (58)" years old, when Noah died!) Noah's son Shem and his grandson Ever, were also around in Abraham's day.

Yet, notwithstanding the fact that Abraham descended from such righteous figures, Abraham did not, in his youth, benefit from their influence. There existed a "generation gap" that severed his ties with his righteous forebears

Abraham was thus entirely on his own. And despite the lack of any support from his parents and his environment, Abraham realized that there was only one G-d and that this G-d was interested in living our lives according to the dictates of justice and righteousness.

Once Abraham took the first step to declare his belief in one G-d did G-d respond to him.

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After Abraham defied Nimrod's order to bow down to him, did G-d perform a miracle for Abraham and allowed him to escape unharmed from the fiery furnace into which he had been thrown.

The Master Plan

We must now try to understand why these two features of Abraham's life are crucial to his identification as a Jew.

When G-d created the world, He did so with a plan. The plan was for the world, that was created by design to appear independent, to transform itself into a world that was hospitable to G-d.

If G-d were to impose this on the world, there would be no reason why He created it to be independent in the first place. G-d had to allow the world, of its own volition, to choose G-d.

Towards that end, G-d had to create a sentient being endowed with free choice.

However, if G-d let it remain in the hands of mortals who can choose freely there may never be a world that conforms to G-d's plan. He therefore "waited" for a human being to

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arrive on the scene who had the capacity to withstand the pressures of the world with his own power and transmit these ideals to the rest of the world.

Abraham was the first human being in whom G-d could entrust the mission of receiving the Master Plan and transmitting it to others. Abraham was thus the first of a line of “trustworthy” agents of the Master Plan, which is the Torah. G-d now had a guarantee, that humanity will eventually and inexorably come to the point where it embraces G-d’s plan and make it a reality: the Messianic Age.

To accomplish this G-d needed one who has the twin capacity to withstand pressure and transmit this knowledge and values to the next generation and to the rest of the world

Our Abraham Generation

We are living in a generation that shares this last distinction with Abraham. Unlike our ancestors who grew up in a Torah saturated environment, our generation has been detached from its spiritual moorings. And yet, instead of the elders imparting Jewish values to their children, there is a new phenomenon

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that has occurred. The youth have discovered their own Jewish identities. And it is the youth that is inspiring the parents to return to the Jewish way of life. What is happening now, represents the realization of the Messianic prophecy at the end of the book of Malachi (3:24, Rashi's commentary) which states that "the hearts of the fathers will be restored through the children."

From Abraham – the first Jew – until recent times, there has never been a phenomenon of Jews who have found their Jewish roots on their own and who are responding to G-d's call, to "leave their land (or: their desires) and travel to the land that I will show you." This gives new meaning to the phrase: "The end is wedged in the beginning and the beginning in the end." The beginning of the Jewish people (Abraham and his discovery of Judaism) is now manifesting itself.

May we all soon see the fulfillment of the other part of that prophecy: "Behold I am sending you Elijah the prophet" who will herald the arrival of our righteous Moshiach!

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ESSAY FIVE

ISRAEL THE PEOPLE AND ISRAEL THE LAND

**People and Land do not necessarily go hand
in hand.**

Here is one notable exception.

The Jewish people and Israel.

One was tailor made for the other.

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ESSAY FIVE

ISRAEL THE PEOPLE AND ISRAEL THE LAND

Symbiotic Relationship

Israel the land and Israel the people have enjoyed a relationship that no other land has had with any other people. While other nations have been attached to their lands, their attachment has never come close to the Jewish people's attachment to Israel.

Where did it all begin?

According to *Rashi*, from the very beginning of creation G-d designated the land of Israel as a land destined for the Jewish people. But, not until Abraham the first Jew did this relationship become a reality.

In this week's Torah portion, *Lech Lecha*, we read of how G-d promised Abraham that the land will eventually belong to his descendants. Moreover, G-d actually deeded over the land to Abraham.

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Why was it so important for G-d to actually **give** the land to **Abraham**? Why didn't He give the land to the Jewish nation after the Exodus, when they were about to enter the Promised Land?

Centrality of Israel

By giving the land to Abraham the first Jew, the A-mighty underscored the centrality of the Land of Israel in Judaism. While every nation needs its own territory to protect itself, preserve its character and enable it to thrive, the Jewish people's need for a land goes to the very essence of Judaism.

Judaism is not a religion, but a way of life. It does not recognize the traditional dichotomy that exists in other religions between the holy and the profane. In the sphere of Jewish thought everything in existence has a purpose. Moreover, the more physical something is the more it is part of G-d's plan.

First and foremost, Judaism is directed towards creating and cultivating a harmonious relationship between body and soul. Rather than viewing these two entities as adversaries, Judaism — particularly

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Chassidic thought — views their relationship as a marriage.

Abraham and Sarah: Soul and Body

Abraham and Sarah, the first Jewish husband and wife, our sages in the Zohar tell us, are a metaphor for the soul and the body. In a marriage both partners are equal. Likewise, the body and the soul are equally important within the scheme of Judaism. And while it might appear that the body is at variance with the soul, it is the soul's task to reveal the body's true intrinsic G-dly nature.

Moreover, according to the teachings of Kabbalah and Chassidus, the body's spiritual source is even higher than that of the soul. And that is the function of the soul to expose and reveal the body's true Divine character.

But, Judaism goes one step further. It does not suffice for the soul to elicit the Divine energy within the body. One must also accomplish the same within one's physical environment. The world around us is our extended body. And while it does not appear to be holy, there are latent divine energies "beneath" the veneer of physicality.

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When we utilize the resources of the world around us — such as when we eat the produce of the earth, build structures from the earth's natural resources etc. for the performance of the Mitzvot — we remove the veil that obscures the true divinity within creation.

With our collective efforts of performing Mitzvot wherever we are with whatever resources that come our way we will have transformed all of the world into a dwelling place for G-d; a place where G-d's presence is easily felt. That is what the Messianic Age is all about.

Model for World

To underscore the centrality of affecting the world around us in Jewish thought, G-d gave us the Land of Israel. This land is a Holy Land, a land that from the very beginning of time possessed a unique propensity to holiness and divinity. If G-d were to have given this land to the Jews after they were already a nation, they would have assumed that it was a land like all the others; that their relationship to it was like the relationship of other nations to their land.

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By giving the land to the first Jew Abraham, however, G-d introduced the notion that Israel — where the land itself is holy — is the very paradigm of Judaism. Judaism's goal is to transform the **entire** world into a Holy Land, a land that lives in harmony with its divine Creator.

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ESSAY SIX

LET YOUR GUARD DOWN

**Entering into a space means more than a
casual connection to it.**

**When a child enters into the covenant it is
life's most powerful interaction with G-d.**

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ESSAY SIX

LET YOUR GUARD DOWN

Three Milestones

Circumcision, or *Brit Milah*, of which we read in this week's parsha, was the initiating rite for our father Abraham, the first Jewish male, and for all subsequent generations of Jews. At the tender age of eight days, a baby boy undergoes a minor surgical procedure that forms a covenant between himself and G-d.

At a circumcision ceremony, the father recites the blessing: thanking G-d for having given us the commandment to

“enter him (the child) into the
Covenant of Abraham our father.”

After the father recites this blessing, the assembled guests respond with:

Just as he has entered into the
Covenant, so may he enter into Torah,
into marriage, and into good deeds.

Commentators are somewhat puzzled by the reference to specifically these three

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milestones in one's life: "Torah, marriage and good deeds." Furthermore, why are good deeds mentioned last? Isn't a person expected to perform good deeds before they enter into marriage?

Surrendered and Embraced

One possible answer to this question lies in a better understanding of what it means to "enter" into the Covenant. Entering into something is more than a casual commitment to it. To enter into something is to surrender your self-hood to something that is much greater than your faculties and your very self. To enter into something is to allow yourself to be enveloped, encompassed and embraced by an entity that transcends your own identity.

Human nature is such that when an adult embarks on a path to greater commitment, he or she proceeds with caution. Our sense of vulnerability prevents us from experiencing the other aspects of life with which we are not familiar.

This coping mechanism is a healthy one when it is activated at times that we are threatened

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by being engulfed by negative powers. Other people, institutions and experiences threaten to overwhelm us and “swallow” us in a way that will deny our individuality and integrity.

But this coping mechanism can also be a double-edged sword that prevents us from entering into positive relationships that have the capacity to elevate us and transform us.

The Mitzvah of circumcision, performed at eight days, instills the child with the potential to enter into Jewish life in a healthy and positive way. By performing circumcision on an infant who has no intellectual or emotional resistance, the child enters into a relationship with G-d that transcends his own limited self-hood. He is completely enveloped by a reality that is infinite and provides him with unlimited spiritual potential.

Entering Into Torah

At that point we say to the father of the child, “Just as he has entered into the Covenant, so may he enter into Torah, into marriage, and into good deeds.” By saying this we are blessing the child that he should have the capacity to create the same

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relationship with Torah.

Torah study, the very foundation of Jewish life, can be deceptively easy. It is, after all, an intellectual exercise. One can casually master the study of Torah, without having the Torah exercise any mastery over the person.

By starting off our lives with the Mitzvah of circumcision, we are given the ability to enter into Torah as well. This means that we can approach Torah with the understanding that it is infinitely greater than our minds; there is a divinity possessed by Torah that encompasses us and embraces us even as we let our minds conquer the knowledge of Torah.

Entering Into Marriage

The next institution of life that requires our ability to “enter” into it is marriage. When we marry a person we enter into a relationship that transcends our limited appreciation for the other spouse. We accept the totality of the other person not their finite number of qualities that we can appreciate. Marriage, like Torah, possesses the potential for failure. After all, we cannot get married to a person

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unless we get to know the individual and appreciate their qualities and virtues. In a sense, it is comparable to Torah study whose logic we try to master. Where do we get the inspiration and capacity to truly enter into a marriage?

By drawing on the inspiration of circumcision we allow ourselves the right to make the leap from the casual reflective approach to Torah and marriage into a covenantal one. Circumcision is the empowerment to jump into Torah and marriage to the point where it encompasses us, even as we encompass it.

Entering Ito Good Deeds

But we are still not finished. After we marry and settle down to a life of accomplishment through our good deeds, we need, once more, to draw upon the inspiration of circumcision. Otherwise, our good deeds would merely be extensions of ourselves, based on our inherently finite identities. Our good deeds are a snap shot of all the influences that have shaped and molded us.

But this is not enough. Rather than allowing our good deeds to merely express our own

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limited self-hood, we should endeavor to **enter** into our good deeds, so that **they** define us rather than we define them.

All of this starts with circumcision at the beginning of the child's life that introduces the Jew into a spiritual universe that is larger than life itself. We pray and hope that the spirit of circumcision would permeate into marriage and a life of good deeds.

A Taste of the Future

It is no wonder that the prophet compares the Messianic Age, which is associated with realizing the highest spiritual forms of circumcision, with being immersed in the body of G-dly knowledge. The Messianic Age is when the prophet says, "I will circumcise the foreskin of your heart."

And the Messianic Age is also when we will be deluged with G-dly knowledge, as the prophet Isaiah states "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the water covers the seabed."

On the surface, these are two disparate themes. Circumcision is removal of an impediment, while immersion in the sea of

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knowledge is an all-encompassing experience.

In light of our above analysis, they are actually expressive of the same idea. The process of circumcision is the process of taking a plunge into the most refreshing and endless waters of G-dly knowledge and experience.

We get a good taste of that at the circumcision ceremony

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ESSAY SEVEN

DRIVING TWO WAYS ON A ONE WAY STREET

**Life seems to be taking us in so many, and
often opposite directions.**

This can lead to confusion and despair.

**In truth, all directions that we travel revolve
around and lead us to one overarching goal:**

**We travel to Jerusalem to bring back its
inspiration to our homes; to transform our
lives into Jerusalem.**

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ESSAY SEVEN

DRIVING TWO WAYS ON A ONE WAY STREET

Lech Lecha and the Seventh of Cheshvan

This week's Parsha of *Lech Lecha* coincides with a special day in the Hebrew calendars: the seventh day of *Cheshvan*. On that day the Jewish people in the Land of Israel begin to pray to G-d for rain. This prayer is supposed to begin fifteen days after the Festival of Sukkot, so the last traveler from Jerusalem, who had gone there on the annual pilgrimage, would get home before the rain would start.

The significance of the seventh of *Cheshvan* is not simply negative. It is not just the day until which the prayer for rain was delayed. Rather, that very negative aspect of this day—the delay of the prayers for rain until the travelers reach the border—indicates that the seventh of *Cheshvan* has a connection with the Festival of Sukkos itself. After all, it's

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a two-way journey to Jerusalem. Celebrating the holiday of Sukkos included both going to and coming from Jerusalem. As long as the Jews who lived in the most remote places did not return home they were still rejoicing in and observing the holiday.

The seventh of Cheshvan thus marked the completion of the holiday. It was a day of descent from the heights of holiness the people experienced in the Temple in Jerusalem. It was like landing on earth after a long trip climbing the tallest mountains.

Let us now see if there is a connection between the theme of the seventh of Cheshvan and the theme of this week's Parsha. At first glance the connection seems to relate to the idea of a journey. The seventh of Cheshvan marks the end of the journey of Jews from their pilgrimage to the Temple, and this Parsha highlights the journey of Abraham.

Climb up or Descend Down from the mountain?

However, this is where the analogy seems to break down. The opening words of the

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Parsha “*Lech Lecha*” means “go out.” Abraham was asked by G-d to leave behind his home and travel to the Land of Israel. We too are taught to apply this to our own lives, to leave our material concerns and comforts and ascend to the land of Israel — to elevate ourselves spiritually.

This seems to be in stark contrast to the lesson of the seventh of Cheshvan that teaches us to follow in the footsteps of those who left the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, to return home, to go back to our material involvement in the physical world, by descending from the heights of spirituality.

Is the lesson of this week to climb the mountain or to descend from the mountain?

Two Sides of the Same Coin

Actually, elevating one's self spiritually and involving oneself in worldly concerns are inter-related. The purpose of *Lech Lecha*, of going forth, is to create a dwelling place for G-dliness. The spiritual elevation, the ascent to the Land of Israel, indicated by the journey of Abraham is not an end in and of itself. Rather, it provides the inspiration and

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direction, giving us the ability to “go forth” into the world and transform it.

This return home, associated with the seventh of Cheshvan, this descent into the material world outside the land and milieu of Israel, is really the climax and objective of the ascent to Israel, Jerusalem and the Holy Temple.

It does not end there, however. The purpose of our return home — indicated by the seventh of Cheshvan — was so that we could once again prepare for the journey back to Jerusalem to reach even greater heights, which we, in turn, bring back home with us.

The Ascent in the Descent of Exile

This can explain the phenomenon of exile in which we live and have lived for close to 2,000 years. For over 1,200 years, since the building of the Mishkan in the desert through the building of the First and Second temples, the Jewish people were able to ascend the spiritual heights. What is the purpose of this current period of exile?

One answer is that just as the ascent to the Temple for the Festival of Sukkos reached its

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climax when they returned home to the mundane world, similarly, all of our greatest spiritual achievements during our period of “ascent” have reached their climax when we brought them home, in the days of exile in the Diaspora.

And just as the period of returning home on the seventh day of Cheshvan marked the beginning of preparation for the next pilgrimage and ascent to an even higher level of holiness, similarly, our stay in exile is a prelude to a qualitatively higher level of elevation — the coming of Moshiach and the rebuilding of the third Temple.

ESSAY EIGHT

LOOKING FOR THE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

**Life can be an adventure with its many twists
and turns.**

**The sense of excitement is magnified when
one realizes that the detours are part of a
Master Plan that will, in the end, be
appreciated.**

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ESSAY EIGHT

LOOKING FOR THE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Deficiency of Test

The first test that Abraham was given by G-d was to leave his homeland, his birthplace and his father's house and travel to an unknown land that G-d would ultimately show him.

No sooner does Abraham arrive in this land — the Land of Cana'an, which ultimately became the Land of Israel — Abraham is compelled to leave it because there was a famine in the land.

There are two views amongst the classical commentators as to whether Abraham's quick departure from the land due to famine was proper. According to Nachmanides, this was a serious deficiency for Abraham. Abraham, Nachmanides maintains, should have had faith that despite the famine, he would survive.

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According to Rashi, however, the phenomenon of the famine and Abraham's descent to Egypt was part of a Divine test. Will Abraham lose faith in G-d, upon being told that he was to leave the very land to which he had been commanded to travel?

In Rashi's approach, Abraham passed the test admirably. Nowhere do we find Abraham questioning G-d about this strange twist of events. Nowhere does Abraham complain to G-d, even as he and Sarah endure the indignities of staying in the morally depraved environment of the Pharaoh of Egypt.

Abraham and his View of Reward

With this premise, we can shed some light on a rather enigmatic aspect of this episode. When Abraham arrives in Egypt he realizes his wife's beauty and the danger to her well-being this might present. "Please say that you are my sister," Abraham implores of Sarah, "So that they will reward me for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

Now, we can somehow comprehend why Abraham put Sarah in danger. Regardless of what she would say about her relationship

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with Abraham, she would have certainly been abducted and given to Pharaoh. In addition, they would most likely have killed Abraham so as to eliminate the threat Abraham might pose in his likely attempt to liberate his wife Sarah.

We can therefore understand why he asked her to say that she was his sister, so as to remove the possibility that he would be murdered in addition to her abduction.

But why did Abraham add that this would provide him with a reward? How could Abraham think of a material reward when his wife's honor and his life were at stake? Certainly Abraham, the paragon of virtue, the epitome of kindness, compassion and sensitivity to the plight of even total strangers, would not speak callously about the reward he would get at her expense.

Putting it all in Perspective

Upon deeper reflection, there was no callousness in Abraham's remarks to Sarah; instead Abraham was trying to put the troubling and confusing twist of events into some perspective.

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As was noted, Abraham did not question why G-d had changed his plans and compelled him to precipitously leave the land to which He instructed him to travel and settle. But when Abraham saw how G-d's plan was beginning to make sense, he acknowledged and utilized that knowledge.

In what way was Abraham and Sarah's ordeal beginning to making sense?

We can find the answer to this in the opening statement of this week's Parsha. G-d tells Abraham to uproot himself and travel to the new land. G-d, however, doesn't just leave it at that. He also tells Abraham that by doing so he will get certain benefits.

I will make you into a great nation,
and I shall bless you, and I shall make
your name great.

What did G-d mean when He said "I shall bless you?" Weren't all the other assurances blessings?

Rashi, anticipating this difficulty, interprets this blessing to refer specifically to financial reward. G-d, in effect, was telling Abraham that his traveling to the Land of Israel will yield economic benefits for him. To be sure,

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Abraham was not interested in financial windfalls for its own sake; and that was not G-d's intention. Abraham needed no financial incentives to do G-d's bidding.

By adding the monetary benefit, G-d perhaps wanted Abraham to realize that he would be provided with the means to spread Monotheism and the paths of justice and righteousness. Or, that others who do value the rewards for doing good will be impressed by Abraham's acquisition of wealth.

Now that Abraham began to see how **G-d's plan**, of him amassing wealth, was coming to fruition. By virtue of this terrible ordeal — the abduction of Sarah — he would be rewarded by the Egyptians, and G-d's plan would ultimately become a reality. By mentioning the rewards he would receive Abraham was demonstrating to Sarah how G-d's mysterious behavior was beginning to make some sense.

A lesson for this narrative can be applied to our own lives. While we cannot comprehend the reason for all the suffering that we have endured in recent times — how can anybody possibly fathom G-d's ways? Nevertheless, we do have a right to identify the good that

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emerges from the suffering as it manifests itself.

By looking for the light in the darkness we prepare ourselves for that time in the near future about which we were told that all the suffering will disappear and the light that came out of the darkness of exile will shine brightly — the coming of Moshiach.

ESSAY NINE

LECH LECHA AND BAR/BAS MITZVAH

The underlying joy of a Bar or Bas Mitzvah is he or she has graduated from volunteering Judaism to accepting full responsibility.

There is a world of difference between these two thrusts, with assuming responsibility to be superior.

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ESSAY NINE

LECH LECHA AND BAR/BAS MITZVAH

The First Bar Mitzvah

A Bar/Bas-Mitzvah is one of the most widely observed Jewish practices today. What is really so special about a Bar-Mitzvah? True, it is the day when the Bar/Bas-Mitzvah boy or girl is mature enough to perform all the Mitzvos. But, don't we actually start doing Mitzvos *before* our 12th/13th birthday?

The answer to this question can be found in this week's Torah portion "Lech Lecha" which features the first Bar Mitzvah. Until Abraham was commanded by G-d to circumcise himself, there was no such thing as a Bar Mitzvah. Abraham was the first Jew; and the first Mitzvah he received as a Jew - at the age of 99 -- was the Mitzvah of circumcision.

Why did Abraham Wait so Long?

The question has been asked, why did

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Abraham wait until he was 99 years old to circumcise himself? According to the Talmud, Abraham kept the entire Torah - which was prophetically revealed to him - even before it was given. Why then did he wait until he was 99 to perform a mitzvah as important as circumcision?

Volunteering or Following Orders: Which is Superior?

The answer to this question is based on the statement of the Talmud:

One who is commanded to do a mitzvah and does it is greater than one who does a mitzvah not having been commanded to do it.

At first glance this seems hard to understand and appears counterintuitive. Why should a person who voluntarily chooses to do a good deed, be considered inferior to one who does it only after being commanded to do so?

One of the answers to this question is that a Mitzvah is more than just doing a good deed. Besides being a good deed, a Mitzvah is what connects us to G-d. Ordinarily, how can a finite human being ever attain any connection

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with his infinite Creator? The only way we can connect to an infinite G-d is by doing what He wants us to do.

The word Mitzvah is thus translated two intertwined ways. Firstly, a mitzvah is a commandment. Secondly, the word Mitzvah means connection. We can only be connected to G-d when we do what *He* tells us to do, and we observe *His* commandments.

In order to accomplish this impossible feat of a limited human being becoming attached to an unlimited G-d, we must be commanded by G-d to do a Mitzvah. No other act, no matter how selfless, sincere and good can compare with an act ordained by G-d Himself -- a Mitzvah.

To be sure, most acts that most reasonable human beings consider to be good and noble are indeed commandments. However, there are many commandments that we would not consider to be good and noble; yet because they are G-d's will that we perform these Mitzvos, they connect us to G-d, whether or not we sense their goodness.

We can now understand why Abraham waited until he was *commanded* by G-d to circumcise himself. Since a Bris can only be

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performed once, Abraham wished to have the privilege of doing the Mitzvah in a way that would accomplish his goal – of connecting to G-d.

We can now also understand the significance of a Bar/Bas Mitzvah. Bar/Bas-Mitzvah, is when the person becomes obligated for the first time. A Bar/Bas Mitzvah, thus, is not just someone who performs Mitzvos, but is someone who is able to create a unique bond and relationship with G-d Himself.

The Future Grand Bar/Bas-Mitzvah

Although any boy or girl who has reached the age of 13 or 12, respectively, is a Bar Mitzvah, his/her status as a full-fledged Bar/Bas Mitzvah is not complete.

As long as we are in a state of Galus/exile we cannot fully follow G-d's will in its entirety because we lack the full degree of spiritual maturity.

In the Messianic Age, we will see the fulfillment of the prophetic prediction "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the seabed is covered with water."

When we achieve this heightened measure of

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G-dly knowledge then we will truly appreciate the significance of our Mitzvah observance.

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ESSAY TEN

HOW TO BE W.E.A.L.T.H.Y AND HAPPY

Wealth, like poverty, is neither a virtue nor a vice. Although, like poverty, it can be either.

Wealth can make a person happy only if its possessor conforms to six rules.

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ESSAY TEN

HOW TO BE W.E.A.L.T.H.Y AND HAPPY

Wealthy Biblical Figures

G-d promises Abraham great wealth. Indeed, upon his return from Egypt where his wife was abducted, he is rewarded with wealth from Pharaoh to compensate for all the pain Sarah endured. Abraham was again offered wealth from the King of Sodom when he saved him in his battle against the alliance of four kings who had abducted his nephew Lot. Abraham refused to take this wealth. In the end, Abraham became independently wealthy and prosperous.

When we review the Torah's description of Isaac, he too is extremely wealthy; so too Jacob. Joseph, the viceroy of Egypt accumulated enormous wealth, and according to the Midrash, Moses became wealthy from the chips of Sapphire that were hewn for the purposes of the Tablets upon which G-d engraved the Ten Commandments.

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What is it about wealth that was the hallmark of the Patriarchs and progenitors of the Jewish people? Doesn't religion disparage the accumulation of great wealth?

No Disparagement of Wealth if...

In truth, there is no such disparagement. What is strongly denounced is the attitude that wealth can bring to its possessor that makes him infinitely poorer than the greatest pauper. With the correct perspective on wealth, wealth can be extremely positive.

One of the pitfalls of possessing the wrong perspective towards wealth is that it does not lead to happiness; on the contrary. In the words of our Sages,

“One has a hundred wants two hundred; one who has two hundred wants four hundred.”

A wealthy person's distorted attitude towards the acquisition of wealth causes him or her to never be happy with their lot. In the words of Ethics of the Fathers: Who is rich? One who is happy with his lot.” How does one accomplish this and still acquire material wealth?

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The Six Rules for Happiness

There are six rules that will help the wealthy stay happy. They can be remembered by way of a mnemonic: W.E.A.L.T.H.

- 1) **Where it Comes from.**
 1. **Emotion, Energy and Enthusiasm.**
 2. **Accomplishment.**
 3. **License and Legitimacy.**
 4. **Tzedakah.**
 5. **Healthy and Happy Soul**

The First Rule: Where it comes from

The first rule of being wealthy and happy is to recognize where wealth comes from. Who is the source of our success? To be happy one must know that wealth comes from G-d like Manna from heaven.

King Solomon puts it succinctly:

The blessing of G-d is what makes one rich and there will be no sadness with it.

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When we realize that it all comes from G-d, we feel that whatever we have, is beyond our expectations of ourselves. It is all a gift.

Indeed, it was Abraham who taught us this lesson. When Abraham refused to accept the wealth from the king of Sodom after winning the war that liberated his nephew Lot, he explained:

I raise my hand to G-d, the supreme G-d, Who possesses heaven and earth, that (I will not take from the spoils), even a thread or a shoelace, nor will I take from whatever you possess—so that you will not say, “I have made Abram wealthy...”

Abraham did not want to accept a notion of wealth if it was not connected to the belief that it is G-d's blessing that makes us rich and not simply our own business acumen and hard work.

The Second Rule: Emotion. Energy and Enthusiasm.

One might get the erroneous impression that the above heading suggest that to be happy

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with our wealth we must invest our emotion, energy and enthusiasm in our work.

Nothing can be further from the truth; the very opposite is the reality. To be happy with wealth we must not invest all of our emotion and enthusiasm in its pursuit.

King David taught us this lesson in his Psalms:

The toil of your hands and you will eat.

This is interpreted to mean that we should not place our heads in our work just our hands. Of course, this does not mean that a doctor, for example, should not use his head in treating his patients, for that would render him totally derelict in his duty to provide good medical care. What it means is that we should not be obsessed with our work as a means of acquiring wealth to the extent that this pursuit becomes all consuming.

If the physician wants to invest his emotions it should be in the desire to help his patients; not the accumulation of wealth. The same holds true, of course, for every profession.

Thus the “head”— i.e., the first consideration of a person—should not be the pursuit of

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wealth. The pursuit of wealth and the toil in one's pursuit of a livelihood should be viewed as a means to the end; not an end unto itself.

This too we can see in Abraham's life. Not only is it seen in Abraham's reluctance to take the wealth from the king of Sodom, but in subsequent narratives as well. Among them, we find Abraham saying to G-d, when G-d offers him great reward:

“G-d, A-mighty G-d, what could you possibly give me?”

Abraham laments, of what use is his wealth if he has no children who would inherit it. In other words, Abraham was not interested in his own wealth and success; he wanted it for his children.

A Third Rule: Accomplishment

Accomplishments must be savored. Workaholics never have time to sit back and appreciate what they have accomplished. They are so enslaved to their work that they cannot enjoy what they've done—assuming it was productive and positive—and they certainly cannot enjoy their families, friends

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and the other more enduring things in life. They also cannot find enough time to fulfill their spiritual needs, the needs of others as well as their religious and communal obligations.

This is one of the reasons we have the Shabbos. Shabbos not only teaches us that G-d is the Creator of the world, but, it also expresses the notion that G-d is our Liberator.

Shabbos is a day when we are liberated from the six work days; when we can turn our attention to more enduring and more enjoyable matters. Shabbos puts a limit on our worldly involvement so we can enjoy an “other” worldly delight. No matter how much importance we attach to our work, when Shabbos comes we desist.

On Shabbos we’re allowed to not think about business and not feel any guilt. It is indeed a liberating experience from the constraints of the week.

Furthermore, as we sit back and rest on the Shabbos we can savor our accomplishments.

Kabbalah teaches us that it is the soul’s power and faculty of delight that motivates

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us to work. But while we are engaged in the actual work, the delight is eclipsed by the work itself. Only on Shabbos does the soul's inner delight come to the fore, and we can feel the most powerful experience of pleasure.

Moreover, on Shabbos we can devote ourselves to the higher pursuits of life, and the true sources of joy. Shabbos is what gives us a sense of what we've accomplished and it is therefore what makes us enjoy the fruit of our labor

Again, Abraham can be seen as a model for this emphasis on Shabbos. The Talmud states that Abraham observed the Torah's commandments even before they were given at Sinai. The example they give is associated with preparations for the Shabbos. Abraham knew the value of Shabbos even before it became a formal commandment.

A fourth Rule: License and legitimacy.

The Midrash tells us that G-d created gold for the construction of the Temple. Once it was created, He gave us the ability to use it for our own personal uses.

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There is another way of looking at our use of gold, the symbol of wealth. G-d gave us gold, and wealth in general, not half-heartedly, or as a concession to us, by saying, G-d forbid, “What the heck, I created it already you might as well use it.” In giving us gold and wealth it was G-d’s way of licensing the rights to it to us so that we should utilize this wealth to fulfill our mission and role as G-d’s partners in making the entire world a Sanctuary and dwelling place for Him.

Once we recognize that the use of wealth to make our homes and communities Sanctuaries for G-d—where G-d finds a comfortable and hospitable place, and that we are therefore His partners in creation—it gives our lives legitimacy that we might not feel we earned otherwise.

There is no greater feeling of joy than the sense of legitimacy. When our wealth serves as a justification for our existence it provides us with a profound sense of satisfaction and genuine happiness.

The fifth Rule: Tzedakah.

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The greatest source of joy for a human being is the joy of giving. When we take our wealth and give it to those who are in need, we receive far more than what we give. What we give—even if it is billions of dollars—is finite. What we receive from the knowledge that we have made a difference in someone's life is of infinite value. In the words of our Sages:

“The poor man does more for the rich man, than the rich man does for the poor.”

To truly enjoy one's wealth one must be on the giving side.

The Sixth Rule: Healthy and Happy Soul.

We can easily relate to the fact that it is hard for us to appreciate our wealth if we are ailing and in constant physical pain. The same is true when our souls are undernourished and writhing in pain we cannot be happy. The more we try to distract ourselves from our soul's discontent by drowning our misery in more material matters, the more the soul is in anguish and

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the more depressed we become and the less we can enjoy our wealth.

When we allow our soul to flourish by nurturing it with more Torah study and more Mitzvot, our physical wealth and pleasure that goes along with it is enhanced. The physical wealth becomes an external manifestation of our spiritual wealth. One feeds and feeds off the other.

The Ultimate Happiness of the Future

In the Messianic Age, Maimonides writes,

“All of the world’s delicacies will be as abundant as the dust of the earth.”

At that time we will be able to fully appreciate material wealth because at that time:

- a) We will all know where our wealth comes from.
- b) We will also put our emotions and energy into the more important things in life, build the Temple in Jerusalem and our own personal Sanctuaries with that wealth.

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- c) We will then also fully savor all of our accomplishments, inasmuch as the future Messianic Age is regarded as the Sabbath of Creation.
- d) In that era all selfishness will obviously disappear, and we will be the most selfless and giving people.
- e) Our souls will be healthy and enjoy perpetual happiness.

ESSAY ELEVEN

THE LAST LAUGH AND THE LAUGH THAT LASTS

The Messianic Age is an age of joy.

**Joy is serious business; it does not happen
when we are passive.**

**We must proactively engage in joy now as a
way of preparing ourselves for the future.**

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LECHA**

ESSAY ELEVEN

THE LAST LAUGH AND THE LAUGH THAT LASTS

“He Will Laugh”

When G-d informed Abraham that his wife Sarah will bear him a son, He immediately tells him that he will be should name him Yitzchak-Isaac saying:

Your wife Sarah will bear you a son,
and you shall call him Yitzchak.

Rashi informs us that the name Yitzchak is because of the laughter. The selection of this name was clearly G-d’s way of saying that Isaac’s miraculous birth—when Abraham was ninety and Sarah a hundred—would certainly evoke laughter and unparalleled joy.

However, the name Yitzchak does not mean laughter or joy. It is written in the future tense and should be translated literally as: “he **will** laugh.”

Two questions arise upon reflection.

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First, why did G-d have to tell him a year before the child was born what he should name him?

Second, why is the future tense used for his name? He could have been called “*tzchok*,” which simply means laughter.

Third, it is not clear who will laugh? Was it Isaac that would laugh? Or perhaps it refers to everyone who will hear about this miraculous event, as Sarah exclaimed, upon giving birth to Isaac: “whoever shall hear will laugh.”

A Response to the Cynics

A simple way of answering these questions is that Isaac would laugh at those cynics who declared the Abrahamic cause dead. With no heir to Abraham’s legacy of spreading monotheism, justice and righteousness, all of Abraham’s contributions will disappear. Thus Abraham’s very life’s work, for which he was willing to sacrifice his life, was called into question.

G-d thus says to Abraham, when your wife Sarah will bear you a child, he will be the next link in the chain of your tradition, and

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he will keep it alive and well.

Thus, Isaac will laugh at those critics and cynics because he will demonstrate the fallacy of their thinking.

We too are confronted with cynical remarks from our detractors, and frequently we may harbor these sentiments ourselves. Of what avail are our efforts today, when the changing world of tomorrow will no longer accept our Jewish values.

The birth of Isaac and his naming was intended not just for that generation but for all times. Whenever we have a foreboding sense of doom, whenever we become pessimistic about our Jewish future, G-d says to us in effect: “**Yitzchak!**” You will yet have the last laugh. You, the Jewish people and your teachings and values that we inherited from our ancestors going all the way back to Abraham, will endure.

No Degeneration

There is yet a deeper dimension to all this. Some pessimists might concede that the Jewish people will survive and some version of the original Torah will be preserved. But,

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whatever will be salvaged will in no way come close to the glory of the past. What we will have is a adulterated and compromised Jewish existence.

To these “moderate” pessimists G-d declares: **Yitzchak!** He will laugh. The Jewish people and the Jewish way of life will not degenerate G-d forbid, it will not be diminished in any way. On the contrary, the greatest joy and excitement is yet to come.

Yitzchak’s name with its message of the future is echoed in the Psalm:

Then our mouths will be filled with
laughter.

Referring to the future Messianic Age, the Divinely inspired Psalmist assures us that our future will not only guaranteed, but it will be guaranteed to be one of joy and exhilaration.

Judaism is not a Sit-Back-and-Wait-for-all-the-Fun-to-Unfold Religion.

However, G-d informed Abraham about the birth of his son in conjunction with the commandment to circumcise himself and his children. The connection between the birth of Yitzchak and Abraham’s circumcision was

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intended to eliminate any notion of complacency. By linking the glorious future of the Jewish people, “Yitzchak, he will laugh,” to Abraham’s circumcision it underscores that Judaism is not a sit-back-and-wait-for-all-the-fun-to-unfold religion.

Judaism demands of us to be active participants in the process of making the future joyous and glorious by removing all the impediments to our true Jewish souls.

Furthermore, the fact that circumcision is performed on the procreative organ symbolizes that our involvement is crucial for the future.

It also conveys the message that we must impart to our children and their children the same unadulterated Jewish beliefs, feelings and practices, absent all the obstructions that come from the outside. As soon as we water down the Judaism of the past generation, the child is deprived of some of the joy, the Yitzchak of being Jewish.

Joy in the Present

There is also another message in the naming of Yitzchak. Although the laughter and

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unbridled joy is intended for the future Messianic Age, we nevertheless have to prepare for it by increasing in our own joy in these last moments of exile.

While our Sages asked us to restrict our joy upon the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash and the dispersion of the Jewish people in the Diaspora, since the advent of the Ba'al Shem Tov and the inception of the Chassidic movement, the emphasis on denying our joy has greatly diminished. In fact, the Chassidic movement brought back intense and demonstrable joy.

Why has this emphasis changed in recent history?

There can be two apparently contradictory answers that parallel the two reasons why the mystical Chassidic teachings, which were concealed for millennia, were exposed, revealed and popularized in recent times.

We Need it Now More than Ever!

First, it is because we have so suffered, both physically and spiritually, in our stay in exile, we could not have survived if we didn't get a boost of the energizing teachings of

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Chassidus which ignited our collective soul and awakened us from our Galus induced stupor.

The Alter Rebbe provided a famous parable to this situation. Chassidus is likened to the crown jewel of the king which the king allowed its removal and its destruction to help save the life of his son, the crown prince from death.

Chassidus is G-d's most treasured possession and He allowed it to be squandered so that one drop of it may enter our system and revive us.

Similarly, with respect to joy; our exile conditions have become so harsh that under the yoke of exile pressures we are in danger of being depressed, demoralized, crushed and incapable of coping with Galus conditions.

Only overt, unmitigated joy coupled with the life sustaining and positive teachings of Chassidus can we survive.

A Taste of the Future

Second, as we stand poised to enter into the Messianic Age, when all the barriers to G-dly knowledge will be removed, it is crucial that

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we get a taste of that G-dly knowledge now. Therefore, the teachings of Chassidus, a taste of Moshiach's teachings, were revealed in the present day and age, as we stand on the threshold of the Final Redemption.

There is a custom to taste the food of Shabbos before the Shabbos. The Messianic Age, which is likened to Shabbos, is no exception to this rule. We must savor the taste of the future in the present eve of Shabbos period.

Similarly, with regard to joy. Granted it is only in the future when our mouths will be filled with laughter, but to be prepared for such unmitigated joy we must get a taste of that joy in the present day, as we ready ourselves to march jubilantly into the Messianic Age, with Moshiach at our head.

ESSAY TWELVE

THE INEXORABLE JOURNEY

**One of the tragedies of life is giving up on
our life's goals.**

**Sometimes we give up right before realizing
these goals.**

Abraham taught us to persevere.

**We are on the cusp of the Final Redemption.
This is not a time to give up.**

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ESSAY TWELVE

THE INEXORABLE JOURNEY

Multiple Departures?

This week's parsha begins with G-d's instruction to Abraham to leave his land, his birth place, and his father's house and go to the land that G-d will show him.

The Torah then records Abraham's compliance with G-d's directive to him and he takes his wife, his nephew and all their belongings that they acquired in Charan and:

...they departed heading to the Land of Canaan and they arrived at the land of Canaan.

When surveying the very first verse where G-d tells him to leave his land, his birth place and his father's home, the following question arises:

Hasn't he already left his birthplace? At the end of the last parsha, the Torah makes it clear that:

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Terach took Avram his son, Lot—the son of Haran, his grandson—and Sarai—his daughter-in-law, the wife of Avram his son—and they went out with them from Ur Kasdim to go to the land of Canaan. They reached as far as Charan and settled there.

It is clear that Abraham—who was then still called Avram—together with his father, Terach had already left his land and birthplace of Ur Kasdim. Shouldn't the Torah have stated only that G-d told Abraham to leave his father's house?

Where was Abraham Born?

This question has prompted a debate among early Bible Commentators about the location of Abraham's birthplace. According to Nachmanides, it was actually in Charan. Terach then moved to Ur Kasdim and then returned to Charan. And it was from Charan—his birthplace—that G-d asked Abraham to depart.

Ibn Ezra, however, follows the approach that he was born in Ur Kasdim and then moved to Charan. If so, the question remains why did

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G-d tell him to leave his birthplace if he had already done so?

Ibn Ezra explains that the command to leave Ur Kasdim actually preceded his father's move to Charan. But, whereas his father decided to stay in Charan, Abraham continued on his journey to Canaan.

Rashi appears to adopt the position of Ibn Ezra and responds to the question of why G-d commanded him to leave his land and birthplace, which he had already done, and explains that G-d meant he should **continue** to distance himself from his land and birthplace.

Three Questions

The question still remains, however, why couldn't G-d simply say to him, "Leave your father's house and go to the land that I will show you?" Why bother mentioning his land and birthplace at all?

Another question raised by *Or Hachaim*: After G-d tells him to leave his land, there is no longer a need to tell him to leave his father's house. Why did G-d have to refer to both?

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One can raise a third question:

In the verse that describes Abraham's departure, it states:

Avram took Sarai...and they departed,
heading for the land of Canaan and
they arrived at the land of Canaan.

Why does the Torah have to say that “they departed heading for the land of Canaan” and then say they arrived there? It could have simply stated: “Avram took Sarai and they arrived in the land of Canaan.” If he was originally in Charan and then he arrived in Canaan, it is obvious that he departed heading for the land of Canaan, why must it be stated explicitly?

A Study in Contrasts: Abraham and Terach

To answer all these questions we ought to contrast the statement here and the one made at the end of last week's parsha about the respective journeys of Terach and Abraham:

In last week's parsha the Torah states:

Terach took Avram ...and they went...
from Ur Kasdim to go to the land of

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Canaan. They reached as far as Charan and settled there.

Terach also intended to go to Canaan but when he got to Charan he terminated his journey and stayed there. He never made it to his original destination—the land of Canaan.

By contrast, when Abraham departs with the intention of going to Canaan, he actually goes there. He does not get stuck in Charan, but moves on without his father to realize the goal G-d had set for him.

This not only underscores the greatness and uniqueness of Abraham but it also conveys an important message for all generations—ours in particular.

There are many idealistic people who make resolutions to achieve certain goals. And indeed they are sincere in their intention of realizing their objectives. They set forth on a journey determined to reach their destination. However, when they stop to rest on the way, they find it difficult to continue on their journey notwithstanding their original idealism.

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Abraham was different. Nothing could sidetrack or distract Abraham from fulfilling his G-d given mission; nothing could deter him from pursuing his goal.

The Psychology of Giving Up

Why do people abort their spiritual journey?

Several reasons can be proposed that explain why people do not follow through on their intentions

The first reason is fear. Many discover how daunting the journey can be when they confront unanticipated obstacles. When people confront resistance they are intimidated and freeze.

This explanation is hinted in the location at which Terach aborted his journey—Charan. The word Charan is etymologically related to the word Charon, which means anger. When one confronts the opposition and rage of a reluctant and adversarial world, it instills fear and paralysis in the hearts of those who started their journey with idealism and enthusiasm.

A second reason why some cannot realize their life's goal and cut short their journey is

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that they are distracted by the enticements of the places they stop at along the way.

A parable that describes this phenomenon is the king who makes an extravagant offer. Anyone may enter the palace treasury and take any article of value for one day only. Many people are so dazzled by the lush gardens that surround the palace, the mesmerizing music, the beautiful artwork that adorns the palace that never make it to the treasury to claim their treasure.

In a similar vein, we get so caught up in the material and secondary spiritual matters that we forget that we are on a journey that is supposed to take us to a final destination.

A third reason is that people get tired and decide to retire early. People get tired and lose some of their original energy and zeal for the journey.

A fourth reason is complacency. Many people make great strides in the initial stages of their journey and are quite content. They revel in the positive accomplishments that they already enjoyed. They no longer feel compelled to advance forward.

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Abraham Had his Eye on the Goal

We can now answer the questions posed above.

The reason why G-d said to Abraham to leave his land and birthplace, considering that he had already left his land and birthplace, is to highlight the inadequacy of just leaving a birthplace—one's point of origin—only to remain stuck in one place. Terach also left his birthplace but only in the geographic sense. Abraham, by contrast, was able to truly make a complete and total detachment from his birthplace. Abraham did not regress.

Thus G-d tells him to leave his birthplace even though he had already told him to leave his land. By truly leaving his attachment to his birthplace and the attraction it held for him, he was empowered to leave his land as well. Again the contrast with Terach is highlighted. Terach, though he left his birthplace, could not leave his land because in truth he never really left his birthplace.

And this answers the question of why the Torah has to add that “Abraham departed.” It is to underscore that Abraham's resolution to leave towards Canaan was a resolution that actually translated into action, as opposed to

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Terach's determination to go to Canaan that was halted.

Our Final Destination

The message for our generation is that we too were told by G-d to go on a journey that will lead us inexorably to the time of the final Redemption, when the world will become a good and G-dly world.

A problem arises when we give up on continuing on the journey to finally reach our destination. Whether our hiatus is a result of our being intimidated by the obstacles, enticed by the glitter, or complacent with our achievements in exile, it must be overcome.

Whatever the reason we get stuck in "Charan", we must learn the lesson from our father Abraham to once and for all take our determination to leave our land, birth place and our father's house aspects of exile and march toward the final Redemption!

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LECHA**

ESSAY THIRTEEN

A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

Sensitivity to others is a virtue.

**Judaism, while directed to the Jewish people,
also requires of us to be a light to the
nations.**

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ESSAY THIRTEEN

A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

Abraham's Concern

When Abraham was given the Mitzvah to circumcise himself, the Midrash relates how he responded:

Before I was circumcised there were many wayfarers who would come to me, whereas now that I am circumcised no wayfarers will come to me.

The question has been asked: What connection does circumcision have with the Abraham's hospitality? And why was Abraham so concerned that he would not attract any wayfarers once he was circumcised? The simple answer was that he was talking about the short-term effects of his procedure. He would not have any guests coming to him as long as he would be convalescing.

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A deeper answer to this question is that circumcision served as a testimony to Abraham's unique relationship with G-d. Circumcision is a covenant that G-d made with Abraham and all his Jewish progeny that sets them apart from the rest of the world.

To Abraham, circumcision would place him on a pedestal in relation to the other nations.

With his elevation to the status of a chosen person and the father of a chosen nation, how would other people feel? Would they not become alienated from Abraham? With that attitude, would they ever care to enter his home again?

Mamre the Consultant

This premise can also explain why, according to Rashi, Abraham consulted with his friend Mamre as to whether he should circumcise himself. The question is asked, why would Abraham consult a friend as to whether he should follow G-d's command?

In light of the above it may be suggested that his question was not whether he should comply with G-d's command, but whether it

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would create a barrier between him and the other nations of the world.

While Abraham knew that regardless of the consequences vis a vis his neighbors, he would go through circumcision. His question was. Would it indeed have a deleterious effect on his relationships with others and if yes, what could he do about it?

G-d's Reassurance

We can now understand why G-d changed his name from Abram to Abraham. Abraham, the Torah states, translates as:

A father of a multitude of nations.

By giving him this name, G-d was responding to his fears. Not only would he not lose the people he had already befriended, his influence will spread far and wide to an even greater audience—he will become the father of a multitude of nations.

This premise will also clarify why immediately after the story of Abraham's circumcision the Torah continues with the way G-d sent angels disguised as people so that Abraham could play host to them. By relating this event, the Torah wishes to underscore that

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his circumcision did not deter people from coming to Abraham. Soon after his circumcision—even as he was still recovering from the self-inflicted surgical procedure at the age of 99!—he was able to reach out to strangers. This helped to assuage Abraham's concerns that he would lose contact with outsiders.

Why did Abraham Care about Losing Guests?

One can still raise the question as to why Abraham was so concerned about this Mitzvah of circumcision in particular. Our Sages tell us that Abraham anticipated all of the commandments even before they were given at Sinai and performed them to the extent possible. (For example, while he could not recite the Haggadah on Passover night that describes the future Exodus of the Jews from Egypt, he could have eaten Matzah. He may have even recounted how G-d saved him and his wife Sarah from their ordeal in Egypt at the hands of Pharaoh as recorded in the beginning of this week's parsha.)

Why then did he not show any concern that his very different code of behavior would not alienate others?

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To answer this question we have to ask another question. Why did Abraham care if the performance of circumcision would distance wayfarers from his home? If G-d was not concerned, why should he. True, inviting guests into your home is a mitzvah—but if G-d gives us one Mitzvah and then tells us to do another that will override the first one; that too is G-d's will. Why then did Abraham worry about the loss of wayfarers coming to his home?

Abraham's Life's Mission

Abraham was charged by G-d to reach out to all of the people with whom he had contact and “convert” them to ethical monotheism. In the very beginning of the parsha the Torah relates how Abraham came to Canaan with “the people they acquired in Charan.” According to Rashi this was not a reference to servants or slaves but to the people they succeeded in influencing to accept the belief in one G-d and follow in the just and kind ways of Abraham and Sarah. This was not just Abraham fulfilling a specific Mitzvah. It was his *raison d'être*. This was his life's mission.

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To this end G-d promised him before leaving for Canaan that “I will make your name great,” the meaning of which is that Abraham’s fame will enhance his influence over others. Rashi explains that the “greatness of his name” alludes to the expansion of his name from Abram to Abraham that occurred in conjunction with his circumcision. This connotes that Abraham’s future would revolve around his ability to change the world and make it conform to G-d’s plan.

We can now understand Abraham’s dilemma. Abraham knew that he had to continue to influence the world, which he did primarily by playing host to wayfarers. In order to have an effect on others they have to feel that you share interests, come from the same background or have a similar destiny.

As long as Abraham’s focus was on ethics and morality there was common ground between him and all the others. Even the recognition of G-d was achieved by Abraham demonstrating to them how G-d was their Provider and Benefactor. Abraham essentially introduced them to a G-d who is the Creator and Provider of all humanity equally. From

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that vantage point it was relatively easy to convince them to follow in his footsteps.

Once he would be circumcised—which goes against nature—to form a Supra-rational bond with G-d—to the exclusion of the rest of humanity—it had the potential to thwart his ability to influence others. Abraham’s dilemma was how does one balance the two? How can one be an “elitist” and expect the rest of humanity to be receptive to the message?

Moreover, Abraham’s question was, how does one reconcile the changing of his name to Abraham with the connotation of reaching out to other nations with the fact that it came in conjunction with circumcision which separates him from other nations?

The New Guest

The answer to his dilemma is further provided for by the Midrash: “G-d said: ‘Heretofore people came to you, now I, in My glory, shall come and reveal Myself to you, This is the meaning of [the subsequent verse, at the beginning of the next parsha]: “G-d

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revealed Himself to him in the plains of Mamre.”

G-d's response to Abraham was that in the past these **people** were coming to **you**. Since you are a finite human being and they are finite human beings there is a limit how far you can go to influence them. There are barriers to your soul's potential and therefore you needed to find common ground to have an effect on them. Now that you are made “perfect” by circumcision, you now will have access to the Divine. Nothing can prevent G-d from entering Abraham's home to bestow a G-dly glow in it. This will do wonders to remove all impediments and barriers to inspire and impact others.

Lesson for Contemporary Times

There is an obvious lesson to be derived from the above. When we try to be a “light unto the nations” we may entertain the notion that we must not focus on our unique relationship with G-d. This will drive a wedge between us and the rest of the world.

We might be apprehensive that it will not help us to bring the world closer to following

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the Seven Noahide Commandments, (the commandments given to Noah and his progeny (i.e., all of humanity) that are geared to make the world a habitable and stable place). Many have used the argument that favored assimilation in some form as the only means to relate to the other nations and have a positive influence on them.

The story of Abraham turns this argument on its face. On the contrary, only when we live a more Jewish and exalted life and identify with and enjoy our special relationship with G-d, symbolized by circumcision, can we really have an impact. And this is not only attributable to the greater respect we will command when they see us living a more refined and G-dly life, but also because we then allow G-d to become our “guest” in our home. This, in turn, will radiate G-dly truth and light to all those outsiders that may enter our sphere of influence.

Seven Mitzvot and Moshiach

The Torah belief in the Messianic Age is that Moshiach will influence all nations of the world to follow in their Seven Mitzvot. Indeed, Maimonides’ Yad Hachazakah devotes

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several chapters to the laws concerning our obligation to educate and influence the nations of the world to observe the Seven Noahide Commandments. Immediately following these laws Maimonides discusses the laws concerning the coming of Moshiach.

Why does Maimonides link these two themes of the Noahide commandments and the Messianic Age?

One simple answer is that as we get closer to Moshiach, we are witness to an unprecedented phenomenon. Never before have Jews had the freedom to practice their own religion undeterred and to even inspire non-Jews to keep their Mitzvot. This paves the way to the day when Moshiach will “call unto all the nations to serve G-d as one.”

However, in light of the above, one may suggest a deeper explanation:

As we get closer to the Messianic Age when G-d’s unfiltered light will shine, we are empowered to inspire all the nations of the world more than any time previously.

In the days of King Solomon, at the peak of Israel’s spiritual development—occasioned by and reflected in the construction of the Bais

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Hamikdash, the Holy Temple—the nations of the world were enamored with the Jewish people and their teachings and were attracted to them.

Similarly, as we stand on the threshold of the final Redemption we can already see and bask in some of that unprecedented G-dly light and positive version of “global warming.” As a result, our ability to be a “light to the nations” has become easier. And the more of that G-dly light associated with the Messianic Age that we identify with the greater the potential we have now to change the world for the good.

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ESSAY FOURTEEN

TWO LEVELS OF CHANGE

**The most dramatic changes in our lives are
the evolutionary, not the revolutionary
changes.**

**Revolutionary changes can be unsettling. The
evolutionary changes are seamless and enable
us to fully internalize them.**

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ESSAY FOURTEEN

TWO LEVELS OF CHANGE

Changing Names

The Patriarch Abraham was originally named Abram. Before Abraham could father a child, G-d changed his name by adding just one Hebrew letter, *hei*. Now, and for all times, he was to be known as Abraham, and not Abram. Indeed, the Talmud states that it is a violation of the Torah to continue to call Abraham by his original name.

This is in stark contrast with the third Patriarch Jacob, whose name was also changed by G-d to Israel. Yet, we still refer to him as Jacob. Why isn't it forbidden to use the original name Jacob?

The Talmud asks this question and answers that the Torah itself continues to use the name Jacob, even after it was changed to Israel, whereas Abraham's original name never appears again in the Torah.

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But, this just begs another question: Why does the Torah continue to use the name Jacob, but yet insists on dropping the name Abram?

New or Modified Names

The Toshpos commentary (authored by the French Talmudic Sages of the 12th through 14th centuries) gives the following explanation:

When Abraham's name was altered from Abram to Abraham it was not a new name, but a modified name. Hence the original name was dropped. The name Jacob, by contrast, was not altered. The new name Israel he was given was an entirely new name. Hence the original name was not dropped since it had not undergone changes.

On the surface, one could have made the opposite case. A new name represents an entirely new identity, whereas a modified name leaves room for the previous identity. Why is it that modifying a name is a more powerful rejection of the original name than giving someone an entirely new name?

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The answer to this question can provide us with a glimpse into the way we look at our own development and changes in life.

Incremental Versus Drastic Changes

There are forms of development and maturation that come in increments. One would be hard pressed to identify the day that one graduates from immaturity to maturity. It is a seamless transition. The new attitude and character is not an abrupt change from the past. It fits into our earlier mold.

Conversely, there are times when we make drastic changes and chart new directions in our lives. Even after we develop this new image, we still retain our original identity.

To use a simple example from the world of professions: One can be a physician and then become a lawyer. The new profession does not negate his earlier one. One would certainly not be insulted if he was reminded of his first career.

However, the same physician who improves his technique and reduces the mortality rate, for example, would not want to be identified

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and reminded by his inferior performance at an earlier age.

On a deeper level, it is not just the shame of being associated with a lower level of achievement and maturity that makes us want to shed our original name and identity. The very fact that we grow into something more sophisticated proves that this is—and not our earlier unsophisticated level—who we truly are. The new level is not superimposed on us. It is just a matter of time for this mature level to manifest itself.

When we change directions in life, however, the new direction is not necessarily an outgrowth of our previous existence and it is not necessarily an exclusive reflection of who we are. It might have been acquired from outside of our own experiences and inner form; and that we can add on to our stature. It doesn't negate our previous essence; it enhances it.

Abraham and Abram represent stages in Abraham's development. The additional *hei*, our Sages tell us—alludes to Abraham's moral growth. The letter *hei*, numerically five, represents how Abraham gained complete control over five of his organs that were

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previously not totally under his control. They included his eyes and ears, as well as the sexual organ. The Abraham persona negated the Abram persona, who lacked that level of control and discipline. Abraham doesn't backslide, for this was the realization of his true potential. When he was Abram, it was not yet the real he.

Jacob and Israel: Not Two Mutually Exclusive Talents

Jacob and Israel, on the other hand, represent two different directions and talents that are not mutually exclusive.

Jacob is the talent of coping with the material world, and Israel is the challenge of being in a spiritual environment.

Jacob is the ability to be a follower and Israel is the talent of leadership.

Jacob is the weekday Jew, and Israel is the Sabbath Jew.

Even after acquiring the name and status of Israel, we still retain and cherish our Jacob status because Judaism wants us to acquire the paradoxical traits of being involved in our material world, while rising to greater

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spiritual heights; being a follower and a leader; a weekday Jew and a Sabbath Jew.

Moshiach Radical Change or Incremental or Both?

When we survey Torah literature concerning the Messianic Age, it seems that Moshiach will usher in a New Age that is radically different from the present era of exile. Knowing that things will change drastically can be intimidating. We are usually afraid of the unknown. How are we to deal with the changes of the future?

In truth, the Messianic Age will enjoy both of the features of: Abram's transformation into Abraham and Jacob's acquisition of the second name Israel.

In the Messianic Age, there are things in our lives that will certainly change. But those changes will be incremental ones; changes that will involve our gradual maturation, whereby one level fits comfortably into the lower one, as if it was always there. We will hardly be able to feel that we've given up anything. Those changes will reflect our true

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identities and potential. At that time we will be who we truly were created by G-d to be.

Yet there are certain positive aspects of our lives that we enjoy today that we loath to give up. Here too, we are told that even after Jacob (a name that is associated with our exile status) had his name changed to Israel (a name that is associated with Redemption) the name Jacob will still remain, because there are certain virtues that are attached to the name and concept of Jacob that will endure forever alongside the virtues that will be introduced in that glorious Age of Redemption.

Thus, the Messianic Age will enjoy the best of both worlds. On the one hand, we will go through a spiritual maturation process and grow to heights that we will recognize as something that was always who we were. On the other hand, we will acquire new approaches and talents that will complement the ones we had prior to the onset of the Messianic Age.

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LECHA**

ESSAY FIFTEEN

PHAROAH YES, SODOM NO!?

How do we know what is important?

**Frequently, it is measured by the degree of
internal opposition we have to it.**

**The more pressure we have to do something
the more we have to consider whether it is
positive.**

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ESSAY FIFTEEN

PHAROAH YES, SODOM NO!?

Abraham's Wealth

When Abraham was compelled to go to Egypt because of famine in the land of Canaan, he told Sarah to say that she is his sister so that they do not kill him.

When Pharaoh learns the truth about Sarah and Abraham he sends them away, but not before he gives Abraham gifts.

Indeed, Abraham, the Torah relates was “Heavy with cattle, silver and gold.” We may presume that he acquired this wealth from the gifts he received from Pharaoh that generated even more wealth for him. In short, the troubling ordeal with his wife Sarah and Pharaoh paid off, at least, financially.

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Not Even a Shoelace

We then proceed to a subsequent narrative in this week's parsha, where Abraham assists the King of Sodom in his battle with other kings. The King of Sodom expresses his gratitude to Abraham by offering his considerable compensation for his support. Abraham was offered to keep all the spoils of war except for the human hostages that were to be returned to him.

Abraham spurned that offer and refused to take even a shoelace from the king of Sodom.

The question has been raised: Why did Abraham refuse to take anything from the King of Sodom, while the Torah does not record that he demurred when Pharaoh gave him gifts?

One answer, based on Rashi's commentary, is that in truth, Abraham never used the gifts he received from Pharaoh. He subsequently gave it to his children (Yishamel and the six other sons of his third wife Keturah). He refused to benefit from these gifts.

The question still can be raised as to why he refused to even take anything from the king

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of Sodom and leave it for his children, while he did take the gifts from Pharaoh?

Don't take Credit for My Wealth

One answer that may be offered is contained in Abraham's own words. Abraham upon refusing to accept the king of Sodom's offer said, "And you shall not say that I have made Abraham rich." Abraham did not want the king of Sodom and others to think that the wealth G-d promised him actually came from the king of Sodom.

We may conclude that this fear that people would say that his wealth came from a mortal king rather than from G-d was a concern only with the king of Sodom and not with Pharaoh the king of Egypt. Why?

Sodom Cruelty

Sodom distinguished itself in its selfishness. In Sodom outsiders were not welcome except to the extent that they helped Sodom become richer. Indeed, their cruelty to unwanted guests was legendary. That is why they welcomed Lot into their community because he brought them much wealth, while they

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were ready to torture to death an unwitting traveler whose misfortune brought them into the city limits of Sodom.

Based on his knowledge of the psychology of Sodom, Abraham knew that when G-d's blessing to him for wealth would be realized, the King of Sodom would claim that the wealth was all his. He would demand that Abraham share his wealth with him. Thus Abraham refused to take anything from him lest his blessings would be tainted by the involvement of the king of Sodom.

By contrast, Pharaoh, as depraved and immoral as he was, was not into claiming everything for himself. The evil of Egypt was not selfishness to the ultimate degree as was the evil of Sodom. Pharaoh, when realizing that Sarah was Abraham's wife, he was more than eager to have her returned to Abraham and asked Abraham to leave the country. He was not interested in gaining from Abraham. Abraham therefore did not refuse to accept gifts from him because he did not fear that Pharaoh would lay claim to all his future wealth.

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Heavy Fortune

Another novel way to understand the difference in Abraham's attitude towards the gifts he received from Pharaoh and those he received from the king of Sodom involves a better understanding of the human condition with respect to doing that which is required.

When the Torah describes the wealth of Abraham after his departure from Egypt it uses the word "heavy" to describe the extent of his fortune. One way of understanding the unusual choice of language to describe immense wealth instead of just stating that he was very rich, is to understand the dynamics of human nature.

It is almost axiomatic in Talmudic literature that when a person has an obligation to do something there will frequently be a negative reaction, a certain reluctance to do the Mitzvah. Moreover, even when we would desire something that is neutral, if we then become obligated to do it, we will, very likely, develop a resistance to it.

Thus the Talmud counter intuitively states:

Greater is the one who is commanded
to do a mitzvah and does it than the

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one who is not commanded to do it
and still does it.

For example, we may regularly and cheerfully volunteer for a charitable cause. One day, we may be told that we are now obligated to help. According to the Talmud, we will discover a certain measure of hesitation and lack of enthusiasm for the same acts of kindness.

The rationale for this apparently irrational reaction is that when one is obligated to do something, the evil inclination within us puts up a fight, so that what we do requires a bit of a struggle and what we do that is good is a challenge. This gives our positive actions that much more meaning.

Hence, the novel and ironic way of translating the words “And Abraham was heavy with cattle, silver and gold.” Abraham felt a sense of heaviness and an aversion to the wealth he was offered by Pharaoh. Instead of the natural human inclination to crave wealth, or at the very least, welcome it and feel good about it, he felt that this wealth was heavy, a burden.

Abraham therefore knew that it would not be a concession to his evil inclination for him to

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take the wealth because he had absolutely no positive feelings about it and was not attracted to it at all. He felt that this type of wealth would not bring him down.

Abraham concluded that it must simply be G-d's way of providing him with the means to carry on his work to bring G-d's unity and the virtues of kindness and justice to the world.

Let us now contrast Abraham's reaction to the offer of wealth by the king of Sodom.

When he was offered wealth by the King of Sodom, by contrast, he felt a natural sense of desire for it. He felt good about it. For Abraham that was, ironically, a danger signal. That was a sign to him that he was being tested. Abraham passed that test and declared he wants no part in the wealth that comes from unholy sources.

Savor the Challenges of Exile Even as We rave for the End of Pain and Suffering

One of the distinguishing elements of the Messianic Age is that the challenges that we have now will no longer be around. To be sure, the Messianic Age and the opportunities

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it will bring will provide us with new challenges—such as the challenge of going from one positive experience to another. However, the challenge that we have today to resist temptation and to counter the resistance we have for good, will no longer be around.

The message is that we should utilize every remaining moment before the transition into the ultimate Age of Peace arrives to meet our challenges to today.

One such challenge is to recognize that the blessings we enjoy in the world today do not come from the kings of modern day Sodom. They are G-d's blessings!

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ESSAY SIXTEEN

HOLY SHOE LACES

**Shoes are a protection from the earth.
Shoelaces keep our shoes on.**

**Some places are so corrupt that even the
shoelaces are tainted and afford no
protection.**

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ESSAY SIXTEEN

HOLY SHOE LACES

“I Won’t take even a Thread or a Shoelace”

Abraham was informed that his nephew Lot had been taken captive by an association of four kings who had waged war against a group of five kings, one of whom was the king of the wicked Sodom where Lot took up residence.

To show gratitude for saving him, the king of Sodom graciously offers Abraham to partake of the spoils of war. Abraham strongly declines.

Abraham tells the king of Sodom that he had sworn to G-d that he would not take even “a thread or a shoelace.”

The Reward: Tzitzis and Tefillin

The Talmud states that G-d rewarded Abraham for refusing to take even a thread or a shoelace. For declining the thread, his

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children were given the Mitzvah of Tztzit-fringes; the threads that we place on the corners of our garments. The reward for turning down the offer of shoelaces Abraham's descendants were rewarded with the Mitzvah of Tefillin that are wrapped around our heads and arms by way of leather straps, akin to shoelaces.

What connection is there between shoelaces and Tefillin straps other than the fact that both are made of leather? And what does either of these things have in connection with Abraham's refusal to benefit from the property of Sodom

The Art of Putting on Shoes

The answer to these questions will become evident when we examine a connection between shoelaces and Tefillin straps that is reinforced in another Talmudic statement that deals with the etiquette of putting on our shoes.

The Talmud generally gives precedence to the right hand in the performance of a Mitzvah (a left-handed person would regard his or her left hand as the right in Jewish law).

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However, with regard to tying our shoes, the Talmud states that we ought to tie our left shoe first since Tefillin are tied on the left hand/arm.

The question can be asked here too: Why would we overlook the preeminence of the right hand because Tefillin are tied on our left hand/arm. And why does it make a difference which shoe we tie first?

The Spiritual Dimensions of Right and Left

To answer these questions let us examine why Tefillin are indeed placed on the left hand/arm considering the fact that as a general rule the right hand is given precedence in the performance of a Mitzvah.

The reason why the right is usually preferred is because the stronger hand is expressive of the Divine attribute of *chesed*-kindness. As the stronger hand, it is the one that is usually involved in giving as opposed to the weaker hand that remains passive. When we do a Mitzvah we want to highlight the role of kindness and pro-activeness in our Jewish lives.

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The source of the requirement to wrap the Tefillin on our left hand is the anomalous way the Torah refers to the hand upon which we wrap the Tefillin. The Hebrew word for “your hand” is *yadcha*. However, the Torah “misspells” the word and adds the silent letter *hei*, which can also be read as “*yad kei’ha*, the weaker hand.

Another reason for the emphasis of the left with respect to Tefillin is that Tefillin are supposed to be placed near the heart, which is on the left side.

Strengthening Character

What connection is there between the idea of the weaker hand and the proximity to the heart?

One of the reasons we wear Tefillin (in addition to the fact that it is a Divine commandment, mentioned four times in the Torah as a commandment) is that it is designed to strengthen our character. Human beings are born with natural weaknesses. We can easily be enticed; we allow our egos to get in the way of doing what is right etc. The

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Tefillin were designed by G-d to strengthen our character; to shore up our weak side.

By placing the Tefillin on our left (read: weaker side) near the heart the symbol of our emotions that often lead us astray, the Tefillin empower us to inject vigor and moral courage into our weaker and vulnerable side.

We can now understand the connection between Tefillin and the tying of our shoelaces.

Why we Wear Shoes

A shoe is worn to protect our feet from the earth. This conveys a deeper symbolic meaning. The earth is the source of our sustenance. We are eternally grateful to G-d that we have dry land under our feet. Indeed, we recite a daily blessing thanking G-d for spreading the earth over the waters.

Because of our dependence on the earth and the security it provides we can become so attached to it that we begin to worship it. We become so earthy and materialistic that the earth and all that it represents becomes a deity, as it has become in many cultures. Even in those areas where the earth is not

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worshipped in the literal sense of the word, the earth dominates our lives; we become materialistic and unrefined.

The shoe symbolizes the protection we afford our feet so that its contact with the earth is not direct. The shoe guarantees that there will always be a separation and barrier between the person and the world that we stand on. As important as the earth is to our existence, we always remain above it.

Thus, when Moses approached the burning bush—sacred ground—he was told to remove his shoes. On sacred ground there is no need to set up a barrier between one's feet and the earth. In all other situations, the earth represents our vulnerability and weakness and we must wear shoes to protect us.

The Kabbalah of Shoelaces

However, even shoes can become loose and not afford the protection we need. The shoelace, in a strictly symbolic sense, is the equivalent of our Tefillin that we place on our weaker arm to shore up our defenses.

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Similarly, the shoelace is the guarantee that our defenses remain intact and secure.

We can now also understand the connection between the shoelaces of the king of Sodom that Abraham refused to take as a reward for his liberation of Sodom.

Of all cities in the world, the morally weakest city was without question the city of Sodom. Sodom was the center of vice in those days. Every perversion was practiced and flaunted in its midst.

When Abraham saved the city and its king from being conquered, the king of Sodom was under the impression that Abraham might not have been opposed to their way of life—at least not to the same extent that he was opposed to it in the past. By taking some of its possession, Abraham would be acknowledging that there was something good and redeeming about the city and its mores.

Moreover, if Abraham was concerned with the deleterious effect the city can have on him, the king of Sodom, was willing to give Abraham shoelaces. He can always use them as his symbolic protection against the corrupt earth of Sodom.

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By refusing to take the shoelaces from its leader, Abraham was repudiating any contact with Sodom—even its shoelaces. Abraham was saying that even what purports to be a safeguard against corruption and degeneration that was associated with Sodom—i.e., their shoelaces—would not suffice to be protected from Sodom. Sodom was so corrupt that it even corrupted its shoelaces. Indeed, Sodom's earth had to be turned upside down. No shoes and shoelaces would do to protect anyone from its evil.

Moshiach is in Sodom!

Our Sages comment on the verse in the book of Psalms: “I found My servant David.” The Midrash asks rhetorically, “where did G-d find him? In Sodom!”

One interpretation of this anomalous Midrash is that Moshiach, a scion of David, is associated with Sodom. On the simple level it refers to the fact that the daughters of Lot who escaped from Sodom were the ancestors of Ruth the Moabite princess, from whom the Davidic dynasty through Moshiach descended.

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However, we might attempt to find some symbolic meaning in the identification of Sodom as the city from which Moshiach heralded.

Sodom of old could not be salvaged; not even its shoelaces could be used by Abraham. In the Messianic Age, though, things will change. Even the city of Sodom will be purified. For in the Messianic Age evil will cease and all that is impure will no longer be there to contaminate the world.

We may suggest that the process of transforming Sodom began with Abraham and his saving of Lot, which produced the ancestor of King David and Moshiach.

However, if Abraham would have allowed himself to be influenced by the “shoelaces” of Sodom, it may have tainted this entire process. Thus, his refusal to accept anything from Sodom enabled him to inaugurate the Messianic process, through the liberation of Lot from the ashes of Sodom, which will ultimately leads to the Final Redemption with Moshiach.

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ESSAY SEVENTEEN

A PURE MITZVAH

**Doing good, for any reason, is preferable to
inaction.**

We, nevertheless, must strive for perfection.

**The goal must be to serve G-d with purity of
heart, without ulterior motives.**

**The paradigm for this purity is the Mitzvah
of circumcision.**

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ESSAY SEVENTEEN

A PURE MITZVAH

Why Did He Wait So Long?

The first Mitzvah given to Abraham, the very first Jew, was circumcision. As recounted in this week's parsha, Abraham was 99 years old when he received this commandment from G-d.

According to the Talmud Abraham had prior knowledge of all of the commandments and performed them without waiting for G-d's command. The question is therefore asked, Why did Abraham wait so long to be circumcised? Why not circumcise himself at an earlier age?

Numerous answers have been offered to this question.

Only Once!

The most frequently cited answer is based on the counterintuitive Talmudic statement, "one

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who is commanded to perform a Mitzvah and does it is superior to the one who is not commanded to do the Mitzvah and performs it.”

Thus, if Abraham had circumcised himself before being commanded by G-d, he would have lost any ability to do so by a Divine command in the future. One can only be circumcised once!

The Two Dimensions of Circumcision

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (the founder of Chabad, also known as the Alter Rebbe and the author of the classic work *Tanya*) writes in his work *Torah Or* that there are two spiritual dimensions of circumcision. While it is possible to achieve the first level by way of the physical act of circumcision without G-d's express commandment, one cannot attain the loftier level of spiritual circumcision without G-d's assistance, as it is channeled through His commandment.

This loftier dimension of circumcision will be fully revealed in the Messianic Age. Abraham, however, sought to experience that level in his lifetime, which could only happen with G-

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d's express commandment to him after living a life of total commitment to serving G-d by performing all of the Mitzvos of his own volition. Once he had attained the ultimate level of personal growth on his own initiative, he was ready for G-d to reveal this sublime level of spiritual circumcision.

King David's Distress

Perhaps one can offer another answer to this question. The Ba'al Shem Tov cited a passage in the Talmud (*Menachos* 43b) concerning King David's distress when he was bathing and it dawned upon him that he was naked and therefore not engaged in any Mitzvah. When, however, he realized he was circumcised he was comforted. He then sang praise to G-d for this Mitzvah and composed Psalm 12 which begins:

For the conductor; on the Sheminis
(an eight-stringed instrument) a song
of David Psalms 6 and 12).

According to the Talmud the eight-stringed instrument also alludes to the Mitzvah of circumcision which occurs on the **eighth** day.

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The Ba'al Shem Tov explains further that King David's bathing is to be understood in spiritual terms. He wanted to cleanse himself of every vestige of sin and impurity. While doing so, he reflected on his life of performance of Mitzvos and realized that he was "naked."

The Ba'al Shem Tov teaches that King David's nakedness, in this context, meant that he was bereft of all the Mitzvos because he could not find any Mitzvah which was totally pure. He was concerned that there might have been a trace of an ulterior motive in every Mitzvah that he performed.

It should be noted, that while it is true, as the Talmud states, "one should always do a Mitzvah, even if it is for ulterior motives, for from the ulterior motive one will eventually come to do it for pure motives," nevertheless, doing things for ulterior motives is certainly not the ideal. A person of the stature of King David, in pursuit of total cleansing and catharsis, cannot reach complete cleansing so long as his Mitzvos are tainted, ever so subtly, with a motive of personal gain.

King David therefore felt that, at the very least, he needed to possess one unadulterated

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Mitzvah. He sought a Mitzvah free of even the slightest tinge of personal gain or ulterior motive. This was the Mitzvah of circumcision.

Eight Day Purity

What distinguishes this Mitzvah from all others? It is the only Mitzvah one performs as a newborn and is incapable of understanding the Mitzvah. An eight-day old baby cannot possibly do something for selfish reasons. It is the most pure Mitzvah one ever performs; as pure and innocent as the baby itself.

When King David considered the fact that he was circumcised at the age of eight days he was mollified. It was the Mitzvah that removed his spiritual nakedness.

This explains why he sang the psalm that alludes to the eighth day. This underscored the significance of circumcision occurring on the eighth day. It was not just the actual Mitzvah of circumcision that assuaged his feelings of nakedness but the **eighth-day** component of the Mitzvah.

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Infectious

We still need to clarify the Ba'al Shem Tov's analysis of how King David's concerns were allayed by the Mitzvah of circumcision. While it is true that the Mitzvah of circumcision is untainted because it is performed when a child is just eight days old, how did King David cleanse himself from his perception that all of his other Mitzvos were tainted by ulterior motives?

Just as a local infected wound can spread and wreak havoc on the entire body, so too one "perfect" Mitzvah will spread its positive G-dly power and "infect" the entire person and all of the Mitzvos that he has performed. Circumcision is the positive version of the Achilles heel that renders us "vulnerable" to the unadulterated G-dly energy within our Mitzvos.

There is, however, one proviso. This Mitzvah of circumcision must not be compromised. When we are conscientious about our moral life and our physical relationships, we carry within us the incredible power of this unmitigated, pure Mitzvah which neutralizes any negative attachment to our Mitzvos.

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This might explain the Talmudic statement (*Eiruv* 19a) that Abraham stands at the entrance of Gehinnom [the purification process the soul goes through before entering Paradise] and saves those souls who are circumcised provided that they have not compromised the integrity of that Mitzvah. When this Mitzvah remains intact it cleanses and rehabilitates all of our other Mitzvos, which, in turn, helps remove the stains of the transgressions for which Gehinnom may have been warranted.

The premise that circumcision is the only Mitzvah for which there is absolutely no ulterior motive is alluded to in the traditional blessing at a Bris:

Just as you entered into the covenant
[of circumcision] so may you enter
into Torah, marriage and good deeds.

What is the connection between circumcision and Torah, marriage and good deeds?

Chassidic masters have said that the underlying meaning of this blessing to the newborn infant is that just as when you were circumcised, there was no ulterior motive, so too may you enter into Torah, marriage and good deeds with purist of motives.

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Abraham's Divine Mohel

We can now find an additional explanation for Abraham's waiting to be commanded to circumcise himself rather than performing this Mitzvah voluntarily at an earlier stage of his life.

Abraham was keenly aware of the unique character of the Mitzvah of circumcision. He knew that it was the one Mitzvah that affects all of the other Mitzvos that one does. He had, however, a serious problem and it prevented him from voluntarily circumcising himself. He realized that what makes circumcision unique is that it is performed at the age of eight days, as explained above. Abraham was a mature adult and realized that his circumcision would not reflect the purity of the eight-day old child which "infects" all of the Mitzvos that one does with purity.

Abraham therefore had to wait for G-d to command him to be circumcised in order to endow his adult-version of it with the same measure of purity as an eight day old infant.

This explains why the Torah uses the words "Abraham was 99 when he was circumcised..." This passive way of phrasing

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the act of circumcision, Rashi explains, suggests that it was done to him; that G-d actually assisted him in the act of circumcision. Not only did G-d command him to do it but, moreover, G-d Himself was directly involved in this act. It, therefore, endowed the Mitzvah with the same measure of purity that an eight-day old child has when he is circumcised.

Pre-Circumcision and Post Circumcision Eras

Generally speaking, for all of our history, from the time of Creation until the Final Redemption, we exist in a pre-circumcision mode. All of our Mitzvos are, by definition, incomplete; this is particularly so in the period of our exile. While, relatively speaking, circumcision does endow us with a Messianic purity, it cannot compare to the purity and integrity we will attain when Moshiach, the descendant of King David, leads us out of the tainted state of exile, which is likened to the foreskin that obstructs the purity of our souls.

Moshiach is the ultimate Mohel. He will be endowed with the most formidable G-dly power to cleanse us from our spiritual

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“nakedness” and usher in the age when G-d will remove the “foreskin of our hearts.”

During these last moments of Galus-exile we must prepare ourselves for the Redemption. Since Redemption is multi-faceted we must also prepare in multi-faceted ways. The way to prepare for the ultimate circumcision aspect of the Redemption is to fulfill this Mitzvah, literally, with great joy coupled with efforts to bring purity and refinement to this Mitzvah by living a moral life. Guarding and protecting the purity and holiness of the Bris is our way of preparing for the ultimate Bris—the true and complete Redemption.

ESSAY

EIGHTEEN

**CONCLUDING EXILE
WITH ABRAHAM**

There are many admirable traits that we
inherited from our Patriarchs.

However, the trait with which we will emerge
from this exile is the trait of Abraham, acts of
love and kindness.

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EIGHTEEN

CONCLUDING EXILE WITH ABRAHAM

The Patriarchs

The Talmud (*Pesachim* 117b), cited by Rashi, discusses the uniqueness of Abraham even among the other two Patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob.

In our daily prayers, known as the *Shemoneh Esrei*-Eighteen Benedictions or Amidah-standing prayer, we begin by mentioning all three Patriarchs: “The G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac and the G-d of Jacob.” Yet when we conclude the blessing, we only say, “Blessed are You, G-d, the shield of Abraham. The Talmud, commenting on the opening verse of this week’s parsha, discusses this discrepancy in the following manner:

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“I will make of you a great nation” – this is what we say: “The G-d of Abraham.”

“I will bless you” – this is what we say: “The G-d of Isaac.”

“And I will make your name great” – this is what we say: “The G-d of Jacob.”

It could be thought that that we should conclude with [a mention of] all of them. The Torah therefore states: “And you shall be a blessing,” [to teach us that] “we conclude with **you** [Abraham] and we do not conclude not with all of them [Isaac and Jacob].”

This Talmudic commentary needs clarification. Why would Abraham feel better knowing that he was singled out for special mention that excluded his beloved son Isaac and grandson Jacob? Any loving parent and grandparent would relish the idea that his progeny would be regarded as equals or even as superior to himself.

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The Three Pillars

The following is partially based on an answer from a 20th century Chassidic work, *Ateres Tzvi*.

Abraham Isaac and Jacob were not just great people; they were the very foundations of the Jewish nation. Moreover, they personified the most basic traits and virtues that we, their descendants, need to fulfill our mission on earth.

Thus, our Sages inform us that the three Patriarchs represent the three pillars upon which the world stands. (Avos 1:2): Torah, *Avodah* (sacrificial service or prayer), *Gemilus Chasadim* (acts of loving kindness).

It is axiomatic that a Jew cannot be content to strive for one or two of these pillars. We are required to incorporate all of the three in our daily lives. A Jew is duty bound to study Torah each and every day. Even one who is heavily involved in their livelihood, must separate at least some time in the morning and the evening to study Torah. Likewise, every Jew is obligated to pray to G-d multiple times daily. And, obviously, one cannot be a good Jew without reaching out to sustain the

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less fortunate in our midst by acts of loving kindness.

It is therefore also axiomatic in Jewish thought that we need to invoke the names and traits of all three Patriarchs because they represent these three pillars, all of which are indispensable:

Abraham and Loving-kindness

Abraham personified kindness at its best.

This explains the Talmud's allusion of Abraham in the words "I will make of you a great nation." To create a community and a nation one must be imbued with a profound sense of responsibility towards every individual. Without dedication to acts of kindness, giving and sharing, a society cannot survive. This highlights the stark contrast between Abraham and Sodom: The Sodomite people were destroyed because a society cannot possibly survive when it is not based on the principle of kindness. In the Chassidic translation of the words of the Psalmist (89:3): "The world was built with kindness."

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Isaac and Prayer

Isaac is known particularly for his role as a sacrifice, which parallels the pillar of “avodah-the sacrificial service or prayer its substitute.”

This explains the Talmud’s allusion of Isaac in the words “I will bless you.” Our prayers are replete with blessings, particularly, the Amidah, which comprises 18 blessings. Our prayers are designed to elicit G-d’s blessings to the world.

Jacob and Torah

Jacob, who is described in the Torah as one who “dwelled in the tents,” which Rashi explains as an allusion to the tents of Torah study which he frequented, represents the pillar of Torah.

This too can explain the Talmud’s allusion of Jacob in the words, “And I will make your name great.” Torah study has the capacity to enhance one’s reputation. They are the one’s whom people look up to for guidance and inspiration.

Thus we begin our most important prayer by invoking the names of all three Patriarchs as

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a way of establishing the necessity to connect to G-d through all of three approaches.

“Who is Like Your Nation Israel?”

For most of Jewish history, the Jewish nation, as a whole, has adhered scrupulously to these three pillars. Certainly there were many who have fallen short of the mark. Moreover, even those who have studied assiduously can always find ways of enhancing their learning experience. One can either devote more time to one's study or study with more depth, enthusiasm and passion. However, on balance, we, as a people, have done quite well in this regard. Even the simple Jew was able to learn on his level and picked up much knowledge by osmosis.

Insofar as prayer is concerned, Jews always prayed. In most of our journeys through the various exiles we had no choice. Helpless against pogroms and massacres, we were compelled to turn heavenward and beseech G-d to save us in our time of need.

The same can be said about acts of loving kindness. There was never a people who gave so much Tzedakah. Rich or poor, Jews

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contributed with their souls, bodies and money. Every community took care of its poor. For a community to have a miser was a novelty. Stories were told about them because they were so rare and reviled. And even many of those misers preferred to give Tzedakah anonymously and suffer the indignity of a community's ridicule.

So engrained was the desire to give Tzedakah, that Jewish law had to place a limit. One is obliged to give at least 10 percent of one's net income to Tzedakah, preferably 20 percent. However, the Talmud rules, one is not permitted to give more than 20 percent. And even this prohibition has its loopholes. Many a rabbinic authority has found ways to accommodate many who wanted to give more.

In light of the above we can comfortably recite the Biblical praises of Israel: "Who is like Your nation Israel, one nation on earth." Indeed, we are unique in the way we excelled in all of these three domains represented by our forefathers.

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All Three are Needed

In effect, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not only our ancestors; they are alive and well within each and every one of us. We inherited their traits even after close to 4,000 years since they inhabited the physical world.

Thus, in the Amidah prayer which is designed to forge a deeper connection between us and G-d, we make mention of the three Patriarchs equally because they are all indispensable resources and influences in our collective and individual lives.

How do We Conclude?

A question does remain. Granted that we have excelled in all three areas and granted that we have to continue to integrate Torah study with prayer and acts of kindness, but which of these three is the most salient aspect of this triad? Which of these three will we need to specialize in beyond all others to conclude our mission in Galus? This indeed is the essence of the Talmud's question, "how do we conclude?" The question is not just about the concluding part of the prayer; it is about the conclusion of history prior to the

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onset of the Final Redemption. Where should be place our greatest emphasis in the final days of Galus/exile?

And the Talmud's unequivocal answer is: Abraham! Notwithstanding the importance of Torah study and prayer, Abraham's trait of kindness must now dominate.

This interpretation about the supremacy of kindness in the current age is rooted in the words of the Alter Rebbe in his classic *Tanya* (*Iggeres Hakodesh* sec. 9) where he offers a mystical explanation as to why our primary focus prior to the Messianic Age must be on helping those who have nothing of their own. Since G-d's presence (known as the Shechinah) has descended to the very nadir of existence (a process which started with the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash and spiraled downward as our exile progressed) we too must reach out and down to those who are in the abyss. Only this empowers us to connect to the Divine because that precisely is where the Divine resides.

Intertwined

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One may take this lesson a step further. By concluding with Abraham's ideal of kindness we are actually reinforcing the other two pillars of Torah study and prayer. In our day and age one must engage in acts of kindness to help those who are poor in terms of their Torah knowledge. Likewise, we must apply kindness to prayer and implore G-d to bring salvation to the entire world by bringing Moshiach. Hence, while the focus is on Abraham,. Isaac and Jacob are subsumed with Abraham.

ESSAY NINETEEN

THE SEPARATION OF GOOD AND EVIL

“There is no evil without a little good in it.”

**This is true only until the Final Redemption,
when evil will be totally separated from good,
and eventually fade away.**

**Our efforts at doing good since Adam and
Eve have made that separation process occur.**

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ESSAY NINETEEN

THE SEPARATION OF GOOD AND EVIL

“Tell them that You are My Sister”

Abraham and Sarah finally arrive in the Land of Cana'an; the land that G-d had promised them would bring them all of His blessings. No sooner do they arrive there they were compelled to leave because of a devastating famine that plagued the “Promised Land.” Of course, this was a test for Abraham.

Upon their arrival in Egypt Abraham expresses his fear to Sarah:

Behold I realize that you are a beautiful woman. When the Egyptians will see you, they will say, “It’s his wife!” They will kill me and keep you alive! Please say that you are my sister, so that they will favor me because of

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you, and my life will be spared thanks to you.

What About Murder?

The question asked by many of the commentators is, if Abraham was concerned that the Egyptians were so immoral that they would commit murder, they would also commit adultery. If so, why would they have to kill Abraham to take Sarah, they could simply take her and spare Abraham's life? Why would murder be countenanced by these depraved people, but adultery would be shunned by them?

A simply answer is that Abraham was concerned that the Egyptians would think that Abraham would fight to the bitter end to prevent Sarah's defilement at the hands of the Egyptians. He therefore surmised that they would kill him to get him out of their way.

There is another explanation, adapted from the work "*Me'ayin Yavo*," by R. Yaakov Cohen, a nineteenth century Tunisian rabbi, which addresses this difficulty:

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Rationalizing Indirect Murder

The Egyptian officials would not commit outright murder or adultery, but they would find ways of indirectly eliminating Abraham by causing his death. In their mind, causing the death of a person was not tantamount to murder. Poisoning Abraham or otherwise facilitating his demise was not considered a crime to them, but outright murder or adultery was.

Hence, Abraham knew that they would not take Sarah and violate her because no legal justification could be found for that; but the indirect death of Abraham was something which they could justify.

At first glance this explanation appears specious. How could any rational person think that causing the death of an innocent person to get his wife was legal? And if they were so immoral why wouldn't they simply kill Abraham?

Historical Precedents

Upon review of the history of evil and despotic governments this answer is not so farfetched. Virtually every tyrannical

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government in recent history looked for ways of legalizing their most heinous crimes. The depraved communists would torture their victims to sign a confession to their “crimes.” If they were so faithful to the law that requires a confession how did they justify torture? And why couldn’t they simply sign the confession themselves. Better still, why did they need a confession to execute the people they didn’t like?

Why did the Germans have to legislate the Final Solution if they were bent on the wholesale slaughter of millions of innocent men women and children? And while we cannot always understand the mindset of these diabolically evil people, we can learn an important lesson from this phenomenon.

Evil’s Siphoning of Power

Evil likes to cloak itself in the mantle of respectability and legality. Frequently, the greater the evil, the greater is its attempt at deception.

Kabbalah explains that evil cannot exist on its own. Contrary to other belief systems that posit the independent nature of evil that is

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pitted against G-d, Judaism asserts, as is stated in the book of Isaiah, that evil was created by G-d to serve as a challenge to us.

Thus evil must always look for ways of “siphoning” off some of the energy from the G-dly forces of goodness. Otherwise evil would not exist.

New Dynamic

In today's world we are witness to a new phenomenon. Brazen and unmitigated evil is being perpetrated by men women and children in the name of killing as many innocent men women and children! No need to find circuitous and devious ways of killing others. No need to find “legal” rationalizations for their most barbaric actions. How does one explain the appearance of naked evil?

Again Kabbalah advances the following explanation. The intermingling of good and evil, which is responsible for evil seeking ways of justifying itself, began at the time Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree. That sin inaugurated a process known as “birur,” which demands of humankind to work at refining everything in our world. This means

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that we are to look for the good in every aspect of our behavior and in all of our experiences and reject the evil parts of it, thereby separating the good from the evil and restoring the world to the idyllic Garden of Eden state of existence.

In the thousands of years that have elapsed since Adam and Eve, and particularly, after the 3,300 years since we received the Torah at Sinai, our cumulative efforts towards this goal have successfully achieved a significant measure of separation of good from evil.

Evidence of this is the incredible explosion of unadulterated, unmitigated and altruistic goodness in our world. Billions of dollars given to help others; millions of people involved in doing good for the sake of good, demonstrates how far we've come.

And here we have the “bad news-good news” situation. The “bad news” in this phenomenon is that the evil that has been separated is of the raw brand of evil that is not tempered by the admixture of good in it. It is evil in its most ferocious and brazen form. The “good news” is that this evil since it has no source of energy to nourish itself, by definition, will have a short life span.

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In the remaining moments of exile, before the onset of the Messianic Age when evil will be abolished forever, our little actions therefore carry that much more weight. Any action can be the final act of goodness that will tip the scales and usher in an age of perpetual and naked goodness.

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LECHA**

ESSAY TWENTY

ABRAHAM MY LOVER

**Contrary to the identification of Abraham
with love; he also possessed other traits when
necessary.**

**We cannot be monolithic beings.
Mono-dimensional behavior is good for angels
and animals.**

It is neither human or G-dly.

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LECHA**

ESSAY TWENTY

ABRAHAM MY LOVER

Love: Abraham's Most Salient Trait

If we had to find one word to describe the primary characteristic of Abraham, what would it be?

Arguably, the answer to our question would be the word “love.”

Abraham is known for many great accomplishments. He was a man who brought Monotheism to the world. He was an indefatigable fighter for justice. He was the ultimate man of faith. Abraham was unmatched in the art and science of hospitality. Abraham was a valiant soldier. Indeed, Abraham possessed unparalleled *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice for G-d and all of G-d's teachings.

Notwithstanding all of these qualities with which Abraham was blessed, Abraham was the personification of love.

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Abraham is described by the prophet as: “Abraham My lover.” His love for G-d was only matched by his love for G-d’s creatures.

(It is by Divine providence that this issue #414 (when this essay was originally published) equals the numerical value of the word *Ve’ahavta*—and you shall love. Moreover, the number 414 is double the number for the word “*ohr*” which means light. The implication of this fact is that love is a composite of two reciprocal forces of light that are generated from the lover to the one who is loved and back.)

Reconciling Love with Driving Hagar out of the House

When we are in love with another, our love will manifest itself in many ways. The very first and most basic manifestation of love is acting kindly towards the object of our love. Abraham’s love of G-d and His creatures was translated in Abraham’s untiring efforts on behalf of others. Whether it was his hospitality, his defending of his nephew Lot, or his prayers to save the wicked people of Sodom, Abraham was always seeking to shower his kindness on others.

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With this introduction about Abraham's personification of love, the question arises how do we reconcile Abraham's love with his consenting to throw his pregnant wife Hagar out of their home? True, it was in response to Sarah's request, but, nevertheless, why did Abraham not even utter one word of protest? It is also true that Hagar, upon conceiving, started to speak condescendingly, to Sarah. However, how does that justify Abraham's complete acquiescence to Sarah in performing an act that appears to be the very antithesis of Abraham's trait of love?

To be sure, Abraham and Sarah were both prophets, who were in touch with G-d. Indeed, our Sages tell us that Sarah was an even greater prophet than Abraham. It is thus safe to assume that everything Abraham did was with Divine sanction, including the apparently improper treatment of Hagar.

The question, however, remains, how does Abraham, the epitome of love, so easily give in to his wife's demand that he do something to punish Hagar?

Abraham: Multiple Characteristics

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One approach to answering this question requires a better understanding of what it means that Abraham personified love. Does it mean that Abraham was incapable of expressing any other emotions? If that were to be true, then Abraham would cease to be human. What distinguishes a human being from an animal is the multifaceted and multi-functional nature of a human being as opposed to the uniform nature of an animal.

Furthermore, people who possess multiple characteristics, but is dominated by one, even if it is boundless love for G-d, is, in truth, not serving G-d, but expressing his or her own nature.

Abraham must have had the capacity to be a disciplinarian as well as a person of unlimited love and kindness. And though he would rarely express anything but love for others when someone, as Divinely connected as his wife Sarah, would alert him to the need to act harshly, Abraham had the capacity to express a totally different attitude than what was his norm.

Abraham's ability to suppress his dominant nature of love and replace it, albeit for a short duration with the opposite of love, was

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an indication that Abraham was eminently human by virtue of his possession of multiple characteristics.

In addition, Abraham was a true servant of G-d, and was therefore capable of transcending his own dominant nature to do the right thing, even if it meant allowing his dominant nature of love to be suppressed.

We must be Living Paradoxes

We are living in times that demand of us to exhibit contradictory traits. On the one hand, the greatest emphasis must be on cultivating Abraham's love and kindness. If senseless hatred caused the destruction of our second Temple and the ensuing exile, it follows that the way to end the exile and usher in Redemption is to perform acts of "senseless kindness" and love.

Nevertheless, in these unique times, when the most potent forces of evil have reared their ugly heads—as the last stand of evil, before the ultimate Redemption when evil will cease to exist—we must be able to shift gears and reveal another part of our personalities—total and uncompromising rejection of evil.

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When someone threatens the integrity of the Jewish people or our connection to the Land of Israel, we must change our focus, albeit, for a few moments, to express our absolute outrage at those who seek to undermine our existence.

To be capable of properly expressing opposite emotions is not only a sign that we are human, but it also indicates that we are capable of liberating ourselves from anything that might inhibit our ability to serve G-d in the most complete manner.

This paradoxical approach will surely help us realize the collective liberation of all the Jewish people and the entire world, with the imminent coming of Moshiach. Moshiach, like his ancestor Abraham, distinguishes himself with his unparalleled love for others, while also fighting against evil whenever necessary.

ESSAY TWENTY-ONE

STAR AND DUST

**There are people of great achievement who
are likened to the stars.**

**And there are lowly people likened to the
dust of the earth.**

Both are flawed.

**The stars are whole and a source of blessing
when they behave with the humility of the
dust.**

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LECHA**

ESSAY TWENTY-ONE

STAR AND DUST

Where was Abraham's Faith?

Abraham is singled out in the Torah as a man of exceptional faith and devotion to G-d among his various other qualities. Yet, in this week's parsha, a rather unusual exchange between Abraham and G-d ensues that seems to belie his identification with faith.

When G-d promises him Divine protection and great reward, Abraham demurs and states:

What can you give me, when I am going childless.. Behold you have not given me children...

In other words, Abraham turned down G-d's gifts to him because it was worthless to him to have these gifts if he were not to father children.

Or Hachaim (one of the great Biblical commentators of the eighteenth century)

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raises a strong question. Had not G-d already promised him children? Did G-d not say to him: “And I will make your seed as plentiful as the dust of the earth?” Why did he now doubt G-d’s words?

And, most importantly, how does this square with the characterization of Abraham as a man of faith in this very narrative, when it appears that he did not have faith in G-d’s promise to him that he would have children?

Or Hachaim raises an additional question, which he says is the key to answering the first one: Why does Abraham emphasize that “You [G-d] have not given **me** children?” It would have sufficed for Abraham to have said, “You have not given children.” It would have been obvious that G-d was referring to **his** children, since he already mentioned that he was childless.

Quality Versus Quantity

Or Hachaim’s answer to these questions is that when G-d promised him children he referred to them as “dust of the earth.” In Abraham’s mind this was not only an expression of abundance, but that it also

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portended that they will be as lowly and earthy as the dust of the earth. In other words, Abraham thought that he would have to sacrifice quality if he was to have the quantity of children that G-d offered him.

Abraham was clearly not completely content with this blessing. That is why, *Or Hachaim* explains, Abraham stressed the word “me” when he stated that “You have not given me children.” What he meant by that was that while G-d had indeed promised him children in great numbers, he nevertheless was apprehensive that they were going to be his children just in name, not in spirit. While he might be their biological father, Abraham feared, they will be under the influence of others whose less than ideal and lofty ways would rub off on them and render them unworthy of carrying on Abraham’s legacy.

Only when G-d promised him, in this parsha, that his children will be like the stars of the heavens was Abraham mollified.

Why the Dust of the Earth Metaphor?

The question, however, can be raised. If G-d really intended for Abraham’s children to be

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like the stars of the heaven, exalted and lofty souls, why did he previously use the metaphor of dust of the earth?

Furthermore, as *Or Hachaim* notes, G-d repeats the very blessing of “your seed shall be as dust of the earth” to Jacob together with the blessing for his progeny to be like the stars of the heaven. If “dust of the earth” has a negative connotation, why did he repeat it to Jacob?

Or Hachaim’s answer is that, independently, the “dust of the earth” metaphor can, indeed, be understood negatively. However, once G-d invoked the “stars of the heaven” metaphor, it shed new light and redefined the comparison of Jews to the dust of the earth in a positive light.

When one attains the status of a “star,” and also possesses the humility that is represented by the dust of earth, he or she is indeed worthy of the title “children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” who personified these very traits.

Viewing Dust from the Stars

On a deeper plane, dust is lowly to one who

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does not possess the exalted perspective of the “stars of the heaven.” When one sees things from a heavenly vantage point, they can see the value in the dust as well. As Rabbi Sholom Dovber (the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose birthday we will be observing on the 20th of Cheshvan, in close proximity to this Shabbos), once commented to a person who failed to see the qualities in simple folk:

To appreciate their exquisite beauty one must be a maven, a connoisseur, just as one must have a highly trained eye to appreciate the beauty of a precious diamond.

Messianic Age: Delights as the Dust of the Earth.

Perhaps this explains Maimonides’ description of the proliferation of physical delights in the future Messianic Age, that they will be as abundant as the “dust of the earth.”

On the one hand, it suggests that physical delights will be as available to us in an unlimited way, even more than one could possibly desire. On the other hand, because we will then attain the “star like” exalted

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status, we will be afforded the opportunity to better appreciate the incredible beauty and spiritual value of even the most prosaic and humble aspects of our existence—the dust of the earth. The higher we will reach, the more we will appreciate the true value of those things that **appear** at the bottom of the hierarchy of treasured things.

ESSAY TWENTY-TWO

STAYING IN ONE PLACE

**Our lives require building solid foundations
and then building magnificent structures on
them.**

**When we focus on the construction of the
foundation, there is little movement; just
singular concentration and focus.**

**When we embark on erecting the edifice, we
need to be creative, fluid and multifaceted,
allowing for many stories and rooms.**

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LECHA**

ESSAY TWENTY-TWO

STAYING IN ONE PLACE

It's All about Traveling

The name of this parsha, Lech Lecha, describes, in a nutshell, the content of the entire parsha: Abraham's travels.

First G-d commands him to "leave your land, your birth place and your father's house. Even after Abraham comes to the land of Cana'an he does not stay in one place: "Then Avram journeyed on, journeying steadily toward the south."

Shortly after arriving in Cana'an, a famine forces him to travel to Egypt.

After his return to Cana'an the Torah records further travels after which G-d tells him to walk the length and breadth of the land.

Abraham finally settles down in Elonei Mamre. But soon after, a war breaks out and his nephew Lot is abducted. Abraham goes

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back on the road, this time fighting and winning the war.

The Torah then relates Abraham's vision in which G-d predicts how his children will be persecuted in a foreign land but will eventually return to the Promised Land. Once again, we see the theme of movement.

No Movement While Reciting the Shema

This theme of traveling, the name of the parsha and a good part of its content, provoked a discussion in the Talmudic era Midrash Tanchuma. Midrash Tanchuma usually begins its comments with a Halachic (Jewish law) query and discussion. It serves as an intro to its exposition of the parsha.

The following is the Halachic discussion of this week's parsha which focuses, appropriately, on travelling:

Teach us our rabbi. "May a Jewish person accept upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven while traveling?"

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Rav Idi and Rav Huna said in the name of Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yosi [who said] in the name of Rabbi Shmuel:

“It is forbidden to accept upon oneself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven while traveling. Rather one should stand in one place and direct his heart heavenward, with a sense of awe, trembling and perspiration while declaring G-d’s unity, [pronouncing] each and every word with concentration of the heart, proclaiming: “Hear O Israel, G-d is our G-d, G-d is one,” followed by “Blessed is the name of Your glorious kingdom for ever and ever.” When one begins *V’ahavta*-You shall love..., one may stand or sit if one so desires...

While the connection to our parsha is obviously the theme of traveling, what does Abraham’s traveling have to do with reciting the Shema in a standing position?

Moreover, the emphasis in the Midrash Tanchuma is on **not** moving while reciting

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the Shema, the very opposite of the theme of traveling.

Why did G-d Wait so Long?

The following explanation is based on the 19th century commentary Biur Ha'amarim.

The Midrash's analysis of the law of standing to recite the Shema was intended to address a powerful question on the Biblical narrative.

When G-d told Abraham to leave his birthplace, etc., he was 75 years old. Abraham certainly did not start his spiritual career and quest to serve the one G-d at that age. According to an oral tradition, Abraham was actually three years old when he recognized there was one incorporeal G-d and progressed from there. There are some opinions that he was 40 years old when he discovered G-d. However, all opinions agree that he had discovered one G-d, and was even prepared to give his life for that belief, well before he was 75 years old.

Why then did G-d wait until Abraham was 75 years old to tell him to leave his land?

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Two Phases of the Shema

This question prompted the Midrash Tanchuma to cite the law that prohibits one from walking when accepting the yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom by the recitation of the Shema, but permits movement when reciting the V'ahavta, the continuation of the Shema.

The difference between these two sections is encapsulated in the Mishnah (Berachos, Chapter 2). The Shema is the foundation of Judaism because it is about accepting the yoke of Heaven. The paragraph that follows the Shema deals with the acceptance of G-d's commandments. Before we can accept G-d's commandments, the Mishnah states, we must first accept the "yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven," i.e., G-d's authority to command.

We can now understand why movement is restricted while reciting the Shema. Forging a relationship with G-d's very authority requires our total concentration. This is also why we cover our eyes while reciting the Shema as a way of blocking out all outside influences. Even the influence of serving G-d

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through the observance of the Mitzvos is a distraction at this point.

This can be compared to the construction of a multifaceted building. While the building itself will have multiple levels, a plethora of rooms with different shapes, sizes, colors and multifarious uses, the foundation itself is bland with a single function; to serve as a foundation for the structure. We first have to create a solid and stable foundation before we can build a structure of many stories, chambers and functions. And while building the foundation we must be far more concentrated on doing it right lest the entire structure that follows will crumble with the slightest amount of stress.

The analogue to all this is the different attitude we must have to the acceptance of G-d's authority while reciting the Shema and the acceptance of the Mitzvos that follows. During the Shema we must have a singular focus on our total acceptance of G-d. Acceptance requires more than just believing in it; it also means that we must internalize it so that it permeates our entire being.

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Moreover, when we recite the Shema at the end of Yom Kippur we are instructed to reflect on our preparedness to even die for G-d and not betray our faith in Him. No other material, physical or even spiritual interest must enter our consciousness when we recite the Shema.

Movement while reciting the Shema is precluded for two reasons.

First, it is hard to concentrate when we are in motion.

Second, physical movement is expressive of emotional, intellectual and spiritual fluidity. It indicates change and putting oneself in a variety of “locations.” One cannot be in multiple places when focusing on G-d’s singularity and our singular acceptance of that Divine singularity.

Once we’ve graduated from the stage of accepting and internalizing the acceptance of the Kingdom of Heaven with the Shema, we can tolerate and even appreciate movement. When accepting the commandments, the very backbone of Judaism, we involve our mind, heart and action. There are times when G-d

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wants us to go in one direction and other times when He desires that we go in the opposite direction. And while there is a singular Divine source and a singular objective, making the world a dwelling place for G-d, we approach our objective by many pathways, directions and locations.

The Two Phases of Abraham's Life

All of the above can be applied to Abraham's life, divided as it was into two phases: his foundational stage with his acceptance of the yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom and his structural stage, with his transformation of G-d's plan into reality.

In the first phase, Abraham developed awareness of G-d as the Supreme Being. Accepting G-d as his Monarch entailed more than declaration of the Shema. Abraham strived to make this awareness fill every fiber of his being to the point where he was prepared to die for this belief. Indeed, the Midrash relates how Abraham was thrown into a fiery furnace because he refused the

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demand of King Nimrod to worship other gods.

During this first stage, when his foundation—and the foundation of all future Jewish generations—was being forged, Abraham could not move. He couldn't segue into the mobility stage because he was still concentrating fully on his stationary stage of accepting and internalizing G-d's sovereignty.

Once Abraham reached the age of 75 and had developed a firm footing he was ready for the movement stage of his life. His physical movements expressed his ability to relate to different people and situations and infuse them with G-d's teachings of justice and kindness with a monotheistic underpinning.

Thus, the Midrash Tanchuma's discussion of the law against movement during the recitation of the Shema parallels the first stage of Abraham's life before he received G-d's command to travel.

A Glaring Omission!

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This explains another anomaly. The Torah is silent about Abraham's entire life up to his 75th year. In the early period of his life Abraham actually passed the first of his "ten tests," and was prepared to die rather than bowing to an idol. Why would such an important part of Abraham's life be omitted?

In light of the above comparison of Abraham's early life to a foundation we can understand why that phase was hidden from our view. A foundation is concealed from view. While it contributes strength and stability to the entire structure the foundation remains hidden from view and is largely inaccessible.

So too, Abraham's early and foundational phase of life was kept from our view in the Torah. But by no means is that meant to minimize its importance.

Whenever we recite the Shema and hide our eyes it should remind us of how Abraham's early life was hidden from our view while building the foundation of his life and that of all the Jewish people.

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The End is Wedged in the Beginning

The early Kabbalistic work Yefer Yetzirah, attributed to Abraham himself, states:

The end is wedged in the beginning
and the beginning is wedged in the
end.

If Abraham represents the beginning of our Jewish nation's history, the end surely is the Messianic Age.

Just as the beginning of the beginning required a singular devotion, one that could not stand to be diluted by any other spiritual focus, so too our generation, the last of exile, must also exhibit that singularity.

Our singular devotion must be to finishing the process of bringing the world to its state of perfection, i.e., the Messianic Age. All of our multifaceted efforts and our many Mitzvos must be directed to, and permeated with, the overarching themes of Moshiach and Redemption.

And just as the early phase of Abraham's life was concealed from our view, so too the last phase of preparations for the Final

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Redemption, the Midrash tells us, will be one in which Moshiach is concealed.

Moshiach's concealment is not intended as a curse or an extension of exile. Rather it represents Moshiach's way of absorbing the most profound and hitherto elusive levels of G-dly knowledge to enable him to usher in the Messianic Age. It is the foundation of the imminent future, may we see it unfolding now!