

Teachings for Bnei Noach

Abraham's Shield

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

The Roman Senator

Based on the verse, "And you shall return to *Havayah* your God" the *midrash*¹ states that, "There is nothing greater than repentance." The *midrash* then continues to relate the following story,

Once, our rabbis, Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Joshua, and Rabbi Gamliel, were in Rome when the Senate issued a decree that within thirty days no Jew would be found in the whole world [i.e., they planned to annihilate the entire Jewish people].

Now, one of the Emperor's senators was a God-fearing man, and he came to R. Gamliel and disclosed the decree. Our rabbis were in great distress, but that God-fearing man said to them, "Do not be distressed; within thirty days the God of the Jews will arise to help them."

At the end of twenty-five days he revealed the decree to his wife, and she said to him, "Twenty-five days have already gone."

He replied, "There are still five days remaining."

Now his wife was even more righteous than he and she said to him, "Have you not a ring?" [In order to be able to commit suicide when necessary, Roman senators wore a ring with poison in it.] "Suck it and die, and the session of the Senate will be suspended [in your honor] for thirty days and the decree will not come into force."

He followed her advice, sucked his ring, and died.

When the rabbis heard of it they came to his wife to express their sympathy. The rabbis said to her: "Alas for the ship that has sailed without paying her dues" (meaning thereby, that this righteous man [her husband] had not merited to be circumcised).

Said his wife to them: "I fully understand the meaning of what you say; by your life, before the ship sailed, she did pay her dues." At once she entered the chamber and brought out to them a box containing his foreskin, with rags full of blood upon it.



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The rabbis applied to him the following verse:

The princes of the peoples are gathered together, the people of the God of Abraham; for unto God belong the shields of the earth. He is greatly exalted.²

What is the meaning of, “the shields of the earth?” God said: “To Abraham I became a strong shield” —as it is said, “I am your shield”³—“whereas to this one [the senator] I shall become many shields.” How? God first said to Abraham, “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you... and make your name great”⁴ and only after that assurance did Abraham circumcise himself; but this one received no such assurance from God [and yet he circumcised himself].

What is the meaning of “he is greatly exalted?” This one is exalted above Abraham!

The righteous gentile/convert of this story willfully sacrificed his life to save the Jewish people from annihilation. The Rabbis identified him as being one of “the people of the God of Abraham” and, at the same time, “exalted above Abraham.”

Sons of Abraham

Clearly, his righteousness stems from that of Abraham. He is a spiritual son of Abraham (“the father of the multitude of nations”⁵). The great spiritual power that he manifested derives from the potential in the soul of Abraham, the first Jew. Yet, for all the potential that Abraham’s soul had, the sages explain that, “the power of the son is greater than that of the father.”⁶ Meaning, that the greater power of the son derives from the potential in the father; the son actualizes his father’s latent potential.

But, not only is the Roman senator in this story similar to Abraham, he also had the same type of relationship with his wife as did Abraham with his wife, Sarah. In respect to Abraham’s relationship with Sarah, we read that God told Abraham, “All that Sarah tells you, hearken to her voice.”⁷ From this statement, the sages learn that Sarah possessed a greater degree of prophetic inspiration than Abraham.⁸ Likewise, the Roman senator’s wife is described as even more righteous than her husband. And like Abraham, the Roman senator followed his wife’s advice.

From this we may infer that the righteous couple of our story, who so clearly reflect (and even exceed) the virtues of the first Jewish couple, Abraham and Sarah, are indeed a reincarnation of Abraham and Sarah. The two returned to our world once more in order to reach an even higher level than they had in their first incarnation.

This is the greatest of all lessons for every righteous gentile. Every righteous gentile has the opportunity to truly dedicate his or her life to the service of “the God of Abraham.” This means doing all in his or her power to aid in fulfilling the objective for which God chose His people, Israel—universal redemption with the coming of *Mashiach*.

By doing so, every righteous gentile can reach a level even higher than that of Abraham himself! Each one can actualize a part of the infinite potential of Abraham's soul!

Parts of Moses

Let us delve a bit deeper into the verse that was quoted in the *midrash*. The full verse is,

I am your shield, your reward is very great.

The last word of the verse is "very [great]" (מְאֹד). This is the same word that appears in the verse the *midrash* quotes from Psalms,

The princes of the peoples are gathered together, the people of the God of Abraham; for unto God belong the shields of the earth. He is greatly (מְאֹד) exalted.⁹

Thus, the "very exalted" righteous gentile/convert is in fact a part of the infinite reward that God promised to reward Abraham with for his own self-sacrifice.¹⁰

The Arizal states that the initial letters of the phrase "your reward is very great" (שְׂכָרְךָ הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד), which are שְׁהַמ, permute to spell Moshe (מֹשֶׁה), i.e., Moses. Moses is the one and only soul in the Bible who is generally considered to be greater than Abraham. Thus, Moses, the seventh generation from Abraham is Abraham's ultimate reward. The truly righteous amongst the nations are then both "sons of Abraham" and "parts of Moses."

1. *Devarim Rabbah* 2:24.

2. Psalms 47:10.

3. Genesis 15:1.

4. *Ibid.* 12:2.

5. *Ibid.* 17:5.

6. *Shavu'ot* 48a.

7. Genesis 21:12.

8. *Tanchuma Shemot* 1

9. Psalms 47:10.

10. The verse about God being a shield for Abraham appears after Abraham risked his life to save his nephew Lot.