



Abraham's Eshel: Making Requests of God and Asking Questions About Him

Excerpted and translated from Rabbi Ginsburgh's Ma'ayan Ganim for the Torah portion of Vayeirah

Abraham's first (and main) life mission, which began with the Divine directive to go forth, "*Lech Lecha*," is completed and crowned with success in our Torah portion, with the verse, "And he planted a tamarisk tree (*eshel*) in Be'er Sheva and he called there in the Name of *Havayah* the eternal God."¹ Abraham, "the head of all believers"² publicizes the faith in One God and brings God into the human conversation.

What is the connection between Abraham's calling in the Name of *Havayah*, the eternal God and his planting an *eshel*, as per the beginning of that verse? The simple meaning of this expression is that Abraham planted one tree (mentioned because it was highly visible and significant, serving as a sign³ or marker for a place or event⁴). The sages, however, go on to explain that the *eshel* is actually a large orchard of all types of species ("figs, grapes and pomegranates"⁵ and even "all sorts of delicacies"⁶).

Chassidut⁷ explains that the verse relates to many trees of different species in the singular form due to the unity that manifests in them – the unity of the World of Emanation, in which all is One and wholly conscious of its Divine origin. This is the essence of Abraham's power ("Abraham was one,"⁸ "For I have called him 'one'"⁹) - to herald faith in the oneness of God through his war against the pagan worship of a plethora of idols and to manifest the oneness of God in a world that appears to be split into myriad details.

There are three explanations in the Midrash as to the nature of the *eshel* mentioned in our Torah portion¹⁰: An orchard (in which we count three types of fruit: "Ask what you will ask, (*she'al mah shetishal*, in Hebrew, the same root as *eshel*) figs and grapes and pomegranates," as above), an inn and the Sanhedrin (which is inferred from the verse, "And

¹ Genesis 21:33.

² As per *Shir Hashirim Rabah*, 4:20.

³ *Sotah* 10a-b.

⁴ Ibn Ezra *ad loc.*

⁵ *Breishit Rabah* 54:6.

⁶ As per *Shir Hashirim Rabah*, 4:20.

⁷ See the *Or Hachaim* on this verse, as well as *Pelach Harimon* and *Magen Avot*.

⁸ Ezekiel 33:24.

⁹ Isaiah 51:2.

¹⁰ As per *Shir Hashirim Rabah*, 4:20.

he sits on the hill beneath the *eshel* in Rama¹¹ – that the royal presence of Shaul in Giv’ah was in the merit of Shmuel’s court of Jewish law in Rama).

As above, in their explanation of *eshel* as an orchard and as an inn, the sages refer to the common root between *eshel* and *she’al*, which means to ask or request. In Hebrew, this request also refers to a request in prayer, as in the verse, “One thing do I request of God, it is that that I seek”¹². In keeping with this explanation, one of the meanings of “the *eshel* in Be’er Sheva” according to Chassidut¹³ is the “ladder on earth and its top reaches heaven”¹⁴ – the ladder of Jacob – the legs of which are set firmly¹⁵ in Be’er Sheva while its top reaches heaven in Beit El.¹⁶ The Zohar explains that the “ladder is prayer.”¹⁷

Be’er Sheva is the “point of Zion”¹⁸ - the innermost point of the heart – from which prayer wells forth. When Abraham planted the *eshel*, he was planting that innermost feeling that we can ask anything of God, and there is nothing that can stop Him from fulfilling our request. When guests would finish their feast at Abraham’s *eshel* (inn), he would ask them to thank God for the food that they had eaten. Abraham’s *eshel* was the foundation of his educational project: Planting in his guests the consciousness that they can ask anything of God, leading them to ultimately recognize God’s goodness and thank Him. (This is also how we can explain the order of prayer: praise, request, thanks.¹⁹ The praise expresses faith in the all-powerful God, which is translated into the heartfelt emotion of request, which is the essence of prayer. This is followed by thanks for God’s goodness).

Can we Ask Questions?

The Hebrew word for “question,” “*she’ailah*” (cognate to *eshel*, as above), can also mean “to investigate.” When we ask questions about God, we need deep, clear answers. As a rule, above the revealed and known dimension (the revealed world, which corresponds to the *sefirah* of Kingdom) there are levels at which we can investigate, ask and even merit answers (an aspect of “the honor of kings is to investigate a matter,”²⁰ which corresponds to the attributes of the heart). There are levels at which we can ask (the secret of “*מי דקיימא לישאלה*”, relating to the *sefirah* of Understanding) but not expect an answer. And then there are levels (from Wisdom and up) at which we cannot ask at all (the aspect of “The honor of God is to conceal a matter”²¹).

¹² Psalms 27:4.

¹³ *Be’er Mayim Haim ad loc.*

¹⁴ Genesis 28:12.

¹⁵ The Hebrew word for “set firmly” is *nitzav*, which in Aramaic also means “to plant.”

¹⁶ *Bereishit Rabbah* 69:7 (And Rashi on Genesis 28:17).

¹⁷ *Zohar Chadash alef, 266b.*

¹⁸ See *Be’er Mayim Haim ad loc.*, which explains that “*sheva*” refers to the seventh *sefirah*, the *sefirah* of Malchut and “*Be’er Sheva*” is its attribute of Foundation, the point of Zion, which is a well that elevates feminine waters. (There are additional explanations in Chassidut, according to which “*Be’er Sheva*” is the attribute of Understanding, the source of the seven attributes, or the attribute of Kingdom as it descends to the World of Creation, the source of the seven chambers of the World of Creation. Of course, “All of these explanations are the words of the living God”).

¹⁹ *Brachot* 34a. *Rambam* Laws of Prayer, chapt. 1b.

²⁰ Proverbs 25:2.

²¹ See *Zohar Chadash alef, 1, 2 (and 24).*

From this structure, it is clear that the question that will merit an answer is specifically a question that wells forth from the heart. Chassidut, which translates all the secrets of the Torah – including the loftiest secrets – into practical steps of service of God, encourages us to always ask. Chassidut explains that “Ask please about the first days”²² also refers to the loftiest and most concealed, deepest levels. At each level, the question relates to the attributes of the heart included in that level and the answer is relevant to man’s service of the heart.

When Abraham began to investigate in his mind “Who is the master of the world”²³ and discovered that it is always possible to delve deeper and deeper, he planted in humanity the Jewish urge to ask questions (including those questions that are ‘forbidden to ask’²⁴). His questions led him – and paved the way for us - to infinitely deepen our love and service of God through contemplation and questions. And we can always delve even deeper.

²² Deuteronomy 4:32.

²³ According to *Breishit Rabah* 39a.

²⁴ See Rabbi Ginsburgh’s book, *Ma’ayan Ganim* on Pesach year 2. (Also printed in Rabbi Ginsburgh’s Passover Hagaddah “Secrets of the Seder” before the Four Questions and in *Min Hapardes* for Pesach).