



## אמרי נא אחותי את:

# The Key to Serving G-d in a G-dless Society

מוצ"ש פרשת וירא תשע"ט given on שיחה

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וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר הִתְעוּ אֹתֵי אֱלֹהִים מִבֵּית אָבִי וְאָמַר לָהּ זֶה חֲסִדְךָ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשִׂי עִמָּדֵי אֵל כָּל הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר נָבֹא לְשִׁמָּה אֲמַרְי לִי אָחִי הוּא: (בראשית כ:יג)

Rashi explains that the word התעו refers to ה' who took אברהם out of his father's home. Grammatically, however, we have a hard time understanding the plural construct of the word התעו, implying multiple individuals or groups wandering, and not just ה'1. According to רש"י, the wording should be התעה. The Targum, sensitive to this nuanced formulation, interprets the פסוק the following:

והוה כד טעו עממיא בתר עובדי ידיהון יתני קריב יי לדחלתיה מבית אבא ואמרית לה דא טיבותך דתעבדין עמי לכל אתר דנהך לתמן אמרי עלי אחי הוא:

*When the nations of the world were misled and followed their handiwork, ה' brought me out of my father's house and allowed me to attain a level of awe, יראה. As the entire world was moving in one direction, G-d pulled me in the opposite direction. And then I told her, "Do a favor for me. Where ever we go, tell the people that I am your brother."*

The obvious question is what does this request have anything to do with the fact that the world was observing paganism? This has more to do with the world of תאוה than with זרה? We see the same thing occurring in לך לך, as it says:

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר הִקְרִיב לְבֹא מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל שְׂרֵי אֲשֶׁתּוֹ הִנֵּה נָא יְדַעְתִּי כִּי אִשָּׁה יָפֶת מְרָאָה אַתָּ: וְהִנֵּה כִּי יָרְאוּ אֹתְךָ הַמִּצְרַיִם וְאָמְרוּ אֲשֶׁתּוֹ זֹאת וְהִרְגוּ אֹתִי וְאֹתְךָ יִסִּי: אֲמַרְי נָא אָחִיתִי אַתָּ לְמַעַן יִיטֵב לִי בְּעַבְדְּךָ וְהִיטָה נַפְשִׁי בְּגִלְדְּךָ: (שם יב:יא-יג)

There are many problems with this request: First, why does אברהם need to add the detail of ואתך? I don't mind dying, but you alone, I can't bare it! Second, שרה tells אברהם, "Say that you are my sister." Why: למען ייטב לי - in order that I can make money off you, and by the way, now they'll let me live. How exactly do we understand this?

What was the culture of אברהם's time? What was it like to live in a world when wife-snatching was accepted as a norm? The first time we saw an era similar to this was during the דור המבול. The תורה says there:

<sup>1</sup> See רש"י שם

וַיְהִי כִּי הִחֵל הָאָדָם לָרֵב עַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה וּבָנוּת גִּלְדוֹ לָהֶם: וַיִּרְאוּ בְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת בָּנוֹת הָאָדָם כִּי טֹבֹת הָיָה וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּחָרוּ: (שם ו:א-ב)

The word אלוהים, as רש"י explains there, doesn't refer to ה'. This term implies men of stature. The upper-class elite saw the בנות האדם. אדם denotes the lowly of mankind, deriving from the root word אדמה, earth. The members of this social class were downtrodden and undignified. We can already see a contrast. The men of the big city see the women of the farm. How do they describe what they see? טובות הנה. It doesn't say they were wise or intelligent. They were "good." This is the first time in history man objectifies the woman. It's really disgusting. We don't know what she really is. All we know is that she is *good for me*. The word טוב doesn't describe objects on objective terms. There is no such thing as an "objective good." The right word is truth. Good means I have an advantageous relationship with a certain value, place, or person. No one says, "This bottle is green. That's good." That's awkward. It would only mean something if I'm Irish and the color green reconnects me to my past, which I identify with, making me feel good. The green color per se can't be defined as good. It's the green which shoots memories which makes me define it as good. If you aren't Irish, then it's not "good" for you! It just is. It's just a bottle! The words good and bad merely describe how you react to something. וירא אלוקים כי טוב. What does it mean? It means that G-d "felt good" about the world and there He decided to maintain its existence<sup>2</sup>. עבודת ה', in בדרך אגב, this is an important idea in. The extent you create a תענוג to, the more you are a reason for קיום העולם. The more you disappoint Him, the more you are a reason for the negation of reality.

When these women are described טובות, it doesn't mean they are intelligent. It's doesn't mean they're beautiful. Beauty is a description of the proportionate merging of different elements, each part existing in harmony with each other. Rather, it means she's attractive. If a girl thinks she's attractive, she's basically objectifying herself. That's טובות. It's the objectification of the person. You, as an individual, really don't mean anything to me. All I care about is how *you* make *me* feel good. There is *you* as far as *I* am concerned. I judge you with just one question: are you good for me or are you bad for me.

These בני אלוהים dehumanized these women. What happened after that? The פסוק continues "בעולת בעל, אף הזכר וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּחָרוּ." Rashi explains that this refers to "והבהמה". Morality collapsed. Desire and objectification dragged them down. It was now accepted to wife-snatch, perform bestiality and משכב זכר. This moral decay stems from one core issue. Once you define people as good or bad, not factoring in any objectivity, centering your world around yourself and your desires, you will begin to break those boundaries. Everything is fair game. This is where אברהם is found. According to אונקלוס's understanding, אברהם is saying because of the pagan culture morality doesn't exist, and they might take you. What does this have to do with paganism? This is an outgrowth of desire! How does עבודה זרה lead to this?

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<sup>2</sup> See the רמב"ן there. קיום העולמות טוב means.

The answer lies in the פסוקים we mentioned earlier:

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר הִקְרִיב לְבוֹא מִצְרָיִמָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל שְׂרֵי אִשְׁתּוֹ הֲנֵה נָא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אִשָּׁה יְפֹת מְרָאָה אַתָּה: וְהִנֵּה כִּי יֵרְאוּ אֹתְךָ הַמִּצְרָיִם וַאֲמָרוּ אִשְׁתּוֹ זֹאת וְהִרְגוּ אֹתִי וְאֹתְךָ יִסִּי: אָמְרִי נָא אֲחֹתִי אַתָּה לְמַעַן יִיטַב לִי בְּעַבְדֶּיךָ וְחִיְתָה נְפֹשִׁי בְּגִלְלֶיךָ: (שם יב:יא-יג)

You really think אברהם didn't know that his wife was good-looking? He was married with her for over 50 years! Why is אברהם talking about money, let alone to mention it first, but before his own life! On the level of פשוט these questions are quite strong. To understand these פסוקים we have to understand them on a different level. Before we start, I have to predicate something. When we look at the חומש we are seeing multiple layers of understanding. We are primed thinking "the פשוט is x," but what *is* פשוט? It really depends on what's the purpose of this amazing book.

Do you see חומש as a history book? That would be ludicrous. The תורה is presented not just anachronistically, but actually *anti*-sequentially. The theme of מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה is used extensively in רש"י's commentary. Last week, we read about the הבתרים and that happened 5 years before אברהם ever heard לך לך<sup>3</sup>! אברהם actually went to ארץ ישראל twice: first for the הבתרים and then after the calling of לך לך. Understand this. By definition, it can't be a history book. So, what is it? It's a piece of literature. Ok, but what kind of literature? If it were to be defined as a novel, it wouldn't be read. The characters aren't fleshed out in any way. We don't know about אברהם except for the fact that he has a father named תרה, he left כשדים אור, stopped in חרן for some unknown reason, and then was suddenly told, "Go to the land where I will show you." Who's Abraham? Nothing. You can tell me the מדרש says x and y, but I'm asking about the book itself. What is this ספר about?

The answer is the חומש is a collection of short-stories. They don't have fleshed out characters because the characters aren't important for they are merely vehicles conveying the information needed for the reader to understand the lesson. The characters are there to create situations which are deemed valuable for the reader to comprehend. When I see חומש, I see short stories. It means that the history is not important. The character development is not an essential value. The situation is important. G-d took snippets of history, something that really did occur, and presented the characters and setting in a certain context to convey His message. He wants you to *chap*. Any author of a short-story doesn't write the story to know the story. He wants you to understand the meaning behind the storyline. It's an אמצעי for a מטרה. The personalities of the Bible only mean anything to the extent that biblical characters convey and embody the message intended.

When we are reading the תורה we are looking for her messages. It's not history nor a novel. If so, there are multiple levels of understanding the storyline, for each level uncovers more of what the message is. When we say פשוט רמז דרש סוד, we are saying the message of G-d is really multilayered because there are multiple ways of seeing the situation presented in the wording

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<sup>3</sup> ע' תוספות שבת י: 3

of the תורה. Depending on your cultural background it could mean many different things. However, many people are still stuck with their kindergarten images of the תנ"ך. They think that the Jews who left Egypt were bearded men who wore ציציית and *shtreimels*. I'm telling you now that they were assimilated and pagan. It's totally something else.

Therefore, there is no reason to say that פשט is *more real* than that of סוד or רמז דרש. It's G-d speaking to you through the situation. Instead of writing philosophical treatises, stories are told to embody those concepts. When you write in prose, the words are in a defined reality. When you write in poetry, it's endless. It's taking those infinite feelings and limiting them into words on paper. You use language in a non-restrictive way and therefore allow for numerous levels of interpretation. When you read אגדה don't you realize you'll encounter poetic language? It's like when the historians say, "The Prussian Eagle spread her wings over Europe." They don't mean a mythological creature owned by the Prussians hovered over the continent. If you know your history, the eagle is the emblem of Bismarck, the unifier of Germany, and through him the nation became a superpower. So, don't think when חז"ל say, "a bird was flying over something" that there was a real bird. There was no bird! It's an allegory to some idea or value. This is obvious.

This is all the more true with the תורה. It's like a love letter. You דרשן the color, texture, space between the letters etc. You read it five times and you understand it differently each time. G-d, in His infinite wisdom, expressed His חכמה through the poetic language of the תורה. It's endless. If you are a competent interpreter and disciplined enough, you can extract that אמת. But you need to know something. Start by understanding כל התורה כולה.

When I have questions on the פשט of the פסוק it could be that it's indicating the understanding is based off the רמז and דרש רמז. סוד. The גר"א writes that for פשט to be correct, it must also fit with the other levels of interpretations. If you don't know all of it, then you don't know what the פשט *really* is. Everything has to go together. Let's begin to understand what אברהם was doing when he was about to go down to Egypt.

The זוהר הקדוש writes that there are three people who tried to change the world. One was אדם הראשון. He tried to eat the forbidden fruit and, let's just say, he was living a purely cerebral reality with no dominance at all over his sensual self. He chose to have the opportunity of experiencing the world with this animalistic side and succeed in having his intellect dominate his sensual nature. He wanted to have relative thinking. He wanted a balanced perspective of objective truths and subjectivity in order to ultimately have the intellect govern. So, he ate the fruit. This is really what you should be doing today. You have a מוח and a לב and the מוח should overpower the לב. The problem was, he sunk. The מוח went down and the לב went up and he suddenly began engaging in תאוה, irrational, obsessive desires. It's not defined by שכל. Once subjectivity became the dominant way of seeing things, feelings were used to define realities. "I don't do things because they're the best for me or they're right. I do them because they make me feel good." There is no thought behind it. If you were a בעל שכל, then you would feel good in

the place where your שכל will grow. That's the honest truth. But living only an experiential life is a problem. That's where תאוה comes in. Man starts objectifying people based on how they make you feel good and not based on who they are. It leads to the decay of our morality, committing sins like בעולת בעל and משכב זכר. You walked away from the dominance of the cerebral and your decision making is based on your emotions, totally devoid of thought. Now everything is defined on "what will make me feel better." The גר"א in משלי says that the two things which make the world move are תאוה and גאווה. Self-centeredness and obsessive desires not defined by rational. Anyone self-centered is really lacking שכל because he can't see the broad picture of reality. He's blind. He's myopic. Because with שכל, you can't be בעלי גאווה. People who think and understand see the world with a broad scope. Do you know how big the universe is? It's enormous. And you think *you* are the center of it all? Are you funny? It's a big world out there. Relax on your גאווה. גאווה is the biggest סימן מובהק that G-d is not in the center of your world. , You know what, once G-d is not in the center of your reality, תאוה also comes in to fill the void. You define the world by what makes you feel good and go after it.

That's what happened to Adam. He wanted to create this balancing act and he flopped. The next one who tried it was נח. He took the גפן, which some understand to refer to the עץ הדעת, into the תיבה. He no one asked him to do this. As soon as he came out, he planted the grapevine. Why did he do it? The זוהר says that he wanted to do what אדם did. He wanted a second try. He thought he was different. Mankind now experienced the trauma of the מבול. He has an inherent sense of G-d awareness. Do you know how society deals with trauma? It's a powerful force. The world of Victorian England died in the advent of World War I, socialism entered the stage etc... Values changed because the people began reassessing them due to the trauma, instilling a level of יראה שלא מדעת. Things changed. We don't do things like that anymore. It's not catalyzed by the intellect. It's part of the condition of man in response to trauma. Anyone who grew up in a Holocaust survivor's house will recognize that their parents had a certain relationship with food: it can't be wasted. It's not conscious. It's a part of their inner subconscious. נח was the survivor of a major, traumatic experience. His society was eradicated. Nothing was left except for him. Can you imagine his life? נח realized that this trauma instilled a certain מדעת שלא יראה. He's more equipped to deal with the challenge of subjectivity versus cerebral truths. He wants to give it another try because if he succeeds it's the best thing for humanity. He went for it. He failed miserably. He was humanities hope, the man of the great trauma; yet, still failing.

But it happened again. It was אברהם's turn as he was going down to מצרים. Think about it. What is Egypt? At the time, it was the ultimate hedonistic, pleasure-seeking country in civilization. It's called ערות הארץ. You know why during מכת בכורות there were a lot of בכורות being discovered that night. Family life was not existent in Egypt. תוספות ג: in תוספות says that Egyptian society is the source that גויים don't have ייחוס. It's זרמת סוסים זרמתם. There was no father-son relationship. It was more of a progenitor-offspring one. The child was a consequence of his desires. There is no idea of דורות there. Everyone has focused on the here and now. But they

didn't look for the future, which really means that they didn't have a past either. It was pure hedonism.

Egypt was exactly like the *דור המבול* in this sense. To them, the world was not defined in objective terms; rather, they viewed reality through their subjective lens. It's because they were wealthy. In the agrarian society of ancient civilizations, if one farmed with a constant water supply then he was rich. The Nile guaranteed its farmers success. It was very fertile. They didn't need rain. G-d tells the Jews *לא כארץ מצרים היא*. The Land of *ארץ ישראל*, which I am going to bring you in, is not like Egypt. One must rely on the rainfall for the success of his crops. In Egypt, all one had to do was kick open the floodgates and relax. Now you have to worry. Is this a good thing? I'm always living in anxiety about my crops. I would much rather have a guaranteed cash flow. The *פסוק* says that life on the Nile is actually a low life. It's like G-d gave them a credit card and said, "OK, live your life." G-d says to us, "I want to talk to you on a weekly basis. Come to *ארץ ישראל* where that can be done." If all you want is money and not know about your Father, then go ahead. But if you want the relationship, you'll sacrifice the never-ending credit card and instead live on a weekly allowance. Then He'll talk to me. I have a private meeting with G-d. That's not bad. If you think about Me, I'll "make the time" to think about you too. That's why *ארץ ישראל* is so great.

Living in an agricultural society, dependent on the rainwater, actually makes you more aware of G-d. The Gemara<sup>4</sup> says *אמונה* refers to *סדר זרעים* because the farmer has to pray in order for his crops to grow. You don't have that feeling when you live in the big cities. The more you live in an urban society, the more divorced you are from nature. You don't see the G-d of nature. You think tomatoes are grown in the storefronts. You think water comes from the tap. That's not the case. There's something happening in nature which allowed this to happen. If you lived with nature and experience the Creator of nature, you would live with a heightened religious awareness.

Egypt didn't have this. It wasn't necessary to look up to G-d for anything. They were so self-efficient that they were free not to think about Him. And this had consequences: the world devoid of G-d is a very hedonistic one. Imagine a society which can actually drown children! It's the same society which sees children as the price you pay for a minute of pleasure. The child is nothing. The husband-wife relationship wasn't seen as a means to create the future. It's not to create history. The encounter is personal and it's now. You couldn't care less about the consequences. You go brain-dead, and you don't find it a problem to drown those "accidents." The society we live today is remarkably very similar. That's the Egypt of *אברהם*. Going down to Egypt is THE PLACE of experientialism. Can he enter that society and take in that sensuality and walk out a healthy man? Can this man of prophecy, trying to change the world, exactly like *נח* did, drink the wine and not get drunk? Because if you do and yet your *מוה* still wins, then you won.

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<sup>4</sup> שבת לא.

אדם tried it. He failed. נח tried. He tanked really badly. The זוהר says that אברהם walked in poor and came out rich. *Vidi vini vici*. He met it. He encountered it. And he won. He walked out enhanced with a whole new side of himself which we encountered and subjugated to his value system.

That's the מעשה אבות סימן לבנים. The רמב"ן writes that all the stories and experiences of the אבות form the spiritual and metaphysical DNA of the Jewish nation for the rest of history. G-d created this reality through the אבות and now it's a part of us. The זוהר explains that before accepting the challenge, אברהם spoke to his wife. We must explain the idea of זכור ונקבה before we continue. G-d is also described as "זכור ונקבה." The Infinite G-d expresses Himself in different ways. There is the Infinite G-d Who is not really comprehensible, Who is the source of creation and ideas. Then there is the Infinite G-d Who is expressed in the natural world. We'll describe this in terms such as the G-d of philosophy and the G-d of science. The experiential G-d and the G-d of the שכל. These are two perspectives in how we relate to הקב"ה. One is called קודשא בריך הוא. One is called שכינה. שכינה is feminine. We say לייחד קודשא בריך הוא ושכינתיה הוא. The רמב"ן, in his commentary on אנכי ה', writes that the obligation is to bring more of the cerebral understandings of הקב"ה and making them part of our experiential lives. This is "bringing together" the קודשא בריך הוא ושכינתיה. We are making a union between our intellectual understanding of הקב"ה and our feelings about Him. That's our goal. We are trying to take the mistake of אדם and use it in a balanced way via תורה ומצוות.

Obviously, אברהם's a person. שרה's a person. But when we talk about the biblical characters, as far as I'm concerned, we look at the literary character. This book is not a history book. So how does the תורה depict these two characters in this story to represent a certain idea and value? The זוהר writes that when אברהם looked at his wife, the נקבה, he saw the שכינה and said אמור לחכמה אחותי את which means אמרי נא אחותי את. Again, this interpretation is found on the level of סוד, not of פשוט, and the meaning is quite profound. The זוהר is saying that אברהם is praying to the שכינה, "Before I go into this hedonistic society, the experiential world, I ask allow me to be enriched by these experiences." He knows that what he's doing is almost impossible. So, he prays. He asks that the שכינה be like my sister and not like my wife. It was because of this prayer אברהם won. What does this mean and how did it work?

What's the difference between a sister and a wife? The wife-you have to work for. And even when you have her, you have to work constantly to maintain her. It's nothing to take for granted. One you take it for granted, it's over. It must be constantly nurtured. You acquired it. You can lose it. I've seen couples fall apart at the age of 70. In this type of relationship, you are really מחדש בכל יום תמיד מעשי בראשית. In a crazy way, it's external. It's something that you have, but it's not you. You have make sure it stays together. Then you have the sister. I'll do anything for her. But I can't get rid of her. You're stuck. You can't "un-sister" her. She can never be lost.

Do you realize that there are aspects of your relationship with G-d that G-d is like your wife? If you don't constantly nurture it, you'll lose it. Similarly, there are basic religious values which you take in, but they are like an added load which you need to constantly retighten. If don't

work on it, then you'll lose it. We have our ups and downs in our religious behavior. There are times we fail. But will you lose it? You know what you can do to always have it? Take those values and transform them from being your wife into being your sister. Have them internalize into your self-image, make them become a part of who you are? There is a big difference between *doing* good things and *being* a good person. It's who you are. There are values which become part of your subconscious self. That's why you identify with them. Those are the things which don't have to battle for. You'll never lose them. If you go back to a society, which certain *מדות* and *הנהגות* of become lax, *תפילה* *בציבור* for example, that means that you are at risk of also treating that value like a wife (more like a *פילגש*). Definitely not like a sister. That's why you might end up not going to minyan three times a day. The goal is to make it part of your essence.

Many of you will return to a multi-disciplined reality, the broad world. It's a big world out there. Knowing the society of today, you're going back to *ארץ מצרים*. You can stay close to yourself. But it doesn't work. In the end of the day, *everybody* gets exposed. You will encounter a world which will challenge you and your religious posture. It's a wild world out there and you're going to the modern-day Egypt. But you're looking for success. You want to do the same thing as *אברהם*. You want to say *vidi vini vici* too. I think's a great idea. But we learn from *אברהם* *אבינו* there is *one* thing must do first: when I'm found in a society going in one way and myself being pulled in the opposite direction say *אמרי* *נא אחותי* *את*. *אברהם* prayed for his *קדושה* to become realized and internalized in his life. When he took those transcendent ideals, and expressed and lived them, seeing them as definition to who he was, he saw the *שכינה*, for the *שכינה* is the feminine aspect of the Infinite G-d which expresses itself in this finite reality.

That's what *אברהם* did and that's your job too. Internalize those values to the point that they are who *you* are and nothing can stop you. Don't go near the challenge until you have this because if it's just *אשתי* you probably will lose it. If it's just acquired things, it's not going to work. You have to make it *עשה* *רצונו* *רצונו*. If you lost anything in your religious posture, it's because it wasn't part of your essential being. It was merely *רצונו* *בפני* *רצונו*. It was religious obligation, which you did see as important, but it wasn't you. If that's the case, you better find yourself a cloister until you make it a part of you. *Then* go out and change the world. I think great people did great things because they incorporated broad ideas of history, philosophy, and literature into their worldview. The world wouldn't be the same without the Rav. It wouldn't be the same without the Lubavitcher Rebbe. They were *אחרי* *כן* *יצאו* *ברכוש* *גדול*. We owe them a big favor. It was because they were *זוכה* to say *אמרי* *נא אחותי* *את*. The first thing that comes out is *למען* *יטב* *לי*. *אברהם* came out with a *רכוש* *גדול*. He's going down to Egypt in order to be enhanced by that experience. When I'm enhanced with the experience then *והיית* *נפשי* *בגללך*.

This is very practical. *אברהם* did it. But, you know, *אדם* and *נח* also tried and they failed. They did the right moves. They danced the right songs and cried the right tears. But it was all *אשתי* not *אחותי*. So, they failed. How many times do I see these kids with their *ציצית* out, looking very *frum*, and somehow I see them sitting next to the girls on the plane giggling together the whole

time. This is the guy who's is x and does y. That's bankruptcy. That's נה. For me, מעשה אבות סימן tells me you can't do it that way. We do go down to our Egypt and come out ברכוש גדול. We emptied them all out and it wasn't just from their money. It means whatever קדושה and good we found in that place we took. We incorporated the good parts of that society (be it immoral and hedonistic) into our identity. It colored our psyche. You are influenced by the place you live in, by the books you read, even by the streets you walk in. The question is how are *you*. Is it אחותי את or אשתי את? That's the goal. We go into the great world to enhance our עבודת ה'. You can succeed but there is one big "if," and if you have it, then you could enter into that world and grow.