



A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

by Daniel Hammerschlag

CHUMASH (Bible): The Challenge of Learning and Living...



If there is one thing that's been emphasized in my year in Israel it is a love for **Chumash** (Bible). At least five days a week, I sit in the *beit midrash* (study hall) and learn *Chumash* with my *chavrutot* (study partners), a new and enriching experience for me. Learning with a *chavruta* differs from learning solo, mainly because it challenges you to study in a whole new fashion, with a new perspective. *Chevvruta* study has given me the opportunity to study *Bereishit* (Genesis) with a whole new set of eyes, giving me a novel and personal understanding of the patriarchs.

Judaism develops the patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, as a history of sorts of the birth of the Jewish people. But to me, their lives and stories are not just a story of a birth of a nation, but also a paradigm of the path an individual may pursue to connect to both G-d and a Jewish lifestyle, as well as one's true self. I also think it is a great analogy for what I went through when I began my year in Israel, where I was three months or so ago, and where I am now.

When I think of Avraham, there are two particular things that come to mind. The first, a well-known concept, is that of Avraham as a representation for *chesed* (loving-kindness), an aspect of monotheistic religion that everyone admires. He is said to have had a tent with four doors, for no other purpose but to be better able to invite people into his home. Additionally, when Avraham is introduced, he is already an old man at the twilight age of seventy, and has a connection with G-d. We are not told what he has done with his life up to this point, nor how he developed such an intimate link with G-d.

Avraham represents a stage that we all start with or go back to at one point in our lives. It's **the beginning part of the struggle.**

If we want Judaism in any form within our lives, we have to ask ourselves: "What do I stand to gain from this book, what in here will make me a better human being?" The answer is rarely going to be the complex ideas and philosophies that are harder to grasp logically, such as *Kashrut* (keeping kosher), but rather the ideas that are instilled within us from birth: do not murder or steal or gossip.

We connect with these simple, yet vital ideas, acknowledging that a philosophy that looks out for people to the extent that Judaism does, probably has much value as a lifestyle. These are ideas we can relate to, ideas that the western world is built upon to a certain extent, so they are easy to come to. Thus, many people's journey to religion will often begin by acknowledging the *chesed* or **Avraham** aspect of Judaism.

However, developing a relationship with G-d is more difficult than developing a relationship with just Judaism, especially in today's secular world. No two people can travel the same path towards G-d, as it is a unique and personal relationship. Just as Avraham came to G-d in his own, unknown fashion, so must we find our own unique path to a relationship with the Divine in our own lives. We then take these stepping stones, a connection with Judaism and a blooming relationship with G-d, and build on both of them, which then lead us towards the next stage: **Yitzchak**.

Yitzchak is one who sticks to himself, almost selfishly, his critics would say. His first great act, and probably most well known, is one where he isn't even particularly active: in the *Akeidah* (the binding of Isaac). His father, Avraham, is instead the active character in this story, with Yitzchak just passively acquiescing. This seems to be the model which he follows for the rest of his life. He has all this knowledge of morality and ethics, as well as the Divine, that could have benefited the world, but instead is forced to or chooses to seek a life of near solitude¹.

Yitzchak represents the period of development following that of Avraham, where one sticks to oneself. This is a necessary stepping stone to becoming an active Jew. Yitzchak is the time one spends on oneself, on learning how to better one's connection to G-d, and the general understanding of the ways and the laws of Torah, much like one's year in Israel.

And then there is Yaakov. **Yaakov** represents a combination of the best of both Avraham and Yitzchak, a leap back out into the world while still staying to true to oneself. He is born and raised alongside Esau, lives under Lavan, and next to many other non-monotheistic influences², yet still manages to live by the ideals of Judaism he began with, under many challenging circumstances³.

The stage of **Yaakov** is the point where one feels ready to actualize things learned and bringing them back out into the world. It is in the stage of **Yaakov** that one takes the self-focused orientation of **Yitzchak** and makes it selfless, by making the world a better place starting with oneself. Or as my *Chavruta* Avi is fond of saying, "**You have to fill your cup before you can give to others**", so too must you first have something worth sharing with the world before you can actually share anything. If Yaakov had come into the world before Yitzchak, he would have had nothing to share beyond a method of

¹ In the one case he tries to go out and live like his father (Genesis 26:1), he tries to avoid a famine and follow in the footsteps of his father and go down to Egypt, but G-d comes to him and tells him not to, for his path is not the same path as Avraham. I also said he chose to live this way, because much like Noah, we are never shown Yitzchak interacting or influencing his polytheistic neighbors.

² Often not even moral societies as seen with the city of Shechem, where his daughter Dinah was taken and became a victim of implied rape and the Egyptians, who have a near completely opposite life view to ours and who also went and enslaved his descendants for centuries.

³ We know he lived and kept his ideals for his entire life for no other reason than the fact that the Jews descend from him and that G-d remained with him until he died. Had he strayed, the Torah in all probability would have shared this, and he wouldn't have been the holy man the Torah emphasizes he is.

connection that would be effective for no one else other than himself. Because of Yitzchak's life of drawing in, Yaakov was able to gain from that and give back to the world.

Before I came to Orayta, I did not have much to say about religion, Judaism, or "G-d" that was positive. I wasn't even on the level of Avraham, for I did not even respect the *chesed* aspect of Judaism, focusing instead on its' more negative aspects. After learning here for a month or so, I began to notice a change in my attitude. I began to see wisdom within my religion, and in turn began to respect and then trust it. I also had noticed that things that I used to despise in my Jewish schooling, such as learning both *Chumash*, *Gemara*, and pretty much anything but philosophy (which I never seemed to be able to find consistently offered) were now not only studied for the challenge, but for the enjoyment and improvement I got out of studying them. Without realizing it, I had entered and gone through the Avraham and Yitzchak stages.

I'm hoping that I can reach the third and final stage, where I can take my life that I have found to have been made better by my study and beginning practice of Judaism and help give it back to the world. Originally, I thought this year would have little merit. That has all changed. Thanks to this "meritless" year, I will not only be a better, more knowledgeable and mature human being and Jew, but a more active one as well and hopefully those around me will also be able to gain by my new found ability to give back.

Shabbat Shalom and **Mom: Surprise!**

Disclaimer: This is an idea that I've been toying with and developing for a while but I didn't feel was ready. Rav Moish and Scott however asked me to write this week's article, so if the idea doesn't make sense or has holes, it was completed under time pressure; direct all critique their way!

Daniel graduated from the FRISCH school.

He was the Founder and President of the Comic Book Club, School drama set builder, Debate team researcher amongst his many other extra-curricular activities.

Daniel loves everyone at Orayta and the staff for letting him keep his "pet" shopping cart in the dorm.

After Orayta, Daniel will be attending Brandeis University, majoring in psychology, computer science and philosophy.