

## Toldot | What's it like to stand on the shoulders of giants

Beginnings are always definitive moments. They set the tone, the foundation for what follows. The beginnings of the Jewish people are no exception. These portions of the Torah which we are reading at the moment from the Book of Genesis detail the origins of the Jewish nation, telling the events of our forefathers and foremothers ? Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov; Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah. These are the formative moments of our faith; the lives they lived and the ideals they upheld literally brought the Jewish people into being, and the values they embodied are those we still live by today.

Avraham and Sarah were the first two to reach out and connect with G-d. In a world filled with paganism and idolatry they re-established the idea of monotheism, a belief in one G-d. They reached out to the people around them, spread these ideas, but most importantly handed them on to their children and grandchildren so that our ancestors became the custodians of faith in G-d. G-d established His covenant with them and their children and made pledges to them about the future blessings which awaited their descendants.

The founding mothers and fathers are the original biological ancestors of the Jewish people. But it is their spiritual parenthood that is crucial. We see this from the fact that converts can join Am Yisrael and be considered the children of our forefathers and foremothers even though they are not biologically connected. In fact, converts are explicitly referred to as sons of Abraham and daughters of Sarah.

And so when we encounter G-d today we do so standing on the shoulders of giants, continuing the journey of our great ancestors who took those cosmically significant first few steps. At one of the greatest moments of Jewish history, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the Jewish people who crossed over on dry land declared, ?This is my G-d and I will glorify Him? (Exodus 15:2). Our sages explain that the word ?this? indicates that they had such a degree prophetic insight that they were, in a manner of speaking, able to point to G-d, and perceive Him with a clarity that even the greatest prophets in later generations were unable to experience. And yet, even at this climax, this pinnacle of human spiritual achievement, the verse continues, ?? [He is] the G-d of my fathers and I will exalt Him?. Rashi paraphrases: ?I am not the beginning of the holiness, rather the holiness and His divinity has been established with me from the days of my fathers?. Even in their heightened prophetic state, they were completely dependent on the spiritual endeavours of those who came before them. Everything rested on the foundations laid by their ancestors.

Rav Elya Meyer Bloch cites a similar example from the Gemara (Shabbos 30a). The Gemara discusses the inauguration of the Temple by King Solomon, and how the gates of the Temple would not open no matter how much he prayed. Eventually, he invoked the merit of his father, King David, at which point they opened. In building the Temple, King Solomon reached a level of greatness that even his father King David had not reached. Nevertheless at such a time he was reminded that his achievements were based on the merit of his father. And similarly, so much of what we have today as the Jewish people, so much of what we have achieved and who we are, rests on the foundations of the generations that came before us.

It is for this reason that we begin the amidah, the central Jewish prayer, by invoking our ancestors, ?Blessed are you Hashem our G-d and G-d of our Fathers, G-d of Abraham and the G-d of Isaac and the G-d of Jacob ?? We encounter G-d not on our own merits, but on the merits of our forebears. We acknowledge the spiritual foundations that they built which have prepared the way for us to commune with G-d, Himself. We stand before G-d in the merit of the community among whom we pray, but also in the accumulated merit of the generations of Jews who came before us, and especially those who laid the foundations for our people, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov; Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah.

Our spiritual fathers and mothers also did something else. They paved the way by connecting to certain key values which are central to how we serve Hashem and to the kind of people that we are today. And in that sense we are also their spiritual children, having received their values. The Mishna in Pirkei Avot says that the world stands on three spiritual principles: the learning of Torah, the service of G-d, and acts of kindness (Pirkei Avot 1:2). These are the spiritual pillars of the world. The Maharal of Prague explains

that our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, each embodied one of these pillars.

Avraham is the icon of acts of kindness. He embodied compassion, giving, and love for all people. Yitzchak is the icon of service of G-d. It was he who willingly submitted himself as a sacrifice to G-d, and embodied devout service and prayer. And Yaakov is the icon of Torah learning. This week's parsha, Toldot, describes him as a pure man who dwelt in 'tents', which our sages understand to mean the tents of Torah learning. Yaakov was someone devoted to the pursuit of truth.

Rav Yaakov Kamanetsky raises an interesting question. He points out that Avraham and Yaakov each have a number of Torah portions devoted to their life story, while Yitzchak has just one - Toldot. Why is there so much told about Avraham and Yaakov and comparatively little about Yitzchak?

Rav Yaakov Kamanetsky explains that the discrepancy is related to the impact each had on the world around them. The Rambam writes that Avraham influenced tens of thousands of people to become adherents of ethical monotheism. His impact on the world was substantial. As the embodiment of loving-kindness, he reached out to others - and people associated his kindness and compassion with G-d's own kindness and compassion. The midrash says, for example, that when Avraham would host guests in his home, at the end of the meal they would thank him, and he would redirect them to thank Hashem.

As the one who disseminated Torah to the world, Yaakov had a similarly momentous impact. Rav Yaakov Kamanetsky explains that Yaakov's approach in teaching Torah was through its intellectual power. He was able to convey the depth of the wisdom of Torah to so many, illuminating both the world around them and within them.

Yitzchak on the other hand was very private. He embodied personal discipline and self-sacrifice, and a deep, unwavering commitment to G-d. His impact on the world was through his one and only disciple - his son, Yaakov.

Rav Yaakov Kamanetsky goes on to explain that Avraham and Yaakov had a much wider impact because their teachings were based on kindness and wisdom respectively, which are appealing and compelling to people. But Yitzchak's message was one of discipline and self-control, of personal integrity and self-sacrifice. These aren't popular notions, and therefore his impact on the world was far more limited.

Rav Yaakov Kamanetsky makes the point that while these three different approaches impacted the world to different degrees, nevertheless all three are essential. Kindness and empathy; wisdom and insight; self-discipline and personal integrity - all three are vital components of true greatness. And all three - and the people who embodied them - are the spiritual pillars on which the world stands and the very essence of the Jewish people.