

Repetition

By Rabbi Joshua (repeatedly known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

The story is told of Rav Saadia Gaon, the great tenth century rabbinic scholar and leader of Babylonian Jewry, that he once came to town to deliver a Torah discourse, and stayed overnight at an inn. The innkeeper, who did not realize the stature of the lodger, dealt with him rather abruptly, telling him where his room was and walking away. The next morning, this innkeeper heard that all of the businesses in town were closed, and a large gathering of people had assembled to hear a Torah lecture from the great Rav Saadia Gaon. The innkeeper, wishing to participate, made his way to the lecture hall. When he got there, he was horrified to see that the man he had treated so poorly the night before was the greatest Torah sage of the generation. After the lecture, he approached Rav Saadia, fell on his face and begged to be forgiven, saying, 'Had I known yesterday what I know today, that you are Rav Saadia Gaon, I would have treated you so much differently.'

The next day, upon returning home, Rav Saadia entered his study, sat down and began to cry. When a student walked in and saw him in this state, he asked what the matter was. Rav Saadia told him what had happened in the town, and what the innkeeper had told him. If the innkeeper could feel that way, he said, how much more should I have a similar feeling. Everyday I learn Torah and understand more about my Creator. The more I learn, the more I realize how deficient my service of and dedication to God the day before was. That is why I am crying. Had I only known yesterday what I know today, I would have acted so much differently, and for that I have to ask God forgiveness.

I believe that this story of Rav Saadia Gaon can give us added insight into an episode recorded in this week's parsha. Before descending to Egypt due to a famine in Canaan, Avram pitches his tent, with Beis - El to the west and Ai to the east, builds an altar there, and invokes God by name (Bereishis, 12 : 8). The Targum explains that Avram prayed to God there, while another explanation is that he told people about God. On his return from Egypt, laden with the riches he had received there, we are again told that Avram "proceeded on his journeys from the south to Beis - El, to the place where his tent had been at first...to the site of the altar which he had made there at first ; and there Avram invoked God by His name" (Bereishis, 13 : 3-4). Rashi explains that by referring to 'his journeys,' the Torah is telling us that Avram, on his return trip from Egypt, would stay overnight in the same lodging places that he had stayed in on his journey down there. Why did he do so? Rashi brings two explanations from the midrash. Either it was proper conduct - derech eretz - to lodge in the same place, or he did so in order to pay his debts, as he was impoverished on his way down.

Both of Rashi's explanations teach us something of Avraham's sterling character. With the story of Rav Saadia Gaon in the background, however, Avraham's conduct takes on added meaning. The Torah tells us that Avraham invoked God's name on his return trip at the same altar where he had invoked it originally. One explanation, as we have seen, is that he taught people about God at that spot. After the events in Egypt, and the divine help he received there, his appreciation of God increased, and the message about God's providence and kindness that he brought to others also changed. Staying in the same lodgings thus gave him an opportunity to teach his host what he had learned in the interim, and thereby show him first hand the greatness of God. According to the Targum, the Torah is telling us that Avraham prayed to God at the same place where he had prayed on his way to Egypt. Here, too, the message is that his experiences in Egypt deepened his relationship with God, and his prayers, at the same altar where he had prayed on his way down, were commensurately deeper. Avraham's descent to Egypt, then, which was one of

the ten trials he underwent, was a further step in his development as a spiritual model for the world.

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