

Parshas Lechi Lechia 5772

HOW THE WORLD CHANGED

AVRAHAM AVINU – REVOLUTIONARY PAR EXCELLANCE

When we compare the two worlds – today’s era, compared to the time of Avraham Avinu – a compelling difference emerges. Now, what Avraham was able to achieve in his world is truly remarkable. He is referred to in our *parshah* (*Bereishis 14:13*) as Avraham Ha’Ivri (literally, *the Hebrew*), which Chazal understand as reflecting his position: כל העולם כולו מעבר אי והוא מעבר אי “The whole world was on one side, and Avraham was on the other” (*Bereishis Rabbah 42:8*). While the entire world was steeped in idolatry, Avraham recognized the true Creator through clear-headed observation and contemplation. And so he set about denouncing idol worship and spreading the word of the One True Hashem.

His efforts met with great success, as he won over scores of people to the true faith. These individuals were the core of the group described in this week’s *parshah* (*ibid. 12:5*) as “The souls acquired in Charan” (*cf. Rashi there and Rambam, Hilchos Avodah Zarah, 1:3*). As testimony to the widespread acceptance of Avraham and his teachings, he was crowned as “G-d’s prince” by an assemblage of all of the nations (*Rashi to 14:17*).

Such a massive theological upheaval (for the better) was possible in Avraham’s era. In contrast, the so-called “modern” era has witnessed an unfortunate trend in the opposite direction – and under conditions that should have been ideal for a *strengthening* the awareness of the Creator. The great advances in technology and scientific discovery have afforded an opportunity to examine the wonders of the minutiae of the natural world more than ever before, from the tiniest cells to the celestial bodies. One would have

expected that more people would come to believe in and be awestruck at the works of the Creator. Unfortunately, from some of these very scholars and leaders comes denial and cynicism. How was it possible for an Avraham Avinu to convince a whole world of pagans to abandon their idols, yet in today’s world there almost seems to be a crusade against the Creator in the public and academic world? What has changed, exactly?

A RENEGADE EX-THEOLOGY STUDENT AND A WILLING AUDIENCE

To be specific, it may even be possible to identify an approximate point in time when this shift in attitude occurred. Until relatively recently, there was near-universal recognition of a Creator. Anyone familiar with documents of the founding of this country, for example, can attest that there was no reluctance to acknowledge the existence of the Creator, even in public, governmental settings.

But then, about 200 years ago, the situation was significantly altered. This phenomenon can be summed up, perhaps, by a compelling observation made by R’ Chatzkel Levenstein (*Ohr Yechezkel, Emunah, p. 20*), which helps to explain the basis of this monumental change.

It seems that the earlier generations – with all of their primitiveness and false belief in idolatry – did have “one-up” on our contemporaries. At the very least, the ancients were aware of the simple fact that Creation was *created*. They erred tremendously by attributing the creation to arts-and-crafts projects of clay and stone, but they at least realized that the world must have been fashioned by Someone. And so, there existed the possibility for a righteous teacher like Avraham to rectify their mistakes and guide them as to Who the true Creator really was. But the position of the latter generations is much more egregious, as their heresy leaves

לזכר נשמת פיגא ריזא בת ברוך שלום ע"ה

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of רות בת גרשון הכהן ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

much less room for correction. Led by significant portions of academia, current theorists contend that the world (and everything in it) was never created by anyone; it just sort of “popped” itself into existence (or something like that).

But this situation itself requires explanation. Is there something unique about this era that allows for the adoption and acceptance of such wayward sentiments? What could account for the fact that so many otherwise brilliant scholars subscribe to the idea that an amoeba became a fish, which became a weasel, which became a man, while so many billions of beautiful and wondrous natural phenomena provide straightforward and open testimony to the existence of the Creator?

The explanation, perhaps, can be found in a well-known Mishnah.

OUT OF THIS WORLD

The Mishnah in Avos states (4:21):

רבי אלעזר הקפ"ר אומר, הקנאה והתאונה והפבוד מוציאין את האדם מן העולם.

“R’ Elazar Hakapar says: Jealousy, desire and (the pursuit of) honor remove an individual from the world.”

On the most simplistic level, the intent of the Mishnah is to eschew the enslavement to base instincts and the overindulgence in material pursuits. But the Mishnah’s characterization of the result of such tendencies seems to require some explanation. What does it mean that these traits will “remove an individual from the world”? Is this a reference to an untimely end or to some other form of retribution?

Perhaps this particular phrase refers to something other than the fate and punishment of one who succumbs to these attributes. Instead, the Mishnah is highlighting their harmful spiritual effects. As explained elsewhere (*Mishnas Chayim, parshas Shoftim, 5771*), the lure of material desires can be quite powerful – so much so that they can derail one’s ability to think straight. Such is the basis for the prohibition against accepting bribery; the prospect of even the most minimal material gain can corrupt the “vision” of the most upright and brilliant judge.

One aspect that has characterized the modern era is the almost unrestrained indulgence in society’s whims and desires. It is hard to picture a society more permissive and – quite frankly – more decadent than what one can witness on the screens or even the street on a daily basis.

And so, when the likes of a Darwin presented his theories to the public, he was actually rendering them a great service. By negating the notion of a Creator, he was basically granting the masses a license with which to pursue their desires with no boundaries. In effect, he was delivering the message that one can now do as he wishes because, after all, no one’s watching (Heaven forbid!). No wonder his words were accepted with such enthusiasm! Once steeped in the unmitigated pursuit of material enjoyment, one is rendered incapable of perceiving the obvious testimonies of the Creator from the wonders of the world. In effect, he has been “removed from the world,” for only a person absent from the world can fail to recognize the Creator through its wonders.



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