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### THOUGHT OR ACTION?

**T**HE ACCOUNT OF THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS, WHICH IS THE THEME of our Sedra<sup>1</sup> and of subsequent portions of the Torah, has an intriguing quality. We are learning about the origin of the Jewish people and of Judaism, during the epoch prior to the Giving of the Torah. What does this have to teach us?

The Judaism with which we are acquainted lays great stress on practical elements which, by and large, are not mentioned in the narratives about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Midrash informs us that in fact the Patriarchs *did* observe the practical laws of Judaism. However those practical actions - the Mitzvot- did not have the force and significance that they acquired after the Torah was given at Mount Sinai.

As the Sages express it, “the Mitzvot of the Patriarchs had [merely] the quality of a fragrance”<sup>2</sup>. Before the Torah was given the practical laws were like an extra; afterwards they became the central focus of Jewish teachings, as we see in the later books of the Torah which comprise to a great extent lists of specific practical Mitzvot.

The main reason for this change is because the Giving of the Torah broke through the barrier dividing the spiritual from the physical. The Commands of the Torah, coming from the Essence of the Divine, achieve the sanctification of physical life in a powerful and permanent way. After Sinai, for every single Jew, simple, basic activities such as eating and drinking can enter the domain of the holy,

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governed by sacred Torah laws.

The first step toward this total sanctification of physical life is seen at the end of the Sedra, when Abraham was given the command of circumcision. Only after having been given this command was Abraham capable of fathering Isaac. This command was given when Abraham was ninety nine years old. Previously the Jewish dimension of his life was characterised, first, by his thinking about G-d and his personal discovery of Monotheism. Later on, he and his wife Sarah spent their lives teaching others that there is One G-d who created and rules all existence.

We therefore see two quite different paths of relationship with Judaism. One which preceded the Giving of the Torah, and the other which came after Sinai.

Before Sinai the path began with Thought. As in the case of Abraham's early recognition of G-d, this stage was mainly cerebral. The next stage was that of Speech: Abraham spent a lifetime teaching people about the existence of G-d. Finally he was commanded to carry out a sacred action, to circumcise himself and all the males in his household. This was the third stage, after Thought and Speech: Action.

By contrast, after the Giving of the Torah at Sinai the order is different. The most effective first step in relationship with Judaism is practical action, the discovery of contact with an infinite dimension of existence through the observance of one or other of the Mitzvot, the practical laws of the Torah. On this basis one builds further, entering the realm of Speech with Torah study and prayer, and ultimately reaching the most profound levels of Thought<sup>3</sup>.

Of course, Thought is important; and Torah study and prayer are both deeply significant. However, real steps forward in a person's life often depend on action, pure and simple. A person decides to improve his or her relationship with Judaism and with G-d on a down-to-earth, practical level. A Mezuzah on the door, observance of Kashrut, lighting candles for Shabbat, Tefilin. The simple practical actions, sanctified by Sinai, bring extra holiness to one's life, to the life of one's family and to the world.

1. Genesis chs.12-17. 2. Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:3. 3. Freely based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *From Day to Day*, 7 Cheshvan.

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SEDRA LECH LECHA

**ABRAHAM'S SHEPHERDS...**

Come on Michael, we're going to be late!" Debra called impatiently to her brother. Michael put his coat on quickly and went out to the car.

It was Sunday afternoon and they were going on a shopping trip with their mother. Soon they were on their way to the shopping centre.

"Hey look, Mummy!" Debra exclaimed, as their car approached the large shopping precinct. "They've opened up a `Toys "R" Us' ".

"Great!" said Michael, enthusiastically. Their mother drove into the car park near the new giant toy store. They drove around the car park for a few minutes, but there didn't seem to be any available spaces. After impatiently driving around for a while, they finally came across an empty parking space.

"Gosh!" said Debra, "we can finally park!"

"Well," said her mother, "this space is reserved for people with disabilities. That means we can't park here".

"Why ever not?" said Debra, "we *should* be allowed to park here!"

"Yes" added Michael "we're shopping over here, so we *should* be allowed to park!"

"Look," their mother explained to them, "if the people with disabilities would have to park hundreds of yards away, it would be very difficult for them to walk to the shopping centre, so if we park here in their space it would be a little like stealing from them!"

Debra and Michael thought about that for a minute. "You know something," said Michael, "I think our teacher said something about that last week."

"He was explaining to the class how Abraham did not want his shepherds to let his sheep eat from other people's fields. He told them to fit a muzzle on the sheep's mouths. In fact G-d had already promised Abraham that the Land would be given to him. Because of this, Abraham's shepherds and Lot's shepherds had an argument."

"What's all this got to do with parking the car?" asked Debra. She couldn't wait to get inside the big building and see all those toys.

"Well, Lot's shepherds thought that they were allowed to graze their sheep in those fields. They knew G-d had told Abraham he and his children would have the Land of Israel. So since Lot was Abraham's nephew, the shepherds thought they had a right to graze Lot's sheep where they liked. But Abraham's shepherds said that the land didn't belong to them yet so they shouldn't use it".

"You still haven't explained..." said Debra.

"Anyway", Michael continued, "our teacher said that the Torah tells us this story in order to teach us that even if we might think that we have a right to use something that doesn't belong to us, we still shouldn't use it, because it is like stealing and its very wrong to steal!"

"Hey look!" said their mother. "There is a car pulling out of an ordinary parking space. I think even Abraham's shepherds would agree we can park there!"

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