

## "Avraham Came to Eulogize Sarah and Weep over Her" A Hespded marking the Yahrzeit of the Dreadful Massacre

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### The First Eulogy in the Torah

**“Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and weep over her”** (*Bereishis* 23:2). From the beginning of the Torah this is the very first time we are told about a *hesped*; surely such great figures as Adam, Sheis, Noach and Mesushelach were also eulogized. And even *this hesped* gets no more than a mention; we are told nothing about its content. While the medrash reveals that Avraham eulogized his wife with the verses of *Eishes Chayil* (*Mishlei* 31:10-31), the Torah leaves us without the slightest allusion as to what Avraham said. A further question asked by all the commentators is why *hesped* is mentioned before weeping, when bereavement usually evokes a visceral, non-verbal response such as weeping, before the mourner is capable of expressing grief in a spoken eulogy.

On the words **“Avraham came”** the medrash (*Bereishis Rabba* 58:5) cites two opinions as to where he came from: either from the burial of his father Terach or from Har Hamoriah. Here too, the commentators on the *chumash* ask why this is mentioned here; what relevance does Avraham’s previous location have to his eulogy of Sarah?

The explanation is that Avraham’s eulogy consisted of just a few simple words: “I have come from Har Hamoriah.” No more was necessary. After his tenth and most difficult trial, Avraham told those present when he eulogized his wife, “I want you all to realize that Yitzchak only had the spiritual mettle to allow himself to be bound as a sacrifice because he was Sarah’s son.” He did not need to say any more.

### You Bound a Sacrifice on One Altar; I Bound Sacrifices on Seven of Them

In its account of the martyrdom of Channah and her seven sons, the gemara (*Gittin* 57b) tells us that

after her seventh son was killed his mother addressed him saying, “Go tell Avraham Avinu, ‘You bound a sacrifice on one altar; I bound sacrifices on seven of them.’” What was the purpose of this mission? Was there some kind of numerical competition as to who had martyred more sons? Even stranger is that Avraham Avinu didn’t actually kill his son, while Channah’s sons were killed; which sacrificial altar of Avraham’s was she referring to?

Channah’s message to Avraham Avinu was: Where did my seven sons draw the strength from to sacrifice themselves on an altar in sanctification of Hashem’s Name? Only in your merit were they able to do so, for you bequeathed the power of self-sacrifice for Kiddush Hashem to all your descendants. This was what Channah wanted her son to convey to Avraham Avinu.

### Avraham’s Eulogy was a Lesson in Faith

This was the lesson Avraham wanted to teach his contemporaries – **“the souls they had gathered in Charan”** (*ibid.* 12:5). This was no private eulogy on the loss of a wife; it contained a message to the entire future Jewish nation, demonstrating the wholehearted faith that every Jew must have. Avraham therefore first delivered his *hesped* and only then wept – because its purpose was to teach, not to express grief; his own grief came afterwards. This is also why it is the first *hesped* mentioned in the Torah – this was the first to carry a message for the Jewish nation: Realize that the world has a Leader!

### The Letters of Hespded Also Spell Hefsed

We are here tonight to be *maspid* close friends, among the finest members of our community, who were bound upon the altar of Kiddush Hashem –

may Hashem avenge their blood, “Earth, do not cover their blood!” The Chasam Sofer is quoted as having pointed out that when the middle letters of *hesped* (*heh-samech-pei-dalet*) are switched the word reads *hefsed*, loss. The purpose of a eulogy is to arouse ourselves to full awareness of the magnitude of our loss and the caliber of the departed. We lost the finest, the very best our community had to offer in terms of both Torah scholarship and the practice of kindness – five men of spiritual integrity, men of truth, of outstanding stature, crowned with every superlative trait.

In his *Mili De’agadeta* (pg. 17), the author of *Nesivos Hamishpat* asks a question on the opinion in the gemara (*Sanhedrin* 46b) that a *hesped*’s purpose is to honor the deceased: how are honor and respect relevant to souls that have already arrived in the World of Truth? He explains that there is a great arousal in heaven and peace for the departed soul when the good deeds it performed during its lifetime are related. Doing so also accords honor to the survivors, for they can learn from the example set by the deceased.

### **Our Eulogy Has an Additional Dimension – What Lesson Must We Take from What Hashem Has Done To Us?**

Besides all the above it is important to reflect again on what Hashem has done to us. What lesson we are to take from the brutal massacre which saw sacrifices offered on five altars?

The trial of Yitzchak’s binding as a sacrifice, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, was the tenth with which Avraham Avinu was tested, following which *Hakadosh baruch hu* told him, “**Now I know that you fear G-d**” (*ibid.* 22:12). The test was to ask Avraham Avinu, who embodied the trait of kindness, to perform the cruelest act in the world – that a father should slaughter his own son. To Avraham Avinu however, it was straightforward that if this was the Divine will, this was what had to be done.

In *Moreh Nevuchim*, the Rambam explains that some of Avraham’s contemporaries did believe in

the existence of a Creator but not that He supervises the deeds of His creatures. They believed that “**The Almighty is... on high, His glory is upon the heavens**” (*Tehillim* 113:4). We know however that “**His gaze reaches low, [extending] upon [both] heaven and earth**” (*ibid. pasuk* 6). Avraham had to proclaim and convince them of the existence of Divine Providence that extends to every detail; that *Hakadosh baruch hu* knows and is concerned with what every person is doing and thinking. Avraham Avinu’s life teaches the Jewish nation that in order to truly believe it is not enough for a person just to know that the world has a Leader, he must become a servant of Hashem – he must assume a yoke of servitude and realize that he cannot act as he pleases. One cannot live life just as one wishes simply “knowing” that there is a Creator. If the world has a Leader then it follows that we are His servants, who must carry out their Master’s bidding. To live otherwise is to be tantamount to “an apostate in regard to the entire Torah, who in several respects has the same status as a gentile.”

While many fundamentals of Torah need strengthening nowadays, this is a pivotal area which is not given much attention, namely, that we ought to be living with full clarity and awareness that the world has a Leader and that we are His servants. **We do not do what we want to do; we fulfill Hashem’s will, having been taught what He wants from us by our ancestors and our teachers, father to son, teacher to disciple, generation to generation, extending all the way back to the Giving of the Torah at Har Sinai.**

### **All the Way Back to Har Sinai**

To believe with this clarity and to have it reflected in how we live, are the goals for which each and every individual must aim. This is the way our forebears and our ancestors lived. The question we hear most often though is, how does one live this way? Up until just before the Holocaust, this question did not exist within most Jewish communities, for this was the way everybody lived, with children following in their parents’ paths. Ever since a lack of faith has sadly gripped our nation’s masses, in particular following their arrival in Eretz

Yisrael, these traditions, which spanned generations uninterrupted, have been severed.

I recently heard the following story, related by one of today's leading activists in bringing *Yidden* back to their spiritual heritage. While this individual was still taking his first steps towards his eventual return, he met Rav Yitzchak Shlomo Zilberman *zt'l*, of the Old City and asked him the following question. "I already believe that the world is the work of a Higher Power but who says that He is interested in what I do, or that He even knows what I do?" Rav Zilberman *zt'l*, called all his eighteen children *sheyichyu*, and had them line up in order of age. He then put a question to the youngest and when the child answered, asked him how he knew this. The child responded that his elder brother has told him. When the father asked the next one up how he knew, he said he had heard it from the brother above him and so on. Upon reaching the eldest in this manner, Rav Zilberman concluded, "The eldest heard it from me and I heard it from my parents and so on, all the way back to Har Sinai!"

This was how Rav Zilberman demonstrated to the young seeker the unbroken chain of transmission via which the principles of our faith have reached us, to which any individual can reattach himself even if his personal link did not remain intact.

A person who never received a Torah education from his parents and teachers will never understand how it's possible to have a lifelong absorption with the contents of the gemara, poring over obscure the Aramaic text and debating how to understand the discussions of Abaye and Rava. Neither is there any way to explain it to him. He views this occupation as fruitless and devoting one's life to it as pointless, echoing the question with which the gemara (*Sanhedrin* 99b) defines the heretic: of what benefit to us are the rabbis?

Whoever lives this way however, knows that this is genuine life. Living this way imparts the resources to enjoy a rich, inner spiritual life, not squandering oneself on externals, ever focusing outwards. This kind of life affords awareness that

**"None of your sought after desires are its [i.e. Torah's] equal" (*Mishlei* 3:15).**

The goal for which every Jew must strive is to live with the clear knowledge that the world has a Leader and that He watches our every deed. It is very difficult to fully live up to this awareness yet it is the foundation of our lives. A very commonly heard question nowadays is, "Define your goals in life; have you set yourself a goal in life?" To this, a *ben Torah's* response should be, "To live as a servant of Hashem."

This is something that all five martyrs had in common. This is how they lived; it was the very fabric of their lives, whether they were counted among those who toil solely in Torah, or those who combine Torah study with pursuing a livelihood. They were men of spiritual integrity, whose outer deeds and actions fully reflected the inner truths to which they adhered.

They were spiritually elevated individuals. Discussion of their virtues constitutes both "honor of the deceased" and "honor of the living." They all knew that Torah is the Jewish People's supreme asset. They lived their own lives and raised their families accordingly.

### **We Have Established a Yeshiva Where They Fell**

Since the attack, we have turned our *beis haknesses* into a thriving Torah center, day and night, where Torah is studied uninterrupted, including Fridays and Shabbos, morning and evening; we are thus providing their souls with huge merits; *Kollel Ateres Hakedoshim*, today numbers over one hundred and fifty *avreichim* studying Torah in several different learning programs.

**This is the opportunity to call upon each and every member of the community and neighborhood resident to come and join these learning sessions. This is the greatest possible source of merit for elevating their souls.**

## **The Merit of Torah Study Exceeds that of Reciting Kaddish**

While the masses of the House of Yisrael are extremely punctilious during periods of mourning *Rachmana litzlan*, over saying Kaddish and leading communal prayers, our early scholars have written that the very greatest merit that can possibly be provided to parents in the World of Truth is for children to increase their Torah study and their acts of kindness. In *Yosef Ometz, Moreinu* Harav Yosef Yospa Hahn *zt'l*, writes that the spiritual rectifications of children's saying Kaddish and Borchu are only for the unlearned, while Torah study is a several fold more effective means of elevating the souls of the deceased than any prayers and that it ushers the deceased into Gan Eden, while if a son develops novel Torah insights his father merits limitless honor on that account in the Heavenly Academy.

In a similar vein, in *Sukkas Shalom*, the *gaon* Rav Eliyahu Gutmacher *zt'l*, enumerates the customary practices and rectifications undertaken to provide merit to the pure souls of the deceased, dividing these into six categories, of which the lowest one is saying Kaddish and leading the prayers, while the highest ones, which elevate the souls of the deceased, extricating them from every level of Gehonim and illuminating their path, involve studying the holy Torah, to whose worth nothing else approaches. Even a mitzvah does not affect the same sublime elevation as Torah study.

**This is the main reason why we chose to devote this *yahrzeit* day, which fell this Shabbos, to collective Torah study, both of adults and of young children, for there is no greater or better elevation for the soul of the deceased than Torah study; it is the greatest virtue with which the deceased's soul can be provided.**

## **The Merit of the Akeidah has the Power to Arouse Heaven's Mercy**

In *Avos* (5:2-3), the *mishnah* first tells us, "There were ten generations from Noach to Avraham" and then that "Avraham Avinu was tested with ten trials..." In his commentary *Ru'ach Chaim* on *Avos*, Rav Chaim of Volozhin *zt'l*, notes that the title "*avinu*, our father," is conferred only in the second statement, regarding the ten trials, and not in the first. He explains that when a father bequeaths his traits and characteristics to his offspring after him, those traits that the parent toiled with great effort to acquire are ingrained in his offspring, who are able to attain them with minimal exertion. By way of example he cites the fact that there have been many unlearned Jews who sacrificed their lives in sanctification of Hashem's Name, for this is ingrained in our nation from the time of Avraham Avinu who sacrificed himself at Ur Casdim – choosing to be cast by King Nimrod into a fiery furnace rather than renounce his faith in G-d – and went on to withstand all ten of his trials. Thus, only the *mishnah* which mentions the ten trials refers to Avraham as "*avinu*," for his role as our father is only relevant in regard to his having bequeathed us his spiritual valor, not to his position in the list of generations.

Klal Yisrael is spiritually nourished to this day by the merit of *Akeidas Yitzchak*. In our prayers we repeatedly ask Hashem to remember it as a source of merit for us. *Akeidas Yitzchak* arouses Heaven's mercy in the world. Meshech Chochmah points out that until the *Akeidah*, Hashem addresses Avraham with the Name which represents His attribute of judgment, while from the *Akeidah* onward, He addresses Avraham with the Name that represents His attribute of mercy.

**We too, send up our prayer to the Creator: Merciful One, heed from on high Your nation's cry and in the merit of *Akeidas Yitzchak* and the *akeidos* of all Your other dear children *Hy'd*, send Your People's redemption and deliverance speedily, for we are currently being "slaughtered for the sake of Your Unity" and may we speedily merit our complete salvation, *amein*.**