

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 97a) refers to the first two millennia of world history as, "The Two Thousand Years of *Tohu* / Emptiness," and to the next two millennia as, "The Two Thousand Years of Torah." That latter era began when Avraham Avinu was 52 years old--soon after he recognized *Hashem*--and ended approximately when the *Mishnah* was written. During that era, even before the Torah was given (in the year 2448), the Patriarchs and their descendants studied and taught Torah (see, e.g., *Bereishit* 18:19). The final two millennia are known as, "The Two Thousand Years of *Mashiach*," because, explains *Rashi z"l*, they make up the era when we await the Redeemer's arrival.

Midrash Rabbah comments similarly on the verses (*Bereishit* 1:2-3), "The earth was astonishingly empty, with darkness upon the surface of the deep"--this refers to the earlier generations--"And *Elokim* said, 'Let there be light'"--this refers to Avraham. [Until here from the *Midrash*.]

But what was unique about Avraham? asks R' Gershon Chanoch Henach Leiner z"l (1839-1890; *Radzhiner Rebbe*, best known for his efforts to reintroduce the *Mitzvah* of *Techeilet*). Were there not others who recognized *Hashem*; for example, Malki-Tzeddek, about whom we read in our *Parashah* (14:18), "He was a priest of *Kel*, the Most High"?

The *Radzhiner Rebbe* answers: Indeed, there were others, such as Malki-Tzeddek--the same person as Shem, the son of Noach--who recognized *Hashem*, but they considered Him "Most High," i.e., a Diety to Whom man cannot relate. Avraham was the first, however, to recognize that man can have a relationship with *Hashem*. That relationship was completed with the *Mitzvah* of *Brit Milah*--a sign of the relationship that was placed on his body. (*Sha'ar Ha'emunah V'yesod Ha'chassidut*)

Shabbat

R' Ben-Zion Meir Chai Uziel z"l (1880-1953; *Sephardic* Chief Rabbi of Israel) writes: The *Mitzvah* of *Shabbat* contains within it two remembrances that are fundamental to our Torah and our nationhood--remembrance of Creation and remembrance of the Exodus. When we remember the first, we are reminded that man is the pinnacle of Creation and of G-d's Will. The heavens and earth and everything in them are not some machine, a mere collection of gears, that necessarily exists, that operates automatically, or that has no purpose. It is a novel Creation resulting from the Will of the One Who made it, and man is at its pinnacle. Remember Creation, recognize its secrets, know what makes it function, and choose your path in life accordingly.

R' Uziel continues: Know, man, that you are not a small cog in the big machine of Creation. With your Divine soul, you rule over it and are distinguished from all other creatures. You are not an ant whose entire mission is to store food in the summer; indeed, your mission does not involve food at all. You are a creation that has a mission. You are here to prepare in the foyer--this world--to enter the banquet hall--the World-to-Come.

When we remember the Exodus, continues R' Uziel, we remember how we were once enslaved, body and soul, to a master, with no purpose other than to fulfill the will of that master. We remember how we were once slaves to food (see *Bemidbar* 11:5). In contrast, when *Shabbat* comes, we prepare in advance so that the holy day will not be consumed by worries about food. On *Shabbat*, we disengage from this world and feel the ultimate joy of freedom. (*Shabbat U'mo'ed* p.39)

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“He said to Avram, ‘Know with certainty (literally, ‘Know, you shall know’) that your offspring will be foreigners in a land not their own; they will serve them, and they will oppress them four hundred years.’” (15:13)

Midrash Rabbah comments: Know that I will disperse them, and know that I will gather them in. Know that I will pledge them as collateral, and know that I will redeem them. Know that I will subjugate them, and know that I will save them. [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R’ Yehuda Loewe *z”l* (*Maharal* of Prague; died 1609) asks: It would have been enough to say, “Know that I will subjugate them, and know that I will save them.” Why does the *Midrash* seemingly say the same thing in three different ways?

He explains: The *Midrash* understands that the repetition, “Know, you shall know,” is meant to refer to two different things: subjugation and salvation. But the *Midrash* wants to teach something more: that the fact that there will be subjugation is proof that there will be salvation. This is what the *Midrash* means when it says, “Know that I will disperse them, and know that I will gather them in.” The natural state of the Jewish People is to be united, and dispersion is unnatural for the Jewish People [see below]. Therefore, if you see that the Jewish People are dispersed, you can be certain that we will be gathered in. Similarly, it is unnatural for the Jewish People to be dominated by another nation. Therefore, if you see that the Jewish People are, so-to-speak, pledged as collateral, know for certain that *Hashem* will redeem us. (*Netzach Yisrael* ch.1)

R’ Avraham Tilman *shlita* (Yeshivat Chen Ba’midbar in Arad, Israel) writes: *Maharal* does not mean that the Jewish People are, in practice, more united than other nations. Rather, he means that the Jewish People are united by something that is part of our essence and is eternal, unlike other nations that are formed to achieve some shared social, political, or economic goal, or because their people happen to live on the same land. This is what the verse means when it says (*Shmuel II* 7:23), “And who is like Your people, *Yisrael*, one nation on earth.”

What unites the Jewish People? The Torah we received from Heaven and the shared mission it gives us! Other nations also have codes of law and etiquette, but not like the Torah. The world consists of two seemingly unrelated realms--the physical and the spiritual--and other nations’ laws and etiquette address only how to get along in the physical world. The Torah, in contrast, is G-d’s own instructions for how to bring spirituality--to bring G-d Himself--into the physical world. These instructions were given to all the Jewish People and, because we have a common mission, dispersion is unnatural for us. (*Be’ur Al Netzach Yisrael*)

“Avram took his wife Sarai, and Lot, his brother’s son, and all their wealth that they had amassed, and the souls they had made in Charan, and they left to go to the land of Cana’an, and they came to the land of Cana’an.” (12:5)

R’ Avraham ben David *z”l* (“*Ra’avad*”; Provence; died 1198; best known for his glosses on *Rambam’s Mishneh Torah*) writes: After a convert immerses in a *Mikvah* as part of the conversion process, he recites the blessing, “Who commanded us regarding *Tevilah* / immersion.” Though we usually recite blessings before doing a *Mitzvah*, this person cannot do so because he is not yet Jewish.

Ra’avad continues: One might ask, “Where was he commanded” (*i.e.*, how can he say, “Who commanded us”)? *Ra’avad* answers: In the verse, “The souls they made in Charan.” How did Avraham and Sarah “make” souls? If all the world’s people would work together, they could not create even one gnat! Rather, the verse refers to the people that Avraham and Sarah converted and brought under the wings of the *Shechinah*.

(*Ba’alei Ha’nefesh*: End of *Sha’ar Ha’tevilah*)

R’ Avraham Sherman *shlita* (now-retired member of Israel’s Supreme Rabbinical Court) explains: How does the phrase, “The souls they made in Charan,” imply that the conversion process is a *Mitzvah*? Avraham himself was not motivated by any command to convert people! Moreover, Avraham lived before the Torah was given, so how can a verse about Avraham be the source of a *Mitzvah* for us?

R’ Sherman answers: R’ Moshe ben Maimon *z”l* (*Rambam*; 1135-1204; Spain and Egypt) writes that the *Mitzvah* to love *Hashem* (*Devarim* 6:5) includes encouraging other people to love and serve *Hashem*, for when one loves another, he wants others to love that person too. Similarly, if one loves *Hashem*, because he has recognized the truth of *Hashem’s* existence, he will want others to love *Hashem* also. Certainly, he does not want others to deny *Hashem’s* existence; he wants them to recognize the truth that he has recognized. We find, *Rambam* continues, that Avraham Avinu is called (*Yeshayah* 41:8), “Avraham, who loved Me.” And, we find that Avraham encouraged others to believe in *Hashem*, as we read, “The souls they made in Charan.” You, likewise, should encourage others to love *Hashem* just as you love Him, *Rambam* concludes.

R’ Sherman continues: *Rambam* does not say expressly that there is a *Mitzvah* involved in converting converts. However, based on *Rambam’s* words about what follows from loving *Hashem*, we can understand also *Ra’avad’s* assertion that there is a *Mitzvah* involved in facilitating others’ conversions--specifically, the *Mitzvah* to love *Hashem*.

(*Ateret Avraham: Geirut* p.4-5)