



## INSIGHTS INTO THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

DR. ARIELLA AGATSTEIN

# The Root of Emunah

**OU Israel's Torah Tidbits is honored to welcome Dr. Ariella Agatstein as a new monthly columnist. Dr. Agatstein will be sharing insights concerning the uniqueness of the Hebrew language and the inspiration that we can find in speaking Hebrew and appreciating its profound depth and true beauty.**

The great Viktor Frankl, the famous Holocaust survivor who witnessed the horrors of Auschwitz, Dachau and Terezin, wrote famously about man's ability to keep his spirit intact even in the harshest and cruelest environments: "Between the stimulus and response, there is a space. And in that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." Frankl stressed the idea that we have the capability of deciding *how* we want to respond to a given situation, and the great human power which exists in that choice. Our Rabbis attest to this power. In almost every facet of life, Chazal wanted us to maximize our unique ability to choose. They wanted us to have intention and purpose, כוונה, in all of our efforts to serve G-d. "Who is strong?" - "אִיזוֹהוּ גִבּוֹר הַכּוֹשֵׁב אֶת יִצְרוֹ" He who conquers his inclination" (Avot

4:1). Rather than simply being impetuous and impulsive, Chazal understood that Hashem wants us to proactively select *how* and *what* our *best* response should be.

In this week's Parsha, we are introduced intimately to a man named Avram. In many ways, Avram, and later Avraham, is the archetype of a בעל בחירה, a human being who mastered his use of choice.

"עשרה נסיונות נתנסה אברהם אבינו עליו השלום, ועמד בכלם, להודיע כמה חבתו של אברהם אבינו..."

"Avraham was tested with ten tests and he passed each of them, to show his love [for G-d]..." (Avot 5:3) At each difficult juncture, at each challenge, Avraham worked against his instinct to refine his ability to understand what G-d wanted of him and to respond accordingly. Despite the fear of going to an unknown and foreign place, Avram picked up his family and traveled when Hashem said "לך לך מארצך" - "Go for yourself from your land..." At each turn, when fear could have consumed him- fear of the unknown, fear of being alone, fear of an enemy, fear of a family member, fear for his wife, fear of losing his only son with Sarah, Avraham asked himself only one question: "What does G-d want from me?" -and that is what he chose to do. That is why Avraham was called אברהם העברי "Avram the Hebrew". Rabbi Yehuda

explains that he was called as such because he was עבר, across the river. While he stood on one side of the river, the entire rest of the world was on the other (Beraishit Rabba 42:8). Our Rabbis understood this river to be not just a geographic location, but also symbolic of how Avraham related to the world around him. Physically and spiritually, much like the Jewish people later in history, Avraham was alone. Despite this isolation, Avraham would become אב המון גוים “A father of a multitude of nations”. He would end up leading mankind towards belief in G-d.

Where did he get the strength to make his choices? How did Avraham push past his natural inclination?

In this week’s Parsha, we get a glimpse into the answer. Despite his lacking children, yet due to his super-human spiritual choices, Hashem promises him many descendants.

In Beraishit 15: 5-6, Hashem takes Avraham Avinu outside and shows him the night sky and tells him:

הַבֶּט־נָא הַשָּׁמַיִמָּה וְסַפֵּר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם־תּוּכֵל לְסַפֵּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ

“Look toward the Heavens and count the stars if you can count them. And He said to him: So will be your children” In the very next pasuk, the Torah says:

וְהֵאֱמַן בָּהּ...

“And he believed in Hashem...”

What does it mean to believe in G-d? The root of the word אמונה, belief, is אמנ. Rav Hirsch, in his brilliant commentary on the Torah explains however that to define אמונה, as “belief” is to oversimplify our understanding of the word. He points out that the pasuk does not say “והאמן לו” - as would be written when one humbles his thoughts to those of

another, but rather “והאמן בו” which translates as “and He relied upon G-d” in thought and in practice. There are no coincidences in Lashon HaKodesh, in G-d’s language. The root of the word אמונה is also the root of the word אומן which translates as an “artist” and also the word for “educator”. Rav Hirsch explains that having אמונה in G-d means surrendering ourselves to G-d being our shaper, the ultimate “Artist” of history. It means yielding to our belief that even when we do not understand, that G-d is our “Teacher” shaping us much like a teacher shapes the minds of his or her students.

When the pasuk says ‘והאמן בה’, it means in thought and action, every part of Avraham surrendered himself to G-d’s plan and relied upon Him. And like a cycle, the merit of THAT אמונה also effected the outcome. It made Avraham even more worthy of the blessing which G-d wanted to bestow upon him. The Gemara in Shabbat צז states that the Jewish nation are ‘מאמינים בני מאמינים’ - “believers and the sons of believers” and quotes Avraham’s belief from this Parsha as proof that in our spiritual DNA, we are the sons of those that surrender all to Hashem.

We find ourselves today at one of the most difficult times in Modern Jewish history. We feel traumatized learning of the atrocities which were committed on שמחת תורה in southern Israel. We are trembling and vulnerable and feel weak to the knees. The seemingly impossible has happened. Soldiers and civilians have been murdered, young and old, women and children. In Frankl’s language, the “stimulus” has occurred, and now, this space, is the time when we **choose** how to respond to that

stimulus. On a physical level, looking at the Jewish world, it is so incredibly moving, how much we have come together. Secular and religious, young and old, Jews from across the globe have united in ways which has perhaps never been seen in our history. We have channeled our millennia long spirit of survival into crying out “here I am”, marching heroically into war, helping victims, displaces families, soldiers, families of soldiers, raising our voices for those who have been kidnapped. We have taken this “space” of choice and have chosen to sanctify it.

Despite the deep darkness, we have chosen to act much like stars - bringing individual and collective light into the world. And yet, in those moments when fear creeps in, when the magnitude of it all seems too scary, at those moments, we are to follow in Avraham’s footsteps. והאמן בה - The Parsha is speaking to us. We are meant to rely on Hashem, to have faith in G-d’s process, even when we don’t yet understand. We are meant to know with clarity that He has, does and always will fight for us. We are meant to know, we are NOT alone. As a nation, by any measure, we should have been annihilated ages ago, but Hashem is our מגן אברהם - Hashem his our ultimate shield of protection. In addition to all of our necessary efforts both on the battlefield and at home, our steadfast belief in Him, WILL further make us even more worthy of his protection and salvation- something our ancestors always knew to be true. When we say אמן after a Bracha, we need remind ourselves we do so as a declaration of א-ל מלך נאמן - “G-d is our Trustworthy King”. We declare that Hashem is whom

we rely upon. We are מאמינים בני מאמינים – believers and the sons of believers - and specifically when the world has turned its backs on us, and when we feel alone much as Avraham felt on the other side of the “river”, that is the time to remember, G-d is with us and we will prevail. ■

**Dr. Ariella Agatstein** has been involved in Jewish educational leadership for over 20 years. She received her Doctorate in Jewish Educational Leadership from Azrieli Graduate School, focusing her thesis on the religious development of Modern Orthodox high school students. Dr. Agatstein has taught Limudei Kodesh in various schools throughout the Unites States and was the Assistant Principal of Girls Judaic Studies in Yeshivat Yavneh of Los Angeles. She subsequently moved with her family and children to Jerusalem where she became an Eshkolot Fellow at the Matan-Sadie Rennert Women's Institute for Torah Studies. Dr. Agatstein continues to lecture all over Israel on topics related to Torah and pedagogy and she remains very passionate about bringing her knowledge and experience to the field of Jewish education in Israel. She is currently the Director of the Bellows Eshkolot Professional Development Fellowship in Matan.

*As our prayers and efforts extend on behalf of our valiant soldiers - and the missing, abducted, and wounded - please remember those on the home front who stand alone.*



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