From My Heart — Chaim Shulem
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Are We Searching for HaShem or for an Experience?

A personal reflection on אברהם אבינו, the extraordinary attraction of עבודה זרה, and the difference between seeking powerful spiritual experiences and living with HaShem Himself.

A Clarity That Shook Me

Last Friday morning, I woke up with a clarity that shook me.

We learn these stories as children. We hear them year after year. We know what happened, but sometimes we never stop to think what it means.

Imagine the world אברהם אבינו was born into.

עבודה זרה everywhere. Different forms. Different powers.

And then along comes a boy who keeps questioning.

How can something created be the Creator?

How can an idol made by human hands rule the universe?

It made no sense to him.

He kept searching for the אמת.

The רמב״ם describes that search in הלכות עבודה זרה, פרק א׳.

The מדרש in בראשית רבה, פרשה ל״ח tells of the shattered idols and the furnace that could not burn him.

And then the question that struck me.

WERE THEY ALL FOOLISH?

I don't believe that for a moment.

People were serving because they believed it worked.

They sought healing, פרנסה, protection.

In my understanding, they experienced something powerful.

And when people get results, why stop?

But אברהם אבינו wasn't satisfied.

Even if something worked, he wanted HaShem Himself.

THE EXTRAORDINARY POWER OF עבודה זרה

Generations later, even among people who knew about HaShem, the attraction to עבודה זרה remained extraordinarily powerful.

The גמרא tells us an extraordinary story about מנשה מלך יהודה, who appeared to רב אשי in a dream.

During their conversation, מנשה demonstrated his considerable Torah knowledge.

This led רב אשי to ask a fascinating question.

If you were so knowledgeable, why did you serve עבודה זרה?

And מנשה gave him an extraordinary answer.

THE ORIGINAL גמרא:

> אמר ליה: מאחר דחכימתו כולי האי, מאי טעמא קא פלחיתו לעבודת כוכבים?

> אמר ליה: אי הות התם, הות נקיטנא בשיפולי גלימא ורהטת אבתראי.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

מנשה asked רב אשי:

"If you were so wise and knowledgeable, why did you worship idols?"

מנשה replied:

"If you had lived in our generation, you would have lifted the bottom of your garment and run after me!"

Source: מסכת סנהדרין, דף ק״ב עמוד ב׳

Think about that.

We're talking about רב אשי!

The גמרא is revealing something about the extraordinary strength of that temptation.

It wasn't simply a matter of intelligence.

It wasn't simply that people didn't know any better.

There was a powerful attraction that we can hardly imagine today.

And then something extraordinary happened.

The sages begged to remove the יצר הרע for עבודה זרה, and it was taken away.

Source: מסכת יומא, דף ס״ט עמוד ב׳

Around that same period, רוח הקודש, נבואה, was no longer with כלל ישראל as it had been.

Source: מסכת סוטה, דף מ״ח עמוד ב׳

As if an entire spiritual landscape was changing.

I find that extraordinary.

And that takes me straight to now.

WHAT ABOUT OUR WORLD TODAY?

People are hurting, searching across our Heimishe communities, wanting to heal, to be better.

And many run toward extraordinary experiences.

I've travelled through these experiences myself.

And those who know me know that I don't tend to do things halfway.

When I go into something, I go all in.

I don't dip my finger into the water. I immerse myself completely.

Sometimes that has brought extraordinary benefits. And sometimes I've paid a significant price.

So I'm not speaking as an outsider looking in.

I've been there.

But clarity isn't yet change.

You can come home inspired and still fall into old habits.

Real change needs small steps.

עבודת הרצון.

Fear keeps us running.

Fear of rejection, of failure, of losing control.

Those fears give rise to beliefs like, "I'm not worthy," "I'm powerless."

We build lives around avoiding those fears until we're just surviving.

But fear can be עבודה, too.

Places to speak to HaShem, to thank Him even for the struggle.

As רבי נחמן מברסלב teaches in תורה כ״ה, תנינא ליקוטי מוהר״ן:

> "ההתבודדות הוא מעלה עליונה וגדולה מן הכל"

We don't need to chase experiences.

We have תפילה, תורה, daily life to bring Him into.

אמת IS אמונה

אמונה isn't another experience.

אמונה is אמת.

There's something we need to remember.

WE'RE NOT HERE TO CHASE EXPERIENCES THAT MAKE US FEEL SPIRITUAL. WE'RE HERE TO FIND HaShem.

To speak to Him.

To develop a relationship with Him.

To recognise Him in everything that happens in our lives.

In the beautiful moments.

In the difficult moments.

Even in the moments we cannot understand.

This is what אברהם אבינו was searching for.

Not something that could give him an extraordinary experience.

Not something that could provide him with what he needed.

But the Creator Himself.

And that is our עבודה too.

Not to search for something that feels like HaShem.

But to live with HaShem Himself.

Our עבודה is to turn to Him, to bring Him into our marriages, our children, our fears, our confusions, today.

I'm not writing to judge.

I've been there.

But I can't let fear decide what I say.

Not everything that feels spiritual is אמת.

LET'S STOP SEARCHING FOR AN EXPERIENCE OF HaShem AND BEGIN LIVING WITH HaShem HIMSELF.

From My Heart

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Shvil MeHatzad — שביל מהצד