



# Ohr Yerushalayim News

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## News This Week

### מזל טוב

Mazel Tov to Chaim and Tamar Rubin on the birth of their daughter, Penina Rifka, there is a Kiddush after davening for Men at their home 13 Falcon Court.

Mazel Tov to Bernard and Shelley Levey on the birth of a granddaughter to Michal and Eli Barron in Israel.

Mazel Tov to Rabbi and Mrs YY Katz on the engagement of their granddaughter Brocha Katz to Alexander Ryde.

### Nach Yomi

Starts a new cycle this Thursday. Anyone who is interested in starting should speak to The Rov or Dr Wilks

## A Burning Question

Dani Epstein

Galileo Galilei was a very clever sort of chap, who invented all manner of really useful things such as the thermoscope and various military compasses. Where he really shone, however, was in astronomy. Some of his contributions include the observation of the phases of Venus, the observation of the four largest satellites of Jupiter and the observation of Saturn's rings.

What really got him into hot water, though, was his ideas on heliocentricity. The Roman Inquisition of 1615 concluded after a full investigation that the theory was "foolish and absurd in philosophy, and formally heretical since it explicitly contradicts in many places the sense of Holy Scripture". As if that was not enough, he was tried again 1632, this time over the book he authored on the topic entitled "Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems". He was forced to recant and remained under house arrest until he died.

It's particularly irritating to read about this sort of thing since the church was oh-so-stupidly wrong. How could they have possibly ignored his pretty impressive evidence on the basis of some verses in an old book? It does lend itself to an observation, however. When people have their deeply-ingrained beliefs challenged, they can become quite upset. If they just happen to run the Catholic Church, then inevitably someone is going to suffer for that.

This is hardly new.

One fine day roughly 3,800 years ago a philosopher (i.e. a seeker of truth) stepped forward with a new theory: monotheism. Let's be fair, it was hardly new. After all, Noach had barely died and Hashem had actually spoken to him; there was the Yeshivah of Shem and Ever and so on; however in the Mesopotamian basin Avodah Zoroh (which includes, but is not limited to, idol worship) was all the rage, specifically that of star and sun worship. Their religious doctrine essentially stated that the world had existed forever and the sun and the stars were gods, with the sun being the most powerful of the pantheon.

Along comes this philosopher and attempts to challenge the prevalent beliefs with rational arguments. As this sort of thing tends to run, he rapidly accumulated a sizeable following who examined his position and found it logical hence recanting their previous views. This man, as we all know, was called Avrom and later renamed by Hashem to Avrohom.

Not only did he present logical arguments in defence of his thesis, he also performed miracles in order to prove his point. As the gemoro in Bovo Basro (16b roughly halfway down the wide lines) states:

רבי שמעון בן יוחי אומר אבן טובה היתה תלויה בצוארו של אברהם אבינו שכל חולה הרואה אותו מיד מתרפא ובשעה שנפטר אברהם אבינו מן העולם תלאתה הקדוש ברוך הוא בגלגל חמה "A beautiful stone hung around the neck of Avrohom and every sick person who saw it was immediately cured. At the time of Avrohom's departure from this world, Hakodosh Boruch Hu hung it in the sphere of the sun."

His success did not go unnoticed by the local church, i.e. King Nimrod, who had him hauled in for a friendly chat. The conversation was quite straightforward, with Avrom being challenged by Nimrod to pick something, anything as his god. The sun, stars, clouds, fire, water, Marmite; it made no difference. As long as Avrom was willing to recant and accept two premises, namely that the world had always existed and that there was no prime existence – a creator of everything – then he was free to go.

Avrom stood his ground and demonstrated the foolishness of Nimrod's arguments. "If the stars exist physically as does the sun, then neither of them could have created the other. In which case, neither the stars can be a god, nor the sun." He had many more arguments, none of which Nimrod was able to respond to with any measure of success.

Nimrod was thrown into confusion. First of all, Avrom's arguments were pretty impressive, and secondly he was becoming quite the popular figure. Any moment he might lead a populist movement to depose Nimrod, and who would want that? In order to resolve the problem, he did the obvious thing and had him thrown into a kiln. This sort of thing is really quite effective when dealing with recalcitrant philosophers and remained a popular solution for an awfully long time. In this case, though, it backfired somewhat, since Avrom was miraculously saved from a pretty horrible death and ended up strolling around the kiln in great comfort! Now what was Nimrod to do? Clearly this man had incredible powers, both for curing the sick and not getting toasted in kilns which made him rather difficult to get rid of. So in the end he did not object when Avrom wandered off the reservation of his own accord and breathed a sigh of relief once he saw the back of this troublesome philosopher.

This story shows us the incredible self-sacrifice Avrom was capable of for his belief in Hashem, and the lengths Hashem was willing to go to save him, even if it did mean giving physics the day off.

## The Week Ahead

### שבת פרשת לך לך

Candle Lighting	No later than 4.08pm
Mincha	4.13pm
Shacharis	9.15am
סוף זמן ק"ש	9.37am
Children's Group	10.45am
1st Mincha	1.30pm
2nd Mincha	3.55pm
Shalosh Seudos	Following
Motzei Shabbos	5.15pm
Ovos uBonim	6.15pm
Sun	7.15am / 8.20am
Mon / Thurs	6.45am / 7.10am / 8.00am
Tues / Wed / Fri	6.45am / 7.20am / 8.00am
Mincha & Maariv	4.05pm
Late Maariv	8.00pm

Here is a little question though. This was a monumental story of pivotal importance to us. The father and founder of our nation was happier to be thrown into a burning kiln than give up his belief in Hashem, and then was saved with an open miracle of epic proportions. Why doesn't the Torah start the account of Avrohom's life with this story? What could be more impressive? And yet there is not a hint of this in the posuk. Odd, no?

Before you start gathering wood to heat up the local matza oven and then throw me in, allow me to point out that this question is raised by the Ibn Ezra, so calm down and please put down those matches.

The question remains and the Abravanel is clearly deeply bothered by it. It is a testament to his enduring faith and absolute deference to Chazal that he put his mind to resolving this vexing conundrum with his inimitable brilliance, something which we can learn a great deal from.

Fundamentally the Abravanel is unwilling to dismiss this account with some hand-waving about drush etc. and then move on, simply because of the ubiquity of this story within Chazal. Furthermore the posuk does say: "ואמר – אני ה' אשר הרצאתיך מאור כשדים" – I am Hashem who took you out from Ur Kasdim", which is indicative of some significant event occurring there that required Hashem's intervention at some level. So here is the Abravanel's understanding of this matter (with some speculation/creativity/conjecture/hilarity on my part, therefore all errors herein are most definitely mine).

In addition to the account of Avrohom's Auto-da-fé we have two conflicting statements from Chazal regarding the age Avrohom came to recognise Hashem. In Nedorim (32a, bottom two lines) we read: "ואמר רבי אמי בר אבא בן שלוש שנים הכיר אברהם את בוראו שנאמר עקב אשר שמע אברהם בקולי" – Rav Ami said that at three years old Avrohom recognised his creator since it says (Bereishis 26:5) 'Because Avrohom listened to my voice'. [The word Ekev] adds up to 172". The implication is that Avrohom listened to Hashem's voice for 172 years and since he lived for 175 years, he must have only started listening at age three.

In Bereishis Rabboh (anyone's guess what the actual location is since there is no consistent chaptering system for the Medrash Rabboh, just search Sefaria) we have the following: "רבי חנינא ורבי יוחנן תריהון אקמין בון" – Rabi Chaninoh and Rabi Yochanan both say that at 48 years old Avrohom recognised his creator".

This requires reconciling; fortunately it is no too difficult to do so. Allow me to illustrate this with a tale from my father's youth. My father was not brought up to be Shomer Torah uMitzvos, since his parents knew nothing about Torah and Yahadus. Despite this, he had the distinct honour of being ejected from every school in his area and yet he was not a "naughty boy" as such. The following story sheds some light on the reason for this rather interesting situation. When my father was seven years old, at one point approaching the other winter festival, the teacher told the class the story about their saviour's miraculous birth. My father stood up and said: "If you believe that, you are crazy". His poor mother was hauled in for a grilling, and when informed of the incident – credit to her – she argued that her son had a good point. Eject! Eject! Eject! My father should have been given an ejection seat for his school career, it would have saved everyone a great deal of paperwork.

The point of this is that even though at the tender age of seven my father had no conception of Hashem or Yahadus, he knew crazy when he saw it. So did Avrohom. Very early on he developed a critical eye and realised that he was surrounded by a form of madness or obstinate stupidity, and didn't mince his words. Was he three years old at the time? That's very unlikely; kids can be smart, but this would be something for YouTube. Chazal borrow the phrase from the posuk (Vayikroh 19:23): "שלוש שנים יהיה" – לָכֶם עֲרְלִים – three years it should be to you forbidden", homiletically interpreting the word עֲרְלִים as 'uncircumcised' in relation to Avrohom. So, three simply means really early, not really three. We have many examples of Chazal using hyperbole to reinforce a point, such as the phrase גורמא בעלמא.

As Avrohom started questioning the very tenets of his parent's and compatriots' beliefs he began to formulate a philosophical rejection of idolatry, star- and sun-worship. This matured over the years to the point he began spreading his thoughts to his family, friends and neighbours and eventually became some kind of a guru, although he had yet to come

to the logical conclusion and discover Hashem. He was just observing that Avodoh Zoroh was illogical, fallacious and plain simple stupid.

Now, whilst he was merely questioning the reality of the sun and stars being gods, with the sun being the chief god, Nimrod was fine with the situation.

When Avrohom reached the age of 48 (the Rambam has this at age forty in Hilchos Avodoh Zoroh 1:3) he finally concluded that there was one supreme existence that had created and controlled everything and that was beyond any physicality. Once he started preaching this new thought Nimrod realised that his throne could be easily usurped by an irate populace and he could be thrown out of the area penniless and hungry as well as perhaps slightly beaten up, so he had Avrohom arrested. Even in prison, Avrohom continued to preach monotheism which did him no favours. His arguments were cogent, logical and unassailable which garnered him more supporters; something which got Nimrod even more worried.

Since Avrohom had undermined the sun god which Nimrod and all the other regional Avodoh Zoroh groupies worshipped, he should have enjoyed a trial by fire and been burned at the stake or perhaps thrown into a kiln. That this did not happen was in and of itself a miracle. Hashem manipulated Nimrod's heart in such a way that the king decided to throw him out of the country rather than kill him. After all the posuk does say (Mishlei 21:1): 'לְבִימֶלֶךְ בְּיַד ה' – the heart of a king is in the hands of Hashem. Due to the ejection of Avrohom from Nimrod's turf, his family was forced to tag along rather than suffer the fallout from the incident, which explains why they left with him.

So, there was no kiln and miraculous escape, rather there was a very close scrape, with the situation being saved at the last minute by divine, miraculous intervention. Quite a different story.

Once Avrohom had demonstrated his absolute fealty to Hashem and willingness to risk his life for his philosophy and discovery of – and trust in – Hashem, at this point he became a vessel fit for nevuoh, which is the next stage beyond pure rational thought, so only now does the narrative exist in the Torah because only now did he become a novi and follow Hashem without wavering a millimetre.

But what about the אבן טובה, the beautiful stone that hung around his neck with which he cured sick people just by sight?

In Brochos 17a, roughly half way down, we have several statements that start of with the phrase "מרגלא בפומיה" – a gem in the mouth of...". This expression simply means that the individual concerned had an aphorism they were wont to express on a regular basis, as opposed to them walking around with bling bling grillz (for the uninitiated, this consists of ornamental dental shields usually fabricated of precious metal, frequently sporting gemstones generally of the molecular carbon form referred to as "ice"). So, we see here that a sage piece of advice can be considered as precious as a gemstone.

What more precious advice can there be than encourage people to discard the sheer stupidity of Avodoh Zoroh, even without a knowledge of Hashem? How much more so when you take this person who has now been cured of this mental sickness and provide them with the tools to understand the existence of Hashem?

Avrohom did not bully them into following him, he did not charge them money or initiate them into a cult, he simply asked them cogent questions, provided them with some food for thought and they were cured simply by looking at this precious gem, i.e. having their eyes opened to the simple truth.

With this, the conundrum that the Ibn Ezra raised is resolved fully, as are the conflicting statements from Chazal and the difficulties of this whole topic. Moreover, this allows those of us who are devotees of the Rambam's philosophical and rational approach to Yahadus (as the Abravanel clearly is, despite his frequent quibbles with the Rambam) to not waver one iota from our absolute adherence to Chazal without introducing compromise or apolegetics.

Above all, the Abravanel has succeeded in his dazzling brilliance to once more raise the flag of our enduring pride in – and unequivocal fealty to – Chazal as well as demonstrate the validity, truth and genius that lies within midroshim – provided we have some kind of decryption key that gains us entrance into the Pardes, even if we are able only to stand at the gate and merely attain a glimpse of what lies within.