WEEKLY DVAR TORAH • LECH LECHA

Afraid of *What*, Exactly?



4G SENIOR MECHANECH

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אַל תִּירָא אַבְרָם אָנֹכִי מָגֵן לָךְ

"Do not be afraid, Avram. I am your shield."

BEREISHIS 15:1

That is the first thing Hashem says to Avraham Avinu after his victory over the four kings. It's a strange thing to say to someone who has just *miraculously won a war.*

Avraham had gone out with a small group of men to rescue his nephew Lot from four powerful kings. Against all odds, he emerged victorious. We would have expected him to return home with an enormous sense of confidence. After all, he had just experienced an extraordinary demonstration of Hashem's protection.

And yet, Hashem comes to Avraham and tells him not to be afraid.

What exactly was Avraham afraid of?

01 RASHI'S APPROACH

The Fear That Comes After the Victory

Rashi explains that Avraham had two concerns:

CONCERN ONE

After being gifted with this extraordinary miracle, perhaps he had already received the reward for all of his righteousness.

CONCERN TWO

Avraham had killed people during the war, and he was afraid that he might be held accountable for their deaths.

> Hashem therefore reassured him: אָנֹכִי מָגֵן לָךְ, that he would be protected from punishment, and שְׂכָרְךָ הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד, that his reward would still be very great.

The question we need to consider is the **timing** of Avraham's fears.

When Lot was captured, Avraham didn't hesitate. He gathered his men and went to war. Whatever concerns he might have had about the consequences, they didn't prevent him from doing what needed to be done. Only once the battle is over does Avraham begin to consider the implications of the war. Why is it that only now is Avraham Avinu afraid?

The truth is that I think we can relate to Avraham Avinu's experience. During a crisis itself, we are often incredibly capable. Maybe more capable than we ever thought possible. We find the strength to make difficult decisions and take responsibility for situations that we never imagined we would be able to handle. There is an immediate problem in front of us, and our attention is entirely focused on solving it.

We hold ourselves together throughout a difficult period and then fall apart when everything is finally okay.

Only afterward, when life begins returning to normal, do we sometimes discover how much the experience has affected us. During the crisis we were occupied with surviving. Only now, when everything is okay, can we begin to process what happened.

Avraham has been the beneficiary of an extraordinary miracle, but in the aftermath, as he processes what happened, he is concerned about the spiritual price he may have paid. Has the *neis* diminished what remains available to him? Perhaps the miracle has exhausted his *zechuyos*.

There is something remarkably relatable about this concern. Sometimes we find it difficult to receive something good without wondering what it will eventually cost us.

Perhaps we have received an amazing gift, but instead of simply saying thank you and enjoying it, we begin thinking about everything that will now be expected of us. When someone offers to help us, although we are genuinely grateful, we may feel uncomfortable accepting the kindness because we wonder what we will owe them in return.

For some people, this way of experiencing the world began early in life. Perhaps affection and generosity were accompanied by expectations. What was given could later be used to make us feel indebted, and we learned that receiving something good meant paying a price.

Over time, we may develop a way of relating to the world in which every kindness must eventually be repaid. Even when nobody is asking anything of us, we find ourselves keeping score. And this can make it surprisingly difficult to experience joy. Instead of allowing ourselves to appreciate what we have received, we immediately begin calculating what it means and what it might cost.

Chazal explain (Bereishis Rabbah 44:5) that Hashem responded to Avraham that everything He has done for him in this world was given ***chinam*, freely.** His reward has not been diminished.

Avraham was concerned that the miracle represented a withdrawal from his accumulated *zechuyos*. Hashem reassures him that the salvation was not a payment for his past accomplishments. It was something Hashem had given him without diminishing what was still waiting for him.

Not everything good that comes into our lives needs to be understood as compensation for something we have done. They want to help because they genuinely care.

> *Sometimes someone loves us simply because they love us. And sometimes we are allowed to receive something wonderful without immediately wondering what we will have to give up in return.*

02

THE RAMBAN'S APPROACH

What the Victory Could Not Give Him

The Ramban offers a different explanation for Avraham's fear. He explains that Avraham was afraid of two things:

FEAR ONE

Perhaps the kings would return with greater armies and he would be killed.

FEAR TWO

Perhaps his life would come to an end without children.

The first concern is understandable. Avraham had survived one battle, but there was no guarantee that he would survive another. Just because he won the war doesn't mean the war is necessarily over.

The second concern is particularly heartbreaking. Avraham has just defeated four kings and rescued Lot. He has experienced an extraordinary miracle, and he has every reason to be grateful for what Hashem has done for him. **But he still doesn't have a child.**

Scottie Scheffler, the world's number one golfer, held a press conference before the British Open in July 2025. Scheffler had achieved what most professional golfers spend their entire lives dreaming about. He had won multiple major championships and established himself as the best golfer in the world. And yet, when asked about his success, he spoke with remarkable candor about what those accomplishments meant to him.

He described winning a tournament near his hometown of Dallas, something he had dreamed about since childhood. He spoke about the emotion of finally accomplishing something he had worked toward his entire life, celebrating with his family, and experiencing the extraordinary satisfaction of having reached his goal.

And then, within minutes, the celebration ended and life went back to normal. Scheffler spoke about how meaningful his victories were and how much he loved the game, but he also understood that the joy of winning could only give him so much.

> *"It's fulfilling from the sense of accomplishment, but it's not fulfilling from a sense of the deepest places of your heart.*
>
> SCOTTIE SCHEFFLER, JULY 2025

Scheffler went on to explain that his relationship with his wife and son mattered far more to him than anything he could accomplish on the golf course.

We sometimes imagine that if something is truly meaningful, it ought to make us feel completely fulfilled. We expect a major accomplishment to produce a lasting sense of satisfaction, and when it doesn't, we wonder whether something is wrong with us.

Often we're expecting something from our accomplishments that they were never capable of giving us.

There are different dimensions to the human experience, and each has its own needs. A person can experience tremendous fulfillment in their work and still long for a deeper relationship with their spouse. We can be surrounded by people who admire us and still feel terribly lonely. None of this diminishes the goodness that is already present in our life, but it may not leave us feeling whole.

Avraham Avinu's deepest longing is for a child. He wants someone with whom he can share his life, someone who will continue everything he has dedicated himself to building. No military victory, however miraculous, can replace that.

Avraham says to Hashem:

> ה׳ אֱלֹקִים מַה תִּתֶּן לִי וְאָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ עֲרִירִי
>
> *Hashem, what can You give me when I remain childless?*

The Ramban explains, ומה יהיה שכרי בלא בנים, what meaning will my reward have without children?

Avraham is not denying the manifest and revealed good that Hashem has already given him, but he is also painfully aware of what is still missing.

When someone is suffering, we often try to help them by reminding them of everything they have to be grateful for. And sometimes we do the same thing to ourselves. We look at our blessings and feel almost guilty that there is still something we want so badly. We may feel that our feeling of lack reflects a lack of gratitude.

But the truth is, why should one invalidate the other?

Why should a person who has experienced tremendous success feel that he has no right to be lonely?

Why should someone who has a beautiful marriage feel guilty about grieving the absence of children?

We can genuinely appreciate the blessings in our lives without expecting them to resolve every other longing we carry. Avraham can recognize the extraordinary miracle of his victory and still turn to Hashem and ask for a child.

And let's look at how Hashem responds. He takes Avraham outside.

> הַבֶּט נָא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וּסְפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם תּוּכַל לִסְפֹּר אֹתָם ... כֹּה יִהְיֶה זַרְעֶךָ
>
> *Look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them... So shall your offspring be.*

Hashem doesn't remind Avraham of everything He has already done for him, nor does He suggest that Avraham ought to be satisfied with the amazing miracle he has just experienced. **Hashem tells him that the best is yet to come.**

I think there's an important lesson here about what it means to live a wholehearted life. We want to be able to appreciate our victories, and we should experience genuine satisfaction in what we've accomplished and gratitude for the blessings we've received. And we also need to make room for the things we are still longing for.

TAKE IT WITH YOU

Grateful for what we have. Honest about what we still long for.

Avraham Avinu had just won a miraculous war, but he still longed for a child. Like a son who knows how deeply his father loves him and feels comfortable asking for what he needs, Avraham turned to Hashem and asked for a child. His request did not reflect a lack of gratitude for what he had received. If anything, it reflected the strength of his relationship with Hashem.

And the same is true for us. We can be genuinely grateful for all the blessings in our lives and still turn to Hashem with the deepest longings of our hearts.



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SOURCES

Bereishis 15:1 to 15:5 (sefaria.org/Genesis.15.1-5) · Rashi on Bereishis 15:1 (sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.15.1) · Ramban on Bereishis 15:1 to 15:2 (sefaria.org/Ramban_on_Genesis.15.1) · Bereishis Rabbah 44:5 (sefaria.org/Bereshit_Rabbah.44.5) · Scottie Scheffler, pre-tournament press conference, The Open Championship, July 2025