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The Berachah "Magen Avraham" Protects a Jew's Innermost Self from the Yetzer HaRa

This week's parsha is parshas Lech Lecha. We will focus on the decision of the Anshei Kenesses HaGedolah to formulate the first berachah of Shemoneh Esrei, which we recite thrice daily, by mentioning the three holy Avos: "ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו, אלקי אברהם אלקי יצחק ואלקי יעקב." Furthermore, we will elaborate on the significance of the conclusion of the berachah with: "ברוך אתה ה' מגן אברהם"—which mentions only Avraham.

Now, we are taught in the Gemara (Berachos 26b): "תפלות אבות תקנום... אברהם תיקן תפלת שחרית... יצחק תיקן תפלת מנחה... יעקב תיקן תפלת ערבית." **The tefilos were instituted by the Avos . . . Avraham instituted the Shacharis prayer . . . Yitzchak instituted the Minchah prayer . . . Yaakov instituted the Arvis prayer.** Accordingly, it makes perfect sense that our three daily tefilos begin by mentioning the three holy Avos who instituted them.

However, the fact that they chose to conclude this first berachah with the words "מגן אברהם" suggests that this sacred formula relates to the promise HKB"H made to Avraham Avinu. We know that HKB"H subjected Avraham to ten tests. One of them is recorded at the beginning of this week's parsha (Bereishis 12, 1): "ויאמר ה' אל אברם, לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשר אראך, ואעשך לגוי גדול ואברכך ואגדלה שמך והיה ברכה." **Hashem said to Avram, "Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you will be a berachah."**

Rashi explains HKB"H's promise in two ways: (1) A journey impacts the traveler negatively in three ways—it diminishes reproduction, it diminishes one's money, and it diminishes one's name and good reputation (which must be earned anew in the new location). **Therefore, he** (Avram) **needed these three berachos—one regarding children, one regarding money, and one regarding his reputation.** Accordingly, the promise **"I will make of you a great nation"** relates to the children; the promise **"I will bless you"** relates to money; the promise **"you will be a berachah"** relates to his good name and reputation.

Rashi's second explanation is based on the following Gemara (Pesachim 117b): "אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש, ואעשך לגוי גדול, זהו שאומרים אלקי אברהם, ואברכך, זהו שאומרים אלקי יצחק, ואגדלה שמך, זהו שאומרים אלקי יעקב. יכול יהו חותמין בכולן, תלמוד לומר והיה ברכה, בך חותמין ואין חותמין בכולן." **Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: "And I will make of you a great nation"—this is fulfilled by saying "G-d of Abraham." "And I will bless you"—this is fulfilled by saying "G-d of Yitzchak." "And I will make your name great"—this is fulfilled by saying "the G-d of Yaakov." One might have thought that they should conclude** this first berachah of the Amida **with all** (three) **of them, therefore the passuk states: "And you will be a berachah." They will conclude** the berachah **with you and not with all of them.**

Thus, we learn a tremendous chiddush. The formula instituted by the Anshei Kenesses HaGedolah for the first berachah of the Shemoneh Esrei we recite thrice daily is related to the promises HKB"H made to Avraham Avinu at the beginning of our parsha.

Since we have a principle that wherever there are two explanations, they both represent divine truth, we will combine the two explanations provided by Rashi. Prior to praying for our general needs in the middle twelve berachos of Shemoneh Esrei, we mention the three holy Avos in keeping

with the promise of HKB"H to Avraham Avinu. By mentioning their three names, we are also privileged to have HKB"H fulfill His promise to bless Avraham's progeny with children, money, and good reputations.

The First Berachah "Magen Avraham" Corresponds to Avraham Avinu

It is worth noting that the statement of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish **"בך חותמין ולא בהם"**—that we conclude the first berachah with by referring to Avraham exclusively—**"מגן אברהם"**—coincides very nicely with the teaching that the first three berachos of Shemoneh Esrei align with the three holy Avos. A source for this teaching is found in the Shibolei Leket (Tefilah 18):

When Avraham was saved from the ordeal in Ur Kasdim, the ministering angels proclaimed, "Blessed are You, Hashem, the Shield of Avraham." When Yitzchak Avinu was bound atop the mizbeiach and turned into dust, his ashes were cast over Har HaMoriah. Immediately, HKB"H covered him with dew and brought him back to life . . . Immediately, the ministering angels proclaimed, "Blessed are You, Hashem, Who resurrects the dead." When Yaakov Avinu came and encountered the gates of heaven and sanctified the name of HKB"H, the ministering angels immediately proclaimed, "Blessed are You, Hashem, the holy G-d."

Based on this, we can appreciate why in the first berachah, which corresponds to Avraham Avinu, the formula instituted mentions all three of the Avos: **"אלקי אברהם אלקי יצחק ואלקי יעקב".** In this manner, the promise HKB"H made to Avraham Avinu is fulfilled: **"ואעשך לגוי גדול" is fulfilled by uttering "אלקי אברהם"; "ואגדלה שמך" is fulfilled by uttering "אלקי יצחק"; "ואברכך" is fulfilled by uttering "אלקי יעקב".** Then we conclude the berachah with the phrase **"מגן אברהם"** in keeping with HKB"H's promise to Avraham of **"והיה ברכה"**—on which they expounded in the Gemara: **They will conclude** the berachah **with you and not with all of them.**

Let us now add several things the Anshei Kenesses HaGedolah instituted in the formula of the berachah in relation to Avraham Avinu:

(1) In this berachah HKB"H is described as **"אל עליון"—the Supreme G-d.** This correlates with the berachah Malki Tzedek King of Shaleim bestowed upon Avraham Avinu (ibid. 14, 19): **"ברוך אברם לאל עליון קונה שמים וארץ"—blessed is Avram to the supreme G-d, Maker of heaven and earth.**

(2) The formula describes HKB"H as **"גומל חסדים טובים"—Who bestows beneficial kindnesses;** this alludes to the fact that Avraham Avinu emulated HKB"H by bestowing "chesed" on everyone. Thus, he fulfilled the directive taught in the Gemara (Sotah 14a) regarding the passuk (Devarim 13, 5): **"אחרי ה' אלקיכם תלכו... להלך אחר מדותיו"—"after Hashem, your G-d, you are to follow" . . . to emulate His attributes.**

(3) They added the depiction **"וקונה הכל"—and creates everything**—which is also mentioned in the berachah Malki Tzedek bestowed upon Avraham Avinu: **"ברוך אברם לאל עליון קונה שמים וארץ".**

(4) Lastly, the formula of the berachah depicts HKB"H as: **"וזוכר חסדי אבות ומביא גואל לבני בניהם למען שמו באהבה"—Who recalls the kindnesses of the Avos and brings a redeemer to their children's children for His Name's sake, with love.** This correlates with the promise HKB"H made to Avraham Avinu at the Bris Bein HaBesarim regarding the future geulah (ibid. 15, 14): **"וגם את הגוי אשר יעבודו דן אנכי"—but also that nation whom you shall serve, do I judge.** They expounded in the Midrash (B.R. 44, 19): **The passuk should have simply said "גם". Why does it say "וגם"? "גם" refers to Mitzrayim; "וגם" comes to include all four of the galuyos.**

Why Was It Important to Avraham Avinu to Have the Berachah Conclude with His Name Alone

It is now incumbent upon us to reconcile the surprising promise that the conclusion of the berachah would mention Avraham exclusively: **"מגן אברהם".** It implies that this was extremely important to Avraham. This is seemingly difficult to comprehend. After all, we know that Avraham Avinu was extremely humble. This is apparent from his remark to HKB"H (Bereishis 18, 27): **"הנה נא הואלתי לדבר אל אדוני ואנכי עפר ואפר"—behold, now, I have begun to speak to my Lord although I am but dust and ash.** So, why was it important to him to have the berachah conclude with his name only?

I would like to propose a wonderful explanation based on a precious teaching from the immaculate works of the Chiddushei HaRim, zy"a, in his handwritten Sefer HaZechut (Sazria). He comments on the passuk related to the Bris bein HaBesarim (ibid. 15, 1): **"אחר הדברים האלה היה דבר ה' אל אברם במחזה לאמר אל תירא אברם אנכי מגן לך שכרך הרבה מאד"—after these events, the word of Hashem came to Avram in a vision, saying, "Fear not, Avram, I am a shield for you, you reward is very great."**

The Chiddushei HaRim explains that there is a "spark"—literally, a "point"—within the heart of every Jew that Blessed One **shields,** so that it will not be lost or corrupted. This is true of all Jews, even if they have sinned. He contends that this is the significance of the declaration at the conclusion of the berachah that Hashem is **"the shield of Avraham—"מגן אברהם.**

This incredible, fundamental principle—that every Jew has a shielded, inner spark—is also brought down in the sefer Butzina D'Nehora, authored by esteemed Rabbi Baruch of Medzhybizh, zy"a. Based on this principle, he interprets the tefilah of David HaMelech (Tehillim 37, 10): **"ועוד מעט ואין רשע והתבוננת על מקומו ואיננו"—soon there will be no wicked, you will contemplate his place, and he will no longer be there.** In other words, even a Jew that has committed so many sins as to be considered a "rasha," nevertheless: **"ועוד מעט"**—there still remains within him that innermost spark embedded in his heart; **"ואין רשע"**—where he is not considered wicked, because the taint of his misdeeds does not reach that spot. To which David HaMelech prayed to Hashem: **"והתבוננת על מקומו"**—please consider this innermost spot; **"ואיננו"**—and You will see that his wickedness does not exist in this innermost haven; all of his sins are merely external manifestations that do not stem from the depths of his heart.

In the sefer Dover Shalom (230), the author presents an interpretation Sar Shalom of Belz, zy"a, said at his table on the fifteenth of Shevat regarding the passuk (ibid. 130, 1): **"שיר המעלות ממעמקים קראתיך ה'"—a song of ascents, from the depths, I called to You, Hashem.** He asks: How is it possible for a person to overcome the yetzer hara that already controls him and has corrupted him? He advises the person to beseech Hashem to arouse the holy spark within him over which the yetzer hara has no power or control. In this manner, he will overcome the yetzer and draw closer to Hashem. This then is the meaning of the passuk: **"שיר המעלות ממעמקים קראתיך ה'"**—I beseech You from the innermost depths of my heart that remains untouched and untainted by the deleterious effects of my sins.

This is also the message conveyed by the Yismach Moshe (Noach) in his interpretation of the passuk (Yeshayah 6, 10): **"ולבבו יבין ושב ורפא לו"—and his heart will understand, and he will repent and be healed.** Teshuvah begins when the sinner searches deep within himself, to the depths of his heart where the divine spark is concealed. That fiery spark is never extinguished. It enables a Jew to ignite an intense fire in his heart that will extend kedushah and taharah to all of his 248 limbs and 365 sinews. This is the implication of the passuk: **"ולבבו יבין"**—if he truly comprehends the significance of the inner focal point in his heart; **"ושב ורפא לו"**—he will be inspired to perform teshuvah and will be healed.

Mentioning the Names of the Three Avos Arouses This Innermost Spark that We Inherited from Them

What we learn from the Chiddushei HaRim, zy"a, is that the source of this inner, Jewish spark that always remains untarnished is the promise HKB"H made to Avraham: **"Fear not, Avram, I am a shield for you."** While it is clear that HKB"H made this promise initially to Avraham Avinu, in truth, it applied to all three of the Avos. Shlomo HaMelech alludes to this fact with the following truism (Koheles 4, 12): **"והחוט המשולש לא במהרה ינתק"—and the three-ply cord will not be severed easily.**

Let us now introduce what the author of the Tanya discusses at length in Likutei Amarim (Chapter 18). In times of religious persecutions, we witness a surprising phenomenon. Even uneducated Jews and sinners, who have been victims of the yetzer of earthly desires, nevertheless, refused to repudiate and renounce their religion and convert to Christianity. They even sanctified the holy name and were willing to sacrifice their lives despite being tortured and suffering various indignities. If they could not even resist the yetzer of earthly

desires, how were they able to withstand being tortured and still refuse to renounce their religion?

The author of the Tanya explains that every Jew—even the uneducated, least observant, and the biggest sinners—harbors in the depths of his heart an intense love for Hashem which is beyond intellectual comprehension. It is a heritage from the holy Avos. Here is a translation of what he writes:

For the Avos are the chariot for the Shechinah. As such, they were able to endow their children after them with a "nefesh," "ruach" and "neshamah" (the three parts of the soul) **forevermore . . . to each and every one according to his spiritual level and according to his deeds . . . even the most non-observant and the biggest sinners of Yisrael.**

So, how do we explain the fact that these sinners fail to observe Hashem's mitzvos? It is because this love they possess is concealed and dormant—it is in a state of hibernation. It is obscured and cloaked by their shameful transgressions. Yet, when this non-observant Jew is subjected to the ordeal of renouncing his faith and denying his belief in Hashem, this hidden love awakens from its slumber in the depths of his heart. It bursts forth like a holy flame, which even copious quantities of water cannot extinguish. As a result, even the most non-observant and unaffiliated Jew is suddenly willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of "kiddush Hashem"; for he refuses to damage and uproot the deep-seated love for Hashem that he inherited from the holy Avos.

He is undoubtedly referring to the internal spark in a Jew's heart that is immune and refractory to any blemish. This is even true of a consummate rasha who has corrupted every component of kedushah in his being. Hence, when such a rasha is subjected to the difficult ordeal of renouncing Hashem and worshipping avodah-zarah, he remains stalwart on account of this inner, Jewish spark that burns within him. It inspires him to avenge the honor of Hashem and perform an act of "kiddush Hashem."

The author of the Tanya also refers to this in Likutei Torah (Emor) in relation to the passuk (Vayikra 22, 32): **"ונקדשתי בתוך בני ישראל"—and I shall be sanctified among (within) Bnei Yisrael.** He interprets this as a reference to the internal spark within the heart of each and every Jew; there he **"will be sanctified."** Their hearts burn there with an intense, strong love for the blessed, holy, incomparable King.

Based on the fact that we inherited this awesome quality from our holy Avos, we can comprehend what the author of the Tanya writes in Torah Ohr (Vaeira): The reason we say **"אלקי אברהם אלקי יצחק ואלקי יעקב"** in every tefilah, mentioning the names of all three Avos, is to arouse the internal spark that we inherited from them. Here is a translation of the passage:

Every Jew, in every generation, inherits traits of the Avos—every individual according to his respective level. We express this fact in our prayers by uttering: "The G-d of our forefathers, the G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchak and the G-d of Yaakov." The traits of other tzaddikim, such as the shevatim—Reuven, Shimon, Levi, etc.—however, albeit admirable and desirable, are not inherited by everyone; some Jews do not inherit them, at all. This is not true of the attributes of the Avos; they must be present in every Jew, since they are the roots and source of every Jewish neshamah.

Aspiring to Be Like Avraham Yitzchak and Yaakov

It is now appropriate to introduce the sacred remarks of the Yismach Moshe (Vayechi). He addresses the following statement in the Midrash (Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu Rabbah, 25): **"שכל אחד ואחד מישראל חייב לומר, מתי יגיעו מעשי למעשה אברהם יצחק ויעקב"—every single Jew must say to himself, "When will my actions equal the actions of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?"** His explanation is based on what the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh (Korach) writes concerning the ill-fated dispute involving Korach and his assembly (Bamidbar 16, 1): **"ויקח קרח בן יצהר בן קהת בן לוי"—Korach the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehas, the son of Levi, separated himself.**

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 109b) explains why Yaakov's name is not listed in this lineage: **"יעקב ביקש רחמים על עצמו, שנאמר בסודם אל תבוא נפשי ובקהלם אל תחד כבודי, בסודם אל תבוא נפשי, אלו מרגלים, ובקהלם אל תחד כבודי, זה עדת קרח".** **Yaakov requested mercy for himself** (that his name would not be included in the lineage of Korach)**, as it is stated** (Bereishis 49, 6)**: "Let my soul not**

come into their council; to their assembly let my honor not be united." "Let my soul not come into their council"—these are the meraglim. "To their assembly let my honor not be united"; this refers to the assembly of Korach. We must explain what benefit this was to Yaakov—to not have his name associated with them. After all, it is common knowledge that Korach was a descendant of Yaakov.

The Ohr HaChaim explains that Yaakov Avinu incorporated the qualities of all three Avos. As such, he is the root of all the neshamos of Yisrael. Hence, he did want his name to be associated with Korach, so that his spiritual blemish would not taint the root of his neshamah originating from Yaakov, the head of the holy genealogical tree. Had the blemish reached the neshamah of Yaakov, the beginning of the chain, even teshuvah and Gehinnom would not have provided a tikun. Yaakov wanted to ensure that all of his future descendants would always have a ray of hope and would not be sullied by Korach's sin.

Based on this, the Yismach Moshe interprets the statement of David HaMelech (Tehillim 49, 20): **"תבוא עד דור אבותיו עד נצח לא יראו אור"—you shall come to the generation of his fathers; unto eternity they shall see no light.** So long as the blemish of one's sins does not reach the root of the holy Avos in his soul, there remains hope of rectifying everything by means of teshuvah. But if, chas v'shalom: **"You shall come to the generation of his fathers"**—i.e., the blemish has reached all the way back to the holy Avos in the root of their neshamos—**"unto eternity they shall see no light"**—there is no longer hope of a tikun, since the root has also been blemished.

Accordingly, the Yismach Moshe asserts that the opposite is also true. If a person manages to elevate his level of kedushah significantly through Torah-study and good deeds, he can inspire his neshamah to establish a stronger bond with the holy Avos—the source of his kedushah. They will illuminate his being with an enhanced level of kedushah. This then is the meaning of the Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu: **Every single Jew must say to himself, "When will my actions equal the actions of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?"** In other words, every Jew is obliged to elevate himself through Torah and mitzvos until he succeeds in connecting with the seeds of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov in his neshamah. This will illuminate his neshamah with an intense, holy light that will inspire him to serve Hashem with yirah and ahavah. These are his sacred remarks.

The Three Dots of the "Segol" Allude to the Three Avos

We can find an allusion to this concept in parshas Yisro. In the preface to Matan Torah, HKB"H says to Yisrael (Shemos 19, 5): **"ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו בקולי ושמרתם את בריתי והייתם לי סגולה מכל העמים כי לי כל הארץ, ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש"—and now, if you hearken well to Me and you will keep My covenant, you will be a "segulah" to Me from among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine. You will be to Me a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation.** The Shem MiShmuel writes (Nitzavim 5676) in the name of the great Rabbi David of Leluv, zy"a: **"והייתם לי סגולה כמו נקודת סגול, דאפילו אתה מהפכה לכל צד תישאר בתמונתה"—"you will be a 'segulah' to Me" like the symbol of the (vowel) "segol"; no matter which way you turn it, it retains its same configuration.**

In keeping with our current discussion, we can suggest that HKB"H is intimating that the bond between Yisrael and their Father in Heaven—which is above and beyond His bond with any other nation—stems from the fact that they are a "segulah"—a treasured nation. This elite status is attributable to their inner spark and focal point, which is a "segol." The term "segulah" is related to the name of the "segol"—the triangular vowel composed of three dots. The "segol" alludes to the three holy Avos. The two upper dots allude to Avraham and Yitzchak; Avraham's midah of "chesed" is to the right and Yitzchak's midah of "gevurah" is to the left. The bottom dot, situated midway between the upper two dots, alludes to Yaakov's midah of "tiferes," which incorporates both "chesed" and "gevurah" ("din"). Seeing as this holy trinity is the source of all Jewish neshamos: **"והייתם לי סגולה מכל העמים"**—we have been designated as **"a 'segulah' to Me from among all the peoples."**

We can now begin to appreciate why HKB"H's promise was so important to Avraham Avinu: **"והיה ברכה, בך חותמין ולא בהם".** Based on the Zohar hakadosh (Terumah), our sacred sefarim teach us that each of the Avos served Hashem with his own unique midah (attribute)—Avraham with "chesed," Yitzchak

with "gevurah" ("din"), and Yaakov with "tiferes" (a composite of "chesed" and "din").

This explains very nicely why Avraham Avinu yearned to conclude the first berachah of Shemoneh Esrei with his name—**"מגן אברהם".** He wanted to guarantee that HKB"H would safeguard the inner Jewish spark with the midah of "chesed" above and beyond what a person really deserves. We can suggest that this was implied by HKB"H when he told Avraham **"אנכי מגן לך"**—I will **"shield"** you and your legacy.

Let us elaborate. We know that the divine name **א"ל** is associated with the midah of "chesed." This is evident from the passuk (Tehillim 52, 3): **"חסד אל כל היום"—the "chesed"** (kindness) **of G-d is all day long.** This is perhaps why Malki Tzedek employed this divine name when he blessed Avraham Avinu by saying: **"ברוך אברם לאל עליון קונה שמים וארץ".** He acknowledged the fact that Avraham had succeeded in awakening in the world HKB"H's midah of "chesed" emanating from the name **א"ל.** Avraham Avinu strove to influence Yitzchak and Yaakov to follow in his footsteps to also safeguard the inner spark with the midah of "chesed."

This then is the remez inherent in the term **מג"ן.** Its gematria (93) equals three times the numerical value of the name **א"ל** (31); thereby alluding that all three of the Avos consented to safeguard the inner spark with the "chesed" emanating from the name **א"ל.** This is the significance of the divine promise made to Avraham Avinu: **"אנכי מגן לך".** Therefore, we begin Shemoneh Esrei by mentioning all three Avos— **"אלקי אברהם אלקי יצחק ואלקי יעקב";** we then conclude the first berachah **"ברוך אתה ה' מגן אברהם".** This formula employs the term **מג"ן** with a gematria of three times **א"ל** to express the fact that all three Avos committed to safeguarding the inner spark with the midah of "chesed," in keeping with HKB"H's promise to Avraham Avinu **"אנכי מגן לך".**

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