

# Knowing Yourself Better Than the Devil Part 2

Source Sheet by Rabbi Reuven Ibragimov

1. **From Encyclopedia.com, Entry: Abraham** .א  
 Abraham is now regarded as one of the most influential people in all of history. The world's three largest monotheistic religions – in fact possibly monotheism itself – found their beginnings with him. Over 3 billion people in the modern world cite Avraham as the "father" of their religion.
  
2. **Rashi on Genesis 14:13** .ב  
 (2) **העברי** THE HEBREW — the one who came from the other side (עבר) of the River (Euphrates) **רש"י על בראשית י"ד:י"ג העברי. שָׁבָא מֵעֵבֶר הַנָּהָר (בראשית רבה):**  
**Genesis Rabbah 42:8**  
 Avram the *Ivri*.” Rabbi Yehudah said, “[This teaches us that] the entire world was on one side, and he was on the other side.”
  
3. **Exercise #1: Does Our Society Condition us to Its Values?** .ג
  - What does your society value more: entertainment or human dignity? Cite three proofs.
  - Is exploitation of women justified to sell products?
  - Does the value of pluralism, “I'm OK, you're OK,” make it difficult for you to develop and assert clear values?
  - Is a girl in high school looked down upon for covering her body?
  - Will I be condemned or approved of by others if I claim I know what I know to be absolutely true at the expense of someone else's truth?

Are you aware what the values of your society are? Could it be that you have passively accepted some of them? If you are aware of them, are you comfortable challenging the values of your society?
  
4. Why should Avraham's clarification of the truth give him the strength to challenge authority? Why should this information transform him? .ד

5. **Bereishit Rabbah 39:1**

Rabbi Yitzchak said, “There was once a person traveling from place to place who saw a palace that was burning. He wondered, ‘Is it conceivable that this palace has no one in charge of it?’ Thereupon, the owner of the palace appeared to him and said, ‘I am the master of this palace.’”

Similarly, because Avraham our father wondered, “Is it conceivable that this world has no one in charge of it?” the Holy One, Blessed be He, appeared to him and said, “I am the Master of the world.”

6. **Rabbi Jeremy Kagan, The Jewish Self, p. 152**

Why does the Midrash compare the world to a burning castle, and why should its burning lead Avraham to the conviction that the world must have a master? Burning connotes destruction. Avraham looked around the world and saw that everything either dies or is destroyed. People grow old and die, as do trees and animals. Mountains, continents, even stars eventually wear down or burn out. Nothing is permanent. He saw on the one hand his body aging towards death. Though that aspect of himself which was accessible to [Avraham's] senses – his body – was mortal, that which he knew in its essence – his self – was experienced as meaningful and infinite.

He concluded that if the only thing he knew in its essence was infinite, even though its physical manifestation was mortal, it must be that, though the world which he could see was finite, there is something beyond it, infinite and forever. At that moment Avraham discovered both himself and God. Thus the midrash states that Avraham learned Torah “from himself” (Bereishit Raba 95:3) – from his root awareness of self, which contradicted the culture and philosophy of his times. Avraham built his vision of the world from himself.

7. **Rabbi Ezriel Tauber, Thoughts for a Jewish Heart, pp. 129-131**

God chose Avraham because he was the first one to realize that the world was created for him. Noah, Shem and all the Sages and righteous people of earlier generations unanimously recognized the existence of the Creator. They believed that He was the first and the only Supreme Being, and the Creator of all the worlds. But they never thought that God's satisfaction in all His grand Creation comes from lowly man, here in this physical world.

The ancients did not lack *Emunah* (faith) in the Creator. What they lacked was *Emunah* in themselves: who they are and what they can accomplish ... This is the train of thought that led to the world's decline. People took the attitude that it was improper for the lofty and almighty Creator of the World to concern Himself with humans, formed of material substance, who live in this lowly world.

This deteriorated into the belief that the Creator was uninvolved in what happens in our world; that He gave the world over to the rule of the astrological influences of the stars and planets. People began to think that man was incapable of changing

anything, that he was controlled by the zodiac. Confusion increased until mankind began actually worshiping the stars and planets.

Avraham Avinu's situation made it almost impossible for him to choose the good. Born to the heathen Terach, he lived in a house full of idols and was raised in the clasps of idolatry. He had every reason in the world not to choose the good. But, thanks to his profound insight, he discovered Creation's awesome secret: the world was created for man. Man has free choice, he acts as an independent agent; thus, he can rectify the world – or ruin it.

Avraham believed in this potential with all his heart. He believed that God is just "waiting" for the person who will come along and discover that man is the focus of Creation. Avraham succeeded in his mission: He became the father of the eternal nation that will bring the world to its final rectification.

8. **Exercise #2: If we look at the world the way Avraham did, what will we conclude?** .n

Observing nature, an object's form reveals its function. For example, the sun is designed in an ideal way and positioned precisely in the universe so that it casts rays at a distance of 90 million miles from the Earth, enabling life to exist here. Man was designed with the "awareness" to conceive that he, and even the sun, is a mere speck in the universe.

- o Why is the sun, and man himself, designed with such precision?
- o What is the purpose of this design feature apparent throughout nature?

9. **Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, Netivot Shalom, pp. 62-63** .b

No two people have been created alike, from the time the world was created until now. No one can fulfill the mission that his friend is intended to fulfill. That is, each person has a mission and calling which he must achieve in his life. This includes the specific purpose that he came into this world to fulfill. God sets up each individual's life with the specific circumstances and conditions necessary to fulfill his purpose, to achieve his unique mission and calling.

All the conditions of a person's life – whether physical or spiritual, the good as well as the bad – are granted to him in order to fulfill his unique purpose in the world. Only with these specific conditions can a person fulfill his calling; without them he would not be able to. And since each person has his own specific purpose and calling, the conditions of each person's life differ one from another; one person has an easy life, and another has a more difficult life...

This is the meaning of, "Go from your land and your birthplace and your father's house." Go for yourself – towards your mission, and the perfection of your soul.

10. **#3: Finding a spark of Avraham within ourselves.** .s

- o Did you ever stand up for something?

- If so, what value did you feel you were fighting for?

Imagine for a moment that you had a personal trainer who helps you live each moment with this value.

- Would your life be different?
- How so?

11. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *The Jewish Teenager's Guide to Life*, pp. 12-13** .87

In order to begin the path of genuine self-development, you must learn to reject the mode of today's culture, which sees the world as existing to serve the individual's self-interest.

You must look beyond yourself [You must be able to see yourself as part of a greater context ...] If you cannot really give of yourself to anyone or anything else, you will forever be alone in your undeveloped smallness. When you have begun to resolve the conflict of living as part of a greater reality and yet in that greater, expanded reality discover your own individual uniqueness, you have begun to walk the long road that leads to real maturity and real greatness.

So there are two phases: First ... strive to discover your uniqueness ... What essential part of the world is yours to build? This question is critically important – a life spent pursuing some unrealistic and inappropriate goal is a life wasted, and worse *it damages the entire world*. When that small insignificant screw in [the] engine rattles around in the wrong place ... the entire engine may be irreparably damaged.

Second, develop the depth to see that the thrill of fitting in is a much more mature experience than the thrill of being a loner at any cost. The immature personality will choose to step out of line in order to experience its own uniqueness ... Immaturity cannot see the beauty in yielding the self in order to actualize the self; in truth, however, that is the only way to genuine selfhood.

12. **Exercise #4: How Well Do I Know Myself?** .27

My career plan/college major was a result of: (a) an inner sense of what I need to know to fulfill my purpose in the world (b) clarity of my gifts and strengths which I need in order to fulfill my purpose (c) what others told me I might like (d) none of the above

-I am \_\_\_\_\_ about what I value and refuse to value: (a) clear, (b) not sure, (c) in agreement with my peers, (d) willing to take time to begin thinking.

-When I think about my unique role, I: (a) look at career opportunities that sound interesting, (b) listen to the advice of others for what to do (c) examine my life experiences to see what areas I excel or fail in to get a realistic picture of where I should invest my energy (d) first try to clarify why I am here in the world in general.

-I have a clear sense of what is good for me and worth pursuing, and what is a fantasy that although exciting is not realistic and probably bad for me.

True (b) False (c) Never thought about it (d) Good question; how do I figure that out?

-My friends and boy/girl friends are people who:

(b) share my likes (b) are similar to me (c) share my values even if they are different from me (d) happen to be around me.

-I'd feel stronger about being myself if I had more clarity about:

(a) what makes me special (b) what it means to be Jewish (c) what I believe in (d) all of the above.



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