

After recounting Abraham's victory over the Four Kings, the Torah relates God's promise to not only provide him a son but also the Land of Israel as his children's eternal inheritance. The verses state: "And He said to him, 'I am the Lord, who brought you forth from Ur of the Chaldees, to give you this land to inherit it.' And he said, 'O Lord God, how will I know that I will inherit it?' And He said to him, 'Take for Me three heifers and three goats and three rams, and a turtle dove and a young bird.' And he took for Him all these, and he divided them in the middle, and he placed each part opposite its mate, but he did not divide the birds... And He said to Abram, 'You shall surely know that your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will enslave them and oppress them, for four hundred years.'" (Bereshiet 15:7-13) There are a several questions that quickly arise from the above. Firstly, why did Abraham question God's promise to inherit the Land when, in the just the verse beforehand in regards to the promise of a child, the verses write, "And he believed in the Lord..." (Bereshiet 15:6) Why believe in God's ability to deliver one miraculous promise but not the other? Secondly, how does the command "...take three heifers and three goats and three rams, and a turtle dove and a young bird..." answer Abrahams query? And finally, what is the deeper message that we can learn from this most perplexing narrative for our own times?

In answer to the all of the above questions Rav J.B. Soloveitchik offers a fascinating insight into this biblical text. He explains that Abraham's question of "How will I know?" implies so much more than just "knowing" in the colloquial sense of the word i.e. the process of gathering knowledge. Rather "knowing" in this context means acquiring a feeling of love, compassion and involvement, as can be understood from the verse in Bereshiet regarding Adam and Chava "Adam knew Chava his wife." (Bereshiet 4:1). Therefore, according to Rav Soloveitchik, Abraham's questioning of God's promise of inheriting the Land was not about expressing doubt in whether or not this would actualize. Rather, Abraham is asking God: "How will I love this land so much? How do you expect me to establish an eternal bond between myself and the land, such that it will become a homestead passed on for all generations?" (Abraham's Journey, pg. 154) Abraham's question was not a theological one but a practical one: he wished to discover how he could ensure that the Land of Israel would be loved and cherished by his descendants for generations to come.

With Abraham's question now in clearer perspective, we can better understand God's answer. In response, God commands Abraham to "Take three heifers and three goats and three rams, and a turtle dove and a young bird" and to divide them — with the exclusion of the birds — and place them opposite each other. These animals, and the rite which was preformed with them, was not just a solemn ritual and covenant between God and Abraham. In fact, they hold the key to how exactly the children of Israel can form an everlasting bond and eternal connection to the Land of Israel.

According to Rav Soloveitchik, the one common factor uniting all of the animals in the above verse is the fact that they represent the three classes from which the Torah has designated that korbanot (offerings) be brought from. The answer, therefore, to Abraham's query is as follows: "Deep commitment to the land will be based on sacrifice. You do not appreciate something if you do not have to fight for it, if you do not sacrifice in order to get it... The most distinctive feature of the Jewish people is its readiness to sacrifice...." Rav Soloveitchik posits that this also explains God's answer of "You shall surely know that your seed will be strangers" in that it was through the subjugation of the Egyptian exile —and every subsequent exile that followed — wherein the constant yearning for redemption burned in the heart of every Jew. This is a second component that forever enables the Jewish people to truly appreciate and merit the Land of Israel as their everlasting home. (ibid, pg. 154-155)

But what of the birds? As we know from the verses, the birds were not divided as the other animals were. "And he took for Him all these, and he divided them in the middle, and he placed each part opposite its mate, but he

did not divide the birds.” Rav Soloveitchik beautifully explains that the bird — who is able to soar high above and escape the earthly reality in which the other animals live — represents the spirit of the Jewish people. At times during our long exile, hope seemed lost and redemption seemed far away. Yet, the undefeatable spirit of the nation has always had the ability to rise high above and transcend whatever tragedies the Jewish people have endured throughout history. Even when all seemed bleak, the Jewish spirit was able to soar up to the heavens (ibid, pg. 156). That, explains Rav Soloveitchik, is why the birds were not divided – because the spirit of the Jewish people can never be broken.

The verses above are not only describing God’s covenant with Abraham, but in fact contain a pertinent message to each and every one of his descendants. First and foremost, even in the darkest times—whether as a nation or as an individual – there is always hope. Through countless episodes in our history we have seen that the Jewish spirit can never be broken; one need only hold tight to its wings and with it we can soar to the uppermost heights. Additionally, in order to fully realize our prayers and dreams of returning to and inheriting the Land of Israel, we must be willing to sacrifice for it. Concludes Rav Soloveitchik, “Throughout the dark night of galut (exile), you will have only one dream, one vision, one aspiration, one hope: to get back to Eretz Yisrael! Next year in Jerusalem! And after you return to Eretz Yisrael, I assure you that you will be deeply in love with the land. It will be an eternal love, not just a passing affair.” (Ibid, pg.155)

As we have seen in our own times, with the re-establishment of the modern day State of Israel and mass waves of Jewish immigration, we are well on our way to bringing this promise to fruition. By strengthening the love of the Land in our hearts, may we merit to see the final redemption speedily in our days.