

Stories with a Twist [340]

Our Forefather Abraham Was Fearful... Insights into Genesis Rabbah 44:4



Background to Our Story (What you need to know to better understand the story)

Genesis 15:1

אַחַר ׀ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם בְּמַחְזָה לֵאמֹר אֶל־תִּירָא אַבְרָם אֲנֹכִי מִגֵּן לְךָ שְׂכָרְךָ הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד:

Some time later, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."

? What question/s might you have after reading the above verse?

The War Against the Four Kings (Genesis 14)



The phrase "the war against the 4 kings" can refer to a few different conflicts, most famously the ancient battle in Genesis 14 involving an alliance of four eastern kings against five kings of the Jordan Valley, which included the capture of Lot, Abram's nephew.

Biblical war in Genesis 14

- Who fought: Four kings from the east—Chedorlaomer, Amraphel, Arioch, and Tidal—fought against a coalition of five kings from the Jordan Valley, including the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah.
- Why they fought: The four kings had previously conquered the five kings, who then paid tribute for 12 years before rebelling.
- Key events:
 - The four kings defeated the five kings in the Valley of Siddim.
 - Lot, Abram's nephew, was captured along with his possessions.
 - Abram gathered his men and pursued the four kings, defeated them, and rescued Lot and the other captives.

Abraham and the Fiery Furnace



The story of "Abraham and the fiery furnace" is a legendary tale found in non-biblical Jewish and Islamic traditions, not the Bible. In this story, Abraham is thrown into a fiery furnace by King Nimrod for refusing to worship idols. He is miraculously saved by God, while his brother Haran, who hesitated in his faith, dies in the flames.

- The incident: According to the story, King Nimrod orders Abraham to be thrown into a fiery furnace for smashing his father's idols and refusing to worship them.
- Divine rescue: Abraham is miraculously protected by God, and the fire only burns the ropes that bind him.
- Haran's fate: Abraham's brother, Haran, is also thrown into the furnace but dies because he did not have a perfect faith.
- The aftermath: Abraham is taken out of the furnace unharmed, and the event leads to the king and his people acknowledging God's power.
- Source: This story is not in the biblical text but appears in sources like *Genesis Rabbah*, *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* (a Jewish midrash), and the Quran.

The Text: Genesis Rabbah 44:4

אָנְכִי מִגֵּן לֶךְ (בראשית טו, א)

רַבִּי לֹוי אָמַר תַּרְמִיז, וּרְבִנּוּ אֲמַרֵי תְדֵא. רַבִּי לֹוי אָמַר לְפִי שֶׁהָיָה אָבִינוּ אֲבָרְהָם מִתְפַּחַד וְאוֹמֵר תֹּאמַר אוֹתָן אֲכַלְוּסִין שֶׁהֲרֵגְתִּי שֶׁהָיָה בָהֶם צְדִיק אֶחָד וַיֵּרָא שְׁמַיִם אֶחָד, מִשָּׁל לְאֶחָד שֶׁהָיָה עוֹבֵר לְפָנָי פֶּרֶדְסוֹ שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ, רָאָה תְּבִילָה שֶׁל קוֹצִים וַיֵּרֵד וַיִּטָּלָהּ, וַהֲצִיץ הַמֶּלֶךְ וַרְאָה אוֹתוֹ, הִתְחִיל מִטְמֵן מִפְּנֵיו, אָמַר לוֹ מִפְּנֵי מָה אָתָּה מִטְמֵן, כִּמָּה פּוֹעֲלִים הָיִיתִי צָרִיךְ שֶׁיִּקְשׂוּ אוֹתָהּ עֲכָשְׂיוּ שֶׁקָּשְׂשֶׁת אוֹתָהּ בּוֹא וְטַל שָׂכָר. כִּךָּ אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְאַבְרָהָם אוֹתָן אֲכַלְוּסִין שֶׁהֲרֵגְתָּ קוֹצִים כְּסוּחִים הֵיוּ, הֲדָא הוּא דְכָתִיב (ישעיה לג, יב) וְהָיוּ עַמִּים מִשְׂרָפוֹת שִׂיד קוֹצִים כְּסוּחִים.

רַבִּי לֹוי אָמַר אוֹחְרִי, לְפִי שֶׁהָיָה אָבִינוּ אֲבָרְהָם מִתְפַּחַד וְאוֹמֵר תֹּאמַר אוֹתָן הַמְּלָכִים שֶׁהֲרֵגְתִּי שֶׁבְּנֵיהֶם מְכַנְסִין אֲכַלְוּסִין וּבָאִים וְעוֹשִׂים עַמִּי מִלְחָמָה, אָמַר לוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: אֵל תֵּירָא אָנְכִי מִגֵּן לֶךְ, מָה הַמֶּגֶן הַזֶּה אֲפִלּוּ כָל הַתְּרַבּוֹת בָּאוֹת עָלֶיךָ הֵיא עוֹמְדָת כְּנֻגְדוֹ, כִּךָּ אֵת אֲפִלּוּ כָל עוֹבְדֵי כּוֹכָבִים מִתְפַּנְסִין עָלֶיךָ גִּלְחָם אֲנִי כְּנֻגְדוֹ.

וּרְבִנּוּ אֲמַרֵי תְדֵא, לְפִי שֶׁהָיָה אָבִינוּ אֲבָרְהָם מִתְפַּחַד וְאוֹמֵר נִרְדַּתִּי לְכַבֵּשׁן הָאֵשׁ וַנְּצַלְתִּי, נִרְדַּתִּי לְמִלְחָמַת הַמְּלָכִים וַנְּצַלְתִּי, תֹּאמַר שְׁנֵתִּיבְלִתִּי שְׂכָרִי בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְאֵין לִי כְּלוּם לְעֵתִיד לְבוֹא, אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: אֵל תֵּירָא אָנְכִי מִגֵּן לֶךְ, וְכָל מָה שֶׁעֲשִׂיתִי עִמָּךְ בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה חֲנֹם עֲשִׂיתִי עִמָּךְ, אֲבָל שְׂכָרְךָ מִתְקַן לְעֵתִיד לְבוֹא. שְׂכָרְךָ הֲרֵבָה מְאֹד, הֵיךְ מָה דָּאֵת אָמַר (תהלים לא, כ): מָה רַב טוֹבְךָ אֲשֶׁר צָפַנְתָּ לִירֵאִיךָ.

1

... our forefather Abraham was fearful and said to himself: Perhaps you might say that among those people whom I killed in my war against the four kings, there was one righteous person, or one God-fearing person.

This is comparable to a person who was passing by the king's orchard. He saw a bundle of thorns, and he went down to the orchard and took it away. The king looked out of his window and saw him [the person], upon which, he [the person] began hiding from him [from the king]. He [the king] said to him: Why are you hiding from me? How many workers would I have needed in order to collect [the thorns]. Now that you collected it for me, come and take your reward.

Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham: Those people whom you killed were thorns already cut down. This is what is written: *Nations will be like burnings for lime, like cut thorns set aflame (Isaiah 33:12)*.

....

2

...our forefather Abraham was fearful and said to himself: I went down into the fiery furnace and was saved, and I went down to the war against the four kings and was saved. Perhaps you might say that I have received my reward in this world, and I have nothing [left] for the future [the world to come].

The Holy One blessed be He said to him [to Abraham]: *Fear not, Abram, I am a shield [magen] for you* – and everything that I have done for you in this world, I did for you for free, but your reward is still allocated for you in the future [the world to come] – and *your reward is very great*. This is similar to that which you say: *How great is the goodness You have in store for those who fear You (Psalms 31:20)*.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension Questions

- ?** Why was Abraham fearful according to the first explanation?
- ?** How did God assuage Abraham's fears according to the first explanation?
- ?** Why was Abraham fearful according to the second explanation?
- ?** How did God assuage Abraham's fears according to the second explanation?

Analysis Questions

Extra Bonus **?** How can we restate Abraham's fears in a more general way? In other words, what was Abraham *really* afraid of?



? Both explanations to Abraham's fears are connected to him winning the war. Do you think it's surprising that winning a war could make a person feel less confident, not more? Why or why not?

? What is scary about having possibly hurt an innocent person? How does it feel wondering if you might have accidentally done that?

? Many people ask why bad things happen to them; but not many people ask why good things happen to them. What do you think is the reason?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? God assuaged Abraham's fears about "using up" all his reward, by telling him that his reward is still intact. Giving the fact that God doesn't talk to us directly, what can you do when you feel that you have been blessed in excess?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text.

! Perhaps someone was hurt unjustly through my fault... & ...Perhaps my blessings are more than what I deserve: The merit of going through life with (a little bit of) Abraham's fears.



Did I hurt someone by mistake? Why are all these good things happening to me? Our short story invites the reader to ask himself or herself Abraham's questions. While excessively delving into these questions might not be practical or even counterproductive, a modicum concern that perhaps we hurt someone unjustly, and the awareness of our many blessings, can lead us to live more moral and meaningful lives.