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The assignment: this month's activity is to write about a great martial artist. They can come from any style or discipline, an ancient master or a contemporary master. Research his life and art or arts that he has practiced. Include any facts that you feel are interesting or important. Include all you can discover about their personal philosophy – the ways in which they viewed their art and practice beyond physical technique.
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I am writing about Avraham Avinu, “Abraham, our Father”, otherwise known as the Biblical Patriarch Abraham. My knowledge of his life in general, and his martial practice in particular, is drawn from the Bible itself, along with the commentaries of Biblical scholars. Although he is not called a martial artist per se, it is clear from my understanding of martial arts that he was indeed a master.

In traditional martial arts training, the real battle of life is the battle for self-mastery. Only a warrior who is at peace with himself can promote a peaceful resolution of conflict with an opponent, be the confrontation verbal or physical. The martial artist is considered to have seven “weapons” for engaging the “enemy” of his own poorly-controlled self in everyday life: concentration, affirmations and visualizations, breathing techniques, meditation, reading inspirational writings, physical practice, and consciously designing your life. (*from “Lessons in Mindfulness: Supporting the Practice of Serious Martial Artists, Module 1 Lesson 8: Our Deeds Determine Us”, p7*).

In this paper I will present examples of Biblical texts that can be interpreted to show how Avraham Avinu did indeed employ many of these “weapons” in his own personal growth struggle and martial leadership. We will start with an account of his role in one of the major battles reported in the Torah, or Bible.

Combat

In the book of Genesis (Bereshit) chapter 14, the Torah describes a dramatic war featuring many armies. Here are the highlights:

*The kings of four countries wage war against the kings of five countries in what appears to be a rebellion;
The rebels win and take with them the spoils of war;
These spoils include Lot, the nephew of Avraham, and his possessions;
News of this capture is brought to Avraham, who musters a military campaign to rescue his kinsman;
Avraham prevails and returns with not only Lot but all the spoils as well;
Avraham attempts to return the goods he retrieved to their rightful owner but is given the opportunity by their spokesman to keep them as a reward;
Avraham rebuffs this offer to avoid a becoming indebted to these people, and emphasizes that he serves only God.*

Avraham’s martial prowess in this episode is revealed from a variety of vantage points. The text says in Chapter 14 verse 14 that Avraham had a fighting force of 318 trained

men at his side. That being the case, they must have had very advanced fighting skills to take on four armies! Since they had to rely on hand-to-hand combat, they must have been superb martial artists. And, the text does emphasize that all the soldiers were trained by Avraham, so he must have been a superior martial arts instructor.

However, Rashi calculates that the figure 318 is actually a symbolic way of referring to Eliezer, Avraham's chief servant. If that was the case, then only two men took on the four armies, and their martial arts skills must have been even greater!

Malbim on this verse, quoting the Rambam in the Guide for the Perplexed 11.38, points out that "the man whom the spirit of God envelopes becomes imbued with wise counsel and strength that will sometimes cause him to challenge a great army with courage and fearless strength". He points to other incidents in the Bible in which men exhibited such spiritually-based martial capability.

Looking at the original Rambam text (Friedlander translation page 229), the Rambam states that every man possesses a measure of this courage, but that it increases among those who employ it more frequently (and diminishes among those who use it rarely). From this perspective we can claim that Avraham must have indeed led a life of bravery so that it was second nature for him to stand up for his family even against a multitude of foes.

And, it should be emphasized that this strength was not of the ego but of humility. He could very easily have accepted the spoils he had recaptured, as most victors would have done. Instead, he declined them and pledged his allegiance to God, the Ultimate Source of power. We can see here the virtues of wisdom, benevolence, sincerity and bravery that characterize the true martial arts master, as taught in traditional schools.

Concentration

How did Avraham achieve this mastery? What led him onto this path? In the Mishneh Torah (Avodat Kochavim Chapter 1), the Rambam describes the process through which Avraham became a believer in the One and Only God.

First he tells how people came to believe in false gods. Here is a summary:

In the days of Enosh (grandson of Adam HaRishon, Adam the first man), the wise men of the generation made a grave error of "thoughtless counsel" (Touger translation page 14). Their error in thinking took this form:

God created the stars and heavenly spheres;

People praise and glorify God;

Therefore, people should praise and glorify those who "serve" Him, namely His creations.

As a result, they constructed temples to the stars and offered sacrifices to them;

False prophets arose and devised symbols to represent these gods so it would be easy for all the common people to engage in this worship;

People then began to believe that these symbols really had the power of creation, and the True Creator was forgotten.

In essence, people lost their “mindfulness” or “consciousness” of how God’s creation really works. Thus “mindless”, they endowed simple wood and stone objects with false powers. One could say that false thinking had led to no thinking, which in turn led to lives based on falsehood.

Thankfully, a man arose to correct peoples’ thinking – Avraham. The Rambam describes his ascent to the position of “pillar of the world” as follows:

*Even as a young child, he thought incessantly about how the world works;
He came on his own to conclusions such as “How is it possible for heavenly spheres to continue to revolve without anyone controlling it?”;
He realized then there was One God who controlled the spheres as well as all of creation;
He recognized that the whole world had made a mistake in serving the stars and images, and that they had “lost awareness of the truth”;
He then began to debate his neighbors to dissuade them from following the wrong path in life.*

In essence, Avraham regained - through correct thinking - the mindfulness people had lost through false thinking. By probing deeply with his mind and asserting control over his thoughts, he cast aside beliefs that did not seem true and replaced them with beliefs that more accurately reflected reality. The concentration and thought control that he exhibited are basic martial arts skills. The place of these skills in the career of the artist is described in this training guide:

“...practice is so much more than just mindless robotic exercises designed to get you into shape. It increases focus and concentration, and helps you to strengthen your body and mind.”

“High achieving individuals almost always share certain common characteristics...One of their acute distinctions is the ability to concentrate and focus their minds. They are able to dwell on one idea for extended periods of time without interruption.”

“Our thoughts hold extreme power...Your future resides in your thoughts from this moment on. Be ultimately aware, giving time and attention only to those thoughts you consciously choose to develop...Change your thoughts and your behaviors will begin to change.”

(from “Lessons in Mindfulness: Supporting the Practice of Serious Martial Artists, Module 1 Lesson 6: The Power of Thought”, pp 4-7).

In correcting his thoughts, Avraham not only transformed his own life, but – as we will see later – became a key figure in the elevation of mankind. First, we will examine evidence that shows how Avraham engaged in yet another of the basic martial art skills that actually enabled him to concentrate and establish thought control. That skill is meditation.

Meditation

The centrality of meditation to traditional martial arts is articulated in this training guide:

“When people use the term ‘environment’, they are usually referring to an external setting or place...external environments can significantly impact our behavior and our thoughts. (But) most of us don’t realize that we also have an internal environment.”

“Most people recognize the need for a little self-control. But few of us comprehend the difference between self-control and mastery of the self, which includes control over thoughts and feelings, discipline of the breath, and command over mood and attitudes.”

“Our internal environment is made up of thoughts, vibration, and consciousness. It is the lens through which we view the world. Our internal environment ultimately determines the degree of happiness we experience over our lifetime... We have the power to master the most difficult part of our practice, the self... To maintain and eventually master the internal environment, learn to monitor thoughts, feelings and emotions.”
(from “Lessons in Mindfulness: Supporting the Practice of Serious Martial Artists, Module 1 Lesson 11: Mastering Your Internal Environment”, pp 4-8).

In his book “Meditation and the Bible”, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan discusses how the prophets used meditation to achieve their unique states of consciousness. He points to numerous Biblical verses that can be interpreted as referring to meditative states, once the vocabulary is understood. Here are some examples that involve Avraham:

“The very first mention of a prophet in the Bible occurs after King Abimelech had attempted to take Sarah away from Abraham, and had been warned by God in a dream not to do so. God then tells Abimelech, ‘Now restore the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you’ (Genesis 20.7). There are many forced attempts that try to explain why this verse mentions that Abraham was a prophet, and what effect this would have on his prayer. But if we understand that the main power of a prophet is the ability to channel spiritual energy, the reason is obvious. Through his prayer, Abraham was able to channel such spiritual energy, and it was therefore likely that his prayer would be effective.”(p 29)

“Phrases (in the Bible) speak of using God’s name as a means of attaining the prophetic state. Some Kabbalists also see the use of God’s name as a method of attaining enlightenment. In the case of Abraham, the Bible says that ‘he called in the name of God’ (Genesis 12.8). This is usually interpreted to mean that he prayed in God’s name, or announced God’s existence to the world, but the Kabbalistic interpretation fits the word more literally.” (p 75)

“The concept of a prophetic dream and that of a vision are so close to each other that they both can be considered the same. The reason for this is that they both have the same source..”

“Such a prophetic dream comes through meditation (hitbodedut) involving the mind and consciousness. As a result of the power of this meditation on a subject in the mind, a strong impression is made on the soul. Through this meditation, the soul elevates itself...This is actually the meaning of the word ‘chalom’, meaning dream. It comes from the root meaning ‘to strengthen’. When one is in a state of preparation through meditation (hitbodedut), he is strengthened through a prophetic dream.”

“A prophetic vision is also the result of meditation...It is in this manner that one receives a prophetic message, and the words are engraved (chakak) in his heart in a spiritual manner.”

“After the vision leaves him, he divests himself of the (meditative) Form... This is alluded to in the Torah, which says ‘God left when He was finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place’ (Genesis 18:33). This means that Abraham returned to his prior level, where he was before he had his vision.”(pp 90-91)

Rabbi Kaplan points out that Avraham had achieved enlightenment, as described by the word Tamim.

“According to the Maharal (of Prague, the eminent Kabbalist and mystic Rabbi Judah Low), the number seven refers to the seven days of creation, and hence, this number always denotes the perfection of the physical world. The number eight is the next step, and therefore denotes one step above the physical. Whenever we find the number eight used, it is in reference to something that brings one into the spiritual realm.”

“The Maharal speaks of the number eight with regard to circumcision, which is always performed when the child is eight days old. Sex involves some of man’s deepest emotions and strongest desires. In giving Abraham a covenant related to the sex organ, prescribing it for the eighth day, God indicated that these emotions and desires would henceforth be used for the mystical quest of the Divine on a transcendental level...”

“It is significant to note that before giving Abraham the commandment of circumcision, God told him, ‘Walk before Me and be complete (tamim) (Genesis 17.1).’...The word Tamim denotes spiritual completeness, where one can attain the eighth level, above the mundane.”

“As the renowned exegete, Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel, explains, the word Tamim has the connotation of true enlightenment and prophecy, as distinguished from spurious mystical states.” (pp 10-141)

As a prophet and master meditator, Avraham transcended his self and thus reached the state of Tamim, or enlightenment.

Physical practice

Avraham apparently practiced the Abir Keshet martial art. This system is not mentioned in the Bible specifically, but is alluded to in certain texts. Today’s Grand Master of the art, the Aluf Abir, is the holder of a tradition that he dates back to the time of the Patriarchs. Here is a summary of its features (source: www.abir.org):

“Abir, as a fighting system of the people of Israel, began with the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham was the son of Terach, the warlord of Nimrod, ruler of the kingdom of Babylon...Abraham taught Abir Keshet, the fighting system from his father, to his son Isaac, who in turn taught his own son, Jacob. Jacob further developed this art and gave a unique form to each of his sons, who later became the twelve tribes of Israel.”

“The system includes therapeutic use of diet, herbs, oils, extracts, compresses, massage and self-induced change produced through special motivational motions and

verbal fortification of one's positive connection with our innermost built-in positive aspects."

"Categories of training include tribal warrior arts utilizing bio-mechanical principles; emulation of the characteristic movements and 'spirits' of the fighting animals who symbolically represent the attributes of specific tribes (of Israel, i.e. Lion – tribe of Judah, snake – tribe of Dan, etc.); warrior arts using arched limbs (keshet means 'bow' in Hebrew); combat forms based on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet; building connections with the God, people, land and Torah of Israel."

The art emphasizes getting in touch with your central good core, and from that center forging positive relationships with the world around you – your people, your land, your tradition, your God. The extreme importance of this approach to life is clearly seen when considering the state of the world at the time the art was developed.

Affirmations and visualizations

In the passages leading up to the story of the Flood, the Torah characterizes the actions that led to our demise. In Genesis 6.5 it says, "God saw that man's wickedness on earth was increasing. Every impulse of his innermost thought was only for evil, all day long". (Kaplan translation). The Hebrew word for "evil" is *rah*, and for "impulse of his innermost thoughts", the Hebrew is *yetzer machshevot lev*. *Rah* is frequently translated as "evil", but I think a closer meaning, according to many Biblical contexts, would be "injurious or harmful; causing pain, unhappiness or misery". *Lev*, as pointed out by scholar Ethan Dor Shav (Hebrewwisdom blog), means the location of the mind. The Torah is therefore telling us that at this point in history, people were wholly consumed with thoughts of harming one another.

Then, in Genesis 6.9, 10, the Torah states, "The world was corrupt before God, and the land was filled with crime. God saw the world, and it was corrupted. All flesh had perverted its way on earth."(Kaplan translation). It is interesting to note that the same Hebrew word – *sh-cht* – is used to mean both corruption and perversion. Corruption and perversion of what? The natural social order. How do we know that? Because the Hebrew word for "crime" here – *hamas* – can refer to the underhanded dealings people perpetrate to undermine the social fabric of trust. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch describes it this way in his commentary on this verse:

"... by hamas - underhand dealing by cunning, astute dishonesty, craftily keeping within the letter of the law - (society) does go to ruin; by wrongs which human justice cannot reach, but which can only be prevented by self-judging conscientiousness before God. Immorality kills this trait of the human mind, and with its loss the grave of civic well-being is also dug." A number of commentators (Rashi, Ramban, Hirsch,) point out that physical violence, including robbery and sexual deviance, takes place as well.

In essence, people's conniving ways had become the norm, and so their inner moral voices became stilled. We had then put ourselves on a path of societal destruction, and that was we got, in the form of the Flood. Only Noah and his family were selected to survive the destruction. Why them? Because through Noah, righteousness could

become the norm and humanity could then embark on the path of social growth. The Torah says that “Noah, a righteous man, was perfect in his generation...” (Genesis 9.1).

Here is what Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says on this verse: “... *moral depravity and improbity, moral and social corruption are shown us immediately as the character of the time, in contrast to which Noah was tzadik and tamim. Tzadik against hamas... The tzadik looks at everything objectively, at nothing from the standpoint of his own interest, but everything from the point of view of what is right.*”

God gave human society a new start after the Flood. On what basis did He believe that we could become a righteous people? The text shows that God perceived our potential to transcend ourselves. Genesis 8.21 portrays God’s regard for us: “...God said to Himself, ‘Never again will I curse the soil because of man, for the inclination of man’s heart is evil from his youth. I will never strike down all that I have done.’” On this verse Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch maintains that the translation of the Hebrew word *n’ar* simply as “youth” is misleading; it can more deeply be understood as “to shake off”, and he references other locations in Tenakh in which it means just that (i.e. Judges 16.20). He says that youth are called *naarim* because it is the time in which young human beings really want to grow out of themselves.

This mode of self-reinvention – to transcend the ego and liberate your inner, higher self - is part and parcel of traditional martial arts training. For example, here is what is said about the importance of self-programming:

“(Repeating affirmations) is one of the most powerful techniques you can practice, and is similar to visualizations or imagery. Visualizations are like videotape, with pictures and images. Affirmations are like audiotapes, without pictures, only sound.”

“Learning to listen intently to others will help your relationships, but we also need to listen to our inner dialogue or self-talk. Many of us talk much worse to ourselves than we would allow others to talk to us. These destructive thoughts often sabotage our successes”.

“You are what you think about. Moods, habits and behaviors are all formed from thoughts. By controlling your thoughts, you control your deeds and take control over your life.”(From “Lessons in Mindfulness: Supporting the Practice of Serious Martial Artists, Module 1 Lesson 8: Our Deeds Determine Us”, pp. 12-13).

In the time leading up to the Flood, people filled their minds with thoughts of malice, and these naturally translated into harmful deeds. They went looking for harm, and they found it until virtually all humanity was led to its death. After the Flood, people would have to look for good, so good things would happen and society could flourish. It was in this circumstance that Avir may have developed, and it was at this time that Avraham was selected to lead people onto the right path.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel asks, “Why and for what purpose was Abraham chosen to become a great and mighty nation, and to be a blessing to all the nations on the earth? ‘In order that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep

the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice'. (Genesis 18.18,19).

Righteousness is foremost among the things God asks of man."

"This is sublime knowledge, sublime understanding, a new grammar of experience. What we encounter in the world is not neutral, impersonal being... what we encounter is full of God's kindness, justice and righteousness. ..God's love and kindness indicate a road."

"Knowledge of God is action toward man, sharing his concern for justice; sympathy in action.... The prophet is a man who sees the world with the eyes of God, and in the sight of God even things of beauty or acts of ritual are an abomination when associated with injustice." (Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel , "The Prophets, An Introduction", pp 210-212).

The Torah provides many examples of how Avraham succeed in making his life a vehicle for righteousness:

He made peace with his nephew Lot to alleviate the dispute over land;

He showed kindness to the three strangers who visited him in the hottest part of the day;

He advocated on behalf of the people of Sodom;

His prayers helped heal the women in the house of Abimelekh from God's decree against them;

He preserved the dignity of his departed family members by securing proper burial arrangements.

With these examples of how Avraham "worked on himself", he can be viewed as a true martial arts master and role model for all people.