

Potomac Torah Study Center
Vol. 9 #4, October 22, 2021; 16 Chesvan 5782; Vayeira 5782

NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah. New: a limited number of copies of the first attachment will now be available at Beth Sholom on the Shabbas table!

Mazel-Tov to Kira Koplow on her Bat Mitzvah this Shabbat at Beth Sholom Congregation. Mazel-Tov also to her siblings Zach and Eliana, and to her grandparents. Friends of the Koplow family have sponsored the Devrei Torah this Shabbat in honor of Kira's Bat Mitzvah.

According to the dates in the Stone Chumash (p.53), Vayeira takes place between years 2047 (when Avraham was 99 years old) and 2085 (when Yitzhak was 37 years old). God's first call to Avraham was in 2023. God waited more than two thousand years to find a person to start a special nation devoted to bringing God's message to the world. Vayeira opens with God visiting Avraham (Himself and through three angels) after Avraham's bris, and it closes with the Akeidah.

During some of the early challenges that God placed before Avraham, our Patriarch was a work in progress. Avraham did not trust God enough to introduce Sara as his wife to Paro or to Avimelech. In both cases, he introduced her as his "sister," out of fear that the pagan rulers would kill him to take Sara as a wife. When God said that He would make a great nation out of Avraham, he asked how that was possible when he had no heir other than his nephew Lot or assistant Eliezer (not trusting that God would give him a son). By the end of Vayeira, Avraham shows complete faith and trust in God.

The Akeidah is the one challenge that the Torah explicitly calls a test of Avraham (22:1). God had set conditions to make this test as difficult as possible for Avraham. He promised Avraham that his child from Sara would be the father of a great nation. Since the promise of a son from Sara, in thirty-eight years, Sara had only given birth to one child, Yitzhak. God promised Avraham that He would ensure that a great nation would come from Yitzhak (17:19; 21:12). According to Midrash, Yitzhak looked exactly like Avraham, a reminder to the world that Yitzhak was Avraham's son (and a reminder to Avraham that Yitzhak was a part of him).

When God told Avraham that He was about to destroy Sodom and Amorah, Avraham argued with God to try to save Sodom on the merit of ten or more righteous people. When God told Avraham to take Yitzhak and sacrifice him, Avraham got up early in the morning and prepared his donkey himself – not delaying at all to carry out this command from Hashem. Why did Avraham argue in the first case but not in the second? Avraham reasoned that God's plan to destroy Sodom did not concern him, so the only reason for God to tell him was that He wanted Avraham to argue and save the city. When God told him to sacrifice his only son, however, it was a command directly to him and only involving him and his family, so there was no room to argue. Carrying out that demand required complete faith that Hashem would find a way to make it

work out for the best. (For implications of Avraham's discussion with God on the meaning of prayer, see the beautiful Dvar Torah by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer below.)

The Torah provides some hints that God inserted to help Avraham believe that following His command would work out well for him. In His first message to Avraham, God had said, "lech lecha" – go for yourself. The message was that leaving his father and family to follow Hashem would be good for Avraham. When it became time for the Akeidah, God told Avraham to take Yitzhak to Moriah "lech lecha" – it will be good for you (22:2). God was telling Avraham that following this command would be good for Avraham, that it would work out. God had promised Avraham that He would make a great nation from his child with Sara – and with the command to sacrifice Yitzhak, God repeats that it will work out well for Avraham.

God's call to Avraham had another parallel to his early call. God's first call to Avraham was for him to go "for yourself, from your land, from your relatives, from your father's house" (12:1). His command for the Akeidah would have reminded Avraham of the earlier message: "take your son, your only one, whom you love" (22:2). The three fold description was another message to Avraham that this message would work out for him, as did God's initial request.

God never withdrew His promise of making a great nation from Yitzhak. Avraham did not know or understand how God could keep His promise of making a great nation from Yitzhak while also having Avraham sacrifice his son. Despite not understanding what would happen, Avraham continued with great faith that Hashem would find a way to make everything work out for the best for him.

At the time of the Akeidah, Yitzhak was 37 years old and Avraham was 137. There is no way that a very old man could force a youth in the prime of life to travel three days to be a sacrifice unless the youth cooperated. It was one thing for Yitzhak to set out with his father. Imagine, however, how difficult it must have been for Yitzhak to travel for three days, all the time realizing that the march was to his death. According to the Torah, Avraham and Yitzhak walked together, went up the mountain to the sacrifice (with Yitzhak carrying the wood for the fire), and then returned together (22:6-19). Yitzhak's cooperation during the entire episode demonstrated his complete faith in Hashem and closeness to his father – a beautiful parallel to Avraham's love and devotion to his son.

To me, perhaps the greatest theme of Vayeira is Avraham's spiritual growth into a man who had complete faith in Hashem and transmitted this complete faith to his son Yitzhak. Growing in personal faith and trusting that God provides us with opportunities that will be good for us is a lesson that I started learning through many years of study with my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l. For example, when I was in college and graduate school, the only career path that interested me was becoming a professor of economics. Two years as an assistant professor taught me that I might have better alternatives. When I decided to look for a research job, I was only interested in lab or economics. During a hiring freeze, my best offer was to switch from labor to industrial organization (Federal Trade Commission). Taking that job taught me that the FTC was a far better fit for me – and while working in DC, I met my wife. Lech lecha – it was good for me to follow the opportunities that God provided for me. I sincerely doubt that I could attain the complete faith of Avraham and Yitzhak – as did some Jews in later history, such as Miriam and the martyrs of history who gave their lives rather than violate our religion. However, I have learned to increase my faith over time, and lech lechi – it has been good for me.

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Yehoshua Mayer HaLevi ben Nechama Zelda, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, David Leib ben Sheina Reizel, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, Ramesh bat Heshmat, and Regina bat Simcha, who need our prayers. I have removed a number of

names that have been on the list for a long time. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

Drasha: Vayera: Mixmaster
By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 1996

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

It's not often that one receives such diverse company on a single day. But if you're Abraham, anything can happen. The portion begins this week as Abraham is sitting outside his tent, three days after his circumcision, on a boiling hot day. He is visited by none other than the Divine Presence. In the middle of the conversation, Abraham looks up. He spots three Arab nomads meandering, in the intense heat in his direction. Imagine yourself. You are recuperating from an operation that most males receive 99 years prior, you are in the middle of a conversation with G-d Al-mighty, and three Arabs happen to pass within shouting distance of your tent. We all know what we would and would not do. Let us analyze what Abraham does, and how he does it.

The Torah tell us, "and he (Abraham) said, 'My Master, if I find favor in your eyes, do not pass over your servant.' " The Torah is unclear. Who was Abraham referring to when he said "My Master?" Is he telling G-d not to withdraw His presence as he invites some nomads, or was he respectfully interrupting his conversation with G-d as he shouts to the wayfarers, "Don't leave me, I'll be with you as soon as I finish this conversation with G-d?"

It is quite hard to believe, but these two ideas are Talmudic opinions! I understand how the Talmud can argue about a tree — was it a willow tree or an apple tree? After all the difference is not consequential. Was the window situated in Noah's ark an actual pane of glass or a sparkling jewel that allowed for a brilliant shine? The opinions in those instances are diverse yet compatible. But the schism in opinions, whether "My Master" is referring to G-d Himself or the leader of a band of Arab shleppers, is too wide to fathom!

What is more troubling is how is it possible to say that Abraham actually paused during a conversation with G-d to tell a few Arab nomads to wait until he is ready?

Rabbi Isser Zalman Melzer was once sitting with a group of students when suddenly one of them looked out the window and announced that one of Israel's leading Torah scholars was coming toward the home.

Rav Melzer quickly prepared his modest Jerusalem apartment to greet the honored guest. The table was bedecked with a freshly laundered, tablecloth adorned with a bowl of fruit, in honor of the distinguished visitor. Rabbi Melzer changed into his Shabbos attire so as to show his respect.

Suddenly there was a knock. Reb Isser Zalman rushed to the door to greet the honored guest. However there was no Rav at the door. In his stead, stood a simple poor Jew who needed a letter of approbation in order to raise funds. He appeared from the distance like the scholar, but obviously the student was mistaken. To the surprise of his wife, and even more so the visitor himself, Rav Melzer ushered the poor man into his dining room. He proceeded to seat him at the head of the table, converse with him, feed him, and give him the respect he would have afforded a revered guest. After discussing the man's needs, he wrote a letter full of complimentary descriptions regarding the man and his situation.

After the old man had left, Reb Isser Zalman commented, "who really knows how to evaluate and differentiate the value of people. Perhaps this is the way one must treat every Jew. I was happy to channel my enthusiastic expectations of the Rabbi's visit toward this simple Jew."

Avrohom knew that there is a Mitzvah to love Hashem, but he also knew that G-d created man in His image. Perhaps it can be an acceptable argument amongst our sages, which Master was told "please wait?" Was it the actual Master of the

universe, or the master that was created in the image of the ultimate Master? Perhaps one of the ways that Avrohom manifested his great love for Hashem was through his actions toward his fellow human-being. And believe it or not, the Master waited.

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/drasha-5756-vayera/>

Why Did God Test Avraham?

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2016, 2021

Why did God test Avraham with the command to offer Yitzchak as a sacrifice? This is really two questions. First, what purpose was the akeidah meant to serve? And second, how could God have commanded such a reprehensible act, implicitly condoning murder, even if the plan was to retract the command all along?

Midrash Tanhuma addresses both of these questions. Let's start with the first one. The midrash asks why God tests only the righteous:

Said Rabbi Yonah – flax, the more you pound it, the more it improves. When is this true? When it is of good quality but when it is of inferior quality, if you pound it, it bursts. Similarly, God tests none but the righteous.

Said Rabbi Yehudah bar Shalom -a potter does not tap on a weak vessel or jar, lest it break. On what does he tap? On a strong vessel...

Said Rabbi Elazar – this can be compared to a farmer who has two cows, one strong and one weak. On which one does he place the yoke? Is it not on the one that is strong?

According to Rabbi Yonah, when God tests a person, it is like the pounding of the flax – it is not pleasant for the flax, but the flax comes out stronger as a result. Similarly, our ability to withstand adversity, to persevere, to keep the faith even in the most difficult of times, transforms us and makes us stronger than we were. This approach is adopted by Ramban: "The purpose of a test is for the one being tested. God commanded this act in order to actualize Avraham's potential, that he should receive reward for his good acts and not just his good intention." (Commentary to Torah, Breishit 22:1).

Rabbi Yehudah offers an explanation more in line with the pshat. A test allows one to know the quality of that which is being tested, just as a potter taps a pot to know that it is good. God tested Avraham to know how God-fearing he was, as the angel says, "Now I know that you are God fearing." The problem here is obvious: God is all-knowing, so any such test would be superfluous. Perhaps the point of the midrash is that a potter taps his pot to demonstrate its quality, not to determine it. The test allows others – Avraham himself and all future generations – to know the quality of Avraham's faith and character. Thus, Breishit Rabbah states that the word nissa (to test) indicates that this test was like the raising of a flag (neis) announcing Avraham's greatness to the world.

Rabbi Elazar provides the third metaphor: placing a yoke on a cow. Here, the farmer is not interested in the cow. He wishes to plow his field and he chooses the animal that is best suited for the task. God has a lesson to teach humanity. The nature of the lesson has been debated through the centuries but according to the pshat of the text it is clear: one must be prepared to give up everything that is dear to him for his love and fear of God. Avraham was commanded in the akeidah not to test him, but because he could be trusted to carry it out. Rambam echoes this position when he states, "Know that the aim and meaning of all the trials mentioned in the Torah is to let people know what they ought to do or what they must believe... The purpose not being the accomplishment of that particular act, but the latter's being a model to be imitated and followed." (Guide, III:24)

Any one of these three explanations is satisfactory provided that we could find a satisfactory answer to our second question. How could God ask Avraham to take the life of another in God's name?

Tanhuma seems to have this question in mind when it tells the back-story of the akeidah. According to this midrash, Yishmael had taunted Yitzchak that while he, Yishmael, submitted to circumcision at the age of 13, Yitzchak was circumcised as an infant and was not prepared to suffer for God as much as he did. Yitzchak responded: "Were God to say to my father, 'Slaughter Yitzchak your son,' I would not resist." The midrash continues:

Immediately the matter pounced upon him, as it says, "It was after these devarim, these words (of Yitzchak), and God tested Avraham."

If Yitzchak was prepared to give his life to God, God is now – in the eyes of the Midrash – off the hook. This point is illustrated in the Talmudic discussion of the need for *hatra'a*, forewarning, for a person who is about to commit a cardinal sin. Only if the person states that he knows that this sin is punishable by death and is choosing to sin nonetheless, do we execute him, because then he "accepted this death upon himself." (Sanhedrin 40b) A human court can only use violence against another person if that person has given them license to do so. Similarly, according to the midrash, God had license to ask Avraham to do violence against Yitzchak because Yitzchak had given God permission to do so.

The midrash also defends God by positing that God was not the initiator; God is merely following Yitzchak's lead. There is also a subtext that Yitzchak's boast was inappropriate, that he should not be seeking to suffer or give our lives for God needlessly. The command to Avraham was a punishment for Yitzchak, laying the responsibility for the akeidah even more fully at Yitzchak's feet: "Immediately, the matter pounced upon him."

But, with all this, shouldn't God have refused? This is taking innocent life; nothing should have compelled God to command it! The next passage in the midrash provides an answer to this question:

This is as the verse states, "Where the word of a king is, there is power: and who may say unto him, this is what you should do? He who keeps the commandment shall fear no evil thing (Kohélet 8:4-5). Whatever God wants to do, He is the ruler, and no one can stay his hand. But who can tell him, "Here is what you should do"? "The one who keeps the commandments" – these are the tzadikim, the righteous ones who keep God's mitzvot, and God fulfills their edicts....

This audacious passage reads the juxtaposition of two verses in Kohélet to teach that a righteous person can tell God what God must do. This idea that God fulfills the decrees of a righteous person is found in the Talmud (e.g., Sotah 12a) where the Gemara tells us that God fulfills the wishes or pronouncements of *tzadikim*. In our case, the meaning is more shocking: a righteous person can tell God how to act even to the point of countermanding God's own wishes. The midrash gives an example: God wanted to destroy the people when they made the Golden Calf but Moshe grabbed God – as it were – by the collar and would not let this happen; Moshe told God what to do!

Once we have established that God's hand can be forced by the demands of the righteous, God is now totally off the hook for commanding the akeidah. Yitzchak wanted this test and God had no choice but to acquiesce.

Implicit in this need to defend God is the recognition by the midrash that God's command to Avraham presents deep moral challenges. This grappling with the command of the akeidah also seems present in the Rabbis' citation of the verse "Who can tell the king how to act?". In this citation, we can hear the Rabbi's desire to challenge God for commanding the akeidah, and at the same time their acknowledgement of their inability to do so, for who are they to say that God acted incorrectly?

Breishit Rabbah uses this verse in just this way: "Who can tell the king how to act?... [In the Torah it states,] 'You shall not test God,' [and yet,] 'The Lord tested Avraham'." By testing Avraham, the midrash is saying, God is acting against God's own rule. We can call attention to this, raise questions and struggle with this, but in the end we must accept it and submit to God's authority.

The irony in the Tanchuma is that alongside their reticence in voicing a critique, the Rabbis have also asserted that a *tzaddik* can challenge or countermand God. They are willing to state that Yitzchak did this – by asking God to command the akeidah – but they are not prepared to do this themselves and directly challenge God for giving this command.

In these short passages of Tanchuma, we see the Rabbis offering multiple ways of understanding the purpose of the akeidah, and the moral challenges that it presents. The grappling is subtle and it is expressed through the tradition, not in

opposition to it. As we face struggles in our own lives and feel that we are being tested by God, let us pray that we will have the strength to endure, to deal with our challenges constructively and emerge stronger from the process.

[Note: Rabbi Linzer's Dvar Torah was late this week, so I am reprinting one of his Devrei Torah from his archives.]

<https://library.yctorah.org/2016/11/why-did-god-test-avraham/>

The Silence that wasn't Awkward

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine * © 2021

Avraham and Sara were quite a team. Deeply committed to G-d, they chose to emulate G-d. Just as G-d sustains the world, so they chose to be as benevolent as possible. This led them to a great Mitzva for which they are known, the Mitzva of Hachnosas Orchim (hospitality).

Avraham and Sara advanced in this Mitzva in such a dramatic way that they became known for it. It was their personal trademark. To this day, when a school child wants to depict the home of these beloved ancestors, they will do so with a drawing of a tent with a door on each of its four sides. This was the trademark of Avraham and Sara's home; there was a door on each side to welcome travelers.

Hospitality became a way of life for Avraham and Sara to the point that even when Avraham was ill, he sat by a door of his tent yearning for guests. When guests appeared he excitedly ran to greet them, despite his old age and illness. This was Avraham's Mitzva, and he was ready and able, yearning to perform it at all times.

Rabbeinu Yona (Shaarei Teshuva 3:71) writes, "It is proper that there should be people in every community who are dedicated and available to help people in their time of need." Rabbeinu Yona doesn't specify what type of need such dedicated people should be looking to address. That really depends on one's strengths and abilities. But the idea is a powerful one: To develop yourself in a skill or talent, or to acquire wisdom in an area of your choice that can be useful to someone else in their time of need.

Training in first aid and joining Hatzolah is an obvious example. Chaveirim is another. Members of these groups train and are available. When a need arises, whether it be trouble breathing or a flat tire, these people are ready to respond.

But the application of this concept isn't limited to responding to emergencies with flashing lights. Sometimes a person encounters a difficult challenge in life and learns to overcome and persevere. Often the knowledge acquired through the experience can be useful to others. If we grow our talent or wisdom in any area, we can then be helpful to those who encounter a similar challenge.

Think about challenges such as elder care, how to best raise a child with special needs, how to buy a house, or how to get out of debt. Life has a way of enabling us to become experts. When we do we become the "go-to" person for that need; we become identified with that Mitzva much as Avraham and Sara became identified with hospitality.

When I was in high school, there was an elderly gentleman who frequented the Yeshiva. A kindly man, we called him Reb Zev, and he would sit in the Beis Medrash learning on his own or with others, available to any of us teens who needed to ask a question or just needed a good word.

One winter morning an ice storm hit, and the entire town was on a two-hour delay. Eventually, most of us made it to Yeshiva. It was shortly after Noon, when the news got out that Reb Zev was looking for someone who could drive him back to his apartment. We listened incredulously to the news. We wondered, "How did this frail, elderly man make it to Yeshiva this morning, in the first place?" The answer was quick in coming. "He had walked to Yeshiva at 5:30, on his regular schedule, before the storm had started."

We stood in reverence as the impact of Reb Zev's schedule really dawned on us. The schedule of the frail looking man was downright awesome. Our Rebbe saw how we were touched and decided to use it as an instructive moment. He said, "Every person chooses to represent something in this world. Reb Zev's life is Torah. For decades he learned, he taught,

he instructed, he helped. Now in his retirement he is the “go-to” person in our Beis Medrash. Each of you can become a “go-to” person...”

Rebbe stopped, in what seemed to be mid-sentence to let us think. I imagine that some people would describe such silence as awkward. But for us, it wasn't awkward. It was awesome. Rebbe was inviting us to think. Rebbe was inviting us to take the inspiration personally as a charge for life. “Each of you can become a “go-to” person...”

Eventually, someone brave was found to take Reb Zev to his apartment. But Reb Zev's unassuming greatness lives on. Regardless of how each of us students accepted the challenge, we each accepted the challenge to follow in the legacy of Avraham and Sara and develop a Mitzva by which we could be readily identified. Ultimately it was Reb Zev who had unwittingly challenged us to be all we could be.
Have a wonderful Shabbos!

Rabbi Rhine, until recently Rav of Southeast Congregation in Silver Spring, is a well known mediator and coach. His web site, Teach613.org, contains many of his brilliant Devrei Torah. RMRhine@Teach613.org

Sand and Stars: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

...I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the sea-shore... (Bereishith 22:17)

In his memoir, *The Torch in My Ear*, the Sephardic Jewish writer Elias Canetti (who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981) reflects on an insight that came to him as a young man: “I realized that there is such a thing as a crowd instinct, which is always in conflict with the personality instinct, and that the struggle between the two of them can explain the course of human history.” (*The Memoirs of Elias Canetti*, p. 387). This idea became central to Canetti's life, ultimately resulting in his classic book, *Crowds and Power*.

What is the “crowd instinct?” It is the desire to blend into a crowd, to dissolve one's personality into a large mass of people. The crowd instinct can be witnessed in sports' arenas, where fans become one with each other and with the players on the field. It can be experienced in mass rallies where fiery orators fire up the crowd, or at rock concerts where fans lose themselves in their wild admiration of the singers and their music. People have a deep desire to be part of such crowds.

Yet, crowds can become dangerous. When individuals succumb to crowds, demagogues can control them, can drive them to do terrible things, can turn them into lynch mobs or murderous gangs, can push them into terrorism and war.

And so there is also a “personality instinct,” a deep desire to retain our own ideas and values, to resist the mesmerizing power of crowds. Although we at times want to share in the enthusiasms and griefs of crowds, we simultaneously want to maintain our inner freedom from the crowds. We want to blend in...but not to blend in.

In the Almighty's blessing of Abraham, we can detect both the crowd instinct and the personality instinct. God apparently wanted Abraham to keep aware of these conflicting pulls, and to maintain spiritual balance.

God promised that He would multiply Abraham's seed “as the stars of the heaven.” Stars, although there are so many of them, are essentially alone...light years separate one star from the next. Stars symbolize the personality instinct, the unique separateness of each one. Although part of a galaxy, each star is separate and distinct, never losing its particular identity.

But God also promised that Abraham's seed would be “as the sand which is upon the seas-shore.” Sand represents an entirely different kind of multitude than stars. While each star is alone and separate, each grain of sand is surrounded by many other grains of sand. Whereas stars evoke separateness, sand evokes incredible closeness...masses of grains touching each other so that it is almost impossible to take only one grain of sand in your hand. Sand symbolizes the crowd instinct.

Abraham was to found a new nation, and nations need to have adequate numbers in order to thrive. Nation-building entails working with crowds, striving to create consensus among various factions. Nations demand patriotism, national symbols that inspire citizens to feel united with each other. But nations can become dangerous crowds. Demagogues can manipulate the crowd's emotions and can control information that they share with the masses. Crowds can become dangerous; crowds can be turned into murdering, war-mongering and hateful entities.

How can one resist the power of crowds? For this we need the personality instinct. Each person needs to understand the crowd, but keep enough independence not to totally succumb to the power of the crowd. Each person literally has to be a hero, has to be willing to stand up and stand out...and possibly take terrible risks in order to maintain personal integrity.

This was God's blessing to Abraham: Your seed will learn how to form positive, helpful, cooperative crowds that will enhance human civilization. Your seed will be composed of individuals who will have the wisdom and the courage to remain separate, to resist those who would try to manipulate the crowd into wickedness. Your seed — like the stars — will be composed of strong, luminous and separate beings. Your seed — like the sand — will come together to form healthy, strong and moral communities and societies.

Throughout human history, there has been an ongoing tension between the crowd instinct and the personality instinct. Too often, the crowd instinct has prevailed. Masses of people have been whipped up to commit the worst atrocities, to murder innocents, to vent hatred. Too seldom have the masses acted like stars who can and do resist the power of dangerous crowds.

In our time, like throughout history, there are those who seek to manipulate crowds in dangerous, murderous and hateful ways. There are those who play on the fears and gullibility of the masses, who dissolve individuality and turn people into frenzied sheep.

But there are also those who refuse to become part of such crowds, who resist the crowd instinct and maintain the personality instinct. These are the stars who will form a new kind of crowd, a crowd that will bring human beings together in harmony and mutual respect. God's blessing to Abraham is a blessing that we all need to internalize...the sooner the better.

...I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the sea-shore... (Bereishith 22:17)

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/biblical-heroes-imperfections-truth-thoughts-parashat-lekh-lekha>

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Prayer and Happiness

A Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The Talmud (Berakhot 31a) provides guidelines for how we are to approach prayer: "Our sages taught: One must not stand in prayer in sadness or in laziness, or in laughter, or in conversation, or in light-headedness, or in idle matters; but [one should pray] in happiness [of a mitzvah]."

Sadness: This does not only refer to feeling sad about some unfortunate situation. It also refers to feeling sad about having to pray! For some, prayer is an unpleasant burden. They come to services because they feel they have to show up. They don't follow or understand or concentrate on the prayers. They find the service boring.

Laziness: This does not only refer to feeling drowsy during prayers. It also refers to a lazy attitude toward prayer. Instead of being energized or engaged emotionally in the prayers, some people do not invest their spirits in the service. They are passive, and simply watch quietly as the service proceeds.

Laughter: This does not only refer to silly laughter and foolish jokes. It also refers to a cynical attitude that sees the synagogue as a sort of amusement hall. Some people forget they are in the presence of God, and that solemnity and decorum are appropriate for a sacred space. Instead, they want entertainment, they want to laugh.

Conversation: This does not only refer to quiet conversation with fellow congregants. It also refers to “internal chatter” within a person’s own mind. Instead of being focused on the prayers, some people let their minds dwell on business, on what people are wearing, on the latest sports scores.

Light-headedness: This does not only refer to frivolity. It also refers to a disdainful attitude to prayer. Some people treat the synagogue as they would treat a sports arena. They lack gravitas, the elemental ingredient for actual prayer.

Idle Matters: This does not only refer to secular topics. It also refers to keeping one’s mind off the topic of prayer. Instead of devotional prayer, some people read books or newspapers.

Happiness: The proper approach to prayer is happiness. This does not refer to silliness or a feeling of self-contentment. Rather, it refers to a tremendous optimism and joy at the privilege of being able to address the Master of the Universe. If one understands the awesome nature of prayer, one is filled with an ineffable happiness, a feeling of being at one with the One. This happiness cannot be artificially manufactured; it has to arise from an authentic spiritual longing. Such happiness is a blessing not reserved for an elite few, but a blessing to which all sincere souls can have access. But it requires thoughtfulness, solemnity, gravitas, concentration, elimination of extraneous impediments.

Happiness of a Mitzvah: Some texts add the words “of a Mitzvah” to the quality of happiness. This means that one should not see prayer as an end in itself, but as a means to living a finer, kinder and more thoughtful life. By linking our prayers to the performance of Mitzvoth, we thereby indicate that our spirituality is not only a matter between us and God, but is also a matter between us and our fellow human beings. A rude, dishonest, hypocritical person does not achieve proper prayer, no matter how much he or she concentrates on the prayers. Our prophets have taught that the Almighty is repelled by the prayers of those who are immoral and unrighteous, but who pretend to be pious. The Happiness of a Mitzvah is a reminder that we must clean our own slates as we come before God in prayer, that we must sincerely and honestly do our best to stand before the Almighty with clean hands and pure heart.

Some people walk out of synagogue after services, and they are the same person as they were when they entered the synagogue. These people have missed a grand opportunity. Some people walk out of synagogue after services and they feel transformed, elevated, happy. These are the ones who have understood the privilege of prayer, and who have let their souls soar to a higher level. May we all merit to pray with genuine Happiness, with the Happiness of a Mitzvah.

[Ed. Note: proper davening is speaking to Hashem – it is NOT racing to see who can finish first.]

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/blog/prayer-and-happiness-blog-rabbi-marc-d-angel>

Va'eira - What We Don't Deserve

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2021

This week’s parsha opens with powerful illustrations of the lofty spiritual levels of our forefather Avrohom. At the age of 99 years old, in the days following his circumcision, G-d appears to Avrohom as he is waiting for guests outside his tent. When guests appear, he serves them royally rushing to arrange all their needs. The guests turn out to be angels who have been sent to inform Avrohom of a great miracle to come, that he and Sarah will yet bear a child in their old age. As Avrohom is escorting these guests, unbeknownst to him, their next mission is to destroy Sodom and its surrounding cities.

Hashem then states that due to Avrohom's greatness it is only proper that Hashem inform Avrohom before destroying these cities. Avrohom then immediately begins to pray on their behalf.

Rashi notes that there is a difficulty in the verse that tells us that Avrohom began to pray. The Torah relates that after Hashem revealed His plans to Avrohom the angels continued on their way, and Avrohom remained standing before G-d. The next verse begins, "And Avrohom approached G-d" (Bereishis 18:22-23). What does the Torah mean that Avrohom approached G-d, if he was already standing before G-d?

Rashi explains based on a Medrash (Bereishis Rabbah 49:8) that the Torah does not mean that Avrohom approached G-d in the traditional sense. Rather, the Torah is referring to a change in Avrohom's attitude as he began to pray. There are three ways in which Avrohom "approached" G-d to ask Him to spare the people of Sodom – battle, appeasement and prayer.

This explanation raises two difficult questions. First of all, what does it mean and how could it possibly be that Avrohom would go to battle with G-d? Second, what is the difference between appeasement and prayer – isn't all prayer an effort to appease G-d that He should grant our requests?

The Eitz Yosef (ibid.) explains that the battle Avrohom was preparing for was a battle with G-d's court system. Avrohom fully understood G-d's message that Sodom and its environs deserved to be destroyed. However, he was seeking to weaken the strict letter of justice through appeasement and prayer. He was preparing to ask G-d to bend the law.

Based on this, the Eitz Yosef answers the second question. Appeasement and prayer are two different approaches for seeking to find leniency. The first approach, appeasement, is used when there is a judgement call. If there is a gray area, one can approach the judge and seek to soften his heart and take the lenient view.

This, he explains, was Avrohom's request to save the righteous people who lived in these cities. Any righteous people who lived in such an environment had clearly failed to properly inspire their friends and neighbors. Their righteousness was faulted, and they could also be considered partially culpable for the sins of those around them for their failure to inspire them. On the other hand, if they had managed to maintain their righteousness despite their surroundings, they deserved credit for their efforts. Perhaps, they could have done more, but there certainly could be room to excuse them. For this Avrohom sought to appease G-d.

Standard prayer is something much more. Standard prayer is when we come to G-d and ask Him to grant us a gift just because we asked. It is the act of a child coming and expressing their heart's desires and wants to their parent, hoping the parent will simply grant their request out of love. This was Avrohom's prayer that the wicked be spared along with the righteous – even though they certainly didn't deserve it.

This is the true secret of prayer. While we are certainly not approaching G-d to make demands, that doesn't mean that we need to deserve what we ask for. Each of us is G-d's precious child. A child of the King, has the right to ask the King for anything at any time. It is this right that we invoke when we pray.

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How To Be Dynamic With God

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

Over the course of three weeks, we read about the 175 year life of Abraham. Such a fast read through the life of original Jewish patriarch can give us the illusion that Abraham's spiritual dynamic stayed the same throughout his life.

But that's not true. The Torah portrays Abraham relating to God in many different ways, ranging from blind obedience to protesting to demanding. When God tells Abraham to get up and go away from his birthplace, Abraham goes without a word. When God promises Israel to Abraham though, Abraham demands proof. "With what will I know that I will inherit it." God tells Abraham he will live through his son Yitzchak but Abraham pleads on behalf of Yishmael.

And of course, who could forget Avraham challenging God on Sodom and his wheeling and dealing for at least 10 righteous people.

Then Avraham goes back to being obedient and unchallenging when given the mitzvah of the Akedah. For some reason, when God requests Avraham bring his son as a sacrifice, Avraham is as docile as a ram. (Much like the ram pictured above from my timely visit this week to the Birmingham Zoo. Both lambs and rams can be fairly docile. They wouldn't let us pet the lions or the flamingoes but the rams even the kids could pet. But I digress)

What's the bottom line? Avraham had different reactions and relationship dynamics with God throughout his entire life. One life event called for this reaction while another called for that one.

For some that might seem like a shame. We want definite answers with clear rules for how we're supposed to relate to God. But that's just not possible. Life is too vast, complex and individualized for the Torah to go over every situation. Nachmanides said that the Torah would never end if it listed every single application of its law and lessons.

So we must be content with general guidelines and trust and pray that we will know how to react when the time comes. We must be comfortable being in this dynamic relationship with God and the world. Some days we'll need to challenge God like Avraham, Isaiah, and the various fables of rabbis who have put God "on trial." (Indeed, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks called Judaism a "religion of protest.")

And there are sometimes where we must step back and have faith that it will all work out. That's the lesson of Shabbat where we retreat from the world. That's the lesson of Emunah where we trust that we're in good hands even if we don't see the whole picture.

So which reaction is correct? When do we challenge God and when do we let Him be? Such a question is not subject to definite rules before the situation comes. We have to figure it out as we go along.

But that's part of the fun isn't it?

Shabbat Shalom!

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Rav Kook Torah

VaYeira: Hidden and Revealed Holiness

A Paradoxical Blessing

After Abraham passed the test of the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, an angel informed him:

"This is what God says: I have sworn by My Essence, since you performed this act and did not withhold your only son, I will bless you greatly and increase your descendants like the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will possess their enemies' gate. And all the nations of the world will be blessed through your descendants." (Gen. 22:16-18)

This blessing appears to contradict itself. On the one hand, Abraham is promised that his descendants will be victorious over their enemies: "Your offspring will possess their enemies' gate." On the other hand, his descendants will be prized and cherished by other peoples: "All the nations of the world will be blessed through your descendants."

What will be the lot of Abraham's descendants: hostility and strife from the nations, or love and respect?

Also: why did God compare the Jewish people to both the stars and the sand?

Two Realms: Internal and External

In fact, an angel appeared to Abraham not once but twice. The first time, an angel appeared just as Abraham was about to offer up his son, commanding him:

"Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God."
(Gen. 22:12)

Why were there two messages from God?

We all live in two realms. There is our external world of action and deed; and there is our hidden inner life, our thoughts and desires. Often there lies a wide discrepancy between our outward actions and our inner thoughts and intentions.

The Akeidah occurred differently in these two realms. In the realm of actual deed, Abraham offered a ram on Mount Moriah. But in his inner thoughts and emotions, in his extraordinary dedication and love for God, Abraham offered up his own son. The Midrash writes:

"As he performed each stage of offering [the ram], Abraham prayed: 'May it be Your will that this act should be considered as if it was done to my son: as if my son was slaughtered, as if his blood was sprinkled, as if my son was flayed, as if he was burnt and reduced to ashes.'" (Rashi, based on Tanchuma Shelach 14)

The two calls from heaven, as well as the dual blessing, correspond to the two aspects of the Akeidah: in deed and in thought; the actual and the potential; the revealed and the hidden.

The first call from heaven stopped Abraham from physically carrying out the Akeidah. "Do not lay your hand on the boy." This summons related to Abraham's inner state of holiness, fully revealed only to God. "For now I know that you fear God." Only God truly knew the nobility of Abraham's soul. This level of hidden holiness could not be expressed in action. "Do not do anything."

After Abraham offered the ram in place of his son, a second angel appeared. Abraham's inner devotion had been expressed also in the realm of action. Now, the angel informed Abraham, his blessing was no longer limited to himself, to his own inner spiritual world, but extended to all future generations of his descendants. Abraham had succeeded in revealing his inner holiness in the physical realm. The angel emphasized that Abraham had realized his love for God in deed and action, "since you performed this act."

What is the meaning of this unusual oath, "I have sworn by My Essence"? This short phrase refers to both the inner and revealed dimensions. God's Essence is, of course, the deepest, most profound secret. An oath, on the other hand, is a promise to take action, to act upon an inner decision.¹

Dual Blessing

This dichotomy of the hidden and the revealed explains Abraham's dual blessing. Why were his children likened to both the stars and the sand? They will reach for the stars as they strive to realize their inner aspirations. At the same time, they will be like the sand, with a down-to-earth holiness, expressed with practical mitzvot.

The story of Abraham's descendants among the nations also reflects this dual nature. In the beginning, the Jewish people made their appearance as yet another nation in the world, struggling against enemies and foes. Their inner sanctity was hidden and unrecognized. At this stage in their history, the Jewish people require the Divine blessing of "possessing their enemies' gate."

But in the future, God's hidden light on the Jewish people will be revealed to all. The nations will recognize that this is no ordinary nation; Israel is the revelation of God's will in humanity and the entire universe. They will acknowledge Israel's inner sanctity: "All the nations of the world will be blessed through your descendants."

(Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. I, pp. 94-96.)

FOOTNOTE:

1 The word “oath” (shevu'ah) has the same Hebrew root as the word “seven,” thus corresponding to the seven days of creation and the physical world.

<http://www.ravkooktorah.org/VAYERA61.htm>

Vayera (5772) – Walking Together

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Former UK Chief Rabbi,*

There is one image that haunts us across the millennia, fraught with emotion. It is the image of a man and his son walking side-by-side across a lonely landscape of shaded valleys and barren hills. The son has no idea where he is going and why. The man, in pointed contrast, is a maelstrom of emotion. He knows exactly where he is going and why, but he can't make sense of it at all.

The God who gave him a son is now telling him to sacrifice his son. On the one hand, the man is full of fear: am I really going to lose the one thing that makes my life meaningful, the son for whom I prayed all those years? On the other hand, part of him is saying: just as this child was impossible – I was old, my wife was too old – yet here he is. So, though it seems impossible, I know that God is not going to take him from me. That is not the God I know and love. He would never have told me to call this child Isaac, meaning “he will laugh” if He meant to make him and me cry.

The father is in a state of absolute cognitive dissonance, yet – though he can make no sense of it – he trusts in God and betrays to his son no sign of emotion. Vayelchu shenehem yachdav. The two of them walked together.

There is just one moment of conversation between them:

Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” (Gen. 22: 7-8)

What worlds of unstated thoughts and unexpressed emotions lie behind those simple words. Yet as if to emphasise the trust between father and son, and between both and God, the text repeats: Vayelchu shenehem yachdav. The two of them walked together.

As I read those words, I find myself travelling back in time, and in my mind's eye I see my father and me walking back from shul on Shabbat. I was four or five years old at the time, and I think I understood then, even if I couldn't put it into words, that there was something sacred in that moment. During the week I would see the worry in my father's face as he was trying to make a living in difficult times. But on Shabbat all those worries were somewhere else. Vayelchu shenehem yachdav. We walked together in the peace and beauty of the holy day. My father was no longer a struggling businessman. Today he was a Jew breathing God's air, enjoying God's blessings, and he walked tall.

Shabbat was my mother making the food that gave the house its special Shabbat smell: the soup, the kugel, the lockshen. As she lit candles, she could have been the bride, the queen, we sang about in Lecha Dodi and Eshet Chayil. I had a sense, even then, that this was a holy moment when we were in the presence of something larger than ourselves, that embraced other Jews in other lands and other times, something I later learned we call the Shekhinah, the Divine presence.

We walked together, my parents, my brothers and me. The two generations were so different. My father came from Poland. My brothers and I were “proper Englishmen.” We knew we would go places, learn things and pursue careers they could not. But we walked together, two generations, not having to say that we loved one another. We weren't a demonstrative family but we knew of the sacrifices our parents made for us and the pride we hoped to bring them. We belong to different times, different worlds, had different aspirations, but we walked together.

Then I find my imagination fast-forwarding to August this year, to those unforgettable scenes in Britain – in Tottenham, Manchester, Bristol – of young people rampaging down streets, looting shops, smashing windows, setting fire to cars, robbing, stealing, assaulting people. Everyone asked why. There were no political motives. It was not a racial clash. There were no religious undertones.

Of course, the answer was as clear as day but no one wanted to say so. In the space of no more than two generations, a large part of Britain has quietly abandoned the family, and decided that marriage is just a piece of paper. Britain became the country with the highest rate of teenage mothers, the highest rate of single parent families, and the highest rate – 46% in 2009 – of births outside marriage in the world.

Marriage and cohabitation are not the same thing, though it is politically incorrect to say so. The average length of cohabitation is less than two years. The result is that many children are growing up without their biological father, in many cases not even knowing who their father is. They live, at best, with a succession of stepfathers. It is a little-known but frightening fact that the rate of violence between stepfathers and stepchildren is 80 times that between natural fathers and their children.

The result is that in 2007, a UNICEF report showed that Britain's children are the unhappiest in the developed world – bottom of a league of 26 countries. On 13 September 2011, another report by UNICEF, compared British parents unfavourably with their counterparts in Sweden and Spain. It showed that British parents try to buy the love of their children by giving them expensive clothes and electronic gadgets – “compulsive consumerism”. They fail to give their children what they most want, and costs nothing at all: their time.

Nowhere do we see more clearly the gap between Jewish and secular values today than here. We live in a secular world that has accumulated more knowledge than all previous generations combined, from the vast cosmos to the structure of DNA, from superstring theory to the neural pathways of the brain, and yet it has forgotten the simple truth that a civilisation is as strong as the love and respect between parent and child – Vayelchu shenehem yachdav, the ability of the generations to walk together.

Jews are a formidably intellectual people. We have our Nobel prize-winning physicists, chemists, medical scientists and games theorists. Yet as long as there is a living connection between Jews and our heritage, we will never forget that there is nothing more important than home, the sacred bond of marriage, and the equally sacred bond between parent and child. Vayelchu shenehem yachdav.

And if we ask ourselves why is it that Jews so often succeed, and succeeding, so often give to others of their money and time, and so often make an impact beyond their numbers: there is no magic, no mystery, no miracle. It is simply that we devote our most precious energies to bringing up our children. Never more so than on Shabbat when we cannot buy our children expensive clothes or electronic gadgets, when we can only give them what they most want and need – our time.

Jews knew and know and will always know what today's chattering classes are in denial about, namely that a civilisation is as strong as the bond between the generations. That is the enduring image of this week's parsha: the first Jewish parent, Abraham, and the first Jewish child, Isaac, walking together toward an unknown future, their fears stilled by their faith. Lose the family and we will eventually lose all else. Sanctify the family and we will have something more precious than wealth or power or success: the love between the generations that is the greatest gift God gives us when we give it to one another.

* <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5772-vayera-walking-together/> Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

Parshas Vayeira: Ma'aseh Avos Siman L'Banim by Chaya Mushka and Nechama Dina Krimmer *

The famed Sephardic scholar Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, better known as the Rambam, taught that "ma'aseh avos siman l'banim," the actions of the forefathers are a sign to their children. This week's parsha, parshas Vayeira, focuses on the

actions and deeds of Avraham and his prophetic wife, Sara. These stories provide a template for Jewish life and consciousness throughout time.

In the final aliyah of last week's parsha, parshas Lech Lecha, Avraham is commanded to circumcise himself in his old age. All mitzvos initiate change in both the spiritual and physical worlds, whether or not we are sensitive enough to perceive them. Bris milah, circumcision, is unique in that we can observe with our own eyes how this mitzva changes physicality.

This is similar to the lighting of the Shabbos candles. The physical light of the candles mirrors the spiritual light that comes from the mitzva itself. Avraham's wife, Sara, was the first woman to light Shabbos candles and the Midrash tells us that, miraculously, Sara's candles would remain lit from one Shabbos to the next.

Parshas Vayeira opens on the third day after Avraham's bris. Hashem appears to Avraham to comfort him in the time of his distress, performing the mitzva of bikur cholim, visiting the sick. Our Sages teach that there are many ways to perform the mitzva of bikur cholim: approaching the sick person in a positive mood in order to lift his (or her) spirits, aiding in his physical comfort, offering prayers and reciting psalms for his speedy recovery, and providing him or his family with financial assistance, if needed. So great is the mitzva of bikur cholim that it is one of the mitzvos a person "eats of its fruits" in both this world and the world to come.

Despite his weakened state, when Avraham sees three Arab Bedouins approaching his tent, Avraham takes leave of Hashem and runs to greet them. The Talmud states that we learn from Avraham that it is greater to receive guests than to receive the Divine Presence! Such is the greatness of the mitzva of chachnasas orchim.

Avraham prepares an elegant table on his guest's behalf and is quick to provide them with his best food, drink, and provisions. Although Avraham was a wealthy man who could have charged his servants to serve the three men, it was Avraham's pleasure to cater to them himself.

These three Bedouins, the Torah teaches, were actually angels in disguise. As they depart from Avraham's tent, one of the angels tells Sara that in a year's time, she will be blessed with a child. In Jewish mysticism, it is taught that three months prior to a child's conception, the soul of the child draws near to its mother. This process began with the departure of the angels. And, indeed, a year later, Sara gave birth to her son, the righteous Yitzchok, who was circumcised by Avraham at 8 days old.

Pirkei Avos, the Ethics of our Fathers, states that Avraham was tested ten times. Avraham's final and most difficult test was the Akeidah, the binding of Yitzchok. Hashem commands Avraham to bring his son up for a sacrifice, a horrendous practice that was common in that time and place. Avraham is shocked and crestfallen but with complete and total faith in Hashem, Avraham prepares to follow Hashem's command with mesiras nefesh, the self nullification required to sacrifice anything and everything for the sake of Hashem, even giving up one's own life.

Ma'aseh avos siman l'banim. The deeds of the forefathers are a sign to their children. Circumcision. Visiting the Sick. Welcoming Guests. Self-Sacrifice in the Service of Hashem. In this week's parsha, we see both the kindness and strength required of, and gifted to, every Jew in all generations.

This Shabbos falls on the 20th day of the Hebrew month of Cheshvan, the birthday of the 5th Rebbe of Chabad, known as the Rebbe Rashab. When the Rebbe Rashab was a boy of four or five, he ran to his grandfather, the Tzemach Tzedek, with tears in his eyes. When his grandfather asked why he was crying, the Rebbe Rashab explained that he had learned in school that Hashem had appeared to Avraham Avinu and the boy was sad and confused that Hashem had not appeared to him!

Inside every Jew is a soul that cries out to witness the revelation of Hashem. With the faith and sincerity that only children can possess, may we cry out together to merit seeing this revelation through the coming of Moshiach, speedily, in our days.

* © Chaya Mushka Kramer and Chabad of Greater Dayton, OH

https://www.chabaddayton.com/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/5284015/jewish/Vayeira.htm

Sacrificing Morality: An Essay on Vayeira

By Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz) * © Chabad 2021

“Bechol meodecha”

The Mishna states, “Abraham our patriarch was tested with ten trials, and he withstood them all.”¹ It stands to reason that these trials begin with “lech lecha” (or, possibly even earlier, with the trial of the fiery furnace in Ur Kasdim) and with time become progressively more difficult. The trials include famine, domestic distress, and geopolitical crises, each trial more difficult than the preceding one.

It would have been fitting, then, for the series of trials to conclude with the trial of the Akeidah. The trial of lech lecha is certainly difficult, but “your son, your only son, whom you love” is the greatest trial that a person could face, and yet Abraham withstood even that.

However, at least according to Rabbi Jonah Gerondi, Abraham’s final trial is not the Akeidah. Rather, it is the story that appears at the beginning of Parashat Chayei Sarah, namely, the search for a burial site for his wife Sarah and the difficulties that accompanied this search. After G d had promised Abraham, “For all the land that you see, to you will I give it,”² he had to go to Efron the Hittite and bargain with him over the price of a parcel of land.

What is the point of testing a man like Abraham, who already withstood the Akeidah, demonstrating his willingness to sacrifice his only son to G d, with such a trial, which at first glance does not even approach the level of difficulty of the Akeidah?

Our sages interpret the verse, “You shall love G d your Lord with all your heart (bechol levavecha), with all your soul (bechol nafshecha), and with all your might (bechol meodecha)”³ as follows: “‘With all your heart’ means with both your inclinations, with the good inclination and with the evil inclination; ‘with all your soul’ means even if He takes your life; and ‘with all your might’ means with all your money.”⁴ Focusing on the third clause, our sages go on to explain, “There are people who value their lives more than their money...and there are people who value their money more than their lives.”⁵ Indeed, there are people who would rather lose a limb than lose their money, including even great tzaddikim. The Talmud reports regarding Abba Chilkiya that when he would pass through thorns he would roll up his garment because, he said, a scratch on the body heals by itself, but if his garment were to be torn, he would not have the money to buy a new one.⁶

From the order of the verse’s wording, however, and from our sages’ interpretation, it appears that “with all your soul” is a higher level of devotion to G d than “with all your heart,” and that “with all your might” – i.e., with all your money – is the highest of them all. How is this possible?

Drop by drop

In Likkutei Torah, a chasidic work by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, “with all your might” is interpreted as follows: In everything that one does, one must do more, in the sense of “meod,” which literally means “more.”⁷ This understanding of “meod” makes “with all your might” an even higher level than giving up one’s life; giving up one’s life requires a moment’s decision, and with that the matter is settled, whereas “with all your might,” as the Likkutei Torah understands it, represents unending love of G d.

An example of this level of devotion is found in the Talmud: “If Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah had been lashed, they would have worshiped the golden image.”⁸ They were threatened and even thrown into the fiery furnace because they refused to bow down and worship the idol, and it is true that they were willing to die. But if they had been lashed, says the Talmud, they would not have been able to bear it. There is suffering that is worse than death, and such suffering is much harder to bear.

In this respect, “with all your money,” while seemingly unimpressive, is no less of a sacrifice than the other two levels of devotion. The meaning is not in the sense of “hand over your money or give up your life.” Rather, the Torah commands us to love G d even in the face of oppressive poverty, whose effects are cumulative, gradually piling up. These are not troubles that occur all at once, but troubles that drain the spirit drop by drop, each day drawing out another drop and yet

another. In the process known as “Chinese water torture,” water is slowly dripped onto a person’s head, drop after drop. It turns out that this method of torture breaks even people who were not broken by any other method.

Even people who are capable of enduring major tribulations and who proved themselves willing to actually offer up their lives are not always capable of bearing the suffering of small troubles. There was once a Chabad Chossid who eventually apostatized, and toward the end of his life became the chief censor of Russia. It is said about him that even forty years after he apostatized, though he had long since ceased to keep the mitzvot, he would mention the name of the Baal HaTanya (Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi) only with the greatest awe and reverence. This individual, once a pious man and a Torah scholar, was not broken by sudden, momentous tribulations but by smaller troubles. To earn a living, he had to work in a large city, even though, as a Jew, this was prohibited by Russian law. He was repeatedly caught and evicted until the strain of this lifestyle finally broke him.

Thus, “with all your might” does not entail choosing between life and death; rather, it entails withstanding hardships that befall a person little by little. This was the nature of Abraham’s tenth trial. Our sages say that Sarah died just as Abraham returned from the Akeidah.⁹ After the Akeidah, during which Abraham truly offered up his entire soul, he now had to return to daily life, with all the picayune annoyances of everyday affairs. It is not just the distress of his wife’s death and the need to arrange for her burial, but the very fact that he must deal with the petty process of the negotiations, the purchase, and the burial. After Abraham reached such a high level of intimacy with G d, instead of being able to sit down and mourn his wife as people do, he must endure a different type of suffering: He must meet with Efron the Hittite and deal with the business of purchasing land, forcing himself to be polite and to repeatedly bow down before the people of the land. To be sure, this still may not appear to be the ultimate trial for Abraham. Everyone experiences the slog of daily life, yet it can frustrate some people even more deeply than a life-threatening situation. For many people, it is precisely these small things, which are seemingly easier for a person to withstand, that can become the biggest stumbling block.

Self-sacrifice

Broad generalities are not always perfectly accurate, and are often debatable. Despite this, I would like to attempt an overarching analysis of the ten trials of Abraham. Each of the trials of Abraham represents a different type of self-sacrifice. The trials are not about breaking the body or slaying the evil inclination. They are not about things that are intrinsically difficult to accomplish. The difficulty lies in the fact that self-sacrifice completely transcends the question of bodily limits; the challenge is to break the bounds of one’s self. In each one of the trials, Abraham must prevail not over some external foe, but over himself.

Furthermore, in each of the trials, G d presents Abraham with a choice whose different sides do not fall into simple categories of good and bad. In most trials, there is no moral dilemma: The individual knows that what he is doing is right. However, doing the right thing is often difficult, and it is this difficulty that constitutes the trial. In the trials of Abraham, however, G d commands him to do things that are sometimes morally problematic, and therein lies the difficulty of the trials.

When a person fights an inclination with which he has no internal relationship, it is relatively easy for him to speak of “overcoming the inclination.” In such a case, a person can stand up, laughing and proclaiming, “An arrow in the eye of Satan.”¹⁰ This may not be a simple task, but there is a clear moral path to success. However, when the evil inclination is close to one’s heart, it becomes much more difficult to overcome it. One may know all the considerations that direct him to the proper course of action, and still fail to overcome one’s inclination to act otherwise.

Still, even the most difficult struggle with one’s inclinations and desires cannot compare to the level of inner difficulty that Abraham encountered in his trials. Abraham was tested by G d with genuine moral-spiritual dilemmas, with real struggles between G d’s will and personal conviction.

Sacrificing morality

Abraham achieved great success through his spiritual work in Charan, as our sages interpret, “‘The souls they had made in Charan’ – they brought them under the wings of the Shechinah. Abraham converted the men, and Sarah converted the women.”¹¹ In Charan, Abraham carries out his mission, proclaiming G d’s name in the world, and he is regarded as one of land’s eminent and noble personalities. After all that, G d tells him to go away to an unfamiliar place, where he does not know the people, and begin everything anew. Abraham was, after all, seventy-five years old – not a young man, even in

those days. What was to become of all his life's work? What was to become of all the energy he had invested, all of his great accomplishments? G d tells him to go and sever all ties with his former life.

Yet here, too, Abraham's trials continue. Even the war of the Canaanite kings is a trial. Spilling blood is out of character for Abraham; he may be courageous but he is certainly not a man of war. Nevertheless, he must go off with people he does not truly know to a war that barely concerns him. He is charged with saving Bera, Birsha, and all the other kings – characters with whom he has very little connection. Still, he must wage war, endanger himself and all that he has, in order to save a few despicable creatures: the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Adma, and Tzevoyim. When a man who fights for his country, homeland, and home puts his life in danger, he at least knows why he is fighting. Here, Abraham goes to save Lot, after Lot had parted ways with him in the wake of the shepherds' quarrel. Because of Abraham's lack of connection to the Canaanite conflict, he refuses to keep any of the spoils of war: This money is loathsome to him. Abraham does not want anything to do with these people, does not want to negotiate with them, and does not want their money. When the war is over, all Abraham wants is to go home. He did what he had to do, and now he must leave.

When Abraham has to cast out Hagar and his son Ishmael, he openly expresses his reluctance to do so. How can he bring himself to take human beings – his wife and his son no less – and cast them out into the wilderness? But G d tells him that this is what he must do, and he obeys. When he obeys, his problem is not what to do with the child; it is how to come to grips with his own moral persona after such an act.

Not long before the story of Hagar and Ishmael, the Torah relates a different story – that of Abraham and the three angels – which perhaps serves to emphasize the poignancy of what is required of Abraham here. Despite Abraham's advanced age and frailty, when three people come his way, he immediately runs toward them and does all that he can to help them. He does this for no reason other than "because you have passed by"¹² – because they have come this way. By contrast, when it comes to his own wife and son, he must do the opposite: Not only does he not provide them with food, but he banishes them from his home. How should he view himself now? A man whose whole essence is kindness to others must now do something that is entirely anti-thetical to his character – like one who urges others to pursue one course of action and then himself does the opposite.

In the case of the Akeidah, the worst thing from Abraham's point of view was that he had to slaughter a human being, let alone "your son, your only son, whom you love." The slaughter of children appears in the Torah itself as an example of the most abhorrent of all acts: "For even their sons and their daughters do they offer up in fire to their gods."¹³ And yet Abraham, who knows that it is abhorrent, is commanded: "Take your son, your only son" – and sacrifice him. Before facing the trial of love for his own child, Abraham was forced to ask, "Where is my whole world? Where is my whole concept of justice? Where is my morality?" At the Akeidah, Abraham sacrifices not only his son's body but his own soul.

Giving up the World to Come

Abraham's trials present us with an opportunity to discuss self-sacrifice in our own lives. When is self-sacrifice required of us? What is the challenge of self-sacrifice in today's world?

Throughout our lives, we must often give of ourselves for G d's sake, but that is only a minor sacrifice. The prospect of giving up our portion in the World to Come, however, is a much weightier matter. It would be short-sighted and even animalistic to give up the World to Come for the sake of this world. But from Abraham's narrative we learn that for the sake of Heaven, we must sometimes renounce even the World to Come. Deciding not to go to a nightclub when one's ticket to the Garden of Eden is at stake is simple. It is much more difficult when one is required, for G d's sake, to walk into Gehenna of one's own volition, into the fire.

The Talmud interprets Esther's statement to Mordechai, "and if I perish, I perish,"¹⁴ as follows: "As I am lost to my father's house, so will I be lost to you."¹⁵ But Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin offers another interpretation: "As I am lost in my worldly existence, so will I lose the next world."¹⁶ Until now Esther had associated with Achashverosh under compulsion, but now she must continue their relationship of her own volition. To do such a thing, Esther must go beyond her ordinary limits. Until this stage, Esther had preserved her innocence, for her entire relationship with Achashverosh had been under duress. The moment it ceases to be under duress, she forfeits her moral and spiritual high ground. Though all she does is for G d's sake, she nevertheless seemingly loses her portion in the World to Come.

There are various stories that deal with this difficult subject. The Midrash relates that when Elisha ben Avuyah died, Rabbi Meir thought that he died in a state of repentance. However, when Rabbi Meir was later told that a fire was burning in

Elisha ben Avuya's grave, he visited the grave, covered it with his tallit, and gave the following interpretation of the verse in Ruth 17: "Stay for the night" – in this world, which is like the night – 'and it shall be, in the morning' – regarding the world that is wholly good [i.e., the World to Come], 'if the Good One' – G d – 'would redeem you, let Him redeem. But if He does not want to redeem you, I will do so myself'.¹⁸ Rabbi Meir avows that if G d does not take Elisha ben Avuyah out of Gehenna, then he will do so himself.

"If you seek it like silver"

The stories that we have been discussing are not simply "deeds of the patriarchs," what people call "Bible stories"; rather, these are guidelines that teach us how to act. But where can we possibly find the strength to emulate Abraham and our other biblical role models? Children draw strength from their parents, and disciples from their masters. In the Talmud there are several stories that convey this notion. For example, a woman once came to Rabbi Meir's beit midrash and said, "Rabbi, one of you [i.e., one of your students] betrothed me by way of -- intercourse" – but she did not know the identity of the student.¹⁹ In order to avoid embarrassing a student who may have engaged in the unseemly practice of betrothal through intercourse, Rabbi Meir rose and wrote out for her a bill of divorce. Thereupon, all the students stood up and did likewise, and as a result the woman was released from the betrothal. The Talmud then explains that Rabbi Meir learned this mode of conduct from Samuel the Small, who in turn learned it from a tradition going back to Joshua and Moses.²⁰

In order to act in an ideal way, one must truly care with one's whole being. When a person is suffering from physical pain, he immediately goes to the nearest doctor. A person who suffers greater pain will rush all the more quickly to find a cure for his ailment. Similarly, one who suffers from hunger – real hunger, not the hunger one experiences after fasting on Yom Kippur – and wonders where he will find bread to eat and water to drink will not first organize a symposium to discuss the question of poverty and unemployment. The acute sensation of hunger creates in him the readiness and urgency to act. One who is not experiencing pain or hunger personally may be tempted not to come to the aid of those who are needy, thinking, "What can I do? I am only one insignificant person." This line of thinking, however, implies that the matter is not his concern – it does not truly affect him. Others may rationalize their actions, saying, "I agree that in principle I should help, but in practice it is difficult for me." If he can help without expending much of his time or resources, he will not object to doing so, but this person will never go out of his way to help others.

This phenomenon occurs in other areas as well. Someone who has a love for Torah will find a way to study it even if he does not know "how to learn" in the conventional sense. He may have to work ten times harder than someone who has more experience in the world of Torah study, but in the end he will succeed. Proverbs states, "If you seek it like silver and search for it like hidden treasure, then you will grasp the fear of G d and discover knowledge of G d."²¹ If you identify Torah as something that is missing in your life, and you search for it as one searches for treasure, you will undoubtedly find it.

At the beginning of the parashah, G d shows kindness to Abraham, as it were. It is hot outside, and G d arranges that no guests arrive at his tent, allowing Abraham to rest. But Abraham does not want to rest – he wants to perform acts of kindness for others, and he cannot be at peace until guests arrive. When the guests finally come, in the form of angels sent by G d, Abraham must rush about and attend to them in order to put himself at ease. When one's soul yearns for something and it affects him on a deep, personal level, he will always find a way to achieve his goal.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Avot 5 .
2. Gen. 13:15–17.
3. Deut. 6:5.
4. Berachot 54a.
5. 61b
6. Taanit 23b.
7. Likkutei Torah, Shir HaShirim 16:3

8. Ketubbot 33b.
9. Genesis Rabbah 58:5.
10. Sukkah 38a.
11. Genesis Rabbah 84:4.
12. Gen. 18:5.
13. Deut. 12:31.
14. Est. 4:16.
15. Megillah 15a.
16. Likkutei Amarim 16
17. Ruth 3:13.
18. Ruth Rabbah 6.
19. She wanted the student to come forward and either marry her or release her from the betrothal by giving her a bill of divorce.
20. Sanhedrin 11a.
21. 2:4–5.

* Rabbi Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz) (1937-2020) was internationally regarded as one of the leading rabbis of this century. The author of many books, he was best known for his monumental translation of and commentary on the Talmud.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/4942506/jewish/Sacrificing-Morality.htm

Vayeira: Being a Positive Influence by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky * © Chabad 2021

Abraham planted an orchard and opened an inn in Beersheba. There he proclaimed the name of G-d (Genesis 21:33)

Abraham's inn was the first public institution devoted to the dissemination of the belief in monotheism and to the ethical behavior that follows from this belief. By establishing a public institution that challenged the world's hallowed tenets, Abraham promoted the awareness of monotheism even among people who never actually visited his inn. As its renown spread, Abraham's inn wielded increasingly profound and broad influence.

Likewise today, the very existence of synagogues and institutions of Torah study exert great positive influence upon a city simply by the mere virtue of their presence, over and above the intrinsic value of the study and prayer that take place within their walls.

* — from *Daily Wisdom #1*

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman

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Volume 28, Issue 4

Shabbat Parashat Vayera

5782 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The Binding of Isaac

"Take your son, your only son, the one you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." (Gen. 22:2)

Thus begins one of the most famous episodes in the Torah, but also one of the most morally problematic. The conventional reading of this passage is that Abraham was being asked to show that his love for God was supreme. He would show this by being willing to sacrifice the son for whom he had spent a lifetime waiting.

Why did God need to "test" Abraham, given that He knows the human heart better than we know it ourselves? Maimonides answers that God did not need Abraham to prove his love for Him. Rather the test was meant to establish for all time how far the fear and love of God must go.[1]

On this principle there was little argument. The story is about the awe and love of God. Kierkegaard wrote about it[2] and made the point that ethics is universal. It consists of general rules. But the love of God is particular. It is an I-Thou personal relationship. What Abraham underwent during the trial was, says Kierkegaard, a "teleological suspension of the ethical," that is, a willingness to let the I-Thou love of God overrule the universal principles that bind humans to one another.

Rav Soloveitchik explained the Binding of Isaac episode in terms of his own well-known characterisation of the religious life as a dialectic between victory and defeat, majesty and humility, man-the-creative-master and man-the-obedient-servant.[3] There are times when "God tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most." [4] We must experience defeat as well as victory. Thus the Binding of Isaac was not a once-only episode but rather a paradigm for the religious life as a whole. Wherever we have passionate desire – eating, drinking, physical relationship – there the Torah places limits on the satisfaction of desire. Precisely because we pride ourselves on the power of reason, the Torah includes *chukim*, statutes, that are impenetrable to reason.

These are the conventional readings and they represent the mainstream of tradition. However, since there are "seventy faces to the Torah," I want to argue for a different interpretation. The reason I do so is that one test of the validity of an interpretation is whether it coheres with the rest of the Torah,

Tanach, and Judaism as a whole. There are four problems with the conventional reading:

We know from Tanach and independent evidence that the willingness to offer up your child as a sacrifice was not rare in the ancient world. It was commonplace. Tanach mentions that Mesha, King of Moab, did so. So did Yiftah, the least admirable leader in the book of Judges. Two of Tanach's most wicked Kings, Ahaz and Manasse, introduced the practice into Judah, for which they were condemned. There is archeological evidence – the bones of thousands of young children – that child sacrifice was widespread in Carthage and other Phoenician sites. It was a pagan practice.

Child sacrifice is regarded with horror throughout Tanach. Micah asks rhetorically, "Shall I give my firstborn for my sin, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Mic. 6:7), and replies, "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Mic. 6:8) How could Abraham serve as a role model if what he was prepared to do is what his descendants were commanded not to do?

Specifically, Abraham was chosen to be a role model as a parent. God says of him, "For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." How could he serve as a model father if he was willing to sacrifice his child? To the contrary, he should have said to God: "If you want me to prove to You how much I love You, then take me as a sacrifice, not my child."

As Jews – indeed as humans – we must reject Kierkegaard's principle of the "teleological suspension of the ethical." This is an idea that gives *carte blanche* to religious fanatics to commit crimes in the name of God. It is the logic of the Inquisition and the suicide bomber. It is not the logic of Judaism rightly understood.[5] God does not ask us to be unethical. We may not always understand ethics from God's perspective but we believe that "He is the Rock, His works are perfect; all His ways are just" (Deut. 32:4).

To understand the Binding of Isaac we have to realise that much of the Torah, Genesis in particular, is a polemic against worldviews the Torah considers pagan, inhuman and wrong. One institution to which Genesis is opposed is the ancient family as described by Fustel de Coulanges[6] and recently restated by Larry Siedentop in *Inventing the Individual*. [7]

Before the emergence of the first cities and civilisations, the fundamental social and religious unit was the family. As Coulanges

puts it, in ancient times there was an intrinsic connection between three things: the domestic religion, the family and the right of property. Each family had its own gods, among them the spirits of dead ancestors, from whom it sought protection and to whom it offered sacrifices. The authority of the head of the family, the *paterfamilias*, was absolute. He had power of life and death over his wife and children. Authority invariably passed, on the death of the father, to his firstborn son. Meanwhile, as long as the father lived, children had the status of property rather than persons in their own right. This idea persisted even beyond the biblical era in the Roman law principle of *patria potestas*.

The Torah is opposed to every element of this worldview. As anthropologist Mary Douglas notes, one of the most striking features of the Torah is that it includes no sacrifices to dead ancestors.[8] Seeking the spirits of the dead is explicitly forbidden.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that in the early narratives, succession does not pass to the firstborn: not to Ishmael but Isaac, not to Esau but Jacob, not to the tribe of Reuben but to Levi (priesthood) and Judah (kingship), not to Aaron but to Moses.

The principle to which the entire story of Isaac, from birth to binding, is opposed is the idea that a child is the property of the father. First, Isaac's birth is miraculous. Sarah is already post-menopausal when she conceives. In this respect the Isaac story is parallel to that of the birth of Samuel to Hannah who, like Sarah, also is unable naturally to conceive. That is why, when Samuel is born Hannah says, "I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of Him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord." (1 Sam. 1:27) This passage is the key to understanding the message from heaven telling Abraham to stop: "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son" (the statement appears twice, in Gen. 22:12 and 16). The test was not whether Abraham would sacrifice his son but whether he would give him over to God.

The same principle recurs in the book of Exodus. First, Moses' survival is semi-miraculous since he was born at a time when Pharaoh had decreed that every male Israelite child should be killed. Secondly, during the

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tenth plague when every firstborn Egyptian child died, the Israelite firstborn were miraculously saved. "Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to Me, whether human or animal." The firstborns were originally designated to serve God as Priests, but they lost this role after the sin of the Golden Calf. Nonetheless, a memory of this original role still persists in the ceremony of Pidyon HaBen, redemption of a firstborn son.

What God was doing when He asked Abraham to offer up his son was not requesting a child sacrifice but something quite different. He wanted Abraham to renounce ownership of his son. He wanted to establish as a non-negotiable principle of Jewish law that children are not the property of their parents.

That is why three of the four matriarchs found themselves unable to conceive other than by a miracle. The Torah wants us to know that the children they bore were the children of God rather than the natural outcome of a biological process. Eventually, the entire nation of Israel would be called the children of God. A related idea is conveyed by the fact that God chose as His spokesperson Moses, who was "not a man of words" (Ex. 4:10) He was a stammerer. Moses became God's spokesman because people knew that the words he spoke were not his own but those placed in his mouth by God.

The clearest evidence for this interpretation is given at the birth of the very first human child. When she first gives birth, Eve says: "With the help of the Lord I have acquired [kaniti] a man." That child, whose name comes from the verb "to acquire," was Cain, who became the first murderer. If you seek to own your children, your children may rebel into violence.

If the analysis of Fustel de Colanges and Larry Siedentop is correct, it follows that something fundamental was at stake. As long as parents believed they owned their children, the concept of the individual could not yet be born. The fundamental unit was the family. The Torah represents the birth of the individual as the central figure in the moral life. Because children – all children – belong to God, parenthood is not ownership but guardianship. As soon as they reach the age of maturity (traditionally, twelve for girls, thirteen for boys) children become independent moral agents with their own dignity and freedom.[9]

Sigmund Freud famously had something to say about this too. He held that a fundamental driver of human identity is the Oedipus Complex, the conflict between fathers and sons as exemplified in Aeschylus' tragedy.[10] By creating moral space between fathers and sons, Judaism offers a non-tragic resolution to this tension. If Freud had taken his psychology from the Torah rather than from Greek myth,

he might have arrived at a more hopeful view of the human condition.

Why then did God say to Abraham about Isaac: "Offer him up as a burnt offering"? So as to make clear to all future generations that the reason Jews condemn child sacrifice is not because they lack the courage to do so. Abraham is the proof that they do not lack the courage. The reason they do not do so is because God is the God of life, not death. In Judaism, as the laws of purity and the rite of the Red Heifer show, death is not sacred. Death defiles.

The Torah is revolutionary not only in relation to society but also in relation to the family. To be sure, the Torah's revolution was not fully completed in the course of the biblical age. Slavery had not yet been abolished. The rights of women had not yet been fully actualized. But the birth of the individual – the integrity of each of us as a moral agent in our own right – was one of the great moral revolutions in history.

[1] Guide for the Perplexed III:24.

[2] Søren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling, and The Sickness Unto Death*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954.

[3] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition* 17:2, Spring, 1978, pp. 25–37.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 36

[5] For more on this subject, see Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, NY: Schocken, 2015.

[6] Fustel De Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, (1864), Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956.

[7] Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*. London: Penguin, 2014.

[8] Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

[9] It is perhaps no accident that the figure who most famously taught the idea of "the child's right to respect" was Janusz Korczak, creator of the famous orphanage in Warsaw who perished together with the orphans in Treblinka. See Tomek Bogacki, *The Champion of Children: The Story of Janusz Korczak* (2009).

[10] Freud argued, in *Totem and Taboo*, that the Oedipus complex was central to religion also.

The Person in the Parsha **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersch Weinreb**

Dystopia

I never thought that I would begin a discussion of the weekly Torah portion by referring to a person who was canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church. Never, that is, until I sat down to write this week's Person in the Parsha column.

The person in question is Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), the great jurist and counselor to the notorious King Henry VIII, who was beheaded because of his insistence that the Catholic Church was his supreme religious authority, and not King Henry.

I have long admired Sir Thomas because of his courage and also because of his wisdom. One example of the latter is the following

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quotation, which remains one of my all-time favorites: "The ordinary arts we practice every day at home are of more importance to the soul than their simplicity might suggest."

Although those words of wisdom could themselves serve as the basis for an essay, it is another one of More's contributions to the world's culture that prompts me to begin this column by mentioning him. More earned a prominent place in the history of world literature because of his classic work, *Utopia*. In this work, More imagines the ideal society, one that is perfectly just and fair. Indeed, More coined the word "utopia," which has become part of our everyday parlance.

Centuries after More's martyrdom, at least two of his countrymen found it necessary to seek a word which would signify a perfectly evil society. They searched for an antonym to "utopia." In the early 19th century, Jeremy Bentham introduced the word "cacotopia," defining it as a nightmare society in which morals mean nothing. Bentham's follower, the philosopher John Stuart Mill, preferred the term "dystopia." It is Mills' term that has prevailed as the antonym of choice for "utopia." Subsequent philosophers have found it ironic that this nightmare world often results from attempts to create an ideal society.

This week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayera (Genesis 18:1-22:24) tells the story of what was the world's first "dystopia," Sodom. We first encounter this "nightmare society" in last week's parsha, Parshat Lech Lecha. There, we read of Lot's decision to leave his Uncle Abram's company and "pitch his tents near Sodom." Immediately, the Torah interjects: "Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked and sinful against the Lord." (Genesis 13:13) The careful reader of this phrase wonders, "What exactly did they do to deserve such a malignant biblical review? What behaviors were so wicked and sinful?"

The rabbinic commentators, from the Talmud and Midrash down to our very own times, expand upon this description of Sodom and fill in some of the details for us. Rashi briefly summarizes some of the Talmud's views: "They were wicked with their bodies, sinful with their material possessions, and were intentionally rebellious against God." They violated sexual mores, were unethical in their business dealings, and based their behavior upon a corrupt theology.

The great medieval commentator, Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher, elaborates even further by referring to a passage in the Book of Ezekiel that provides us with some further background as to the nature of Sodom. The passage reads: "Behold, this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. In their haughtiness, they committed abominations before Me; and so I removed them, as you

saw." (Ezekiel 16:49-50) The prophet informs us that Sodom was an affluent society which could easily have been charitable to others; yet they enacted laws against charity. They were untroubled, at peace because of their military power, yet they isolated themselves from less fortunate neighboring societies. They committed moral abominations.

Rabbenu Bachya continues, "Although the Torah had not yet been revealed, simple human reason demands charitable deeds and moral behavior. It is despicable that one human would stand idly by as another human suffers from hunger. How can one who has been blessed with bountiful wealth not alleviate another person's poverty? How much more despicable is he who ignores one of his own people, one who dwells within his own community."

Our Sages assert that Sodom and the three cities that were her cohorts were denied a place in the World to Come. It was not because they were a lawless society that they deserved this extreme punishment. Quite the contrary—they had an elaborate legal and judicial system. But their laws were based upon intolerance, selfishness, and cruelty. Our Sages tell us that their laws were enforced by means of the most sadistic tortures imaginable.

Abraham's weltanschauung was the polar opposite of Sodom's. Is it not astounding, then, that he pleaded with the Almighty for Sodom's salvation? After all, if the antonym for utopia is dystopia, then Abrahamism is the antonym for Sodomism. Yet Abraham prayed for Sodom!

Commentators throughout the ages have sought to understand why Abraham supposed that there might be fifty, or even ten, righteous men in such a thoroughly corrupt society. One approach to this problem is attributed to Rabbi Isaiah Jungreis, author of the work Chazon Yeshayahu, a profound and original thinker whose life was snuffed out by the Nazis in 1944.

He argues that, paradoxically, the comprehensiveness and totality of Sodom's evil was precisely what Abraham used in its defense. He puts these words into Abraham's mouth: "Almighty Lord! Is it not conceivable that there are indeed fifty individuals in Sodom who recognize the cruel and evil nature of their society but who cannot protest, because their own lives would then be in danger? Surely these well-intentioned but impotent individuals deserve to be considered righteous individuals in whose merit all of Sodom should be saved!"

Rabbi Jungreis suggests that the Almighty's responded as follows: "Yes, dear Abraham. He who opposes evil but does not protest because he fears for his own life is a righteous person. But there were not fifty, nor even ten, individuals in all of Sodom with troubled consciences. It was not the coercive nature of

their environment that prevented them from speaking out. It was their evil and sinful behavior."

I am not qualified to debate Rabbi Jungreis, a keen student of biblical texts and a kadosh, a martyr, of the Holocaust. I concur with his hypothesis regarding Abraham's argument. Abraham may very well have argued that those who fail to protest in order to protect their own lives should be considered righteous men.

But I take issue with his conjecture regarding the Almighty's response. I find the following Divine response more likely: "Abraham, dear Abraham! A person who finds himself in an evil society must voice protest, whatever the cost, if he is to be considered righteous. There may very well have been ten, or fifty, or perhaps even more, residents of Sodom who were aware that theirs was a morally corrupt environment. Arguably, those men should not be considered evil. But there is no way that they can be considered righteous. A righteous person speaks out courageously against the evil that surrounds him. Trust me, Abraham, had anyone in Sodom broken the conspiracy of silence which allowed evil to persist, I, the Lord Almighty would have hastened to assist him in his cause."

It was not only Sodom's evil that God could not tolerate. It was also the silence in the face of that evil. And that silence ultimately excluded all of Sodom from the World to Come.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Things Do Not Occur at Random

Parshas VaYera contains the pasuk, "I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may sustain yourselves, then go on, inasmuch as you have passed your servant's way. They said, 'Do so, just as you have said.'" [Bereshis 18:5] One of the amazing things about Chumash is that you can learn the Parshas haShavua for sixty, seventy, or eighty years, or you can read the same pasuk over and over again hundreds of times, and then you read it once more and you say to yourself: "I never thought of this question!" Chumash study is as deep as the ocean.

In this pasuk Avraham tells the Angels, "Okay, eat something, for that is why you have passed your servant's way." Rashi comments: "I make this request of you after you have passed my way." It seems like Avraham is saying, "Since you came, I am asking you to do this" (eat something). What does this mean? Why not just offer them food? And what do the Malachim say? "Do as you have said." – You know what? – Give us food!

Have you ever invited someone for Shabbos lunch—or any meal for that matter—and received such a reaction? You tell them – "Why don't you stop by my house and have a meal?" And they respond, "You are right. I should have a meal by you!" That is in effect

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what the Angels are saying here. What is this dialog all about?

The truth of the matter is that Avraham is telling the Malachim something much deeper than it appears on the surface. He is saying: Listen here, there is no such thing as pure 'chance' (mikreh) in this world. We do not experience random events in our lives. That which happens in this world happens because the Ribono shel Olam deems it to happen. Life is full of Hashgocha Pratis (personal Divine Providence). People should seek out those Divine Messages and act upon them.

Avraham thinks to himself: "Here I am – it is hot as blazes outside! Nobody is walking around. Suddenly, you happen to come to my house? This is not an accident! This is not something that 'just happened.' It happened because the Ribono shel Olam wanted it to happen. And He wants me to serve you, and therefore you must eat by me. That is G-d's Will." This is what Avraham is telling the Malachim.

The Angels answer: "You are right! If we are here now and you happened to see us, and you are inviting us because you understand that this is G-d's Will, because it is not an accident that all this happened, then we indeed must eat by you! We too are bound to carry out G-d's Will as expressed by His Hashgocha."

Things don't happen for no reason at all and if something lands in your lap, it is because G-d wants it to be in your lap, and you must take that as a sign from Heaven!

This theme is one of the central ideas of Megillas Esther. (I know this is not the time of year to focus on Purim, but this idea happens to be a key theme of that entire story.) What does Mordechai tell Esther? "Listen, Esther, you need to do this. You need to go into King Achashverosh, even though you have not been invited, even though that violates his policy and risks your life."

I saw a Medrash this week that Esther had to pass through six or seven chambers to get to the throne room of Achashverosh. When she reached the third chamber, the king saw her coming and yelled out, "Vashti never did this! What a chutzpah! She is coming uninvited?" Esther knew she was taking her life in her hands by approaching the king uninvited, but Mordechai told her, "Esther, you need to do this! Do you know how I know that you need to do this? Because why on earth, out of all the women in the kingdom, were you chosen to be the queen? Obviously, it is because the Ribono shel Olam wants you in the palace in that role!" That is the Hashgocha, and a person cannot hide from the Hashgocha. A person cannot hide from G-d's calling!

Avraham was faced with the same situation: He recognized, "If I have these Malachim

standing here now, it is because G-d wants me to invite them in.

I read about the following incident many years ago, and I read about it again recently: In Poland, before the war, there was a custom among Ger Chassidim that if someone could not pay his rent and was about to be evicted, the entire Ger community would come to the fellow's aid and pay the rent so that he should not be evicted. The community made a collection to pay the landlord for the Chassid's rent so he should not wind up on the street.

An incident once happened in Lodz, Poland. One Gerer Chassid rented his apartment from another Gerer Chassid. The renter could not pay his rent. The landlord wanted to evict his tenant and went to the Gerer Rebbe, the Imrei Emes and explained the situation to him. "Listen, this fellow is not paying me his rent. I need to make a living. I have my own expenses. If he does not pay, I want to evict him."

The Rebbe told him – "Heaven forbid! You cannot throw another Gerer Chassid on the street." The landlord then said to the Rebbe, "Okay, then let's have everyone chip in and pay the fellow's rent, as is the custom among Ger Chassidim." The Rebbe said, "No! You need to sustain the whole thing yourself." The landlord asked, "Why me? It is not fair! When a non Ger Chassid is the landlord, everyone chips in and pays the landlord the rent of the Ger tenant. Just because I am a Ger Chassid, I need to sustain the whole cost of a bankrupt renter myself? I do not get it!"

The Rebbe reaffirmed his original ruling: "That is indeed the case. If the Ribono shel Olam puts you in the situation that you are the landlord and this bankrupt Chassid is the tenant, the Ribono shel Olam is giving you this mitzvah of Tzedaka, and you cannot run away from it. That is why you are there. You are there because He wants you there. This is your challenge. This is your nisayon, your mitzvah, and therefore you are expected to fulfill it yourself."

This is the message Avraham Avinu gave to the Malachim: "For this reason you passed by your servant. Therefore, you need to eat here." And it was to this logic that they Angels concurred: "Yes. We must do as you said."

Three Interpretations of a Most Difficult Medrash

I would like to share a difficult Medrash which I came across recently, but I am not going to be able to give a definitive interpretation of it. I am going to offer three interpretations.

The pasuk by the Akeida says: "Then Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father and said, 'Father...'" [Bereshis 22:7] This seems a bit redundant. The word 'father' appears two times in the same pasuk! The Medrash states that Samael (same as the Angel of Death and

the same as the Satan) did not want to let the Akeida happen. He understood that this would become a seminal event in Jewish history which would always cause the Almighty to remember His children with Mercy. To sabotage the incident, Samael went to Avraham Avinu and told him "Are you out of your mind, Avraham? You waited a hundred years for this son to be born, and now you are going to slaughter him?" Avraham replied "I know what I am doing. The Ribono shel Olam asked me to do it. I am going to do it!"

Samael tried another couple of tracks with Avraham Avinu, but nothing worked. When Samael came to the conclusion that Avraham was not budging, he attempted to preempt the Akeidah by speaking with Yitzchak. He came to Yitzchak and said, "Yitzchak, do you know what is going to happen? Your father is going to slaughter you!" Yitzchak repeated his father's determination: "I know that. I am going to go through with it anyway." Samael then asked Yitzchak, "What is going to be with your poor mother? She waited all these years to have a child. She will be devastated by this incident." Yitzchak maintained his steadfastness.

Samael then persisted, "But Yitzchak, all those beautiful clothes that your mother made for you – Yishmael is going to inherit them. You will have nothing." The Midrash writes that this argument gave Yitzchak pause and he then cried out "Father, father..." so that his father would have mercy upon him. This explains why the pasuk has the term father twice.

This is a wondrous Medrash! The Satan tells Yitzchak "you are going to die" and it does not faze him. He tells him "your mother is going to be devastated" and it does not faze him. But when he tells Yitzchak that Yishmael will inherit his nice clothing – suddenly, he cries out to his father for mercy. What could this Medrash possibly be telling us?

I saw three interpretations:

I have a sefer called Nachalas Eliezer, from the Mashgiach in Gateshead. He says that we see from here the power of midos (character traits). Even a person like Yitzchak, who is G-d fearing and steadfast in his obedience to Him, when you arouse within him a possible kernel of jealousy, that is strong enough to sow doubts in his mind about the proper course of action.

It is hard for me to accept this approach. I find it difficult to accept the idea that Yitzchak Avinu, who was an Olah Temima (a pure burnt offering) should be subject to the moral frailty of Kinah (jealousy).

I was sitting at a Chuppah two hours ago, next to Rabbi Goldberger. I told him over this Medrash and asked him to give me his interpretation of it. He told me that we find in Chazal that sometimes Eisav appears like a

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wicked thief and sometimes he appears like a Talmid Chochom, meaning that we need to beware of our spiritual enemies no matter in what type of garb they appear. Here too the Medrash is expressing the concern that Yishmael might dress up in Yitzchak's clothing and look like Yitzchak, giving people the impression that the wicked Yishmael is really righteous. This is dangerous. Yitzchak felt, "I cannot have him wearing my clothes because maybe he will seduce people by disguising himself as if he were me." This is Rabbi Goldberger's pshat.

Finally, I was walking to the Yeshiva last night and I ran into Rabbi Steinhart. I told him over this Medrash and asked, "What do you think it means?" He answered basically as follows: Yitzchak and Yishmael are perpetually engaged in an epic battle. It is a battle that began when they were young children, and it is a battle that has lasted until today. This is a battle for the ages: Yishmael versus Yitzchak. Bnei Yishmael versus Klal Yisrael. They are still at it. The Moslems believe that (what we call) Akeidas Yitzchak was actually Akeidas Yishmael. They believe that they are the rightful heirs of Avraham Avinu, and they will not give up. Eventually, there will be a final battle between Yishmael and Klal Yisrael and we will win that final battle, and only then will they concede.

The Maharal of Prague writes that the first nation of the Nations of the World to recognize Moshiach will be Yishmael. So, when the Satan tells Yitzchak "Yishmael is going to get your clothes" he does not look at this as merely clothes and something about which to be jealous. Yitzchak is concerned: Yishmael will win the epic battle? He will be around at the End of Days and I will not? Now we are talking about the future of the Jewish people! Yitzchak says "I am willing to die. I am willing to cause my mother pain. But there is one thing I am not willing to do. I am not giving up on the future of Klal Yisrael." That far he was unwilling to accept: "Father, father, please have mercy."

These interpretations and the Medrash itself warrant further thought and discussion. It is something to think about at your Shabbos tables.

Dvar Torah

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

The greatest leaders, just like great parents and teachers are all defined by one thing... Parents only teach their children one lesson. What is it? Parshat Vayeira commences, "Vayeira elav Hashem," – "Hashem appeared to Avraham," immediately after his circumcision and it was in this vision that Avraham saw three strangers coming towards him.

Chazal, our sages, in the Gemara, Masechet Sotah, teach: "Mikan shemidat Hashem levaker cholim." – "From here we learn that

one of the ways of the Almighty is to visit the sick.”

Hashem is obviously the ultimate leader. He’s the Melech Malchei haMelachim, the Supreme King of Kings and He wants us to know that a crucial ingredient of outstanding leadership is setting an example to others. Policies are important, instructions are crucial, but there’s nothing more important than doing the right thing and leading the way. It’s not only what you say that counts. It’s also what you do.

Similarly in Parshat Vezot Habrachah after we read about the sad passing of Moshe Rabbeinu, the Torah tells us, “Vayikbor otoh bagai.” – “And He buried him in the valley,” and no one has ever discovered the burial place of Moshe.

“Vayikbor,” – “He buried him,” – Who served as the chevra kadisha? According to tradition, it was none other than the Almighty himself setting an example to us for all time of how important it is for us to relate with respect to the remains of the deceased. So from Hashem we learn how important it is for leaders to do the right thing.

And we have a fine example of this in Parshat Vayaira. The Parsha immortalises Avraham Avinu and it does so through revealing to us details of the Akeida, when Avraham took his precious son Yitzchak, listened to the word of Hashem and nearly sacrificed him on an altar.

Of course Avraham changed the world, transforming lives from that time onwards through teaching people a new way of morality, ethics and spirituality, and his legacy lasts to this day. But ultimately Avraham is remembered because of what he did – the Akeida. Together with the nine other trials, this proved that he was the real thing. He was a sincere leader. He didn’t only say what was right – he always did what was right, setting that prime example for others.

So from Avraham Avinu, indeed from HaKadosh Baruch Hu, we learn the crucially important lesson of inspiring and leading others. Teachers only teach one class, Rabbis only deliver one sermon and parents only teach one lesson to their children and that is: the lives that they live.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Open Eyes, Heart, Mind and Hand by Rabbi David Kalb

This week’s Parsha teaches the mitzvah of Hachnasat Orchim, the commandment of welcoming guests. At the beginning of the portion, Avraham (Abraham) is found sitting in his Ohel (tent), which, according to the Midrash Yalkut Shimoni on Parshat Vayera, was designed in such a way that he could see visitors coming from all directions. In essence it was open on all four sides, enabling Avraham to not only to see any travelers who might be coming, but to indicate that those

travelers would be welcome to food, drink or shelter.

Avraham was so committed to being open to welcoming guests that, according to the Talmud in Bava Metziah 86b, he sat out in the hot sun despite the fact that this was the third day after his Brit Milah (a religious circumcision). According to Bereishit (Genesis) 17:24, he was 99 years old at the time; imagine the painful state he was in, recovering from his circumcision at such an old age. The Parsha goes on to describe in detail how Avraham takes care of three travelers, (who according to Rashi, Bereishit 18:2, were melachim, angels.). He welcomes them and serves them a meal.

Obviously, this story is about Avraham’s willingness to open himself to guests. However, there is a deeper meaning as well. It is a powerful, symbolic idea that Avraham’s tent is opened up on all four sides. Perhaps we are supposed to learn something through this imagery, and through Avraham himself, a lesson about what it means to be “open.”

Mitzvot are not just about fulfilling certain religious responsibilities. Part of their purpose is to transform us. When a Mitzvah obligates us to do something kind for another person, there is more to it than the kind act that we are performing in that moment—that mitzvah should ingrain kindness and compassion as a true, reflexive characteristic within us. Therefore, when we are commanded to be open to welcoming guests, an additional goal is to, through that welcoming spirit, become open people, with open eyes, hearts, minds and hands.

Open eyes: The first lines of the Parshah are full of eye imagery and openness imagery. Bereishit 18:1 וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה, בְּאַלְנֵי מִמְרָא; וְהוּא – “He lifted his eyes and saw: And behold, three men were standing over him, and he saw, so he ran toward them from the opening of his tent”.

Line 2: וַיֵּשֶׁא עֵינָיו, וַיֵּרָא, וַהֲנֵה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים, נֹצְבִים – “He lifted his eyes and saw: And behold, three men were standing over him, and he saw, so he ran toward them from the opening of his tent”.

First God appears to Avraham while he is sitting at the opening of his tent. Then his eyes see the three guests that Avraham will welcome into his tent. Lastly he saw the guests and he ran toward them from the opening of his tent. The Torah makes it clear that Avraham was a person with open eyes, eyes which saw divinity operating in the world and detected the needs of other human beings.

Open heart: What gave Avraham the ability to see God? Why was Avraham so open to helping others? His eyes were open because his heart was open; his capacity to see was an extension of his capacity to feel. Avraham’s lesson is a fundamental and timeless one.

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That by opening our hearts to others, we open our own eyes; when we open our own eyes, we see even more deeply the needs of others. The more open we are to seeing others, the more open we are to seeing God. Devarim (Deuteronomy) 10:17, לֹא תִאֶמֶן אֶת-לִבְךָ, “You shall not harden your heart”. On the contrary you should open your heart.

Open mind: As his open heart is predicated on his open eyes, so his open mind is an extension of his innate openness. Avraham would not be able to see and feel God’s presence in the world if his mind was not open to the possibility. He would not be able to be open to the opportunity to help others unless his mind was open and compassionate. What is his lesson to us? No less than that we should strive to open our minds. We should open them to people who have different ideas than we do, who have different worldviews, different religious or political views. Iyov (Job) 36:3-4:

אֲשָׁא דַעֲי, לְמַרְחֹק; וּלְפָעִל, אֶת־צֶדֶק : כִּי-אֶמְנֶם, לֹא-שִׁקֵּר מִלִּי; תִּמְיִם דַּעוֹת עֲמֹד.

“I will fetch my knowledge from afar, and will ascribe righteousness to my Maker. For truly my words are not false; one that is upright in mind is with you.”

How do we become upright in mind? By having an open mind.

Open hand: Finally, Avraham takes the openness of his emotions and perceptions and translates them into action: he opens his hand. How open are our own hands to welcoming others, to helping others? Perhaps this is how we should understand the line in Tehilim (Psalms) 145:16: פֹּתֵחַ אֵת יָדָהּ וּמַשְׂבִּיעַ לֵל-הִי רָצוֹן.

“You open up your hands and satisfy every living thing according to its desire”. The line refers to God feeding the hungry. However, does God have hands? Yes. We are God’s hands. When we feed the poor we are operating as God’s open hands.

Open eyes, open hearts, open minds, open hands. During weekday Shacharit (Morning Prayer) there is Mitzvah to wear Tefilin, (leather black boxes held to head and arm with leather straps, which contain the Shema and other texts). Tefilin are worn between our eyes, on our hearts, around our head which contains our mind and around our arm and hand. Perhaps part of the message of Tefilin is that we should look at the world with our open eyes and see the problems that exist in the world. What we see should emotionally affect us—our hearts should be open. Then we need to think with an open mind about what we should do, and then with an open hand, we should do something about it.

Nor is Tefilin the only Mitzvah that uses the open eyes, heart, mind and hand. When we

light Shabbat candles we use open eyes, heart, mind and hand. When we give Tzedakah (literally righteousness, but is also the word that is popularly used for charity) we use open eyes, heart, mind and hand. When we do Bikur Cholim (visit the sick) we use open eyes, heart, mind and hand.

On some level, every Mitzvah we perform requires us to open our eyes, hearts, minds and hands. However we should not only perform Mitzvot is this way. We should embody at all times in our life the idea of opening our eyes, heart, mind and hand.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

Judaism: A Blueprint for Humanity

I was truly amazed to learn that the first seventy-one pesukim of parshas Vayairah are stuma -closed, i.e. it is one long paragraph. Whenever a new idea is being presented in the Torah, it is awarded its own individual format. Here, what appears, on the surface, to be two separate narratives, the angles coming to Avraham and the destruction of Sedom, are clearly joined and meant for us to take notice of as a unit. The opening words of the parsha, namely "vayera eilav Hashem", have puzzled the commentaries, including the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, as the Torah is most vague as to what the nature of this "appearance" is. The Gemarah (Sotah 14a) teaches that we are to understand these introductory words as a mandate to engage in bikur cholim, visiting the sick; just as Hashem visited Avraham, so too are we to emulate His noble ways and visit the sick.

I'd like to suggest that the opening words convey that Hashem communicated to Avraham as the story unfolds itself. While initially Avraham is unaware that the three men are indeed angels, the vayera eilav becomes clear when the angel informs Sarah that she will have a child and the second angel heals Avraham.

I'd like to further suggest that the Torah informs us that Hashem continues the vayera / communication to include the impending destruction of Sodom and its surrounding cities. We are taught in Tana D'bei Eliyahu that we are to examine and study carefully the exemplary behavior of our avos in order that we should model and perpetuate their behavior. Avraham Avinu personifies the midah of chessed. Indeed, the Navi declares, "teetein emes l'Ya'akov v'chesed l'Avraham." Sodom personifies the antithesis of Avraham; the law of the land in Sodom was that no chessed was allowed. Any yet Avraham did not merely casually pray for Sodom, rather the Torah devotes no less than ten pesukim specifying in exact detail the prayer of Avraham on their behalf. Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky, zt"l (in Emes l'Yaakov) adjures us to note how strong and passionate the chessed of Avraham was, that he puts in so much effort and concern on their behalf.

The immediate lesson that we learn therefrom is that now that Avraham and Sarah were promised a child, Hashem is urging them to expand their horizon and show concern and responsibility for those beyond their immediate circle. We, too, are to follow in the illustrious ways of Avraham and personify that which the Gemarah (Yuma 86a) teaches that "v'ahavtah es Hashem Elokechah" is to be understood not only to require one's personal love towards Hashem, but also to conduct oneself in a manner which results in G-d becoming beloved to others. Our honesty and integrity in the workforce both with Jews and non-Jews is an additional implementation of vayera eilav Hashem.

The concept of pesuchos and stumos - breaks in the text that establish new paragraphs - is, according to many, a halachah l'Moshe miSinai. As such, the incident of Lot and his daughters in the cave which appears at the end of the seventy-one pesukim might well be the culmination of vayera eilav Hashem. How so? There is a fascinating Medrash Tanchuma Vayera (6) which states that in the merit of the mitzvah of circumcision that Avraham performed, Hashem granted him an abundance of prophecy. The Ail Todah (commenting on the Medrash Tanchuma) says that the abundance of prophecy referred to is Hashem showing Avraham the course of Jewish history. The prophecy which began with vayera eilav takes us all the way through the incident of Lot and his daughters in the cave, which led to the birth of Mashiach, the culmination of Jewish history.

I'd like to share a fascinating story which is found in the introduction to the eight volume of Igros Moshe of the late Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l which, aside from being astonishingly insightful, will help provide an answer as to how the Mashiach can emerge from an incestuous relationship between a father and daughter. This story occurred ninety-nine years ago when Rav Moshe was a rabbi in Russia. A gentleman was sick with an unusual illness that affected his tongue which was swollen and diseased. Rav Moshe went to visit him at which time he asked that all should leave the room except for the rabbi. He proceeded to tell Rav Moshe why he had this rare sickness.

He said last week was Parshas Vayera, and he spoke especially strongly, in a most negative way, against the daughter of Lot who had the audacity and chutzpah to name the child Moav, announcing to the whole world that her father was the father of her child. That night the patient had a dream: two elderly women with covered faces came and announced that they were Lot's daughters coming from the olam haemes to answer his immoral charge. They explained: we are taught in this week's parsha (19:29), "So it was when G-d destroyed the cities of the plain that G-d remembered Abraham, so He sent Lot from amidst the

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upheaval when He overturned the cities in which Lot had lived." Since their survival was miraculous, they were afraid lest people should claim that an additional miracle happened and they became pregnant from the Shechinah and perhaps this would cause a religion to emerge like Christianity, therefore to prevent such a claim, they announced without a shadow of a doubt that for a woman to become pregnant you need a father and a mother and, indeed, that is what happened in the cave.

Since unfortunately, continued the patient, he spoke badly regarding the daughters of Lot, he was punished measure for measure, as indeed were the meraglim (see Rashi Bamidbar 14:37); as they were punished with a disease which began in the mouth and tongue, so too was he. Immediately thereafter he turned to the wall and died. Rav Moshe believed the man and asked his family that this story be shared in perpetuity. Rav Moshe continued, perhaps there is a midah kinaged midah, G-d rewards a measure for measure. They wanted to prevent a false Messiah from emerging, therefore they merited that the real Messiah should come from them.

The sum total of what emerges from the beginning of vayera eilav Hashem through the incident in the cave is a directive to Avraham and his descendants that the actions of man, his hachnasas orchim, his prayers, and his authentic beliefs, will bring the Mashiach.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah

by Rabbi Label Lam

His Super Human Achievement

And HASHEM appeared to him in the plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot. (Breishis 18:1)

Suddenly a seeming small detail jumped out at me that I had never spent much time considering. Every jot and diddle in Torah is Holy. Why should Moshe transcribe by the word of HASHEM and why should scribes expend precious ink and time to tell us and tell us where HASHEM appeared to Avraham? Why the plains of Mamre?

Well, I'm not alone. Rashi was troubled by the same question and he tells us that Mamre was a trusted colleague of Avraham who had advised him about making a Bris. Well it seems that the Bris and the Divine presence that rested on Avraham after the Bris should be in his territory and that it should be recorded in the Torah for all time as a reward for his supportive role. So we see how valuable it is to encourage others to do the right thing.

It doesn't end there. What was Mamre's advice? I found in The Zohar HaNiglah the rest of the story. When Avraham was commanded to make a Bris at the age of 99 years old he consulted with two friends. One friend, Anar told Avraham, "Your 99 years old, do you want to make yourself sick!?" Mamre reminded Avraham that HASHEM had saved

him from the fires in Ohr Kasdim, during the famine that brought him down to Egypt, and in the war of the four kings and five kings. With those words, Avraham proceeded to make the Bris!

Now, the big question! Why did Avraham have to ask advice? HASHEM commanded him. It's not a discussion, it's a Divine mandate. When it came time for the Akeida, HASHEM says, "NA" – "please" and with a request that could seem optional he was willing to defy all public opinions, internal voices of reasonable resistance, and raging rivers of physical opposition to sacrifice his beloved son. Why over here is there a need to ask for council?

The answer is right nearby. When HASHEM was visiting Avraham on the 3rd day after his Bris, guests suddenly arrived and Avraham, so to speak, put HASHEM on hold, and ran to attend to the needs of the guests. The Talmud says that from here we learn that it is better to greet guests than to entertain the Divine Presence. One of my dear Rebbes asked, "Very nice, but where did Avraham learn it?" His answer was, as the verse testifies, "He saw and he ran". His feet decided!

After his Bris, the numerical value of his new name was boosted to 248 equal to the limbs of the human anatomy. The body is a garment for the soul. It's like a glove designed for each digit of the hand. If the body is impure then there are impediments that keep the hand from fitting into the glove neatly. Imagine a coarse wool glove filled with glass and foul materials. Which sensitive hand would feel comfortable residing in that space?! After Avraham's Bris his soul entered the body like a trained surgeon's hand in a latex glove. The body offers zero resistance and is perfectly responsive to the desires of the soul which wants only to express the will of its Creator. The biggest proof this is so is that by the Akeida, Avraham is described as sending out his hand to take the knife to Shecht his son. He had to force his hand, because ultimately it was not what HASHEM really wanted him to do.

So before the Bris and up until the Bris Avraham was like the Beinoni described in Sefer Tanya. "The in between man" struggles with contrary tendencies but eventually decides and overrides those opposing forces and he does the right thing. There is a battle! Post op, after the Bris, Avraham Avinu graduated to the level of a complete Tzadik where there is no longer an internal struggle but rather, the primary instinct is only to do the will of HASHEM. Armed with this information, we have a glimpse into the depths of his truly human struggle and the height of his super human achievement.

Weekly Parsha VAYEIRA 5782

Rabbi Berel Wein's Weekly Blog

Our father Abraham experiences the revelation of the Lord when he is sitting alone at the opening of his tent. Only a few days had passed since his circumcision and the day itself is being described. He appears to us as a solitary figure, wrapped in his own thoughts, searching for attachment to his Creator. We are accustomed to think of this situation as being one of preparation for the visit of the three angels. However, if we but take a broader view of the matter, we readily can see that the Torah is describing for us the permanent and regular state of being of our Father figure.

He constantly experiences the presence of the Lord within and without. All his life, in everything that he does, is measured by the metric that the Lord is looking over his shoulder and recognizing the potential reward for his actions and goodness. King David centuries later said that he always envisions the presence of the Lord before him permanently. This is the highest level of attachment to the Creator that is humanly possible. This emotional attachment is described for us in detail in many of the holy Psalms of King David. These depictions are based on the formative experiences of our father Abraham in founding the Jewish people. Wherever he goes and whatever he does, our father Abraham feels within himself that the Lord is appearing before him and accompanying him on his new and difficult journey through life.

Even in his moments of sleep and while dreaming, Abraham is constantly aware of, if not in fact interacting, with his Creator. The gift of prophecy is one of the highest forms of communication and attention to God. There were, in ancient times, schools that trained people to become prophets. I have often wondered how that is possible, since the service of prophecy seems to be a one-off moment of revelation bestowed upon certain human beings. So how can one go to school to become a prophet?

Upon deeper reflection, it is obvious that even if the moments of recorded prophecy are rare and few, part of the necessary attribute to become a prophet is that one constantly trains oneself to visualize Heaven and to attempt to maintain a constant attachment to one's eternal soul and Creator. And this required training includes study, effort, sacrifice, and the attainment of a special relationship with impunity and eternity.

So, the description of the Lord that begins this week's Torah reading should be viewed as a description of the constant and permanent state of the relationship between God and Abraham, and not merely as a one-time fortuitous experience of holiness. Perhaps, this is what the rabbis meant when they stated that the all-merciful One desires our hearts. God desires our permanent attention, goodness, and righteousness, and that we not be distracted by the vagaries of life. We must become a holy nation and a kingdom of priests

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

The Binding of Isaac (Vayera)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

"Take your son, your only son, the one you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." (Gen. 22:2)

Thus begins one of the most famous episodes in the Torah, but also one of the most morally problematic. The conventional reading of this passage is that Abraham was being asked to show that his love for God was supreme. He would show this by being willing to sacrifice the son for whom he had spent a lifetime waiting.

Why did God need to "test" Abraham, given that He knows the human heart better than we know it ourselves? Maimonides answers that God did not need Abraham to prove his love for Him. Rather the test was

meant to establish for all time how far the fear and love of God must go.[1]

On this principle there was little argument. The story is about the awe and love of God. Kierkegaard wrote about it[2] and made the point that ethics is universal. It consists of general rules. But the love of God is particular. It is an I-Thou personal relationship. What Abraham underwent during the trial was, says Kierkegaard, a "teleological suspension of the ethical," that is, a willingness to let the I-Thou love of God overrule the universal principles that bind humans to one another.

Rav Soloveitchik explained the Binding of Isaac episode in terms of his own well-known characterisation of the religious life as a dialectic between victory and defeat, majesty and humility, man-the-creative-master and man-the-obedient-servant.[3] There are times when "God tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most." [4] We must experience defeat as well as victory. Thus the Binding of Isaac was not a once-only episode but rather a paradigm for the religious life as a whole. Wherever we have passionate desire – eating, drinking, physical relationship – there the Torah places limits on the satisfaction of desire. Precisely because we pride ourselves on the power of reason, the Torah includes chukim, statutes, that are impenetrable to reason.

These are the conventional readings and they represent the mainstream of tradition. However, since there are "seventy faces to the Torah," I want to argue for a different interpretation. The reason I do so is that one test of the validity of an interpretation is whether it coheres with the rest of the Torah, Tanach, and Judaism as a whole. There are four problems with the conventional reading:

We know from Tanach and independent evidence that the willingness to offer up your child as a sacrifice was not rare in the ancient world. It was commonplace. Tanach mentions that Mesha, King of Moab, did so. So did Yiftah, the least admirable leader in the book of Judges. Two of Tanach's most wicked Kings, Ahaz and Manasse, introduced the practice into Judah, for which they were condemned. There is archeological evidence – the bones of thousands of young children – that child sacrifice was widespread in Carthage and other Phoenician sites. It was a pagan practice.

Child sacrifice is regarded with horror throughout Tanach. Micah asks rhetorically, "Shall I give my firstborn for my sin, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Mic. 6:7), and replies, "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Mic. 6:8) How could Abraham serve as a role model if what he was prepared to do is what his descendants were commanded not to do?

Specifically, Abraham was chosen to be a role model as a parent. God says of him, "For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." How could he serve as a model father if he was willing to sacrifice his child? To the contrary, he should have said to God: "If you want me to prove to You how much I love You, then take me as a sacrifice, not my child."

As Jews – indeed as humans – we must reject Kierkegaard's principle of the "teleological suspension of the ethical." This is an idea that gives carte blanche to religious fanatics to commit crimes in the name of God. It is the logic of the Inquisition and the suicide bomber. It is not the logic of Judaism rightly understood.[5] God does not ask us to be unethical. We may not always understand ethics from God's perspective but we believe that "He is the Rock, His works are perfect; all His ways are just" (Deut. 32:4).

To understand the Binding of Isaac we have to realise that much of the Torah, Genesis in particular, is a polemic against worldviews the Torah considers pagan, inhuman and wrong. One institution to which Genesis is opposed is the ancient family as described by Fustel de Coulanges[6] and recently restated by Larry Siedentop in *Inventing the Individual*. [7] Before the emergence of the first cities and civilisations, the fundamental social and religious unit was the family. As Coulanges puts

it, in ancient times there was an intrinsic connection between three things: the domestic religion, the family and the right of property. Each family had its own gods, among them the spirits of dead ancestors, from whom it sought protection and to whom it offered sacrifices. The authority of the head of the family, the *paterfamilias*, was absolute. He had power of life and death over his wife and children. Authority invariably passed, on the death of the father, to his firstborn son. Meanwhile, as long as the father lived, children had the status of property rather than persons in their own right. This idea persisted even beyond the biblical era in the Roman law principle of *patria potestas*.

The Torah is opposed to every element of this worldview. As anthropologist Mary Douglas notes, one of the most striking features of the Torah is that it includes no sacrifices to dead ancestors.[8] Seeking the spirits of the dead is explicitly forbidden.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that in the early narratives, succession does not pass to the firstborn: not to Ishmael but Isaac, not to Esau but Jacob, not to the tribe of Reuben but to Levi (priesthood) and Judah (kingship), not to Aaron but to Moses.

The principle to which the entire story of Isaac, from birth to binding, is opposed is the idea that a child is the property of the father. First, Isaac's birth is miraculous. Sarah is already post-menopausal when she conceives. In this respect the Isaac story is parallel to that of the birth of Samuel to Hannah who, like Sarah, also is unable naturally to conceive. That is why, when Samuel is born Hannah says, "I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of Him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord." (I Sam. 1:27) This passage is the key to understanding the message from heaven telling Abraham to stop: "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son" (the statement appears twice, in Gen. 22:12 and 16). The test was not whether Abraham would sacrifice his son but whether he would give him over to God.

The same principle recurs in the book of Exodus. First, Moses' survival is semi-miraculous since he was born at a time when Pharaoh had decreed that every male Israelite child should be killed. Secondly, during the tenth plague when every firstborn Egyptian child died, the Israelite firstborn were miraculously saved. "Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to Me, whether human or animal." The firstborns were originally designated to serve God as Priests, but they lost this role after the sin of the Golden Calf. Nonetheless, a memory of this original role still persists in the ceremony of *Pidyon HaBen*, redemption of a firstborn son.

What God was doing when He asked Abraham to offer up his son was not requesting a child sacrifice but something quite different. He wanted Abraham to renounce ownership of his son. He wanted to establish as a non-negotiable principle of Jewish law that children are not the property of their parents.

That is why three of the four matriarchs found themselves unable to conceive other than by a miracle. The Torah wants us to know that the children they bore were the children of God rather than the natural outcome of a biological process. Eventually, the entire nation of Israel would be called the children of God. A related idea is conveyed by the fact that God chose as His spokesperson Moses, who was "not a man of words" (Ex. 4:10) He was a stammerer. Moses became God's spokesman because people knew that the words he spoke were not his own but those placed in his mouth by God.

The clearest evidence for this interpretation is given at the birth of the very first human child. When she first gives birth, Eve says: "With the help of the Lord I have acquired [*kaniti*] a man." That child, whose name comes from the verb "to acquire," was Cain, who became the first murderer. If you seek to own your children, your children may rebel into violence.

If the analysis of Fustel de Colanges and Larry Siedentop is correct, it follows that something fundamental was at stake. As long as parents believed they owned their children, the concept of the individual could not yet be born. The fundamental unit was the family. The Torah represents the birth of the individual as the central figure in the moral

life. Because children – all children – belong to God, parenthood is not ownership but guardianship. As soon as they reach the age of maturity (traditionally, twelve for girls, thirteen for boys) children become independent moral agents with their own dignity and freedom.[9]

Sigmund Freud famously had something to say about this too. He held that a fundamental driver of human identity is the Oedipus Complex, the conflict between fathers and sons as exemplified in Aeschylus' tragedy.[10] By creating moral space between fathers and sons, Judaism offers a non-tragic resolution to this tension. If Freud had taken his psychology from the Torah rather than from Greek myth, he might have arrived at a more hopeful view of the human condition.

Why then did God say to Abraham about Isaac: "Offer him up as a burnt offering"? So as to make clear to all future generations that the reason Jews condemn child sacrifice is not because they lack the courage to do so. Abraham is the proof that they do not lack the courage. The reason they do not do so is because God is the God of life, not death. In Judaism, as the laws of purity and the rite of the Red Heifer show, death is not sacred. Death defiles.

The Torah is revolutionary not only in relation to society but also in relation to the family. To be sure, the Torah's revolution was not fully completed in the course of the biblical age. Slavery had not yet been abolished. The rights of women had not yet been fully actualised. But the birth of the individual – the integrity of each of us as a moral agent in our own right – was one of the great moral revolutions in history.

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Vayera (Genesis 18:1-22:24)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "And it came to pass...that God tested Abraham, saying to him, 'Abraham,' to which he responded, 'Here I am!' And He said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, offering him there as a sacrifice on one of the mountains that I will show you'" (Gen. 22:1-2).

Has Abraham lost his moral compass? When God presents Abraham with the most difficult and tragic command, to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, Abraham rises early the next morning, loads his donkey, calls his servants and immediately starts the journey—without a word of protest.

Not long before, though, when God declares the imminent destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham passionately protests the Divine decree, pleading for the lives of their immoral inhabitants: "Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?" [ibid. 18:25].

If Abraham was willing to defend the wicked residents of Sodom and Gomorrah from a mass death, could he not have done at least as much for his righteous, beloved and Divinely-promised son? What has changed within Abraham?

Indeed, Abraham has undergone a change, and it is because of this change that he does not argue with God now. Abraham relates to God differently from how he related to Him before. He now has a more distant relationship with God that does not permit the camaraderie of questioning a Divine order. Why is this? At first glance, this would appear to be a negative development. How could distance from God be positive? Paradoxically, in the case of Abraham, it was a necessary evolution. Permit me to explain why.

Fear of God and love of God are two fundamental principles of Jewish philosophy, forming the framework for our service to the Almighty. The former emanates from a sense of healthy distance from God, while the latter involves a sense of closeness to Him. Both relationships are necessary, and complement each other.

Fear of God is critical to the fabric of human existence. Those who love—either God or another human being—may sometimes rationalize away their own lapses and indiscretions with the sense that the beloved will understand, that those in love 'need not say they are sorry.' In contrast, fear of God brooks no exceptions, keeping us honest,

constantly spurring us on to remain steady and steadfast despite the narrowness of life's very narrow bridge.

Abraham is the paradigmatic example of loving God. He leaves the comforts of his homeland, birthplace and family and enters an unfamiliar land in order to be with God—much as a lover following his beloved.

Abraham establishes altar after altar in the name of his beloved God, about Whose ethical teachings and powers of creativity he never ceases to speak—and attempts to persuade others to accept Him. He is close to God and he understands God. Hence, his argument with the Divine on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah.

This changes when Abraham sojourns to the Land of Gerar, a place about which he comments, “Surely the fear of God is not in this place” [ibid. 20:11]. The final words we read before the account of the Akeda is that Abraham lived in the land of the Philistines for many days. Indeed, the very introduction to the Akeda story begins: “After these things...” [ibid. 22:1], a reference to his stay in Gerar. What was he doing in a place defined by its lack of fear of God?

This, in fact, is the basis for the segue to the incident of the Akeda, which bespeaks Abraham's fear of God and his unquestioning acceptance of a Divine command he could not possibly understand. His experience in Gerar had apparently caused him to place an emphasis on a fear of God that he had not previously had to employ to such an extent in his service of God. And it had a balancing effect on him.

We can now see the significance of the climactic moment of the Akeda, when, as Abraham lifts the slaughtering knife, the angel of God cries out, “Do not harm the boy! For now I know that you fear God...” [ibid., v. 12]. In other words, “You had long shown your love of God. Now your fear of God has been tested, as well, and you have succeeded!”

It is at this crucial moment that a circle has been completed, an event that began in the land of Gerar and ends on the mount of Moriah. It was in Gerar that Abraham honed his fear of God, a necessity in a culture in which it was sorely lacking.

Whereas Abraham's first commandment to go to the Land of Israel epitomizes the love of God, this final commandment, the Akeda, most accurately embodies the fear of God. In the process of his life experiences, Abraham has found the proper balance of both religious dynamics, perfecting his relationship with the Almighty, and teaching his descendants the proper path for our service of God.

Shabbat Shalom!

From Spouse to Sibling

When Your Relationship Faces Crisis, Tell Them She Is Your Sister

Rabbi YY Jacobson

A Chassid related the following story:

The loyalty of Russian soldiers to the Czar was legendary. I once saw a Russian soldier being whipped. His crime? While standing watch on a Russian winter night, his feet had frozen to his boots.

"Had you remembered the oath you took to serve the Czar," his commander berated him, "the memory would have kept you warm."

"For 25 years," concluded the Chassid, "this incident inspired my service of G-d[1]."

A Self-Absorbed Husband?

This week's Torah portion, Lech Lecha, relates how a famine breaks out in the Land of Canaan, and Abraham and his wife Sarah head down south to Egypt. As they approach Egypt, Abraham voices his fears to his wife that the Egyptians, notorious for their immorality, might kill him so that they may lay their hands on the most beautiful Sarah.

"Please say that you are my sister," Abraham pleads with his wife, "so that they will give me gifts for your sake and my life will be spared[2]."

This is a difficult story to digest. Abraham, the founder of Judaism, considered one of the most spiritual humans of all times, the person who gave the world the gift of Monotheism and taught humanity the value of kindness, seems to be all-consumed by the fear for his life, and totally unconcerned with the fate of his wife.

What is even more disturbing is Abraham's interest that "they give me gifts for your sake," while his wife would be enduring abuse and humiliation.

No less absurd is the fact that the Torah finds it necessary to begin the biography of the father of the Jewish people with this episode, as though signifying that it contained the fundamentals of Jewish faith and practice...

Two approaches can be found among the commentators. The Ramban (Nachmanides, circa 1194-1270) writes that Abraham performed indeed "a great sin, inadvertently." The Zohar explains (Tazria 52a), that Abraham, who knew Sarah's superior spiritual quality, was certain that no harm would befall her. He was only fearful about his own fate.

Yet, as in every story of the Torah, this narrative contains a psychological and spiritual message[3].

A Tale of Two Loves

What is the difference between the sibling relationship and the spouse relationship? A spouse you choose; siblings you don't choose. Your connection with your brothers and sisters is natural and innate.

The bond between siblings is constant and immutable. Whether you love your brothers or not, he will always remain your brother; you are eternally connected by genes, culture, and soul connection.

Conversely, the bond with a spouse is subject to change and fluctuation; today you are married, but in a year from now you may sadly be divorced.

Yet paradoxically, the love of a sibling – even at its best -- is calm and placid; the love of a spouse, on the other hand, is capable of becoming fiery and passionate. Because the love of a sibling is inborn and natural, it can never die, but we also don't get too excited about it. It is part of who we are.

The love of a spouse is something created anew as a result of two separate individuals coming together at a later stage in life. The distinctiveness, rather than the sameness, of the two individuals linked in marriage, is what gives the relationship its intensity and drama, feelings that cannot be found even between close siblings. Yet this same quality is also the reason some marriages are short-lived. Passion can flourish, but passion can fade away.

And when the marriage does fail, you fall back on the innate bond that exists among family members, who are, hopefully, always there for you.

Tough Times

The story of Abraham and Sarah is also allegorical.

When one is situated in the holy-land, a term symbolizing a psychological state of serenity and spirituality, he is her husband and she is his wife. They care for each other and look out for each other in a way that only a husband and wife can. Those are the days when you wake up in the morning and say, "Thank you G-d for giving me such a special person in my life."

But then a famine may erupt, starving your heart and dulling your senses, you end up in "Egypt," which in Hebrew means "constraints" and "limitations." You lose your passion for your spouse, barriers between you are constructed, and your love becomes a challenge.

At these moments one must remember that his wife is, in essence, also a sister and that her husband is also a brother. Even if you don't feel the connection, you remain connected innately; even if you don't experience the romance consciously, you remain linked essentially. Because the shared bond between a wife and her husband is not only the result of a created union at a later point in their lives; rather the spouse relationship is innate and intrinsic, in the words of the Zohar, "two halves of the same soul[4]." A marriage, in the Jewish perspective, is not only a union of two distinct people; it is a reunion of two souls that were one and then, prior to birth, separated. In marriage, they are reunited.

The relationship between spouses goes beyond feelings. We crave to always be husbands and wives, but sometimes -- for our marriages to survive and thrive -- we must become brothers and sisters. Whether you feel it or not, your wife is one with you, always[5]. Do not allow the loyalty and trust to wane, on both sides. Even if there are arguments, difficulties, and hardships, maintain the loyalty to each other, like healthy and functional siblings.

Abraham and Sarah taught us, that when the relationship becomes challenging, you cease to be husband and wife; now you become brother and sister. You fall back on the innate, intrinsic oneness which binds you in an eternal link.

This, in fact, brings an awesome benefit to a husband. When you are there for your wife even when you're not in the mood for it, an extraordinary energy of love is later returned to you. That's why Abraham told Sarah that by saying that she was his sister, he would not only survive but would also receive special gifts.

G-d My Sister, G-d My Wife

"A sound! My beloved knocks! Open your heart to Me, My sister, My wife, My dove, My twin (5)." In these stirring words, King Solomon describes the Jew both as G-d's spouse and as G-d's sibling.

There are times when the Jew is situated in the holy-land, inspired and motivated to live a spiritual and G-dly life. Like in a good marriage, the Jew is excited about G-d, yearning to be close to Him and fulfilled by having a relationship with Him.

But then come the days when you enter into a psychological "Egypt," where your inner spirituality is numbed, as you are overtaken by self-centered lusts, beastly cravings, negative impulses, and enslaving addictions. Your marriage with G-d seems all but dead.

The key to survival at those moments is to remember that G-d is not only a spouse but also a sibling. We are sacred and G-dly not just because we feel it and we love it, but because a person is inherently a sacred creature, and G-dliness is intrinsic to the human being's very composition. Whether I'm in the mood for it or not, when I behave in a moral and spiritual way, I am being loyal to my true self.

You are holy not because you feel holy, but because you are essentially holy – this is one of the most fundamental ideas of Judaism, expressed in the first narrative about the first Jew.

When the Russian winter threatens to freeze our souls, it's time to recall the warmth provided by G-d as a member of the family. It's time to remember the intrinsic bond existing between you and your sibling that will never fail[6].

[1] Once Upon A Chassid, p. 217.

[2] Genesis 12:10-13.

[3] Cf. Likkutei Sichos vol. 20 Lech Lecha. Based on the idea of the Baal Shem Tov (Baal Shem Tov Al Hatorah Lech Lecha), that as a result of descending to Egypt Abraham's relationship with Sarah was compromised, for then he began seeing her beauty as autonomous of the Divine beauty, it is possible to suggest that the explanation in the essay is relevant on some level to the literal story as well.

[4] Vayikra p. 7b.

[5] Song of Songs 5:2.

[6] This essay is based on the writings of the Chabad Chassidic Masters (Or Hatorah Emor, pp. 149-151; Safer Hammamarim 5627, pp. 248-251; Likkutei Sichos vol. 20 Lech, and Tanya chapters 18 and 25).

Insights Parshas Vayeira - Cheshvan 5782

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in memory of Mina Bas Yitzchak Isaac. "May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

Cutting Them Loose

Avraham made a great feast on the day that Yitzchak was weaned (21:8).

This week's parsha retells the stories surrounding the prophecy to Avraham and Sarah that they will have a child, and the subsequent birth of Yitzchak the following year.

Rashi (ad loc) quotes the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 53:10) and explains that the word ויגמל means "weaned" and this is referring to the end of the twenty-fourth month (i.e. age 2) when a child is weaned of his mother's milk. There is another opinion in the Midrash that it is referring to the age when he is weaned off of the evil inclination, which is the age of thirteen (bar mitzvah) as we see in Chazal (Avos D'rebbe Nosson 16:2). What is the relationship between being weaned off milk and that of being weaned off the yetzer hara that the same word ויגמל – can refer to a bar mitzvah or being weaned off milk?

In order to properly understand this concept, we must delve further into the meaning of the word גמל and its most common iteration – to be gomel chessed or gemillus chessed. Why are acts of kindness called gemillus chessed?

The answer is that at its very essence doing chessed for someone can actually be a source of pain for them. Rashi (Vayikra 20:17) explains that the word chessed in Aramaic means shame. As explained in prior editions of INSIGHTS, Aramaic is the language of understanding another's perspective. In other words, as you are doing someone a kindness they feel shame for not being self-sufficient and having to rely on the largesse of others.

The expression gemillus chessed is very precise; it tells us how we have to perform acts of kindness. We have to give the recipient the ability to be weaned off of the chessed. In this way, they can become self-sufficient and restore their sense of self. Just as importantly, we must also wean ourselves from the feeling of being benefactors. We must focus on the ultimate way to perform acts of kindness and realize that they aren't about us. This is why Maimonides rules that the highest level of tzedakah is when neither party is aware of the other's identity.

This is also the connection between bar mitzvah and a weaned child. One might wonder why for a boy we use the word bar mitzvah and for a girl bas mitzvah – it's incongruous: The word bar is of Aramaic origin and bas is of Hebrew origin. Why isn't a thirteen-year-old male called a ben mitzvah, which would be the Hebrew equivalent?

The word bar in Aramaic doesn't just mean "son of" – it originates from another meaning for bar in Aramaic: "outside of." The true meaning of bar mitzvah is that he is now weaned and independent. Essentially, he is now ready to go out and leave his parental family unit and begin his own, thus he is "outside" the family. Conversely, women are always associated as daughters of the family they grew up in – thus she remains a bas mitzvah.

Rooting Out the Problem

And he settled in the desert of Paran and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt (21:21).

In this week's parsha, the Torah relates the events surrounding the birth of Yitzchak and the subsequent conflict with his older (half) brother Yishmael. At this point, Sarah demands that Avraham expel both Yishmael and his mother Hagar from their home.

The Torah goes on to tell us the details of what happens to Yishmael and Hagar in the desert and how Yishmael was miraculously saved from an illness after his mother despaired for his life. The Torah ends the narrative with the statement that Yishmael settled there in the desert and that his mother Hagar took a wife for him from Egypt.

Rashi (ad loc) comments, "[Hagar obtained a wife] from the place where she grew up [...] This is what people say, 'Throw a stick in the air and it will land on its root.'" However, the Torah doesn't mention random facts and Rashi isn't given to repeating trite colloquialisms; so what is the Torah trying to teach us about Hagar and Yishmael and how is Rashi defining what Hagar did?

The Talmud (Yoma 38b) on the verse "and the name of the wicked shall rot" (Mishlei 10:7) explains that this means we do not use the names of the wicked. Rashi (ad loc) explains this further to mean that we do not give the names of the wicked to our children. The commentators (Ritva and Tosfos Yeshanim ad loc) ask on this assertion: Seeing as Yishmael is considered such a wicked person, why were righteous Kohanim Gedolim and Tana'im given this name?

The answer is that since Hashem said that this name should be given to Yishmael we are not concerned. Alternatively, R' Elazar holds the opinion that Yishmael did teshuvah (Bava Basra 16b). Yet these answers require a deeper understanding. How do these answers address the fact that Yishmael behaved so wickedly for much of his life? In other words, even if someone repents at the end of his life, how do we reconcile the fact that the vast majority of his life was rife with evil acts and that those acts were committed by someone named Yishmael? It seems odd to name someone after him.

It is fascinating to note that the Torah only calls Yishmael by name in a few places: when he is born, when he is circumcised, and when

Avraham Avinu dies and Yishmael defers to Yitzchak by the burial (see 25:9 and Rashi ad loc). In this week's parsha – the only place in the Torah that has a story of any length about Yishmael – he is never referred to by his name (Yishmael), rather he is always called “נער — lad.” This is very odd, Yishmael had already been introduced a few times, why does the Torah refrain from using his name?

The Torah is telling us something remarkable. The word נער means to shake and be unstable. The reason a youth is called a נער is because a person in his youth does not yet have an identity and he is in a constant state of flux. The key event in this week's parsha is the prophecy and birth of Yitzchak Avinu to the true wife of Avraham Avinu. This displacement served to destabilize Yishmael and caused his identity to be in a state of flux; that is why he is now called a נער. These evil acts weren't done under the identity of the name Yishmael. Therefore, the name can be used in the future.

It was the instability in his self-definition that caused him to act out and misbehave. Hagar, in her motherly wisdom, recognized that her son needed to find his identity. She therefore arranged a wife for him from the land of Egypt – a place where he is of royal lineage. Hagar was trying to take him back to his family origins and root him to stabilize him. This is what Rashi means when he says, “throw a stick in the air and it will land on its root.”

Did You Know...

In this week's parsha the Torah describes the destruction of Sedom and the story of Lot and the melachim. The story ends with them fleeing Sedom and Lot's wife ignoring the angels' explicit orders and turning around to gaze at Sedom getting destroyed. She immediately turns into a pillar of salt because, as Rashi (19:26) recounts, she sinned with salt by refusing to serve it to guests in her home. What has become of this pillar of salt?

Josephus states that he saw the pillar himself (Antiquities 1:11:4). Additionally, the Gemara (Berachos 54b) tells us of the bracha (Baruch Dayan HaEmes) that one should say upon seeing that pillar. Clearly, the Gemara wouldn't be giving us a bracha to say if there was zero chance of ever seeing this pillar of salt – so we know that it existed in the time of the Gemara and there's a chance that it still exists today. So, where might it be?

Fascinatingly, there's actually a mountain along the southwestern part of the dead sea in Israel, part of the Judean Desert Nature Reserve, that's called Mount Sedom.

Mount Sedom, or Jabel Usdum in Arabic, is, according to the Living Torah (by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan), the most likely location where Lot's wife died, based upon the contention that Lot was heading south to escape. Furthermore, even nowadays, there's a pillar on that mountain called Lot's Wife, which seems to resemble a human form. See picture above. Interestingly, while the Torah doesn't mention her name, we learn in Sefer HaYashar 19:52 that her name is Ado.

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For the week ending 23 October 2021 / 17 Cheshvan 5782

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parashat Vayera

Make Yourself at Home!

"And behold - three men were standing over him!" (18:2)

There are some people who look like they are giving but they are really taking. And there are some people who look like they are taking when they are really giving.

Anyone who buys a \$5,000-a-plate charity dinner is giving a lot of charity, but he is also getting a lot of status mixed in with his sushi.

On the other hand, there are people who look like they are takers but they are really giving.

Once there was a Jewish traveling salesman who found himself in a largely non-Jewish town on Friday afternoon. His business had delayed him way beyond his expectations and there was now no way he could get home for Shabbat. He had heard that there was just one Orthodox

family in town where he could spend Shabbat, and as the sun was starting to set he made his way there.

The owner of the house opened the door to him and showed him into the living room. "May I stay here for Shabbat?" asked the traveling salesman. "If you like," replied the host. "The price is \$200." "\$200!" exclaimed the traveling salesman. "That's more than a first-class hotel!" "Suit yourself," replied the host.

Realizing that he had no option, the salesman reluctantly agreed. In the short time left before Shabbat, the host showed the salesman his room, the kitchen and the other facilities for his Shabbat stay.

As soon as the host left the room, the salesman sat down and thought to himself. "Well, if this is going to cost me \$200, I am going to get my money's worth." During the entire Shabbat he availed himself unstintingly of the house's considerable facilities. He helped himself to the delicious food in the fridge. He had a long luxurious shower, both before and after Shabbat. He really made himself "at home."

When he had showered and packed, he made his way downstairs and plunked two crisp \$100 bills down on the table in front of his host.

"What's this?" inquired the host. "That's the money I owe you," replied the salesman. "You don't owe me anything. Do you really think I would take money from a fellow Jew for the mitzvah of hospitality?" "But you told me that Shabbat here costs \$200."

"I only told you that to be sure that you would make yourself at home."

When a guest comes to your home, his natural feeling is one of embarrassment. No one likes being a taker. When a guest brings a present, the worst thing you can say is, "You shouldn't have done that!" Rather, take the bottle of wine (or whatever it is), open it, place it in the middle of the table, and say, "Thank you so much!" By allowing him to contribute to the meal, you will mitigate his feeling of being a taker and you will have done the mitzvah of hospitality to a higher degree.

The mitzvah of hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence. We learn this from the beginning of this week's Torah portion. G-d had come to visit Avraham on the third day after his brit mila, the most painful day. G-d made the day extremely hot so that Avraham should not be bothered by guests. When G-d saw that Avraham was experiencing more pain from his inability to do the mitzvah of hospitality than the pain of the brit mila, He sent three angels who appeared as men so that Avraham could do the mitzvah of hospitality. When these "men" appeared, Avraham got up from in front of the Divine Presence to greet his guests.

Hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence.

Sources: Rashi, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler and others

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Rabbi Yisrocher Frand - Parshas Vayera

Suspect Subtly, With Honor and Respect

I would like to say over a brilliant shtickle Torah from the present-day Tolner Rebbe of Yerushalayim, Rav Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg.

In the beginning of our parsha, the Malachim come to Avraham Avinu (who does not realize they are Angels). Avraham Avinu offers them to wash their feet, and rest up a bit. Rashi explains that the reason he asked them to wash their feet was because he thought that they were Arabs who bow down to the dust of their feet.

There were different forms of Avodah Zarah. Some people worshipped the sun. Other people worshipped the moon. There was, apparently, a particular sect that worshipped the dust of their feet. Avraham did not want these visitors to walk into his tent with their Avodah Zarah on their bodies, so he asked them to first wash their feet. Rashi here comments that Lot had no such reservations and offered these same guests, when they came to visit him, lodging first—and only afterwards the opportunity to wash their feet. This is the Rashi at the beginning of Parshas Vayera. [Bereshis 18:4]

However, there is a different Rashi later on in the parsha [Bereshis 19:2], when the Malachim enter Sodom. Rashi asks on the expression “Take lodging and wash your feet”: Is it customary to first take lodging and only later to wash up? A person does not go to sleep and then take a

shower; he showers and then goes to bed! Rashi there answers that Lot was afraid that the people of Sodom would come and find his guests all washed up from their travels and would suspect that he had already been hosting them for several days. He preferred that they remain dusty to appear like they had just arrived and had not yet had time to wash up. In Sodom, they did not take kindly to people who offered hospitality to wayfarers. If they would see that Lot had strangers in his house with clean feet, the Sodomites might fine him for violating their “zoning rules”!

Thus, there is a contradiction between the two comments of Rashi. In the beginning of the Parsha, Rashi says that Lot offered lodging and then washing because he was not concerned about the Avodah Zarah of the dust of their feet. Rashi later on in the Parsha says that he did this to trick the Sodomites into thinking the guests just arrived. This is the first question the Tolner Rebbe asked.

The Tolner Rebbe’s second question is the following: Why does Rashi even mention Lot at the beginning of the parsha when explaining why Avraham said first wash and then seek lodging? That really has nothing to do with what Avraham told the Malachim. Let Rashi save his comments about Lot for the later chapter in Chumash that deals with Lot’s interaction with the Angels! What is the need to raise the issue now?

Third of all (this is an issue that many other Chumash commentaries also deal with) – why did Avraham Avinu say “take a little water and wash your feet” (me’at mayim). Is Avraham Avinu being stingy? Is he worried that he will need to schlep too much water? By food, he gave them each a tongue of a cow, which is huge. But when it comes to water, he only allows them to have a little bit. What is going on here?

These are the three questions that the Tolner Rebbe raises regarding the interaction(s) of Avraham (and Lot) with the Malachim.

The Tolner Rebbe answers beautifully. There is a popular maxim about how a host should treat his guests: Kab’deyhu, v’Chash’deyhu – Honor him, but be suspicious of him. When someone who is a perfect stranger comes to your house, you need to treat him with honor and respect. But at the same time, do not leave the silver unlocked. Treat your guest like a king, but count your silverware at the end of Shabbos because you really don’t know what type of person this is.

Actually, there is no such saying in Chazal of Kab’deyhu v’Chash’deyhu. The world says this, but Chazal have a variant expression (found in Maseches Derech Eretz): All people should be in your eyes as if they were robbers, but honor them like Rabban Gamliel (the Nasi of the Jewish people). This is a very difficult thing to do. You must suspect that a person is going to steal you blind, but at the same time treat him like he is the Prince of Israel.

Maseches Derech Eretz then tells a story: There was an incident with Rav Yehoshua. He had a guest who he fed and provided with everything he needed. He then took him up to the roof. He told him “My guest room is in the attic.” Fine. Good night. Rabbi Yehoshua then (unbeknownst to his visitor) removed the ladder which served as the stairs between the attic and the main dwelling area.

In the middle of the night, this visitor went around collecting all the valuables he found in the upper story of the dwelling. He went to the place where the ladder was supposed to be. Lo and behold the ladder was not there. The guest falls to the ground and is left lying there until the next morning. The next morning, he complains to his host “You took away the ladder!” Meanwhile, the valuables are spread out all over the floor. Rabbi Yehoshua tells him “You thief! We know how to deal with your type!”

Rabbi Yehoshua commented: “Any person (who you don’t know) should be in your eyes as if he is a thief, and nevertheless you must honor him as if he were Rabban Gamliel.” So we learn in Maseches Derech Eretz. The succinct way in which the masses express this idea is “Kab’deyhu v’chash’deyhu.”

Similarly, in this parsha, Avraham Avinu is demonstrating how to properly be suspicious of your guest. In practical terms, how do you implement “Kab’deyhu v’chash’deyhu”? Do we need to ask for photo ID whenever someone shows up at our door? Should we ask all guests to

leave us a credit card when they “check in” for our home hospitality “just in case we need to cover the incidental charges”? Is that how we are supposed to treat our guests? Or, when the guest is about to leave, do we ask to look through his luggage before he steps out of our house?

We obviously don’t do that, because that is insulting. When you suspect a person, you need to do so in such a subtle manner that he does not even begin to grasp that you are suspicious of him. This is why Avraham says to his guests “Please take a little bit of water.” If he would give each one a barrel of water like he gave each one a tongue, they would ask, “Why is he giving us so much water to wash? Does he think we are that dirty?” Avraham very delicately says, “Please take a little bit of water to wash yourselves” so that they do not have the slightest inclination that this has to do with Avodah Zarah.

Now we understand how subtle Avraham was with this comment. Lot was the disciple par excellence of Avraham Avinu regarding hachnosas orchim (to such an extent that later on in the parsha Lot is willing to give over his daughters to the Sodomite mob rather than to have them mistreat his guests). But even Lot did not recognize what Avraham Avinu was doing when he made these subtle comments to his guests. The reason Lot did not do this was because he did not realize he should do it. Lot learned everything from his uncle. Avraham Avinu gave them a little water, but Lot never sensed the etiquette of Avraham’s mode of expression.

That is why Rashi points out over here at the beginning of the Parsha that this was not the practice of Lot. Rashi is making the point that Lot did not offer a little water because he never grasped the subtlety that this is the way a host should treat his company.

Later on, Lot will in fact have yet another reason why they should wash their feet second rather than first. Rashi there tells us that second reason (because he didn’t want them to look like they had been there for a long time), which was also true. Both reasons are true.

This answers all three questions: There is no contradiction between the Rashis because both of Lot’s reasons are true. Lot really did not offer them to wash first, because he wanted to make them look like they just arrived, as Rashi says over there. Avraham only offered a little water in order to be subtle about his suspicions that they worshipped the dust on their feet. And the reason why Rashi also contrasts Avraham with Lot over here, is in order to point out that Avraham kept his suspicion of his guests so subtle that Lot did not even realize what was going on. With this approach, the Tolner Rebbe says an incredible ‘chap’.

On the surface, this maxim that Rav Yehoshua says in Maseches Derech Eretz (that people should suspect every stranger of being a thief and yet honor them like Rabban Gamliel) means that the person should be honored as if he were Rabban Gamliel. However, the Tolner Rebbe says, there is also a hidden message here. Rav Yehoshua and Rabban Gamliel had a history between them. In Maseches Rosh HaShannah [25a], Rav Yehoshua calculated a different day when Yom Kippur should be observed than did Rabban Gamliel. Rabban Gamliel, who was the Nasi, insisted that Rabbi Yehoshua accept the date that Rabban Gamliel calculated as Yom Kippur, and ordered Rabbi Yehoshua to appear before him on the date Rabbi Yehoshua thought was Yom Kippur, carrying his staff and his money bag.

The Gerer Rebbe asks a question on this incident: If Rabban Gamliel wanted Rabbi Yehoshua to admit that he was wrong, why didn’t Rabban Gamliel order him to appear before him and eat a sandwich on the day he thought was Yom Kippur? Taking a money bag and a staff is only a rabbinic prohibition of muktzeh, while breaking one’s fast would be a Biblical offense involving the kares punishment. The answer is that Rabban Gamliel did not want to do that to Rav Yehoshua. Rabban Gamliel had that sensitivity. He did not want to crush Rabbi Yehoshua by asking him to eat on Yom Kippur.

This explanation allows us to view Rabbi Yehoshua’s maxim “...and respect him like Rabban Gamliel” in a new light. He did not mean that a person should respect the suspected thief as if he were Rabban Gamliel. He meant a person should show respect to this person like Rabban Gamliel showed respect to me. Just like Rabban Gamliel did not make me eat on Yom Kippur even though he held I was wrong, but rather he

had respect for my self-esteem and personal dignity – that is how you should treat everyone, even if you suspect their character and integrity. There is no mitzvah to crush people or to break them.

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Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parashat Vayera 5782 Seeing the Good

11 Heshvan 5782 October 17, 2021

In Parashat Vayera, we read the story of the city of Sodom. The people of Sodom deteriorated to abominable behavior and their society became morally corrupt, committing acts of burglary, murder, and rape. As a result of this continuous depravity, G-d decided to destroy the city. But first He shared his plan with Abraham, the man who publicized G-d's name in the world by spreading justice and loving-kindness.

We might have expected Abraham to be happy about this news, about evil being punished. But that's not what happened. Abraham begged G-d to look at all the people in Sodom, asking Him to save the city even if there were only fifty righteous people among them. When G-d doesn't find fifty righteous people, Abraham keeps begging, dropping the number gradually until he gets to ten. When it becomes clear that there aren't even ten righteous people in the entire city, Abraham surrenders and stops praying to save Sodom.

What will examine is why Abraham thought, and G-d agreed, that it was enough to find ten righteous people to warrant saving the entire evil city from punishment. Couldn't those ten righteous people be rescued and the rest of the city be punished?!

To answer this question, we will look at something said by the sages of the Mishna:

...judge all men with the scale weighted in his favor. (Pirkei Avot 1, 6)

Different interpretations have been offered to this Mishna. One of the most fascinating of them is attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Breslev. He said that when we look at others carefully, we should always search for their good points. Even when it is a person who conducts himself badly or immorally, even then, we must look for the good in him since it is impossible that there is a person – even the most corrupt one – who does not occasionally do good deeds. This does not mean that we should ignore others' negative behavior, or see them as positive. The sages of the Mishna ask us to shine a light on the positive things we see around us and to focus on those.

Usually, when we examine ourselves, we are critical and tend to focus on the negative and inappropriate things we've done. The sages of the Mishna ask us to use that same positive outlook when we are introspective, focusing on our positive deeds and traits.

By doing so, not only can we live in peace and joy with our surroundings and with ourselves, but it also leads to real change. When we see someone in a positive light, he himself manages to see that same goodness in himself and manifest it. The same is true when we look inside ourselves. Focusing on our good points is the key to being able to make real change, to make ourselves better people. This is the deeper intent of the saying, "judge all men with the scale weighted in his favor."

Our patriarch Abraham does not ask G-d to ignore the sins of Sodom for a handful of people. He asks G-d to shine a light on the righteous people who live in Sodom and focus on the good in it, thus allowing the people of the city to undergo a process of real transformation. When it became clear that the city of Sodom isn't capable of containing even a handful of good people, and evil and corruption have consumed even the remnants of good people, it was obvious that they needed to get the full extent of G-d's punishment.

Modern therapists recognize this phenomenon that the sages point to, in light of the interpretation of Rabbi Nachman of Breslev. By tilting the balance toward positive feelings when we examine ourselves, our partners, and our environment – not through a critical prism, and not by ignoring what needs to be repaired, but by focusing on the good points –

we can inundate these relationships with joy and create space for personal and moral growth for ourselves and for all those around us.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Rav Kook Torah

Vayeira: The Journey to Moriah

Chanan Morrison

"On the third day, Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from afar." (Gen. 22:4)

For three days Abraham traveled, following God's command, towards Mount Moriah. What happened during this long journey, the prelude to the Akeidah? What was Abraham — a loving father, soon to offer up his only son to God — thinking about? What were his feelings and emotions?

In general, the Torah's style is terse. The text focuses on actions, rarely describing inner thoughts and emotions. Still, a careful reading reveals much about how Abraham undertook this trial.

The Greatest Challenge of the Akeidah

God did not initially tell Abraham where to offer his son. The Divine command was deliberately vague. "Bring him there for an offering, on one of the mountains that I will tell you" (Gen. 22:2). Rav Kook wrote that this detail indicates the most challenging and remarkable aspect of the test.

It would not be sufficient for Abraham merely to carry out the technical aspects of the Akeidah. If Abraham had gone through the outward motions — preparing the wood and the knife, bringing the fire and his son — and yet was inwardly troubled by fears and doubts — he would have failed the test.

Abraham needed to be ready to receive an additional prophecy. Only after three days would the exact location of the Akeidah be revealed to him. And that was the catch. Only a person who is at peace with himself, filled with joy and happiness, is a fitting vessel for prophecy. To complete the test, Abraham would require incredible reserves of spiritual fortitude to be able to receive that future prophecy. If Abraham was disturbed by misgivings and doubts, if his faith and equilibrium were shaken, he would not merit receiving God's instructions where to offer up Isaac.

Without rock-solid faith in his mission, Abraham would never make it to Mount Moriah.

Focused Yet Serene

In fact, the text hints at Abraham's remarkable strength and composure as he readied himself to fulfill God's command.

"Abraham woke up early in the morning." Abraham had been called to sacrifice his beloved son — how could he sleep? A man of lesser faith would have been unable to sleep, disturbed and troubled over what was expected of him. But no feelings of anxiety disturbed the sleep of this remarkable tzaddik. He awoke at his usual hour, eager to perform God's will with the swiftness of a deer and the courage of a lion.

"He saddled his donkey." Abraham's every move was deliberate and precise. His first priority was to arrange the fastest and most assured transportation to fulfill his mission. Only afterward did he attend to other, less essential preparations for the journey.

"He split wood for the offering." Abraham could have waited until later to find wood. Or he could have brought the wood, and only later split it into smaller pieces. But a profound love of God, beyond ordinary human measure, burned so fiercely in his heart that he made sure to prepare every detail.

"And he rose" — not bowed and beaten, but proud and tall, full of strength and energy — "and went to the place that God had told him." All of Abraham's actions were focused on reaching the desired destination and fulfilling God's word. Everything else, whether of a personal or societal nature, became inconsequential compared to his soul's burning desire to carry out the Divine command.

"On the third day..." What happened during those three days? The text does not tell us. The unique experiences of that spiritual journey cannot be expressed in words; they transcend the limits of human language.

“Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from afar.” What was to be an oral prophecy — “on one of the mountains that I will tell you” — was in fact a prophetic vision. Abraham’s soul experienced a spiritual elevation so great that his senses became united. Speech and sight, together with his faculties of prophetic insight, were combined as one. “Abraham lifted his eyes.” His physical eyes became receptors for prophetic vision.

Abraham had passed the most extraordinary aspect of the trial. He had reached Mount Moriah, where the Akeidah would take place.

(Adapted from Olat Re’iyah vol. I, pp. 86-87)

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Vayeira

פרשת וירא תשפ"ב

ותצחק שרה בקרבה

And Sarah laughed to herself. (18:12)

Sarah *Imeinu*, the *tzadekes*, righteous and pious Matriarch, was a prophetess. Thus, her incredulous laughter begs elucidation. Is anything beyond Hashem’s ability? Indeed, it is specifically this question that Hashem presented to Avraham *Avinu*. Furthermore, why did Sarah deny her mirthful reaction to the news that she would have a child? It seems that when Avraham *Avinu* laughed at the same news, it was acceptable. Why did Sarah’s reaction draw the Almighty’s subtle rebuke? To set the record straight, Sarah *Imeinu*’s laughter was no different than that of Avraham; both expressed joy and gratitude. Nonetheless, Hashem saw a nuanced variation, a tinge of impurity in Sarah’s laughter, sufficient to warrant His rebuke. Wherein lay the difference between these two laughs?

Horav Yisrael Belsky, zl, explains that the slight tinge of laughter, rooted in ridicule, which stained Sarah’s expression of joy was so minute that the Matriarch herself was unaware of it. How did it occur? The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, and *leitzaanus*, ridicule/cynicism, are total opposites. One who ridicules lacks *yiraas Shomayim*. Therefore, Sarah, who was certain that she was filled with *yiraas Shomayim*, understood that ridicule had no place in her personality. The slightest vestige of ridicule would have tainted her *yiraas Shomayim*, and she would have noticed it. This is why she replied, *Lo tzachakti*, “I did not laugh.” She intimated that had it been a laugh of ridicule, she would have noticed a drop in her level of *yiraas Shomayim*, which did not occur. She was confident that her laughter was an expression of joy – not ridicule.

Avraham responded that although he did not understand how it was possible, Hashem had spoken, which means that He sensed something improper, even though Avraham and Sarah did not. Sarah accepted the rebuke, acknowledging the fact that it was possible to be (on some remote level) insensitive to the ridicule in one’s own mirth. She worked on herself to the point that this failing, which Hashem identified in her, would be expunged. From now on, her manifestation of joy would be one that expressed *simchah shel mitzvah*, the joy of performing a *mitzvah*, in its most pristine form.

It is for this reason that when Sarah observed Yishmael “laughing,” she understood that the laughter which Hagar’s son expressed was not a laughter of joy, but a malicious form of laughter that bespoke his latent tendency toward murder and idol worship. We derive a powerful lesson herein: Laughter is not innocuous. Laughter can betray the real motivation behind it. Yishmael grew up in Avraham *Avinu*’s home. Hence, he was privy to the character refinement and moral cultivation that existed in this home. Furthermore, G-d was an intrinsic part of their lives. Thus, Yishmael’s laughter should have been a refined, honorable expression of joy. For all intents and purposes, quite possibly, as far as Yishmael was concerned – it probably was. However, Sarah, having learned a powerful lesson concerning the depth of expression that laughter can manifest, realized that something was amiss in Yishmael’s laughter. When she shared her feelings with Avraham, he was at first not in agreement, until Hashem instructed him to listen to Sarah. She had a deeper understanding of laughter, having herself

undergone an educative experience followed by self-imposed sensitivity training.

Rav Belsky makes an insightful observation concerning the *leitz*, scoffer/cynic/ridiculer, and his bag of tricks called *leitzaanus*. Hashem created the universe *yeish mei’ayin, ex nihilo*; something from nothing. The *leitz* employs his power of ridicule to create nothing out of something. This is why *yiraas Shomayim* and *leitzaanus* can never coalesce. The *leitz* tears down anything in his way, because it means nothing to him. Nothing is sacred if it is in his way. One who fears Hashem recognizes His Creation and its significance. He acknowledges that everything in this world has a purpose; otherwise, Hashem would not have created it.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* concludes with an exhortation to expunge ridicule and cynicism from our lives. As long as we are subject to the effects of these reprehensible character deficiencies, we will never rise above the exile in which we live. Wherever we go, we take it along with us. It is similar to someone who carries a foul-smelling object in his pocket. He thinks the stench is the product of the environment in which he finds himself, so he moves elsewhere. It still smells. He moves again. It still smells. He never thinks that he is transporting the smell from place to place – in his pocket! The *leitz* takes his miserable outlook on life wherever he goes. In the beginning, he is funny. When the people stop laughing and he is rejected for what he is, he just moves on and takes his toxic personality elsewhere – until someone has the courage to tell him: You are not wanted here.

ויהי בשחת אלקים את ערי הכנר ויוכר אלקים את אברהם וישלח את לוט מתוך ההפכה

And so it was when Hashem destroyed the cities of the plain that G-d remembered Avraham; so he sent Lot from amidst the upheaval. (19:29)

Rashi asks: What is the remembrance of Avraham concerning Lot? He explains that Hashem remembered that Lot was aware that Sarah was Avraham’s wife, and he heard Avraham say (in Egypt) that she was his sister. Lot did not divulge that Sarah *Imeinu* was, indeed, Avraham *Avinu*’s wife. Therefore, Hashem took pity on Lot. In other words, Lot was rewarded with his life because he did not inform the Egyptians that Sarah was actually Avraham’s wife. If Lot would have spoken up, the Egyptians would have killed Avraham, leaving Sarah a widow. Sarah was really Yiskah, the daughter of Haran, sister of Lot, who was taken in by Terach, her grandfather, upon Haran’s untimely death. What was so laudatory about Lot’s silence? Should he be rewarded for not causing the death of his brother-in-law?

Concerning Noach, the Torah writes, “And Noach found favor in the eyes of Hashem” (Ibid. 6:5). *Chazal* (*Bereishis Rabbah* 28:9) teach that actually Noach was not deserving of being spared the fate suffered by the rest of the world. Despite the fact that he was righteous and perfect, when the Destroyer is granted permission to devastate, one needs a special merit in order to be spared. Noach found favor. This is what protected him – not his righteousness! If so, asks *Horav Eliyahu Svei, zl*, how is it that such a minor act of silence – the act of not catalyzing Avraham *Avinu*’s death – served to protect Lot from the devastation that wiped out Sodom?

The *Rosh Yeshivah* suggests that *Chazal* are teaching us an important principle concerning the extraordinary positive effect of even the slightest relationship with someone as holy and prestigious as Avraham *Avinu*. Lot did practically nothing. Indeed, he was passive, and his deference saved Avraham’s life. This in and of itself is sufficient reason for him to have been saved from Sodom – at a time when everyone else was destroyed.

We find a similar instance concerning Og, King of Bashan. Moshe *Rabbeinu* feared initiating any altercation with Og due to Og’s merit, earned when he informed Avraham that Lot had been taken captive. It was a simple act of decency, performed for the wrong reason. Actually, Og hoped that Avraham would rush into battle and lose his life, thus freeing him to marry Sarah. Nonetheless, the slightest relationship which benefitted Avraham was considered meritorious for Og – enough that Moshe feared his worthiness.

In connection with this concept, *Horav Yechezkel Levinstein, zl*, comments, concerning *Chazal's* enjoinder, *Hevei z'nav l'arrayos v'al tehi rosh la'shualim*; "Be a tail to lions, rather than a head to foxes" (*Pirkei Avos* 4:15). He explains that Lot was spared from certain death as a result of his connection to Avraham. When a person performs a favor for someone, it is considered as if he has given him a part of himself. Thus, he is bound to him and shares in his merits. Since Lot acted kindly to Avraham – even though it was not much – it was still considered as if he had given Avraham a part of himself. This connection was his source of salvation. The *Mashgiach* cites the *Chasid Yaavetz* who explains the above quoted dictum from *Pirkei Avos*: "A tail of a lion is still a lion; and the head of a fox is still a fox." This means that if one conjoins with a lion, regardless of where and how he is connected, he is a lion. Likewise, if he is joined only to a fox, he is a fox. Whatever the linkage, it creates a bond that makes one a part of the subject to whom he is fused.

We note that following the devastation of Sodom and Lot's having been saved, the Angels wanted to take Lot and return him to Avraham *Avinu's* proximity. Lot demurred, claiming that he was more comfortable and felt safer not being near Avraham. *Chazal* (*Bereishis Rabbah* 50:11) explain Lot's reasoning, "As long as I was in Sodom, I was compared to the evil Sodomites. Therefore, I appeared meritorious. In comparison to Avraham, however, I will pale." What happened all of a sudden? He had been with Avraham prior to moving to Sodom. It did not seem to have been a problem then. Why would a relationship with Avraham now present itself as an issue?

Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, explains that earlier Lot had been connected with Avraham. As such, he was a part of the Patriarch. Once they separated and Lot moved to Sodom, their relationship was severed. Therefore, despite his present realization of his earlier grievous error, it was too late. The prior connection could not be repaired to its previous state in which Lot was a part of Avraham. He would now have to fend for himself. This proved to be too much of a challenge for him to navigate. As long as one remains steadfastly connected to a pure and sacred source, he is included in it. Once the affiliation has been dissolved, he no longer enjoys the benefits.

והאלקים נסה את אברהם

G-d tested Avraham. (22:1)

The question is obvious: Why is the *Akeidah*, Binding (of Yitzchak), considered a test of Avraham *Avinu's* conviction? One would think that for a thirty-seven-year old man to "stretch out his neck" and prepare to be slaughtered as an offering to Hashem is an extraordinary test of his own faith. Why is it not considered the test of Yitzchak? The commentators, each in his own idiomatic manner, offer an insightful explanation. Yitzchak *Avinu* achieved a level of spirituality which was extraordinary. As the first one willing to allow his father to slaughter him as a sacrifice to Hashem, Yitzchak not only set a standard for our people, but he also engraved in the hearts and minds -- in the psyche of Jews throughout time -- the concept of a willingness to devote ourselves to Hashem, even if it means the ultimate commitment. We tend to overlook one aspect of Yitzchak's commitment: his education; his mentor.

Yitzchak was the primary student of Avraham. As such, he was raised from birth in the most positive, spiritual environment, inculcated by parents who were themselves the exemplars of spiritual dedication. Is it any wonder that Yitzchak acted accordingly? This is what his parents taught him! Is it then any wonder that the *Akeidah* is known as the test of Avraham? He demonstrated the depth of his faith when he showed what his student had achieved.

וישם אותו על המזבח ממעל לעצים

And he placed him on the Altar atop the wood. (22:9)

The *Yalkut Shemoni* (*Parashas Vayeira* 101) teaches that Avraham *Avinu's* eyes looked into Yitzchak *Avinu's* eyes, while Yitzchak's eyes gazed up at the Heavens. Tears dropped incessantly from Avraham's eyes. We derive from here that Avraham did not abrogate his human emotions. He was a father whose overwhelming love for his son was evident throughout the *Akeidah*. His love for

Hashem was evidently greater. Avraham wanted to carry out Hashem's command with total equanimity and joy. Nonetheless, it pained him greatly that executing the command meant slaughtering his son. The *Alter, zl, m'Slabodka* wonders why Avraham did not subdue his emotions altogether in order to perform the *mitzvah* in *total simchah*.

He explains that Avraham refused to subdue his emotions totally, because this would involve uprooting his unparalleled love for his son to an extent. Hashem imbues a father with love for his child. It is wrong for a parent to uproot this love, because doing so would make his service to the Almighty almost mechanical in nature. Hashem does not want robots without feeling and sensitivity. He wants us to be normal and to serve Him amid normalcy. On the contrary, Hashem commanded Avraham to sacrifice the son whom he loves. One whose relationship with Hashem causes him to become emotionless, unfeeling, uncaring and robot-like is missing the point. This is not what Hashem asks of us. He wants normal human beings – not angels.

וישב אברהם אל נערי... וישב אברהם בבאר שבע

Avraham returned to his young men... and Avraham stayed at Be'er Sheva. (22:19)

The Torah informs us that following the *Akeidah*, Avraham *Avinu*, made an about face and returned home with the two lads - assistants (Eliezer and Yishmael) who had accompanied him and Yitzchak *Avinu* on this momentous journey. Four people left – three people returned. Where was Yitzchak? *Targum Yonasan* explains that the future Patriarch, who was prepared to relinquish his life for Hashem, seems missing from the equation. Apparently, Avraham had sent his primary son to Shem ben Noah to study in his *yeshivah*. Yitzchak spent the next three years studying Torah from Shem.

This directive begs elucidation. Why did Yitzchak require a change of venue, indeed, *galus*, exile, to Shem's *yeshivah*. Was Avraham's Torah insufficient for guiding Yitzchak on the correct path? Avraham seems to have appropriately prepared Yitzchak for his mission in life. To achieve *Olah Temimah*, perfect sacrifice, status is not a simple achievement. Certainly, Avraham's educational abilities were as good as those of Shem. The Torah that Avraham taught was the epitome of *Toras chesed*. How did it differ from the Torah taught by Shem?

Horav Moshe Tzvi Neriah, zl, cites *Chazal* and early commentators who identify Avraham's distinctive method of teaching Torah through the medium of outreach to the masses, to the point that he even published manuscripts explaining the fallacies of idol-worship and the existence of one Supreme Creator (*Rambam Hilchos Avodah Zarah* 1:5). Shem, in contrast, maintained his *yeshivah* for those unique highly-motivated seekers of truth. Avraham went into the streets and preached to the masses. Shem remained ensconced in his cubicle and worked with those who came to him.

Clearly, during all the years that Yitzchak was home, he was the repository of his father's *derech*, method, of teaching. He would one day assume the position of mentor to the world. As such, his father taught and prepared him for that moment in which he would transition into Patriarchal status, when the baton of leadership would pass on to him. This was the case until the *Akeidah*, when Avraham observed the spiritual plateau to which Yitzchak rose; when he saw him achieve the apex of *yiraah* and *ahavah*, awe and love, of Hashem. When his unequivocal faith to the Almighty burst forth, Avraham realized that Yitzchak was no longer the same Yitzchak that had departed with him three days earlier. Yitzchak was no longer the person to reach out to the masses. His level of *avodas HaKodesh*, service to the Almighty, was not something that could be inculcated into just anyone. It was for *yechidei segulah*, unique individuals, who had achieved a lofty spiritual plateau and sought to grow higher and better. Thus, Avraham decided that his son needed to change *yeshivos*, to transition into the *derech* which Shem promoted. His *yeshivah* was not for "everyone." Indeed, later on (when Yitzchak came to greet his *kallah*, Rivkah *Imeinu*), the future Patriarch could be found secluded in Be'er Lachai Ro'ie. Until now, he had served Hashem through the medium of *ahavah*; it was now time to transition to the lofty plane of *yiraah*.

Kiruv richokim, outreach to the unaffiliated, requires intense commitment, extraordinary love and a heavy dose of common sense. Rarely does a “one size fits all” approach work successfully. The expert outreach professionals who succeed in their field are individuals who innovate and devote themselves caring and lovingly to their work and to their charges. Clearly, every culture, every environment -- both geographically and societal-- presents their individual challenges, but through deft skills and dedication, one can successfully maneuver himself to surmount them.

Horav Yitzchak David Grossman, Shlita, is such an individual, who, through his life’s work, has saved thousands of young unaffiliated and alienated men and women from both physical and spiritual disaster. While every person/situation is different, his approach from day one has always been: to attempt to understand the person whom he is trying to win over; neither threaten nor castigate; sympathize, care and show love; and, above all, be sincere. These are the ingredients that often spell the difference between success and failure with regard to outreach.

When *Rav* Grossman arrived in Migdal HaEmek, the city which he almost singlehandedly transformed, he discovered that many of the stores were open on *Shabbos*. He figured that taking on all the stores at once would be a lesson in futility. He would begin with the popular restaurant that was near his *shul*. He entered the restaurant *Minchah* time on *Erev Shabbos* to see an establishment filled with young men and women playing games, listening to music and engaged in various other acts of *chillul Shabbos*. Most of them adhered to the Sephardic custom of calling out *B’oi Kallah*, “Welcome, Bride,” in reference to the *Shabbos* Queen, who was soon to make her appearance. All this was done amidst flagrant *chillul Shabbos*. A lesser person would have cringed or even shouted out at them for their hypocrisy.

Rav Grossman reminded himself of a similar incident which had occurred with *Horav Aryeh Levin, zl*, who fruitlessly attempted to convince a barber to close his shop for *Shabbos*. Finally, with no other recourse, *Rav* Aryeh took a seat near the shop’s entrance, hoping that his presence would inspire the customers to return home and observe *Shabbos*. The potential customers demurred from entering the shop out of embarrassment in front of *Rav* Aryeh. He would do the same, hoping that he, too, would succeed in closing the door. Within a few weeks, the barber noticed that his business was suffering due to *Rav* Aryeh’s intervention. In due time, other barbers closed their shops prior to *Shabbos*.

Rav Grossman entered the restaurant and was overwhelmed with the cacophony of sound, the clinking of beer bottles and the calling out of *B’oi Kallah*. Alas, welcoming the *Shabbos* bride in such a manner defamed it. Clearly, these young men and women were clueless concerning the meaning of *Shabbos*, its sanctity as an integral aspect of Judaism. *Rav* Grossman was in a quandary. This group was not open to a lecture on *Shabbos*. They would ignore him, laugh at him, or throw him out. Unless he showed that he respected them despite their present alienation from religion, he was wasting his time. He decided on a brilliant ploy. He walked into the center of the room and recited the final verse of *Ashrei* – *Va’anchnu nevaireich Kah mei atah v’ad olam Hallelukah*. Without waiting for anyone to react, he immediately commenced with *Kaddish*, *Yisgadal v’yiskadash Shmei Rabba!* Immediately everyone in the restaurant screamed out, “*Amen*” at the appropriate place.

As soon as he concluded *Kaddish*, he began *Shemoneh Esrai*, followed by *Chazaras Ha’Shatz*, the repetition of the Prayer. When it was time for *Kedushah*, everyone participated. He finished *Minchah*, and, while he had their attention, he called out, “*Chevrah, Shabbos Kodesh! Shabbos Kodesh! Holy Shabbos!*” He had their attention, and he followed up with an insightful story. Needless to say, *Rav* Grossman had caused a stir, which became a movement that catalyzed the return to religion for these and other young people. He was unable to convince them to come to *shul*, so he brought the *shul* to them – and others, as he went from restaurant to restaurant to *daven* with the customers. He understood them; he respected them. They, in turn, realized that he

sincerely cared for them. This brought about their “homecoming” to *Yiddishkeit*.

Va’ani Tefillah

ונפשי כעפר לכל תהיה – *V’Nafshi ke’afar lakol tiheyeh*. And let my soul be like dust to everyone.

Concerning Avraham Avinu, the Torah writes, *V’santi es zaraacha k’afar ha’aretz*, “I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth” (*Bereishis* 13:16). (Various interpretations abound regarding dust as a simile for *Klal Yisrael*.) The *Chidushei HaRim* interprets dust as denoting something which people step on and trample. It is also a reference to Avraham Avinu’s sense of humility in considering himself lowly and unworthy of acclaim and recognition. Hashem told him that He would make his descendants just like him, i.e., they, too, would maintain a sense of humility. Thus, when a Jew acts with arrogance, he not only acts inappropriately, he also goes against the “grain” with which Hashem imbued him.

In 1954, the *Bais Yisrael* attended the *Knessiah Gedolah* which took place in Yerushalayim. It was the first such conference to convene following the cataclysmic destruction of European Jewry. Thus, it was attended by thousands of Jews from all corners of the globe. When the *Rebbe* entered the room, the entire congregation rose up in reverence for the saintly leader of *Gerrer Chassidus*. As he walked to the dais, the *Rebbe* kept “mumbling” to himself. He later explained that he had been reciting the verse, *V’nafshi ke’afar lakol ti’heyeh*, to remind himself not to let the public acclaim go to his head.

Dedicated in loving memory of our dear father and grandfather

Arthur I. Genshaft

יצחק בן נחום ישראל ז"ל נפטר חי' חשוון תשל"ט

Neil and Marie Genshaft

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prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

Ask Rav Aviner: toratravaviner@yahoo.com

Ha-Rav answers hundreds of text message questions a day. Here's a sample:

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov in Tzefat?!

Q: Is it true that Rebbe Nachman of Breslov was reburied in Tzefat and is no longer in Uman?

A: This claim has no strong basis.

Rambam's Medical Advice

Q: Is it permissible today to disagree with the Rambam's medical advice?

A: Yes. The Rambam explains at length in his medical writings that they are not based on Torah but rather on Galen. Baruch Hashem, medicine has greatly advanced since then.

Baal Shem Tov and Halachah

Q: The Baal Shem Tov did things which appear to be contrary to Halachah. How so?

A: They appear to be contrary but are not. They can be explained (The Satmar Rebbe opposed telling stories which seem to contradict Halachah so people will not come to take Halachah lightly. In the book "Abir Ha-Ro'im", p. 31-33).

Sha'ar Ha-Rachamim

Q: Is it true that the Messiah will enter Yerushalayim through Sh'ar Ha-Rachamim?

A: No. The Turkish Sultan heard this, and there closed up the gate.

Birkat Cohanim with Snuggly

Q: Is it permissible for a Cohain to recite Birkat Cohanim while carrying a baby in a snuggly?

A: When there is no other choice and the baby is covered.

Saving Parking Space for Husband

Q: Can I save a parking space for my husband when other cars want the space?

A: Yes. "Ishto Ke-Gufo" – a wife and husband are like one being.

Falling Asleep in Front of Chief Rabbi

Q: If someone falls asleep during the Chief Rabbi's class, should I wake him up?

A: Yes. It is certainly his desire even if he did not say so explicitly. And the same applies to the classes of other Rabbis.

Minhag of Child of Divorced Parents

Q: Whose Minhag should a child of divorced parents follow if he lives with his mother?

A: His mother's. After all, he lives with her there.

Tefillin for Vegan

Q: What should a Vegan do about putting on Tefillin?

A: Display self-sacrifice and put on regular Tefillin 22-Day Fast

Q: There was a news story that someone fasted for 22 days. Is this possible?

A: Refraining from eating is possible – but damages the body. But refraining from drinking for that long is impossible.

The Words of the Prophets

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

At this beginning of parshas Vayeira, the Torah tells us that Hashem appeared to Avraham Avinu --

Question #1: Just This Once

"Obviously, I never met either the Chofeitz Chayim or Rav Aryeh Levin, but there is a great tzadik in our neighborhood, a big talmid chacham and a mekubal, who is never involved in what is going on. Today, he came to me, quietly, and told me that Hashem appeared to him in a vision and instructed him to tell me that this coming Shabbos, but only this Shabbos, I am supposed to drive him somewhere in my car. Am I supposed to listen to him?"

Question #2: Untruthful Prophets?

The brocha we recite prior to reading the haftarah states ve'rotzeh be'divreiheim ha'ne'emarim be'emes, that Hashem "desired the words of the prophets that are said in truth." This brocha requires explanation: Of course, Hashem desires the words of the prophets – He was the One Who sent them the message in the first place! What does this brocha mean?

Answer:

To answer the above questions thoroughly and correctly, we need to study the entire halachic issue of prophets, beginning from the Chumash, through the Gemara, rishonim and poskim. Even if we do not happen to have a neighbor in shul who meets all the requirements of a navi, we should know these laws:

- (1) From a perspective of mitzvas Talmud Torah.
- (2) So that we can observe them properly when we again have the opportunity.
- (3) So that we can understand the verses that are germane.
- (4) A proper understanding of the thirteen ikarei emunah of the Rambam is contingent on comprehending these laws.

How prophetable?

We will start with the Torah's discussion in parshas Shoftim about the topic:

"You shall be wholehearted with Hashem, your G-d... A prophet from among you, from your brothers, like me (Moshe), will Hashem, your G-d, establish for you. You shall listen to him.... Then, Hashem said to me... 'I will establish for you a prophet from among your brothers, like you, and I will put My words in his mouth – everything that I will command him. Whoever will not listen to My words that the prophet will speak in My name – I will exact punishment from him. However, any prophet who will have the audacity to speak in My name that which I did not command him to say, or any prophet who will speak in the name of foreign gods – that prophet shall surely be put to death.' And should you ask in your heart, 'How am I to know which statement was not said by Hashem?' (The answer is): That which the prophet says in the name of Hashem (that it will miraculously happen) and the matter does not transpire, this is, for certain, something that Hashem never said. This prophet has violated the Torah intentionally: Do not be afraid of him." (Devorim 18: 13, 15, 18-22).

We see in these pesukim the following laws:

A. If a prophet demonstrates that he is, indeed, a prophet that Hashem sent, we are required to obey whatever he tells us that Hashem commanded. Based on the pesukim and some relevant passages of Gemara and halachic midrash, the Rambam (Sefer Hamitzvos) explains as follows: "Mitzvah #172 is that we were commanded to listen to every prophet and to obey what he commands, even if it contradicts a mitzvah... as long as it is temporary, not a permanent change either to add or subtract... The words of the Sifrei are 'to him shall you listen'; even if he tells you to violate temporarily one of the mitzvos that are written in the Torah, listen to him."

B. Someone who does not follow the commandment of the prophet – Hashem will exact punishment from him. Chazal tell us that the punishment is quite severe.

C. If the prophet claims to speak in Hashem's Name and he had received no such commandment – such a "prophet" should be executed.

D. Someone who meets all the requirements of a true prophet, but relates a prophetic vision in the name of an idol or other foreign god (anything that qualifies as avodah zarah) -- this "prophet" should also be executed.

In the Rambam's opinion, there is also another place in the Torah where this mitzvah is discussed. At the end of parshas Va'eschanan, the Torah writes, "Lo senasu es Hashem Elokeichem, do not test Hashem your G-d" (Devorim 6:16), which the Rambam explains to mean: Do not test the promises or warnings that Hashem sent to us via His prophets, by casting doubt on the veracity of a prophet after he has proven his authenticity. This mitzvah is similarly quoted by the Sefer Hachinuch, who calls this mitzvah (#424 in his count): "Not to test a true prophet more than necessary."

This leads us to the following question: What are we to do when someone seems to have the right qualifications for a prophet, and he tells us that he received a prophetic vision? The prohibition just described is only after he has demonstrated adequately that he is, indeed, a navi. How does he prove that he is an authentic navi?

Who is prophetable?

First, we need to establish that there are pre-requisite qualifications that must be met by a navi. The Gemara (Nedarim 38a) states: "Hashem places his presence only on someone who is physically powerful, wealthy, wise and humble." The Gemara proceeds to prove that we know these factors from the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu was physically strong enough to assemble the Mishkan on his own, and that he was extremely wealthy from the trimmings of precious stone that he collected when he chiseled out the second luchos.

The Rambam adds a few other qualities that a prophet must always exhibit: "Among the most basic concepts of religion is to know that Hashem communicates with people. Prophecy happens only to a very wise talmid chacham who is in total control of his personality traits, whose yetzeir hora never controls him – rather, he is in control of his yetzeir hora, always. He must also be someone with tremendous and correct understanding. Someone filled with all these qualities, who is physically complete and healthy, when he begins studying the deeper aspects of Torah and is drawn into these great topics, develops great understanding, becomes sanctified and continues to grow spiritually, separates himself from the ways of common people who follow the darkness of the time, and instead, he is constantly growing and spurring himself onward. He teaches himself to control his thoughts so as not to think of things that have no value. Rather, his thoughts should always be engaged with the 'Throne of Hashem', in his attempts to understand holy and pure ideas.... When the spirit of Hashem rests upon him, his soul becomes mixed with that of the angels... and he becomes a new person who understands that he is no longer the same as he was before, but that he has become elevated beyond the level of other talmidei chachamim" (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 7:1).

Net prophets

When the prophet reveals his first prophecy, the posuk that we quoted above teaches: "How am I to know which word was not said by Hashem?" (The answer is): "That which the prophet says in the name of Hashem (that it will miraculously happen) and the matter does not transpire, this is for certain something that Hashem never said."

This posuk teaches that, in addition to having all the requisite personal qualities, a navi must foretell the future in the Name of Hashem in order to qualify as a navi. There is a dispute between Rav Sa'adiyah Gaon and the Rambam what type of "prophecy" must be demonstrated to prove that he is a prophet. According to Rav Sa'adiyah, the prophet must perform something that is supernatural, such as Moshe did when he turned water into blood, or the stick into a snake. This is because the navi, functioning as a messenger of Hashem, would have been provided by Him with a sign that only Hashem could accomplish, such as preventing water from running downhill, or stopping a heavenly body in its course (Emunos Udei'os 3:4). (This is also the opinion of the Abarbanel in parshas Shoftim.)

On the other hand, the Rambam (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 10:2) disagrees, stating:

"Any prophet who arises and says that Hashem sent him does not need to produce a sign on the level of what Moshe Rabbeinu did, or Eliyahu or Elisha, which was completely supernatural. It is sufficient that he prophesy, saying that something will happen in the future, and his words come true.... Therefore, when a man appropriate to being a navi comes... we do not tell him, 'Let us see you split the sea, or bring the dead back to life, or anything similar, in order that we can believe you'. Rather, we tell him: 'If you are indeed a prophet, foretell something that will happen.' When he foretells, we then wait to see if it happens. If it does not happen, even if something small of his prophecy does not happen, we know for certain that he is a false prophet. If his words are entirely fulfilled, you should consider him to be truthful. We then proceed to check him several times; if each time his words are exactly fulfilled, we consider him a true prophet."

According to some acharonim (Arba'ah Turei Aven), we test him three times, just as Moshe Rabbeinu was given three signs. If he meets all the requirements of a navi and foretells the future, perfectly and accurately, three times, we are required to follow what he tells us to do, and, when we do so, we accomplish the mitzvah of the Torah.

If he predicts that something will happen and it does not, we know that he is a false prophet. In any of these cases where we are not permitted to obey his words, the Sanhedrin would subject him to capital punishment as a false prophet.

Prophets on prophets

There is another way that a navi can be verified as such, without his producing a miracle or foretelling the future. If someone we already know to be a prophet testifies that an individual who meets the personal requirements of a prophet is indeed a navi, the second individual should be accepted immediately as a prophet (Rambam, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 10:5). The proof for this is that Yehoshua became accepted as a prophet on Moshe Rabbeinu's say-so, without producing any miracles or foretelling the future. (The miracles he performed were done later, after he already had been accepted as a navi.)

Gross prophet

What is the halacha if someone who clearly does not meet the personal requirements that we have described tells us that Hashem spoke to him. Let us even assume that he foretells the future successfully, or that he performs miracles. What is the halacha?

The halacha is that he is considered a false prophet. When the batei din had the ability to carry out capital punishment, he would be executed by them. Since our batei din do not have this ability today, we can excommunicate him or banish him, to mitigate the harm he causes. This was done many times in our past, when we were confronted by false prophets. In other words, it is non-prophetable to have him among the Jewish people.

Highly prophetable

The halacha is that once he proved he is a prophet, we are required to obey him, even if he tells us to do something that is counter to a mitzvah or is usually prohibited. The two exceptions are if he tells us that he is changing something of the Torah permanently, or if tells us to violate the prohibition of avodah zarah. In either of these two situations, the Torah tells us that he is a false prophet, even if his tests were true.

Is this a prophetable venture?

At this point, we can analyze our opening question: "Obviously, I never met either the Chofeitz Chayim or Rav Aryeh Levin, but there is a great tzadik in our neighborhood, a big talmid chacham and a mekubal, who is never involved in what is going on. Today, he came to me, quietly, and told me that Hashem appeared to him in a vision and instructed him to tell me that this coming Shabbos, but only this Shabbos, I am supposed to drive him somewhere in my car. Am I supposed to listen to him?"

Let us assume that this talmid chacham/mekubal meets all the requirements that the halacha requires, as quoted above. He now needs to meet the next challenge: According to Rav Sa'adiyah and the Abarbanel, he must perform a miracle that defies nature as we know it. According to the Rambam, he must successfully predict future events several times, without a single detail varying from his description and without any incorrect prediction. If his prophecy is inaccurate even in a slight detail, he is subject to the death penalty, if Sanhedrin can carry out this ruling. Since we have no Sanhedrin today, he would be ruled as a rosho, notwithstanding his other, fine qualities.

Personally, I would think that he is probably suffering from some mental illness, and I would recommend that he have a full psychiatric evaluation. I do not think that he is evil; I think that he is ill.

Prophetable brochos

At this point, let us examine our second opening question: The brocha we recite prior to reading the haftarah states that Hashem "desired the words of the prophets that are said in truth." This brocha requires explanation: Of course, Hashem desires the words of the prophets – He was the One Who sent them the message in the first place! What does this brocha mean?

We can answer this question by realizing the following: With the exception of Moshe Rabbeinu, Hashem communicated to the prophets in a vision, not in words. The prophet, himself, put the ideas he had seen, heard and understood into his own words. It is for this reason that the Midrash teaches that ein shenei nevi'im misnabe'im besignon echad, it will never happen that two prophets recite the exact same words of prophecy (Pesikta and Midrash Seichel Tov, Parshas Va'eira 9:14). Each prophet still maintains some of his own personality and upbringing that will reflect itself in the way he describes what he saw. Yet, the final words, which are the words of the prophet, "their words," are still "said in truth" – meaning that notwithstanding the personal imprint of the prophet on what he said, the words all convey Hashem's absolute intent.

Conclusion:

In the Sefer Hachinuch, mitzvah #424 is: "Not to test a true prophet too much." He explains that, if we test the navi after he has adequately proved his veracity, those jealous of him or pained by his success may use excessive testing as an excuse not to listen to his commandments. In other words, they will deny his authenticity unjustifiably, by claiming that he has as yet not been tested sufficiently. Thus, we see that even something so obvious as the ability of a great tzadik to foretell the future can be denied by people, when they don't want to accept the truth!

לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל

Parshat Va-Yera: The Akeidah

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

I: WHAT MAKES LOT TICK?

II: THE CHALLENGE OF THE AKEIDA (BINDING)

Our questions this week:

1. Why does the Torah spend so much space telling us about Lot, Avraham's nephew? We hear that Lot accompanies Avraham on the journey from Ur to Haran to Canaan; that Lot chooses to move to Sodom and its environs to find grazing space for his growing flocks; that he is captured in a war and saved by Avraham; that angels come to warn him of Sodom's destruction; that he seeks refuge in various places and is tricked by his own daughters into sleeping with them. What are we meant to learn from Lot and his misadventures?

2. "Sacrifice your only son, the one you love," says Hashem, and Avraham obeys with silent alacrity. To appreciate the Akeida (Binding of Isaac), we need to understand Avraham's mentality in facing it: the substance of the test, after all, was whether he would be able to overcome his feelings. Since the Torah tells us nothing about Avraham's emotions throughout the ordeal, we must look for hints wherever the Torah drops them. How do the literary features of the way the story is told accent the difficulty of the test?

3. Believe it or not, since long before commanding Avraham to sacrifice his son, Hashem has been working hard to make this test even *harder*. What does Hashem do to make the test harder? Look for evidence both within Parashat VaYera and in the previous parasha.

4. What does the test of the Akeida show about Avraham, and what should we learn from it?

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I: WHAT MAKES LOT TICK?

As the curtain rises on our parasha, angels appear to Avraham. He rushes to welcome them, feed them, and offer them shelter and comfort. After reporting Avraham's conversation with the angel-visitors, the Torah moves on to the story of the destruction of Sodom and how Lot, Avraham's nephew, is saved. Clearly, the figure of Lot is set up for comparison to Avraham: the same angels who enjoyed Avraham's gracious welcome now visit Lot to tell him he should leave Sodom before Hashem destroys it. Just like Uncle Avraham, Lot eagerly welcomes the guests into his home, even using language similar to Avraham's. But these similarities only accent the deep differences between Avraham and Lot which quickly become apparent.

LOT'S VOLUNTARY AKEIDA:

Lot has learned from Avraham that welcoming guests is a good thing to do, so he eagerly welcomes the angels. But when his evil Sodomite neighbors surround his house and demand that he send out his guests so they can abuse (and perhaps rape) them, Lot says something so ridiculous that it would be funny if it weren't so disgusting: "Now, look, you don't want to do anything evil! [Al na, ahai, ta-re'u!] These are my guests, and I must guarantee their safety. Instead, I will send out my two daughters -- both virgins! -- and you can do with them whatever you like." Like Avraham, Lot feels responsible for the welfare of his guests; like Avraham, Lot is willing to sacrifice even his children for an important purpose. But while Avraham is willing to sacrifice his son only in response to a direct and excruciatingly specific divine command ("Take your son, your only one, the one you love -- Yitzhak"), Lot is a volunteer, offering his daughters for sacrifice in place of his guests. This, he suggests to the crowd of louts surrounding his house, is a good way to avoid "doing evil"!

MEASURE FOR MEASURE:

As promised, Hashem destroys the city of Sodom, and Lot and his daughters eventually seek refuge in the mountains. Witnessing the destruction of their city and its environs, Lot's daughters apparently believe that their father is the last man left on Earth and conclude that in order to perpetuate humanity, they must conceive by him. Anticipating his resistance, they get him drunk, seduce him, and bear children by him. This is a classic pattern of *mida ke-neged mida* (measure for measure): Lot offers up his daughters to be raped by the crowd; in retribution, his daughters 'rape' him (See also Midrash Tanhuma, VaYera 12). Just as Lot justified the rape of his daughters as a means of doing good (protecting his guests), so do his daughters justify 'raping' him as a means of doing good (propagating humanity).

What can we learn from Lot? Is he just a biblical clown, here just for our comic relief and occasional horror, or maybe just to throw Avraham's virtues into sharp relief?

Although very enthusiastic about copying behavior he has seen modeled by a good person, Lot is deaf to the values spoken by his actions. Either he has never understood the values which motivate Avraham's virtuous actions, and so he never arrives at a proper balance of those values, or his living in Sodom has corrupted his values, leaving him with only the

memory of Avraham's virtuous behavior but without the proper hierarchy of values to guide that behavior. Action not motivated by sensitivity to the values underlying it can easily pervert those underlying values and accomplish great evil in trying to ape good behavior. Lot, for example, can offer his daughters for rape in place of his guests. Lot's acts of hesed express his values to the same degree that a parrot's jabberings express its thoughts: neither a parrot's gracious "Hello" nor the ensuing stream of verbal filth express its thoughts, since all the parrot can do is imitate. In the same way, we are impressed by Lot's kindness in welcoming the guests, but when we stay to hear the end, it's clear that he has no real understanding of hesed. He can only imitate the behavior of a good person. But doing good is not just a particular behavior or pleasant habit, it is the expression of internalized and well-balanced values.

Lot is not simply a scoundrel: his intentions are noble, as he offers his daughters in order to protect the visitors who have taken shelter with him, not simply out of cruelty. But his act is grotesque and horrifying *especially* because he performs it in the same breath as his heroic defense of his guests, and in service of that heroic defense.

II: THE CHALLENGE OF THE AKEIDA:

Since long before commanding Avraham to sacrifice his son, Hashem has been hard at work making the upcoming test even harder.

A SON IS PROMISED:

We start in Perek (chapter) 17. Last week, we spent some time on this section developing the idea that the Berit Mila is the eternal, national, historical covenant with Hashem, a covenant which all generations of Jews make with Hashem throughout history. Hashem changes Avraham's name from "Avram" to "Avraham" to symbolize his new status as an "av hamon goyim," a founder of many nations, referring to the 12 quasi-nations which will be the tribes of Israel. What we did not look at last week is the second half of that section, where Hashem changes Sara's name from "Sarai" to "Sara" and tells Avraham of another promise. I left this section for this week because it works with our theme:

BERESHIT 17:15-21 --

Hashem said to Avraham, "Sarai, your wife -- do not call her 'Sarai,' for 'Sara' is her name. I shall bless her and give you a son from her; I shall bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Avraham fell on his face, laughed, and said in his heart, "Can a child be born to someone a hundred years old? And as for Sara, can a woman ninety years old give birth?"

Avraham said to Hashem, "Would that Yishmael could live before You!"

Hashem said, "Nonetheless, your wife, Sara, will bear a son to you, and you shall call him 'Yitzhak.' I shall keep my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his children after him. As for Yishmael, I have heard you; I have blessed him, and multiplied him, increased him very greatly -- he shall bear twelve princes, and I shall make him into a great nation. But My covenant I shall keep with Yitzhak, whom Sara will bear to you at this time next year."

When Avraham hears that he will have a son with Sara, he has two reactions:

- 1) He laughs at the improbability of people of his and Sara's age successfully producing a child.
- 2) He wonders why it is necessary to have another child to succeed him. What is wrong with Yishmael?

Hashem responds very subtly to Avraham's doubt; Avraham does not explicitly voice a doubt, so Hashem does not explicitly voice a response. But Avraham knows Hashem knows that he laughed in disbelief at the promise. Hashem responds to the laugh with equal subtlety, by instructing Avraham to name the child "Yitzhak" -- "He shall laugh." Hashem is saying, "I know you laughed inside"; He is telling Avraham that he must strengthen his faith, that He is aware that his faith is not yet perfect.

Hashem responds to the second issue -- the Yishmael query -- by repeating that Yishmael cannot do the job. The covenant just concluded with Avraham -- the Berit Mila covenant, whose focus was that Hashem would be the God of Avraham's descendants and that He would give them the Land of Canaan forever -- would be fulfilled not through Yishmael, but through Yitzhak. Everything Avraham has been promised will be channeled to Yitzhak. Hashem responds to Avraham's love for Yishmael by also giving him a blessing, but the special relationship with Hashem and with the Land is reserved for Yitzhak. Hashem firmly plants the idea in Avraham's mind that his successor will be Yitzhak.

MORE LAUGHS:

We now move on to Perek 18, the beginning of our parasha, which reports the conversation between Avraham and his three visitors, the angels who have come to deliver a message to him:

BERESHIT 18:10-14 --

He [the angel-visitor] said, "I shall return to you next year, and Sara, your wife, shall have a son."

Sara was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him. Avraham and Sara were old, coming along in years; Sara no longer had the way of women. Sara laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I am worn out, I will become young again?! And my husband is also old!"

Hashem said to Avraham, "Why did Sara laugh, saying, 'Can I really bear a child? I am old!' Is anything beyond Hashem?! At the appointed time, I shall return to you in a year, and Sara shall have a son!"

Sara seems to react the same way Avraham did when he heard he would have a son. She laughs, as Avraham did, wondering how people as old as she and Avraham can have a child. [She does not ask that Yishmael succeed Avraham because Hagar and Yishmael are rivals to her and Yitzhak.] Hashem reacts explosively to Sara's doubt and makes crystal clear to her husband that the promise that she will have a child is a firm one.

This conversation with Avraham accomplishes two things: one, it communicates to Sara and to Avraham that Hashem will no longer be as patient as before with their doubts of His promises, and two, it reinforces in Avraham the promise that he will have a son with Sara. The fact that Hashem specifically sends messengers to repeat this promise, which He had already made before, and the fact that a date is set for this event, communicate to Avraham that the birth of this child is an event of paramount significance. Hashem takes great pains to clear up any doubts that might remain about Yitzhak's birth. The result is a tremendous buildup of expectation as the time approaches.

AND YET MORE LAUGHS:

Perek 21 tells the story of the birth of Yitzhak and its aftermath:

BERESHIT 21:1-12 --

Hashem remembered Sara as He had said, and He did to her as He had said. She conceived and bore TO AVRAHAM a son for HIS old age, at the time Hashem had told HIM. Avraham called HIS son, who was born TO HIM, whom Sara bore TO HIM, 'Yitzchak.' Avraham circumcised Yitzchak at eight days old, as Hashem had commanded him. Avraham was 100 years old when Yitzchak, HIS SON, was born TO HIM

Sara saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian (whom she had borne TO AVRAHAM) laughing. She [Sara] said to Avraham, "Throw out this maidservant and her son, for he shall not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak!" This was very evil in the eyes of Avraham, on account of his son. Hashem said to Avraham, "Let it not be evil in your eyes on account of the young man and your maidservant. Whatever Sara tells you to do, obey her, for through Yitzchak shall be called your descendants."

The Torah emphasizes over and over that Yitzhak is "born to Avraham." Pasuk 3 alone tells us three times in different ways that Yitzhak is born "to Avraham." Why the emphasis?

And what is Yishmael laughing at? And why does this annoy Sara so much? And what does inheriting Avraham have to do with this whole issue? Shouldn't Sara just ask Avraham to throw out Hagar and Yishmael, without mentioning the inheritance?

We have already seen the word "me-tzahek," "laughing," fairly recently. Both Avraham and Sara laugh in disbelief when told that they will have a child together. Perhaps Yishmael's "tzehok" is about the same thing -- Avraham and Sara's having a child in their old age. But if so, why is Sara angry at Yishmael for not believing the same promise she herself couldn't believe a few months before?

The difference is clear: Sara had trouble believing it when Hashem told her about it. But she was simply indulging a human frailty, having trouble believing something she thinks is simply impossible. Perhaps it is particularly hard for her to believe the promise because she wants so badly for it to be true! (This is a pattern we also see in the Haftara -- Melachim II 4. Elisha the Prophet used to stop at a certain couple's house and sleep there sometimes. After awhile, Elisha felt a sense of great gratitude to the couple, so he asked his hostess what he could do for her in return. She tried to refuse any favors from him, but eventually he realized that she had no children and promised her a child. She reacted the same way Sara does, in a way: She said, 'Do not, master, man of Hashem, do not lie to your maidservant!' She thought he was promising her a child only because he knew she desperately wanted one, but she didn't think he could deliver. So she told him not to lie to her -- she wanted children too badly to be disappointed, so she refused to believe the promise.)

But Yishmael's laughter echoes at a different emotional pitch than Sara's; it sounds a decidedly smirking tone. Yishmael, too, does not believe that Avraham and Sara are capable of having a child together. When Sara *does* bear a child, he can no longer deny that she is capable of having a child, but he can certainly still deny that *Avraham* is capable at this age. He smirks at Sara to tell her he's tickled by the suspicion that maybe she slept with someone else and that the son she has just borne is not Avraham's. This is why the Torah emphasizes so many times that Yitzhak really is Avraham's son, that Yishmael's evil suspicion is groundless!

Imagine Sara's frustration and fury with this mother-son pair, Hagar and Yishmael. Long ago, when Sara realized she could not have children and gave Hagar to Avraham as a wife, Hagar became pregnant and began to lord it over Sara. The same group of people who laughed at Sara before because she **couldn't** have children, are still laughing at her even

now that she ****has**** had children. No matter what she does, she can't escape their laughter. She demands that Avraham get rid of them.

It now also makes sense why Sara focuses on the issue of the inheritance. She is responding directly to Yishmael's claim: Yishmael is hinting that Yitzhak is illegitimate, that he is not Avraham's son and does not deserve to inherit Avraham. Sara is responding that he's got it all wrong: not only is Yitzhak legitimate, and not only will he inherit Avraham, but he, Yishmael, is illegitimate, and will NOT inherit along with Yitzhak. Sara is not claiming that Yishmael is illegitimate in the physical sense -- she admits that he is Avraham's son -- but spiritually, as Avraham's successor in his religious mission, he is illegitimate. In these terms, he can never be Avraham's heir.

This story demonstrates how important Hashem considers the interpersonal in choosing who will be the people with whom He will have a relationship. The crimes of Hagar and Yishmael are not against Hashem, they are against other people. People who can laugh triumphantly at a barren woman desperate for children, who can titter maliciously at that same woman once she has had children, are rejected not only by Sara, who demands their ouster, but also by Hashem, who supports Sara's demand.

The last pasuk above summarizes this section for our purposes: "For in Yitzchak will be called your descendants." Avraham is assured that his successor, the one who is officially called his offspring, the one born "to him," is Yitzhak. Yitzhak becomes the repository of all the hopes Avraham has for the future of his descendants' relationship with Hashem; all of the promises he has been assured of, he expects to see fulfilled in Yitzhak.

THE BINDING OF YITZHAK:

We now move to the Akeida itself:

BERESHIT 22:1-18 --

It happened, after these events, that Hashem tested Avraham. He said to him, "Avraham!" He said, "Here I am." He said, "Take YOUR SON, your ONLY ONE, whom you LOVE -- Yitzchak -- and go to the land of Moriyah, and offer him up there as an offering on one of the mountains which I will show you."

Avraham awoke early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took his two young servants with him, with Yitzchak, HIS SON. He strapped on firewood and got up and went to the place Hashem had told him.

On the third day, Avraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Avraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey. I and the young one will go until there, bow down, and return to you." Avraham took the firewood and put it on Yitzchak, HIS SON, and took in his hand the fire and the knife, and they went TOGETHER.

Yitzchak said to Avraham, HIS FATHER; he said, "FATHER?" He said, "I am here, MY SON." He said, "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the offering?" Avraham said, "Hashem will show for Himself the sheep for the offering, MY SON," and they went on TOGETHER. They came to the place Hashem had told to Avraham, and Avraham built the altar there, set up the wood, and tied up Yitzchak, HIS SON, and put him onto the altar, above the wood. He put forward his hand and took the knife to slaughter HIS SON. An angel of Hashem called to him from the sky and said, "Avraham, Avraham!" He said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not send your hand against the young man! Do not do anything to him! For now I know that you fear Hashem, since you have not withheld YOUR SON, your ONLY ONE, from me" The angel of Hashem called to Avraham a second time from the sky. He said, "'I swear by Myself,' says Hashem, 'that since you have done this thing, and not saved YOUR SON, your ONLY ONE, I shall bless you and increase your descendants like the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore; your children shall inherit the gates of their enemies. All of the nations of the land shall be blessed through your children, since you have obeyed Me.'"

The Akeida presents several challenges at once:

1) It is immoral to kill. This test is therefore particularly painful for Avraham, so merciful and just a person that he pleaded with Hashem to save the people of Sodom for the sake of the few possible righteous among them, even though most of them ***did*** deserve death.

2) Hashem has made it very clear to Avraham that Yitzhak will succeed him. Hashem does not explain here what has happened to that promise, but it certainly occurs to Avraham, as Hashem means for it to.

3) How can a man kill his own son?

Until now, most of what we have seen in the texts sets up Avraham for the philosophical difficulty of the Akeida: Hashem promises repeatedly that Yitzhak will succeed Avraham, and now He appears to renege. But within the parasha of the Akeida itself, the focus of the difficulty is much different -- it is entirely emotional.

What is the lesson of the Akeida? What was right about what Avraham did, and what should we learn from it? What do we learn from the fact that he was prepared to sacrifice his own son, whom he loved, and whom the story refers to with language emphasizing the relationship between father and son?

What do we learn from the fact that Avraham was prepared to sacrifice Yitzhak without questioning what had happened to

all of the promises he had received? Last week, we saw that Avraham *does* question Hashem's promises of land and children; in response, Hashem reassures him. Why doesn't Avraham question Hashem this time?

Morally, how could Avraham be willing to commit this act? How could the same person who pleaded for justice in the case of Sedom -- despite Hashem's judgment that the city deserved destruction -- intentionally murder his own child? How could Avraham, who understands hesed so well, bring himself to an act of such cruelty?

I believe that the answer to these questions is that Avraham went to the Akeida with his entire being screaming out against it. But he pit his love for Yitzhak against his commitment to Hashem -- and chose Hashem. This was what Hashem wanted him to do.

Avraham didn't have a good answer to how it was moral to kill his innocent son. But once Hashem commanded it, that question became moot. He assumed that there must be a moral perspective from which this act was justified, even if he couldn't understand it. He trusted Hashem's morality more than his own.

Avraham didn't have a good answer to what had happened to the promise that Yitzhak would succeed him. He pit his knowledge of Hashem's promises about Yitzhak against the command to kill him -- and decided it was none of his business what would happen with the promises. Once it was clear to him that Hashem did not want him to protest, that He did not want a debate as He did in the case of Sedom, he accepted the command without further explanation.

But how did Avraham know Hashem didn't want him to protest? Maybe Avraham really failed the test -- perhaps the real test was whether he would blindly commit an immoral act, failing the test by sacrificing his son, or stand his moral ground and pass the test by refusing to murder Yitzhak! (Rabbi Shlomo Riskin has suggested this a number of times.)

In order to understand how Avraham knew not to debate with Hashem about killing his son, we must take a step back to Sedom. How did Avraham know that in that case, he was indeed expected to protest, bargaining for the salvation of the damned cities? Avraham took his cue from the relevance -- or lack thereof -- of Hashem's revelation. Hashem appears to Avraham one day and says, "Guess what, Avraham, I've decided to do away with Sedom." Avraham says to himself, "Why is He telling me this?" and immediately realizes that since there is no particular reason for Hashem to have told him of Sedom's fate Hashem is hinting to him that He wants Avraham to engage Him in debate. He wants Avraham to challenge Him.

In the same way, later on in the Torah, we find that Moshe often challenges Hashem: Hashem, infuriated by some Israelite act of disobedience or outright rebellion, turns to Moshe on several occasions and says, "Stand aside and let Me blast them to smithereens!" This is Moshe's cue to stand directly in the way at all costs and prevent Hashem from destroying the people. Moshe asks himself the same question Avraham asks himself: "Why does He need to tell *me* this?" He concludes that Hashem does not really need him to stand aside in order to pulverize the people; he understands that what Hashem is hinting is that He wants him to intercede, to beg for mercy, to resist the decree.

When Hashem commands Avraham to kill his son, however, Avraham has no choice but to take Hashem's words at face value, since he cannot ask himself, "Why is Hashem telling me this" -- for the answer is obvious: Hashem is telling him to offer his son because He wants Avraham to do it. [This is a very subtle point, so if you'd like to discuss it drop me a line!] If Hashem seems to be telling you something for no reason, or asking you to do something for Him which is transparently unnecessary (like moving out of the way so He can punish Bnei Yisrael, when it's clear He can punish them without your moving at all), you know He's hinting something else. But when He delivers a simple command to be obeyed, like a request for a particular sacrifice, the command must be understood and obeyed as voiced.

The lessons of the Akeida are difficult lessons to learn. Some Jews have a very strong commitment to Hashem, sometimes to the detriment of a strong commitment to other people; they have learned the lessons of the Akeida perhaps a bit too well. But others still need to learn the lessons of the Akeida, lessons of absolute commitment to Hashem. A Jew is not only a moral interpersonal agent, he or she is a being dedicated first to the service of Hashem.

Shabbat shalom

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PARSHAT VAYERA

It is very comfortable to think of Sedom as a city of thugs and pervers. After all, is that not the reason why God decided to destroy it? However, if one takes a closer look at the Torah's presentation of these events, one could reach almost the opposite conclusion - that Sedom was a city with culture, boasting a society not very different from our own.

In the following shiur we'll examine this possibility, as we analyze the contrast between Sedom and Avraham Avinu, while considering the very purpose for why God chose a special nation.

INTRODUCTION

Our series on Sefer Bereishit has been following the theme of 'bechira', i.e. God's choice of Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of His special nation. In last week's shiur, we discussed **why** God chose Avraham Avinu - i.e. to create a nation that will bring the Name of God and His message to all mankind. However, we did not discuss the Torah's plan for **how** this nation can ultimately achieve that goal? In this week's shiur, we attempt to answer this question as we study of the story of God's consultation with Avraham Avinu before He destroys Sedom.

To better appreciate how the Torah presents its message through these events; we begin our shiur by paying attention to the lack of any 'parshia' divisions in this entire narrative.

AN EXTRA LONG 'PARSHIYA'

Using a Tanach Koren, follow the segment from the beginning of Parshat Vayera (18:1) until the conclusion of the story of Sedom at the end of chapter 19. Note how this unit contains **two** unrelated topics:

- 1) The news that Sarah will give birth to Yitzchak;
- 2) The story of God's destruction of Sedom (& Lot's rescue).

Nonetheless, this entire narrative is recorded uninterrupted by any 'parshia' break. By including both of these events in the same 'parshia', the Torah is already alluding to a thematic connection between these two events.

One could suggest that these events are recorded together for the simple reason that the same "mal'achim" [angels or messengers] are involved in both stories. However, this itself raises the same question from a different angle, i.e. why are the same mal'achim who are sent to destroy Sedom - first instructed to inform Avraham about the forthcoming birth of Yitzchak?

[If we adopt Rashi's position (see 18:2) that each angel was assigned only one mission, then we would re-phrase our question: Why must all three travel together, or why doesn't each angel travel directly to fulfill his own mission?]

THE DEEPER 'CONNECTION'

The answer to this question can be found (right where we would expect) at the transition point between these two stories. Simply take a look the Torah's 'parenthetical' comment, inserted as Avraham escorts his guests on their way to Sedom. As you study these psukim, note how they explain why God must first consult Avraham before destroying Sedom:

"And God said: Shall I hide from Avraham what I am about to do? For Avraham is to become a great nation [goy gadol], and through him, all other nations will be blessed [ve-nivrech bo...]

For I have singled him out in order that he will instruct **his children** and his household after him to keep the way of God by doing what is just and right... - in order that I shall bring upon Avraham all that I have spoken about him."

(See Breishit 18:17-19)

Note how God's decision to consult with Avraham re: **Sedom** relates directly to the destiny that he has been charged to pass on to his son - **Yitzchak**. But the thematic connection between these two topics goes much deeper. Let's explain how and why.

Review these three psukim once again, noting their textual and thematic parallels to the first three psukim of Parshat Lech Lecha (see 12:1-3), where the Torah details God's original choice of Avraham Avinu:

"... ve-e'escha le-goy gadol - and I will make you a great nation - and bless you and you will be a blessing [to others] - "ve-nivrech becha kol mishpechot ha-adama / - and through you all the nations will be blessed" (see 12:13).

There can be no doubt that the Torah wishes to link these two passages! Then, note how after explaining (in verse 18) **why** He has chosen Avraham Avinu, God explains **how** this will happen - for Avraham will teach **his children** (and those children their children, etc.) to do **tzedaka u-mishpat**! (see 18:18-19)

In other words, Avraham is expected to initiate a family tradition - that will create a society characterized by acts of tzedaka & mishpat. In this manner, they will truly serve as God's model nation. [See also Devarim 4:5-8 for a very similar explanation. See also Yeshayahu 42:5-6.]

PREVENTING FUTURE CITIES LIKE SDOM

This 'prelude' explains why the Torah records both stories in the same parshia, for the reason why God has promised a son to Avraham was in order to begin a nation that will hopefully one day be able to save societies such as Sedom, for they will serve as a 'model nation' from whom they can learn.

This can explain why the Torah records Avraham's petition that God spare the doomed city. Avraham does not ask that God simply save the tzaddikim in Sedom; he begs instead that the **entire** city be saved - for the sake of those tzaddikim! [See 18:26.] - Why?

Because - hopefully - those tzaddikim may one day influence the people in Sedom towards proper 'teshuva', just as the nation of Avraham is destined to lead all mankind in the direction of God.

This also explains when Avraham's petition ends. After God agrees to save the city for the sake of 50 righteous men, Avraham continues to 'bargain' for the sake of 45, 40, 30, etc. - until he reaches ten (see 18:23-32). He stops at ten, for there is little chance that such a small number would ever be able to exert a serious influence upon an entire community.

[This may relate to the concept of a 'minyan' - a minimum amount of people capable of making God's Name known. Note as well the influence the ten 'spies' have on the entire nation in the incident of the 'meraglim', and how Chazal learn the number ten for a minyan from that incident!]

It is God's hope that, in the future, Avraham's nation would prevent the emergence of 'future Sedoms' - by creating a model society established on acts of tzedaka u-mishpat. As Yitzchak is the son through whom this tradition will be transmitted, it is meaningful that the same angels assigned to destroy Sedom must first 'plant the seeds' for the prevention of future Sedom's.

Avraham makes this gallant effort to save Sedom, as this reflects the very purpose for which he has been chosen. Despite his failure at this time, it will be this tradition that he must pass on to his son Yitzchak, and later to all future generations.

AVRAHAM VS. SDOM

Even though at this point in the narrative, we are not yet aware of the precise sin of Sedom, this 'prelude' certainly suggests that it must relate in some manner to a lack of "tzedek u-mishpat".

Now, we will attempt to determine more precisely what their sin was, and how it represents the antithesis of everything for which Avraham stands.

Chapter 18 is not the first time in Sefer Breishit when Sedom is mentioned. As we explained in our shiur on Parshat Lech

Lecha, Lot's decision to leave Avraham and move to Sedom (13:1-18) reflects his preference not to be dependent on God and to dissociate himself from his uncle. It is in that context that we are told: "The men of Sedom were very wicked to God" (see 13:13).

Furthermore, after rescuing Lot from the 'four kings' (see chapter 14), Avraham refuses to keep any property belonging to Sedom which was recovered in that victory. Although he rightfully deserves his 'fair share' of the spoils from the battle which he himself fought and won, Avraham Avinu, expressing his opposition to anything associated with Sedom, prefers to completely divorce himself from any resources originating from that city:

"Avram said to the King of Sedom: I swear to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth: I will not take so much as a thread or a shoe strap of what is **yours**, so you can not say: It is I who made Avram rich" (14:22-23).

Based on this backdrop, it would be safe to assume that the sin of Sedom must relate in some manner to a lack of "tzedek u-mishpat". Therefore, we must read that ensuing story (in chapter 19) in search of that theme.

A GOOD HOST

Review the first three psukim of chapter 19, noting how the Torah goes out of its way to describe how insistent Lot is to provide these two 'unknown travelers' with a place to stay:

"And the two mal'achim came to Sedom towards evening, and Lot was sitting by the gate of the city, as he saw them he approached them... And he said -

'Please come stay at your servant's house, for lodging and washing up, then you can continue on your way in the morning';

but they declined. But Lot **very much insisted**, so they came to his house; he gave them to drink and baked for them matzot [wafers] to eat." (see 19:1-3).

Clearly, the Torah is emphasizing Lot's very own 'hachnasat orchim' [hospitality] as the opening theme of this narrative.

One could suggest that this same theme continues in the Torah's description of the city's reaction to Lot's harboring of his two guests:

"...They [his two guests] had not lain down yet when the townspeople, the men of Sedom, gathered outside his house - from **young to old** - **all** the people until the edge [of the city]. And they **protested** [outside his house] and shouted: '**Where** are those men who came to visit you this evening? Take them **out** of your house so we can **know** them [ve-nei'da'em]" (see 19:4-5).

Most of us are familiar with Rashi's interpretation, that the gathering consisted of merely a small group of the lowest social and ethical stratum of Sedom, who wanted to 'know them' in the Biblical sense (i.e. sodomy, based on 19:8 and 4:1). However, recall that the Torah only states that the demonstrators wanted to 'know them', which is open to a wide range of interpretation.

NO GUESTS ALLOWED

Ramban (and Rasag) advance a different interpretation, explaining that the **entire** town did indeed join in this protest (as the simple reading of this pasuk implies), for they had all gathered outside Lot's house, demanding to 'know' **who** these guests were.

Why are they protesting? As Ramban explains so beautifully (see his commentary on 19:5), the people of Sedom are protesting against Lot's hospitality to these strangers - as they would call for a mass protest anytime there was a fear that someone in their town was 'harboring' guests!

There appears to have been a strict **law** in Sedom: **No guests allowed!** As Ramban explains, the Sdomites didn't want to ruin their exclusive [suburban] neighborhood. Should Lot accommodate guests this evening, tomorrow night more guests may come, and by the end of the month, the city streets could be flooded with transients and beggars. Should the 'word get out'

that there is 'free lodging' in Sedom, their perfect 'country club' would be ruined.

[One could even find a warped ideology in this type of city policy. For example, one could reason in a similar manner that no one should help the needy, for if everyone agreed not to take care of them, then they would ultimately learn to take care of themselves.]

Hence, should any citizen of Sedom bring home a guest ['chas ve-shalom'], the city's 'steering committee' would immediately call for a public protest. [See also Sanhedrin 109a.]

There may have been mishpat, in Sedom - a standardized system of laws - but it was terribly warped. Not to mention the fact that tzedaka had no place whatsoever in this bastion of amorality.

[Chazal remark in Pirkei Avot that the social norm of 'sheli sheli, shelcha shelcha' - what is mine is mine, what is yours is yours - is a 'custom of Sedom'. The attribution of this social philosophy to Sedom reflects this same understanding (see Pirkei Avot 5:10 - 'arba midot ba-adam...').]

TZEDEK U-MISHPAT VS. SDOM

This interpretation explains why, throughout Nevi'im Acharonim, Sedom is associated with the absence of tzedek u-mishpat. In fact, the three most famous of the Nevi'im Acharonim - Yeshayahu, Yirmiyahu, and Yechezkel - all of whom foresee and forewarn the destruction of the first bet ha-mikdash, compare the corrupt society in Israel to that of Sedom, and see therein the reason for their own forthcoming destruction.

As we will show, in every instance where Sedom is mentioned by the prophets, it is always in reference to a society lacking social justice, and **never** in reference to illicit behavior such as sodomy.

Let's start with a quote from Yechezkel in which he states explicitly that this was indeed the sin of Sedom (i.e. the very same point discussed above concerning "hachnasat orchim"):

"...Your younger sister was Sedom... Did you not walk in her ways and practice her abominations? Why, you are more corrupt than they in all your ways... **This was the sin of your sister Sedom** - she had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquillity, yet she did not support the **poor** and the **needy**. In her haughtiness, they sinned before Me, so I **removed** them, as you saw..." (see Yechezkel 16:46-50).

In Yeshayahu, the connection between the lack of tzedek u-mishpat and Sedom is even more explicit. As we all recall from the Haftara of Shabbat Chazon, Yeshayahu compares Am Yisrael's behavior to that of Sedom & Amora:

"Listen to the word of God - you [who are like] officers of **Sedom**, pay attention to the teachings of our God - you [who are like] the people of **Amora**. Why should I accept your many offerings... Instead, learn to do good, devote yourself to justice, aid the wronged, uphold the rights of the orphan, defend the cause of the widow... How has the faithful city, once filled with **mishpat tzedek**, now become a city of murderers..." (Isaiah 1:10-21, see also 1:3-9!)

Recall also how Yeshayahu concludes this nevu'a:

"Tzion be-**mishpat** tipadeh, ve-shaveha bi-**tzedaka** - Zion will be redeemed by our doing "**mishpat**"; her repentance - through our performance of **tzedaka**.

In chapter five - Yeshayahu's famous 'mashal ha-kerem' [the parable of the vineyard] - the prophet reiterates God's initial hope and plan that Am Yisrael would perform tzedaka u-mishpat, and the punishment they deserve for doing exactly the opposite:

"va-yikav le-**mishpat** - ve-hiney mispach"

[God had hoped to find justice, and found instead injustice],

"li-**tzedaka** - ve-hiney tze'aka." (Yeshayahu 5:7)

[to find "tzedaka," and instead found iniquity]

[note amazing parallel with Breishit 18:19-21!]

(See Isaiah 5:1-10, as well as 11:1-6.)

Perhaps the strongest expression of this theme is found in Yirmiyahu. In his powerful charge to the House of David [whose lineage stems not only from Yehuda but also (& not by chance) from Ruth the Moabite, a descendant of Lot!], Yirmiyahu articulates God's precise expectation of the Jewish king:

"Hear the word of God, King of Judah, you who sit on the throne of David... Do **mishpat u-tzedaka**... do not wrong a stranger, an orphan, and the widow.." (Yirmiyahu 22:1-5).

[See also 21:11-12.]

Later, when Yirmiyahu contrasts the corrupt king Yehoyakim with his righteous father Yoshiyahu, he admonishes:

"... Your father (Yoshiyahu)... performed **tzedaka u-mishpat**, and that made him content. He upheld the rights of the poor and needy - is this not what it means to **know** Me [la-da'at ot], God has said! But you (Yehoyakim) - on your mind is only your ill-gotten gains..." (see 22:13-17)

Note that Yirmiyahu considers doing tzedaka & mishpat as the means by which we come to 'know God' ['la-da'at et Hashem' - (compare with Breishit 18:19, see also Yirmiyahu 9:23)!]

Finally, when Yirmiyahu speaks of the ideal king who will bring the redemption, he emphasizes this very same theme:

"A time is coming - Hashem declares - when I will raise up a **true** branch of David's line. He shall reign as king and prosper, and he will perform **mishpat** and **tzedaka** in the land. In his days, Yehuda shall be delivered and Israel shall dwell secure..." (23:5-6). [See also Zecharya 7:9; 8:8, 16-17, II Shmuel 8:15!]

This reason for the choice of the Kingdom of David corresponds with the underlying purpose behind God's choosing of Avraham Avinu. As we have explained numerous times, God's designation of Avraham came not in **reward** for his exemplary behavior, but rather **for a specific purpose**: to establish a model nation - characterized by tzedek u-mishpat - that will bring all mankind closer to God. For this very same reason, God chooses a royal family to rule this nation - the House of David. They too are chosen **in order** to teach the nation the ways of tzedaka u-mishpat.

But even without proper leadership, this charge remains our eternal goal, the responsibility of every individual. To prove this point, and to summarize this theme, we need only quote one last pasuk from Yirmiyahu (not by chance, the concluding pasuk of the Haftara for Tisha Be-av):

"Thus says the Lord:

Let not the **chacham** [wise man] glory in his wisdom;

Let not the **gibor** [strong man] glory in his strength;

Let not the **ashir** [rich man] glory in his riches.

- But only in this should one glory:

Let him be wise to **know** Me [haskel v-yado'a ot] -For I the Lord act in the land with **chesed** [kindness], **mishpat**, and **tzedaka** - for it is this that I desire, says the Lord."

(see Yirmiyahu 9:22-23).

[See also the Rambam's concluding remarks to the last chapter of Moreh Nevuchim!]

Once again we find that **knowing** God means emulating His ways, acting in accordance with the values of **tzedek u-mishpat**. Should the entire nation act in this manner, our goal can be accomplished.

Thus, what appears at first to be simply a parenthetical statement by God (concerning Avraham) before destroying Sedom (in Breishit 18:19) unfolds as a primary theme throughout Tanach!

LA-DA'AT - THE KEY WORD

It is not by chance that Yirmiyahu (in the above examples) uses the Hebrew word 'la-da'at' in the context of following a lifestyle of tzedek u-mishpat. As we have already seen, the shores 'daled.ayin.heh' has been a key word throughout the narrative concerning Sedom. First and foremost in a positive context: "ki yeda'tiv lema'an asher... la'asot tzedaka u-mishpat..."

(18:19), but also in a negative context: 've-im lo eida'a' (see 18:21!).

However, this same word also surfaces in a rather ambiguous manner later on in the story. As noted briefly earlier, Rashi and Ramban dispute the meaning of 've-neida otam' (see 19:5 - when the protesters demand that Lot surrender his guests). From this pasuk alone, it is not at all clear what this phrase implies.

Rashi explains that the men of Sedom wanted to 'know them' in the Biblical sense (to 'sleep' with them 'mishkav zachar' - see 4:1 & Chizkuni on 19:5). Ramban contends that they wanted to 'know' their identity in order to 'kick them out of town,' in accordance with their city ordinance prohibiting visitors.

Clearly, Ramban takes into consideration the psukim from Yechezkel (which he cites explicitly, and most probably also took into account Yeshayahu chapter 1) that clearly identify Sdom's [primary] sin as their unwillingness to help the poor and needy. In light of the direct contrast drawn between Avraham's devotion to **tzedek u-mishpat** and the character of Sedom (as in 18:17-19), we can readily understand why Ramban sought to interpret 've-neida otam' as relation to 'kicking out' unwanted guests.

Rashi (and many other commentators) argue that ve-neida otam implies mishkav zachar (sodomy - and hence its name!). This opinion is based primarily on Lot's reaction to the protestors' request of offering his two daughters instead of his guests, and his comment, 'asher lo **yad'u** ish' (see 19:8 / note again the use of the same 'shores').

Had it not been for the psukim in Yechezkel 16:48-50, and the prelude in Breishit 18:19, then Rashi's explanation seems to be the most logical. However, when we examine the story a little more carefully, the story itself can support Ramban's approach as well.

The most obvious problem with Rashi's explanation (that the protestors are interested in sodomy) stems from their sheer number. From 19:4 it appears that the group that gathers outside Lot's house includes the entire city, most likely hundreds of individuals, young and old! If they are simply interested in sodomy, pardon the expression, how could two guests 'suffice'?

[Rashi, in light of this problem, offers a somewhat novel explanation for 19:4, that only the 'thugs of Sedom' ('anshei Sedom' implying a specific group and not the entire city) banged on Lot's door. The Torah mentions the rest of the population - 'from young to old' - only in regard to the fact that they did not protest the gang's depraved behavior. Rasag (on 19:4) disagrees, proving from 19:11 that both young and old had gathered outside Lot's house.]

Ramban combines both explanations, criticizing Lot's own character for foolishly offering his two daughters in exchange for the protection of his guests. However, this explanation of 19:8 is also quite difficult, for how (and why) should this offer appease this mass crowd who claim (according to Ramban) to be interested only in expelling unwanted guests!

One could suggest an explanation for Lot's remarks that solves all of the above questions, leaving Lot's character untainted, while keeping the focus of these events entirely on the lack of tzedek u-mishpat in Sedom.

GIVING MUSSAR

Lot's statement must be understood in light of the crowd's reaction. Note how the crowd responds to Lot's 'offer':

"And they said to him: **Go away** [gesh hal'ah - move a far distance, you have just (recently) come to dwell (in our city) and now **you judge us!** Now we will deal with you worse than with them..." (see 19:9).

What did Lot say that prompted such a severe reaction? If he simply had offered his daughters, why couldn't they just say: No, we prefer the men? Instead, they threaten to be more evil with Lot than with his guests. Does this mean that they want to 'sleep' with Lot as well?

One could suggest that when Lot pleads: "My brothers, don't do such evil [to my guests], here are my two daughters..." (see 19:6); he is not seriously offering his daughters at all. Rather, he makes mention of them as part of a vehement condemnation of the people. In a sarcastic manner, Lot is telling the crowd that he'd rather give over his daughters than his guests! He has no intention whatsoever of giving them over to a mass mob.

[Note how Reuven's statement to Yaakov that he would kill his own two sons... etc. (see Breishit 42:37) could be understood in a similar manner; i.e. not that he would do that, but to emphasize his seriousness to his father.]

Furthermore, as we mentioned above, how could two women 'appease' such a large crowd! Instead, it would make more sense to explain that Lot is making this harsh statement as a form of rebuke, emphasizing how important it is that they allow him to keep guests. It's as if he said, "I'd **sooner** give you my daughters than my two guests."

[Note as well that Lot does not bring his daughters with him when he makes this so-called 'offer.' In fact, he actually closes the door behind him (see 19:6) afterward, he leaves to negotiate with the rioters. Had Lot really wanted to 'appease' them with his daughters, he should have taken them outside with him! Also, from the conclusion of the story, it seems that his two daughters were married (but their husbands didn't come along)]- v'akmal.]

This explains why the crowd becomes so angered by Lot's remarks. They are taken aback by his harsh rebuke of their 'no guest' policy.

Based on this interpretation [that Lot is 'giving them **mussar**' and not 'making a deal'], we can better understand the mob's response to Lot's offer (19:6-8). They neither accept nor reject Lot's proposal. Instead, they express their anger with Lot's rebuke:

"One has just come to live by us - va-yishpot shafot - and now he is **judging us**; now we will deal more harshly with **you** than [we planned to deal] with **them**!" (see 19:8).

[In other words: they seem to be saying: 'HEY, you're just a newcomer here in our town, and you already think you can tell us what to do! No way - we're gonna kick you out of town now, together with your lousy guests!']

[This would also explain what they mean by - "Now we will do more evil to you than to them" (see 19:9). In other words, before we only wanted to expel you guests from town, now we are going to expel you and your family as well!]

What do people mean by "you are **judging us**"? Apparently, there is something in Lot's response that suggests a type of character judgment - but is it only his request that they 'not be so mean' (see 19:7)?

One could suggest that they consider Lot's sarcastic offer of his daughters instead of his guests as a moral judgment of their 'no-guest' policy; a reprehension of their unethical social system. If so, then this is exactly to what 'va-yishpot shafot' refers to. They are angered for Lot has 'judged' their character. No one likes being told what to do, especially by 'newcomers'; hence their angry and threatening reaction to Lot's remarks.

This interpretation of 'shafot' in relation to rebuke is found many other times in Tanach. See for example I Shmuel 7:6, where Shmuel (at Mitzpa) rebukes the entire nation for their behavior. We find a similar use of the verb 'lishpot' in I Shmuel 12:7, when Shmuel rebukes the nation for not appreciating God's salvation when asking for a king to lead them instead! [See also Yirmiyahu 1:16, and its context.]

If this interpretation is correct, then it may be that Sedom's sin involved **only** social justice (as Yechezkel 16:48-49 implies), and had nothing to do with 'sodomy' at all! And for this reason alone, God found it necessary to destroy that city.

Difficult as it may be to understand, this conclusion should be seriously considered as we set our own values and determine our lifestyle and community priorities.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

1. See Rambam in Sefer Zra'im, Hilchot Matnot Aniyim, chapter 10, the first halacha. Note how he explains that the mitzva of tzedaka requires the highest priority, and he supports his statement from Breishit 18:18-19, as we discussed in our shiur.

2. In Parshat Ki Tetzeh (see Devarim 23:4-5), the Torah forbids the marriage of a Jew with a 'mo'avi ve-amoni' [Moabite or Ammonite], the descendants of Lot. But note the reason, "for they did not greet you with bread and water when you were traveling through the desert..."

Once again we see the theme of hachnasat orchim in relation to Sedom and Lot.

Note as well how Ruth the Moabite does return one strain of Lot back into Am Yisrael, which will later lead to David ha-Melech. However, in that story, Ruth's entry is replete with incidents relating to acts of tzedaka.

PARSHAT VA'YERA - the AKEYDA

In Part Two of this week's shiur, we present a six short 'mini-shiurim' that discuss the Akeyda and misc. topics in the Parasha.

PART I - A CONFLICT BETWEEN IDEALS

In the story of the Akeyda (Breishit chapter 22), we find a conflict between two ideals. From the perspective of 'natural morality', there is probably nothing more detestable to man's natural instinct that killing his own son, even more so his only son. On the other hand, from the perspective of man's relationship with God, there is nothing more compelling than the diligent fulfillment of a divine command.

In an ideal world, these two ideals should never conflict, for how could God command man to perform an act that is immoral? However, in the real world, individuals often face situations where they are torn between his 'conscience' and his 'religion'. How should one act in such situations?

One could suggest a resolution of this dilemma based on the special manner by which the Torah tells the story of the Akeyda (chapter 22). On the one hand, God ["b'shem Elokim"] commands Avraham to offer his only son Yitzchak. Avraham, a devout servant of God, diligently follows God's command, even though this must have been one of the most difficult moments of his life. In this manner, God tests Avraham's faith (see 22:1). However, it is impossible that God could truly make such a demand. Therefore, at the last minute, He sends a "malach" [b'shem Havaya/ see 22:11] to stop him.

Was Avraham correct in his behavior? Should he have not questioned God's command, just as he had questioned God's decision to destroy Sedom?

There is no easy answer to this question. In fact, hundreds of articles and commentaries have been written that deal with this question, and even though they are all based on the same narrative, many of them reach very different conclusion - and for a very simple reason! The story of the Akeyda does not provide us with enough details to arrive at a concrete conclusion.

One could suggest that this Biblical ambiguity may be deliberate, for the Torah's intention may be that we do not resolve this conflict, rather we must ponder it. In fact, it is rather amazing how one very short but dramatic narrative (about ten psukim) has sparked hundreds of philosophical debates over centuries. [This is the beauty of the Bible.]

In other words, it is important that we are internally torn by this conflict, and make every effort to resolve it, while recognizing that ultimately a divine command could not be immoral.

This conflict becomes more acute when we face a situation when is not so clear precisely what God's command is, and when it is not so clear what is considered moral or immoral. When

those situations arise, not only must we ponder, we must also pray that God send a "malach" to help guide us in the proper direction.

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PART TWO - YIRAT ELOKIM & 'NATURAL MORALITY'

Undoubtedly, the climax of the Akeyda takes place in 22:12, when God's angel tells Avraham not to harm his child.

However, this pasuk includes a very interesting phrase - "ki ya'rey Elokim ata...", which may relate directly to our above discussion. To explain how, let's first take a careful look at that pasuk:

"And he [God's angel] said: Do not harm the boy - don't do anything to him, for now I know - Ki ya'rey Elokim ata - 'that' you fear Elokim, and you have not withheld your only son from Me"

[See 22:12 / Note in the various English translations and commentaries the unclarity whether this "malach" is talking on behalf of himself or if it's a direct comment from God.]

According to the 'simplest' understanding of this pasuk, the word "ki" should be translated 'that'. In other words, Avraham's readiness to sacrifice his own son [the final clause of this pasuk] proved to God that Avraham was indeed a "ya'rey Elokim" [the middle clause]. The use of God's Name - Elokim - also appears to make sense, for it was "shem Elokim" in 22:1 that first commanded Avraham to offer his son.

However, there is a small problem with this interpretation. First of all, this suggests that before the Akeyda, God had doubted if Avraham was a "ya'rey Elokim"; yet there doesn't seem to be any reason for this doubt. [Unless one explains that this test was due to God's anger to the covenant that Avraham had just made with Avimelech, see this amazing ('right wing') Rashbam on 22:1!]

Furthermore, this phrase "yirat Elokim" is found several other times in Chumash, but with a very different meaning. The best example is found in Parshat Va'yera itself, in the story when Avimelech takes Avraham's wife Sarah (see 20:1-18). Recall the reason that Avraham tells Avimelech, explaining why he had to lie about Sarah's true identity, and note the phrase "yirat Elokim":

"And Avraham said: for I had assumed that there was no YIRAT ELOKIM in this place, and they would kill me in order to take my wife" (see 20:11)

Obviously, Avraham did not expect that Avimelech and his people were 'Jewish', i.e. God had never spoken to them, nor had He given them any commandments. Clearly, when Avraham mentions YIRAT ELOKIM, he must be referring to the basic 'moral behavior' expected of any just society. As can be proven from the story of the Flood, this 'natural morality' (i.e. not to kill or steal etc. /see the last five of the Ten Commandments!) does not require a divine command. Rather it is God's expectation from mankind.

[Why nonetheless God decided to include them in the Ten Commandments is a very interesting topic, but not for now. However, I do suggest that you note the conclusion of Rashbam's interpretation to Breishit 26:5 in this regard.]

Another example is found in the story of Yosef and his brothers; when Yosef, pretending to be an Egyptian, explains to his brothers why he will not leave them all in jail. After first jailing them, he changes his mind after three days, allowing them to go home to bring back their brother so that they can prove their innocence. Note how Yosef introduces this 'change of mind' by saying: "et ha'Elokim ani ya'rey" (see 42:18 and its context!).

But Yosef says this to his brothers pretending to be an Egyptian! Surely he wouldn't 'blow his cover' by hinting to the fact that he is Jewish. Clearly, here as well, the phrase "yirat Elokim" relates to a concept of 'natural morality'. Yosef, acting as an important Egyptian official, wants to impress upon his brothers that he is acting in a just manner.

The following other examples also include this phrase, and each one also relates to some standard of 'moral' behavior:

Shmot 1:21 - re: the midwives killing the male babies
Shmot 18:21 - re: Yitro's advice re: the appt. of judges
Devarim 25:18 - re: the sin of the Amalek.]
[Please review these before continuing.]

Based on these examples, it seems that the phrase "yirat Elokim" in Chumash refers exclusively to some type of 'moral' behavior. If so, then we would expect it to carry a similar meaning in the pasuk that we are discussing (i.e. Breishit 22:12, the key pasuk of the Akeyda).

However, it would be difficult to explain our pasuk at the Akeyda in this manner, for Avraham did what appears to be exactly the opposite, i.e. he followed a divine command that contradicts 'natural morality' (see discussion in Part One, above).

Why would the fact that Avraham is willing to sacrifice his son make him a "ya'rey Elokim" - in the Biblical sense of this phrase?

The simplest answer would be to say that this instance is an exception, because the Akeyda began with a direct command, given by Elokim, that Avraham take his son (see 22:1).

However, one could suggest a rather daring interpretation that would be consistent with the meaning of "yirat Elokim" elsewhere in Sefer Breishit. To do so, we must reconsider our translation of the Hebrew word "ki" in 22:12, i.e. in "ata yadati, Ki yarey Elokim ata, v'lo cha'sachta et bincha et yechidecha mi'meni".

Instead of translating "ki" as 'that', one could use an alternate meaning of "ki" = 'even though'! [As in Shmot 34:9 - "ki am keshe oref hu", and Shmot 13:17 "ki karov hu" - see Ibn Ezra on that pasuk for other examples.]

If so, then this pasuk would be emphasizing precisely the point that we discussed in Part One, i.e. - EVEN THOUGH Avraham was a "ya'rey Elokim", he overcame his 'moral conscience' in order to follow a divine command. Thus, we could translate the pasuk as follows:

"And he [God's angel] said: Do not harm the boy - don't do anything to him, for now I know - Ki ya'rey Elokim ata - EVEN THOUGH you are a YAREY ELOKIM, you did not withhold your only son from Me."

Specifically because Avraham was a man of such a high moral nature, this test was most difficult for him. Nevertheless, his commitment to follow a divine command prevailed!

In reward, God now promises Avraham with an 'oath' (see 22:16) that he shall never break His covenant with them (even should Bnei Yisrael sin), as explained by Ramban and Radak on 22:16, and as we will now discuss in Part Three.

PART THREE - THE OATH

At the conclusion of the Akeyda, God affirms His promise to Avraham Avinu one more time concerning the future of his offspring (see 22:15-19). Note however, that the when God first explains why He is making this oath in 22:16, He explains specifically because "lo chasachta et bincha" - that Avraham did not hold back his son - and NOT because he was a "yarey Elokim". This provides additional support to our discussion in Part Two (above).

In this oath (see 22:16-19), we find the repetition of themes from Brit Bein ha'tarim such as "kochvei ha'shayamim" and "yerusha", as well as a repetition of God's original blessing to Avraham from the beginning of Lech L'cha.

It is interesting to note that this blessing relates (as does "brit bein ha'tarim") to our relationship with God as a Nation, and our future conquest of the land of Israel ("v'yirash zaracha et shaar oyvav" - your offspring will conquer the gates of its enemies/ see 22:17). It is specifically in this context that Bnei Yisrael will later face this moral conflict as discussed in Part I.

However, the most special aspect of this blessing is the "shvuah" - the oath that God makes that He will indeed fulfill this promise. See Ramban & Radak on 22:16, noting their explanation how this oath takes God's commitment to His covenant one step higher. Now, no matter how unfaithful Bnei Yisrael may be in the future, even though God will have the right to punish them, He will

never break His covenant with them and they will always remain His special nation.

With this in mind, it is interesting to note that the story in Chumash that precedes the Akeyda also relates to a covenant and an oath (see 21:22-34). Recall how Avimelech approaches Avraham to enter into a covenant, while Avraham insists that Avimelech must remain honest in relation to the wells that his servants had stolen.

At the conclusion of that agreement, as Avraham now gains the respect of the local sovereign power, we find once again how Avraham 'call out in God's Name'. Foreshadowing the time period of David and Shlomo, Avraham is now in a position where he can successfully represent God before the other nations of the world.

That setting provides a significant backdrop for Avraham Avinu's ultimate test at the Akeyda.

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MISC TOPICS -

[Relating once again to Sdom vs. Avraham Avinu]

PART FOUR - YEDA & YI'UD

In the shiur we sent out yesterday, we discussed the importance of 18:18-19, showing how God's goal for the nation of Avraham would come true through the establishment of a society characterized by "tzedaka u'mishpat".

Recall how that pasuk began with "ki y'DAATIV", which implies to KNOW, but the key word carried a deeper meaning throughout the entire narrative of Lot being saved from Sdom. [Note also the use of the word "rah" (and "tov") as well as "I'daat" in 19:7-9. This may (and should) point to a thematic connection between the events in Sdom and the story of Adam in Gan Eden where we find the "etz ha'DAAT TOV v'RAH. Note also how God is described by "shem Ha'vayah" in both stories.]

In relation to the translation of the pasuk itself - "Ki YeDA'ATIV lema'an asher yetzaveh et banav... ve-shamru derekh Hashem la'assot TZEDAKA u-MISHPAT....." (18:19), in our shiur we translated "yeda'ativ" as "I have singled him out." The term literally translates as, "I have 'known him.' This meaning, however, seems out of place in this context. If it simply means that God 'knows' that Bnei Yisrael will do "tzedek u-mishpat," how does Hashem 'know' this? What guarantee is there that Avraham's children will keep this mitzvah more than anyone else? Is there no bechira chofshit - freedom of choice to do good or bad?

(Further troubling is the usage of the construction "yeda'ativ," rather than the expected, "yeda'ati" - see mefarshim al atar.) In answer to this question, Rav Yoel bin Nun explained in a shiur several years ago that the word "yeda'ativ" should be understood not as 'yeda' - to know - but rather as "ye'ud" (switching the last two letters as in keves-kesev; salma-simla). Ye'ud (a similar shresh) means designation, being singled out for a specific purpose, a raison d'etre, a destiny. Thus, "yeda'ativ" here should be read not as, "God knows..." but rather, "God set them aside for the purpose..." (that they keep tzedaka and mishpat)." The point is not that God KNOWS that bnei Avraham will do tzedaka & mishpat, but that God chose Avraham in ORDER that his children will do tzedaka & mishpat!

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PART FIVE - TOLDOT TERACH

Parshat Va'yera informs us not only of the birth of Yitzchak, but also of several other grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Terach, such as the twelve children of Nachor, and the two children/grandchildren of Lot. [See 19:30-38, 22:20-24.]

These stories form an integral part of Sefer Breishit for technically speaking, Parshat Va'yera is still under the title of TOLDOT TERACH (see 11:27 with TOLDOT SHEM (see 11:10 and our shiur on Parshat Noach).

[It is interesting to note when considering 11:26-32 that we find a 'header' - "aylele toldot Terach," but we never find the expression: "aylele toldot Avraham" throughout Sefer Breishit, even though we do find "aylele toldot Yitzchak (25:19), and "aylele toldot Yaakov" (37:2). This may relate to Avram's name change, so there can't be TOLDOT AVRAM when he is

first introduced, since AVRAM as AVRAM never has children from Sarah! This may also explain the need for the additional phrase "Avraham holid et Yitzchak" in 25:19!]

Furthermore, many (female) descendants of Terach later 'weave' their way back into the family of Avraham Avinu, such as Rivka, Nachor's granddaughter, and her brother Lavan's daughters Rachel & Leah. [See also part five below in regard to Ruth from Moab.]

[Recall that Terach was the first 'zionist', i.e. it was his idea to attempt aliyah to eretz Canaan (even though he never made it). It may have been in that zchut!]

[Note also the number (and type) of wives and children born to Nachor (in 22:20-24)! Which of the Avot does this bring to mind? [8 + 4]]

Who else in Sefer Breishit has twelve children [8 + 4] ?

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PART SIX / 'MITZAR' - A sad but fitting ending

As Lot escapes from Sdom, a somewhat peculiar conversation ensues between him and the angel concerning the city of TZOAR. What is it all about?

For those of you who don't remember, here's a quick recap:

After taking Lot out of Sdom, the "malachim" instruct Lot to run away 'up to the mountain' ["he'hara hi'malet" /see 19:17]. Lot defers, claiming that 'up in the mountain' poses potential danger. He requests that instead the angels spare one city, which will serve as a "MITZAR," a small place of refuge. The Torah then informs us that this is why the city is named TZOAR (see 19:17-22).

Why do we need to hear about all this?

To appreciate this story, we must return to the first reference to Sedom in Chumash. When Avraham and Lot decide that the time had come to part ways, Lot decides to move to the KIKAR HA'YARDEN (the region of Sdom), rather than the mountain range of Canaan, where Avraham resided.

Recall from our shiur on Parshat Lech L'cha that Lot's choice reflected his preference of the 'good-life' in KIKAR HA'YARDEN (where the abundant water supply alleviated the need to rely upon God's provision of water) over Avraham's lifestyle in the MOUNTAINS (where one depends upon rainfall for his water supply).

Let's take a closer look at the key pasuk of that narrative. [I recommend you read this pasuk in the original Hebrew to note its key phrases. Pay particular attention to the word "kol"]:

"And Lot lifted his eyes, and he saw KOL KIKAR

HA'YARDEN - the ENTIRE Jordan River Valley - that it was FULL of water... like God's Garden, like the land of Egypt, UP UNTIL TZOAR." (13:10)

The final phrase of this pasuk - BO'ACHA TZOAR - appears superfluous. Why must we know the exact spot where the KIKAR ends?

When we consider the origin of the city's name - TZOAR - from the story of Lot's flight from Sdom, this short phrase takes on a whole new meaning. The Torah appears to be taking a cynical 'jibe' at Lot. He wanted EVERYTHING - "et KOL Kikar Ha'Yarden" [see also 13:11: "And Lot chose for himself KOL KIKAR HA'YARDEN..."], and thus chose to settle in Sdom. But when it's all over, Lot finds himself begging the "malachim" for a small hideaway - a MITZAR (the city to be named TZOAR). Lot wants EVERYTHING - KOL Kikar ha'Yarden - and ends up with 'next to nothing' - BO'ACHA TZOAR! [Thanks to Danny Berlin - ish Kamei Tzur - for this insight.]

With this background we can better understand Lot's conversation with the "malachim" when he flees from Sdom. Note their original instruction to Lot:

"And it came to pass when they had brought them out [of Sdom], they told him: Escape for your life, do not look behind you, do not stay behind B'KOL HA'KIKAR. Rather, run away to the MOUNTAIN, lest you be consumed." (19:17)

Once again, the Torah establishes a direct CONTRAST

between KIKAR HA'YARDEN and the MOUNTAIN. Lot is commanded to return to the MOUNTAIN - to the area of Avraham, from where he never have left in the first place. Lot, however, refuses to return. He knows that if he returns to the mountain, he will not be able to 'survive' living in the shadow of Avraham Avinu. He will no longer be the righteous among the wicked, but rather the wicked among the righteous. He therefore begs them for a refuge:

"And Lot begged them - please no. Behold if I have found favor in your eyes...I cannot run away to the MOUNTAIN, lest some evil will take me and I die. [Rather,] there is a city nearby [at the edge of Kikar ha'Yarden] and it is MITZAR - a little one. Let me escape there and my SOUL will live...[They concede to Lot's request,] and that city was therefore named TZOAR. Then the sun rose over the land and Lot arrived in TZOAR..." (see 19:18-24)

Finally, after Sdom and the other cities of the KIKAR are destroyed, Lot changes his mind. He decides to leave TZOAR and settle with his daughters in the MOUNTAINS (see 19:25-30). However, instead of reuniting with Avraham, they HIDE AWAY in a CAVE. The rest is history - i.e. the history of AMON & MOAV, whose descendants have not even the common decency to offer bread & water to Am Yisrael (their kinsman) as they pass Moav on their way from Egypt to Eretz Canaan (see Devarim 23:4-5). It's no coincidence that they never learn the lesson of "hachnasat orchim" - welcoming guests. Sdom was destroyed, but unfortunately, its 'legacy' continued.

One spark of good does, however, come forth from Moav. Ruth the Moabite joins the tribe of Judah - through an act of "chessed" (see Megillat Rut) - and she becomes the great-grandmother of David ben Yishai, the king of Israel. Predictably, Sefer Shmuel summarizes his reign as follows:

"And David reigned over all of Israel, and David performed MISHPAT and TZEDAKA for his entire nation."

(see Shmuel 8:15)

[Recall that David had earlier hidden out in a CAVE in the area of the Dead Sea (Ein Gedi), where he performed an act of "chessed" by not injuring Shaul - see I Shmuel 24:1-15; note especially 24:12-15! See also Yirmiyahu 22:1-5!]

Malchut David constitutes the "tikun" for the descendants of Lot: his kingdom was characterized by the performance of TZEDAKA & MISHPAT - the antithesis of Sdom.

shabbat shalom
menachem

Parshas Vayera: Avraham's Negotiation

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. WILL NOT THE JUDGE OF THE EARTH ACT JUSTLY?

Our Parashah includes one of the most famous negotiations in history. In Chapter 18, beginning with verse 23, we find Avraham pleading before - and demanding of - God, who is the judge of all the earth, to act justly. What is this just action? Not to destroy the wicked with the righteous. Avraham then proposes that if there are fifty righteous people in the wicked cities of S'dom, God should spare the entire area on their behalf. When God accedes to this demand, Avraham raises the stakes - if there are forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty - even ten righteous people to be found, God should not destroy the cities. Rather, He should bear the [sins of] the place on behalf of the righteous.

I would like to address two questions raised by Avraham's negotiating style:

Why is the only just action for God to take - from Avraham's perspective - to spare the cities? Why not send the righteous out - and then destroy? We find this Heavenly approach used in the case of Noach - why not ask for it here? On the other hand, if the presence of the righteous causes the injustice of destroying the city - sweeping away the good with the bad - then why did Avraham stop at ten? Isn't the presence of even one righteous person enough to justify staying the punishment? Wouldn't it be equally unjust to destroy a town of wicked people among whom one righteous man lived? Isn't the punishment of innocents, by virtue of their association and proximity to the guilty, unfit and unseemly for the Judge of all the earth? In short - Avraham's tactic is difficult from both sides - if the presence of innocent, righteous people should render punishment unjust - why stop at ten? And if there is a way to save the righteous while meting out punishment to the wicked (e.g. by sending the righteous away in advance) - why not achieve justice in that manner?

II. BIRKAT AVRAHAM - BY WHAT MERIT?

In order to address these questions, we need to explore a more fundamental question relating to Avraham and the great blessings bestowed upon him by the Almighty.

When we first meet Avraham, God commands him:

Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and I will curse the one who curses you and through you all families of the earth will be blessed (B'resheet 12:1-3).

Avraham is promised these great blessings - and we have absolutely no idea why! Granted, the Midrashim describe mighty battles, debates and challenges - along with philosophical greatness - by which Avraham distinguished himself in Ur of the Chaldeans before the "call"; but why is the text silent on this matter?

This is not the style of the Torah; Before God commanded him to build the ark, we are told that:

Noach found favor in God's eyes...Noach was a righteous, wholehearted man in his generations; Noach walked with God. (B'resheet 6:8-9).

Why, then, does Avraham's "call" come like a bolt from the blue, with neither rhyme nor reason to explain this great blessing?

III. CHAPTERS 1-11: AVRAHAM'S BACKGROUND

Much has been written (including in this forum) as to the implications of the first chapters of B'resheet - and the purpose of the entire Sefer (see Rashi and Ramban in their opening comments on the Torah). There is, along with all of the other fine (and not-so-fine) answers, one that will help us answer our questions:

Given that the Patriarchal narratives are essential in order to understand our national history, claim on the Land etc., the first eleven chapters (including Creation, the Garden, the exile, the Flood and the Dispersion at the Tower) comprise a necessary backdrop against which to view the behavior and activities of the Patriarchs. While this may sound like an attractive approach, some explanation is necessary.

A BRIEF RECAP...

When God created mankind, He called him "Adam" - since he was from the Adamah (earth - note the last phrase in B'resheet 2:5). Indeed, man was so much "of the earth" that his failures caused the earth to be cursed (3:17). This tie was further severed when his son committed the first murder. Not only was he "cursed from the ground that opened its mouth to receive the blood of your brother", but he was uprooted and made to wander (4:11-12).

When humanity continued to descend into a storm of moral depravity and violence, God decided to wipe them out (6:7) - and to begin the process anew with Noach (note the similarities between the charge given to Noach upon his exit from the Ark in Chapter 9 and those given to Adam in Chapter 1).

Just as the name Adam connotes a symbiotic relationship with the earth, implying a static harmony with nature, similarly the name Noach implies a type of respite and calm amid the storm of corruption around him. The Torah provides this explanation for his name, crediting his father, Lemekh, with this prayer/prophecy (6:29). Noach was to be at rest (a close literal translation of his name) and, indeed, that is how he behaved. While the storm of corruption - and, later, the storm of Divine justice - swirled around him, he was calm and at rest. From the Divine perspective, there was every reason to utilize this method of "starting over"; since not only every corrupted being was wiped off the face of the earth, but even the memories of their sinful behavior were eradicated. There was every possibility for a "fresh start". The worldview behind this perspective is that if man is created with goodness, then, if he remains "at rest" (status quo), he will continue to be good and upright.

This approach, as we know, did not succeed. Almost immediately after coming out of the Ark, descended into becoming a man of the earth (9:20; the intent is clearly pejorative - see B'resheet Rabbah ad loc.) After his drunken interaction with Ham (or K'na'an) and the subsequent curse, his progeny continued to behave in an unworthy manner - culminating with the scene at the Tower of Shin'ar.

IV. THE TOWER AT SHIN'AR: THE BACKDROP AGAINST WHICH TO VIEW AVRAHAM

At the beginning of Ch. 11, we meet the builders of the great tower at Shin'ar. We know that their behavior was considered sinful - for why else would God disrupt it?; but what was their terrible sin?

The P'shat (straightforward) reading of the text reveals only one crime:

Come, let us build a tower with its spire in the heavens and make a name for ourselves, lest we be spread throughout the land. (11:4)

God had commanded Noach and his children (in the same manner as He had commanded Adam) to:

be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...spread throughout the earth and multiply in it (9:1,7).

The Divine purpose would be met by mankind's populating the earth, settling many lands and creating diverse civilizations. These sons of Noach chose to do the exact opposite - to build a tower that would support their ill-fated unity.

As is well known, however, the Rabbis read much worse intentions into their behavior - understanding that they desired to compete with God, to fight against Him etc. Where are these ideas in the text? (not that they need be; but it is always more impactful when we identify textual allusions which support Midrashic threads). Truth to tell, we can only identify these textual allusions after our introduction to Avraham, as we shall see.

It was onto this particular stage of humanity, a species which desired nothing but to avoid spreading out and preferred to "sit still", that this great hero, Avraham Avinu, made his powerful entrance. In a world where everyone was satisfied to stay put, Avraham unquestionably and immediately accepted God's call to: Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house. Not only did he leave - he continued his wanderings long after reaching the place that I will show you. Everywhere he went, he built an altar and called out in God's Name (whatever that may mean; prayer, education, declaration). He was clearly a mover and shaker in the most literal sense of the phrase:

He moved from place to place in order to shake the people from their spiritual and intellectual complacency. Note how S'forno (12:8-9) explains Avraham's route (north and south, between Beit-El and Ha'Ai) -

between these two large cities, in order that many people would come to hear him call out in God's Name... when he traveled from place to place as is the custom of the shepherds, he didn't go from east to west, in order not to abandon either one of these cities where some of the people were already drawn to him.

We now understand Avraham's greatness which earned him (and we, his progeny) the great blessings promised throughout his life: When God told him to wander, he took it upon himself to go against the lifestyle in which he grew up, to fight the complacency and "status quo" of the world around him - and to tirelessly bring the word of God to those around him.

V. BA L'LAMED V'NIM'TZA LAMED

Sometimes a model is utilized to inform about a new situation - and our learning enhances our understanding of the model itself! This process, known in Midrashic terminology as Ba l'Lamed v'Nim'tza Lamed (it comes to teach and ends up "learning") can be applied to the relationship between Avraham and the Tower.

From the Noach orientation of the men of the tower, who wanted to avoid movement and dispersion, we learn of the greatness of Avraham, who was willing to continue moving so long as God's Name was not yet recognized and revered in the world. Conversely, from a refrain found several times in the Avrahamic narratives, we can understand the sin of the Tower on a deeper level.

Everywhere that Avraham built an altar, he called out in God's Name. This stands in direct apposition to the plan of the Tower-builders - Na'aseh Lanu Shem - let us make a name for ourselves! Against Avraham's desire to publicize the Almighty, the men of the Tower wanted to publicize their own power. From the Tower, we appreciate Avraham's wanderings; from Avraham, we understand the depth of the sin of the Tower, who wanted to rival God and substitute his Name with theirs. (This last point was suggested by R. Menachem Liebtan in several of his shiurim on Sefer B'resheet.)

This explains - and provides the textual allusion to - the Midrashim which focus on the "battle with God" implicit in the construction of the Tower.

SUMMARY

We now understand the greatness of Avraham - and the worldview which he needed to challenge. Whereas the world around him was satisfied with the way things were, symbolized by the goal of remaining in one place, Avraham set out to move among princes, warriors and travelers and to shake them at their ideological roots.

VI. AVRAHAM AND NOACH

The difference between these two righteous men lies not only in their actions - but also in the mission each had to fulfill. Whereas Noach was called to "start over" - and thus could afford to be "Noach" - at rest and in stasis, Avraham was called for a much more difficult mission.

After the Flood, God promised that he would never again destroy the world. How, then, would Divine Justice be meted out if the world was again deserving of the same fate? Instead of destruction, God would send His messengers to teach, instruct and correct the behavior of mankind. Avraham could not afford to "sit still" because the world he faced was not a fresh one, recently reborn, like the one faced by Noach. Avraham's world was already old, corrupt and confused. This reality does not allow for complacency if the Divine plan is to be implemented; it takes change - radical change - and a charismatic, powerful, saintly person to effect that change.

We now understand Avraham's mission: To bring awareness of the One God - the God whose "traits" are justice and compassion - into the world by teaching others and effecting their Teshuvah. Destruction of the wicked is not the Avrahamic model - it belongs to the "Noach" orientation.

VII. AVRAHAM AND S'DOM

We can now return to our original questions: Why did Avraham ask God to spare the cities - and not just allow the righteous to leave? And why did he stop his negotiations at ten?

Keep in mind that the destruction of S'dom is presented in the Torah with deliberate parallels to the Flood story. Note that a questionably righteous person (Noach, Lot) is saved from the utter destruction of the area - after which he becomes drunk and is involved in sexually disgraceful behavior with his children. I believe that the Torah is suggesting a parallel so that we can better appreciate the Hiddush (innovation) of Avraham's approach, over that of Noach.

Based on everything that we saw, it is clear that Avraham was not praying for the salvation of the righteous - it was the wicked people of S'dom who were the focus of his plea. If there are fifty righteous people there - there is good reason to hope that they will be able to instruct, persuade and enlighten the wicked populace regarding their evil ways. "Is it your way, God, to destroy them together - before the one group has been given every chance to correct and educate the other group?" God's response confirms Avraham's approach - "If I find fifty righteous people, I will bear the entire place for them." In other words, I will tolerate the evil - not on account of the merit of the righteous, but because of the potential for change which their presence suggests.

As the negotiations tighten, Avraham is asking for much more - he is asking that God accept a far-fetched possibility, that ten righteous people might be able to save the city and to educate the populace. Why did Avraham stop here? Why not eight, six, four, two - why not one righteous person?

From personal experience, Avraham recognized the importance of community. He had needed to leave his own community in order to commune with God - and he understood the depths of courage required to do that. He well understood that one - or even a handful - of righteous people could never turn things around. As idealistic as we may be about our ability to educate, to "spread the word" and to draw people close to the word of God - the hard reality is that a holy environment, a sanctified setting and the safety of numbers is essential towards promoting spiritual growth. Avraham could not ask for less than ten, because less than ten is not a community (witness the minimum number for a minyan) - it is a handful of individuals. (S'forno and R. Hirsh, in different styles, suggest a similar approach to understanding Avraham's negotiations).

Seeking the salvation of the citizens of S'dom, Avraham understood that there would need to be a community - small though it may be - that would serve as a shining example of righteousness and truth and that would then be a refuge for those S'domites who were thus attracted to the ways of truth and the paths of pleasantness.

Our challenge, within each of our local communities and throughout the world-wide covenantal community of Am Yisra'el, is to create and maintain a holy and righteous community which will serve as an example for all those around us - and which will be a safe environment within which everyone can grow in righteousness and sanctity.

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Make Yourself at Home!

"And behold - three men were standing over him!" (18:2)

There are some people who look like they are giving but they are really taking. And there are some people who look like they are taking when they are really giving.

Anyone who buys a \$5,000-a-plate charity dinner is giving a lot of charity, but he is also getting a lot of status mixed in with his sushi.

On the other hand, there are people who look like they are takers but they are really giving.

Once there was a Jewish traveling salesman who found himself in a largely non-Jewish town on Friday afternoon. His business had delayed him way beyond his expectations and there was now no way he could get home for Shabbat. He had heard that there was just one Orthodox family in town where he could spend Shabbat, and as the sun was starting to set he made his way there.

The owner of the house opened the door to him and showed him into the living room. "May I stay here for Shabbat?" asked the traveling salesman. "If you like," replied the host. "The price is \$200." "\$200!" exclaimed the traveling salesman. "That's more than a first-class hotel!" "Suit yourself," replied the host.

Realizing that he had no option, the salesman reluctantly agreed. In the short time left before Shabbat, the host showed the salesman his room, the kitchen and the other facilities for his Shabbat stay.

As soon as the host left the room, the salesman sat down and thought to himself. "Well, if this is going to cost me \$200, I am going to get my money's worth." During the entire Shabbat he availed himself unstintingly of the house's considerable facilities. He helped himself to the delicious food in the fridge. He had a long luxurious shower, both before and after Shabbat. He really made himself "at home."

When he had showered and packed, he made his way downstairs and plunked two crisp \$100 bills down on the table in front of his host.

"What's this?" inquired the host. "That's the money I owe you," replied the salesman. "You don't owe me anything. Do you really think I would take money from a fellow Jew for the mitzvah of hospitality?" "But you told me that Shabbat here costs \$200."

"I only told you that to be sure that you would make yourself at home."

When a guest comes to your home, his natural feeling is one of embarrassment. No one likes being a taker. When a guest brings a present, the worst thing you can say is, "You shouldn't have done that!" Rather, take the bottle of wine (or whatever it is), open it, place it in the middle of the table, and say, "Thank you so much!" By allowing him to contribute to the meal, you will mitigate his feeling of being a taker and you will have done the mitzvah of hospitality to a higher degree.

The mitzvah of hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence. We learn this from the beginning of this week's Torah portion. G-d had come to visit Avraham on the third day after his *brit mila*, the most painful day. G-d made the day extremely hot so that Avraham should not be bothered by guests. When G-d saw that Avraham was experiencing more pain from his inability to do the mitzvah of hospitality than the pain of the *brit mila*, He sent three angels who appeared as men so that Avraham could do the mitzvah of hospitality. When these "men" appeared, Avraham got up from in front of the Divine Presence to greet his guests.

Hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence.

- Sources: Rashi, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler and others

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Three days after performing *brit mila* on himself, Avraham is visited by Hashem. When three angels appear in human form, Avraham rushes to show them hospitality by bringing them into his tent, despite this being the most painful time after the operation. Sarah laughs when she hears from them that she will bear a son next year. Hashem reveals to Avraham that He will destroy Sodom, and Avraham pleads for Sodom to be spared. Hashem agrees that if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom He will not destroy it. Avraham "bargains" Hashem down to ten righteous people. However, not even ten can be found. Lot, his wife and two daughters are rescued just before sulfur and fire rain down on Sodom and her sister cities. Lot's wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot's daughters fear that as a result of the destruction there will be no husbands for them. They decide to get their father drunk and through him to perpetuate the human race. From the elder daughter, Moav is born, and from the younger, Ammon.

Avraham moves to Gerar where Avimelech abducts Sarah. After Hashem appears to Avimelech in a dream, he releases Sarah and appeases Avraham.

As promised, a son, Yitzchak, is born to Sarah and Avraham. On the eighth day after the birth, Avraham circumcises him as commanded. Avraham makes a feast the day Yitzchak is weaned. Sarah tells Avraham to banish Hagar and Hagar's son Yishmael because she sees in him signs of degeneracy. Avraham is distressed at the prospect of banishing his son, but Hashem tells him to listen to whatever Sarah tells him to do. After nearly dying of thirst in the desert, Yishmael is rescued by an angel, and Hashem promises that he will be the progenitor of a mighty nation.

Avimelech enters into an alliance with Avraham when he sees that Hashem is with him. In a tenth and final test of Avraham, Hashem instructs Avraham to take Yitzchak, who is now 37, and to offer him as a sacrifice. Avraham does this, in spite of ostensibly aborting Jewish nationhood and contradicting his life-long preaching against human sacrifice. At the last moment, Hashem sends an angel to stop Avraham. Because of Avraham's unquestioning obedience, Hashem promises him that even if the Jewish People sin, they will never be completely dominated by their foes. The Torah portion concludes with the genealogy and birth of Rivka.

Q & A

Questions

1. Why did G-d appear to Avraham after the brit mila?
2. Why was Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent?
3. What were the missions of the three angels?
4. Why did Avraham enjoin the guests to wash the dust off their feet?
5. Why did Avraham ask specifically Yishmael, and not someone else, to prepare food for the guests?
6. Why did the angels ask Avraham where Sarah was?
7. When G-d related Sarah's thoughts to Avraham, He did not relate them precisely. Why?
8. What "cry" from Sodom came before G-d?
9. How many angels went to Sodom?
10. Why was Lot sitting at the gate of Sodom?
11. Lot served the angels matza. Why?
12. Why did Lot delay when he left Sodom?
13. Why were Lot and his family not permitted to look back at Sodom?
14. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Why was she punished in this particular way?
15. In what merit did G-d save Lot?
16. Why did Avraham relocate after the destruction of Sodom?
17. Why did Avimelech give gifts to Avraham?
18. Why was Avraham told to listen to Sarah?
19. Why did G-d listen to the prayer of Yishmael and not to that of Hagar?
20. Who accompanied Avraham and Yitzchak to the akeidah (binding)?

Answers

1. 18:1 - Avraham was sick, so G-d came to "visit" him.
2. 18:1 - He was looking for guests.
3. 18:2 - To announce Yitzchak's birth, to heal Avraham and to destroy Sodom.
4. 18:4 - He thought they were among those who worship the dust, and he didn't want any object of idolatry in his home.
5. 18:7 - To train him in the performance of mitzvot.
6. 18:9 - To call attention to Sarah's modesty, so as to endear her to her husband.
7. 18:13 - For the sake of peace.
8. 18:21 - The cry of a girl who was executed for giving food to the poor.
9. 19:1 - Two; one to destroy the city and one to save Lot.
10. 19:1 - He was a judge.
11. 19:3 - It was Passover.
12. 19:16 - He wanted to save his property.
13. 19:17 - As they, too, deserved to be punished, it wasn't fitting for them to witness the destruction of Sodom.
14. 19:26 - She was stingy, not wanting to give the guests salt.
15. 19:29 - Lot had protected Avraham by concealing from the Egyptians the fact that Sarah was his wife.
16. 20:1 - Because travel in the region ceased and Avraham could no longer find guests.
17. 20:14 - So that Avraham would pray for him.
18. 21:12 - Because she was greater in prophecy.
19. 21:17 - Because the prayer of a sick person is more readily accepted than the prayer of others on his behalf.
20. 22:3 - Yishmael and Eliezer.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Words for Words

Over the years we have discussed many different words in these essays, but we have yet to discuss the words for “word.” In Hebrew there are at least two words for “word”: *milah* and *teivah*. Rabbi Shlomo Pappeheim (1740-1814) seems to understand that *milah* is an original Hebrew term for “word,” while *teivah* is a later neologism coined by grammarians to refer to the more specific grammatical concept of a “word.” Indeed, the word *milah* in the sense of “word” appears in the Bible many times (Ps. 19:5, 139:4, II Shmuel 23:2, Prov. 23:9, and more than 30 times in Iyov, plus in the Aramaic sections of Daniel), while *teivah* in that sense first appears only in later rabbinic writings. This essay closely examines these two words and their respective etymologies to shed more light on how the terms for “word” might actually not be complete synonyms.

Rabbi Eliyahu HaBachur (1469-1549), also known as Elias Levita, writes that many people think that there is no difference between the words in question. However, in his works *Mesorat HaMesoret* and *Sefer Tishbi*, HaBachur disagrees with this assumption, instead arguing that *milah* refers to a “spoken word,” while *teivah* refers to a “written word.” Interestingly, Rabbi Yosef Teomim (1727-1792) slightly differs with HaBachur, maintaining that *milah* can refer to either a written or verbalized word, while *teivah* refers exclusively to a written word.

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman of Hanau (1687-1746) cites HaBachur’s way of differentiating between *milah* and *teivah*, and adds that the word *milah* is derived from the trilateral root MEM-LAMMED-LAMMED (“speech”). This root appears in Sarah’s poetic response to the birth of Isaac: “Who had spoken (*millel*) to Abraham, ‘Sarah will nurse children’? Because I have given birth for his old age” (Gen. 21:7). King David uses a similar word when discussing G-d’s superlative greatness: “Who will

say (*yimallel*) G-d’s feats? Who will make all His praises be heard?” (Ps. 106:2)

Indeed, *millel* is the typical Targumic rendering of the Hebrew *amirah* (“saying”) and its cognates. Moreover, the Babylonian Talmud (*Megillah* 18a) cites a popular aphorism from the Holy Land: “A *milah* is worth a *sela* (a form of currency), and silence is worth two *sela*.” This also implies that *milah* refers to speech, because in this aphorism its antonym is *shtika* (“silence”).

Thus, if *milah* is derived from a root that is related to “speaking,” it makes sense that it would refer specifically to a word that is “said.” In other words, *milah* refers to the smallest unit of speech that can have its own meaning. Phonemes or syllables, of which words are typically comprised, do not necessarily have any meaning on their own. By the way, this is similar to the Greek term *lego* (“to speak”), which serves as the etymon of the words *lexis* and *logos* (“word”).

If *milah/millel* is just another term for “saying/speaking,” then how does it differ from such words as *amirah*, *dibbur*, *sichah*, *ne’um*, *yichaveh*, and *yabia*, which also refer to that concept?

Peirush HaRokeach and *Siddur HaRokeach* explain that *millel* specifically denotes speaking in an elaborate and verbose fashion. To back this position, they point to the opening words of Bildad’s response to Job that reflects such usage, “Until when will you speak (*timallel*) these [words]?” (Job 8:2). Fascinatingly, Rabbeinu Efrayaim (to Gen. 21:7) writes that unlike other terms for “speech,” *millel* refers specifically to speaking the truth. Rabbi Yehuda Leib Shapira-Frankfurter (1743-1826) makes a similar point, noting that *millel* refers to “speaking” as a means of explaining something in the most clear and accurate way possible. They adduce the following verse to support this understanding: “The

knowledge of my lips—clarity, do they speak (*millelu*)” (Iyov 33:3).

Rabbi Pappenheim actually takes a slightly different approach to understanding *milah*. He traces the word to the biliteral root MEM-LAMMED, whose core meaning is “edge” or “extremity.” The word *milah* as in *brit milah* (“covenant of circumcision”) refers to “cutting off” the edge or extremity of a male member’s foreskin. In a similar vein, *milah* as “word” actually refers to a word as an independent unit divorced, or “cut off,” from the rest of a sentence.

HaBachur adduces support for his assertion that *teivah* refers specifically to a “written word” from the Talmud (*Yevamot* 13b), which says: “Any word (*teivah*) that needs a LAMMED at its beginning [as a prefix that denotes “to”], the Scripture [can instead] places a HEY at its end [as a suffix that denotes “to”].” HaBachur understands that this mainly refers to how the word is written. He also mentions the expression *roshei teivos* (literally, “the heads of the words”) used for written acronyms/abbreviations.

On the other hand, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman of Hanau writes that the word *teivah* means “box, chest” and refers to the written word because books that contain written words are stored in a *teivah*.

In Biblical Hebrew, *teivah* means “ark” or “closet.” For example, Noah’s Ark is called a *teivah* (Gen. 6–9), as was the basket wherein baby Moses was placed (Ex. 2:3). In Mishnaic Hebrew, *teivah* refers to the Holy Ark of a synagogue which houses the Torah Scrolls, or to the table (also known as *bimah*) upon which the Torah Scrolls are placed while being read. In a previous article (“A Tale of Two Arks,” 2016), I cited Rabbi Aharon Marcus (1843–1916) who argues that the word *teivah* is related to the word *bayit* (“house”) by way of metathesis (both words contain the same letters). This implies that a *teivah*, in some ways, is like a person’s home. Based on this, I would say that *teivah* denotes a “word” as a sort of house for all the letters to come together in that house or box.

When discussing the Biblical Hebrew word *teivah* (“ark/box/chest”), Ibn Janach writes in his *Sefer HaShorashim* that the root of this word is TAV-BET-HEY. Radak, in his *Sefer HaShorashim*,

mentions a possible alternative root, TAV-YOD-BET. Following this latter approach, Rabbi Yosef Teomim suggests that the root of *teivah* is derived from the Aramaic TAV-(YOD)-BET, which equivalent to the Hebrew SHIN-(VAV)-BET, that means “return.” This connection may be justified by the common phenomenon of the letter SHIN in Hebrew morphing into a TAV in Aramaic. Rabbi Teomim explains that when a person stores something in a *teivah*, he intends to later “return” to that container and retrieve whatever it is he had stored there. By contrast, when a person leaves an item on the floor, he does not show that he intends to “return” to retrieve it.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Gen. 6:14) similarly suggests that *teivah* is derived from the Aramaic root YOD-TAV-BET, equivalent to the Hebrew root YOD-SHIN-BET (“sitting, dwelling, settling”), and refers to the *teivah*’s place as one’s temporary domicile. Perhaps *teivah* in the sense of “word” refers to a place in which letters are nestled.

Rabbi Shimon Yehuda Leib Goldblit (an early 20th century exegete) parses the word *teivah* as a portmanteau of *ta* (“come/enter,” the Aramaic TAV-ALEPH which equals the Hebrew BET-ALEPH) and *bah* (“into it” in Hebrew).

Dr. Alexander Kohut (1842–1894) reports that some claim that the word *teivah* in the sense of “word” comes from an Arabic root that means “to cut.” Thus, he explains that *teivah* is related to “cutting,” just like *milah* might also be related to the verb for cutting. Alternatively, Kohut notes that others explain the word *teivah* as “word” to be derived from *teivah* as “box” in the way that a “word” is like a sort of box that contains all the letters therein (like I suggested above).

Rabbi Moshe Shapiro (1935–2017) points out that another word for “word” in Hebrew is *davar*. He finds it especially telling that DALET-BET-REISH means both “word/speak” and “thing” in Hebrew, alluding to the metaphysical reality described by *Sefer Yetzirah* that G-d created the world by combining letters from the Hebrew alphabet to form Divine words. As Rabbi Akiva Tatz eloquently puts it, “All things in the world are in fact none other than divine words crystallized into material existence.” Interestingly, Rabbi Shapiro

even points to a Talmudic passage (*Shabbat* 58b) that explicitly links the word *davar* (“thing”) to the concept of “speech” in saying that sound-producing implements (that “speak,” so to speak) have the Halachic status of “things” (i.e., *keilim*, “vessels”) vis-à-vis the laws of ritual impurity. (A similar phenomenon exists in Aramaic, wherein the word *milta* means both “word,” as a cognate of *milah*, and “thing”).

Interestingly, Rabbi Matityahu Glazerson proposes that the English word *word* is actually derived from the Hebrew word *davar* by way of metathesis and the interchangeability of the *w*-sound and the *b/v*-sound). If he is right, then the same could be said of the English word’s Germanic siblings *wort* in German and *vort* in Yiddish (with the *d*-sound and the *t*-sound interchanging), as well as the English

word’s Latin cousin *verb* (via labialization, whereby the *d*-consonant after the *r*-consonant in Proto-Indo-European morphs into a *b*-consonant in Latin).

I will conclude with a well-worded musing by Mrs. Faigy Peritzman (*Mishpacha Magazine*, April 1, 2020) about how words are used to box in abstract thoughts and ideas to make them more specific and finite: “We see this concept in the alternate definitions of the various Hebrew words that mean ‘word’: *davar*, *milah*, and *teivah*. *Davar* also means a thing, because a word concretizes abstract thoughts into things. *Milah* also means to cut, to incise, because a word cuts down your limitless thoughts into something tangible and real. *Teivah* also means a box, because a word is our attempt to squeeze our infinite thoughts into a finite casing.”

Ohrnet Magazine is a weekly Torah magazine published by Ohr Somayach Institutions,
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The Ohr Somayach Family mourns the passing of a longtime
Torah teacher to countless talmidim.

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Chaim Zweig ז"ל

May his soul be bound up in the gathering of the living.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

THE BLESSINGS OF THE SHEMA (PART 4)

“The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched
– they must be felt with the heart.”
(Helen Keller)

The second blessing continues: “Our Father, the Merciful Father, Who is ever compassionate, show us compassion, instill in our hearts to understand, to clarify, to listen, to learn, to teach, to safeguard, to perform, and to fulfill all the words of Your Torah’s teachings with love.”

In his seminal work, *Netivot Hakodesh*, Rabbi Avraham Yisrael Solomon of Kharkov (1883-1956) points out that there is no other prayer that uses such emotionally expressive language as here. By introducing the phrase, “Our Father, the Merciful Father, Who is ever compassionate, show us compassion,” the Men of the Great Assembly, who composed the prayer, are teaching us perhaps the most fundamental lesson of all that is found within prayer. It is the lesson that there is nothing more important in this world than delving into the words of the Torah and the performance of the mitzvahs.

Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Sher (1880-1952), one of the most brilliant Torah scholars of his generation, who headed the famed Slabodka Yeshiva both in Lithuania before the Holocaust and in Bnei Brak afterwards, makes a remarkable correlation between our blessing and the Shema immediately following it. Rabbi Sher writes that each request we make in our blessing corresponds to one of the commandments in the Shema.

In our blessing we ask that G-d grant us the ability “to understand and to clarify,” and in the Shema we are commanded to “teach them [the laws of the

Torah] to your children”. Our Sages instruct us (*Kiddushin* 30a) that *we* should know the laws fluently so that we can answer someone who asks us, without hesitation.

We also ask that we are able “to listen.” The Shema commands us to listen to G-d’s commandments. What exactly is it that we are being commanded to do with the words “to listen”? We are being taught the imperative to listen to the timeless messages and lessons of the Torah.

Next we ask “to learn.” The command that corresponds to it is “And put these words on your hearts.” The Shema is commanding us to become so familiar with the words of the Torah that they become imbedded on our hearts.

Then, “to teach.” The verse in the Shema commands us to teach our children to speak about the laws of the Torah. Rashi explains that the word “children” is not just a reference to biological offspring, but also denotes one’s students (*Bamidbar* 3:1 and *Devarim* 6:7). One of the most beautiful dimensions of Judaism is the perpetual emphasis placed on the future generations, and our obligation to educate them. Not just through classroom instruction, but, perhaps even more importantly, through the way that we live our own lives. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (1914-2005), one of the most influential contemporary figures in the Mussar movement, writes in his classic work *Alai Shur*, that children are a very effective means of

identifying the flaws within their parents. Why? Because, very often, the children are simply mimicking them. Therefore, we should be very careful to act and behave in the most exemplary way so that *our* behavior will reflect back through our *children's* behavior.

“To safeguard and to perform” corresponds to the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, as the verse in the third paragraph of the Shema reads, “In order that you should remember and perform all My commandments.”

And, finally, “To fulfill all the words of Your Torah.” The Shema is a declaration of allegiance to G-d. We lovingly accept upon ourselves G-d's Majesty, and we show our devotion and subservience to Him by undertaking to keep all of

His commandments. This precept in the Shema corresponds to the statement in our blessing “to fulfill all the words of Your Torah.”

At first glance it might seem somewhat unnecessary to ask for exactly the same things in the blessing that we are going to mention in the Shema a moment later. However, the Slabodka Rosh Yeshiva explains that this notable list is included directly before we recite the Shema because it is a *request*. We are entreating G-d to help us keep all of the commandments that appear in the Shema successfully, in a way that will please our Father in Heaven.

To be continued...

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Rosh Hashana 2-8

Charity Clauses

We have learned in beraita, “One who says, ‘I am donating this coin to charity in order that my children will live,’ or says, ‘I am donating this coin to charity in order to merit the World to Come’ is a tzaddik gamur (completely righteous person).”

Although the giver is doing the mitzvah of giving charity for ulterior motives, this does not seem to diminish the lofty magnitude of the act, and the giver does not only fulfill a mitzvah but is also labeled by our Sages as being a completely righteous person.

The commentaries ask a question on this *beraita* from a well-known teaching in Pirkei Avot (1:2). There we are taught: “Antignos of Socho received the transmission of the Torah from Shimon Hatzaddik. He used to say, ‘Do not be as servants who serve their master to receive reward. Rather, be as servants who serve their master not to receive reward. And let the fear of Heaven be upon you.’” Accordingly, being that it is wrong to serve the

Master by doing mitzvahs in order to receive a reward, how can a person who does a mitzvah to receive a reward be called a *tzaddik gamur*?

One answer is offered in several places by the *Ba’alei Tosefot*, who explain our *gemara* as speaking about a giver who willingly gives the *tzedakah* “unconditionally.” This means that even if his specified condition is not fulfilled in the way that wants, *he still wholeheartedly wants* his giving to be a mitzvah-act of charity. He is merely attaching a *personal prayer* to his act of mitzvah. Therefore, he is fulfilling the mitzvah to give *tzedaka* without reservation and is worthy of being called a *tzaddik gamur*. (Likewise, this concept is applicable to the widespread custom of giving *tzedaka l'ilui nishmat* —

in the honor of a dearly deceased relative or friend, especially on the *yahrtzeit*.)

Others offer an answer to this question by pointing out the difference between the conduct of a *tzaddik gamur* and that of a *chassid* (meaning “pious” but not in the modern usage of the term as being Orthodox or being a member of one of the many Chassidic courts). A *tzaddik gamur* is not doing anything wrong or reprehensible. But he is not going beyond the basic “letter of the law” as a *chassid* would do. (See the Rambam in *Hilchos De’ot* for more on this topic.) A person who gives charity in order to receive reward – as in the *beraita* – is doing the act of the mitzvah correctly and is not doing anything bad. He is a *tzaddik gamur* regarding his fulfillment of this mitzvah. However, Antignos Ish Socho is teaching how a *chassid* behaves. He does the will of Hashem not for the sake of any reward. He does it purely because Hashem commanded him to do so, *l’shma*. (See Tosefot Rabbeinu Peretz)

Yet another approach draws a distinction between the mitzvah of *tzedakah*, which is the specific mitzvah mentioned in the *beraita*, and between all other mitzvahs. There is unique aspect of the mitzvah of *tzedakah* that is found in the Book of the Prophet Malachi (3:1): “Bring all of the tithes

into the treasury so that there may be nourishment in My House, and test Me now with this, says Hashem, to see if I will not open for you the skylights of Heaven and pour down for you blessing until there will not be enough room for all of it!” Just as charity provides a pathway of blessing to the recipient to have whatever he needs, in a similar fashion Hashem blesses the giver of charity with the reward that he needs.

Rashi explains this topic in yet a different manner. As the *beraita* teaches, a person who gives *tzedakah* or does any mitzvah, mentioning an expected reward, is certainly fulfilling the mitzvah and is considered a *tzaddik gamur*. (Of course, he may have accrued more demerits than merits due to his overall behavior in his life – and therefore not really even be a *tzaddik* or a *beinoni* as explained in the the Rambam’s Laws of Teshuva – but he is nevertheless a *tzaddik gamur* in this particular act of fulfilling a mitzvah. Antignos, although not arguing with this principle, is teaching an important cautionary lesson. A person might do a mitzvah with expectation of a reward, but, if he does not receive reward as expected, he might become upset with Hashem for failing to “keep His end of the deal.” Therefore, a person’s intent when fulfilling a mitzvah should be purely because it is the right thing to do since Hashem said to do so.

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LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman

Beknown and Beloved

Before Hashem carries out His plan to destroy Sodom on account of the incorrigible wickedness of its citizens, He first discloses to Avraham what is about to occur. Avraham is privy to the workings of Hashem because *Avraham is to become a great and mighty nation, and through it, all the nations of the Earth will be blessed*. More, the reason Avraham will bear this great nation is revealed: *Ki y'daativ: For I have known him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of Hashem, to practice dutiful benevolence, and justice. (Ber. 18:18-19)*. Avraham is chosen not for his own sake, but for the sake of the great nation that he will found and educate. As the father and educator of this nation, Avraham is given insight into Hashem's decisions, in order to charge it with its eternal, noble mission. This knowledge will assist and guide him in a most awesome educational task.

Hashem allows Avraham insight into His ways because He *knows* Avraham. *Yadah* – to know – means to perceive by distinguishing characteristics. In the relationship between man and wife, it refers to marital intimacy. In the relationship of Hashem to man, knowledge means Divine Providence, where the knowledge of man is expressed in direct involvement in the happenings of his life.

One who is not a devoted follower of Hashem is under Hashem's general providence. In *Vayikra* we are warned: If one walks with Hashem casually, and only incidentally performs the Divine Will – when it is convenient or coincident – then Hashem will so walk incidentally with him. His fate and fortune will

be left to the vicissitudes of chance. But the righteous, whose sole aim in life is to do Hashem's Will on earth, and thereby make their mission align with the Almighty's, may cast their burdens and all their needs on their Provider, as they are treated with special providence.

As one who tirelessly sought out Hashem's truth, and then made it his life's mission to spread it, Avraham is so known and beloved. He carries this relationship forward to his children, by teaching them *to keep the way of Hashem, to practice tzedakah and justice*. There are two distinct parts to this educational mission: *the way of Hashem* refers to holiness and purity before Hashem (as exemplified by Avraham's circumcision); *to practice tzedakah and justice* refers to uprightness in human relationships (as exemplified by Avraham's *hashnasat orchim*, hospitality).

Although the two appear to be distinct, they form a single phrase. Not “to keep the way of Hashem *and* practice *tzedakah* and justice,” but “to keep the way of Hashem *to* practice *tzedakah* and justice.” Circumcision is the cornerstone of this nation – first the people must learn to sanctify and purify the life of the senses and body with proper limits and boundaries, and *then* it must interact justly and kindly in human relationships. The nation's social future depends on its moral purity.

When Avraham's offspring live these truths, they too are known and beloved, and graced with that special Divine Providence.

■ Sources: Commentary, Bereishet 18:17-19

Perek Shira: The Song of Existence

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

Vayera

The Song of the Earth

The Earth says, "To Hashem is the Earth and all that fills it, the Earth and all who inhabit it." (Tehillim 24:1)
And it says, "From the end of the Earth, songs we have heard, splendor for the Righteous One." (Yeshayahu 24:16)

Man rules the Earth and considers it his own. The Earth sings that, in truth, man belongs to the Earth, and the Earth belongs to Hashem, the ultimate Master of all.

This is expressed by the way in which man was fashioned from the Earth, stands firmly upon it, feeds on it, and is eventually buried within it, empty-handed of his supposed possession. The Earth itself was created by Hashem, and it is He Who suspends it firmly in the cosmos and maintains its inhabitability. The Earth therefore sings that "the Earth and all that fills it" belong to Hashem alone. We, too, are to acknowledge Hashem's ownership of the Earth by blessing Him before benefiting from it, and by willingly sharing His bounty with others.

The Earth sings further that, "From the end of the Earth, songs we have heard, splendor for the Righteous One." The plain meaning of this is that the Earth was formed starting from its principle part, the place of the Beit Hamikdash – "the end of the Earth" – and henceforth the Earth sings through

that gateway to Heaven of "splendor for the Righteous One."

On a deeper level of understanding, "*kenaf*," meaning "end," can also mean "wing". Our Sages teach that the angels have six wings with which they sing to Hashem, using one for each weekday. On the seventh day they say to Hashem, "We have no wing with which to sing!" He tells them that He has another wing, "the wing of the Earth," which sings to Him on Shabbat. Some explain that this refers to the special *kedushah* of *Mussaf*. A wing is an apt symbolism for a source of song. Just like a wing lifts its wielder, our praise of Hashem raises us closer to Him.

- Sources: Targum; Yalkut Shimoni (*Ha'azinu*); Tosafot (*Sanhedrin 37b*); Aderes Shmuel (Rabbi Shmuel Salant)

**In loving memory of Harav Zeev Shlomo ben Zecharia Leib*

This issue of the Ohrnet is sponsored by the
Harry H. Beren Foundation