

## Potomac Torah Study Center

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**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 more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.**

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**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.**

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**May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We celebrate the return of our living hostages and mourn those of our people who perished during the last two years. May we soon retrieve the remaining bodies of our hostages and soldiers who fell in Gaza, and may a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.**

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Vayera is a long, complex parsha that covers several key episodes in the life of Avraham Avinu and several times illustrates the concept of seventy levels of depth in the Torah. With great honor, I introduce Rabbi Hayyim Angel, National Scholar for the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, who initiates a weekly column on the parsha (see below). Rabbi Angel demonstrates that both Yitzhak and Yishmael encounter crises early in their lives, and the Torah uses common language and structure to focus our attention on the similarity of their situations. Yitzhak's approach to the Akeidah (realizing that he is to be the korban) and Yishmael's near death from thirst in the desert both show that G-d is aware of their struggles and cares for each of Avraham's sons with compassion. [Watch for additional insights from Rabbi Angel in future weeks.]

Our parsha and haftorah contain additional parallels to events later in Tanach that help us understand the text. For example, Rabbi David Fohrman observes that we learn of Avraham's greatness as he follows Hashem to the Akeidah, knowing that God had promised him that his descendants through Yitzhak would be numerous and great – while also ordering Avraham to sacrifice Yitzhak in the place that He would show Avraham. How could God make both his promise and his order to sacrifice Yitzhak come true? Avraham has no idea how Hashem will resolve the contradiction, but he continues with complete faith that God will find and show him a solution. When Miriam takes her baby brother, in his tevah, to release him in the Nile, she has no idea how God will save her brother. Miriam hides and watches, even when Paro's daughter, the worst possible person to find the baby, comes and brings him to shore. God shows Miriam that He has compassion for the baby and even permits her to bring her mother to nurse the baby. We as Jews are to emulate the faith of Avraham and Miriam, to know that Hashem always watches over B'Nai Yisrael.

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander extends this lesson to the haftorah, when the Shunamite woman appeals to Elisha after her beloved son dies. Elisha comes immediately, davens over the boy's body, and God brings a miracle to save him. The woman, daughter of the prophet Obadiah, is a widow and has no money. Elisha brings a miracle – the woman's one flask of olive oil flows and fills many bottles with olive oil. The woman can sell her excess olive oil to provide funds to support her for the rest of her life. Yet again, God brings a miracle to save a needy righteous Jew. This haftorah helps us understand the faith of Avraham at the Akeidah and Miriam by the Nile, and these stories help us understand the rewards to Jews with complete deep in Hashem.

As we focus on lessons of true faith in Hashem this Shabbat, we prepare for what comes on Sunday, the 87<sup>th</sup> annual remembrance of the horrors of Kristallnacht, the Nazi directed orgy of violence, destruction, and murder against Jews in 1938, the beginning of the worst of the Holocaust. The Devrei Torah discussions of the Akeidah direct us to renew and increase our faith that Hashem will protect B'Nai Yisrael because of his love for us. Kristallnacht reminds us that we are "Ivri" – we stand alone against the human world of our enemies.

While God protects B'Nai Yisrael, He does not protect all of us. We must work with Hashem to protect ourselves, our family, our shuls, Israel, and our Jewish communities throughout the world. We remember Kristallnacht, because history repeats. We must remember this lesson to prepare and hopefully prevent a repeat of Kristallnacht. We have far too many warnings. Attacks on Jews have become horribly frequent in the Middle East, Europe, Canada, and now even in Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, and New York. The election of a blatant anti-Semite, who speaks openly praising the intifada and Hamas, now mayor of New York City – the city with the largest Jewish population of any city in the world – shows that we cannot count on non-Jews to protect our people. Indeed, apparently many thousands of votes of Jews brought victory to Mayor Mamdani. Will our people ever learn?

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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**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](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.**

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeevi Esther, Avraham Dov ben Blimah; Arie Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel.** Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

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### **Haftarat Parshat Vayera: Loyalty to God And Family**

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander \*

President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

*Dedicated in memory of my brother-in-law, Moish Kranzler z"l, on the occasion of his first grandson Eitan Zeffren's bar mitzvah. Moish lived the values of loyalty to God & family and his legacy will live on through his children, his grandchildren and the thousands he inspired.*

The dramatic and emotionally powerful haftara of Parshat Vayera tells the story of a barren Shunamite woman who performs the kindness of welcoming the prophet Elisha into her home. When Elisha asks how he might repay her, his servant Gehazi volunteers that the woman has no children, and Elisha commits to aiding her. He promises – just as the angels in the parsha promise Sarah – that she will bear a son *"next year at this time"* (II Kings 4:16; see also Genesis 18:14).

The parallel stories of the prayer and promise of children are, on the surface, the reason that this parsha and haftara are paired. However, there is another, less obvious common message in both the parsha and the haftara, one that speaks to the deeper meaning of the promise of children and the nature of religious devotion that is as important today as it was in biblical times. In the parsha, after Yitzchak is born, God famously commands Avraham to offer his only son as a sacrifice. Avraham, the selfless devotee, answers הִנְנִי, “*here I am*,” indicating his presence and willingness to do whatever is commanded of him (22:1). The same word appears again shortly afterward when, as Avraham and Yitzchak walk together toward the site of the sacrifice, Yitzchak innocently inquires as to the animal to be offered. “*Father*,” Yitzchak opens, and Avraham answers: בְּנִי הִנְנִי, “*here I am, my son*” (v. 7).

Those reading quickly will likely miss a small but significant difference between the word הִנְנִי as it appears in these two contexts. In the first instance, the word is spelled with a tzere mark under the letter nun. In the second, the same letter is marked, unusually, with a segol. This very small phonetic difference conveys a nuanced distinction: the tzere (הִנְנִי) indicates the self-abnegating fidelity that we show to God, while that with a segol (הִנְנִי) denotes the readiness and attention that we show to those we love. This second form appears only twice in the Torah, both times spoken by a father to his son (see also 27:18).

The moral and emotional crisis at the heart of the story of Akedat Yitzchak raises an important question about the relationship between these two different states of mind: Can someone possess both הִנְנִי and הִנְנִי at the same time? Does God’s command to sacrifice Yitzchak convey a forced choice between our love and devotion to Him on the one hand, and the responsibilities and affection to our families on the other?

Surface readings of some biblical sources hint that there is indeed a zero-sum game at play here. We see that after the Akeda, Avraham leaves the site of that dramatic event himself, unaccompanied by Yitzchak. Even if Yitzchak was not physically sacrificed, it is possible that the relationship between them was ruptured by that traumatic episode. Thus, Avraham was forced to pay a steep interpersonal price for his act of devotion.

In many ways, we as observant Jews have internalized this dynamic. Parents routinely educate their children about unconditional loyalty to God, even at great personal cost. But the parsha and the haftara together teach that there need be no contradiction between loyalty to God and loyalty to family. Our haftara, like the parsha, focuses on an episode where the long-awaited child almost dies. But in the haftara, as in the parsha, God ultimately shows that He has no actual desire that the child be sacrificed. Hearing that the Shunamite woman’s son has taken ill and died, Elisha hurries to her house and miraculously resuscitates the child, reuniting him with his mother. The idea of resuscitation echoes in the rabbinic tradition surrounding the Akeda.

The Talmud (Zevachim 62a) speaks of the physical ashes of the sacrifice of Yitzchak being found on the Temple mount, hinting that Yitzchak may have actually been sacrificed and resurrected again. Similar imagery can be found in many of the numerous piyutim composed on the subject of the Akeda, as well as in Rashi’s commentary on our parsha (22:14).

**The shared theme of resuscitation in these two stories conveys a powerful lesson: Our devotion to God does not require that we sacrifice the family relationships most dear to us. On the contrary; true devotion to God demands that we invest in those relationships.** [emphasis added]

This is despite the fact that many figures throughout Jewish history may have given us this impression that religious commitment requires sacrifices around relationships, and tension between these two spheres is a commonplace feature of Jewish life. In the past two years, we have seen countless young men and fathers with many children going off to war, leaving their families behind to defend our people and making tremendous sacrifices – even, sometimes, the ultimate sacrifice – for a higher good. Yet **the message of both Avraham and the Shunamite woman reminds us that God does not want estrangement, but rather wholeness.** [emphasis added]

In fact, God desires our devotion not merely as individuals, but as families. He requests that we serve him not merely through personal sacrifice, but by the act of building a better future together for our family, our community, and our people. Serving in the IDF, away from one’s family, is one way of doing this.

At the same time, the **raising, loving, and nurturing of children is one of the highest levels of divine service that it is possible to pursue**. When faced with tensions and difficult decisions that seem to pit our religious observance against love of family, such as engaging with a child whose path is different from our own, we must always remember that loyalty to our loved ones is itself a religious value. If we do, we will make wiser decisions and build a more enduring Jewish way of life. ]emphasis added[

And standing before God, we will be able to proclaim not only הַנִּי, but also הַנִּי.

\* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact [ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org](mailto:ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org) or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

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### **Remembering Kristallnacht \***

Reprinted with permission from *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* \*

The unprecedented pogrom of November 9-10, 1938 in Germany has passed into history as Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass). Violent attacks on Jews and Judaism throughout the Reich and in the recently annexed Sudetenland began on November 8 and continued until November 11 in Hannover and the free city of Danzig, which had not then been incorporated into the Reich. There followed associated operations: arrests, detention in concentration camps, and a wave of so-called Aryanization orders, which completely eliminated Jews from German economic life.

The November pogrom, carried out with the help of the most up-to-date communications technology, was the most modern pogrom in the history of anti-Jewish persecution and an overture to the step-by-step extirpation of the Jewish people in Europe.

#### **Jews Leaving Germany**

After Hitler's seizure of power, even as Germans were being divided into "Aryans" and "non-Aryans," the number of Jews steadily decreased through emigration to neighboring countries or overseas. This movement was promoted by the Central Office for Jewish Emigration established by Reinhard Heydrich (director of the Reich Main Security Office) in 1938.

In 1925 there were 564,378 Jews in Germany; in May 1939 the number had fallen to 213,390. The flood of emigration after the November pogrom was one of the largest ever, and by the time emigration was halted in October 1941, only 164,000 Jews were left within the Third Reich, including Austria.

The illusion that the legal repression enacted in the civil service law of April 1, 1933, which excluded non-Aryans from public service, would be temporary was laid to rest in September 1935 by the Nuremberg Laws — the Reich Citizenship Law and the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor. The Reich Citizenship Law heralded the political compartmentalization of Jewish and Aryan Germans.

#### **Desecrated Synagogues, Looted Shops, Mass Arrests**

During the night of November 9-10, 1938 Jewish shops, dwellings, schools, and above all synagogues and other religious establishments symbolic of Judaism were set alight. Tens of thousands of Jews were terrorized in their homes, sometimes beaten to death, and in a few cases raped. In Cologne, a town with a rich Jewish tradition dating from the first century CE, four synagogues were desecrated and torched, shops were destroyed and looted, and male Jews were arrested and thrown into concentration camps.

Brutal events were recorded in the hitherto peaceful townships of the Upper Palatinate, Lower Franconia, Swabia, and others. In Hannover, Herschel Grynszpan's hometown, the well-known Jewish neurologist Joseph Loewenstein escaped the pogrom when he heeded an anonymous warning the previous day; his home, however, with all its valuables, was seized by the Nazis.

In Berlin, where 140,000 Jews still resided, SA men devastated nine of the 12 synagogues and set fire to them. Children from the Jewish orphanages were thrown out on the street. About 1,200 men were sent to Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen concentration camp under "protective custody." Many of the wrecked Jewish shops did not open again.

Following the Berlin pogrom the police president demanded the removal of all Jews from the northern parts of the city and declared this area "free of Jews." His order on December 5, 1938 — known as the Ghetto Decree — meant that Jews could no longer live near government buildings.

The vast November pogrom had considerable economic consequences. On November 11, 1938 Heydrich, the head of the security police, still could not estimate the material destruction. The supreme party court later established that 91 persons had been killed during the pogrom and that 36 had sustained serious injuries or committed suicide. Several instances of rape were punished by state courts as *Rassenschande* (social defilement) in accordance with the Nuremberg laws of 1935.

At least 267 synagogues were burned down or destroyed, and in many cases the ruins were blown up and cleared away. Approximately 7,500 Jewish businesses were plundered or laid waste. At least 177 apartment blocks or houses were destroyed by arson or otherwise.

It has rightly been said that with the November pogrom, radical violence had reached the point of murder and so had paved the road to Auschwitz.

\* Reprinted with permission from *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* (Yale University Press). Jed.: This Sunday is the 87<sup>th</sup> year memorial of the horrors of Kristallnacht. For many years we might have thought that there could not be another Kristallnacht – but now we realize that history does repeat.[

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/remembering-kristallnacht>

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## **Vayera: Water Shortage**

By Rabbi Dovid Green © 2001

This week's parsha is full of the acts of kindness of our patriarch Avraham. The parsha begins with G-d appearing to a ninety-nine year old Avraham sitting in front of his tent suffering from his recent circumcision. The Rabbis teach us that he was waiting for guests to pass by so he could invite them in, and he was quite discouraged by the lack thereof.

Suddenly Avraham looks up and notices three men coming nearer. Into action he springs. Running to them and then bowing he exclaims: *"Please don't pass on from your servant. Let a little water be brought...and you'll rest under the tree. I'll bring a morsel of bread and you'll satisfy your appetite. Then you'll continue on your way."* (Genesis 18:14-15)

The Torah describes the alacrity which the aged suffering patriarch displays in his efforts on behalf of his guests. He excitedly runs into his wife Sarah. *"Quickly knead bread and make cakes!"* Then again he runs to his herd, chooses a good tender calf for his guests to eat, and hurries the lad to prepare it.

Out of all the things that Avraham offered to do for his guests, why did he offer only *"a little water"*? Everything else was served with great abundance, but why of all things is the water limited? Rabbi Yisroel Salanter (19th century) by his example gives us the answer.

Rabbi Yisroel was once traveling with a close friend of his. It was time for afternoon prayers, and so the two entered a modest synagogue to pray. As is customary, they both washed their hands for prayers. First, Rabbi Yisroel's friend washed with a liberal amount of water from a basin which was filled for this purpose, then Rabbi Yisroel followed suit, however, using a minimal amount of water. *"Aren't you accustomed to wash with a liberal amount Reb Yisroel?" "Yes, in fact, I am. But this is a small synagogue with a small group who comes here on a daily basis. I'm concerned that the sexton only fills the basin with enough water for those who usually come here to pray. If I wash liberally I may leave a noticeable deficiency in the basin. If one of the sexton's overseers feels the sexton is not carrying out his responsibilities correctly, it can cost him his livelihood."*

On another occasion Rabbi Yisroel Salanter was invited by a well to do student of his for the Shabbos night meal. *"I don't except any invitations without first knowing about the house I'm staying in,"* replied the rabbi. The student began to explain how he hired the widow of a learned man who cooks for him who is very meticulous in her standards of keeping kosher, and which butcher he buys from. He explained how he arranges the Friday night meal with song and Torah discussion, and how his feast always ends at a very late hour. *"I'll accept your invitation on the condition that you end two hours earlier,"* answered Rabbi Yisroel.

Indeed, the entire meal extended for less than one hour, and before the participants recited grace after meals the host requested of his Rebbe to explain what was wrong with his way of conducting himself, Rabbi Yisroel did not answer, but rather summoned the widow who cooked the elaborate meal and said to her: *"Please excuse me for putting you under pressure to rush the meal so much on my behalf."* *"Just the opposite, I wish you would come every week,"* said the woman. *"I work hard all day Friday preparing, and I'm usually falling off my feet by the late hour that we usually finish. Because of you we finished earlier, and now I can go home and rest."*

Rabbi Yisroel turned to his student and said *"this woman's answer is the answer to the question you asked me earlier. Indeed, your Friday night customs are extremely admirable, but not if they are observed at the expense of others."*

When it comes to the work of having guests which Avraham and Sarah committed themselves to, and which they personally undertook, the sky is the limit. However, in the case of the water, which someone else was bringing, Avraham did not offer that in abundance at the expense of those who were carrying it. This is the sensitivity which Avraham conducted himself with even when he was personally caught up in performing acts of kindness for his guests.

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5762-vayera/>

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## **Passionate Judaism or Rational Judaism?**

By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2015, 2018

Do we want a religion of fire or ice, of passionate religious fervor or sober, detached rationality? In many ways, Modern Orthodoxy has chosen the latter. This goes beyond an emphasis on the intellectual, on prizing Talmudic scholarship and broad academic achievement. It also entails devaluing the emotional in religious life, diminishing the place of piety and deep religious belief. It is the talmid chacham who is prized and praised. The chasid and the yarei shamayim? Not so much. Just compare the normal davening in a Modern Orthodox shul to that in a yeshivish or charedi one. Where is our passion, our fire, our hitlahavut?

But religious passion can be dangerous. It can lead to extremism, self-righteous certainty, and even zealotry and violence. In the era of Al-Qaeda and ISIS [ed.: and Hamas], we are only too familiar with the murderous realities that can be born of a religious passion left untempered by doubt, humility, critical reflection, or any sense of morality.

Perhaps then the question is not which is better, but which is worse. Robert Frost captured this quandary, in a slightly different form, in his famous poem, *"Fire and Ice"*:

*Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.*

A religion of fire can burn and destroy; a religion of ice can leaves its adherents cold and empty. We need to move away from this either/or formulation and find the elusive possibility to embrace both.

Consider how we approach the akeida. The akeida presents a profound challenge to the contemporary reader. Avraham listens to God and almost sacrifices Yitzchak. Is the message, then, that we should be prepared to listen to God's command even when God tells us to murder the innocent? There are some who will unhesitatingly answer, "Yes. *The test of true faith is following our religion even when its demands seem to violate our sense of morality.*" There are others who will answer no, saying that Avraham failed the test by listening to God. This is an undoubtedly difficult reading of the Biblical verses, but one hears this interpretation more and more these days.

Both of these answers are too simple. Each one chooses one side of the either/or divide. But if the matter had been that straightforward, what would have been the point? When God told Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak, Avraham had two obvious choices: (1) He could have said, "*Absolutely, no problem. God, whatever You say goes.*" Or (2) he could have said, "*Sorry, God, that's murder. I'm not doing it.*" If Avraham would have chosen either of those two choices, he would have failed. Avraham's religiosity would not let him choose the second and his morality would not let him choose the first. Avraham's greatness was that he recognized this command as impossible, that he grappled between his religious fervor and his knowledge of right and wrong until the last possible moment.

The following story from Brieshit Rabbah illustrates this point:

*Samael (a tempting angel) [went] to our father Avraham, and said to him: "What, old man, have you lost your mind? A son given to you after 100 years, you are going to slaughter him?"*

*Avraham responded, "Even so.*

*He said to him, "And if God demanded more from you, would you submit?"*

*He responded, "No matter how much."*

*Samael said to him, "Tomorrow they will say that you are a spiller of blood and you are liable [for having committed murder]."*

*He responded, "Even so."*

As Nehama Leibowitz has pointed out, this midrash is best understood as an external expression of the inner struggle Avraham experienced. Samael is none other than Avraham's own questioning voice. How much, Avraham asks himself, is he prepared to do to submit to God's command? Is he prepared to be perceived as, or perhaps in fact be, a murderer? Avraham's moral self is yelling, "*No! You can't do this!*" His religious self yells back, "*Even so!*" This "*even so*" does not deny the legitimacy of the other voice; it pushes on regardless. But because the voice is not denied, it never goes away.

Avraham's journey to the mountain takes place in complete silence. He does not argue with God because he knows he is being tested. Why else would God ask for such a horrific thing? He is silent on the outside, but a battle rages within. He is not arguing with God because he is too busy arguing with himself. Should he do it? How can he do it? How can he not? And as he struggles, he pushes forward, every hour getting that much closer to the mountain, that much closer to the moment of the ultimate decision.

It is possible to see this struggle in the few words that Avraham speaks before the akeida. He tells his two attendants that he and Yitzchak will prostrate themselves and return. We are accustomed to reading this as a fib told to them to alleviate their worry, but what if Avraham believes it to be true? What if his morality and his belief in God's goodness lead him to believe that God will never demand this of him in the end, that this will not be about sacrifice, that it will be nothing more than an act of worship and that somehow, in some way, both he and Yitzchak will return?

Søren Kierkegaard makes the same point regarding Avraham's response to Yitzchak that God will find the sheep. We normally assume that Avraham is either putting Yitzchak off or hinting to that he will be the sheep. But what if Avraham really means it? Here's what Kierkegaard writes:

*....but in the next place, he makes the movement of faith every instant. This is his comfort, for he says: "But yet this will not come to pass...." Isaac asks Abraham where the lamb is for the burnt offering. "And Abraham said, God will provide Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." (Fear and Trembling, ch. 5)*

Avraham passes the test because he refuses to choose between an uncomplicated moral stance and an uncomplicated religious one. He passes because he struggles until the last minute. And it is because of this struggle that he is able to hear the voice of the angel, and because of this struggle he was able to stay his hands.

Consider, in contrast, the picture of religious passion that Rashi draws:

*"Do not cast your hand against the lad" — to slaughter him. Said Avraham to him, "If so, then I have come here for naught. Let me at least wound him and draw some blood." The angel responded, "Do not do aught to him" — do not even make a wound.*

For Rashi, Avraham was so eager to fulfill God's command that he wanted to find some way of sacrificing Yitzchak even after the angel stopped him. Rashi explains what Avraham was thinking when he offered the ram:

*"[He offered it as a burnt offering] in place of his son"....for every sacrificial act he performed on the ram, Avraham prayed and said, "Let this be as if it were done to my son. As if my son were slaughtered, as if his blood was cast on the altar, as if he were flayed, as if he were burnt up and turned to ashes."*

According to this explanation, Avraham needed to find a way to offer Yitzchak even after the angel had told him not to. He could not take no for an answer. He was all fire and no ice.

But if this were so, if he had been overcome with religious fervor, the angel would not have been able to stop him in time. Avraham could only hear the angel because he was listening for it. He was waiting for God to show him the true ram. Because he was listening, he heard, and because he was looking, he saw.

Thankfully, we are not tested with an akeida. Our test today is whether we can learn the lesson of the akeida. Can we learn the moral dangers of unbridled religious passion and the religious dangers of cool dispassionate rationality? Can we have a religious life that is informed by our morality and a moral and intellectual life that is God-oriented, God-connected?

As always, Rav Kook (*Iggrot HaRa'yah*) said it best:



*Without [the akeida], humanity would have continued to relate to the divine either savagely and wildly, through powerfully pulsating emotions, or with a cool disposition and reservedness lacking the characteristics of a profound life.... Came “the father of many nations” and taught what had to be taught....And the binding of Isaac is mercifully remembered for his children forever and ever.*

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives

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## **Paired Perspectives on the Parashah \***

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel \*

### **Vayera: Isaac and Ishmael, Parallels and Divergences**

Genesis chapters 21 and 22 place two sons of Abraham in mortal danger, one immediately after the other. The Torah invites careful comparison. In both narratives, a parent rises early in the morning and sets out on a journey that leads a child to the brink of death (21:14; 22:3). In both, a heavenly messenger intervenes at the final moment to avert tragedy. And in both, divine blessing follows, promising each child to become the father of a great nation.

The parallels are unmistakable. Yet the question remains: how are we meant to read them? Do the stories align Isaac and Ishmael in shared destiny, or do they stand as contrasting models of covenantal life and spiritual response?

Rabbi Yaakov Medan argues for deep continuity. In *Ki Karov Elekha* (pp. 142–43), he reads these scenes as intentionally linked, underscoring the enduring bond between the two sons. A Midrash cited by Rashi captures this impulse: when God tells Abraham to “take your son,” Abraham replies, “But I have two.” “Your beloved one,” God says, and Abraham answers, “I love them both.” Only then does God specify Isaac (Rashi on 22:2). The Torah later confirms their continued connection; when Abraham dies, Isaac and Ishmael stand together to bury their father (25:9). This family bond, Rabbi Medan suggests, stretches across tension, separation, and divergent destinies. The echoes between chapters 21 and 22 invite us to hear not only the trials but also the shared story of Abraham’s sons.

Rabbi Chanoch Waxman, by contrast, emphasizes that the narrative parallels heighten a profound contrast. In his Virtual Beit Midrash shiur on Vayera (Yeshivat Har Etzion), Rabbi Waxman notes that Hagar, confronted with Ishmael’s suffering, is overcome with anguish. She casts her son aside and breaks down in tears. Ishmael, too, cries out. Their response is deeply human and sympathetic, but marked by panic, despair, and separation.

Abraham and Isaac, however, march together. Twice the Torah declares *vayelekhu shenehem yachdav* — they walked together — even as Isaac gradually understands the mission. However shocking the divine command, father and son confront the crisis with courage, shared purpose, and faith. In this reading, the Akedah becomes an instance of heroic spiritual strength, in stark contrast to Hagar’s anguished collapse.

Each perspective illuminates the text. Rabbi Medan draws our attention to the deep familial bonds and God’s continued concern for both children of Abraham, teaching empathy and broad covenantal vision. Rabbi Waxman highlights the extraordinary courage and faith that the Akeidah demands, sharpening our sense of Abraham and Isaac’s greatness and togetherness in the face of the unthinkable.

Both approaches speak powerfully. Ishmael and Hagar deserve our full sympathy; exile and fear are not failures but human realities, and God responds with compassion. At the same time, the Akedah calls us to recognize a model of steadfast spiritual commitment, united resolve in crisis, and the possibility of walking forward together even when God’s path seems hidden.

The Torah holds both truths. It honors the tears in the desert and the quiet steps up the mountain. And it challenges us, in our own moments of trial, to carry empathy for human vulnerability alongside aspiration toward covenantal courage.

\* National Scholar, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. From Rabbi Angel:

The weekly Torah reading invites us not only to study sacred text but to listen to the many voices through which Torah has been understood across the generations. In this new column, we will explore the parashah through paired perspectives: the classical teachings of our Sages and the medieval exegetes alongside literary and historical insights from modern scholarship. Our goal is not to smooth over differences, but to deepen understanding by letting these approaches speak to one another. Each edition will center on one verse or theme and ask: How do different paths within Torah study open new ways to encounter the divine word?

I hope you enjoy this new column and that it opens new avenues of Torah study and reflection.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3384>

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## Beyond Words: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

*"And Abraham lifted his eyes and looked and behold behind him was a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it for a burnt-offering in the stead of his son" (Bereishith 22:13).*

At the last moment, Abraham was spared from sacrificing his son Isaac. After this trial of faith, Abraham offered a ram as an expression of gratitude...and relief. The ram's horn — shofar — became a symbol of the Akeida episode. When we hear the shofar, we vicariously enter the scene of Abraham, Isaac and the ram.

The evocative power of the shofar made it a significant feature of religious ritual. On Rosh Hashana the Torah reading includes the Akeida story. At various points during the prayer service, the shofar is blown.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik commented on the fact that the shofar is sounded during the recitation of the Musaf on Rosh Hashana. What does the shofar have to do with prayer? *"It seems necessary to say that the mitzva of sounding the shofar is in the category of prayer even though we normally pray with words. On Rosh Hashana, day of judgment, we pray via the sounding of the shofar, a prayer without words or letters..."* We "pray" with the shofar because we simply don't have the words to express our deepest feelings and needs. The shofar transcends words.

At the Akeida, Abraham couldn't find words to express his emotions. The shofar of the ram came to represent wordless prayer, wordless relationship with God, wordless expression of who we are at our core.

When we think about our deepest emotions such as love, fear, anxiety, and awe, we cannot fully describe them in words. The emotions are profound, complex, overwhelming. They are only communicable, if at all, through non-verbal means, by our tears, facial expressions or gestures.

This is true in the realm of prayer. Our prayer book is filled with beautiful words, recitations for every day and every occasion. But real prayer doesn't emanate from the words but from our hearts and souls. Rabbinic tradition refers to prayer as "*service of the heart*." It isn't the words we utter so much as the underlying sense of awe at being in God's presence.

The Israeli writer — and Nobel Prize winner — S. Y. Agnon, captured the mystery of prayer in reminiscing about his hometown of Buczacz. He tells of a man who recited the Musaf and gave him "*a real taste of prayer*." The prayer leader had a pleasant voice, but "*it wasn't a voice we heard; it was prayer*." The heartfelt yearning of sincere prayer — the unuttered and unutterable emotion — was what inspired Agnon. In his book, *To This Day*, he quotes a woman: "*An intellectual, she said, 'is someone who can recite Psalms without tears.' I couldn't have put it any better myself.*"

Abraham's shofar symbolizes thoughts and feelings that go beyond words.. But it is precisely in the realm of wordlessness that we reveal our true selves. This is true in our relationship with others, in our relationship with God...and in our own self-understanding.

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Please share this Angel for Shabbat column with your family and friends, and please visit our website [jewishideas.org](http://jewishideas.org) for many articles that foster an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judaism.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3383>

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## Vayeira – The Double Win

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \*

*May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel*

*Saul and Carol Gold sponsor Rabbi Rhine's Dvar Torah this week in loving memory of R' Jack Gold z.l.*

The story of the Akeidah holds great lessons in our understanding of successful Torah observance. When Hashem instructed Avraham to "*Bring [Yitzchak] up as a Korban*," Avraham understood it to mean that Yitzchak was to be sacrificed. Avraham overcame whatever confusion this directive must have caused for him and proceeded willingly to do the will of Hashem. In doing so, Avraham imbedded in the genetics of the Jewish people the ability for enormous fortitude and self-sacrifice for the sake of a mitzvah.

Really, the directive was only a test. Once Avraham brought Yitzchak "*up as a Korban*," Avraham passed the test. He was willing. In a certain way we might say that Avraham had to be tricked into thinking that he was expected to sacrifice his son so that he would live through that expectation and experience the emotions of wholehearted dedication to Hashem. In the Kabbalistic worlds of emotional experience and intent, Avraham had brought his son as a Korban. His intent and experience were accepted as real, even as the directive not to harm Yitzchak was given.

In fact, I have heard it suggested that this is why Hashem did not personally tell Avraham not to harm Yitzchak. Instead, He sent an angel (22:11). In Hashem's "*world*" the impact of Avraham's willingness had already been made; in terms of merit, we talk of the "*ash of Yitzchak*." For Hashem to say in that context, "*Do not harm him*," would indicate that the sacrifice never happened. That would take away from the Kabbalistic impact of what Avraham did. In heaven it is as if it happened and that merit is something we can tap into for generations.

This principle of the Jew's willingness to make great sacrifice — but once the willingness is there the actual mitvah is not so extreme — is a principle that guides us in our observance of mitzvos.

A gentleman, who himself did not receive a Jewish education, once approached me to help him get his daughter into a Jewish school. He told me that besides the application and admissions process, he was apprehensive about the tuition costs. He told me that someone had told him that Jewish Day School education is very expensive. *"But,"* he added, as he spoke with me, *"I look forward to doing it. My wife and I are willing to downsize and live in a hovel if that's what it takes to get our daughter a Jewish education."*

Fortunately, we made arrangements to have his daughter accepted to a wonderful school at an affordable tuition rate. He didn't have to sell his house and live in a hovel. But I was struck by the willingness of a Jew to make the wholehearted Akeida-like sacrifice for the sake of the mitzvah. I have no doubt that like Avraham and Yitzchak at the Akeida of old, that in heaven, this man's willingness to make a great personal sacrifice for his daughter's Torah education, made a noteworthy impact even if his great sacrifice wasn't needed.

The story is told of a diamond merchant who came to a hotel with a suitcase. A worker hurried to assist him and grabbed the suitcase and carried it up to his room. When the man arrived at his room, he found the worker exhausted and sweating profusely from exertion. In fact, the worker asked the man for a generous tip because of the difficult work he had done. The man said, *"I respect that you worked hard, but if the suitcase you carried was heavy, you took the wrong one. Mine is light; it is filled with diamonds."*

Similarly, there are times that we must be ready to go all out for a mitzvah. Indeed, we are in fact ready to exert ourselves and make sacrifices. But more often than not, the actual mitzva is much easier than we anticipated, once we appreciate what is really being asked of us.

I believe that the holiday of Pesach is such a mitzvah. For many people, even the mention of the word Pesach is overwhelming. I have even heard it said that in one family, a six-year-old sensed the stress level of the family as Pesach approached. Thinking that Pesach was a person causing all of this angst to his parents, he declared, *"When Pesach gets here, I'm going to beat him up."*

I have been approached by Rabbis and mentors who describe stories of families ready to go to a hotel for Pesach, using money they barely have, because they are unsure of how they could possibly live up to the standards of a kosher Pesach.

It is admirable to have the willingness to scrub and clean, and in some homes even paint, in anticipation of Pesach. In some homes the feeling of panic and exhaustion seems to be part of the essence of the holiday. The willingness to exert ourselves if needed is sacred. In heaven Hashem treasures our readiness to do whatever it takes to have a kosher Pesach. But when we examine and study the mitzvah carefully, we realize that stress, panic, and exhaustion are not essential parts of the mitzvah. In fact, it could be argued that without studying the halachos of this mitzva carefully, it is hard to fulfill it with joy, the way the mitzva was meant to be fulfilled.

I am therefore initiating a study program of ten minutes a day, Sunday through Wednesday, in which participants can learn the halachos of Pesach, with the goal of clarifying what shortcuts and solutions can be used to make Pesach the enjoyable Yom Tov it is meant to be. By having everyone in the family as part of the team we can prepare for Pesach and enjoy it. The loving Jewish willingness to get overwhelmed by Pesach is admirable, like the Akeida that Avraham was willing to do. But the actual mitzvah of Pesach is not meant to overwhelm.

Preparing for Pesach is a big task. Like anything monumental, it takes planning and effort. Think of Pesach like a Chasuna between us and Hashem; we want to do it right. And we want to make memories for the children. But we want to know what the mitzvah is so that we don't get overwhelmed by what we think it might be expecting of us. In this way we can "win" and get credit for the astounding self-sacrifice we have been willing to have, and also for the enjoyable Pesach that we hope to have.

Starting on Tuesday, November 11, we will begin this ten-minute a day with the message, “*Study Pesach; Enjoy Pesach.*” Once you sign up you will receive the daily recording so you can listen to it at your convenience. Then, on Thursday evenings we will gather on Zoom to discuss that which we studied that week. [ed.: to join the class, Listen to free samples and sign up at [TEACH613.ORG/PESACH](http://TEACH613.ORG/PESACH). You may also send an email to Rabbi Rhine, email below.]

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos.

\* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are [www.care-mediation.com](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com). **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

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## **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.

Rash"i 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?

Rash"i 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.

\* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and then associated with the Savannah Kollel.

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## **Sciopero Bianco – Avraham's Italian Strike**

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

Growing up in Israel, I would quite often hear, and experience, the term Italian Strike. Such a strike is carried out when workers are forced by law to show up to work and follow instructions, so they do exactly what is required of them and nothing more. The Israeli version of that strike is called a slow-down strike, in which all tasks are performed by the book but at a much slower pace.

Now, I have been reading and analyzing the story of the Akedah for many years, and I have always found it very difficult to defend Avraham's actions.

How was he capable of taking another human being, let alone his son, bind him, and offer him as a sacrifice? Why did he not tell Sarah? Why did he not argue with God the way he argued for the people of Sodom? Why did he not show compassion for Yitzhak as he has shown, or at least tried to show, towards Hagar and Yishmael?

It was only this year, when reading, for the millionth time, the Pesukim of the Akedah, that I gained new understanding into Avraham's actions, and that new glimpse into his mind is heart wrenching.

Avraham is the employee who is forced by law to obey his employer. He must do as God tells him. Unlike the cases of Sodom or Hagar, he feels that now he is asked to show his faith and devotion, so to refuse or to argue is to be disobedient and rebellious. He does not tell Sarah because he does not know how to break the news to her. He sees Yitzhak as an extension of his own being, and it is very probable that had he slaughtered his son, Avraham would have died of heartbreak or would go insane. But he cannot argue...

Instead, Avraham carries out a sciopero bianco, an Italian strike. Let's look at the text:

*Avraham rose up early in the morning and saddled his donkey.* Gen. 22:3

Avraham has many servants, two of whom he takes with him on the journey. Why not ask one of them to saddle the donkey?

*He split firewood.* Ibid.

This takes even longer than saddling the donkey. Why not ask the two servants to help him?

*Avraham travels with one donkey. Ibid.*

In Gen. 12:16 we read that Avraham had many sheep, oxen, donkeys, and camels. Why travel with only one donkey? This becomes especially strange when we consider that Avraham was traveling with a young child (according to Ibn Ezra, Yitzhak was 12 or 13, I believe he was 6 or 7 years old).

Avraham was obviously stalling for time, and by taking only one donkey to carry the firewood, he was able to gain about two days and a half, because the distance from Elone Mamre to Mount Moriah should have taken no more than 12 hours riding a donkey.

*Avraham sees the place from afar, he tells his servants to wait for him with the donkey, and he goes on with Yitzhak. He then builds an altar and sets the firewood upon it. Gen. 22:4-9*

Avraham could have continued with his servants to his final destination. That way, the donkey would keep carrying the firewood, instead of the young Yitzhak. Not taking his servants with him meant that Avraham had to build the altar and place the firewood by himself. That means that leaving the servants behind slowed the process significantly.

*Avraham tells Yitzhak that God will choose His sacrificial lamb. Gen. 22:8*

I see these words now as a suppressed scream, an indirect supplication to God: Please find a lamb! Please don't let it be my son!

I think that during the whole journey, Avraham was silently screaming these words, hoping for an answer from God, for some marvelous twist in the plot or a Deus-ex-Machina to solve his dilemma.

And then comes the final moment. Avraham can delay no more, but in verse 10, he is still trying:

*Avraham stretched out his hand,  
And he took the knife  
To slaughter his son...*

We should read these words in slow motion. The Torah could have simply written that Avraham took the knife, but no! Avraham stretches his hand, slowly, telling God "See? I am about to do it! Please make it stop! Please stop me now!"

The angel finally stops Avraham, and we learn here several lessons:

1. Those of us who judged Avraham harshly should apologize to him.
- 2.
3. Those who have learned from this story that the ultimate act of devotion is sacrificing your life, or that of others, should go back to the text and learn it thoroughly.
4. All of us should study the biblical texts thoroughly because we can always find something new.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan )Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(.

Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.

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## **A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community**

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation \*

In this jam-packed parsha, we read about Avraham's immense hachnasat orchim – his generous welcoming of guests – plus the destruction of Sedom, Lot and his family's escape, the birth of Yitzchak, sending away Hagar and Yishmael, another kidnapping of Sarah and her return, a peace treaty, and finally, the Akeidat Yitzchak, sacrificing Isaac. With so much happening and so many lessons to uncover, I'd like to pose a question for this week below.

This week's question for 'Around the Shabbat Table': Why does Hashem command Avraham to sacrifice his son after everything he has already endured, especially right after making a peace treaty with Avimelech?

[Editor's note: If you became Rabbi of the only synagogue in a small, isolated Jewish community, at what level would you direct your Shabbat message?]

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

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## **Rav Kook Torah Vayeira: The Binding of Isaac**

The great merit of Abraham's trial of the Akeidah — the Binding of Isaac — is mentioned repeatedly in our prayers. It is a theme of central importance to Judaism. Yet one could ask a simple question: What is so profound, so amazing about the Akeidah? After all, it was common among certain pagan cults to sacrifice children )such as the idolatry of Molech(. In what way did Abraham show greater love and self-sacrifice than the idol-worshippers of his time?

### **Monotheism on Trial**

Rav Kook addressed this issue in a letter penned in 1911. The absolute submission that idolatry demanded — and received — was not just a result of primitive mankind's fearful attempts to appease the capricious gods of nature. Even the most abject paganism reflects the truth of the soul's deep yearnings for closeness to God. Even the most abase idolatry contains profound awareness that the Divine is more important than anything else in life.

With the introduction of Abraham's refined monotheism in the world, it was necessary to counter the objection of paganism: can the Torah's abstract concept of God compete with the tangible reality of idols? Can monotheism produce the same raw vitality, the same passionate devotion, as paganism? Or is it merely a cold, cerebral religion — theologically



correct, but tepid and uninspiring?

Through the test of the Akeidah, Abraham demonstrated to the world that, despite the intellectual refinement of his teachings, his approach lacked none of the religious fervor and boundless devotion to be found in the wildest of pagan rites. His refined Torah could match idolatry's passion and fire without relying on primitive imagery and barbaric practices.

)*Gold from the Land of Israel*, pp. 49-50. Adapted from *Igrot HaRe'iyah* vol. II, p. 43.(

<https://ravkooktorah.org/VAYERA58.htm>

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## **Vayera – The Binding of Isaac: A New Interpretation )5771, 5784(**

By Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.\*

It is the hardest passage of all, one that seems to defy understanding. Abraham and Sarah have waited years for a child. God has promised them repeatedly that they would have many descendants, as many as the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, the grains of sand on the seashore. They wait. No child comes.

Sarah, in deep despair, suggests that Abraham should have a child by her handmaid Hagar. He does. Ishmael is born. Yet God tells Abraham: This is not the one. By now Sarah is old, post-menopausal, unable by natural means to have a child.

Angels come and again promise a child. Sarah laughs. But a year later Isaac is born. Sarah's joy is almost heart-breaking:

*Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; all those who hear will laugh with me." Then she said, "Who would have told Abraham, 'Sarah will nurse children'? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." Gen. 21:6-7*

Then come the fateful words:

*"Take your son, your only one, the one whom you love – Isaac – and go to the land of Moriah. There, offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, the one that I will show you." Gen. 22:2*

The rest of the story is familiar. Abraham takes Isaac. Together they journey for three days to the mountain. Abraham builds an altar, gathers wood, binds his son and lifts the knife. At that moment:

The angel of the Lord called out to him from the heavens, *"Abraham! Abraham!"*

He said, *"Here I am."*

*"Do not lift your hand against the boy; do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear God: for you have not withheld from Me your son, your only one." Gen. 22:11-12*

The trial is over. It is the climax of Abraham's life, the supreme test of faith, a key moment in Jewish memory and self-definition.

But it is deeply troubling. Why did God so nearly take away what He had given? Why did He put these two aged parents – Abraham and Sarah – through so appalling a test? Why did Abraham, who had earlier challenged God on the fate of

Sodom, saying, *“Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?”* not protest this cruel act against an innocent child?

The standard interpretation, given by all the commentators – classical and modern – is that Abraham demonstrates his total love of God by being willing to sacrifice the most precious thing in his life, the son for whom he has been waiting for so many years.

The Christian theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote a powerful book about it, *Fear and Trembling*, in which he coined such ideas as the *“teleological suspension of the ethical”*<sup>1</sup> – the love of God that may lead us to do things that would otherwise be considered morally wrong – and *“faith in the absurd”* – Abraham trusted God to make the impossible possible. He believed he would lose Isaac but still keep him. For Kierkegaard, faith transcends reason. [ed.: Rabbi David Fohrman’s interpretation is also that Avraham trusts Hashem to make the impossible possible.]

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik saw the Binding as demonstrating that we must not expect always to be victorious. Sometimes we must experience defeat. *“God tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most.”*<sup>2</sup>

All these interpretations are surely correct. They are part of our tradition. I want, however, to offer a quite different reading, for one reason. Throughout Tanach, the gravest sin is child sacrifice. The Torah and the prophets consistently regard it with horror. It is what pagans do. This is Jeremiah on the subject:

*“They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal - something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind.”* Jer. 19:5

And this is Micah:

*“Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”* Micah 6:7

It is what Mesha, King of Moab, does to get the gods to grant him victory over the Israelites:

*When the King of Moab saw that the battle had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the King of Edom, but they failed. Then he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall. The fury against Israel was great; they withdrew and returned to their own land.”* 2 Kings 3:26-27

How can the Torah regard as Abraham’s supreme achievement that he was willing to do what the worst of idolaters do? The fact that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son would seem to make him – in terms of Tanach considered as a whole – no better than Baal or Molech worshippers or the pagan king of Moab. This cannot be the only possible interpretation.

There is an alternative way of looking at the trial. To do so we must consider an overriding theme of the Torah as a whole. Let us assemble the evidence.

First principle: God owns the land of Israel. That is why He can command the return of property to its original owners in the Jubilee year:

*“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine. You are merely migrants and tenants to Me.”* Lev. 25:23

Second principle: God owns the Children of Israel, since He redeemed them from slavery. That is what the Israelites mean when they sang, at the Red Sea:

*"Until Your people crossed, Lord, until the people You acquired Jam zu kanita[ crossed over." Ex. 15:16*

Therefore they cannot be turned into permanent slaves:

*"For the Israelites are My servants, whom I brought out from Egypt: they cannot be sold as slaves." Lev. 25:42*

Third principle: God is the ultimate owner of all that exists. That is why we must make a blessing over anything we enjoy:

*Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel: To enjoy anything of this world without first reciting a blessing is like making personal use of things consecrated to heaven, since it says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." R. Levi contrasted two texts. It is written, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," and it is also written, "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth hath He given to the children of men!" There is no contradiction: in the one case it is before a blessing has been said, in the other, after a blessing has been said. Brachot 35a*

All things belong to God, and we must acknowledge this before we make use of anything. That is what a blessing is: acknowledging that all we enjoy is from God.

This is the jurisprudential basis of the whole of Jewish law. God rules by right, not by might. God created the universe; therefore God is the ultimate owner of the universe. The legal term for this is *"eminent domain."* Therefore, God has the right to prescribe the conditions under which we may benefit from the universe. It is to establish this legal fact – not to tell us about the physics and cosmology of the Big Bang – that the Torah begins with the story of Creation.

This carries a special depth and resonance for the Jewish people since in their case God is not just – as He is for all humankind – Creator and Sustainer of the universe. He is also, for Jews, the God of history, who redeemed them from slavery and gave them a land that originally belonged to someone else, the *"seven nations."* God is Sovereign of the universe, but in a special sense He is Israel's only ultimate King, and the sole source of their laws. That is the significance of the book of Exodus. The key narratives of the Torah are there to teach us that God is the ultimate Owner of all.

In the ancient world, up to and including the Roman Empire, children were considered the legal property of their parents. They had no rights. They were not legal personalities in themselves. Under the Roman principle of *patria potestas*, a father could do whatever he wished with his child, including putting him to death. Infanticide was well known in antiquity) and in fact it has even been defended in our time by the Harvard philosopher Peter Singer, in the case of severely handicapped children(. That, for example is how the story of Oedipus begins, with his father Laius leaving him to die.

It is this principle that underlies the entire practice of child sacrifice, which was widespread throughout the pagan world. The Torah is horrified by child sacrifice, which it sees as the worst of all sins. It therefore seeks to establish, in the case of children, what it establishes in the case of the universe as a whole, the land of Israel, and the people of Israel. We do not own our children. God does. We are merely their guardians on God's behalf.

Only the most dramatic event could establish an idea so revolutionary and unprecedented – even unintelligible – in the ancient world. That is what the story of the Binding of Isaac is about. Isaac belongs to neither Abraham nor Sarah. Isaac belongs to God. All children belong to God. Parents do not own their children. The relationship of parent to child is one of

guardianship only. God does not want Abraham to sacrifice his child. God wants him to renounce ownership in his child. That is what the angel means when it calls to Abraham, telling him to stop, “*You have not withheld from Me your son, your only one.*”

The Binding of Isaac is a polemic against, and a rejection of, the principle of *patria potestas*, the idea universal to all pagan cultures that children are the property of their parents.

Seen in this light, the Binding of Isaac is now consistent with the other foundational narratives of the Torah, namely the creation of the universe and the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The rest of the narrative also makes sense. God had to show Abraham and Sarah that their child was not naturally theirs, because his birth was not natural at all. It took place after Sarah could no longer conceive.

**The story of the first Jewish child establishes a principle that applies to all Jewish children. God creates legal space between parent and child, because only when that space exists do children have the room to grow as independent individuals.** ]emphasis added[

The Torah ultimately seeks to abolish all relationships of dominance and submission. That is why it dislikes slavery and makes it, within Israel, a temporary condition rather than a permanent fate. That is why it seeks to protect children from parents who are overbearing or worse.

Abraham, we argued in last week’s study, was chosen to be the role model – for all time – of what it is to be a parent. We now see that the Binding of Isaac is the consummation of that story. A parent is one who knows that they do not own their child.

#### FOOTNOTES:

]1[ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling, and the Sickness Unto Death*, 1843, translated by Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954, see pp. 55, 62-63.

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

#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE: Questions to Ponder

]1[ What is the difference between being a guardian and being an owner?

]2[ What are some ways a parent can support their child in developing their religious faith, while becoming independent thinkers?

]3[ When is your faith in God tested? What helps you stay strong and committed in times like these?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/binding-of-isaac-new/> 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 Devar. Note: November 7 marks five years since Rabbi Sacks’ untimely passing.

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## Life Lessons From the Parshah: What to Do When Your Soul Runs Dry

By Yehoshua B. Gordon, z"l \*

Beginning with the Six Day War in 1967 (to some extent even earlier), the Rebbe initiated the "Mitzvah Campaign."

The Mitzvah Campaign involves walking over to a complete stranger, confirming their Jewish identity, and asking them questions such as, "Did you put on tefillin today?" "Do you have a mezuzah on your door?" "Do you light Shabbat candles?" The Rebbe eventually expanded the campaign to include 10 "starter" mitzvot such as keeping kosher, daily Torah study, and giving charity each day.

It was unconventional, to say the least. While standing in a supermarket, for example, you were expected to simply walk over to somebody and say, "Excuse me, are you Jewish? Let's put on tefillin!" These strange interactions ran counter to the typical American ethos of "mind your own business."

Furthermore, why would we begin by asking someone to put on tefillin? Wouldn't it be more logical to first invite them to study with us about tefillin, to begin by introducing them to the whole idea of Torah and mitzvot?

Yet the Rebbe took the opposite approach. *"Start with the action,"* said the Rebbe. *"First you put on tefillin, and then you can go learn about tefillin."*

So the big question is: does the action bring the emotion, or does the emotion bring the action? If the emotion brings the action, I have to wait until I'm in love, and then I'll bring flowers. If the action brings the emotion, it's the other way around.

This idea is discussed in the teachings of Chassidus on the haftarah for this week's Torah portion — an extraordinary story about the prophet Elisha.<sup>1</sup>

Among their terrible activities of the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel was the brutal oppression – and in many cases the outright killing – of the Torah scholars and the prophets of their time.

One of the administrators of the court of Ahab and Jezebel was a righteous man, a prophet himself, who happened to be an Edomite convert to Judaism. His name was Obadiah.

Obadiah was a very wealthy man, and he used his monetary blessings to hide many of the prophets, saving their lives.

Ultimately, the economy turned, and Obadiah, his wealth depleted, resorted to borrowing funds to continue protecting the prophets. Deep in debt, he even borrowed from the loan sharks – the sons of the wicked King Ahab. Unable to repay the loans, and with no bankruptcy laws to protect him, they persecuted him until he died from anguish.

The sons of Ahab then focused their harassment on the administrator's wife, Mrs. Obadiah. Finally, they threatened to come and take her two sons as slaves unless she repaid the money. It is a terrible, sad story.

### A Small Flask of Oil

This is where the storyline of our haftarah picks up:

*"Ishah achat" – "one woman" (the wife of Obadiah) cried out to Elisha, the great prophet of the time, and said, "Your servant, my husband, died. You knew him; he was a G-d-fearing man. Now the loan shark is coming to take my two sons. Please help! You're a miracle man! I need a miracle!"*

So Elisha tells her, *“Let’s see what I can do; what do you have in your house? Do you have anything of value? Gold, silver, precious stones? Stocks, bonds, securities? Anything at all?”*

*“I have nothing,”* she responds. *“All I have left is a small flask of olive oil. That’s it.”*

*“This is good!”* Elisha tells her. *“Here’s what you’ll do: go to all your neighbors and borrow as many jugs and jars and Tupperware as you can. Gather all of these vessels into your house. Make sure your children are there, and close the door. Then, take your flask of oil and begin to pour. Pour oil into every jar and into every container and keep pouring. As long as there are containers to fill, the oil will continue to pour.”*

And it worked! Suddenly, she had a massive volume of oil! When the last of the containers was filled, the oil stopped.

She ran to Elisha and asked, *“What’s next?”*

*“You’ve got plenty of olive oil,”* the prophet told her. *“Sell the oil. You’ll be able to pay all your debts and have enough money left to live comfortably for the rest of your life.”*

### **The Antidote to Spiritual Bankruptcy**

The Alter Rebbe, founder of Chabad, delivered a Chassidic discourse about this story, and many of the subsequent rebbes did as well. In a famous 1985 discourse, building upon the discourses of his predecessors and the teachings of Kabbalah, the Rebbe explained:

The *“one woman”* refers to the neshama, the soul within us. The soul is described as feminine – a woman, a princess.

The soul is *“of the wives of the prophets,”* so called because it is an extension of G d Almighty Himself.

The name Elisha means *“turning to my G d.”* The soul within us turns to G d and says, *“G d Almighty, I have a problem.”* Houston, we have a problem!

*“Avdecha ishi met”* – *“Your servant, my husband, has died.”* In Kabbalah, intellect )chochmah( is referred to as father )“av”( and husband )“ish”( . The soul says to G d, *“My intellectual commitment to Judaism is dead. I am no longer intellectually motivated to pursue Judaism. Other things in life inspire me. There’s a big world out there. I have no intellectual desire to pursue Torah and mitzvot.”*

*“And the collectors have come to take my two sons.”* If the intellectual realm is compared to “parents,” then the sons are love and fear of G d, which are the product of intellectual contemplation of G d’s greatness.

The soul cries out, *“The energies of impurity, the energies of secular life, are coming to take my ‘two sons.’ I’m about to lose my emotional connection to G d, to Judaism. I love other things and I fear other things.”*

As I like to say in my classes: Love G d? I love seven-layer cake! That’s what I love. Fear G d? I fear earthquakes. I fear the IRS. I have many fears, and G d is not one of them.

The neshama is saying, *“I’m going through spiritual bankruptcy. G d, I need Your help.”*

And, of course, G d is there to answer.

*"What do you have left in the house," G d says to the soul. What does the soul have left that it can call its own?*

*"All I've got," says the neshama, "is a small flask of pure olive oil." What is olive oil? Symbolically, it is the pristine essence of the soul.*

What is the nature of oil? If you mix olive oil with water or with any liquid, the oil rises to the top. Olive oil is pure; it's essential. Olive oil represents the spark, the essence, which can never be diluted, lost, or assimilated.

### **Just Do It!**

*"What do you have left in the house?" G d says to the soul, "What do you have left?" And when the answer is that only that spark remains, G d says, "This is good! You're in good shape. I want you to take lots of empty vessels, many containers. I want you to engage in activities of Torah and mitzvot. I want you to put on tefillin, I want you to light Shabbat candles, I want you to do and do and do.*

You don't feel it? That doesn't matter. As long as you keep pouring the oil, as long as you keep doing, even if you're not feeling it, the feeling will come. Take vessels, as many as possible, and do more and more and more.

Force yourself, if need be. And the actions — the pouring of the spark of your soul into the action of Torah and mitzvot — will revive you and will bring about a tremendous fervor, an intense emotional and intellectual connection to G d.

And, practically speaking, this explains why the Rebbe initiated his mitzvah campaigns: he understood that in our generation, the most essential aspect of Judaism is action.

The Rebbe emphasized that when you approach someone and ask them to put on tefillin, consider not only the immediate impact it will have on them, but also the enduring influence that one act might have on their children, their grandchildren, and all of their future descendants for generations to come.

A single experience, such as putting on tefillin, lighting Shabbat candles, or engaging in any of the campaign's mitzvot, even just once, can awaken an inner awareness, one that takes hold of that essential spark and causes it to pour and pour and pour – infinitely and endlessly.

Let's resolve to boldly take action, regardless of our fleeting emotions. Trust the process; first do, and the feeling will surely follow.

\* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons delivered by Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon in Encino, Calif., and broadcast on Chabad.org.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/6156004/jewish/What-to-Do-When-Your-Soul-Runs-Dry.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6156004/jewish/What-to-Do-When-Your-Soul-Runs-Dry.htm)

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## Vayeira: Learning from Abraham's Hospitality

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky \*

*He raised his eyes and saw three men standing nearby. He took note and ran toward them from the entrance to the tent, and prostrated himself on the ground. )Gen. 18:2(*

We can be sure that during the course of his conversation with G-d, Abraham was profoundly engrossed in the Divine revelation that he was experiencing. After all, when we pray, we are enjoined to first clear our minds of any distracting thoughts. The fact that Abraham noticed these men and tended to their needs, despite the intensity of his concentration, shows his extraordinary sensitivity to others.

This sensitivity is the key to hospitality. When offering hospitality to guests, we must do much more than merely offer them a free meal. We must focus fully on them and be attentive to their needs, displaying sincere concern for their welfare and comfort, taking a genuine interest in their conversation, and in general, making them feel at home when they are with us and that we were enriched by their company when we escort them on their way. Abraham was the paradigm of such sensitivity to others: in the very midst of a conversation with G-d, he took notice of three travelers and excused himself from G-d's presence to tend to their needs.

— from *Daily Wisdom #3*

\* An insight by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on parashat Noach from our *Daily Wisdom #3* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

May G-d grant continued wisdom, strength, victory and peace in the Holy Land.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society

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# Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah  
via the Internet

In memory of Rabbi Jack Pianko, z"l,  
on his yahrzeit, 21 Cheshvan,  
by Arlene Pianko Groner and family

Volume 32, Issue 4

Shabbat Parashat Vayera

5786 B"H

## Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

### Walking Together

There is an 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 man's name is Abraham. He is devoted to his God, who gave him a son and who is now telling him to sacrifice this 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. On those days he was a Jew breathing God's air, enjoying God's blessings, and he walked tall.

Before each and every Shabbat my mother made 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 Shechinah, 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 (2011), 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

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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 fathers, 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

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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 in succeeding, so often give of their money and time to others, 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.

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### **Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**

#### **Whose Sacrifice is it Anyway?**

"And they walked, the two of them, together." (Genesis 22:8) Whose sacrifice at the Akeda was greater, Abraham's or Isaac's? Instinctively, the first answer that comes to mind is Abraham. After all, the Torah portion is introduced with the words 'And God tested Abraham.' Indeed, Isaac was the very son Abraham had waited for all his life, the affirmation of his faith, the promise of his future.

Any father, let alone Abraham, would rather die than see his child die. Had God said, 'Sir, you have a choice, either your son or yourself,' Abraham would have done what thousands of others have done – push the child toward safety and climb Moriah himself, ever grateful that Isaac would live. Nevertheless, how can we overlook the depth of Isaac's suffering?

Whose life is it anyhow, whose flesh is bound to the altar, transformed into a whole-burnt offering? Father's or son's? And no matter how hard it may be to witness tragedy, can we deny that the real sacrifice belongs to the one going up in flames? Isaac is certainly no less a hero than Abraham. And it is clear that Isaac understands what is about to occur. According to Rashi he was thirty-seven years old, certainly old enough to fight his father's will or flee outright. And even if Ibn Ezra, who claims that Isaac was twelve, is more in consonance with the outline of the biblical story, Isaac still could have wept, protested, appealed to Abraham's mercy. No remonstrance on Isaac's part is mentioned in the biblical account; much the opposite, even after Isaac presumably is aware of what is about to occur, the text testifies, 'And they walked, the two of them, together.'

Despite the fact that the father in all of us identifies with Abraham's sacrifice, nevertheless there does exist one essential difference between father and son, which was told to me by Rabbi Moshe Besdin.

It was the voice of God which Abraham heard commanding him to take his son, his only son, his beloved son, and to bring him as an all-burnt offering. When Maimonides wants to prove the truth of prophecy, he turns to the Binding of Isaac. Had Abraham not believed in the absolute truth of his prophecy, could he have possibly lifted his hand to slaughter his son? Would he have sacrificed his entire future as well as the future of humanity unless he was absolutely sure of the divine source of the command?

But can we say the same about Isaac? After all, Isaac heard the command not from God, but from his father.

A close look at the text between the lines and words of the Bible will provide a glimpse into the nature of the relationship between this unique father and son. There is a frightening suspicion in the mind of Isaac, a growing awareness of what is about to happen, a desire to confront his father (albeit with great delicacy), and then a profound, acquiescence, even a unity of purpose and mission. Abraham rises in the morning to take his son on the fateful journey. What they talk about, if they talk at all, is not mentioned; but on the third day, after Abraham sends away the young servants, Isaac begins to speak. And what he says, or doesn't say, is of exquisitely sensitive significance.

Professor Nehama Leibowitz has taught us that when the Torah records a dialogue and wishes to inform us of a change in the speaker, it does so by using the word 'Vayomer' – 'And he

### **Likutei Divrei Torah**

said'; after all, the Torah script is devoid of quotation marks. On the third day of their journey, Isaac notices his father preparing the knife and wood for the offering. For the first time since the journey began the Torah records Isaac's words. 'Vayomer, 'the text begins; 'and he said to Abraham his father...'

Now we should expect to find the content of his words. But the biblical text records no such content. Instead, we get another 'Vayomer, 'but this time with a word: 'Vayomer Avi' – 'And he said, "My father..."

But why have one 'Vayomer' after another when both are referring to the same speaker, and Isaac actually said nothing at all after the first Vayomer? It's like having quotation marks with no quote in between them! At this point in the narrative Abraham acknowledges Isaac by saying 'Here I am, my son. 'Now comes Isaac's third Vayomer in this context, 'And he said, "behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?"'

What is the meaning of the Vayomers?

Apparently, Isaac suspects the true purpose of the journey from the moment his father woke him and told him they were setting out. He tremblingly waits in silence for the first three days to either hopefully hear another explanation or to get a tragic confirmation of his worst nightmare. Abraham, understandably, cannot speak. Isaac yearns to ask the question, even if it means that he will hear the worst. Anything, he thinks, would be better than this gnawing uncertainty. But how can a son ask a father, 'Are you planning to slaughter me?' Given the closeness Isaac always felt as the beloved son of a father who waited until he was one hundred years old to have a son with Sarah, how could he even begin to formulate such an unthinkable act?

On the third day, Isaac tries: 'Vayomer...' But all that came out of his mouth was 'Aaah – 'he could only stutter and stammer, he was incapable of formulating such a horrific idea. At length he tries again: 'Vayomer, 'and this time he added, 'My father.... 'Once again, he falters in mid-sentence, to which Abraham gently responds, 'Here I am, my son. 'This finally gave Isaac the wherewithal to delicately suggest: 'Vayomer, ' – 'and he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the whole burnt offering?"'

Abraham's response really leaves no room for further question: 'The Almighty will provide for Himself the lamb for the whole burnt offering, my son. 'If Abraham's words are devoid of a comma, he is clearly suggesting: 'for the whole burnt offering is my son.'

What is truly marvelous is the very next biblical phrase: ‘...so they walked both of them, together (yachdav).’ We must be struck by the ominous use of ‘together’ to describe a journey to which both are traveling with equal dedication despite their common knowledge that only one of them will return alive.

We must likewise be struck by the willingness of both of them to adhere to this most inexplicable command of God – despite the fact that the father heard it from God Himself and the son only heard it from his father.

And with these indisputable facts, Isaac emerges as a true patriarch, a model and paradigm for all future generations. After all, our penitential dirges (slichot and kinot) testify to the fact that Isaac is indeed the model of Kiddush Hashem (sanctifying of God’s name, dying for one’s faith and nation) throughout our blood-soaked and tear-stained history.

Did those who allowed themselves to be slaughtered, impaled on the Crusaders’ swords rather than accept conversion, hear the voice of God directly? Is it not more correct to say that they were heeding their parents and teachers, the traditional texts and lessons transmitted through the generations which defined and delimited the command to give up one’s life in sanctification of God’s name?

Abraham may be the first Jew, but Isaac is the first Jewish son, the first Jewish student, the first representative of the mesora (tradition handed from parent to child, from master to disciple), whose dedication unto death emanates not from his having heard God’s word directly, but from his adherence to the Oral Tradition.

The essence of Judaism is not a religion based on beatific visions along the road to Damascus, or even Jerusalem. Ours is a religion whose truth is passed down from generation to generation, parent to child, master to disciple, teacher to student. And the paradigm for this begins right at the Akeda. Who is the first Jew? Abraham. But who is the first historic Jew, the first representative of the historic chain of being Jewish whose links are forged by the frames of commitment and sacrifice? Abraham’s son, Isaac.

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### **The Person in the Parsha** **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

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#### **“How Would You Translate ‘Yashar’?”**

I’ve set two goals for myself in writing this year’s series of “Person in the Parsha” columns. One is to focus on a person who is barely mentioned in the parsha, as I’ve done in previous weeks with Nimrod. The other is to discuss the parameters of “Good” vs. “Evil,” as exemplified by the courage of the very young

Avram vs. the murderous tyranny of King Nimrod.

This week’s Torah portion, Parshat Vayera (Genesis 18:1-22:24), has its share of minor characters, some quite villainous, one may say “sadistic,” like the population of Sodom and Gomorrah. Others, like Ishmael and Avimelech, upon whom I will reserve judgment for now because of the complexity of their moral standards.

But the outstanding personalities in this week’s parsha are clearly the man and woman now renamed by the Almighty as Avraham and Sarah. They are surely this week’s “stars.”

They are both precursors to millennia of heroes and heroines, all paragons of the “Good”, who deserve the title Yashar. Before defining the term, I must make you aware that the Bible itself refers to the Book of Genesis, Sefer Bereshit, as Sefer HaYashar. The Bible does so in Joshua 10:13 and again in Samuel II 1:18. You might wish to look up these verses and see for yourselves.

So, what does yashar mean? Some define it as “straight,” in the sense of a “straight line,” veering neither to the left nor to the right, geographically or morally. I prefer to define it as “upright,” as the verse in Kohelet, “The Lord made men yashar but they engaged in many schemes (Ecclesiastes 7:29).

Some of the “near-synonyms” which will give you a better idea of what I mean by upright are the following: virtuous, principled, worthy, trustworthy, rightful, correct, faithful, truthful. In short, a person of integrity.

Why would the Bible itself refer to Bereshit as the “Book of the Upright”? For the answer, we must consult the Talmud (Tractate Avodah Zarah 25a) which quotes the sage Rabbi Yochanan who asserts that it is named the “Book of the Yashar/Upright” because it “relates the story of Avraham, Isaac, and Jacob who were all yesharim/upright individuals.”

Who referred to our Patriarchs as “yesharim”? Of all people, Balaam! When asked by Balak to place a curse upon the people of Israel, he demurs and says, among other praises of the people he is asked to curse, “May I die the death of the yesharim/the upright (i.e. the Patriarchs), may my fate be like theirs.” (Numbers 23:10)

I urge you to recall the verse in Devarim which proclaims that the Almighty Himself is called yashar, as in Parshat Ha’azinu (Deuteronomy 32:4), “righteous and upright is He!”

What does it mean to be yashar, and how does Avraham earn this appellation?

## **Likutei Divrei Torah**

For this, I must introduce you to Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the nineteenth century sage who headed the famed yeshiva in Volozhin, Lithuania. He is known by the abbreviation of his full name, Netziv. He was a most prolific writer, and arguably his most famous work is his commentary on the Chumash entitled HaEmek Davar. He devotes his introduction to the Book of Bereshit to the definition of an ish yashar, an upright man.

He begins with a description of the faults of the generation of Jews just prior to the destruction of the Second Temple:

“In those days, the population contained many tzaddikim and chassidim [devout and pious folk] and those who toiled in Torah study. But they were not “upright” in their dealings with others. They held hatred in their hearts, one against the other, so that if they but suspected that another person was not as pious as they considered themselves to be, they accused him of being a Sadducee or an apikores, a sectarian or a heretic.

“In the extreme, this led even to murder and to every possible transgression. Thus was the Temple destroyed... For the Holy One Blessed Be He does not tolerate such “tzaddikim” ... Even if such perversions are supposedly performed for the “sake of Heaven,” they bring about the erosion of the Creation and the ruin of civilization.

“It is to the credit of our Patriarchs that besides being tzaddikim and chassidim and lovers of the Almighty to the extent humanly possible, they were also yesharim! And so, they dealt humanely with other nationalities, and even with despicable idolaters. They dealt with them as peers and were concerned about their welfare because of their own universalist concerns.

“We see this clearly in the fact that Avraham extended himself to pray for Sodom. Even though he disdained the people of Sodom and their ruler because of their evil acts, he nevertheless wanted them to be spared.

“That is why Avraham is called av hamon goyim, father of the multitude of nations. Fathers desire the well-being of even their wayward sons.”

Netziv dedicates the rest of his introduction to the Book of Bereshit to justify why it is called the Sefer Hayshar/“the Book of the Upright.” He demonstrates how both Isaac and Jacob exhibited similar tolerance and sympathy toward individuals who were less than worthy. Examples include Isaac with Avimelech and Jacob with Laban, as we will soon read in future weekly Torah portions.

I close by sharing with you an account of my several experiences leading groups of tourists on trips to Eastern Europe. Among the highlights of all these trips were the visits to the graves of Jewish religious leaders, many of which date back five or six centuries. Before each such visit, I would select a text written by or about the person whose grave we were about to visit.

One of those graves was the final resting place of Netziv, who died brokenhearted after his beloved yeshiva in Volozhin was forced by the Russian government to close its doors. Soon after that tragic disappointment, in 1892, he spent time in Warsaw and passed away there. He was buried in the large cemetery there. The famed Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk, who died several decades later, was buried next to him.

At the end of each of these journeys, I would ask the members of the group to comment upon their emotions and submit a written description of any life-changing experiences they may have had in the course of the weeklong adventure.

I still cherish those scraps of paper and remain amazed and inspired by how many of the participants reported with pride and sincerity that they found Netziv's words greatly influential, if not actually life changing.

I encourage you, dear reader, to try to read Netziv's introduction in its eloquent original. Perhaps you too will be affected by it sufficiently to expand your attitudes towards others in your surroundings and to join the company of our treasured ancestors, the yesharim.

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#### **Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand** **Maintaining Inspiration**

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It is certainly a sobering ethical lesson that even though the people of Sodom were the antithesis of all that Avraham stood for morally, nevertheless Avraham's ahavas habriyos (love of all creation) compelled him to try to save the city upon hearing that they were facing imminent destruction. However, I would like to focus our attention today on a comment Avraham made in "apologizing", so to speak, to Hashem for his brazen defense of the city. Avraham says "...Behold, now, I have begun to speak to my L-rd although I am but dust and ashes." (Bereshis 18:27).

Avraham excuses himself for speaking to the Master of the Universe when he himself is "only afar v'efer" (dust and ashes). Rashi here notes that "afar v'efer" is not merely a colloquial expression. Rashi interprets: "and behold I should have already been nothing more than dust as a result of my battle with the

kings." Avraham Avinu had just engaged in war with the mightiest army in the world. They should have crushed him; pulverized him into dust – and yet he emerged victorious. Furthermore, "I should have already been ashes as a result of my encounter with Nimrod (who threw me into the fiery furnace in Ur Kasdim)."

In other words, "I am afar v'efer" is not merely a rhetorical expression. Avraham states "If not for Your mercy towards me, saving me from two certain death sentences, I would have already been turned into afar v'efer!"

Rabbi Avraham Buxbaum, a former talmid of Ner Yisroel, came out with a very nice sefer on the weekly parsha, in which he makes the following observation: Avraham states over here, "I am afar v'efer" in the present tense. This is noteworthy because Avraham is not afar v'efer now. Avraham really means I was almost dust and I was almost ashes, but right now I am alive and well. Yet Avraham speaks in the present tense.

We learn from here the key to remaining appreciative of something that has happened sometime in the past. It is an extremely common scenario for a person to go through a near death experience and then recover. He may be cured from a life-threatening illness. He may have been in a terrible accident and have walked away from it. It is the nature of people that when they emerge from those type of situations, they proclaim "I am now a new person. From now on, I will never miss davening. I am never going to speak lashon ha'rah. I am always going to daven with a minyan." However, invariably, what happens to most people is that with the passage of time, it becomes "same old, same old."

I know a very fine fellow, who, by his own admission – I am not accusing him of this – experienced this. This fellow was in a terrible car crash. He was hit by a truck and walked away from it without a broken bone. The State Trooper who pulled up to the accident site, upon seeing the car, proclaimed it to be a miracle. "No one walks away from such a crash." The person made a seudas ho'da'ah (meal of thanksgiving). He was very shaken and moved by the whole experience. He told me that he started learning various mussar sefarim, etc., etc.

Now, almost a year later, the effect of the experience dissipated. By his own admission, he does not feel the same way. What is the key to a person maintaining that same feeling of hakaras hatov and gratitude to the Ribono shel Olam, thus enabling the person to maintain the kabalos he accepted upon himself at the time of the "salvation"?

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The key is to keep the day of the crash in mind. Live in THAT time frame rather than in the present. That is what Avraham is saying: Right NOW I consider myself afar v'efer because I should really be a dead man! I remember to this day the moment I entered into the fiery furnace and I didn't burn up. That miracle is ever-present in my mind.

However, if a person focuses on how he is TODAY, rather than immediately after the incident, then his feelings of overwhelming gratitude will inevitably dissipate. The key is to stay focused on the day that it occurred.

Rabbi Buxbaum gives an example: A person has been unemployed for several months. To say the least, it is a very depressing situation. He can't pay his debts. He must come onto the largesse of other people. It can be humiliating and ego destroying. Then someone gives him a job. The day he receives the job and the day he starts receiving a paycheck again, it literally becomes "Layehudim hoysa orah" (To the Jews there was light – Esther 8:16). The person is so grateful: "I am working. I am making money. I am being productive. I have a job."

However, six months later he does not like the working conditions. He thinks he should be getting a raise already. He doesn't like this. He doesn't like that. The boss yells at him. He is grumpy, etc., etc., etc. How does that happen? Why does this happen? It is because the person looks at himself in the present and thinks "I have a job. I don't like the job. What did my boss do for me?"

A person must try to bear in mind the way he felt the day BEFORE he got the job. "Remember how depressed you were – those feelings of worthlessness that you had!" A person should always try to look at where he is NOW, relative to the day BEFORE he got the job! That is the key. "I am afar v'efer."

General Motors once ran a commercial which said, "It is typically American to ask 'What have you done for me lately?'" This is such an improper attitude! It is the diametric opposite of hakaras hatov. Hakaras hatov is constantly bearing in mind what someone else or what the Ribono shel Olam did for you. It is not a question of "What have you done for me LATELY?" That is not a Jewish mentality. That is not our mesorah.

Put differently, Pete Rose famously once said "You are only as good as your last at-bat." That also is a treife hashkafa. A person must constantly be makir tov. This certainly is a challenge. It is human nature to feel otherwise. It is a chess that the Ribono shel Olam blessed us with shikcha (forgetfulness) because if people would be obsessed for the

rest of their lives with the impact of 'the crash,' they would go crazy. That is why we were granted shikcha. The Gemara says in Pesachim that there are three things without which the world could not exist, and one of them is shikcha.

If we didn't have shikcha, we would always be confronted by the greatest tragedies in our lives. When a person, chas v'shalom, loses a relative, there is a decree that the deceased will be (somewhat) forgotten from their loved one's heart after twelve months. It is not as painful as it once was. If it were as painful as the day it happened, people would not be able to go on.

So, emotionally it is a beracha. However, intellectually a person needs to be able to think "I remember what it was like when I did not have a job. I remember when that car hit me and I walked away unscathed. I looked at that car and thought 'And I am but afar v'efer.' I remember how it was when I got the diagnosis and I thought 'That's it! 'But, chasdei Hashem, I was cured.'" That is what we need to remember: Keep THAT day in mind.

This is the lesson that Avraham Avinu is teaching us when he says "I am but afar v'efer."

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#### **Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

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The Akeida was a major misunderstanding. That is how Rashi explains this epic event, which is presented to us in Parshat Vayera. Rashi cites the Midrash in Bereshit Rabbah, suggesting that after Hashem said to Abraham, 'Okay, don't kill Isaac', Abraham then turned to God and said 'Please, God, make up your mind!'

'First of all, my wife and I can't have children, and then miraculously when I am 100 and she is 90, You give us a child and tell us that through him we will have future generations. Then You say to me: 'take this very child and slaughter him.' So, I make all the preparations, and now You say, 'No, don't do that.'

'Please God, won't You make up Your mind?'

Hashem replied to Abraham, 'I've been absolutely consistent, I have not deviated from my intentions, nor from my instructions to you. Did I ever once say to you, Avraham—slaughter your child, kill him? Not at all!'

'What I said was 'Veha'alehu sham le'olah', bring him up, place him on an altar, and then wait for further instructions.'

So, what emerges here is that actually this was a major misunderstanding!

But then what we have to ask is – what was this all about?

Was God just marching Abraham up to the top of a hill in order to march him down again without any purpose whatsoever?

Actually, there was a deep purpose.

It was in order that for the rest of time people would be talking about the fact that there was an opportunity, the potential for human life to be taken, and God said: 'Halt! That is not the way of moral and ethical life. Put down your knife Avraham'.

The message of the Akeidah is that as much as sometimes there may be an urge to kill, we need to promote life. We need to champion the value of life. We need to cherish the preciousness of life. That must be right at the core of everything that our faith stands for, and what we live for.

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#### **Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah**

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##### **Do not stretch out your hand against the boy..." - Ofer Marciano**

For over a year now, we have been entrenched in a physical struggle, contending with enemies determined to obliterate us through missiles, UAVs, and acts of terrorism. Following a time when globalization flourished, allowing us to feel like citizens of the world as international travel became routine, we now face a resurgent global wave of antisemitic voices, a reaction ignited by the relentless attacks we have suffered this past year. Our fight extends beyond borders, as we now confront a formidable challenge worldwide to affirm our right to exist—as a Jewish people and as a sovereign Jewish state in the Land of Israel.

This week's parsha recounts the story of Sarah and Avraham, beginning with the angels' announcement to Sarah that she will bear a child in her old age and culminating with the Akedah—the binding of Yitzhak—one of the most profound narratives, brimming with unanswered questions. Even at its simplest level, we find ourselves wondering why God would ask Avraham to sacrifice his son, and why Avraham would accept such a request. How could a father consent to give up the most precious part of his life? How could Avraham comply with the command and risk the continuity of his lineage with Sarah, after so many years of yearning for descendants? How could he bear such an extraordinary trial set by God?

God tests Avraham through ten trials, each more challenging than the last. He and Sarah face immense suffering, tests, and profound trials of faith before they are finally blessed with Yitzhak. Leaving behind everything

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familiar, they embark on a journey to an unknown land, guided solely by their faith in the Creator. In this land, they encounter famine, forcing them to descend to Egypt. Sarah is taken twice by kings—Pharaoh and Avimelech—while Avraham engages in a battle against four kings and, in his old age, undergoes circumcision.

Sarah ultimately accepts that she cannot bear Avraham a child, and Avraham takes Hagar, who gives birth to Yishmael. After receiving the promise that Yitzhak will indeed be born, fulfilling their long-held hopes for a child, Sarah and Avraham still face household discord. Avraham is ultimately commanded to send Hagar and Yishmael away. For Avraham, Yitzhak is the light at the end of his journey, the place of rest he had long yearned for, ever since he heeded the words, "Go thee from your country..."

What thoughts might have surged through Avraham's mind as he heard God's command: "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Yitzhak... and offer him there as a burnt offering"? How can a person come to terms with the idea of sacrificing something so profoundly precious? What strength and depth of faith are required to recognize that, regardless of your own hopes, desires, or plans, there is a higher design crafted by the Creator—and that fulfilling His command is paramount, even when it defies every instinct, every fiber of one's being?

If we attempt to relate this monumental trial to our own era, we can imagine it as akin to those wrenching moments when wives bid farewell to their husbands as they depart for war, risking their lives; when parents send their children to the frontlines, knowing they are endangering their lives to protect the homeland and its people, and to assert before the world our right to exist as a nation and as a Jewish state in this land. Yet even with such modern parallels, we still find ourselves asking: how could a father bind his own son with his own hands, driven by unwavering faith and loyalty to God alone?

We try to place ourselves in the shoes of those who face such agonizing decisions and question how we would respond. How deep is our own faith? Today, we witness a similar strength as families who have endured unspeakable loss and confronted the face of evil continue to inspire us. Even amidst their grief, countless ordinary citizens pack their bags without a second thought, stepping forward to defend the homeland.

Amid the sorrow, voices of resilience emerge, voices rooted in a belief in the justice of our cause, our right to exist, and our right to live here. Just as Avraham rose after his

circumcision to perform acts of kindness and to welcome strangers, we too witness acts of kindness across the land—memorial initiatives, support for soldiers and their families, and a united national spirit of mobilization.

Like our forefathers, we persist in our faith even when the path ahead is clouded and the purpose seems elusive. We continue to pray, hoping to hear, "Do not stretch out your hand against the boy..." And with fervent hope, we pray for the safe and swift return of all hostages to their homes.

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#### **Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org**

##### **Rabbi Yakov Haber - Jewish Stardust**

In the aftermath of the momentous event of akeidas Yitzchak, an angel bestows Hashem's blessing on Avraham Avinu: "For I shall bless you and multiply your offspring like the stars of the heaven and like the sand on the seashore... and through your offspring will all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Bereishis 22:17-18).

Bemidbar Rabba (2:12) comments, incorporating the aforementioned verse into its presentation:

You find that Avraham was blessed with the stars, as it is stated, "Look now toward the heaven and count the stars...[and He said, 'So shall be your offspring!']" Isaac was blessed with the sand, as it is stated, "For I shall bless you and multiply your offspring as the stars of the heaven [and as the sand on the seashore]." Ya'akov was blessed with the dust of the earth, as it is stated, "And your offspring shall be as the dust of the earth."

My great Rebbe, Maran Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldwicht zt"l, founding Rosh Hayeshiva of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, seeks to analyze the teachings inherent in these three comparisons: stars, sand, and dirt.[1] Furthermore, he asks, why is the comparison to sand attributed to the blessing to Yitzchak when it was stated to Avraham after the binding of Yitzchak?

In answer to these questions, Rav Goldwicht explains that the difference between stars and sand lies in their fundamentally different nature. Stars are uniquely noticeable; they each have their own "personality" as evidenced by the unique name given to each one by its Creator (see Tehillim 147:4). Sand, by contrast, is only significant in its conglomeration; each individual grain is hardly noticeable and of little import. In light of this distinction, Rav Goldwicht explains that Avraham Avinu, standing out as a "stellar" individual, surrounded by a world so distant from the truth, courageously spreading the message of G-d to all who would listen, was

blessed with descendants many of whom would be "stars" in their own right, forging an elevated path in the service of the One whom our father Abraham discovered in the star-lit nights of Mesopotamia.[2] I have also heard an idea that a star, while seeming like a tiny speck of light when viewed from the Earth, is, in reality, indescribable in its magnitude, totally dwarfing the Earth and, for many of them, even the sun. In the language of the Midrash (ibid.), each star is capable of totally devouring our planet.[3] So too, unique individuals within the Jewish people, while seeming ordinary, ultimately are absolutely magnificent in their spiritual stature from Hashem's perspective.

However, not all of Avraham's descendants would follow such an exalted path. Unfortunately, many would not follow in the footsteps of their outstanding ancestors. What would assure their continued existence? Yitzchak Avinu's willingness to offer his own life to obey G-d's commandment, the merit of akeidas Yitzchak, would guarantee the Jewish people's eternal existence even if they were not worthy. For this reason, the blessing of the sand is associated with Yitzchak who partnered with his father, Avraham, in the test of the akeida. Like all the millions of grains of sand of the seashore which collectively hold back the waves from flooding the land even though each grain is insignificant, so too, the collective of Klal Yisrael, regardless of their stature, would always survive.

What does Ya'akov's blessing, comparing his descendants to the dust, represent? The Midrash comments that just as dirt is constantly trampled upon, so too Ya'akov's descendants would be persecuted and abused through much of Jewish history. But, just as the earth continues to exist even after so much trampling and - perhaps we can add - becomes stronger by becoming more packed together, so too the Jewish people would always out-survive their persecutors. Rav Goldwicht explains that this also refers to the spiritual resilience of the Jewish people. Even if, through years of persecution and assimilatory trends, many of the Jewish people would be adversely affected, ultimately, "Once a Jew, always a Jew - ישראל אף על פי שחטא, יהיה!" The internal sanctity in the Jewish individual will ultimately lead to either his or at least his descendants' return to Torah observance.[4]

This past painful year for the Jewish people has demonstrated to all of us all of the blessings bestowed upon Klal Yisrael as stars, as sand and as dirt. The acts of individual heroism of those who rushed to the front - many of whom were not classically connected to halachic lifestyles as well as ongoing chessed projects spearheaded by dedicated

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individuals bringing both the spiritual armor of tzitzis, tefillin and siddurim to those on the front, and the physical armor of helmets, bullet-proof vests, night-vision goggles and more to the tune of millions of dollars, can only be described as "stellar" examples of our people. A religious soldier brought one of the Gedolei Yisrael to tears when, after losing both of his legs and one arm, asked him three questions. First, on which hand shall he place tefillin now? Second, how should he hold his lulav and esrog? Third, should he say the shehecheyanu on his prosthetic limbs when he receives them or when he first uses them? When hearing such stories, one can only think of the verse in Iyov (13:15): "הן יקטלני, וְלוֹ אֵיחָל, אֲפֹרָא אֲחַיֶּה" - even if He kills me, I will still long for Him!" Stories of soldiers diligently continuing Torah study in respites from battle abound.[5] At a shiva house, I recently heard from the father of a fallen soldier that his son[6] finished two masechtos while serving in Gaza! Stories of selfless kindness also have proliferated. As one example, a soldier, finding he was a match for a 3-year old leukemia patient, found the time to donate bone marrow in between battles!

But the collective of the Jewish people who have not yet risen to classic stardom are still surviving and, with the kindness of G-d, still thriving. Economic activity and agricultural productivity - including in moshavim under constant missile attack[7], continues at a robust pace, alongside the constant sweet kol Ya'akov of tefila and Torah heard in shuls and batei midrash. The "sands" of the Jewish people miraculously continue no matter how much the "dust" of Israel is trampled upon.

We hear of so many stories of religious inspiration - soldiers and civilians taking upon themselves the observance of Shabbos or the mitzvah of tefillin for a lifetime realizing that אין לנו להשגות אלא על אבינו שבשמים. The "dust" of Israel, as Rav Goldwicht teaches, will always return to their source! May Hashem continue to fulfill his promise to bless the "stardust" of the Jewish people, save us from our enemies, return all the hostages from captivity, return our chayalim from the battlefield after victory over our many enemies, and may we constantly recognize His protection over us, praise His name and move ever closer to His service!

[1] See Asufas Ma'arachos (Bereishis, "Birchas Haribui"). The editor (Rav Goldwicht's son-in-law, Rav Meir z"l) notes that the essay was not actually presented in this form by Rav Goldwicht, but it is based on his teachings.

[2] A paraphrase from Rav Soloveitchik's majestic Lonely Man of Faith.

[3] Current scientific knowledge, of course, wholly concurs with this midrashic teaching. Also see the Midrash for many other comparisons between the righteous and the stars.

[4] An interesting story is told of a secular, Israeli father who sued his son and his Yeshiva in Israeli court for becoming religious and causing him

suffering. The presiding judge, who recognized the father from Europe as someone who gave up religion and caused his parents much sorrow, chided the father, "Just as you rebelled against your parents and caused your parents pain, your son is doing the same! Case dismissed!"

[5] One is reminded of Chazal's interpretation of the rebuke of the angel to Yehoshua (5:14), "ענה באחי" - "Now I have come" - concerning the stopping of Torah study" (see Megilla 3a). Radak wonders, "War is not the time for Torah study!" Many of our courageous soldiers have followed the simple message of our Sages!

[6] Hillel Eliyahu Ovadya Hy"d.

[7] I recently noticed on a carton of a popular brand of eggs in a local makolet the following note: "We proudly continue to supply these eggs even though we are under constant fire from Lebanon!"

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## Mizrachi Dvar Torah

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### Rav Doron Perez - Absurd Laughte

Why is the first Jewish child born to the first Jewish parents called Yitzchak, "he will laugh"? Both Avraham and Sarah laugh, everybody's laughing. Why is Judaism and the birth of a Jewish child and Jewish continuity a laughing matter?

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains we need to understand the source of laughter and humor. Why do we laugh? Things are funny when something unexpected and absurd happens. Everything about humor is being able to take life and twist it to an unexpected end that you aren't anticipating.

That, I believe, is why so many great comedians have been Jewish. There's something about being Jewish, which is the ability to view the absurdity and not only cry about it, but laugh about it. You see, Jewish survival, continuity and thriving is absolutely absurd. Avraham could not have a child, Sarah could not have a child – together, they couldn't have a child at 100 and 90 years old. It was impossible, absolutely impossible. Yet the impossible became possible.

The truth is, throughout Jewish destiny, Chazal compare the Jewish people to the lamb among the 70 wolves, the nations of the world. And we see this today. Who would have believed that after October 7th, when all Israel is trying to do is fight for its life, bring back all its hostages and just fight for its own survival. Look at the pressure that has been put on by so many places in the world.

How did we survive, this tiny little people among so many threatening forces? It's absurd. There should not have been survival of the Jewish people after the Beit HaMikdash was destroyed. They shouldn't have been a State of Israel after a remarkable 2,000 years of

survival, three years after the ovens of Auschwitz. It shouldn't have been that October 7th happened, but now that it has, the absurdity is it will turn around and it is now turning around.

When we live in G-d's world, we're able to laugh because ultimately the difficult and the challenging situations of life can be viewed with absurdity and with something unexpected that things will turn out for the best. The message of Jewish history is one of hope, humor and positive unexpectedness and absurdity. Ultimately, we will have the last laugh, goodness and G-d will have the last laugh – Yitzchak! We are those who are celebrating, laughing and believing in the future of life together.

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## Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

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### Holy Potato Kugel

Many years ago, when I was still a single Yeshiva Bochur, I was given the privileged assignment to give a ride to a very great person. It was Motzei Shabbos, and a prominent Torah family I knew was having a Bar Mitzvah. I was asked to pick up Rabbi Moshe Neuschlas from New Square. I went with a friend of mine and we arrived at the elderly Rabbi's modest home. He answered the door and we expected him to come right away outside but he beckoned us in instead. We could not refuse his offer.

He seated us at the dining room table and generously presented each of us with a piece of hot and delicious looking potato Kugel. As he was putting the Kugel down, he was explaining to us the YICHUS, the historicity and import of this Kugel. As part of its spiritual ingredients, this holy Kugel contained Shirayim, leftovers, or traces of Kugel that had been eaten from a series of big Rebbe's whose names I cannot recall. I was not so familiar with this selling point of Kugel or any other food.

I felt comfortable enough to ask the Rabbi, "What is the source of Shirayim, eating from the remnants of what a Tzadik has eaten from?" It was a week before Purim, I remember, and he gave two answers immediately. He said there is a Gemara that says, that if someone eats from something that a Sheretz, a mouse ate from then it causes forgetfulness. Therefore, how much more so in a positive direction if one eats from something that a Tzadik ate from it increases his spiritual prowess.

For the second answer the Rabbi referred to a Possuk in the Megillah of Esther, which we read on Purim. The verse says that Haman went out (from the first party) "B'Simcha

## Likutei Divrei Torah

U'BTuv Levav" – with joy and a happy heart. This is not a simple description. The Chumash tells us in the rebukes of KiSavo that the reason why the Bais HaMikdash will have been worthy to be destroyed and the Jewish People exiled from the land is "Tachas Asher Lo Avadeta Es HASHEM Elochecha B'Simcha U'BTuv Levav..." – because you did not serve HASHEM your G-d with joy and a happy heart." Now, the Rabbi asked, "From where did Haman get such a lofty level? The answer is that Haman was exiting the Seuda, the party of Esther, and therefore it was the Shirayim of Esther!" We then went out to the car satisfied with both the tasty Kugel and the delicious answer.

And Sarah said, "G-d has made joy for me; whoever hears will rejoice over me. "And she said, "Who would have said to Avraham that Sarah would nurse children, for I have borne a son to his old age!" And the child grew and was weaned, and Avraham made a great feast on the day that Yitzchok was weaned. (Breishis 21:6-8) The verse subtly reveals to us the healthy skepticism people had about Sarah having actually given birth to a child at an advanced age.

Rashi comments on something puzzling. Sarah would nurse children: Why is "children" in the plural? On the day of the feast, the princesses brought their children with them, and she nursed them, for they were saying, "Sarah did not give birth, but brought in a foundling from the street." The Midrash describes that Sarah began to fount with milk and nurse those children.

The Midrash tells us some other interesting information about the future results of that "party" where Sarah "nursed children". Centuries later the Jewish People unanimously accepted the Torah and the nations of the world were offered the same opportunity but they refused. However, there were certain individuals within those nations that did want to receive the Torah. They would become Gerim, the righteous converts, and these people were the descendants of those children that drank from the milk of Sarah at that party. So, it was the holy milk of Sarah that had such a profound effect far into the future. Now, just imagine the impact on Yitzchok!

One of my teachers told us, perhaps whimsically, but still true, that that is what the Litvaks say. The Chassidim, however, claim that – it was not necessarily the milk that flowed from Sarah but rather the Shirayim of Yitzchok. So, we see that Shirayim is not just a souvenir but the unleashing of a powerful spiritual force embedded deep within a holy potato Kugel.



**Vayera**

**Rabbi Berel Wein**

Sacrificing one's own son was undoubtedly the supreme test of Avraham's life and faith. When Avraham and Yitzchak come down from the mountain of Moriah, their lives and the destiny of the Jewish people were changed forever. The akeidah remains the central story of Jewish history and destiny. Its grim reminder of Jewish vulnerability has never departed from the people of Israel. Though we have survived the myriad periods of akeidah in our history, it has always been with great cost and almost always some sort of permanent trauma.

Why God demanded that test from Avraham and why it is continuously still demanded of the Jewish people is a question that has no real answer. It is however a situation that remains a stark fact of life and an ever-present reality, its inscrutability notwithstanding. We will see in later parshiyot of the Torah how strongly Yitzchak remains affected by his near-death experience. It governs his personality and makes him to us the most inscrutable of all the avot of the Jewish people. Surviving the akeidah takes an enormous toll on one's soul and psyche. And as the rabbis teach us, the occurrences in the lives of the avot are harbingers of the future of their descendants, as the akeidah has certainly become an oft repeated theme in Jewish history. We should not be pessimistic about our present situation and our future. But we should certainly be realistic and wary as to what difficulties certainly face us now and later.

There are two witnesses to part of the akeidah drama – Yishmael and Eliezer. Their impressions of the event are not related to us by the Torah itself. Yishmael will remain the antagonist of Yitzchak and his descendants until our very own time. The descendants of Yishmael will even attempt to substitute their ancestor Yishmael for Yitzchak as the central character of the drama of the akeidah. However, the history of the descendants of Yishmael does not conform to the pattern of historical akeidot. Yishmael remains the aggressor in history and his character, as delineated in the Torah as being warlike and constantly dissatisfied, has been amply justified in human history. It is not the character of someone who has experienced an akeidah.

Yishmael is willing to be the hero of the akeidah but not to suffer its experience and trauma. Eliezer will play an important role in the life of Yitzchak. He is the person entrusted by Avraham to find the proper mate for Yitzchak and he performs his task flawlessly. But then he somehow disappears from the scene of biblical history and the story of the Jewish people. There is a lack of continuity in Eliezer and his descendants that does not allow him or them to remain any longer an integral part of the Jewish story. Thus, the two other participants in the akeidah story depart from the mountain of Moriah unchanged by the event. Apparently, immortality and eternity in Jewish history is gained only by experiencing the akeidah itself. Not necessarily a pleasant thought, but it is a proven reality. May the Lord test us with akeidot no longer.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

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**Even Higher than Angels**

**Vayera**

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

It is one of the most famous scenes in the Bible. Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day when three strangers pass by. He urges them to rest and take some food. The text calls them 'anashim' – 'men'. They are in fact angels, coming to tell Sarah that she will have a child (Genesis 18).

The chapter seems simple. It is, however, complex and ambiguous. It consists of three sections:

Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.

Verses 2-16: Abraham and the men/angels.

Verses 17-33: The dialogue between God and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

How are these sections related to one another? Are they one scene, two, or three? The most obvious answer is three. Each of the above sections is a separate event. First, God appears to Abraham, as Rashi explains, "to visit the sick" after Abraham's circumcision. Then the visitors arrive with the news about Sarah's child. Then takes place the great dialogue about justice.

Maimonides suggests (in Guide for the Perplexed II:42) that there are two scenes (the visit of the angels, and the dialogue with God). The first verse does not describe an event at all. It is, rather, a chapter heading.

The third possibility is that we have a single continuous scene. God appears to Abraham, but before He can speak, Abraham sees the passers-by and asks God to wait while he serves them food. Only when they have departed – in verse 17 – does he turn back to God, and the conversation begins.

How we interpret the chapter will affect the way we translate the word Adonai in the third verse. It could either mean (1) God or (2) 'my lords' or 'sirs'. In the first case, Abraham would be addressing Heaven. In the second, he would be speaking to the passers-by.

Several English translations take the second option. Here is one example:

The Lord appeared to Abraham . . . He looked up, and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them. Bowing low, he said, "Sirs, if I have deserved your favour, do not go past your servant without a visit."

The same ambiguity appears in the next chapter, when two of Abraham's visitors (in this chapter they are described as angels) visit Lot in Sodom:

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening while Lot was sitting by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low he said, "I pray you, sirs, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night there and bathe your feet."

Gen. 19:2

Normally, differences of interpretation of biblical narrative have no halachic implications. They are matters of legitimate disagreement. This case is unusual, because if we translate Adonai as 'God', it is a holy name, and both the writing of the word by a scribe, and the way we treat a parchment or document containing it, have special stringencies in Jewish law. If we translate it as 'my lords' or 'sirs', then it has no special sanctity.

The simplest reading of both texts – the one concerning Abraham, the other, Lot – would be to read the word in both cases as 'sirs'. Jewish law, however, ruled otherwise. In the second case – the scene with Lot – it is read as 'sirs', but in the first it is read as 'God'. This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that Abraham interrupted God as He was about to speak, and asked Him to wait while he attended to his guests. This is how tradition ruled that the passage should be read:

The Lord appeared to him . . . Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. The moment he saw them, he ran from the opening of his tent to greet them, and bowed down low to the ground. [Turning to God] he said: "My Lord, if I have found favour in your sight, please do not pass by your servant [i.e. Please wait for me until I have given hospitality to these men]." [He then turned to the men and said:] "Let a little water be brought so that you may wash your feet and rest under the tree..."

Genesis 18:1-5

This daring interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: "Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine Presence." Faced with a choice between listening to God, and offering hospitality to [what seemed to be] human beings, Abraham chose the latter. God acceded to his request, and waited while Abraham brought the visitors food and drink, before engaging him in dialogue about the fate of Sodom.

How can this be so? Is it not disrespectful at best, heretical at worst, to put the needs of human beings before attending on the presence of God?

What the passage is telling us, though, is something of immense profundity. The idolaters of Abraham's time worshipped the sun, the



stars, and the forces of nature as gods. They worshipped power and the powerful. Abraham knew, however, that God is not in nature but beyond nature. There is only one thing in the universe on which He has set His image: the human person, every person, powerful and powerless alike. The forces of nature are impersonal, which is why those who worship them eventually lose their humanity. As the Psalm puts it: Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils but cannot smell... Their makers become like them, and so do all who put their trust in them.

Psalm 115

You cannot worship impersonal forces and remain a person: compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving. Precisely because we believe that God is personal, someone to whom we can say 'You', we honour human dignity as sacrosanct. Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the Divine Presence when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the Divine Presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

One of the most beautiful comments on this episode was given by Rabbi Shalom of Belz who noted that in verse 2, the visitors are spoken of as standing above Abraham [nitzavim alav]. In verse 8, Abraham is described as standing above them [omed alehem]. He said: at first, the visitors were higher than Abraham because they were angels and he a mere human being. But when he gave them food and drink and shelter, he stood even higher than the angels. We honour God by honouring His image, humankind.

#### Parshat Vayera: Whose Sacrifice is it Anyway?

**Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone**

"And they walked, the two of them, together." (Genesis 22:8)

Whose sacrifice at the Akeda was greater, Abraham's or Isaac's? Instinctively, the first answer that comes to mind is Abraham. After all, the Torah portion is introduced with the words 'And God tested Abraham.' Indeed, Isaac was the very son Abraham had waited for all his life, the affirmation of his faith, the promise of his future.

Any father, let alone Abraham, would rather die than see his child die. Had God said, 'Sir, you have a choice, either your son or yourself,' Abraham would have done what thousands of others have done – push the child toward safety and climb Moriah himself, ever grateful that Isaac would live. Nevertheless, how can we overlook the depth of Isaac's suffering?

Whose life is it anyhow, whose flesh is bound to the altar, transformed into a whole-burnt offering? Father's or son's? And no matter how hard it may be to witness tragedy, can we deny that the real sacrifice belongs to the one going up in flames? Isaac is certainly no less a hero than Abraham. And it is clear that Isaac understands what is about to occur. According to Rashi he was thirty-seven years old, certainly old enough to fight his father's will or flee outright. And even if Ibn Ezra, who claims that Isaac was twelve, is more in consonance with the outline of the biblical story, Isaac still could have wept, protested, appealed to Abraham's mercy. No remonstration on Isaac's part is mentioned in the biblical account; much the opposite, even after Isaac presumably is aware of what is about to occur, the text testifies, 'And they walked, the two of them, together.'

Despite the fact that the father in all of us identifies with Abraham's sacrifice, nevertheless there does exist one essential difference between father and son, which was told to me by Rabbi Moshe Besdin.

It was the voice of God which Abraham heard commanding him to take his son, his only son, his beloved son, and to bring him as an all-burnt offering. When Maimonides wants to prove the truth of prophecy, he turns to the Binding of Isaac. Had Abraham not believed in the absolute truth of his prophecy, could he have possibly lifted his hand to slaughter his son? Would he have sacrificed his entire future as well as the future

of humanity unless he was absolutely sure of the divine source of the command?

But can we say the same about Isaac? After all, Isaac heard the command not from God, but from his father.

A close look at the text between the lines and words of the Bible will provide a glimpse into the nature of the relationship between this unique father and son. There is a frightening suspicion in the mind of Isaac, a growing awareness of what is about to happen, a desire to confront his father (albeit with great delicacy), and then a profound, acquiescence, even a unity of purpose and mission. Abraham rises in the morning to take his son on the fateful journey. What they talk about, if they talk at all, is not mentioned; but on the third day, after Abraham sends away the young servants, Isaac begins to speak. And what he says, or doesn't say, is of exquisitely sensitive significance.

Professor Nehama Leibowitz has taught us that when the Torah records a dialogue and wishes to inform us of a change in the speaker, it does so by using the word 'Vayomer' – 'And he said'; after all, the Torah script is devoid of quotation marks. On the third day of their journey, Isaac notices his father preparing the knife and wood for the offering. For the first time since the journey began the Torah records Isaac's words. 'Vayomer,' the text begins; 'and he said to Abraham his father...'

Now we should expect to find the content of his words. But the biblical text records no such content. Instead, we get another 'Vayomer,' but this time with a word: 'Vayomer Avi' – 'And he said, "My father..."'

But why have one 'Vayomer' after another when both are referring to the same speaker, and Isaac actually said nothing at all after the first Vayomer? It's like having quotation marks with no quote in between them! At this point in the narrative Abraham acknowledges Isaac by saying 'Here I am, my son.' Now comes Isaac's third Vayomer in this context, 'And he said, "behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?"'

What is the meaning of the Vayomers?

Apparently, Isaac suspects the true purpose of the journey from the moment his father woke him and told him they were setting out. He tremblingly waits in silence for the first three days to either hopefully hear another explanation or to get a tragic confirmation of his worst nightmare. Abraham, understandably, cannot speak. Isaac yearns to ask the question, even if it means that he will hear the worst. Anything, he thinks, would be better than this gnawing uncertainty. But how can a son ask a father, 'Are you planning to slaughter me?' Given the closeness Isaac always felt as the beloved son of a father who waited until he was one hundred years old to have a son with Sarah, how could he even begin to formulate such an unthinkable act?

On the third day, Isaac tries: 'Vayomer...' But all that came out of his mouth was 'Aaah' – he could only stutter and stammer, he was incapable of formulating such a horrific idea. At length he tries again: 'Vayomer,' and this time he added, 'My father....' Once again, he falters in mid-sentence, to which Abraham gently responds, 'Here I am, my son.' This finally gave Isaac the wherewithal to delicately suggest: 'Vayomer,' – 'and he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the whole burnt offering?"'

Abraham's response really leaves no room for further question: 'The Almighty will provide for Himself the lamb for the whole burnt offering, my son.' If Abraham's words are devoid of a comma, he is clearly suggesting: 'for the whole burnt offering is my son.'

What is truly marvelous is the very next biblical phrase: '...so they walked both of them, together (yachdav).' We must be struck by the ominous use of 'together' to describe a journey to which both are traveling with equal dedication despite their common knowledge that only one of them will return alive.

We must likewise be struck by the willingness of both of them to adhere to this most inexplicable command of God – despite the fact that the father heard it from God Himself and the son only heard it from his father.

And with these indisputable facts, Isaac emerges as a true patriarch, a model and paradigm for all future generations. After all, our penitential dirges (slichot and kinot) testify to the fact that Isaac is indeed the model

of Kiddush Hashem (sanctifying of God's name, dying for one's faith and nation) throughout our blood-soaked and tear-stained history. Did those who allowed themselves to be slaughtered, impaled on the Crusaders' swords rather than accept conversion, hear the voice of God directly? Is it not more correct to say that they were heeding their parents and teachers, the traditional texts and lessons transmitted through the generations which defined and delimited the command to give up one's life in sanctification of God's name?

Abraham may be the first Jew, but Isaac is the first Jewish son, the first Jewish student, the first representative of the mesora (tradition handed from parent to child, from master to disciple), whose dedication unto death emanates not from his having heard God's word directly, but from his adherence to the Oral Tradition.

The essence of Judaism is not a religion based on beatific visions along the road to Damascus, or even Jerusalem. Ours is a religion whose truth is passed down from generation to generation, parent to child, master to disciple, teacher to student. And the paradigm for this begins right at the Akeida. Who is the first Jew? Abraham. But who is the first historic Jew, the first representative of the historic chain of being Jewish whose links are forged by the frames of commitment and sacrifice? Abraham's son, Isaac.

Shabbat Shalom

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[CS - Late-breaking post:

**Rabbi Yissocher Frand <ryfrand@torah.org>**

**Parshas Vayera**

**Passions Corrupt Good Judgement**

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1355 – Doing Mitzvos First Time – Bar Mitzva & Tephillin; Women & Candles: Shehechianu? Good Shabbos!

Passions Corrupt Good Judgement

The malachim (angels) who came to visit Avraham went on to their next mission, which was to destroy the cities of Sodom and Amora. We know the story. They entered Sodom and encountered Lot. Breaking the normal protocol in Sodom, Lot hospitably invited them in for a meal. Before the malachim went to sleep, the people of Sodom – from youth to elders – surrounded the dwelling and demanded that Lot throw out his guests, so that they may commit depraved aveiros (sins) with them. (This was part of the evil practices of Sodom.)

Lot offered his daughters to the mob in lieu of his guests. The Sodomites were upset with him. The malachim pulled Lot back into the house and miraculously smote the mob surrounding the dwelling with blindness. As a result, the mob could not see, and they therefore could not find the door.

The narration should have ended with the words that the malachim smote the people with blindness. That should have marked the end of their attempt to enter the dwelling. However, it is interesting that the pasuk continues, saying that "they were unable to find the door." This means that even in their blindness, rather than giving up, they were groping around attempting to find the door. This itself is amazing. An entire crowd of people are suddenly miraculously blinded. Should this not have given them pause to perhaps not start up with these malachim? No! They still wanted to find the door, and they still wanted to do what they intended to do.

The Seforno comments tellingly: Even though they were blinded, they struggled to find the door and break it down, as it is said about the wicked: They do not repent even at the gates of Gehinom (Hell). They were not deterred at all.

Rav Elya Svei said in one of his shmuzin that the Sodomites were not deterred at all because such is the power of lust within human beings. They are so obsessed with fulfilling their base animal needs that something that would deter normal human beings does not phase them. As Chazal say, "The drive of kinah (jealousy), tayvah (lust), and kavod (pursuit of honor) draw a person out of this world" (Pirkei Avos 4:21). If a person is not in control of his desires and passions, nothing can deter him.

Bilaam is the same story. Bilaam is going to curse Klal Yisrael. What is his motive? Money. He runs into trouble. His donkey gives him a hard time. He hits the donkey. Suddenly, the donkey opens up its mouth and starts questioning Bilaam. Such an occurrence would give a normal person pause. However, Bilaam gets into a dialogue with his donkey! The reason is that he is so consumed with getting that money (which is one of the great lusts of this world) that no amount of logic or common sense is going to deter him from that pursuit.

A third example of this can be found in both this week's parsha and last week's parsha. Lot's original separation from Avraham Avinu was based on seeing the lushness of the Jordan Valley in which Sodom was located (Bereshis 13:10), even though at that time Sodom and its surroundings already had a reputation for being Sin Cities. Lot leaves Avraham, goes to Sodom, and his life falls apart. He gets caught up in the war of the five kings against the four kings. He is captured and he doesn't know whether he will live or die.

Miraculously, Avraham Avinu comes and defeats the four kings and saves Lot – again. How would a normal man react? "I separated from Avraham and my life went south!" Lot should have returned to Avraham Avinu. But he doesn't. He stays in Sodom. Rashi points out that Lot stayed in Sodom because he liked the life there.

Thus, we have three examples of how passions and tayvoahs affect human beings. When they gain control of us, we lose all perspective.

Divine Benefit of the Doubt

I would like to share an observation from the Meshech Chochmah on this week's parsha. The Gemara says that "a good thought is attached to deed" (Kiddushin 40a). The Gemara explains that when Klal Yisrael intends to do good, they are credited with that good deed even if they do not succeed in accomplishing that good deed. If someone intends to do a mitzvah and then, due to circumstances beyond his control, he is unable to do it, the Ribono shel Olam counts it as if he accomplished it and he is thusly rewarded (Brachos 6a). However, it is troubling that the Gemara says that this principle only applies to Jews. It does not apply to umos haolam. On the face of it, this is terribly unfair. Why should He not provide this same "benefit of the doubt accounting" for everyone? We know that the Gemara says (Avodah Zarah 3a) that the Ribono shel Olam does not stack the deck with his creations. He plays fairly. Therefore, when the umos haolam said, "You gave Klal Yisrael the navi (prophet) Moshe. If we had such a navi, we too would have had a fighting chance." The Ribono shel Olam gave them Bilaam to level the playing field, so to speak. "I gave Klal Yisrael a Moshe. I gave the nations a Bilaam." So here the Ribono shel Olam gives Klal Yisrael this tremendous "benefit of doubt accounting," such that the mere intention of doing a mitzvah is somehow credited as if the mitzvah was actually accomplished. But this was not granted to the umos haolam. How does that work?

Rav Meir Simcha says that this works because of what happened at the Akeida in Parsahs Vayera. It is well known that the motif of Sefer Bereshis is Ma'aseh avos siman l'banim. The accomplishments of the avos are a precursor of their children's accomplishments. Their actions remain, so to speak, part of our DNA.

Moving to Eretz Yisrael is not simple even in our day and age, but people do it. It sometimes takes mesiras nefesh (self-sacrifice). What is the source of this mesiras nefesh? The source is Avram's willingness to follow the Divine command of Lech lecha m'artzecha u'mi'moladetecha u'mi'beis avicha (Go forth from your land, from your birth place and from the house of your father). Avram instilled in us this power that allows us to be drawn by the desire to live in Eretz Yisrael.

Over the millennia, there have been hundreds of thousands of Jews who have been moser nefesh to die al kiddush Hashem (via martyrdom), rather than convert. That attribute of mesiras nefesh to do the will of the Ribono shel Olam came about as a result of the mesiras nefesh of Yitzchak Avinu at the time of the Akeida. That "will" (i.e. – "intent") of the forefather was implanted in his descendants, and that is why Hakadosh Baruch Hu joins our intent with action.

As the Rambam writes (Gerushin 2:20), every Jew wants to do the right thing. It is only our yetzer harah (evil inclination) that sometimes gets in

the way of our positive intentions. The Rambam paskens that when Beis Din decides that a person is obligated to give a get (divorce document) to his wife and he refuses to do so, they can whip him "until he says 'I agree to do so.'" Under normal circumstances, a "coerced get" is invalid. The Rambam explains why this is a valid get. He explains that deep down, the Jew wants to be part of the Jewish people and fulfill all the mitzvos and distance himself from aveiros. However, he is overcome by his yetzer harah. When he is beaten by Beis Din, that weakens the hold of the yetzer harah over him, causing his true will, to follow the will of Hashem, to come to the fore.

This deep desire within every Jew to follow the will of Hashem originated on Har HaMoriah. Yitzchak planted into us this deep-down desire to do the will of Hashem. Therefore, Hakadosh Baruch Hu joins even unrealized action with our proper intent. That proper intent was implanted into us by our ancestor Yitzchak. The umos haolam have no such ancestor and no such presumption of an inner motivation to follow the will of Hashem.

Thus, Rav Meir Simcha says a beautiful p'shat: What did Avraham Avinu call the mountain (the future location of the Beis HaMikdash)? Hashem yireh (The L-rd will see) (Bereshis 22:14). The Gemara says that the name Yeru-shalayim is a contraction of what Avraham Avinu called the mountain (Yireh) and what Shem (son of Noach) called it (Shalem) (Bereshis 14:18). The combination of the two is Yeru-Shalayim.

Avraham's naming of the mountain invoked a prayer: Hashem – Look here. These are the types of children You have! You have children who wish to do the will of Hashem, except that sometimes too many things get in their way – whether it is the yetzer harah or whether it is shibud malchiyus or whether it is other types of temporary setbacks. But this is what Yitzchak gave us – the foundational desire deep down to do the ratzon Hashem.

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[CS Late-breaking post  
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## **My Heart Is on Lockdown: The Widow, the Prophet and a Flask of Oil**

### **The Alter Rebbe's Step By Step Program to Emotional Rehabilitation**

Essay by Rabbi YY Jacobson

Dedicated by the Abrams family

Ignorance & Apathy

What is the difference between ignorance and apathy? A man asked his friend.

— I don't know and I don't care, was his response.

Midnight Lecture

A Jewish man is speeding along the highway at 1 a.m. A policeman stops him and asks, "Where are you racing at this hour?"

"To a lecture," the man responds.

"Who will give you a lecture at this hour?" the policeman wonders.

"My wife," he replies.

The Cruse of Oil

This week, Jews the world over will read a biblical tale about an impoverished widow, a kind prophet, and a cruse of oil, described in the Book of Kings[1]. Here is the story:

"A woman, the wife of one of the prophets, called out to Elisha: 'My husband, your servant, has died, and you know that your servant was G-d fearing — now the creditor has come to take my two sons as slaves'[2].

"Said Elisha to her, 'What can I do for you? Tell me, what have you in your home?'

"She answered: 'Your maidservant has nothing in the house but a cruse of oil.'

"He said, 'Go borrow vessels for yourself from the outside, from all your neighbors; empty vessels; only that they not be few.

"Then go in and shut the door behind you and behind your children; pour into all these vessels and remove each full one."

The woman obeyed. "They brought her and she poured. When all the vessels were full, she said to her son, 'Bring me another vessel.' He said to her, 'There are no more vessels.' And the oil stopped.

"She came and told the man of G-d (Elisha), and he said, 'Go sell the oil and pay your creditors, and you and your sons will live on the remainder.'"

What's the Relevance?

On the surface, this is a story about a compassionate prophet willing to lend a hand to help a lone, destitute widow who lost her husband and is about to lose her children. The prophet performs a miracle of an endless oil flow that saves the woman's family and economy.

Yet, a basic axiom of Jewish tradition is that the true significance of the Torah lies not in the historical tales it records or the ancient figures it depicts, but in the messages these tales and figureheads hold for our lives today. The Torah — including every episode, event, and law transcribed therein — as its name indicates (Torah means teachings) was meant to constitute a blueprint for living, a spiritual road map for the complicated, painful, and stressful voyage of each human being on our small but very hectic planet[3].

But how can we personally relate to this story? Most of us do not profess to be prophets or miracle workers. Though it would actually be nice to have an Elisha who could secure our oil flow, and spare us from dependency on the Middle East, that is not the case at the moment. So how can this tale of a widow, a prophet and a cruse of oil serve as a source for inspiration and guidance in our contemporary lives?

A Young Man's Cry

Two hundred years ago, in the first decade of the 19th century, a young man entered the chambers of one of the great Jewish thinkers and personalities of the time, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812). The young man's question was simple: "I feel numb, frozen, and apathetic; my insides are dead. What should I do?"

Rabbi Schneur Zalman, a person of profound love, extraordinary wisdom, and intense spirituality shared with his distressed young pupil the tale of the widow and the prophet, and proceeded to demonstrate how this ancient biblical story contained a response to the young man's loneliness.

I wish to present to you—in my own words—this insight of Rabbi Schneur Zalman[4].

A Dead Soul

The soul of a human being has been compared to a woman—a wife of G-d, as it were[5].

Why? Because the soul represents that part of our identity that is in a perpetual relationship with G-d, described as "the husband." A husband and a wife, even when they have issues with each other, are still in a relationship. They can love each other or hate each other, but they can't be indifferent to each other. The soul is that part of our self that cannot ignore G-d[6].

But then comes the day when the woman cries out about her husband's death—the death of her divine spark. She turns to the prophet, representing G-d,[7] and says, "My husband, your servant—the divine energy-field within me—has died and you know that your servant was G-d fearing." The Hebrew term for "my husband" (eishi) may also be translated as "my fire." This is the cry of many a human being: My soul used to have a flame, but today it is completely extinguished. I have

become apathetic to any deeper, spiritual reality of life. I am numb, detached, and lifeless. G-d has become meaningless to me.

If Boredom is the desire for desires (as Tolstoy put it in *Anna Karenina*), this soul can be described as genuinely bored. Gone is the sense of mystery, the quest to embrace.

"I'd rather die of exhaustion than of boredom," a wise man once remarked. Indeed, the death that comes from boredom and apathy could be extremely painful.

#### An Enslaved Heart

Even worse, cries the soul, "the creditor has come to take my two sons as slaves."

Love and awe, closeness and distance, affection and discipline, these two polar forces have been dubbed in Kabbalah as the two "children" of their intellectual progenitors. Emotions are born and molded by awareness and cognition; the mind is the parent and the heart is the child. The two primary emotions, or children, are attraction and rejection, since every existing emotion is either a form of attraction or a form of rejection[8].

Everybody experiences attraction and rejection in his or her life. Everybody loves and everybody despises. We gravitate and we recoil; we love and we fear. The question is, toward whom and toward what?

Do you love people, or do you love gossip? Do you love truth, or do you love addiction? Do you love depth, or do you love superficiality? Do you love justice and righteousness, or do you love instant gratification and crave the transient? Are you attracted to your soul or are you drawn to externality or even promiscuity? We all have fear, but from what? From losing our human dignity or from exposing our true selves? From people or from G-d?

This is the cry of the numb human being: My soul is dead, and my emotions have been manipulated and enslaved. I do not own my love or my awe anymore. I have been robbed of them; they are owned by forces outside of me. "The creditor has come to take my two sons as slaves."

#### Whence the Romance?

A similar outcry is often heard from a couple struggling in a relationship.

Perhaps over the years, you shared magical moments with each other; there were times when heaven bestowed its grace on your union, and romance flowed from your lips like milk and honey. You were madly in love.

But now, the relationship is suffocating. The love is gone and the magic dead. Your heart is devoid of any feelings and your spouse drains you. At such a dreadful moment, you turn to G-d, or to a friend, or a marriage counselor and you cry out: Whence the romance? Whence the electricity? What happened to that part of me that could explode in love toward my partner?

#### An Artificial Heart

A similar cry may often be heard from an emotionally crippled adult.

You grew up in a dysfunctional environment. Your father or your mother (or both) never uttered the words every child craves to hear and feel, "I love you." You have never been taught to feel your emotions and express them in an appropriate fashion. Now, when it is your turn to build relationships with your children, you find yourself incapable of experiencing and expressing real emotions. You're locked. You feel that you possess an artificial heart and you hate it.

#### The Human Story

"Said Elisha to her: 'What can I do for you?—Tell me, what have you in your home?'"

She answered: 'Your maidservant has nothing in the house but a cruse of oil.'

The first and most moving divine response to an impoverished soul is, "What can I do for you?" In effect, the response seems to mean that I can't really be of help to you!

Why? Because the drama of human life lay precisely in the fact that it is the only story not written by G-d. G-d can inspire it, create all of the revolving circumstances and even predict it, but never write it[9].

The real question, G-d is saying, is not "What can I do for you?" but rather "What do you have in your home?" You must search within

yourself for the answer to your crisis. The answer to human pain must ultimately come from the human being himself or herself.

"I have nothing," the woman cries. "There is nothing left of my soul. I am spiritually and emotionally dead."

Really? If you were truly dead, why are you in pain? If you don't care, why do you care about the fact that you're don't care?

The woman thus qualifies her previous statement. "Yes, I do have something left in my home that was not taken away: A cruse of oil[10]."

#### Who Are You?

What is the uniqueness of oil? When you mix pure oil with any other liquid the oil remains aloof, never forfeiting its identity in the conglomeration of many other liquids[11].

Oil, therefore, represents the core of cores of human identity — a dimension of self that remains unsoiled and untouched by all of life's experiences[12].

Can you close your eyes, take a deep breath, meditate for a few moments, and then describe your core? When all the layers, including the subconscious layers, are stripped, what will emerge?

Jewish mysticism gives us four cardinal laws to characterize the human core (or any core), termed "etzem" in Hebrew: It is undefined, unchangeable, indivisible, and non-experiential. The most innate dimension of a human life is not defined by anything or anybody outside of itself. It is not a composite of distinct forces that combine to make up the final product called man. Rather, it is a self-contained reality that is defined exclusively within and by itself.

If you attempt to describe your essence, to capture it in words, feelings, or awareness — it is not the core anymore. The only thing that can capture essence is the essence itself. The moment you attempt to "capture" it, to put it in a "box" and transport it to another domain, you have lost the pristine core.

This unshakable core—the essence of human dignity—is the "cruse of oil" that could never be taken from you. It is what makes you — you; it can't be understood, mimicked or manipulated by anybody else. It can't be manipulated even by you yourself.

#### Why Are We In Therapy?

It may be that the primary cause for the deep insecurity and lack of confidence that plague countless women and men today is their lack of identification with this inner "cruse of oil."

Many of us have come to believe that we are merely a conglomeration of various genes, chemicals, and DNA. But does my "self" own a core that is uniquely mine? Judaism teaches that at the core of all the forces governing our lives lays a tiny but untouchable "cruse of oil" bestowing upon us an inexhaustible source of selfhood.

Your emotions may be faint, and your soul may be dead, but your "cruse of oil" is always present. That part of your life that stands face to face with G-d's essence — essence to essence — never dies. It may be buried for decades, but it is never dead.

#### Hollow Vessels

Now, the prophet Elisha turns to the widow and says, "Go borrow vessels for yourself from the outside, from all your neighbors; empty vessels; only that they not be few. Then go in and shut the door behind you and behind your children; pour into all these vessels and remove each full one."

Empty and borrowed vessels serve as a metaphor for uninspired robot-like actions that are empty of passion and enthusiasm, actions which we could never call "our own" since our heart and soul are not present in these actions.

"Go borrow vessels from all your neighbors; empty vessels; only that they not be few," says the prophet of G-d.

Act, act more, and act even more.

Continue to perform G-dly, moral, and sacred deeds, many good and G-dly deeds, even if they seem borrowed and empty to you.

As for an empty marriage — make sure to act lovingly, though you may feel that your spouse is a burden. Fill your life with thousands of empty vessels, with numerous acts of "borrowed love" in which your own heart is not present. Husbands: Go out and buy roses, wash the dishes, put the kids to sleep, pick up the groceries, write cards. Wives: Say loving

words, do kind things, and build up your husbands. Each and every day perform acts of love and kindness toward your spouse.

As for a closed-heart parent attempting to educate his or her children — approach your children, embrace them, and tell them how much you love them. Your heart may be locked, and your emotions stifled — it does not matter. We want empty vessels. As many empty vessels as we can get.

But two other things need to happen: You need to close the door, and you must ensure the vessels are empty.

The Alter Rebbe explains that empty vessels represent the emotional experience of empathy and compassion for the emptiness of my vessels. Can you truly make space for the pain of the fact that your system was hijacked by the parts that will not allow you to experience your love and awe of the Divine and the internal energy beating inside of you and the cosmos?

You should even cry out at the feeling of distance and alienation; ask Hashem and the Divine inside of you to help you realign.

At this moment, I must also "shut the door," plug the leaks in my inner system, to reclaim my love and awe from the hijackers, to emancipate myself from the cobwebs that are hijacking and abducting my energy. The love and awe are there; they have not been obliterated, but they have been hijacked. I need to be able to identify the parts and forces, the thoughts and emotions, that have captured them and manipulated them, and redirect them to my innermost Divine core.

What's the Point?

You know what happens next?

"Go in and shut the door behind you and behind your children," says Elisha. "Pour into all these vessels and remove each full one."

"They brought her and she poured. When all the vessels were full, she said to her son, 'Bring me another vessel.' He said to her, 'There are no more vessels. And the oil stopped.'"

Now, I will find my oil and allow it to flow and fill all my empty vessels, saturating them with love, awe, and the full depth of a vibrant, living relationship.

Every so often in life (it may be once a month, once in three months, or once a year), our "cruse of oil" emerges, if only for a few fleeting moments. If it has no "vessels" to fill, it emerges but then "returns" to its hiding place in the core of cores of the human identity. We remain hungry for our core, but we have no way of accessing it again till the next time it emerges.

But if, when the essence of your soul emerges, it finds "waiting" for it hundreds or thousands of empty vessels, it will begin to flow and flow until every empty vessel is filled with the dignity, depth, and meaning of the divine essence of the human spirit.

Praying When You're Not in the Mood

This, then, was Rabbi Schnuer Zalman's response to a young man, attempting to live a Jewish life based on the principles and guidelines of the Torah and its mitzvos, and yet feeling indifferent and uninspired.

Who among us can't relate to this man's quandary? How many of us could claim that each morning as we awake, we are in the mood of wrapping tefilin (phylacteries), meditating on the soul, and praying to G-d for an hour? How many mitzvos in our daily lives become an exercise in boredom and sluggishness?

At some point, many a person asks himself, "What's the point? If I were to feel G-d, living a life of Torah and mitzvos would be an awesome experience. But most of the time I don't feel G-d; my mitzvos are hollow, empty acts!"

Yet, when we do this work of borrowing empty vessels, of reclaiming our love and awe, of experiencing compassion for the emptiness and blarney of those scared parts of inside of us, we can allow our inner oil to flow freely.

A day not too far away will come when your "cruse of oil" will indeed emerge. Those who with sweat and toil constructed "empty vessels" in their lives, when their matching moment arrives, their days and nights shall become filled with the endless profundity and dignity of their Divine core.

For many of us, it is impossible to live a life of perpetual inner vitality and inspiration, but we are capable of filling our lives with empty vessels, with a schedule saturated with meaningful acts and experiences. As you do the inner work, you can be assured, the moment comes, when your soul will peek out from its inner core, and its life force and inspiration will fill all your empty vessels with life[13].

[1] Kings 2 chapter 4.[2] According to our sages, the widow was the wife of the late prophet Obadiah who spent all his money on oil for the lamps that lit the two caves that hid the last 100 Jewish authentic prophets from the wicked king Ahab and his, even more, evil wife Jezebel. This story takes us back about 2720 years, in the Jewish year 3040 since creation, or 720 BCE (around 300 years before the first temple was destroyed).[3] This fundamental axiom concerning the Bible is beautifully explained in Zohar vol. 3 53b.[4] Published in Maamarei Admur Hazalan Haktzarim pp. 136-138. Quoted and explained in Likkutei Sichos vol. 5 pp. 332-335; Sefer Hammamrum Melukat vol. 4 pp. 43-50.[5] See Maamarei Admur Hazakan ibid. Cf. Song of Songs and many of the commentaries to the book. Rambam Hilchos Teshuvah chapter 10. Many ideas in the Talmud, Midrash and Kabbalah are based on this metaphor.[6] The Tanach uses the expression, "eisha achas," one woman, which symbolizes the idea that the soul is one and always connected to the Divine. She is also the wife of the prophet, symbolizing the fact that the soul is a conduit and a channel for the Divine vibrations within the cosmos.[7] The name of the prophet is Elisha, which means "my G-d turns (and responds to me)."[8] Tanya chapter 3.[9] See Rambam Hilchos Teshuvah chapter 5.[10] This explains why the widow first stated that she has nothing, and then proceeded to say that she possesses a cruse of oil. In the soul's mind, she has nothing left to call her own. Yet her very pain about it demonstrates that the situation is far from hopeless. (This idea, a beautiful addition to the discourse of Rabbi Schnuer Zalman, was presented by the Lubavitcher Rebbe during a 1964 talk. Likkutei Sichos vol. 5 ibid.)[11] See Mishnah Tevul Yom 2:5.[12] See Sefer Hamaamarim Melukat vol. 6 p. 72 and references noted there.[13] The significance of closing the door is also that if you wish that your cruse of oil fill your life with inner meaning and fulfillment, you must put a stop to your addictive habits and your immoral actions. You must shut the door and not allow your urges and impulses to become enslaved to foreign forces.]

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Avraham Avinu served his guests butter and milk...

### **The Great Cottage Cheese Controversy**

**By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff**

Question #1: The whey it was.

Rav Schwartz tells me that his Rosh Yeshiva, a world-renowned European-born gadol, told him that one may eat cottage cheese that is not chalav Yisrael, even though one should otherwise always be careful to keep chalav Yisrael. He also held that there is no gevinas akum problem. What is the rationale for this?

Question #2: Is this the whey to go?

If gevinas Yisrael requires either that a Jew supervise the entire production, or that he own the milk or cheese, how can hechsherim certify cottage cheese produced by a non-Jewish company without a mashgiach temidi?

Question #3: No whey!

My friend Yaakov often travels in places where there are no kosher products available, and he has amassed a list of items that he may eat without a hechsher. Someone told him that when traveling he may eat cottage cheese without any hechsher. Is there a rationale for this psak?

In other articles (that can be read on RabbiKaganoff.com), I explained the basic halachic issues involved in the rabbinic prohibitions called chalav akum and gevinas akum. Chazal prohibited consuming milk that a Jew did not supervise because of concern that it might be adulterated with milk of a non-kosher species, a prohibition called chalav akum. (Henceforth, I will use the term "non-kosher milk" in this article to mean milk from non-kosher species, and "kosher milk" to mean milk from a kosher animal.) In an article, available on the website RabbiKaganoff.com under the title, The Milky Way, I explained the

dispute among halachic authorities whether this prohibition exists when there is strong basis to assume that no adulteration took place, milk that is colloquially often called "chalav stam," and that Rav Moshe Feinstein calls "chalav hacompanies."

There is also a prohibition called *gevinas akum*, cheese from gentiles. When a Jew does not supervise the cheesemaking and does not own or participate in the manufacture of the cheese, it is prohibited. According to some authorities (Rema, Yoreh Deah 115:2), the prohibition of *gevinas akum* is obviated by having a Jew supervise the cheesemaking. According to others (Shach ad loc.), *gevinas akum* is avoided only when a Jew adds the enzyme or acid that curdles or "sets" the cheese, or when a Jew owns the milk or the cheese. "Curdling" means that some of the solid particles naturally dissolved in the milk, predominantly the casein (cheese protein), precipitate out of the milk and clump together.

*Gevinas akum* is prohibited even if all the ingredients are kosher – as I noted above, a Jew must be involved either in the ownership or the production of the cheese, or, according to some, it is sufficient if he supervised the entire production.

Can kosher cheese be made from non-supervised milk (*chalav akum*)?

Many authorities contend that if the cheese contains only kosher ingredients, we are not concerned that it was made from unsupervised milk because of a principle *chalav tamei ein omeid* -- non-kosher milk does not curd into cheese. This law applies not only to the cheese produced, but also to whey, which is the byproduct of cheese production (Shu"t Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah 79).

This is the whey we make our cottage cheese

How is cottage cheese made? When cheese is made, the part of the milk that remains liquid and does not become part of the cheese is the "whey." In earlier days, a forerunner of cottage cheese was made simply by allowing milk to curdle naturally, which created a product called "curds and whey" (remember Little Miss Muffet?). Contemporary commercial cottage cheese is produced by adding an enzyme (also called rennet) to warm milk, allowing it to curdle into its separate components, the curd and the whey. The curd is then removed from the whey and rinsed thoroughly to remove every trace of whey; after which a "cheese dressing" consisting of milk, usually some cream and salt (unless it is sodium-free cottage cheese) and other minor ingredients (such as a preservative, and a stabilizer so that the cream and the milk in the dressing do not separate) is added to the curd. If the cottage cheese is seasoned with fruit, chives or other garnish, these ingredients are also added to the dressing. The percentage of fat in the cottage cheese is determined by whether the milk in the dressing is made from pure skim milk, which means no fat, or has cream added, as is usually the case.

There are three potential *kashrus* issues that can be involved.

1. Is commercially produced cottage cheese prohibited because of *gevinas akum* in cases where a Jew did not add the rennet and/or supervise the entire production?

2. Must cottage cheese be made from *chalav Yisrael* milk?

3. Are the rennet and all other ingredients kosher? Although rennet is used in minuscule quantities, and a food containing less than one part in sixty of a non-kosher ingredient is usually kosher *bedei'evid* (after the fact), non-kosher rennet still poses a serious *kashrus* problem since this is what causes the cheese to form. This gives the rennet a halachic status called *davar hamaamid*, an ingredient that creates a physical change in the processed food, which is not nullified even in small percentages.

When there is a will, there is whey -- a *gevinas akum* review

Is cottage cheese prohibited because of *gevinas akum*?

The Gemara mentions seven different potential concerns why Chazal instituted the prohibition of *gevinas akum*:

1. The enzyme used to curdle the cheese may be from the stomach of a calf that was slaughtered not according to halacha.

2. The enzyme may be from the stomach of a calf that had been offered for idol worship (Avodah Zarah 29b).

3. The milk used for the cheese may have been left in a place where snakes could poison it.

4. The milk may have been adulterated with milk of a non-kosher species. Although milk from non-kosher species contains very little casein and thus cannot be made into cheese, some fluid that could contain non-kosher milk remains in the cheese.

5. The surface of the cheese may be coated with lard.

6. Non-kosher vinegar may have been used to set the cheese.

7. Sap of an *arlah* fruit may have been used to set the cheese (Avodah Zarah 35).

As I mentioned in the other article, the Rishonim dispute which of the above reasons we follow and what are the resultant halachic conclusions. For example, a minority opinion, referred to as that of the *chachmei Narvona*, permitted eating gentile cheese in places where they commonly used vegetable rennet. However, the *Shulchan Aruch* rules like the majority opinion and prohibits this "vegetable rennet" cheese.

This is the whey we make our butter

Before analyzing whether cottage cheese is prohibited because of *gevinas akum*, we should research whether butter produced and owned by non-Jews is permitted for the kosher palate.

Let us first understand how butter is made:

Milk is composed of many components: water, cream, proteins, natural sugars (lactose), and various other nutrients. Butter is made by first separating the cream from the rest of the milk, which happens on its own if the milk is not homogenized, and then churning the cream, which causes its fat globules to combine and solidify. The liquid left behind is called buttermilk (not to be confused with cultured buttermilk, a different product sold in the dairy case of your local supermarket, called by an almost identical name to confuse the innocent).

Is butter included in the prohibitions of *gevinas akum* or *chalav akum*?

A thousand years ago, Jewish communities grappled with the following question: "May one purchase butter from a gentile?" After all, both cheese and milk of a gentile are prohibited. Why should butter be any different?

Indeed many authorities and communities held this way. However, there were also authorities and communities who permitted *chem'as akum* – "gentile butter" (Rambam, *Hilchos Maachalos Asuros* 3:15). According to the Vilna Gaon (Yoreh Deah 115:17), these authorities conclude that *gevinas akum* is prohibited because of concern of the use of non-kosher rennets, a reason that does not apply to butter. After all, although butter is a processed dairy product, rennet is not used to separate the butter.

Those who prohibit butter as *gevinas akum* rule like the other reasons mentioned above to prohibit *gevinas akum*, which do apply to butter. For example, if *gevinas akum* was prohibited because of concern that some milk residue may be left (reason #4 above), this reason applies equally to butter, because some milk residue does remain in the butter even after the buttermilk is removed.

But why is butter not prohibited because of *chalav akum*?

Those who permit gentile butter contend that just as non-kosher milk does not make cheese, it also does not make butter. Although the processes of making cheese and butter are completely dissimilar, and different components of milk are used for each, it is still true that it is difficult to make butter from non-kosher milk because of its low cream content. (See Shu"t Melamed LeHo'eil, Yoreh Deah #34, who provides a chart for the amount of dairy fat and casein found in the milk of various common farm animals, both kosher and non-kosher.) Thus, there were early authorities who permitted purchasing butter from gentiles, contending that it was exempt from both the prohibitions of *gevinas akum* and of *chalav akum*. The common practice was to follow the lenient approach.

Beware of "whey cream"!

Please note: In the contemporary world, butter should not be used without a reliable kosher certification. This is because of a host of potential *kashrus* concerns in today's butter manufacture, the most common of which is the use of "whey cream," the cream salvaged from cheese production, which is often prohibited because of *gevinas akum* absorption. Also note that a *hechsher* on butter does not mean that it is made from *chalav Yisrael* milk, unless this is specified.

A wheyward flock?

In a landmark teshuvah on the subject, Rav Moshe Feinstein discusses the kashrus issues involved in cottage cheese (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 2:48). It is important to understand the details and context of the responsum. In 1960, Rav Shimon Schwab, the late Rav of Khal Adath Jeshurun in Washington Heights, was aware that people were using cottage cheese without any hechsher whatsoever. He asked Rav Moshe a shaylah whether one should publicly announce that cottage cheese that has no hechsher is not kosher.

In answering the question, Rav Moshe discusses all three issues raised above:

- (1) Is cottage cheese prohibited because of gevinas akum?
- (2) Is cottage cheese prohibited because of chalav akum?
- (3) Do we need to be concerned that the rennet used may not be kosher?

Rav Moshe first analyzes whether cottage cheese is prohibited as gevinas akum, and presents a line of reasoning that might permit it. He notes that although accepted halacha rules unlike the chachmei Narvona, and that gevinas akum applies even when the cheese is set with kosher enzymes, it is possible that the prohibition does not apply to varieties of cheese that can be produced without any rennet at all. If one leaves the milk at the proper temperature, it will naturally curd to create the cheese part of cottage cheese. This would draw a distinction between cottage cheese (and similar products such as farmer's cheese, cream cheese, and baker's cheese) and so-called "hard cheeses" that require rennet to produce them.

Rav Moshe concludes that although one should not rely on this analysis to permit cottage cheese, one is also not required to rebuke those who consume this product.

But maybe the rennet isn't kosher?

Subsequently, Rav Moshe discusses that the cheese should be prohibited because the rennet used may not be kosher. Although rennet is used in very small quantities, it should not be nullified in the finished product because it qualifies as a *davar hamaamid*. Rav Moshe notes, however, that, since cottage cheese can be made without any supplementary enzyme, the rennet is added only to speed up the process. The issue of *davar hamaamid* is only when that agent is the exclusive cause of the forming of the product; when the product can form by natural means, or when a kosher enzyme is used and is only assisted by non-kosher rennet, the non-kosher rennet can become *bateil* in the finished product. Therefore, even if the gentile company used non-kosher rennet, the resultant cheese is not prohibited.

Rav Moshe also discusses whether one may eat cottage cheese that is not made from *chalav Yisrael*, which he permits based on his analysis that *chalav hacompanies* (his own term) is permitted. I refer the reader to my previous article for a further analysis of this dispute.

I would like at this point to quote the conclusion of Rav Moshe's teshuvah:

As a final decision, I do not say that this is permitted, but I also do not rebuke those who are lenient since there is a reason to permit it and the prohibition is rabbinic... as a result, I see no requirement... to prohibit those who are not asking, and even more so since there is the possibility that they will not listen... which allows for the additional reason that it is better to violate negligently than intentionally. However, one certainly should not publicize that there is a basis to be lenient."

Thus, Rav Moshe concludes that his reasoning excluding cottage cheese from the prohibition of gevinas akum is not clearcut and should not be relied upon. This allows us to make an interesting comparison between Rav Moshe's psak and that of the other gadol I referred to in our original question:

Rav Schwartz tells me that his Rosh Yeshiva told him that one may eat cottage cheese that is not *chalav Yisrael*, even though one should otherwise always be careful to keep *chalav Yisrael*. He also held that there is no gevinas akum problem.

I have two observations based on this anecdote quoting this esteemed gadol, whom I knew personally. The first is that this gadol disputed with Rav Moshe on a halachic issue. Whereas Rav Moshe contended that one should not rely *lechatchilah* that cottage cheese and other "soft" cheeses

are not prohibited as gevinas akum, this other gadol apparently held that one may *lechatchilah* rely on this heter.

You are going the wrong whey

My second observation is that I believe this gadol was unaware of a technical fact. It appears that he assumed that the liquid part of cottage cheese is the whey byproduct of the cheese manufacture, precisely what Little Miss Muffet ate. It may be that where this gadol grew up this was a commonly produced or purchased food, and indeed this food would have no problem of *chalav akum*. However, contemporary cottage cheese is made by adding milk to the cheese curd. Although the heter of "*chalav hacompanies*" that Rav Moshe accepts, again not *lechatchilah*, applies here, this particular gadol did not rely on this heter. Presumably, he followed the opinion of the Chasam Sofer that one may not use milk that a Jew did not supervise; however, whey of unsupervised milk that was a byproduct of kosher cheese production is permitted.

By the whey

Many years ago, a prominent rav, living in a community where *chalav Yisrael* milk was available but just making inroads, was faced by a dilemma. People in his community were using non-*chalav Yisrael*, non-gevinas *Yisrael* cottage cheese, which Rav Moshe rules that *lechatchilah* one should not use, yet the market for fully *chalav Yisrael*/gevinas *Yisrael* cottage cheese did not yet exist. He arranged that a *mashgiach* should add the rennet to non-*chalav Yisrael* milk to produce a batch of cheese curd from supervised kosher ingredients. The curd produced this way is gevinas *Yisrael*. The rav also arranged that the milk added as "cheese dressing" to the gevinas *Yisrael* curd should be *chalav Yisrael*, so that the resultant product was certainly kosher, was gevinas *Yisrael* and contained *chalav Yisrael*, although its gevinas *Yisrael* was not made from *chalav Yisrael*.

At this point, I would like to address the second question I asked above:

"If gevinas *Yisrael* requires either that a Jew supervise the entire production, or that he own the milk or cheese, how can hechsherim certify cottage cheese produced by a non-Jewish company without a *mashgiach temidi*?"

According to Rav Moshe's teshuvah, the above-mentioned product should not be used *lechatchilah*, so how can someone provide it with a hechsher? The answer is that they feel that there was an old minhag, going back to Europe, that permitted soft cheeses that were not gevinas *Yisrael*. Although Rav Moshe clearly was unaware of such a minhag (otherwise he certainly would have mentioned it), it seems that the other gadol I mentioned above, who was raised in Poland, was familiar with such a minhag. It appears that this minhag was prevalent in some parts of Europe and not in others.

At this point, we can address the last question raised above:

Yaakov often travels in places where there are no kosher products available, and he has amassed a list of items that he can use anywhere. Someone once told him that when traveling he may eat cottage cheese without any hechsher. What is the rationale for this psak?

The answer is that the rabbi who permitted him felt that when traveling he could rely on the minhag that "soft" cheese is not considered gevinas akum. We should realize that Rav Moshe rules that this product should not be used, and, furthermore, even those who do permit this cottage cheese do so only in a place where the leniency to use "*chalav hacompanies*" applies.

Conclusion

Specifically in the context of gevinas akum, the Gemara teaches that the rabbinic laws are dearer to Hashem than the Torah laws. We see how a vast halachic literature developed devoted to understanding the prohibitions of gevinas akum and *chalav akum*, created by Chazal to protect the Jewish people from major sins.

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## Rav Kook Torah

### Vayeira: Abraham's Return from the Akeidah

The Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, was over. Abraham had passed this extraordinary test. He descended from the heights of Mount Moriah — physically and spiritually. The Torah concludes the narrative with a description of Abraham's return to the world:

“Abraham returned to his young men; and they rose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived in Beersheba.” (Gen. 22:19)

Why does the Torah mention that Abraham rejoined the young men he had left behind with the donkey? And why the emphasis on his return to Beersheba and his settling there?

Rejoining the World

The powerful experience of the Akeidah could have caused Abraham to disengage from the world and its mundane ways. The extraordinary spiritual encounter on Mount Moriah might have led him to forgo the battle against ignorance and idolatry in the world and withdraw to live a secluded life dedicated to his private service of God.

However, this did not happen. Every word in the text emphasizes the extent of Abraham’s return to society after the Akeidah.

“Abraham returned to his young men.” Abraham did not relinquish his mission of influencing and educating others. Before ascending Mount Moriah, Abraham had instructed the young men to stay behind. They were not ready for this supreme spiritual ascent. They needed to stay with the donkey- in Hebrew, the chamor – for they were not ready to sever all ties with their chomer, their materialistic life.

But now Abraham returned to them. He descended to their level in order to enlighten and elevate them.

“They rose and went together to Beersheba.” They rose — with elevated spirits, in an atmosphere of purity and holiness. And the most remarkable aspect of Abraham’s return was that, despite everything that had taken place at the heights of Mount Moriah, Abraham and the young men were able to proceed together — united in purpose and plan of action — to Beersheba.

Beersheba

What is the significance of their journey to Beersheba?

The name “Beersheba” has two meanings. It means “Well of Oath” and “Well of Seven.” An oath is a pledge to take action. When we take an oath, we vow that our vision will not remain just a theoretical ideal; we promise to translate our beliefs into action.

The number “seven” signifies completion of the natural world. It took seven days to finish creating the universe. Beersheba is thus not just a location. It is a metaphor for Abraham’s commitment to apply his convictions and ideals in practice.

“Abraham lived in Beersheba.” Abraham stayed in Beersheba, continuing his outreach activities there. His name Abraham — meaning “father of many nations” — was particularly appropriate in Beersheba. There he set up his eshel, an inn that brought wayfarers to recognize God’s providence and to “call in the name of God, the Eternal Lord” (Gen. 21:33).

Where was Isaac?

While the Torah describes Abraham’s return, it is mysteriously silent about Isaac. What happened to Isaac after the Akeidah?

Concealed behind Abraham’s public works was a hidden ray of light. This light was Isaac’s unique trait of mesirut nefesh, the quality of total devotion and self-sacrifice that he had demonstrated at the Akeidah.

While Abraham’s activities were directed towards all peoples, Isaac passed on this legacy of mesirut nefesh to his descendants, a spiritual gift to the Jewish people for all generations.

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## **Rabbi Eliezer Melamed**

### **Build — And Quickly**

#### **Revivim**

Of course, it is preferable not to employ those who oppose our existence in this Land • However, as long as there is no practical alternative, it is forbidden to halt the building of our land • Our goal is to reach two million Jewish residents in Judea and Samaria; delaying construction could cause us to fail through the Sin of the Spies • In the future, the nations will come to learn from us how the tzitzit (ritual fringes) express the ability to bring holiness into ordinary daily life \*• It is an act of piety to check the tzitzit before reciting the blessing, but in our day, there is no need to delay because of it, if there is no reasonable concern that they have torn

A Question Regarding Building in the Settlements

Q: Rabbi, I understand that your opinion is that it is necessary to build in Judea and Samaria, even when employing Arab workers. But it is well known that they hate us and fight us, and when we build with them, we strengthen their hold on the Land. Therefore, the settlements that oppose employing Arabs are correct!

Furthermore, the only argument of those who support employing Arabs is financial—to make construction cheaper. If so, the rabbis should educate the public to overcome the desire for money and be willing to pay more, rather than employ Arabs! Not only that, but if Arabs were completely prevented from working, innovative solutions would be found to lower construction costs, and thus Israel would be doubly blessed.

A: Those who wish to build in Judea and Samaria with Arab laborers aim to settle the Land, and expand Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria as quickly as possible. The higher housing prices rise, the fewer buyers there are, and the settlement process slows down. In addition, there are currently not enough workers to build at the required pace. Although employing hostile Arabs strengthens our enemies, we ourselves gain much more strength from it.

Naturally, everyone would prefer to give work to his own people, and certainly not to workers who are not supportive of our existence in this Land. However, the challenge of changing construction methods, and the identity of the labor force, is a national challenge that only the government of Israel can handle. Around the world there are hundreds of thousands of construction workers who would gladly receive work visas from Israel to work in the construction industry. If various barriers—such as laws and regulations about minimum wage—were removed, construction could progress much faster, and at lower prices.

However, the position of successive Israeli governments, based on the view of the security services, is that it is important to provide work for Arab construction workers from Judea and Samaria. Many believe this position is mistaken and reflects the same conception that led to war and its failures. Therefore, those who oppose this approach should work to change the stance of the security establishment and government—but this must be done politically, not by delaying construction.

Another possible way forward is to improve construction methods based on international experience, adding Israeli innovation. May we find entrepreneurs who will do this. In the meantime, however, we must build as quickly and as cheaply as possible, in order to settle the Land, and prevent the terrible danger of a hostile state in the heart of our country.

Beware of the ‘Sin of the Spies’

Those who call to delay construction must be careful, to avoid falling even into the slightest trace of the ‘Sin of the Spies’. The Spies did not intend to be wicked, to violate the commandment of Yishuv Ha’Aretz (settling the Land of Israel), or to harm Am Yisrael. They had what seemed a strong argument: that conquering the Land would endanger the nation. Since they were sent with God’s approval, they thought it their duty to dissuade the people from undertaking a mission beyond their ability.

Similarly, those who did not immigrate to the Land of Israel when the major waves of immigration began about 120 years ago also had arguments: that one must not cooperate with secular Jews, that the Jewish community was forced to employ Arabs, or that it depended entirely on foreign rule and the Baron’s money.

So too today, regarding building with Arabs — there are arguments with some justification, but in the larger picture, they miss the great goal of Yishuv Ha’Aretz and repelling the enemy. Heavy pressures are still being exerted on the State of Israel, and if we do not reach two million Jews or more in Judea and Samaria as quickly as possible, we will fail to fulfill the commandment and the duty imposed upon us.

Incidentally, it is worth noting another point: often those who call to halt construction have already bought cheap homes built by Arab workers, and now they demand that Arab labor stop, thereby raising housing prices by tens of percent for new settlers—without feeling the slightest pang of conscience. It is unfair to take a position that demands others



pay a higher price, while not volunteering to share that burden themselves.

#### The Tzitzit Reminds of All the Commandments

As we learned in the previous column, the commandment of tzitzit represents all the commandments. The purpose of all mitzvot is to guide a person in expressing his inner powers in the proper and blessed way. The tallit with its four corners symbolizes all the latent powers within a person, and the many threads emerging from it symbolize bringing those powers into action. Thus, the mitzvah of tzitzit reminds us of all the commandments, as it is written:

“And you shall see it and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them” (Numbers 15:39).

As our Sages taught: “Seeing leads to remembering, and remembering leads to doing” (Menachot 43b). Seeing the tzitzit therefore reminds one of all the mitzvot, whose purpose is to bring the inner powers of a person to fruition.

From Noah and Abraham

Our Sages asked: from where did Israel merit the honorable garment of tzitzit? They answered: from Shem, the son of Noah. When Noah became drunk and was disgraced, Shem and his brother Japheth covered their father so that he would not be shamed. God rewarded Shem’s descendants by giving them the commandment of tzitzit, which brings beauty and splendor in this world and the next (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 14).

Japheth, who participated to a lesser extent, merited that his descendants would have proper burial and their bodies would not be disgraced (Genesis Rabbah 36:6).

Others say that Israel merited tzitzit because of Abraham our father, who rescued the people of Sodom from the four kings and could have taken their possessions but chose not to benefit “from a thread to a shoe strap” (Genesis 14:23). In that merit, his descendants received the great honor of the threads of tzitzit (ibid., Sotah 17a).

Noah was the pioneer in developing the powers of the seventy nations, while Abraham pioneered the development of the powers of Israel. Therefore, Israel merited the mitzvah of tzitzit through them.

#### A Message to the Nations

The idea expressed in tzitzit—that through practical commandments, Israel learns to express its inner good—will one day become a message for all humanity. This is the meaning of our Sages’ words:

“Whoever is careful with tzitzit will merit that 2,800 servants attend him, as it is said: ‘In those days, ten men from all the languages of the nations shall take hold of the corner of a Jew’s garment, saying, We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (Zechariah 8:23, Shabbat 32b).

Ten men from each of the seventy nations grasp each corner—700 per corner, 2,800 total.

The term “servants” here does not mean in a degrading sense, but rather people who understand that without the guidance of the Torah, man becomes enslaved to the material world, unable to actualize his spiritual potential. They recognize the greatness of Israel, who are careful with tzitzit, and devoted to redeeming the latent powers within humanity and the world. They wish to attach themselves to Israel to learn how to realize their own gifts, and bring blessing to themselves and their nations (based on Maharal, Chiddushei Aggadot, Menachot 43b; Ein Ayah, Shabbat 2:221).

We may add that the nations’ admiration for tzitzit—a garment everyone wears, yet which Israel has made sacred—conveys a profound message: that all aspects of ordinary life can be elevated to holiness.

#### Must the Tzitzit Threads Be Separated?

Our Sages (Menachot 42a) said the tzitzit threads should be separated. The Tur (Orach Chayim 8:7) explains that tzitzit derives its name from the word meaning “separate threads.” However, separation is not essential to the mitzvah, and one should not miss communal prayer because of it (Magen Avraham 8:10; Eliyah Rabbah 8; Shulchan Aruch HaRav 12; Mishnah Berurah 18).

When the threads are good quality, as they are today and do not tend to tangle, there is no need to spend time separating them (Aruch

HaShulchan 13). But if they have become entangled, for example after washing, one should separate them.

#### Checking the Tzitzit Before the Blessing

Q: Must one check the tzitzit before saying the blessing?

A: In the past, tzitzit threads were less durable and often tore without the wearer noticing. Therefore, the Rosh wrote: “One who is fearful of God should check the tzitzit before wrapping himself, lest he recite a blessing in vain” (Hilchot Tzitzit 20). Likewise, the Shulchan Aruch rules: “Before blessing, he should inspect the tzitzit threads to ensure they are valid, so as not to bless in vain” (Orach Chayim 8:9). Some say this inspection is also for the sake of fulfilling the mitzvah properly (Mishnah Berurah 22).

However, this is an act of piety, not obligation, since we assume the tzitzit remain intact unless proven otherwise (Responsa Zera Emet III:142; Aruch HaShulchan 8:14–15). Many great Torah scholars did not follow this pious practice (Yechaveh Da’at VI:1). Therefore, one who is in a hurry to join communal prayer, or to be called to the Torah, need not delay to check his tzitzit (Magen Avraham 8:11; Taz 13:3; Ben Ish Chai, Bereishit 3; Mishnah Berurah 8:22).

The pious custom of checking applies only when threads often tear unnoticed (Turei Zahav 8:8; Magen Avraham 8:19). Nowadays, since most people’s tzitzit threads do not tear easily, there is generally no need to check them before the blessing.

Nevertheless, one who suspects that his tzitzit may have torn—for example, after heavy activity, such as labor or military training—should check them before blessing.

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#### This Anonymous Email Left Me Shaken

##### By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Just before Rosh Hashana an email arrived without a name: just a cry, an anonymous letter addressed not to me, but to God. “You have hurt me. You have abused and tortured me. You have taunted and judged me... You left me. And so I leave you, too.” Line after line bled with anguish, betrayal, and the raw honesty of a broken heart.

This email didn’t just arrive in my inbox; it punched me in the gut. I didn’t just read it with my eyes; I felt with my entire being the pain it conveyed. At first glance, it smacks of heresy, sacrilege, and blasphemy. “I leave you, too.” But when you read between the lines, you see something else altogether. With permission, here is the email, followed by what I sent back as a response:

I write this to you, God, because the time for apologetics has come to an end.

I will express this in no uncertain terms. You have hurt me. You have abused and tortured me. You have taunted and judged me. In my hour of need, you abandoned me. You have condemned me to loneliness and envy. You elect at every moment to continue to subject me to pain which drains the little hope I still have for things in my life to improve. I have been aware of all of this for awhile, but the time has come for me to say it.

You dare call yourself a merciful father. A father who treats his children like you do deserves nothing but the staunchest condemnation. You willingly subject humanity to horrors unimaginable and claim to be a God of kindness and compassion. If you are as they say you are – omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent – then it is within your power to reverse the sadistic creation that you have fashioned. Yet you continuously choose to prop it up. Here is what I have to say to you.

Nearly a decade of dedication to you. Your laws. What I thought was your will. Go on. I’d like you to think about the thousands of times I’ve prayed. Put on tefillin. Kept Shabbos. Pushed normal thoughts of girls out of my developing brain and castigated me when I strayed. I slaved away over a Gemara for years, bored to tears and pressured to meet toxic social standards, because I thought it would make you love me. Well, so be it. You have hurt me, and this time, I’m going to remember it.

Of course, what I’d like to say is that I’m going to hurt you, too. But, if you are as they say you are, that’s not quite something I or anyone else can do. Fine. I accept that hurting you is beyond my control. Fortunately

for me, you decided to grant me free will, and oh, I'm itching to use it. This mouth will never utter another word of praise or thanks to you, the source of my pain and misfortune. I will dedicate my arms and legs and ears to helping those in need because you have abandoned them, too. I will forever rue the day your cruel masochism decided to plant me in this traumatic world to suffer and scream. How many times – how many times?! – have I prayed to you to heal me? To comfort and console me? To show me the purpose in my pain? You have left me unanswered. You have stood me up. You left me.

And so I leave you, too.

May you know the pain of a parent witnessing their child turn his back and walk away. May you feel the seething grief that darkens my days and slashes at my guts. May your eyes flood with tears shed over losing your son forever.

I don't want you to explain anything anymore. I don't want to hear from you at all. I'm done asking questions, and I'm done reaching out. I suppose the next time I see you will be whenever you decide to pluck me from this world and stand me up before your kangaroo court to judge me as a wicked man for defending myself from an abuser. Until then, please don't talk to me. Don't communicate with me. I will never forget what you have done to me, and I know you won't, either. This Rosh Hashanah, I will be doing some remembering of my own.

I hope it was worth it.

My response:

I have read and re-read your email so many times and each time it breaks my heart and brings tears to my eyes. I am beyond sorry for your pain and experiences. I found your words so real, raw, authentic, and profound. While they are written to "write off" Hashem, I see them as one of the greatest expressions of emunah I have ever read. If you didn't believe He is real you wouldn't bother being angry or disappointed with Him or walking away from Him. Your walking away is in fact an enormous demonstration of walking towards. Maybe on Rosh Hashana, if you don't want to open a machzor, print out your letter and read it to Him. Scream it to Him.

If you want to communicate further and if I can help you in any way, please let me know. I am honored, humbled, and grateful that you shared your letter with me.

The author ended up revealing himself to me and despite his letter of rejection to God, he not only attended Shul on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, he never stopped davening for a day.

Although his letter rejected Hashem, the fact that he continued to seek Him reminded me of an image shared by Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel.

Elie Wiesel said that he was present when a group of inmates, suffering beyond comprehension in Auschwitz, put God on trial. He described that the Almighty was found guilty for the evils of the Holocaust. Wiesel later wrote a play on this topic called, "The Trial of God." What Wiesel said happened next is truly remarkable. After the trial of God was over with a guilty verdict, noticing the sun was setting, the very same people who acted as the prosecutors organized a minyan and davened Mincha, the afternoon service.

I share this with you not as a model or standard for us to aspire to. Anger at Hashem is not an ideal goal or objective, but it is also not a failure of faith or an expression of heresy. There are some who go through all the motions of mitzvot and Torah, they daven diligently, they would say they talk to Hashem three times a day, but have they ever had a real and honest conversation with Him?

Associating what is happening in our lives as coming from our Creator is not heresy, it is faith. Disappointment and discontent are not necessarily indications of faithlessness, they are often evidence of genuine belief in God. One is not angry at someone that isn't real. One doesn't feel disappointed with a figment of their imagination.

Indeed, while our greatest teachers and leaders were not ordinary people, and their words need to be studied, analyzed and appreciated for their deeper meaning, we do have precedent for directing dissatisfaction and challenges toward Hashem, beginning in our parsha with our founding father, Avraham.

When informed that Sodom is going to be destroyed, Avraham doesn't passively accept the will of Hashem. He brazenly challenges: "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ... Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?"

Generations later, feeling overwhelmed and upset, even somewhat abandoned, Moshe challenges: "Why have You dealt ill with Your servant? ... Did I conceive all this people? ... I am not able to carry all this people alone... if You will deal thus with me, kill me, I pray You, at once."

This theme continues with our Neviim. After Hashem spares the people of Nineveh, Yonah, feeling his mission is undermined, is explicitly angry: "But it displeased Yonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed and said, 'Hashem, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? ... Therefore now, Hashem, please take my life from me.'" Experiencing misery, pain and grief, Iyov expresses his anger after what he feels is unjust suffering: "I will say to Hashem, Do not condemn me; show me why You contend with me." Feeling betrayed, Yirmiyahu challenges: "You deceived me, Hashem and I was deceived; You overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me."

To be clear, our great leaders used these moments to draw close, not to push away. They believed in and were devoted to Hashem beyond anything we can understand. Their words deserve to be studied closely. But it is undeniable that the Torah communicates their words in a way that gives us license to confront and protest to Hashem. After all, that is the basis of all tefillah, an invitation to challenge the status quo and to appeal to the Almighty to do things differently.

Don't aspire to be upset at Hashem. But if that is how you are feeling, don't deny it, don't beat yourself up, knock yourself down, or feel guilt and shame. It's okay to feel anger, disappointment, or betrayal toward Hashem. These emotions don't have to distance us, they can draw us closer, deepen our prayers, and reveal the raw honesty of our faith. Like the letter-writer, we can confront God and yet continue to daven, knowing that our questions and our tears are themselves an expression of Emunah

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### Parshas Vayeira

#### Rav Yochanan Zweig

##### That Healing Feeling

To him Hashem appeared, in the plains of Mamre, while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw three men standing before him [...] (18:1-2).

This week's parsha begins with Hashem coming to visit Avraham. Rashi (ad loc) explains the reason for the visit: "It was the third day since the circumcision, and Hakodosh Baruch Hu inquired as to his welfare." Chazal (see Sotah 14a) clearly state that Hashem came to visit Avraham for the mitzvah of bikur cholim, and we are thus instructed to visit the sick just as Hashem visited Avraham.

Hashem noticed that Avraham was pained by the fact that he couldn't fulfill the mitzvah of hachnasass orchim (inviting guests into one's home), so He summoned three "men" to come and visit with Avraham. Rashi (18:2) informs us that these "men" were actually angels sent to Avraham, each with a specific task to accomplish. According to the Talmud (Bava Metzia 86b), the angel Michael came to inform Sarah that she would give birth; Gavriel came to overturn Sodom; Rephael came to heal Avraham from his circumcision.

This seems a little odd. After all, Hashem Himself came to visit Avraham to do bikur cholim. Ostensibly, this would seem to be the highest level of "medical care" that one could hope to achieve. What possible reason would there have been to also send the angel Rephael to heal him?

One of the most under appreciated aspects of recovering from a trauma is considering the emotional state of the patient. There have been countless studies that show that recovery is aided greatly by a person's attitude. Science has tried to explain how the emotional state directly effects the healing process (perhaps the brain releases healing endorphins, etc.) but the link is undeniable.

In other words, there are two aspects to healing: 1) recovering from the actual physical trauma to the body and managing the pain and 2) restoring the patient's proper emotional state, which has been negatively affected by a diminished sense of self. The latter is obviously very much exacerbated by the medical environment where most patients are treated like an object, or worse, a science project. The significant indignities (hospital gowns – need we say more?) suffered in that environment have a strong and deleterious effect on a patient's emotional state as it has a terribly negative impact to one's sense of self.

Hashem visited Avraham not to heal his physical body or to help manage his pain. This is, after all, the domain in which Hashem placed Rephael to administer. Rather, Hashem come to visit Avraham in order to restore Avraham's sense of self. After all, if the Almighty comes to visit you, you're a pretty "big deal," and an important part of His plan. This too is a form of medical treatment as understanding that you matter is the basis for wanting to recover, which therefore speeds up the healing process.

This is the point of bikur cholim (unfortunately, often overlooked). All too frequently, bikur cholim is performed perfunctorily; that is, the person visiting makes some "small talk" for a few moments and promptly begins to ignore the patient; either watching television, talking to other visitors, or answering phone calls and emails.

We are instructed to follow Hashem's lead in bikur cholim by making sure the person understands that our visit is all about them, conveying that we care about them, and ensuring that they know that they are important. In other words, your job in bikur cholim is to restore the patients sense of self. In this way, you are following Hashem's example and actually participating in the healing process.

People in Glass Houses...

Let a little water be fetched, please, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread, that you may nourish your hearts. After that you shall pass on; seeing that you have already come to your servant. And they said, So do, as you have said (18:3-5).

Rashi (ad loc) quoting the Gemara (Bava Metzia 86b) explains that Avraham was under the impression that these "visitors" were Arabs, whom were known to worship the dust that was on their feet. This was a type of idol worship; as they were a nomadic people who traveled frequently – thus they worshipped the "god" of the roads. They viewed the dust of the road as something sacred; something that should be bowed down to (Maharal).

The Gemara goes on to say that the angels didn't appreciate Avraham suspecting them of such a thing and actually criticized Avraham in their

response: "Did you actually suspect us to be Arabs that bow to the dust of their feet? First look at your very own son Yishmael (who regularly does that)?"

In other words, the angels are telling Avraham – before accusing others of misdeeds get your own house in order. How does the Talmud know that this is what the angels replied to Avraham? Our sages don't invent conversations out of thin air. Where in the verses can our sages deduce that this is what actually took place?

If one examines the verses carefully, it can readily be seen what caused the sages to come to this conclusion. Consider, for a moment, three people who are traveling in the blistering heat on a parched and dusty road, desperate for some sort of shelter. They come across a welcoming tent with a benevolent host offering them not only respite from the sun, but plenty of water and food as well. The host only has one stipulation; "please wash your feet, I will then fetch you water and food while you're comfortably resting in the shade of my tree."

What should be the appropriate response to this kind and generous offer? One would imagine that you don't have to have the manners and etiquette of Emily Post to respond, "Thank you kind sir! Of course we will do as you wish!" Yet the angels respond in a very odd manner; they basically command him, "So shall you do, just as you have said." Clearly Chazal are bothered that this is an inappropriate response to a kindness that is offered with a generous heart.

Chazal therefore conclude that the angels aren't responding to his generous offer, they are responding to his accusation or assumption that they are idol worshippers. Now their comments begins to resonate – before trying to fix other people's shortcomings, first take care of the very same issues that you have in your own home.

Perhaps most remarkable is how Avraham responds to their chastising of the manner in which he runs his household. After all, it's never easy to open oneself to honest criticism. One would imagine that accepting severe criticism from someone you are going out of your way to be kind and generous toward would give one serious pause. Yet Avraham takes their criticism in stride and literally "runs" to make preparations for them and otherwise oversees that all their needs aren't just minimally met; they are offered expensive delicacies and attentive service.

Undoubtedly, this is why Avraham is the paragon of the attribute of chessed. True kindness shouldn't be delivered based on your feelings toward the recipient; true kindness is based on the needs of the recipient and doing whatever you can to show them how much you appreciate the opportunity to be of service.

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לע"נ

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

## **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 Liebttag 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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## **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 Sedom, 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 Sedom 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 Moriyya, 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 Sedom 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 shoresh '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 protesters' 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 'shoresh').

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 protesters 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 Sodom'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 keshef 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 Karmeil 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