

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

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

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How do we relate to the world and other people? Why did Hashem put us in the world? From whom in the Torah should we learn how to live and relate to others? Possible models include Adam, Noach, Avraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov, Yosef, Moshe, Aharon, Miriam, and many others. Avraham is an excellent candidate, because many lessons that we learn from his life connect (at least thematically) with events and lessons throughout the Torah.

God had promised Noach and the world after the flood that He would never again destroy the world and start over. How then could God deal with a community full of evil? With Noach's generation, he destroyed the world (and people) to start over with Noach's family. At Shinar, He confused the languages to keep the evil people from working together for un-Godly purposes. His new plan was to find special righteous people, such as Avraham, to teach *tzedek u'mishpat* – kindness and justice – to reform the people of the community. God tells Avraham of his plan to destroy Sodom and Amorah. Avraham realizes that God wants Avraham to try to save the cities, so he argues that God should save the evil people if there are as few as 50, 45, 40, 30, and even 10 righteous people there. (Lot's family consists of exactly ten people.) The same issue comes up again with the evil people of Nineveh. We see another aspect of coping with an evil community when God turns to Yonah to warn the people to reform or face destruction. Yonah tries to refuse, because he knows that within a couple of generations, the people will return to evil and end up destroying Israel and the Temple. God insists, however, that Yonah teach *tzedek u'mishpat* to the people of Nineveh.

Avraham's interactions with his nephew Lot also connect with other parts of the Torah. When Avraham realizes that he and Lot must separate, he and Lot look around from their spot in the mountains. Avraham offers him the land to the north or south. Lot chooses instead to go east, to the Jordan valley, where a river runs through desert land and makes it fertile. Irrigating crops requires only pushing aside the soil at the edge of the river to let water flow to the fields. Rashi observes that such a land encourages residents to ignore God, because they can grow crops by simply using their heels to direct the water. In contrast, Israel is a land where the people must look to God, because they only receive water when God sends the rain. Eden, Egypt, and Mesopotamia are all lands where rivers take care of bringing water. In *Eikev*, Moshe uses language associated with Avraham – as Rashi reminds us, to warn against trampling “minor” mitzvot with our heels (one translation of “eikev”). When Lot chooses to live in Sodom despite all the evil there, Avraham realizes that Lot cannot continue to live with his family. When we read of Lot choosing to move to Sodom, we should realize these connections and think about Adam, Chava, the people in Shinar, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Jews about to enter Israel – all in connection with Avraham and his midot (values).

God tests Avraham numerous times to teach him to have complete faith and obey – *lech lecha* – go for yourself. With complete faith, obeying God's commands, blessings will come to Avraham – some blessings during his life, but even more because of his legacy. God tells Avraham “*lech lecha*” – go for your benefit – for both his first and last tests. Avraham obeys without asking why, without asking where he is going and often without asking what will happen. This deep faith that God will take care of the details appears many times in the Torah. A person of complete faith will trust that God will find a way to make things work out, even when he cannot see how. Avraham and Yitzhak have this faith when they walk together up the mountain to offer a korban to God. How could Avraham go to sacrifice Yitzhak and have God keep His promise to make a great nation from Avraham and Yitzhak? Neither Avraham nor Yitzhak knows how God will make both happen, yet they trust that God will find a solution. Miriam has this same faith (at age 6) when she takes her baby brother in his teva to the edge of the Nile. She watches to see how God will protect the baby, even when Paro's daughter is the

one who finds the teva. When Paro's daughter realizes that it is a Jewish baby and is uncertain what to do, Miriam asks if she wants her to find a nursemaid to care for the baby. God finds the solution – with Miriam's help -- because with her faith, she stays to watch. Many years later, when the Jews run out of water in the desert, Miriam has the same faith that God will find water for the Jews. This is the kind of faith that we are to learn from Avraham and Miriam. This is the kind of faith that Jews have had for 3500 years – that God will always protect the Jews, that other nations continue to come and go, but Jews, who represent 0.2 percent of the world population, will survive while much larger nations continue to arise and disappear. This is the kind of faith that enables us to look back at the miracle of the rebirth of Israel 72 years ago, the war for independence that Israel could not possibly have won, the defense wars that Israel could not have won against the combined forces of 100,000,000 Arabs. (I remember how scared we were in 1967 and 1973 when those wars broke out.)

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, taught me some of these lessons over our years together. Some more of these examples come from the amazing insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his associates at Alephbeta.org. My college professors taught that one could never prove or disprove the existence of God. Rabbi Cahan taught me that an intelligent Jew must learn to see the hand of God in the world. Is there any other explanation for how things work out than some intelligent original source starting the process? The Torah helps us understand these deep questions, in part through all the connections among various stories and situations.

Rabbi Cahan's older grandson's Bar Mitzvah will be in five weeks, Shabbat Hanukkah. His Haftorah will be the same one from my Bar Mitzvah and from Rabbi Cahan's Bar Mitzvah. How Rabbi Cahan would have kvelled to be there (with his beloved Elizabeth) for the mitzvah!

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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 the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.**

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Nossan ben Pessel, Yaakov Tzvi ben Liba, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Eli ben Hanina, Yoram HaKohen ben Shoshana, Gedalya ben Sarah, Mordechai ben Chaya, Baruch Yitzhak ben Perl, David Leib HaKohen ben Sheina Reizel, Zev ben Sara Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Marda Behla, HaRav Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Amoz ben Tziviah, Reuven ben Masha, Moshe David ben Hannah, Meir ben Sara, Yitzhok Tzvi ben Yehudit Miriam, Yaakov Naphtali ben Michal Leah, Ramesh bat Heshmat, Rivka Chaya bat Leah, Zissel Bat Mazal, Chana Bracha bas Rochel Leah, Leah Fruma bat Musa Devorah, Hinda Behla bat Chaya Leah, Nechama bas Tikva Rachel, Miriam Chava bat Yachid, and Ruth bat Sarah, all of whom greatly need our prayers.**

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Hannah & Alan

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### **Drasha: Vayera: On Whose Account?**

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 2000

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

Avraham Avinu did not only perform kindness, he defined it, and he eternalized it. This week, the Torah tells us how three angels disguised as Arabs passed by Avraham's tent a mere three days after his bris milah. Avraham ran to greet them and offered them food and shelter from the blazing sun.

"Let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and recline beneath the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may sustain yourselves, then go on — inasmuch as you have passed your servant's way" (Genesis 18: 4-5). Avraham brings butter and milk; he slaughters cattle; Sora bakes. All for three total nomadic strangers. But his actions do not go unnoticed.

Each one of his services, every nuance of his actions, was repaid years later in miraculous fashion. The Medrash Tanchuma tell us that the Almighty repaid Avraham's children for every act that Avraham did towards the nomadic wayfarers. "Because Sora and Avraham gave their guests bread, the Jews were given bread from heaven (manna). Since he offered water, so too, water from a rock was offered to the Jews in the desert! As Avraham washed the travelers feet, so too, Hashem washes us from sin." And so on.

Even the manner in which the hospitality was expressed, merited reward. The Medrash tells us: "in the merit of Avraham saying "a little water be brought," Hashem declares, that He "will thrust these nations from before you little by little; you will not be able to annihilate them quickly, lest the beasts of the field increase against you" (Deuteronomy 7:22). And so for saying "a little," our enemies will disappear, little by little.

There are three powerful questions to ask. The first request, "let a little water be brought and wash your feet," needs to be analyzed. Rashi tells us that Avraham did not bring water himself, rather he asked, "let water be brought." He asked his servant to bring water. Everything else he did himself. Why did someone else get water?

Second, Rashi also explains that the water was not for drinking; for that Avraham gave milk. Avraham wanted water to wash their feet, as the nomads of those days worshipped the sand, and Avraham did not want that form of idolatry brought into his home. But that, too, needs explanation. If the water was meant to wash idolatry, Avraham, the greatest adversary of idolatry, should have showered and hosed the potential spiritual contaminants with a deluge of water. GEVALT! AVODAH ZARAH! IDOLS! Get them out of my home! Yet Avraham only asks, "Have a little water brought." Why just a bit? Why someone else? And third, why is he rewarded for the words "a little bit of water?" Is getting only a little water meritorious?

**Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant, known as Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the mussar movement, was invited to for a meal at the home of a wealthy individual. They began the meal with the traditional netilas yadayim, the washing of the hands for bread. Rabbi Salanter, opened the spigot, and filled the cup with the minimal amount of water required by Jewish law. He proceeded to slowly pour the minimal required amount of water on his hands and made the blessing. After he took his first bite of bread, his host expressed his wonder. "Rabbi!" He exclaimed, "Is it not written that he who washes with much water will be blessed with prosperity! Surely, I am not lacking for water, and you could have washed liberally. Why did you use such a meager amount for the ritual washing?"**

**Rabbi Salanter smiled. "Who schleps your water from the well?"**

**"Why, my maid!" Exclaimed the patron. "Surely I am not the water carrier!" "Aha," declared Rabbi Lipkin. "You want me to wash liberally, depleting the water supply in the barrel. And then your maidservant will have to schlep more water! I should be a tzaddik on her back? No! I would rather use the minimum amount of water, spare her the pain, and fulfill the standard requirement of the halacha. As far as blessing for prosperity, I guess that will come from somewhere else. But surely my blessings, nor any religious stringency, will be carried for me on the back of your maid."**

Perhaps Avraham did not want to deal with the idolatrous sand. He did not touch it or wash it. So he asked someone else. He asked an errand-boy. But if that was the case he made sure to say "a little water." In no way would Avraham, the great rival of idolatry ask for more water than necessary. Because you can't place the burden of your stringencies on the backs of others.

Good Shabbos!

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## Killing in the Name of God?

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2013\*

Is it ever permissible to kill an innocent person in the name of God? Both our religious and ethical intuitions scream “no”! Halakha and Torah values consistently underscore the sanctity of human life and the injustice of allowing harm to come to innocent people, and from an ethical standpoint such an act is the very definition of murder. We only need to look at the evening news or the morning paper to see the hundreds, sometimes thousands, of lives that can be destroyed when people believe that they have a divine warrant, or worse, a divine mandate to kill for a religious cause. For us Americans, the horror of this hit home 12 years ago on September 11th, and for people in certain countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East such horrors are suffered on an almost daily basis.

How then are we to approach the story of the Akeida? This story is presented as a great, if not the greatest, religious achievement on the part of Avraham: “By myself have I sworn, says the Lord, for because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, that I will surely bless you... and through your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have listened to my voice.” (Breishit 22:16-18). What is this achievement if not the willingness to obey God’s command even if asked to murder an innocent child. Obedience to God trumps ethics, trumps the mandate against murder. Is that the message we are supposed to take away from this story?

To begin to answer this question, we need first to recognize our religious and moral responsibilities as readers of the Torah. There are many possible interpretations of any story in the Torah. “Shivim panim la’Torah”, there are 70 faces to every narrative, every verse, in the Torah. As readers of a challenging story such as this, we must ask ourselves not just what it could mean, but also what possible meanings is it our obligation to underscore and emphasize, and what possible meanings is it our obligation to marginalize and even reject.

The reading that absolutely must be rejected is that we must murder innocents if God commands us to do so. That reading of the akeida story, it should be noted, has been the dominant one since Soren Kierkegaard’s book, *Fear and Trembling*. In that book, Kierkegaard frames the test of the Akeida as whether Avraham would act as a religious person, a “knight of faith” to obey God’s command even to violate universal ethical mandates. He calls this a “teleological suspension of the ethical”. This was the test – faith or ethics? Obedience or morality?

But this is not how the test has been understood in our tradition, and particularly not in our liturgy. The refrain in our tefillot is: “Just as Avraham overcame his compassion to do Your will with a full heart, so should Your compassion overcome Your anger against us.” That is to say: Avraham’s great achievement was not obedience to God when it contravenes morality, it was obedience to God when it contravenes fatherly love. Avraham was being called upon to give up his only son from Sarah: “your one son, your only son, the one whom you love”. To do this, he had to give up what was most dear, and to do so at an unimaginable psychic and emotional toll. The message then for us is that we too, when called upon by God, should be prepared to do what is most difficult, no matter the hardship, no matter the cost.

How then to deal with the fact that killing Yitzchak was not only a great personal sacrifice, but also the taking of a human life, an act of murder? That problem seems to be ignored, or bracketed, in our tradition and liturgy. It is perhaps best explained by acknowledging that at that time such an act would not have been seen as murder, rather as a sacrifice. This idea is hard for us to grasp, but consider the analogy to abortion. Is it murder or is it a women’s right to her own body? What to one person, or in one place, or at one time in history, may seem evil and horrific may, at another time and place, seem ethically acceptable. In Avraham’s time, child sacrifice was not only a religious act, but an ethically acceptable one as well. Thus, he was not asked to perform murder, just to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Does this solve the problem? Is this the reading we should adopt? Well, no. Because if this is how we read the story, then what is our takeaway? Partly, to make sacrifices to serve God. That certainly is a message we need for our times. But also, what? That taking an innocent life is not necessarily murder? If it wasn’t murder for Avraham, why is it murder for us? Maybe all of our ethical absolutes should be seen as relative. Maybe there are times we should listen to God even to kill an innocent person. Maybe such an act can be a sacrifice and not murder. In fact, we know that in the Middle Ages, during the Crusades, some Jews slaughtered their children, and then themselves, as a way of protecting their children and their selves against forced conversion. And they invoked the akeida when they did so. In their minds, they were replicating the test of Avraham: They were ready to make the ultimate sacrifice to serve God. Not only were they ready to do so, but they actually did so! And for them this was not murder, it was a sacrifice.

I would suggest a different reading of the Akeida story. This reading starts from the fact that Avraham's act was not only about obedience, it was also about faith, faith that could persevere even in the face of its contradiction. Faith in God and God's promise that Yitzchak would be the future of Avraham's family and through whom all of God's promises would be fulfilled: "For in Yitzchak will your progeny be called" (21:12). Avraham was able to have faith in God's promise even when God had told him to act in a way that would contravene it.

Avraham had another type of faith as well. Another faith in the face of contradiction. Avraham was both prepared to listen to God regardless of what God would ask of him, even to take his son, even to commit murder, but he was at the same time unshaken in his belief that God would never ask him to commit murder. How did he demonstrate this? By listening to the angel. Consider: It was God who told him to sacrifice his son. So when the angel revoked this command, Avraham could have said: Sorry. I'll need to hear that from God Godself. But Avraham didn't say that. Avraham was able to hear the angel. He was able to hear the smaller voice. Not the dominant, loud voice that said: offer your son as a sacrifice, but the small, whispering voice that said: God does not want your son. God would never ask you to commit such an act.

When we tell the story of the akeida, our first religious and moral responsibility to emphasize the end of the story, not the beginning. To learn not that we must be prepared to murder in the name of God, but that God will never ask us to commit murder in God's name. This is what the angel is teaching Avraham. This is the first lesson we must learn.

The second lesson is, if it seems that God is asking us to do such a horrific deed, then we must find a way to hear the voice of the angel. We must be prepared to hear the softer voices in our tradition, even if they are not the dominant ones. The softer voices that say: "You must have misunderstood. God will never ask this of you. Go back, listen again, you will see that that is not what God meant." Rashi states this nicely. After the angel came, God in effect said to Avraham, "Yes, I said put him up as a sacrifice. You put him up. Now you can take him down."

Our responsibility as readers of the story is the same as that of Avraham at the akeida. It is to know the role that we play in listening, interpreting, and retelling the word of God. It is the partnership that we as humans have with God. It is to submit ourselves to the text, but to know that we also interpret the text. It is to be prepared to do anything that God asks of us, and to know that God will never ask for us to murder in God's name. It is the obligation to hear both the voice of God and at the same time the voice of the angel. It is nothing less than Torah she'b'al Peh.

Shabbat Shalom

\* <https://library.yctorah.org/2013/10/killing-in-the-name-of-god/> Note: Rabbi Linzer's Dvar Torah was late this week, so I selected a previous Dvar Torah from his archives.

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### **Vayeira: Meanderings of Life**

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine\* © 2020 Teach 613

The meeting of G-d and Avraham was momentous in so many ways. Avraham had just performed circumcision. G-d's visit was Bikur Cholim (visiting the sick). Undoubtedly, Avraham gained much Chizuk (encouragement) from the personal visit of G-d, Himself.

Immediately thereafter, the three angel-guests appeared and were hosted by Avraham and Sarah. It was during that hospitality that the angel informed them that Sarah would bear a child in the coming year. We wonder: if that message of childbirth was ready to be shared, why didn't G-d, Himself, share it with Avraham?

This week, during the course of my Kashrus inspections, I was to visit one of the local bakeries. I typed the address into my GPS, and found out that it would be 7 minutes by car, or 5 minutes by foot. It was a beautiful day; I decided to walk.

I followed the GPS guidance across two streets and into an underpass below a train station, arriving in a large parking lot. From there I could see my destination: Sunflower Bakery. I glanced at the GPS and it was showing a most convoluted track to the destination. With the bakery sign just up ahead, I felt that I could do this on my own. I turned off the GPS and proceeded confidently on my way.

As I came close to the bakery parking lot, I suddenly realized why the GPS had been guiding me on such a circuitous route. The train station parking lot was surrounded by a formidable fence that I had not noticed before from the distance. Now, standing just paces from the bakery, with a fence between us, I recalled the Talmudic expression, “The long way is sometimes shorter.” I backtracked, followed the circuitous route of the GPS along a small bike path, and was able to reach my destination.

From the time that Avraham and Sarah were promised a child, it was an event, promised by G-d, that would surely happen. At the start of our Parsha, the destiny of the childbirth was so close that it could be compared to a sign that is already close enough to be seen clearly. But, G-d Himself could not yet share that the event was imminent because there were still some meanderings of life that had to occur before Avraham and Sarah would be blessed with the child. Namely, they needed to first host the angels. Only then would the event be truly imminent.

You see, Avraham and Sarah had a very wide embrace in their hospitality. They hosted righteous people and they hosted idol worshippers. Everyone who passed through their tent was encouraged to come closer to the Creator. But this was the first time that they hosted angels.

The Medrash relates that when Moshe ascended to receive the Torah, the angels wondered why a human being could be so bold. G-d made Moshe look like his ancestor Avraham, and He asked the angels, “Didn’t you eat from his food?”

The hospitality provided to the angels was not merely a charade. It was a great moment in the career of Avraham and Sarah that they were – unbeknownst to them—able to provide food on such a spiritual level that even angels could partake. G-d’s message to the angels was that indeed, Moshe represents people, descendants of Avraham, who can elevate and sanctify the physical to the point that it is spiritual, and angels can eat. The task of Torah is to elevate the physical and make it spiritual, and the Jewish people are up to the task.

Sometimes in life it seems that our goal is, or ought to be, in close proximity and in easy reach. Yet, often, there are yet some obstacles and fences that need to be navigated before we really reach our goal. Even as the goal is well within sight, it may, yet, take some meanderings to get there. G-d wasn’t able to say that the childbirth was imminent, because Avraham and Sarah had not yet hosted the angels. But once they did, they showed that they could elevate the physical in such a wondrous way, and then, they were ready to found the lineage of the nation that would accept the Torah. They were ready for the news that imminently would be the birth of Yitzchak.

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## **Wickedness is a Strange Malady: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel\*

The Torah describes the wickedness of Sodom as being pervasive enough to be punished by God’s destruction of the city. There were not even ten righteous people in the entire city. When the men of Sodom surrounded Lot’s home with the intention of doing harm to Lot’s guests, the Torah informs us that the wicked group included “both young and old, all the people from every quarter” (Bereishith 19:4).

Is it really possible for an entire city to be so steeped in evil? How can we imagine a town so corrupt that not even ten good people lived there?

If we peruse human history, we find instances of entire societies becoming mired in corruption, violence and wickedness of every kind. The names of Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot come to mind when we ponder the fate of humanity during the past century. These tyrants were able to mobilize their forces to destroy millions of innocent people. Their henchmen followed their orders blindly, even when those orders entailed the most shameful and immoral cruelties.

But tyrants and their henchmen succeeded in terrorizing their societies because many citizens were too afraid to rise in resistance. The “silent majority”—although composed of people who were not innately evil—went along with the evil by looking the other way.

Tyrants utilize brute force. But they also utilize psychological warfare and intimidation. They vilify anyone who stands up against them. Those who resist the tyranny are branded as traitors or trouble makers. The tyrants, whose goal is to

control the people into total submission, accuse opponents of attempting to control society. The tyrants, whose goal is to maintain total power for themselves, vilify opponents as being power-hungry.

And the masses stay quiet. And those vilified by the tyrants become frightened into silence.

Although there no doubt were good and brave people who found ways of resisting the evil dictators, they were so few that it may have appeared from a distance that "both young and old, all the people from every quarter" were accomplices.

In Ibsen's powerful drama, *Enemy of the People*, Dr. Stockmann found that the water sustaining the local health spas was contaminated. His scientific tests proved beyond a doubt that the water would be dangerous to people who would bathe in it. Instead of being thanked for saving the lives of potential patrons of these spas, he was vilified by the leaders and the masses of the town.

His findings would ruin the town's business. He was branded as an eccentric trouble maker who exaggerated the problem for his own glory. At a town meeting, Dr. Stockmann was declared an enemy of the people. He was fired from his position. His children had to leave school. The windows of his home were shattered. His patients were told to find another doctor. He was ordered to write a public repudiation of his scientific findings, which he would not do.

Were all the people of Dr. Stockmann's town evil? No, they were not. But they were less concerned with truth and health than they were with their pocket books. If word got out that the spas were unhealthful, then the town—and its people—would lose the income brought in by tourists. If the town leaders agreed to have the water supply improved as per Dr. Stockmann's suggestions, it would cost a lot of money and would take several years to accomplish. The people did not want to pay for the repairs and did not want to lose two years of business. They were not concerned about the endangerment of the lives of tourists; they were not concerned that if patrons of the spas got sick, people would finally realize that Dr. Stockmann's reports were correct.

Wickedness is a strange malady. It doesn't only come from wicked people. It also comes from weak people, frightened people, people more concerned with their own immediate gains than with the long-term needs of society. Wickedness is not the monopoly of vicious tyrants and dictators; it is shared by lower level manipulators and demagogues who seek to control and intimidate. It is shared by those who tolerate wickedness and who succumb to the lies and propaganda of the wicked leaders.

The Torah's account of the wickedness of Sodom stands as an eternal warning about what can happen to a society if evil is allowed to persist, if good people are intimidated into passivity and silence.

The story about Sodom is not only about Sodom.

\* Jewishideas.org. **The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website [jewishideas.org](http://jewishideas.org) or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time.**

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### Remembering Rabbi Dr. Sabato Morais

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel\*

Rabbi Dr. Sabato Morais (April 13, 1823–November 11, 1897) was described by a New York Yiddish newspaper as "without doubt...the greatest of all Orthodox rabbis in the United States." This encomium was written several years after the death of Morais, when a full picture of his life and accomplishments could be written with historical perspective.

Few today remember this remarkable religious leader; even fewer see him as a model of enlightened Orthodox Judaism whose example might be followed by modern day Jews. Yet, Sabato Morais was a personality who deserves our attention...and our profound respect.

Born in Livorno, of Portuguese-Jewish background, he was raised in the Sephardic traditions of his community. As a young rabbi, he became the Director of the Orphan's School of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation of London where he served for five years. In 1851, he began service as rabbi of Congregation Mikveh Israel, the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of Philadelphia. He remained with Mikveh Israel for nearly five decades, until his death toward the end of 1897.

Rabbi Dr. Alan Corre, who served as rabbi of Mikveh Israel from 1955 to 1963, wrote an appreciation of his early predecessor. He noted that "in everything he [Morais] writes and does, he comes across as a warm, loving, eminently humane individual, with self-respect, yet remarkably free of egotism for a man in public life who was the recipient of much honor, including an honorary degree from the University of Pennsylvania." Rabbi Morais sought "to live as a Jew without qualifiers, one who revered and loved the Jewish tradition and desired greatly to perpetuate it."

Dr. Corre has pointed out that Rabbi Morais is somewhat of an enigma to many, in the sense that he cannot be easily classified according to the ideologies and styles of the major branches of American Jewish life today. "Orthodox as he was in practice, he does not fulfill the role model of the Talmudic sage, and has about him a somewhat assimilated air at which the strictly Orthodox might well look askance. For the Conservative, he is insufficiently innovative, to unwilling to take religious risks. And of Reform, he was a life-long opponent."

Rabbi Morais was a fine representative of the Western Sephardic rabbinic tradition of his time. Western Sephardim valued general culture, refinement, orderliness, social responsibility. They fostered a Judaism that was loyal to traditional ritual, while at the same time being worldly and intellectually open. Personal piety was to be humble, not ostentatious.

Rabbi Morais wrote: "True worship resides in the heart, and truly it is by purifying our hearts that we best worship God; still, the ordinances which we are enjoined to perform aim at this object: to sanctify our immortal soul, to make it worthy of its sublime origin."

He laid great stress on ethical behavior, on compassion, on concern for others. He worked not only on behalf of the Jewish community, but showed concern for society as a whole. He was a vocal opponent of slavery and an avid admirer of President Abraham Lincoln. He supported the cause of American Indians; he spoke against the Chinese Exclusion Acts during the 1880s. He cried out against the persecution of Armenians in 1895. Working together with Jewish and non-Jewish clergy, he fostered an ecumenical outlook that called for all people to respect each other and to work for shared goals to improve the quality of life for everyone. In all of his work, Rabbi Morais did not seek glory or public recognition. He was compassionate, graceful and idealistic. Perhaps it was his self-effacing style that won him so much admiration and respect from so many. They saw him as an authentic religious personality, not as one who was serving his own ego.

Arthur Kiron, in a fascinating article that appeared in "American Jewish History," September 1996, observed that "those who knew and loved Morais repeatedly referred to him in their memorial tributes in idealized terms, as a religious role model, a prophet like Jeremiah, a man of constancy, duty, absolute sincerity, piety and humility."

One of Morais's memorializers described him as follows: "For the critical eye of man [Morais] has left behind no visible monuments of great achievements, but to the eye of God he has reared a monument far greater than any of those famed by man. That greatness was his goodness, which in point of intrinsic merit will compare with the greatest wonders of genius. Were it possible for man to measure the amount of good he dispensed among the sorrowing and afflicted...the historian would not hesitate to enroll his name among the world's truest and noblest immortals....To do good was the first duty of his creed, to do it in silence always, and in secrecy wherever possible, was his second."

Rabbi Morais and his New York colleague Rabbi Henry Pereira Mendes were co-founders of the Jewish Theological Seminary. They had hoped that this institution would train American-born Orthodox rabbis to lead congregations throughout America. These two rabbis of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregations of Philadelphia and New York worked closely on other communal projects, always in a spirit of devotion to God and community. They both sought to promote a Judaism loyal to tradition, committed to social justice, marked by dignity and gravitas.

Orthodoxy of today is often characterized by increasing narrowness, obscurantism, authoritarianism, and xenophobia. Orthodox rabbis of the ilk of Rabbi Morais are a vanishing breed. The classic Western Sephardic religious worldview is on the verge of extinction. What a phenomenal loss this is for Judaism and the Jewish People!

Yet, as we remember the life of Rabbi Sabato Morais, we know that the memory of the righteous is a blessing. It continues to influence and inspire. The stature and vision of Rabbi Morais will emerge to guide new generations in an Orthodox Judaism that is faithful to tradition, cultured, refined, genuinely pious, humane, and humble. “Happy the man who has found wisdom, the man who has obtained understanding.”

\* Jewishideas.org.

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## Parshas Vayeira

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer\*

When we study the Book of Bereishis and the lives of our Forefathers, it is astounding to behold the lofty spiritual heights they attained. This can be seen both from their devotion and commitment to G-d, as well as from the way G-d deals with them. We find an example of the latter early on in this week's Parsha. As Hashem turns His attention towards Sodom, the Torah relates that G-d paused and said “Am I hiding from Avrohom that which I am doing?” (Bereishis 18:17) It sounds almost blasphemous to say, but G-d felt in some way beholden to Avrohom that He had to inform Avrohom before bringing judgement upon an evil city. How fortunate we are to come from such noble and lofty ancestry. It behooves us to understand the source of G-d's love and respect for our ancestors, to study their lives and to live up to that legacy.

Rash”i (ibid.) explains why G-d felt in some way compelled to inform Avrohom. Hashem knew that the destruction of the cities would be of personal significance for Avrohom. The cities were located within the land that had been promised to Avrohom. Furthermore, Avrohom mentored and taught everyone he could about Hashem and the Torah and mitzvos, and treated everyone as though they were his own child. He would therefore feel great anguish over the destruction of the cities. For both of these reasons Hashem felt that He must tell Avrohom beforehand, because it would be inappropriate G-d to hide such information from Avrohom since he was beloved by G-d.

Rash”i continues and explains how Avrohom had earned that G-d refer to him as “My beloved”. Avrohom had displayed a similar type of concern for G-d. Avrohom understood that Torah and mitzvos are important to G-d. Avrohom was so concerned for that which is important to G-d, that he taught his family and household to follow G-d's path as well. Avrohom wanted to ensure that G-d's will would be carried out even after he had passed away. Such was his concern for G-d.

The Gur Aryeh (ibid.) explains this on an even deeper level. Avrohom engaged in all of these efforts and activities because he understood that this would bring him closer to G-d. Hashem wishes to have a relationship with us. However, for a relationship to be real it has to be reciprocated. G-d has therefore given us Torah and mitzvos and thereby told us what is important to Him. By engaging in that which is important to G-d and showing our respect and love for G-d, we can in some way reciprocate G-d's kindness and love. Through Torah and mitzvos we can develop and enhance our relationship with G-d.

For Avrohom, though, the direct benefit of Torah and mitzvos wasn't enough. He cared so much about G-d and about his relationship with G-d, that he wanted more. The Gur Aryeh explains that Avrohom understood the spiritual benefits of the land of Israel, of the creation of the Jewish nation and of all that Hashem had promised him. He desired that connection and wanted to ensure that he deserved those gifts. The way to ensure this was to deepen his connection and relationship with G-d. The way to deepen our connection with G-d is by caring about that which G-d asks of us. Avrohom therefore committed himself to not only keep the Torah and mitzvos, but to ensure that they are kept even after he had passed from this world.

It was this depth of commitment to G-d and to deepening and increasing his relationship with G-d, which earned Avrohom the title of “Avrohom, My beloved”.

Torah and mitzvos are a wondrous gift. These are the keys to use G-d's creation as He intended, and in that way bring pleasure and joy to our Creator. When we appreciate this and strengthen our commitment, we can reach beyond simply serving G-d, and can begin to enter into a personal relationship with our Creator.

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## Dvar Torah for Vayera

by Rabbi Moshe Rube\*

God is not only a great writer but also a great friend. As the Talmud says in Tractate Nedarim, we learn about the mitzva of Bikur Cholim (visiting the sick) through His visit to Avraham after his circumcision in the beginning of Parshat Vayera.

So in honor of that, let's learn two rarely discussed bits of advice from our Jewish sources about the mitzvah to visit the sick.

### 1) You can fulfill the mitzva to visit the sick through prayer.

When we say a Mi Shebairach for someone who is sick we are actually fulfilling the mitzvah of visiting the sick. The definition of the mitzvah is not necessarily seeing the other person, but to do everything in our power to see that they get better. If you're not the person's doctor, we can still do what we can to buoy their spirits and we can definitely pray. Nachmanides goes even further and says if you haven't said a prayer for the sick person, you have not fulfilled the mitzvah! That's the reason for the standard Jewish practice of telling a sick person "Refuah Sheleimah" (May you have a complete healing) as that itself is a prayer.

### 2) Don't stay too long

The Talmud in Bava Metzia teaches us that it can be detrimental to the sick person if the visitor overstays his or her welcome. They are in a weakened state and we need to be sensitive to the fact that they may not have the energy for an extended visit.

Rabbi Velvel Soloveitchik (1887-1959) once fell ill and someone came to visit him. His visitor was staying too long but Reb Velvel didn't want to insult him by telling him to leave. So he told him this dvar Torah. "The Talmud says you may visit a sick person even a hundred times a day and also that the ideal time to visit is the middle six hours of the day. 6 hours are 360 minutes. If we divide that by 100, we get 3.6 minutes as the minimum time for a visit to the sick."

The visitor got the hint.

Shabbat Shalom!

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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.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. I, pp. 96-97.) Emphasis added

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### **The Space Between Us (Vayera 5778)**

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

### **Please remember Yaakov Tzvi ben Liba for a Mishebarach!**

The stories told in Bereishit chapters 21 and 22 – the sending away of Ishmael and the binding of Isaac – are among the hardest to understand in the whole of Tanakh. Both involve actions that strike us as almost unbearably harsh. But the difficulties they present go deeper even than that.

Recall that Abraham was chosen “so that he would instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just.” He was chosen to be a father. The first two letters of his name, Av, mean just that. Avram means “a mighty father.” Avraham, says the Torah, means “a father of many nations.”

Abraham was chosen to be a parental role model. But how can a man who banished his son Ishmael, sending him off with his mother Hagar into the desert, where they nearly died, be thought of as an exemplary father? And how could a man who was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac be a model for future generations?

These are not questions about Abraham. They are questions about the will of God. For it was not Abraham who wanted to send Ishmael away. To the contrary, it “distressed Abraham greatly,” because Ishmael was his son (Gen. 21:11). It was God who told him to listen to Sarah and send the child away.

Nor was it Abraham who wanted to sacrifice Isaac. It was God who told him to do so, referring to Isaac as “your son, your only one, the one you love” (Gen. 22:2). Abraham was acting on both occasions against his emotions, his paternal instincts. What is the Torah telling us about the nature of fatherhood? It seems very difficult indeed to draw a positive message from these events.

There is an even deeper problem, and it is hinted at in the words God spoke to Abraham in summoning him to the binding of his son: “Take your son, your only son, the one you love—Isaac—and go [lekh lekha] to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” These words inevitably remind us of God’s first summons: “Go forth [lekh lekha] from your land, your birthplace and your father’s house” (Gen. 12:1). These are the only two places in which this phrase occurs in the Torah. **Abraham’s last trial echoed his first.**

But note that the first trial meant that Abraham had to abandon his father, thereby looking as if he were neglecting his duties as a son.[1] So, whether as a father to his sons or as a son to his father, Abraham was commanded to act in ways that seem the exact opposite of what we would expect and how we should behave.

This is too strange to be accidental. There is a mystery here to be decoded.

The barrier to our understanding of these events lies in the sheer abyss of time between then and now. Abraham, as the pioneer of a new kind of faith and way of life, was instituting a new form of relationship between the generations. Essentially, what we are seeing in these events is the birth of the individual.

In ancient times, and in antiquity in Greece and Rome, the basic social unit was not the individual but the family. Religious rituals were performed around the fire in the family hearth, with the father serving as priest, offering sacrifices, libations and incantations to the spirits of dead ancestors. The power of the father was absolute. Wives and children had no rights and no independent legal personalities. They were mere property and could be killed by the head of the household at will. Each family had its own gods, and the father was the sole intermediary with the ancestral spirits, whom he would one day join. There were no individuals in the modern sense. There were only families, under the absolute rule of its male head.

The Torah was a radical break with this entire mindset. **The anthropologist Mary Douglas points out that the Torah was unique in the ancient world in making no provision for sacrifices to dead ancestors, and forbidding the attempt to communicate with the spirits of the dead.[2]**

Monotheism was more than simply the belief in one God. Because each human was in His image, and because each could be in direct relationship with Him, the individual was suddenly given significance – not just fathers but also mothers, and not just parents but also children. No longer were they fused into a single unit, with a single controlling will. They were each to become persons in their own right, with their own identity and integrity.[3]

Such changes do not happen overnight, and they do not happen without wrenching dislocations. That is what is happening at both ends of the Abraham story. At the beginning of his mission, Abraham was told to separate himself from his father, and towards the end he was told to separate himself, in different ways, from each of his two sons. These painful episodes represent the agonising birth-pangs of a new way of thinking about humanity.

**First separate, then connect. That seems to be the Jewish way.** That is how God created the universe, by first separating domains – day and night, upper and lower waters, sea and dry land – then allowing them to be filled. And that is how we create real personal relationships. By separating and leaving space for the other. Parents should not seek to control children. Spouses should not seek to control one another. It is the carefully calibrated distance between us in which relationship allows each party to grow.

In his recent book on sporting heroes, *The Greatest*, Matthew Syed notes how important the encouragement of parents is to the making of champions, but he adds:

Letting go – that is the essential paradox of parenthood. You care, you nurture, you sacrifice, and then you watch as the little ones fly into the great unknown, often shouting recriminations as they depart. You will experience the stomach clenching pain of separation, but you do so with a smile and a hug, aware that the desire to protect and love must never morph into the tyranny of mollycoddling.[4]

It is this drama of separation that Abraham symbolically enacts in his relationship both to his father and to his two sons. In this world-transforming moment of the birth of the individual, God is teaching him the delicate art of making space, without which no true individuality can grow.

In the lovely words of Irish poet John O'Donohue our challenge is: "To bless the space between us." [5]

Shabbat Shalom.

**Footnotes:**

[1] See Rashi to Gen. 11:32.

[2] Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

[3] See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, Doubleday, 1967, 117 where he speaks of "the highly individuated men" (and women) who "populate the pages of the Old Testament to a degree unique in ancient religious literature."

[4] Matthew Syed, *The Greatest: the quest for sporting perfection*, London, John Murray, 2017, 9.

[5] John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, Doubleday, 2008.

\* Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar. See: <https://rabbisacks.org/space-us-vayera-5778/> Emphasis added.

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## How to Be a Luminary

By Menachem Feldman\*

Abraham was the first Jewish luminary. And we can all take a page out of his playbook.

The story of Abraham's life is primarily told in two portions of the Torah, *Lech Lecha* and *Vayera*. In the first portion of Abraham's story, Abraham comes across as a deeply spiritual person. The Torah tells how he traveled the land and of the altars he built for God in every place that he went. Toward the end of the first portion, God introduces a new idea to Abraham. No longer will it suffice for Abraham to be a spiritual person. From now on, Abraham's task will be to connect the spiritual with the physical. Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself, fulfilling God's commandment "My covenant will be in your flesh." From here on, Abraham's mission is to teach how the spiritual covenant must express itself in the tangible physical world.

The second portion, *Vayera*, opens with Abraham, on the third day after his circumcision, sitting at the opening of his tent seeking guests. It's an exceedingly hot day, and there's no one in sight, yet Abraham sits there, waiting and hoping to find someone to invite into his home. As the Torah tells us:

Now the Lord appeared to him in the plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot. And he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing beside him, and he saw and he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and he prostrated himself to the ground.<sup>1</sup>

The opening phrase is "the Lord appeared to him." As a result of this Divine revelation, Abraham reached a greater level of

kindness. Typically, a kind person will express kindness when he or she sees someone in need, or at least someone who can receive the kindness. In this scene, Abraham was sitting at the opening of his tent looking to express kindness even when there was no one in sight who was in need of kindness. Abraham's heart was overflowing with love. For the more Abraham experienced the presence of G-d, the more he transcended himself and sought to connect and share with other people.<sup>2</sup>

The verse continues, "and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot." The literal translation of the verse is "he was sitting at the entrance of the tent like the heat of the day." Not "in the heat of the day," but "like the heat of the day." The verse implies that Abraham himself was like the "heat of the day."<sup>3</sup> Abraham was like the sun, spreading warmth, love and enlightenment.

Many spiritual seekers seek to escape worldly distractions and seek enlightenment in solitude. The more enlightenment they experience, the more removed they become from the rest of society. But Abraham taught us that the closer one comes to spirituality, holiness and transcendence, the more the person will "sit at the opening of the tent," seeking to express kindness even when the need is not immediately present before him or her. The closer one comes to G-d, the more he or she will be "like the heat of the day," like the sun, expressing warmth and friendship to all.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Genesis 18:1-2.
2. Adapted from the teachings of the Rebbe, Vayera 5725.
3. See commentary of the Kli Yakar.

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### Vayera: Bound to Inspire: One Person Can Tip the Balance of the World

By Chana Weisberg\*

In this week's Torah portion, there's an phenomenal exchange between Abraham and G-d. G-d has just informed Abraham that he intends to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. True to his character, Abraham pleads for mercy and begins brokering with G-d.

He begins his negotiations by entreating G-d to forgive the people if there are even fifty righteous people in these cities. Eventually, he presses G-d to withhold punishment if there are even ten righteous people.

In these highly populated yet morally depraved cities, where the crudest behaviors were tolerated and encouraged, all that was necessary to prevent destruction was ten people standing true to their morals.

Ten. That's all.

Maimonides tells us to view our world as being half meritorious and half unmeritorious. We don't need to change the world and all its moral wrongs. All we need to do is one act of goodness to tip the scales in our favor.

Just one positive act by one individual. And any one of us can be that individual.

-- From: Shabbas DeLights \*

\* **Shabbat deLights** is a collection of essays on the Torah portion by acclaimed author, editor and teacher, Chana Weisberg.

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**Covenant and Conversation**

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

**Answering the Call**

The early history of humanity is set out in the Torah as a series of disappointments. God gave human beings freedom, which they then misused. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Cain murdered Abel. Within a relatively short time, the world before the Flood became dominated by violence. All flesh perverted its way on the earth. God created order, but humans created chaos. Even after the Flood, humanity, in the form of the builders of Babel, were guilty of hubris, thinking that people could build a tower that “reaches heaven” (Gen. 11:4).

Humans failed to respond to God, which is where Abraham enters the picture. We are not quite sure, at the beginning, what it is that Abraham is summoned to do. We know he is commanded to leave his land, birthplace and father’s house and travel “to the land I will show you,” (Gen. 12:1) but what he is to do when he gets there, we do not know. On this the Torah is silent. What is Abraham’s mission? What makes him special? What makes him more than a good man in a bad age, as was Noah? What makes him a leader and the father of a nation of leaders?

To decode the mystery we have to recall what the Torah has been signalling prior to this point. I suggested in previous weeks that a – perhaps the – key theme is a failure of responsibility. Adam and Eve lack personal responsibility. Adam says, “It wasn’t me; it was the woman.” Eve says, “It wasn’t me, it was the serpent.” It is as if they deny being the authors of their own stories – as if they do not understand either freedom or the responsibility it entails.

Cain does not deny personal responsibility. He does not say, “It wasn’t me. It was Abel’s fault for provoking me.” Instead he denies moral responsibility: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Noah fails the test of collective responsibility. He is a man of virtue in an age of vice, but he makes no impact on his contemporaries. He saves his family (and the animals) but no one else. According to the plain reading of the text, he does not even try.

If we understand this, we understand Abraham. He exercises personal responsibility. In parshat Lech Lecha, a quarrel breaks out between Abraham’s herdsmen and those of his nephew Lot. Seeing that this was no random occurrence but the result of their having too many cattle to be able to graze together, Abraham immediately proposes a solution:

Abram said to Lot, “Let there not be a quarrel between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let’s part company. If you go to the left, I will go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left.” (Gen. 13:8-9)

Note that Abraham passes no judgment. He does not ask whose fault the argument was. He does not ask who will gain from any particular outcome. He gives Lot the choice. He sees the problem and acts.

In the next chapter of Bereishit we are told about a local war, as a result of which Lot is among the people taken captive. Immediately Abraham gathers a force, pursues the invaders, rescues Lot and with him, all the other captives. He returns these captives safely to their homes, refusing to take any of the spoils of victory that he is offered by the grateful king of Sodom.

This is a strange passage – it depicts Abraham very differently from the nomadic shepherd we see elsewhere. The passage is best understood in the context of the story of Cain. Abraham shows he is his brother’s (or brother’s son’s) keeper. He immediately understands the nature of moral responsibility. Despite the fact that Lot chose to live where he did with its attendant risks, Abraham does not say, “His safety is his responsibility, not mine.”

Then, in this week’s parsha of Vayera, comes the great moment: a human being challenges God Himself for the very first time. God is about to pass judgment on Sodom. Abraham, fearing that this will mean that the city will be destroyed, says:

“Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?” (Gen. 18:23–25)

This is a remarkable speech. By what right does a mere mortal challenge God Himself?

The short answer is that God Himself signalled that he should. Listen carefully to the text:

Then the Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation,

and all nations on earth will be blessed through him” ... Then the Lord said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached Me.” (Gen. 18:17–21)

Those words, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” are a clear hint that God wants Abraham to respond; otherwise why would He have said them?

The story of Abraham can only be understood against the backdrop of the story of Noah. There too, God told Noah in advance that he was about to bring punishment to the world.

So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth” (Gen. 6:13).

Noah did not protest. To the contrary, we are told three times that Noah “did as God commanded him” (Gen. 6:22; 7:5; 7:9). Noah accepted the verdict. Abraham challenged it. Abraham understood the third principle we have been exploring over the past few weeks: collective responsibility.

The people of Sodom were not Abraham’s brothers and sisters, so he was going beyond even what he did in rescuing Lot. He prayed on their behalf because he understood the idea of human solidarity, immortally expressed by John Donne:

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself ...  
Any man’s death diminishes me,  
For I am involved in mankind.[1]

But a question remains. Why did God call on Abraham to challenge Him? Was there anything Abraham knew that God didn’t know? That idea is absurd. The answer is surely this: Abraham was to become the role model and initiator of a new faith, one that would not defend the human status quo but challenge it.

Abraham had to have the courage to challenge God if his descendants were to challenge human rulers, as Moses and the Prophets did. Jews do not accept the world that is. They challenge it in the name of the world that ought to be. This is a critical turning point in human history: the birth of the world’s first

religion of protest – the emergence of a faith that challenges the world instead of accepting it.

Abraham was not a conventional leader. He did not rule a nation. There was as yet no nation for him to lead. But he was the role model of leadership as Judaism understands it. He took responsibility. He acted; he didn't wait for others to act. Of Noah, the Torah says, "he walked with God" (Gen. 6:9). But to Abraham, God says, "Walk before Me," (Gen. 17:1), meaning: be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility. Judaism is God's call to responsibility.

[1] John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, Meditation XVII.

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

"For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not withheld your only son from Me." (Gen. 22:12)

The akeda ("binding" of Isaac) serves as a model for one of the most important questions in contemporary family life: to what extent should a parent continue to influence, direct, or channel their adult child's life? Can the power of a parent be taken too far? Ultimately, how much control can parents continue to have in their relationships with their adult children? The Torah offers an insight to these questions in describing the immediate aftermath of the akeda.

What happened to Isaac after the harrowing experience with his father on Mount Moriah? The Torah states, "So Abraham returned [singular form] to his young men [the Midrash teaches they were Eliezer and Ishmael, who accompanied them, but did not go to the actual place of the appointed sacrifice] and they [Abraham and the young men] rose up and went together to Be'er Sheva and Abraham dwelt in Be'er Sheva" [Gen. 22:19].

Where was Isaac? Didn't Isaac also descend from the altar and return to Be'er Sheva?

Yonatan Ben Uziel, in his interpretive Aramaic translation, writes that Isaac is not included as having returned home to Be'er Sheva because he went instead to the yeshiva of Shem and Ever. In other words, prior to the akeda, father and son magnificently joined together—"and they walked, the two of them, together" (Gen. 22:6)—but afterwards, they had to part ways.

Abraham returns to his household, while Isaac returns to his books, to an academy of solitude and study. In the vocabulary of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l, Abraham is the outer-directed, extroverted, aggressive Adam I, while Isaac is the more inner-directed, introverted, introspective Adam II.

In the conceptual scheme of the mystical Zohar, Abraham is the outgoing, overflowing symbol of hesed (loving kindness), while Isaac

is the disciplined and courageous symbol of gevura (inner fortitude). The akeda is both the point of unity as well as the point of departure between father and son. Isaac enters the akeda as Abraham's son; he emerges from the akeda as Jacob's father (Jacob will also study at the yeshiva of Shem and Ever).

Isaac's commitment to God is equal to that of his father, but his path is very different. Simultaneously, the akeda is the point of unity and separation, between father and son, for each must respect both the similarities as well as the differences within the parent-child relationship.

The commandment to circumcise one's son is most certainly modeled on the symbol of the akeda. After all, the basic law prescribes that it is the father who must remove his son's foreskin (even though most fathers feel more comfortable appointing the more-experienced mohel as their agent).

From a symbolic perspective, it is the parent's responsibility to transmit to the children the boundaries of what is permissible and what is not. Nevertheless, despite the fact that every child is a product of the nature and nurture provided by his/her parents—and the Torah teaches that a child must respect and even revere his/her parents—the existential decisions of how to live one's life, which profession to enter and which spouse to marry are decisions which can only be made by the adult child himself/herself. [See Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah, Chap. 240:25, Laws of Respecting Parents, the last comment of Rema, citing Maharik.]

We see the importance of parental restraint in the continuation of Gen. 22:12: "For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not withheld [hasakhta] your only son from Me."

However, we can also understand the verse to mean, "For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not done away with [the Hebrew h-s-kh can also mean to remove, or cause to be absent] your only son because of [My command]."

In the first reading, the angel praises Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac; in the alternative reading, Abraham is praised for his willingness not to sacrifice Isaac. [See Ish Shalom, 'Akeda,' Akdamot, August 1996.]

The critical lesson of the akeda, then, is not how close Abraham came to sacrificing his own son, but rather, the limits of paternal power.

Paradoxically, when a parent enables a child to psychologically separate, the child will ultimately move forward. Isaac returns from the yeshiva to continue his father's monotheistic beliefs and Israel-centered life. Our paramount parental responsibility is to

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allow our children to fulfill their own potential, and our challenge is to learn to respect their individual choices.

### **The Person in the Parsha**

#### **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

##### **Hospitality Before Heaven**

He was an old man, frail, tired, and bereaved. News of Hitler's advancing army preoccupied him, and he was overwhelmed, if not broken, by the requests for advice he was receiving from hundreds of troubled Jews. Indeed, he may have already sensed that he had only months to live.

His name was Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, and he was universally acknowledged to be the world's leading Talmudic scholar. He lived in the city of Vilna, and the time was late 1939.

The person who told me the story was then a young man, barely twenty years old. He was himself a refugee, along with his fellow yeshiva students. He found himself in the neighborhood of Rabbi Grodzinski's residence during the Sukkot holiday. He decided he would attempt to visit the Rabbi, although he knew that he might not be granted an audience.

How surprised he was to find the Rabbi alone, studying and writing. The rabbi welcomed him, inquired about his welfare, and invited the visitor to join him in a light lunch. The Rabbi told him that because of his age and physical weakness he deemed himself to be exempt from the requirement to eat in the sukkah. He considered himself a mitzta'er, one whose physical discomfort freed him from the sukkah requirement.

"But you," the Rabbi continued, "are a young man and reasonably healthy. Therefore, take this plate of food down to the sukkah in the courtyard, and excuse me for not being able to join you."

The young man did so, but soon, sitting in the sukkah by himself, was surprised to hear the old Rabbi slowly making his way down the many steps from his apartment to join him in the sukkah.

"You may wonder why I am joining you," exclaimed the old Rabbi. "It is because although a mitzta'er, one who is in great discomfort, is exempt from the mitzvah of sukkah, he is not exempt from the mitzvah of hospitality, of hachnasat orchim."

This anecdote underscores the importance of the mitzvah of hospitality and illustrates the fact that even great physical discomfort does not excuse a person from properly receiving and entertaining his guests.

Of course, the biblical basis for Rabbi Grodzinski teaching is to be found in this week's Torah portion, Vayera. In the opening verses, we find that Abraham, despite the fact that he was recovering from his recent

circumcision, exerts himself to welcome a small group of wayfarers and tends to their needs with exquisite care.

Abraham is our model for the important mitzvah of welcoming strangers and seeing to it that they are greeted hospitably.

The 17th century sage, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, known as the Shelah HaKadosh, points out that performance of this mitzvah helps us realize that we are all wanderers and merely transient guests in the Almighty's world. We pray that He treats us hospitably during our sojourn in His world, and to earn such treatment, we are sensitive to the physical and emotional requirements of our own guests.

Our sages discovered an even deeper dimension to Abraham's hospitality. The third verse in our Torah portion reads, "And he said, 'My lord, if I have found favor in your eyes, pass not away from your servant.'" The simple reading of this verse is that Abraham is speaking to one of his guests whom he refers to as "my lord."

Another reading, a startlingly provocative one, suggests that Abraham is addressing the Almighty Himself, and that the word "lord" should be spelled with an uppercase "L". According to this interpretation, Abraham is asking that the Lord Himself excuse him and wait for him while he tends to his guests. "Welcoming one's guests is a bigger mitzvah than welcoming the Shechinah, the Divine Presence." That is the lesson which the Talmud derives from the story which opens our parsha this week.

Commentaries throughout the ages have questioned whether it is indeed legitimate for one to abandon his rendezvous with God in order to attend to the needs of mere human beings. Is it right for one to interrupt his dialogue with the Almighty just to perform the mitzvah of hospitality? There is a rich literature of responses to this question. One approach is to understand that it is not so much that hospitality trumps the experience of communication with the Shechinah. Rather, it is that the way to earn such an exalted spiritual experience is by practicing hospitality.

One does not achieve a spiritual experience through meditation and prayer. One achieves true spirituality by painstakingly attending to the needs of others. This is why we give some charity, perhaps even just a few pennies, prior to engaging in prayer. The Talmud suggests that in order to earn the right to address God in prayer, one must first demonstrate that he is not unaware of his obligations to his fellow. First alms, then prayer. First hospitality, and only then can one come into the Divine Presence.

How important it is that we learn the lesson of religious priorities. Never can we place our spiritual longings above our obligations to our

fellow human beings. This is the lesson taught to us so long ago by our forefather, Abraham, when he turned away from God in order to practice the mitzvah of hachnasat orchim.

#### **Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand** **Why Ask Mamre Whether to Fulfill G-d's Command?**

The pasuk at the beginning of the Parsha says, "Hashem appeared to him (Avraham) in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day." [Bereshis 18:1] Rashi explains why Mamre receives honorable mention in this pasuk recording the Almighty's appearance to Avraham Avinu: Mamre was the person who gave Avraham advice regarding circumcision. Mamre had a covenant with the patriarch Avraham and when Avraham consulted with him regarding G-d's command to circumcise himself at age 99, Mamre advised him to go ahead with the operation. To recognize this role of Mamre, the Torah records here that G-d appeared to Avraham in the plains of Mamre.

Many of Rashi's super-commentaries—including Rav Eliyahu Mizrahi—ask the obvious question: How are we to understand the implication that Avraham consulted with Mamre regarding G-d's mitzvah of Milah? It seems inconceivable that the pious patriarch who was willing to do anything for the Master of the Universe would feel a need to check with his friends before carrying out an unambiguous command from Hashem.

The Maharal, in his Gur Aryeh, gives two answers to this question. First, he says the patriarch did it to preempt criticism from his contemporaries that "Avraham acted without counsel." Certainly, there was no doubt that he would go ahead with the circumcision regardless of what his friends advised him. However, he wanted to fend off societal reaction that he "rushed into a rash action." Therefore, Avraham publicly sought out a prestigious person with whom he consulted so that no one could accuse him of taking this significant action without first going through a thought-out rational process. The Maharal says that this is the same reason that it took Avraham Avinu three days to get to Har Hamoriah. Had he responded to Hashem's command to slaughter his son by immediately slaughtering his son in his back yard, people would have said, "he was making a rash decision in a perturbed frame of mind without thinking through its implications and long-term consequences." Since Avraham undertook a 3-day journey prior to carrying out the Divine command, it was clear to everyone that he had engaged in a thought-out, rational process.

Second, the Maharal says that Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre had an alliance with Avraham (they were Ba'alei Bris with each other) and it is inappropriate for any member of an alliance to initiate a major action or activity independently without first consulting with the

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other members of the alliance. When friends do something crucial in their lives, they share it first with one another. Again, this is not because Avraham considered for a moment doing anything other than what the Almighty commanded him, but it is just proper protocol for a ba'al bris—which is much more than just a friend—to provide the others with a "heads up" before initiating independent action of a momentous nature.

Let us say you decide to move to Eretz Yisrael. Here you are, you are established in the community. You decide you are going to pick up yourself and your family and make Aliyah. Tavo alecha bracha [May blessing come upon you.] However, it is only right that before this becomes public knowledge, you go to your closest friends and associates and tell them, "Listen, I have made a big decision. We are moving to Eretz Yisrael." It is not that you are asking for their permission or even their opinion. But it a natural and appropriate rule of social etiquette to not let your closest friends hear such momentous news about you from others, or after the fact. That is the way friends treat each other. They share with one another their secrets and their plans. G-d willing, when your daughter becomes a bride and it becomes public knowledge, your best friends should not hear about it in shul—they should hear it from you!

In Parshas Lech Lecha, Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky put a different spin on this answer. He cites a Gemara [Nedarim 32a]: When Avraham Avinu received the command "Walk before me and be perfect" [Bereshis 17:1], he began to tremble. He was frightened. Rav Yaakov explains – what was he frightened about? Rav Yaakov brings a Gemara in Sanhedrin [89b] that when Avraham Avinu was on the way to the Akeida, the Satan appeared to him and tried to deter him. The Satan knew it would be futile to tell Avraham "Don't do it!" Instead he told him, "Avraham, have you lost your mind? You—the person who has been the promoter of monotheism and Chessed [kindness] in the world—you are going to slaughter your son? Do you know what is going to happen, Avraham? You will lose every single baal teshuva that you ever made! They will all say, 'The man is cruel. He is a sadist! He is barbaric!' Avraham, how can you engage in human sacrifice? What will everyone say about you?" This is the type of argument that could appeal to most people. "You are going to destroy your life's work. You are going to make a chilul Hashem."

The Gemara says that Avraham responded to the Satan, "I will walk in my innocence" (Ani b'tumi eilech). In other words, Avraham told him, "You have a good question, but I am listening to the Ribono shel Olam. When G-d tells me something, I do not ask any questions."

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky says that the same attitude prevailed by the circumcision.

Avraham Avinu had no doubt that he was going to do the milah. His doubt, however, was, "What kind of impression will this make on people? It may look like my G-d is a barbaric G-d. He asks me to circumcise myself at age 100." Therefore, the whole query that Avraham placed before his ba'ale bris was: Should I do this act publicly or privately? He could have put out the word that he was going to Eilat for a few days, then go ahead and circumcise himself far away from any acquaintances, and come back a week or two later to Beer Sheva. No one would have had to know about G-d's command or his following through on it.

This is why he ran the idea by Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre. He openly told them that G-d commanded him to enter into a Covenant with Him via circumcision. Avraham wanted to hear their opinion as to the expected reaction of society, if word got out about this command and his intention to fulfill it. Mamre told him "If Hashem told you to do it, it must be good for you. People know how G-d loves you. They will understand, and if they don't, don't worry about what people say. Do it publicly!"

Avraham took Mamre's advice. Not about the Milah itself. About that he had no doubts. But he took Mamre's advice to do it publicly, and for that reason the Torah records that G-d appeared to Avraham in the plains of Mamre.

#### Dvar Torah Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

What's the difference between sand and the stars? Immediately after the Akeida, Hashem gave Avraham a wonderful blessing: 'Veharbah arbeh et zaracha k'chochvei hashamayim v'chachol asher al sfat hayam' I shall significantly increase the number of your offspring so they will be like the stars in the heavens above and like the sand which by the seashore.

Why this repetition? Surely we don't need both examples? Both the stars in the heavens above and the sand by the seashore, indicate a number so high that nobody could count them. The Midrash helps us, by saying that when Hashem says that the Jewish people will be like the stars above, that refers to a time when we are loyal to the words of Hashem. And that we'll be like the grains of sand on the seashore below – that's when we rebel against the words of Hashem. The Midrash explains that one cannot touch the stars – they are safe, they are secure and that represents the people of Israel in good times, whereas sand is trampled underfoot and that represents the people of Israel in challenging times.

I'm troubled by this peirush because the context here is one of pure blessing. It's in the immediate aftermath of the greatest statement of faith in God – the akeidah. Hashem wants to reassure Avraham that thanks to the loyalty that we the Jewish people place in God above, He will forever bless us. So therefore both the

stars and the sands must indicate blessing and therefore I'd like to suggest the following...

Like the stars in the heavens above – that means innumerable. Like the sand on the seashore is different. It's not just 'Chol – sand'. It's 'chol asher al-tsfat hayam' – sand by the seashore, which is wet, like mud. It appears as one single entity. Though it is made up of separate grains, they are clasped together as one.

This is a further blessing! In addition to being like the stars above, Hashem is saying that the Jewish people will be blessed with unity. Each individual will retain his or her own unique identity but we will stand together as one great nation.

Through the ages, God has indeed blessed us to survive together as a nation, against the odds. And true to his word we have been like the stars of the heavens above. Let us help Hashem to bless us just as the sand which is by the seashore and guarantee that we will always have unity within our midst.

#### OTS Dvar Torah

##### Betzalel Safrra

What could be greater than meeting Hashem Himself? Do you greet your neighbor warmly when you meet him or her? Do you greet the security guard at the shopping mall without being prompted to do so? Our forefather Abraham treated even the lowliest of people with respect, even though he had more than enough reason not to do so.

Could there be anything greater than meeting Hashem? In this week's parsha, Abraham receives several guests. The Talmud (Tractate Shabbat 126) comments on this episode, stating that "Receiving guests is greater than welcoming the countenance of the Divine Presence" – because although Abraham was deeply engaged in a conversation with Hashem, he leaves this lofty prophetic plane to greet the guests, who surely could have returned another day.

The Midrash adds that the guests seemed particularly lowly, since they had "prostrated themselves to the dust of their feet." Was it worth interrupting a prophecy for such a ragtag bunch? Prophecy, after all, is considered the highest level a human being can attain.

The Maharal uses this example to explain the path of gmilut hasadim, of being kind to others. "Welcoming guests – because they were created in the image of God, this is considered tantamount to revering the Divine Presence... for when welcoming the countenance of the Divine Presence, one never gazes at the countenance itself, as the verse states, 'for man shall not gaze at me and live', and in welcoming guests, one respects other human beings, as if one has chanced upon a new face, and one completely connects with the Divine Image. A new face, just like a guest

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that one welcomes into one's home, after having made the first connection with the guest, this is considered akin to connecting with the Divine Presence, and these things are indeed profound..."

In other words, the encounter with the "path of prophecy" may indeed be very great, but it is still an abstract and theoretical encounter, and to a great extent, it is attained through our power of imagination. Yet the encounter with the image of God in man, here in the physical plane, is tantamount to an encounter with the Divine Presence Itself, and Abraham is deeply connected to this Divine Presence. Another example of how the value of human brotherhood is greater than the name of Hashem appears in the chapter of sotah, the woman accused of adultery, when Hashem's name is effaced in order to preserve a peaceful relationship between husband and wife. This is because the name of Hashem, inscribed into the marital life of a loving couple, is greater than the name of Hashem written on parchment, notwithstanding its sanctity. The Divine Presence, Itself, is the revealed image of God, and it dwells among living human beings.

This message carries a powerful message regarding our everyday lives. Do we see the Divine Presence in every human being we encounter? Do we treat that Divine Presence with the appropriate reverence? Can we make out the Divine Presence in our spouses or children?

How can we allow ourselves to victimize others? Wouldn't that mean harming the Divine Presence? "And Rabbi Hanina says: One who slaps the cheek of a Jew is considered as though he slapped the cheek of the Divine Presence" (Tractate Sanhedrin, p. 58). Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacohen Kook explains that "... in each and every Jew, young and old, the light of Hashem lives in glory of Holiness. This light burns and illuminates, and anyone who slaps the cheek of a Jew is considered as though he slapped the cheek of the Divine Presence. The imagination that sees a sophisticated Divine revelation in the appearance of any Jew is an outcome of the prophetic spark..." (Orot, p. 171)

If the Divine Presence dwells in each of us, this is sufficient reason for us to revere both young and old. Do you greet your neighbor warmly when you meet him or her? Do you greet the security guard at the shopping mall without being prompted to do so? Do you treat everyone in the community with respect, or do you only respect the wealthy or the most popular members of the community? Our forefather Abraham treated the lowliest of people with respect, even though he had enough reasons not to do so. He was sick, he had just undergone circumcision at an advanced age, and he was a dignified individual.

But Abraham does not make these kinds of calculations. When he sees people, he sees the Divine Presence, and he runs out to greet them. Would that we merit for Abraham to truly be our father, and for us to genuinely see the Divine Presence in each individual. When that happens, the Divine Presence will truly dwell in our land.

### Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Yakov Haber

#### Yishmael: Reflections on Origins and Current History

The yishuv of over six million Jews (kein yirbu!) in the Holy Land of Israel was once again under threat this week by vicious rocket attacks at the hands of the descendants of Yishmael placing over a million people in a state of panic and hysteria and effectively shutting down a sizeable portion of Israel for several days. To quote the penetrating words of my rebbe, Rav Mayer Twersky shlit'a, as relevant when they were written as now: "Klal Yisrael's suffering should never be dismissively, solely attributed to geopolitics and vicious anti-Semitism. These are real factors. But there is always a metaphysical reason as well which allows these evil forces to surface." [1] It is in the spirit of this approach that this presentation is given.

Let us begin with the words of Rambam in his Iggeres Teiman addressing Yishmael's persecutions of the Jewish people in his day:

Therefore when David, of blessed memory, inspired by the holy spirit, envisaged the future tribulations of Israel, he bewailed and lamented their lot only in the Kingdom of Ishmael, and prayed in their behalf, for their deliverance, as is implied in the verse, "Woe is me, that I sojourn with Meschech, that I dwell beside the tents of Kedar." (Psalms 120:5)... No matter how much we suffer and elect to remain at peace with them, they stir up strife and sedition, as David predicted, "I am all peace, but when I speak, they are for war." (Psalms 120:7). [2]

His words are extremely prescient of our current situation.

The Torah describes the beginnings of Yishmael: And she (Hagar) saw that she had conceived, and her mistress Sarai was degraded in her eyes...And Avram said to Sarai, "Behold your maidservant is in your hands. Do unto her as you see fit." And Sarai afflicted her and she fled...And an angel of Hashem said, "I shall greatly increase your descendants and they will be innumerable." And an angel of Hashem said, "Behold you will conceive and give birth to a child and you shall call his name Yishmael for Hashem has heard your suffering. And he shall be a wild one among men; his hand will be in all and the hand of all will be in him, and he shall dwell among all of his brethren." (Bereishis 16:4, 6, 10-12).

And she (Sarah) said to Avraham, "Chase away this maidservant and her son for he will not inherit with my son Yitzchak." ...And G-d said to Avraham, "...all that Sarah tells you, hearken unto her, for Yitzchak shall be considered your progeny. And also the son of the maidservant I shall form into a nation for he is your progeny." ...And the water from the flask depleted and she threw the child under one of the bushes...for she said, "May I not see the death of the child" ...and she lifted her voice and cried. And G-d heard the voice of the lad and an angel of G-d called to Hagar from the heavens and said to her, "...do not be afraid for G-d has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Carry the child and place your hand on him for I shall make him into a great nation." (Bereishis 21:10, 12, 15-18)

Yishmael was born through the prayer of Hagar offered in a state of distress, and he was named for this prayer -- ישׁׁמְעָל. Subsequently, his life was saved through his own prayer, and he became a numerous nation through prayer.

It is well known that an important part of Islam is prayer. Copying the model of Yom Kippur, devout Moslems pray five times a day. In much of the Western world nowadays one can find Moslems stopping their schedules irrespective of what they are doing[3] placing the prayer mat on the floor inside or outside and praying. Because Islam abhors any images and idolatry, their conceptualization of the Divine Being is a monotheistic one, and hence they are praying to the same G-d as we are.[4] It is essential that we invest enormous effort into our prayers in order to engage properly in this part of the battle against those members of Yishmael who try to destroy us and chase us out of our land.>[5] Baruch Hashem, we have a Jewish army to help protect us, but we dare not forget Yaakov Avinu's model of preparing for battle and for prayer especially against a nation who excels in prayer.[6] Some humble suggestions of enhancing our prayers specifically regarding protection from our enemies include: 1) reciting the parsha ha'akeida describing Yitzchak Avinu's willingness to give up his very life for Hashem transcending Yishmael's willing submission to bris mila (see below) when he was 13 years old (see Rashi to Bereishis 22:1). 2) Reciting the series of phrases beginning "Shomeir Yisrael" at the end of tachanun with concentration invoking the unique merits of Klal Yisrael. 3) Reciting at least parts of the "V'hu rachum" addition said on Mondays and Thursdays slowly and with concentration.

In Tehillim (79:6), in one of the Psalms which were recited by many communities during the Gulf War (and on Seder night), we find the following verse: שׁׁפֹךְ חָמְתָךְ עַל הָגִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא קָרְאָו יְצָעָךְ וְעַל מִלְכֹתָא אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׁמָךְ לֹא קָרְאָו - "Pour out your wrath on the nations which do not know you and on the kingdoms which do not call out Your name." I found myself troubled by the fact that this verse does not seem to be relevant with respect to those of the Arab nations who

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ruthlessly attack the Jewish people since they do "know" the One and Only G-d and they do call out in His name. I was subsequently comforted by the passage in Yirmiyahu which states:

Let not the wise man take pride in his wisdom; let not the mighty take pride in his strength; let not the wealthy take pride in his wealth. Rather, only in this should one looking for pride take pride - pondering and knowing Me, for I am Hashem who does kindness, justice and charity in the land, for these I desire, says G-d. (9:22-23)

The words of Radak shed light on this verse immensely: "The knowledge of G-d consists of following His ways, to perform kindness, justice and charity, since He does these very acts." Elsewhere, in a rebuke to Shalum the son of Yoshiyahu, Yirmiyahu states: "One who judges the case of the poor and destitute, it will be good [for him]; behold that is knowing Me, says Hashem" (22:16). On this Radak tersely comments: "I have explained this on the verse "Let not the wise man, etc.". Thus, knowledge of G-d does not merely consist of intellectual contemplation of His perfection, His oneness and His Providence, but also in acting kindly to others and seeking justice for the persecuted.[7]

Hence, those descendants of Yishmael who use their talents to maim and to kill indiscriminately, to shoot at innocent families driving on highways sometimes killing a couple leaving a whole family of orphans, who brutally stab those sitting at Shabbos dinner, who blow themselves up bombing pizzerias and hotels killing dozens of Jews, who terrorize millions with indiscriminate rocket launchings do not really know G-d even if they pray to Him. We can confidently pray, "Pour out your wrath on those who do not know you!" concerning this enemy as well.

A passage in the Zohar (2:32a) is most revealing: R. Chiya sighed and cried and began, "And Sarai was barren and had no child." Woe for this; woe for that time that Hagar bore Yishmael. Said R. Yose to him, "Why [the cries], but afterward Sarai gave birth to a son of holy stock?" He replied... "So I heard from the mouth of R. Shimon ... 'Because Sara delayed [in having children]...this caused Hagar to inherit Sara her mistress, and she had a son from Avraham, and Avraham said, "May Yishmael live before you". Even though HKB'H informed him of the future birth of Yitzchak, Avraham cleaved to Yishmael until HKB'H responded, "And I have heard you concerning Yishmael..." Afterward he underwent circumcision and entered the holy covenant before Yitzchak entered the world. Come and see, for 400 years the guardian angel of Yishmael pleaded before HKB'H and said, "Does one who had a circumcision have a share in Your Name?" He replied: "Yes!" [The angel] replied, "But Yishmael was circumcised [and furthermore he

was circumcised at 13 years old!]. Why does he not have a share in You like Yitzchak?" [Hashem] replied, "[Yitzchak] circumcised as appropriate, and properly; [Yishmael] did not do so. Furthermore, these [Yitzchak's descendants] cleave to me as appropriate when eight days old, whereas these [Yishmael's descendants] are distant from me for many days." Said [the guardian angel], "Even so, since he is circumcised should he not get a good reward because of it?"... What did HKB" H do? He distanced the bnei Yishmael from cleaving up on High and gave them a share in the Holy Land because of their circumcision. And the bnei Yishmael are destined to rule over the Hold Land when it is empty for a long time just as their circumcision is empty without completion, and they will prevent bnei Yisrael from returning to their land until that merit of the bnei Yishmael expires."

Here we see that Yishmael's dedication to bris mila gives them a powerful source of Heavenly merit and even a temporary right to Eretz Yisrael. But we know that concerning bris mila the Torah tells us (Bereishis 17:7): "And I will establish my covenant between Me and you and between your descendants after you for all their generations as an eternal covenant to be your G-d and for your descendants after you." This mitzva is not just an isolated one; it is the gateway to a lifetime of devotion to Hashem and His Torah. Only our dedication to this bris and what it represents individually and collectively can, in the long run, outweigh Yishmael's connection to this mitzva.

Yishmael is called a "pere adam - a wild one among men". Rav Yechiel Weitzman[8] explains this as follows: The term "Adam" - reminiscent of Adam HaRishon - used here is indicative of the fact that Yishmael's descendants will have a deep, spiritual connection to G-d, but it will be with wildness and without any proper restraint. Indeed, Yishmael's willingness to kill and even commit suicide purportedly for G-d with cries of "Allahu akbar - G-d is great!" has been readily apparent throughout history and especially in our era. What are we to learn from this?

Rav Weitzman suggests that the unconventional warfare which Yishmael launches against the Jewish people is designed to shake us out of our sense of reliance on our own efforts alone and to realize that "Hashem Ish milchama - only G-d is the real Master of war" and that our victory over our enemies is in His hands alone. We are fortunate to have been blessed with a standing Jewish army ready to defend the Jewish people and to avenge attacks against them. In the famous echoing words of Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt"l (Kol Dodi Dofeik): "For the first time in the history of our exile, Providence surprised our enemies with a rattling discovery - that Jewish blood is not cheap!...The Torah has

constantly taught us that is permissible and even one's holy obligation to protect himself...Baruch shehecheyanu laz'man hazeh that Jews have within their power - with the help of Hashem - to defend themselves." But herein lies a great test. Will the Jewish people see within the Jewish army an agent of Avinu ShebaShamayim Who, in His kindness, has provided a vehicle for the defense of His beloved people? Or will they see within this precious organization an independent defender of the Jewish people, one which allows them to "take their fate into their own hands" without realizing and actualizing our eternal covenant with HKB" H?[9] Losing sight of G-d Who is constantly involved in our lives undermines a central tenet of all of our avodas Hashem and endangers our very security (see Vayikra 26:27-28).

This challenge was one of the problems with the request to appoint a king. The Shoftim fought the wars of Israel in an obviously providential way. By appointing a king, the Jewish people's wars would be fought in a more natural way with the associated challenge of losing sight of the fact that it would only be with Divine assistance and intervention that they would be successful. (See Malbim on Shmuel I 8:6.) King David, in one of his first wars as king against the Pelishtim, was commanded not to wage war against them until he would hear the sound of steps moving in the trees nearby (Shmuel II 5:24). The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 142) dramatically presents the fact that the Philistines were already within 4 amos of the Jewish army, but King David still did not allow his soldiers to fight since he did not yet hear this Divine sign. "Better we die innocent and righteous and not wicked (by violating Hashem's command). Let us place our trust in HKB" H! Once they did so, the trees rustled and they immediately battled against the Pelishtim leading to victory. At the beginning of Dovid Hamelech's long and successful career as a warrior and great defender of the Jewish people, he first had to demonstrate utter reliance on the true Ish Milchama. This test is ever more relevant today.

Let the words of Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer (31) serve as a guide to us in our struggle against Yishmael.

Why is he called "Yishmael"? Because HaKadosh Baruch Hu will ultimately hearken unto the groans of the Nation from all that which the children of Yishmael will perpetrate in the land in the end of days. Therefore his name was called "Yishmael".

It appears that Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer finds difficulty with Yishmael's name since the Torah gives as the reason for its selection to be "כִּי אֲלֹעֲנָה יְהוָה" (Bereishis 16:11). Since עלה is in the past tense, his name should have been שָׁמָעַל or שָׁמָעַל. Why is the future tense, עלה, used at the beginning of his name? To this question the Midrash answers that his name

## Likutei Divrei Torah

contains an allusion to the fact that in the future, the Jewish people will scream out to G-d, and He will answer their prayers. Thus Yishmael, in his very name, included an allusion to his ultimate downfall as a result of his descendants' persecutions of B'nei Yisrael. May Hashem guide us to always remember Him and His Torah and to call out to Him intensely for His protection, and may we merit the day in which all nations will join the Jewish people in calling His great Name.

[1] See Miracles and Mourning on Torahweb which was written in response to Operation Protective Edge in 2014.

[2] Translation from Iggeret Teiman, translated by Boaz Cohen, 1952 available here.

[3] I recall that in Ramat Beit Shemesh, one of our "cousins" who was in charge of selling pizza disappeared for quite a while. When he returned, he was censured by a Jewish worker, "Fouad, where were you, there are customers!" To this, Fouad replied, "Customers! I was praying mincha!"

[4] See Rambam (Ma'achalos Asuros 11:7) and Teshuvos HaRambam (448).

[5] See "Rachel's Weeping and Tefila B'eis Tzara" for further expansions on this theme.

[6] I heard this point in a recorded shiur from Rav Moshe Shapiro zt"l.

[7] This commentary is somewhat in contrast to those Rishonim who saw in the former verse a directive to engage in chakira or philosophical analysis of the Divine. (See Seifer HaBris and introduction to the Leiv Tov elucidation of Chovos HaLevavos by Rav Pinchas Lieberman.)

[8] See "Ishmaelite Exile", by Rav Yechiel Weitzman, a truly eye-opening book, for many more sources on this topic.

[9] Telling is the "compromise" of Ben Gurion when the religious and the secular debated the inclusion of mention of G-d in the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel. It was decided to write מחוק בצוות י"שעא - בטהון בצוות י"שעא with confidence in the Rock of Israel. The religious would interpret this as referring to G-d, the secular to Tzahal! Oh vey!

[This article was received late last week but is very relevant — Compiler]

### Rabbi Mordechai Willig: A Great Nation

I. "And I will make you a great nation" (Bereishis 12:2). Because the journey diminishes reproduction, Avraham needed a blessing to have many descendants" (Rashi). The Midrash Tanchuma explains differently, as follows: when did Hashem make Avraham into a great nation? When Am Yisrael accepted the Torah, as Moshe declared (Devarim 4:8), "And which is a great nation that has just statutes and laws, as the entire Torah that I place before you today?" (Tanchuma Lech Lecha 3).

Rashi understands a great nation quantitatively. Despite the arduous journey, which inhibits procreation, you will father a large nation. By contrast, the Tanchuma interprets a great nation qualitatively and links this greatness to the acceptance of the laws of the Torah.

In fact, the phrase "great nation" (goy gadol) is found twice more in Devarim (4:6-7), "When the nations of the world hear the Torah laws, they will comment, when seeing you observe the laws, 'This great nation is wise and understanding.' For which is a great nation that

has a G-d Who is close to it, as HaShem whenever we call to Him?"

The Ba'al HaTurim writes that the blessing "I will make you a nation (goy)" is the greatest (gadol) of the seven blessings found in 12:2 and 12:3. This national experience includes slavery and emancipation. The mere fact that Avraham's progeny will emerge as a national unit that survives forever, as a national unit in good times and bad, is "gadol," the greatest bracha.

II. The series of the aforementioned three pesukim which contain the phrase "great nation" begins (4:6), "This is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations." The Gemara (Shabbos 75a) asks: What is the wisdom and understanding that is visible to the eyes of the nations? This is the calculation of the "tekufos umazalos." These astronomical and astrological phenomena, as interpreted by wise Jewish scholars, are later confirmed when their meteorological predictions come true (Rashi).

It is this wisdom which is called bina, understanding (Divrei Hayamim I 12:33, see Rashi Devarim 33:18) that the nations, which do not possess Torah wisdom, can ascertain (Maharsha).

This, in turn, leads to their statement that our great nation is wise and because we observe all of the laws of the Torah.

In earlier generations, Rabbinic scholars were recognized for their scientific and medical knowledge, which led to a great appreciation of Torah by their non-Jewish contemporaries. Today, Jewish scientists and doctors continue to enhance our great nation's international reputation.

III. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the Orthodox Jewish community disproportionately. All of the blessings of "I will make you a great nation" have been affected. The sheer number of fatalities, r"l, has quantitatively reduced our great nation. Of course, each loss is a terrible tragedy for the deceased and the close family and friends. But the cumulative losses in the Orthodox community have been devastating.

Our reputation as a wise and understanding nation has been tarnished. Despite staggering numbers of mortality and morbidity, and notwithstanding repeated warnings and predictions that have come true, appropriate precautions are often ignored. Nearly all physicians, including numerous Orthodox doctors, agree that masks and social distance reduce risk of transmission. In many if not most circumstances, lack of precaution adds danger. It is not only unscientific, it is against the halachic requirement to avoid danger whenever possible. The dozens of recent Covid-19 funerals across the spectrum of Orthodoxy, in the US and Eretz Yisrael, should lead to universal compliance. The failure to wear masks and to distance is a perplexing case of cognitive dissonance, unbefitting a wise and understanding nation.

IV. Avraham's greatest blessing was the creation of an eternal national unit known as Am Yisrael. Based on halacha and mesora, Jews congregate in tefila and Torah, in simcha and aivel. However, the basis of these laudable practices is concern for a fellow Jew. We often go to extraordinary lengths to help and join with others. Today this same mandate demands that we reduce these communal activities to help us stay safe. As a single national unit, we may not practice extreme individualism which results in the spread COVID.

Similarly, young Jews many not unnecessarily risk getting COVID-19 based on relatively mild outcomes for youngsters. As a single national unit, the welfare of older Jews, who can be infected by younger ones with disastrous consequences, cannot be ignored. Shuls, schools, wedding and funerals are all potential spreaders and must proceed with caution. Teaching youngsters to engage in lies or subterfuge to circumvent local laws is terrible chinuch. Dishonesty leads some to leave Torah observance (See the book "Off the Derech" by Faranak Margolese), and causes a chilul Hashem. It could lead to anti-Semitism by those claiming that Orthodox Jews spread disease.

V. Thankfully, many are now taking the precautions advocated by many gedolei rabbanim, doctors and governmental authorities. This will lead to the fulfillment of Hashem's promise to make us a goy gadol, a great nation. Our numbers will increase as we limit death by COVID-19. Our reputation as a wise and understanding nation, which the Torah attributes to scientific knowledge as well as halachic observance, both of which are reflected by adhering to sound medical advice, will be restored. And the greatest blessing is realized when, as a single national unit, we do whatever is necessary and appropriate to save lives, including staying home.

As members of this great nation, let us all call to HaShem Who is close to us. May Hashem answer our prayers, bring a refua shelaima to the sick, protect the healthy, end the pandemic speedily and fulfill the blessings He gave Avraham Avinu so many years ago.

#### Torah.Org Dvar Torah

by Rabbi Label Lam

#### HASHEM Hears the Difference

And the water was depleted from the leather pouch, and she cast the child under one of the bushes. And she went and sat down from afar, at about the distance of two bowshots, for she said, "Let me not see the child's death." And she sat from afar, and she raised her voice and wept. And G-d heard the lad's voice, and an angel of G-d called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What is troubling you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the lad's voice in the place where he is. (Breishis 21:15-17)

And she sat from afar: When he drew near death, she went further away. -Rashi  
And G-d was with the lad, and he grew, and he dwelt in the desert, and he became an archer. (Breishis 21:20)

## Likutei Divrei Torah

Since when is the Torah measuring anything in increments of "bowshots"? It's never used any other place in Torah literature to express distance. What's going on here? Another strange point is that Hagar cries and HASHEM hears "the lad's voice". Why was the mother's voice not the note that registered in heaven? Nothing is more powerful than the prayer of a mother! It's curious to note that just a few verses later we are told that Yishmael became, of all things, an archer!

The Torah is not speaking here in objective terms. This is not the omniscient observer reporting mere factual details. We are being given a window into Hagar's subjective perception of reality. Her standard for measurement and the distance she removed herself over and over again (according to Rashi) is in lengths of arrow shots. Why is this relevant? What is the Torah teaching us?

We see here that arrow shot distance is that space that allows Hagar to shield her mind and heart from the suffering of her child. Her moving away is not perceived as a noble step but rather as evidence of selfishness. She is protecting herself from pain rather than comforting her child. The most direct proof of this is that although the Torah records her crying, HASHEM is responsive to the voice of her son Yishmael. Her tears are not acceptable. It's a portrait of self-pity couched as false empathy. "Woe is me! I can't watch this!"

Immediately after this we are informed that Yishmael became an archer. What's the relevance of this? An archer, a shooter of arrows, confronts his enemy, his game in a different way.

Essav is told, "by your sword shall you live". The man with a sword meets his challenger face to face and up close. The range of the weaponry invites a close encounter. The man with bow and arrow or a rocket launcher shoots from a distance.

The distance he creates from his victims is not just a military strategy. It's a psychological strategy. Like mother Hagar, it creates a distance from the shooter and the experience of pain and the destruction leveled on the victim or victims.

For the morally uncourageous it allows for some false sense of plausible deniability. "I only shot a missile in the air, but where it lands and who it hurts, I can't see, and so I do not care!"

Chaim Vital explains that the name Yishmael which literally means that "HASHEM will hear" really means that in the final chapter of history Yishmael will cause the prayers of the victims of his cruel game of target practice to be heard, and that cry will attract HASHEM's attention. Not the voice of the one hunkering and hiding so may arrow shots away but rather "the voice is the voice of Yaakov." HASHEM hears the difference.

### **Weekly Parsha VAYERA 5781**

#### **Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog**

One of the main issues in this week's Torah reading is the relationship between Yishmael and Yitzchak. Yishmael is the son of Abraham and Hagar, while Yitzchak is the son of Abraham and Sarah. It is common knowledge that, as the half-brothers grow up together, the differences between them in character, spirituality, ambition, and behavior become increasingly apparent. Sarah notices that Yishmael is somehow more the son of Hagar than of Abraham. In a bold decision made to preserve the legacy of Abraham and the life and well-being of Yitzchak, Sarah asks Abraham to send Hagar and Yishmael away, and out of the house of Abraham and Sarah.

True to Sarah's intuition Yishmael, left to his own devices, becomes a famous archer and warrior. He is a person to be feared, and his influence and power, not limited to the land of Israel, will spread over the entire geographical area. Sarah senses that no amount of education, training or parental influence would change Yishmael's basic nature of being wild, unpredictable, dangerous and a threat to the lives and ideals that Abraham represents. Yishmael will profit from being the son of Abraham and his descendants have continued to do so, even until today. But descendants are not necessarily heirs—either in the physical sense or even more so in an eternal, spiritual legacy.

The Torah describes Yishmael as being wild and uncontrollable. That is his nature and personality; everything else that occurs throughout human history regarding him and his descendants is colored by this stark description. Sarah senses this almost from the beginning. The Torah records that she saw Yishmael "jesting". Rashi points out that the Hebrew verb which it uses means something far more sinister than merely exhibiting a sense of humor. It indicates a capacity for murder and immorality, for danger and irresponsibility. It is the same verb that the Torah itself will use when describing the mood and the behavior of the Jewish people when they worshipped the Golden Calf in the desert. Rabbis also point out that the same word can mean mockery through humor and sarcasm, as well as sexual immorality.

Humor, like all human traits, can have both a negative aspect as well as a positive one. We live in a generation when what is sacred is mocked at, and what is holy is easily trampled upon. The beginning of murder is to take many things lightly. Those things include human life and any moral restraint. An enemy that we can demonize, mock, laugh at, and constantly insult soon becomes an object not only of derision, but of violence and subjugation too. When Yishmael mocked Yitzchak for his piety, diligence, and an apparent lack of practicality in the world, Sarah sensed that Yishmael was capable of physically harming Yitzchak, even if not murdering him. All of history bears out the fact that persecutions and holocausts begin with insults and jokes, mockery, and degradation of others. This is why the Torah speaks out against such behavior—in all forms and under all conditions.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

### **Answering the Call (Vayera 5781)**

#### **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

The early history of humanity is set out in the Torah as a series of disappointments. God gave human beings freedom, which they then misused. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Cain murdered Abel. Within a relatively short time, the world before the Flood became dominated by violence. All flesh perverted its way on the earth. God created order, but humans created chaos. Even after the Flood, humanity, in the form of the builders of Babel, were guilty of hubris, thinking that people could build a tower that "reaches heaven" (Gen. 11:4).

Humans failed to respond to God, which is where Abraham enters the picture. We are not quite sure, at the beginning, what it is that Abraham

is summoned to do. We know he is commanded to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and travel "to the land I will show you," (Gen. 12:1) but what he is to do when he gets there, we do not know. On this the Torah is silent. What is Abraham's mission? What makes him special? What makes him more than a good man in a bad age, as was Noah? What makes him a leader and the father of a nation of leaders?

To decode the mystery we have to recall what the Torah has been signalling prior to this point. I suggested in previous weeks that a – perhaps the – key theme is a failure of responsibility. Adam and Eve lack personal responsibility. Adam says, "It wasn't me; it was the woman." Eve says, "It wasn't me, it was the serpent." It is as if they deny being the authors of their own stories – as if they do not understand either freedom or the responsibility it entails.

Cain does not deny personal responsibility. He does not say, "It wasn't me. It was Abel's fault for provoking me." Instead he denies moral responsibility: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Noah fails the test of collective responsibility. He is a man of virtue in an age of vice, but he makes no impact on his contemporaries. He saves his family (and the animals) but no one else. According to the plain reading of the text, he does not even try.

If we understand this, we understand Abraham. He exercises personal responsibility. In parshat Lech Lecha, a quarrel breaks out between Abraham's herdsmen and those of his nephew Lot. Seeing that this was no random occurrence but the result of their having too many cattle to be able to graze together, Abraham immediately proposes a solution:

Abram said to Lot, "Let there not be a quarrel between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I will go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." (Gen. 13:8-9)

Note that Abraham passes no judgment. He does not ask whose fault the argument was. He does not ask who will gain from any particular outcome. He gives Lot the choice. He sees the problem and acts.

In the next chapter of Bereishit we are told about a local war, as a result of which Lot is among the people taken captive. Immediately Abraham gathers a force, pursues the invaders, rescues Lot and with him, all the other captives. He returns these captives safely to their homes, refusing to take any of the spoils of victory that he is offered by the grateful king of Sodom.

This is a strange passage – it depicts Abraham very differently from the nomadic shepherd we see elsewhere. The passage is best understood in the context of the story of Cain. Abraham shows he is his brother's (or brother's son's) keeper. He immediately understands the nature of moral responsibility. Despite the fact that Lot chose to live where he did with its attendant risks, Abraham does not say, "His safety is his responsibility, not mine."

Then, in this week's parsha of Vayera, comes the great moment: a human being challenges God Himself for the very first time. God is about to pass judgment on Sodom. Abraham, fearing that this will mean that the city will be destroyed, says:

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (Gen. 18:23-25)

This is a remarkable speech. By what right does a mere mortal challenge God Himself?

The short answer is that God Himself signalled that he should. Listen carefully to the text:

Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him" ... Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous

that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached Me." (Gen. 18:17-21)  
Those words, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" are a clear hint that God wants Abraham to respond; otherwise why would He have said them?

The story of Abraham can only be understood against the backdrop of the story of Noah. There too, God told Noah in advance that he was about to bring punishment to the world.

So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth" (Gen. 6:13).

Noah did not protest. To the contrary, we are told three times that Noah "did as God commanded him" (Gen. 6:22; 7:5; 7:9). Noah accepted the verdict. Abraham challenged it. Abraham understood the third principle we have been exploring over the past few weeks: collective responsibility.

The people of Sodom were not Abraham's brothers and sisters, so he was going beyond even what he did in rescuing Lot. He prayed on their behalf because he understood the idea of human solidarity, immortally expressed by John Donne:

No man is an island,

Entire of itself ...

Any man's death diminishes me,

For I am involved in mankind.[1]

But a question remains. Why did God call on Abraham to challenge Him? Was there anything Abraham knew that God didn't know? That idea is absurd. The answer is surely this: Abraham was to become the role model and initiator of a new faith, one that would not defend the human status quo but challenge it.

Abraham had to have the courage to challenge God if his descendants were to challenge human rulers, as Moses and the Prophets did. Jews do not accept the world that is. They challenge it in the name of the world that ought to be. This is a critical turning point in human history: the birth of the world's first religion of protest – the emergence of a faith that challenges the world instead of accepting it.

Abraham was not a conventional leader. He did not rule a nation. There was as yet no nation for him to lead. But he was the role model of leadership as Judaism understands it. He took responsibility. He acted; he didn't wait for others to act. Of Noah, the Torah says, "he walked with God" (Gen. 6:9). But to Abraham, God says, "Walk before Me," (Gen. 17:1), meaning: be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility. Judaism is God's call to responsibility.

Shabbat Shalom

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### Shabbat Shalom: Vayera (Genesis 18:1 – 22:24)

#### Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not withheld your only son from Me." (Gen. 22:12)

The akeda ("binding" of Isaac) serves as a model for one of the most important questions in contemporary family life: to what extent should a parent continue to influence, direct, or channel their adult child's life? Can the power of a parent be taken too far? Ultimately, how much control can parents continue to have in their relationships with their adult children? The Torah offers an insight to these questions in describing the immediate aftermath of the akeda.

What happened to Isaac after the harrowing experience with his father on Mount Moriah? The Torah states, "So Abraham returned [singular form] to his young men [the Midrash teaches they were Eliezer and Ishmael, who accompanied them, but did not go to the actual place of the appointed sacrifice] and they [Abraham and the young men] rose up and went together to Be'er Sheva and Abraham dwelt in Be'er Sheva" [Gen. 22:19].

Where was Isaac? Didn't Isaac also descend from the altar and return to Be'er Sheva?

Yonatan Ben Uziel, in his interpretive Aramaic translation, writes that Isaac is not included as having returned home to Be'er Sheva because he went instead to the yeshiva of Shem and Ever. In other words, prior to the akeda, father and son magnificently joined together—"and they walked, the two of them, together" (Gen. 22:6)—but afterwards, they had to part ways.

Abraham returns to his household, while Isaac returns to his books, to an academy of solitude and study. In the vocabulary of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l, Abraham is the outer-directed, extroverted, aggressive Adam I, while Isaac is the more inner-directed, introverted, introspective Adam II.

In the conceptual scheme of the mystical Zohar, Abraham is the outgoing, overflowing symbol of hesed (loving kindness), while Isaac is the disciplined and courageous symbol of gevura (inner fortitude). The akeda is both the point of unity as well as the point of departure between father and son. Isaac enters the akeda as Abraham's son; he emerges from the akeda as Jacob's father (Jacob will also study at the yeshiva of Shem and Ever).

Isaac's commitment to God is equal to that of his father, but his path is very different. Simultaneously, the akeda is the point of unity and separation, between father and son, for each must respect both the similarities as well as the differences within the parent-child relationship.

The commandment to circumcise one's son is most certainly modeled on the symbol of the akeda. After all, the basic law prescribes that it is the father who must remove his son's foreskin (even though most fathers feel more comfortable appointing the more-experienced mohel as their agent).

From a symbolic perspective, it is the parent's responsibility to transmit to the children the boundaries of what is permissible and what is not. Nevertheless, despite the fact that every child is a product of the nature and nurture provided by his/her parents—and the Torah teaches that a child must respect and even revere his/her parents—the existential decisions of how to live one's life, which profession to enter and which spouse to marry are decisions which can only be made by the adult child himself/herself. [See Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah, Chap. 240:25, Laws of Respecting Parents, the last comment of Rema, citing Maharik.]

We see the importance of parental restraint in the continuation of Gen. 22:12: "For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not withheld [hasakhta] your only son from Me."

However, we can also understand the verse to mean, "For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not done away with [the Hebrew h-s-kh can also mean to remove, or cause to be absent] your only son because of [My command]."

In the first reading, the angel praises Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac; in the alternative reading, Abraham is praised for his willingness not to sacrifice Isaac. [See Ish Shalom, 'Akeda,' Akdamot, August 1996.]

The critical lesson of the akeda, then, is not how close Abraham came to sacrificing his own son, but rather, the limits of paternal power.

Paradoxically, when a parent enables a child to psychologically separate, the child will ultimately move forward. Isaac returns from the yeshiva to continue his father's monotheistic beliefs and Israel-centered life. Our paramount parental responsibility is to allow our children to fulfill their own potential, and our challenge is to learn to respect their individual choices.

Shabbat Shalom!

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#### Insights Parshas Vayeira - Cheshvan 5781

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

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

**Selfish Giving**

The two angels came to Sdom in the evening and Lot was sitting at the gates of Sdom; and Lot saw and stood up to meet them and bowed, face to the ground (19:1).

This week's parsha contains a remarkable contrast of the chessed of Avraham with that of his brother-in-law Lot. Just as Avraham had been sitting in his tent gazing towards the highway looking for visitors, so too the Torah tells us regarding Lot; "and Lot was sitting at the gate of Sdom (*ibid*)."*Rashi* (*ad loc*) explains that Lot had learned from living in the house of Avraham to seek out guests.

Avraham is known as the patriarch of chessed. Yet by Lot we see a level of chessed that seems to transcend that of even Avraham, the quintessential paradigm of kindness.

Lot invites the angels that came to Sdom to stay at his home and, even after they politely demure, he insists that they take him up on his offer. Bear in mind, showing kindness to strangers was a serious crime in the city of Sdom; merely feeding the poor of the city was a capital offense (See *Sanhedrin* 109b and *Midrash Tanchuma* on *Vayeira*).

By offering to host the angels, Lot was literally putting himself and his family at grave risk. In fact, Lot was well aware of these potential consequences; once the angels agreed to take him up on his offer, he told them to take a roundabout route so that the inhabitants of Sdom wouldn't take notice that they were staying in his home (see *Rashi* 19:2). This seems to be a very high level chessed.

Moreover, when the people of Sdom do find out and surround his home to attack them, Lot makes an extraordinary offer: "I have two daughters that have never been with a man, I shall bring them out to you and you may do as you please with them. Just do not harm these men because they have come under the shelter of my roof" (19:8). Clearly, Lot goes above and beyond to protect these visitors. How is it possible that he isn't the quintessential "bal chessed"?

While it's true that doing kindness is an admirable trait, there are often different motivations for being a bal chessed. Helping others is a very fulfilling experience, one feels that he has done the right thing and this is very satisfying. However, another aspect of a being a bal chessed is the feeling that one has now become a greater person for becoming a bal chessed. One who is known as a magnanimous person is admired and held in high esteem.

True chessed requires one to diminish oneself. We see this from Hashem Himself: The world was created as an act of chessed (see *Derech Hashem*, Part One) and in order to effect a real act of creation Hashem constricted Himself (the *tzimtzum*), as it were, to give mankind a feeling of an independent existence. Thus, Hashem limiting Himself effected the original act of chessed and now defines how true chessed is accomplished: through a diminishment of the benefactor.

Avraham Avinu did chessed in exactly the same way; "Avraham ran to the cattle... he took cream, milk, and the calf which he prepared, and placed it before them; and he stood over them..." (18:7-8).

Even though Avraham was very wealthy he didn't just snap his fingers and have servants prepare everything and serve his guests. On the contrary, he ran himself to prepare all the foods and then acted as a waiter to serve the food himself — even hovering nearby to see what else they might require.

On the other hand, the Torah tells us exactly Lot's motivation: "for they have come under the shelter of my roof." He didn't want the people of Sdom harming anyone who was under his protection because that would be a violation of his power to shelter someone. For Lot, his magnanimity was about his power and his reputation; it was really all about him. This is reflected in his outrageous offering of his daughters to the people of Sdom to protect his reputation.

### An Amazing Sacrifice

And it happened after these words that Hashem tested Avraham... (22:1) At the end of this week's parsha we find the famous story of the akeida, where Hashem asks Avraham to bring his beloved son Yitzchak as a sacrifice. This is the last and hardest of Avraham's tests from Hashem.

Just as Avraham passed the first nine tests, he perseveres in this test as well. Thus, he is accorded great righteousness and devotion for being

willing to sacrifice his son at God's request. Obviously, Avraham's achievement is enormous.

Yet, we must delve deeper. Unfortunately, Jewish history is replete with tragic stories of losing family members. In fact, we find by the tribe of Levi that when Moshe called them to action after the episode of the Golden Calf, they had no qualms about murdering their families (their brothers, parents, grandchildren, and grandparents, see *Rashi Shemos* 32:27 and *Devarim* 33:9), all of whom had taken part in the sin of the Golden Calf. They too sacrificed beloved relatives for the sake of Hashem!

We also find the story of Chana and her seven sons (*Gittin* 57b): The Caesar demanded that her children be brought to him and bow down to worship an idol. One by one they refused and were put to death. When the Caesar saw that his threats had no impact on their resolve, he approached the last child and told him, "I will merely throw down my signet ring and you will bend down to pick it up, so that people will say you have accepted the king's authority." The child refused, saying; "If you have such concern for your honor, how much more so do I have to be concerned for the honor of the Almighty!"

When he was taken out to be killed, Chana begged to give him a final kiss. She told him, "Go tell your patriarch Avraham that he did one akeida altar while I did seven akeida altars." In truth, Chana's sacrifice seems to be even greater than that of Avraham Avinu's, what was it about Avraham's act that made him so unique?

People deal with horrific situations in various ways, but the most common way is to disconnect themselves from either their body, their emotions, or both. We see this almost daily in the news, people explaining that they endured the most horrific acts by physically and emotionally disconnecting. This is how most people cope and, unfortunately, it wreaks havoc on a person's state of mind.

This is how the members of the tribe of Levi were able to kill so many of their relatives: they emotionally disconnected themselves from what they had to do. This is also how Chana coped with the loss of her seven sons. However, this tragedy took an incredible toll on her; the story ends that she then committed suicide by throwing herself from the roof.

Avraham Avinu was different. When Hashem asked him to bring his beloved son as a sacrifice he didn't disconnect himself. On the contrary, Avraham was fully engaged emotionally: he was filled with love for Hashem (see *Rashi* on 22:3) and joy in fulfilling God's command (see *Rashi* 22:6). Avraham wasn't a cold and distant person, on the contrary, he is known as the "patriarch of kindness." Nevertheless, his absolute faith and connection to Hashem allowed him to complete this terrible act of sacrificing his son with true love, joy, and devotion. He didn't have to disconnect himself. This is what made Avraham's fulfillment of the test of the akeida so unique.

### Question of the Week

In this week's parsha we have the destruction of the city of Sdom. Sdom has become the archetype model of a city that is both evil and morally bankrupt. Interestingly, the mishna in *Pirkei Avos* (5:10) describes different types of outlooks on life: One who says, "What is mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" is a boor. One who says, "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours" is representing the outlook of an average person (meaning neither righteous nor wicked); yet others say that this is the character of a Sdomite.

In other words, there are some who feel that the Sdom philosophy is acceptable outlook on life. How is this possible?

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### Rav Kook Torah

#### VaYera: Sanctity in Space

"Abraham rose early in the morning, to the place where he had [previously] stood before God." (Gen. 19:27)

What does it mean that Abraham "stood before God"? The Talmud interpreted this phrase to refer to prayer. (The central prayer is called the *Amidah*, meaning "standing," since it is recited while standing.)

## A Set Place for Prayer

From the fact that Abraham returned to the place where he had prayed in the past, the Sages deduced that Abraham had designated a particular spot for prayer.

“Rabbi Helbo said: Anyone who has a set location for his prayers will be assisted by the God of Abraham. And when he dies, they will say about him, ‘What a pious individual! What a humble person! He was a disciple of our forefather Abraham.’” (Berachot 6b)

In what way is a person who sets aside a place for prayer a humble individual? What makes him a disciple of Abraham? Why is it so praiseworthy to always pray in the same location?

## Spatial Holiness

We are accustomed to the idea that holiness is a function of space. Different places have different degrees of sanctity. The synagogue is holier than the Beit Midrash (the house of study), the Beit Midrash is holier than an ordinary home, and an ordinary home is holier than the bathhouse. Levels of sanctity are also a geographic reality. The Land of Israel is holier than outside of Israel, Jerusalem is holier than other parts of Israel, the Temple Mount is holier than the rest of Jerusalem, and so on.

When examined by cold logic, however, our sense of holiness in space raises questions. Does not God’s glory fill the entire universe? Are not the limitations of space and location irrelevant to God? Why should it matter if I pray to him in the synagogue - or in the bathhouse? What difference is there to God between the inner sanctum of the holy Temple and a Los Vegas casino?

## Elevating the Imagination

Rav Kook explained that a fundamental truth is at work here: whatever contributes to our ethical and spiritual improvement merits divine providence. Our moral perfection is dependent not only on the intellect, but on the refinement of all of our faculties, including our powers of imagination. Anything that elevates our emotions and imagination, directing them towards good deeds and refined character traits, merits divine providence.

A set location for prayer is a powerful mechanism for uplifting the imagination. Sanctity of place greatly enhances our sense of holiness. Because of its importance in developing this aspect of human nature, there is divine providence to help us succeed in this area.

## Intellectual Humility

### What makes this conduct humble?

The essence of religious humility is preventing the intellect from belittling matters of spiritual value, even though logically they appear to be baseless. We live not by the intellect alone. Good deeds are the ultimate measure of true living, and our actions are greatly influenced by our imagination and feelings.

Abraham exemplified this form of intellectual modesty. He arrived at belief in the Creator through his powers of logic and reasoning.<sup>1</sup> But when he was tested in the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, Abraham relied solely on his faith in God. He chose to disregard all arguments of reason and logic.

Anyone who follows in Abraham’s footsteps, and sets aside a special location for prayer, is elevating his imaginative and emotive powers. He is a disciple of Abraham, emulating his traits of humility and piety.

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## Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parsha Insights

For the week ending 7 November 2020 / 20 Heshvan 5781

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - [www.seasonsofthemoon.com](http://www.seasonsofthemoon.com)

## Parshat Vayera

### Last in Line

Something that always amazes me when I travel by plane is how competitive people are to get to the front of the line, whether it’s for the security check, check-in, passport control or boarding. Human nature wants to be “the first.” And even in these days of limited air travel and much shorter lines, people still want to be first in those short lines. When flying out of Tel Aviv the other day, I pointed this out to my wife and asked, “We’re all going to get on the same metal tube and leave at

the same time, so what does it matter who goes first?” “Well,” she said, “they’ll have more time for shopping.” I said, “But the shops are all closed in the airport.” So she said, “Even so, people want to just get through and sit down.”

During the prayers of the Yamim Noraim — the Days of Awe — we pray to Hashem to put an end to competitiveness. Were it not for competitiveness, a person would be happy to live modestly, dress modestly and behave modestly. But, because we cannot bear the thought of someone being more than us, our lives become dedicated to out-doing our neighbors.

The difference between Capitalism and Communism is the kind of competitiveness their systems produce. The Communist says, “Your car is bigger than mine. I’m going to make sure you don’t have a car at all!” The Capitalist says, “Your car is bigger than mine. I’m going to make sure that I have a car so big that I can put your car in my trunk and give you a ride!”

Arguably, the beginning of the Communist approach to competitiveness was in Sodom. The evil of Sodom and Amora was that they usurped a trait of Hashem. The deeper sources teach that their society was based totally on the characteristic of din — strict justice. The trait of din says, “You get what you deserve, no less, and certainly no more.” In such a society there is no room for chessed, kindness, because we often receive chessed even when we do not necessarily deserve it. Chessed is “for those who are good and for those who are evil.” When Hashem judges us with din, it is always to fulfill the purpose that His chessed should be of the best kind.

But, if competitiveness is part of human nature, it must have a positive application. The Mesillas Yesharim describes three levels of spiritual motivation. The second level is that we cannot bear the thought of getting to the next world and seeing our friend in a “better seat.” The third level is that we cannot bear the thought that when we get to the next world we will see someone in a “better seat” and think to ourselves, “That could have been my seat!” It is not that we are jealous, that we want our fellow not to have that seat. It is just that we know that had we tried harder and been more competitive in the things that really matter, we could have the front row in the stalls of the World to Come. And that’s significantly more painful than having to join the line at the back of the line at the airport.

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**Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

**The Chief Rabbi’s D’var Torah for Vayeira - The greatest leaders**

*The greatest leaders, just like great parents and teachers are all defined by one thing.*

Parents only teach their children one lesson. What is it?

Parshat Vayeira commences,

“Vayeira elav Hashem,” – “Hashem appeared to Avraham,” immediately after his circumcision and it was in this vision that Avraham saw three strangers coming towards him.

Chazal, our sages, in the Gemara, Masechet Sotah, teach:

“Mikan shemidat Hashem levaker cholim.” – “From here we learn that one of the ways of the Almighty is to visit the sick.”

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

Similarly in Parshat Vezot Habracha after we read about the sad passing of Moshe Rabbeinu, the Torah tells us,

“Vayikbor otah bagai.” – “And He buried him in the valley,”

and nobody has ever discovered the burial place of Moshe.

“Vayikbor,” – “He buried him,” – Who served as the chevra kadisha? According to tradition, it was none other than the Almighty himself setting an example to us for all time of how important it is for us to

relate with respect to the remains of the deceased. So from Hashem we learn how important it is for leaders to do the right thing.

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

Of course Avraham changed the world, transforming lives from that time onwards through teaching people a new way of morality, ethics and spirituality, and his legacy lasts to this day. But ultimately Avraham is remembered because of what he did – the Akeida. Together with the nine other trials, this proved that he was the real thing.

He was a sincere leader. He didn't only say what was right – he always did what was right, setting that prime example for others.

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

*Shabbat shalom.*

*Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.*

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**Rav Yissocher Frand - Parshas Vayera**  
**Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya**

**Things Do Not Occur at Random**

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

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

Have you ever invited someone for Shabbos lunch—or any meal for that matter—and received such a reaction? You tell them – “Why don’t you stop by my house and have a meal?” And they respond, “You are right. I should have a meal by you!” That is in effect what the Angels are saying here. What is this dialog all about?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Avraham was faced with the same situation: He recognized, “If I have these Malachim standing here now, it is because G-d wants me to invite them in.

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

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

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

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

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

**Three Interpretations of a Most Difficult Medrash**

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

The pasuk by the Akeida says: “Then Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father and said, ‘Father...’” [Bereshis 22:7] This seems a bit redundant. The word ‘father’ appears two times in the same pasuk! The Medrash states that Samael (same as the Angel of Death and the same as the Satan) did not want to let the Akeida happen. He understood that this would become a seminal event in Jewish history which would always cause the Almighty to remember His children with Mercy. To sabotage the incident, Samael went to Avraham Avinu and told him “Are you out of your mind, Avraham? You waited a hundred years for this son to be

born, and now you are going to slaughter him?" Avraham replied "I know what I am doing. The Ribono shel Olam asked me to do it. I am going to do it!"

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

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

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

I saw three interpretations:

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

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

I was sitting at a Chuppah two hours ago, next to Rabbi Goldberger. I told him over this Medrash and asked him to give me his interpretation of it. He told me that we find in Chazal that sometimes Eisav appears like a wicked thief and sometimes he appears like a Talmid Chochom, meaning that we need to beware of our spiritual enemies no matter in what type of garb they appear. Here too the Medrash is expressing the concern that Yishmael might dress up in Yitzchak's clothing and look like Yitzchak, giving people the impression that the wicked Yishmael is really righteous. This is dangerous. Yitzchak felt, "I cannot have him wearing my clothes because maybe he will seduce people by disguising himself as if he were me." This is Rabbi Goldberger's pshat.

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

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

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

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com  
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### **Drasha Parshas :: Parshas Vayera :: Blessing In Disguise**

**Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky**

*Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya*

In Parshas Vayera, Sora, the 90-year-old wife of Avraham, receives a most surprising piece of information from an even more surprising source. She is told by Arab nomads, who had found obliging accommodation in Avraham's house, that in one year she will have a child. Instinctively, she reacts in disbelief to this prediction. She laughs. Immediately, Hashem appears to Avraham. He is upset. "Why did Sora laugh? Is there something that is beyond the Almighty? At the appointed time I shall return, and behold Sora will have a son (Genesis 18:12-13). Hashem's ire must be explained. After all, Sora was not told by Hashem that she will have a baby. She was informed by what appeared to be Arab wanderers. And though the Talmud explains that the three nomads were indeed angels sent by the Almighty, they did not identify themselves as such. So what does G-d want from Sora?

A man once entered the small study of the revered Steipler Gaon, Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievski with a plea. "I'd like a blessing from the Rav. My daughter has been looking to get married for several years. All her friends are married and she would like to get married too, but nothing is working. Can the Rosh Yeshiva bless her to find her bashert? (appropriate one)," he asked.

The Steipler turned to the man and asked, "Is this your first daughter?"

"No," replied the distraught parent, "Why do you ask?"

"When she was born did you celebrate with a kiddush?" (a celebratory party in a religious setting)

The man was perplexed. "No. But, that was 27 years ago," he stammered, "and she was my third girl. I may have made a l'chayim while the minyan was leaving shul, but I never made a proper kiddush. But what does a missed kiddush 27 years ago have to do with my daughter's shidduch (match) today?"

"When one makes a kiddush at a festive occasion," explained Rav Kanievski, "each l'chayim he receives is accompanied by myriad blessings. Some are from friends, others from relatives, and those blessings given by total strangers.

Among those blessings are definitely the perfunctory wishes for an easy time in getting married. By not making a kiddush for your daughter, how many blessings did you deprive her of? I suggest you make your daughter the kiddush that she never had."

The man followed the advice, and sure enough within weeks after the kiddush the girl had met her mate.

At the bris (circumcision) of his first son (after ten girls), my uncle, Rabbi Dovid Speigel, the Ostrove-Kalushin Rebbe of Cedarhurst, Long Island, quoted the Ramban (Nachmanides) in this week's portion.

The reason that Hashem was upset at Sora was that even if an Arab nomad gives the blessing, one must be duly vigilant to respond, "Amen." One never knows the true vehicle of blessing and salvation. Hashem has many conduits and messengers. Some of those messengers' divinity is inversely proportional to their appearance.

We have to do is wait, listen, and pray that our prospective exalter is the carrier of the true blessing. And then, we have to believe.

Quite often, we have ample opportunities to be blessed. Whether it is from the aunt who offers her graces at a family gathering or the simple beggar standing outside a doorway on a freezing winter day, blessings always come our way. Sometimes they come from the co-worker who cheers you on at the end of a long day or the mail carrier who greets you with the perfunctory "have a nice day" as he brings today's tidings. Each blessing is an opportunity that knocks. And each acknowledgment and look to heaven may open the door to great salvation. The only thing left for us to do is let those blessings in.

Dedicated to our Beloved Mother Shirley Eskowitz – Sarah bas Reb Moshe by Marilyn & Jules Beck  
Good Shabbos!  
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Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky: is the Dean of the Yeshiva of South Shore.  
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**Vayera: Sacrifice**

**Ben-Tzion Spitz**

*For anything worth having one must pay the price; and the price is always work, patience, love, self-sacrifice — no paper currency, no promises to pay, but the gold of real service. - John Burroughs*

In the middle of the synagogue service, a man quietly walks up to his rabbi who is sitting at the front of the synagogue and admits to having committed a horrible, highly embarrassing sin, and that he is now seeking to repent. The rabbi looks at him, thinks, and then tells him to go to the middle of the synagogue, bang on the table, and publicly declare to the entire congregation his sin.

“Here? Now?” the man asks, his face ashen.

“Yes,” the rabbi declares firmly. “It’s the only way to repent.”

The man looks incredulous, but he trusts his rabbi and he deeply needs to repent. He walks to the middle of the synagogue as if it were a death sentence. He is about to bang on the table when a hand grabs his shoulder. It’s the rabbi.

“That’s far enough,” the rabbi tells the man. “That’s all you need to do. You needed to demonstrate that you were willing. That’s your repentance.”

For me, one of the more theologically challenging narratives in the Bible is God’s apparent command to Abraham to bring his son Isaac as a sacrifice. The Sages throughout history have praised Abraham’s complete devotion to God and willingness to sacrifice his long-sought and beloved son.

Nonetheless, there remain troubling aspects. Did God truly desire Abraham to kill Isaac? It doesn’t seem likely. Did Abraham misunderstand such a significant divine communication from God? Also, hard to imagine. Did God never intend for Abraham to carry through with the sacrifice but purposely mislead Abraham? It’s not clear from the plain text.

The Bechor Shor on Genesis 22:12 suggests that there was some level of purposeful misdirection on God’s part. He explains that God knows the heart of every person and He knew very well that Abraham was so completely devoted to God, that he would even sacrifice his son, the very son God had promised him, if that was God’s command. But it seems that not only did God want Abraham, Isaac, and us, their descendants to see that he was willing to make such a sacrifice to God, but He also wanted the nations of the world to realize Abraham’s commitment to God.

The misdirection comes in the Hebrew word that God used here for “sacrifice” – Olah. In the common language of sacrifices, an Olah, translated as an Elevation Sacrifice, is an animal sacrifice which is completely consumed by the fire of the Altar. However, in its simplest meaning, Olah means to elevate. The Bechor Shor suggests that God never intended Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but He did want him to think that He wanted him to sacrifice Isaac. It was a test that Abraham passed with flying colors. God wanted Abraham to elevate Isaac, to bring him up to the altar he built on Mount Moriah without harming him, but He also wanted Abraham to demonstrate his willingness to follow God’s directive, as excruciating, as incomprehensible, and as sacrificial as it might seem.

*Dedication - On the engagement of our son, Elchanan, to Zavi Lava. Mazal Tov! Shabbat Shalom*

*Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.*

**Parasha Vayera 5781 - Divine Revelation Versus the Needs of Others**

This week’s parasha, Vayera, begins with a double story: The Divine Revelation that Abraham experiences and his “hachnasat orchim,” his hospitality. The sages of the midrash teach us that the reason Abraham sat at the entrance to his tent on that hot day was because he was looking for guests. Abraham’s life was founded on giving. He felt an obligation to give to others. Therefore, he sat at the entrance of the tent and looked out onto the horizon hoping that maybe someone would pass by who might be happy to stop in Abraham’s tent for some refreshments and rest.

While sitting at the entrance of his tent, Abraham experienced a Divine Revelation. The great commentator, Rashi, explained that G-d came to visit Abraham who was recovering from the brit mila, the circumcision he had undergone at an advanced age. At that same moment when Abraham experienced this spiritual transcendence, he noticed three people approaching the tent. It could be there was a moment of hesitation. Did Abraham ignore those people and continue to immerse himself in the spiritual revelation, or did he stop and approach the guests?

Whether or not there was any hesitation, Abraham’s decision was unequivocal:

“...and he saw and he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and he prostrated himself to the ground. And he said, ‘My lords, if only I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass on from beside your servant.’” (Genesis 18, 2-3)

Who was Abraham speaking to? The Hebrew is in the singular so some of the commentators understood that Abraham was speaking to one of the three approaching people. But if so, why would Abraham speak to only one of them? Indeed, Rashi suggested an additional explanation, that Abraham was speaking to G-d “and he was telling the Holy One, blessed be He, to wait for him until he would run and bring in the wayfarers.” Abraham gave up on the spiritual transcendence in order to welcome the guests, feed them, and bring them something to drink. The Babylonian Talmud learns the following principle from this:

“Welcoming guests is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shechinah (G-d)” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 127)

To understand how profound a decision it was to surrender the Divine Revelation for the sake of strangers, we have to try to examine Abraham’s understanding of “chessed” – acts of loving-kindness. We saw that Abraham sat at the entrance of his tent on a hot day to search for guests. This is slightly odd. We are used to understanding the term “chessed” as one in which we fulfill the needs of others. We see someone who is lacking something and as a result we do “chessed” and give him what he was lacking. But we are not accustomed to thinking of “chessed” as an essential need of the giver’s, as seems to be reflected in the story about Abraham.

One of the greatest people in the Hassidic movement from the beginning of the 20th century, the Admor Rabbi Shmuel Bornstein of Sochatchov, Poland, wrote about this in his book “Shem Mishmuel.” There he states that a person who is exposed to another’s despair and does “chessed”, even if it is obviously a positive act, there is something egotistical about it. It is hard to witness despair and suffering. Our desire to solve someone else’s problems stems also from our own difficulties with seeing someone else suffer. But there is another form of “chessed” that is altruistic, when someone wants only what is best for another.

That’s who Abraham was. He did not do acts of loving-kindness only when he saw someone who needed them. He waited at the entrance of the tent for an opportunity to do “chessed.” Therefore, he even gave up on a Divine Revelation. The Revelation includes an aspect of spiritual pleasure, but Abraham postponed this spiritual pleasure until he finished seeing to the needs of his guests.

How suitable are the words of Yisrael Salanter (Lithuania 1810 – Prussia 1883), the founder of the “Mussar Movement” in Lithuanian yeshivas, who said, “The material needs of others are my spiritual needs.” When a person internalizes this, he is capable of even giving up on a Divine Revelation in order to see to the material needs of another.

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**Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz**

וַיַּשְׁאַל עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה שֶׁלְשָׁה אֲנָשִׁים נַצְבִּים עַלְיוֹן

**He lifted his eyes and saw: And behold! Three men were standing over him. (18:2)**

If Lot had learned one thing from his uncle, Avraham Avinu, it was to adhere meticulously to the *mitzvah* of *hachnosas orchim*, hospitality to wayfarers – and anyone in need of a bed or a meal. *Hachnosas orchim* is just one of the many activities that fall under the rubric of *chesed*. Avraham was the *amud ha'chesed*, pillar of loving-kindness. Avraham devoted himself to it to the point of self-sacrifice. *Chesed* also gave him the opportunity to reach out to the pagan world spiritually and to teach the pagans about Hashem. *Chazal* laud Avraham for his extraordinary dedication to serving the three travelers that presented themselves at the door of his tent. This occurred while Avraham was recuperating from his *Bris Milah*, circumcision. While one cannot argue that Avraham deserves recognition for his actions, we cannot ignore the fact that Lot did the same thing when the angels visited his home in Sodom. Indeed, Lot risked his life to protect them. What distinguishes Lot's act of *chesed* from that of Avraham?

The *Kedushas Levi* (also attributed to *Horav Leib Sorah's*) explains that Avraham did not have a selective policy concerning his *hachnosas orchim*. He was hospitable to anyone and everyone who came to his door – rich, poor, pagan; his door was always open and welcoming. Lot, however, knew his guests were Heavenly angels. It is no wonder that he bent over backwards to serve them. Angels did not visit him every day. Lot's *chesed* was discriminating. Avraham's *chesed* was open and indiscriminate. He acted in order to do a *mitzvah*. Lot acted in order to promote himself. He felt good when he reached out, but he was not prepared to reach out to just anyone.

The story is told concerning a *tzaddik nistar*, covert righteous person, who, although a holy man, was careful not to reveal his righteousness. He wandered from place to place, serving Hashem wherever he was. He stopped in a community and approached a well-known philanthropist and asked if he could spend the night in his home. [The man had no shortage of rooms, no lack of food.] The wealthy man took one look at the *tzaddik*'s shabby clothes and altogether unbecoming appearance and bid him a good day. He had no room for him. Two years later, the *tzaddik* revealed himself to the world, and now lines of visitors petitioned his blessings. As a distinguished *Rebbe*, he no longer traveled by foot; rather, he had a coach that was pulled by four horses and a driver who chauffeured him. This time, when he had occasion to visit the community where two years earlier he had been shunned, the wealthy man who had ignored him earlier approached him and begged him to stay in his house: "It would be a great honor for me if the holy *Rebbe* would spend the night in my 'simple abode.'" [When one wants to glorify himself with the presence of a *tzaddik*, his palatial home suddenly becomes a simple abode.] The *Rebbe* replied in the affirmative. How surprised the wealthy man was to see the *Rebbe*'s driver and horses waiting by the entrance to his large barn. The *Rebbe*, apparently, was residing at the home of a poor, but learned, Jew.

"*Rebbe*, why was my home not blessed with his honor's presence?" the wealthy man asked. The *Rebbe* smiled and explained, "When I was here two years ago and needed a place to sleep you demurred. I was not sufficiently worthy of your attention. This time, suddenly you want me to stay at your home. What changed? I realize that the only real difference between who I was two years ago and who I am today is my horses. When I last came, I was a poor, itinerant beggar. Today, I am a famous *Rebbe*. Truthfully, the only change that transpired is that now I travel in style. Obviously, what impressed you were my horses. So, I brought you my horses. Let them sleep in your barn!"

The man was more impressed with the outer trappings of the *tzaddik* than with his inner essence. He was not performing *chesed* for the poor person. He was offering to perform *chesed* for himself.

The *Mararil Diskin*, zl, was a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, whose encyclopedic knowledge of Torah was peerless. He spent every waking moment deeply engrossed in Torah study. He was a saintly Jew whose self-abrogation of materialism and physicality paralleled his devotion to Torah and *mitzvos*. He was also a *gaon in chesed*. He did not just "give"; he thought before he gave. He empathized with those who came to him and sought the most beneficial avenue to help them. When he left Brisk (where he was *Ray*) and emigrated to Yerushalayim, it was not long before he realized the plight of its many orphans. He then established the Diskin Orphanage, where he and his *rebbetzin* became surrogate parents to those helpless children.

The *Rav*'s home was open to anyone. At any time, one could find individuals who had been struck by life's adversities, sitting in his home, being served by the *rebbetzin*, while he continued with his learning. One time, the *Rav* noticed that an elderly, impoverished Jew was having great difficulty chewing his bread. The man no longer had teeth, and the bread was too hard for his gums. The *Rav* arose from his chair, sat down next to the man, took a slice of bread, removed its hard crust, and gave the bread back to the man. The man's face lit up, realizing that he could now eat the bread. This went on for an hour, as the *Rav* peeled the crust and spoon-fed the elderly Jew. Furthermore, how in the midst of his learning was he able to notice that the man was unable to chew because the crust was too hard? One of the *Rav*'s students questioned his *Rebbe*'s taking an hour off from his precious learning to feed an elderly Jew. The *Rav* replied, "Good question! This question, however, should have been posed to Avraham *Avinu*, who, while being visited by Hashem Himself, interrupted the conversation to attend to three angels disguised as Arabs. When Avraham was speaking with the *Shechinah*, Divine Presence, he became devoid of all physicality. How was he even able to perceive the guests that stood at the doorway to his tent?"

"The answer to both question (the *Rav*'s noticing the poor man's chewing problem and how to alleviate it, and Avraham's perceiving the angels while he was so engrossed in his meeting with Hashem) is: when one must perform *chesed* – he sees! If you want to do *chesed* and your heart empathizes with the plight of your brethren, then, even when you are in the midst of your *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty – you will sense the needs of another Jew!" Sensitivity for another Jew should permeate a person to the point that it breaches through anything in which he is involved – even *avodas Hashem*!

כ) ידעתינו למן אשר יזכה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו

**For I have loved him because he commands his children and his household after him. (18:19)**

*Chinuch ha'banim*, educating our children, inculcating them with the moral/ethical values of our Torah expounded by *Chazal*, is the primary role with which parents are charged. Hashem says that He loves Avraham *Avinu* because he places education uppermost in his mind. Everything that Avraham did contained an educational aspect. He lived to serve Hashem. We can perform no greater service to the Almighty than one which imbues others and brings them closer to serving Hashem. We can derive a number of lessons from this *pasuk*. First, one is not included under the rubric of a *yarei Hashem*, G-d-fearing Jew, unless he maintains a strong eye over his children's education. Avraham *Avinu* reached the apex of spiritual devotion to Hashem, yet he did not warrant the love of the Almighty until he demonstrated his affinity for transmitting the Torah to his children and household.

Second, we wonder about the meaning of *acharav*, after him. Simply, it means that they follow his example. What he does and how he acts comprise one element of his pedagogical dynamic. They follow after him, doing what he demonstrated for them. I think, however, that we may suggest a deeper message in the word *acharav*, after him: after he is gone. The litmus test of a parent's educational success is: whether

his child continues along the path that the father delineated and practiced.

All too often, we (sadly) visit homes whose affiliation with Torah is tenuous or, at best, the people are complacent. These are young men and women who grew up in observant homes, and, for some reason, the parents' observance did not transfer over to the next generation. Something happened in the "shipping" (or in the "packaging"). Acting in a certain manner does not always send a strong enough message. Children must be educated; they must receive a clearly-defined image of what is acceptable – and what is not. This brings me to the third lesson.

*L'maan asher yetzaveh es banav v'es beiso – acharav,* "Because he commands his children and his household – after him." Writing this circa 2020 amid a society where everything goes, and Heaven help the parent who comes on too strong with his/her child, I wonder how we define *yetzaveh*, command. The Torah is conveying to us, in no uncertain terms, that the most effective manner by which to teach a child is command. This is definitely not politically correct in 2020. On the other hand, the Torah is intimating that if a parent wants to be assured that *acharav*, after him – after he is "gone" (after his "120"), his child, hopefully now grown up, will adhere to his father's image of a Torah Jew, then the father must teach by command. Let me qualify this: How we issue the command (i.e., what motivations, inspirations, prizes, sweet-talking we employ) is dependent on parent and child. One principle is unwaiverable: the child must have a "command" – a clear, defined message that this is the behavior that the parent expects. Otherwise, the *acharav* will probably not occur.

*Yosef HaTzaddik* was on the verge of falling into the abyss of sin. What saved him was *d'mus d'yukno shel aviv*, "the image of his saintly father." This means that his father's image was deeply engraved in his psyche. This can only be achieved through command, whereby a child knows that there is only one way. Each father and mother must endeavor to find the most appropriate, loving manner to convey this command, but it must be a command. Parents who maintain such an unequivocal approach to raising and educating their children will live on and on in their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, because it becomes part and parcel of the essence of the child.

*Horav Yosef Sholom Elyashiv*, zl, was asked who is considered a child's primary educator. His reply: the parents. He/she knows his/her child, understands his/her personality; thus, he/she knows how to educate the child. (Obviously, this is a general statement and open to individual situational exceptions.) The parent's suggestions, based upon his or her individual perception and discernment, should never be ignored, because a parent usually know what is best for his or her child (although parents might lack objectivity – which must be factored in). The mother, as the *Tolner Rebbe*, zl, explains, sets the tone and tenor in the home. While the father might (and should) focus on developing a child's knowledge of Torah, his desire and love of Torah will come from his mother. This, says the *Rebbe*, is the meaning of *Toras imecha*, "The Torah of your mother (*Shema beni mussar avicha v'al titosh Toras imecha*, "Hear, my child, the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the teaching of your mother" [Mishlei 1:8]).

Having said this, we reiterate the importance of parents being firm, but loving, demanding, but understanding. A "one-size-fits-all" approach to child-rearing is not realistic, because children are different. The "oldest," pride and joy, might not be the smartest. The youngest might give the parents a run for their money that overshadows anything they experienced with their other children. That is life. No one said that it was going to be easy, but the rewards are remarkable.

A Bnei Brak family was going through a serious challenge with one of the sons who had gravitated to a group of friends that was not conducive to the spiritual goals that they sought for their children. His parents were firm with him, stating unequivocally that his friends and behavior were unacceptable. *Erev Pesach*, he ran away from home. He claimed that no one seemed to care about him, so he was leaving and going where he would feel respected. The parents were heartbroken and did not know what to do. Since it was *Erev Pesach*, they were busy with *Yom Tov* preparations. The whole time they were hoping that after a few

hours of "stewing," their errant son could come to his senses and return home.

The father returned from *shul*, and the family sat down at the table; one seat was glaringly empty. The father asked the *gabbai* at the Lederman *Shul* (where he attended services) to ask the *Steipler Gaon*, zl, what they should do. The answer came back, *L'hamtin*; "To wait." Two hours passed, while everyone sat around the table talking. The time for eating the *afikoman* was rapidly approaching. Once again, the father appealed to the *gabbai* to ask the *Steipler* what they should do. The response came back: "Wait." Another half hour passed, and suddenly the door opened. Their son had returned. He looked at the table and then at his parents, and he asked, "You waited for me?" "Of course; you are our son." All of his anger melted away once he saw that he was valued by his parents. Sometimes, all the child needs is to be told: "You count; You are special."

The Hermans, *Horav Yaakov Yosef Herman* and his wife, were unusual *baalei chesed*; their kindness knew no bounds. *Rav Yaakov Yosef* was a demanding person – of himself, and of those whom he educated. The family took in an orphaned boy, *Avreml*, whom they raised as their own. Indeed, he required the firm, demanding discipline manifest by *Rav Yaakov Yosef*, coupled with the extraordinary love showed to him by Mrs. Herman. One day, *Rav Herman* made what *Avreml* felt was too strong of a demand on him, and *Avreml* refused to carry out his surrogate's instructions. *Avreml* went so far as to complain, "Do you know that I am an orphan? Why are you so demanding? It is not right!"

*Mrs. Herman* attempted to soothe *Avreml's* feelings – to no avail. He knew that his surrogate father was upset. Finally, *Avreml* announced, "I have decided to move out! I am leaving your house." He collected his few belongings, placed them into a duffle bag and went to the door – all the while turning his head back to see if *Rav Herman* would "beg" him to stay. He did not.

Reluctantly, he went down the stairs. When he reached street level, he heard *Rav Herman* calling after him as he ran down the stairs, "Avreml! Wait a moment!" *Avreml* waited, hoping deep down that now *Rav Herman* would ask him to stay, perhaps even apologize for his demands on him. He was wrong. *Rav Herman*, the educator par excellence, caught up with *Avreml*, and, in his hand, he had a little bag, "Mother and I would like you to have these cookies in case you get hungry." Then, *Rav Herman* took out a few dollars from his pocket and said, "Here, in case you need some money." No apology; no lessening of his demands; just love and more love. *Avreml* came back, realizing that, indeed, he was being treated just like their child: demands coupled with love.

**ויזכר אלקים את אברהם וישלח את לוט מתוך ההפלגה**  
**Hashem remembered Avraham; so He sent Lot from amidst the upheaval. (19:29)**

*Avraham Avinu* was a *baal chesed*, master of kindness. Indeed, the Torah goes to great lengths in describing his devotion to the wayfarer, and how he exerted himself to make sure that whoever came into his home had a pleasurable and satisfying experience. Lot, *Avraham's* nephew, also acted with *chesed*. He moved to Sodom and became a distinguished member of this ignominious community. He moved there because he was into money and everything one can achieve with material bounty. He did, however, retain some of the good qualities that he learned under the influence of his uncle. When the Angels visited Sodom, Lot risked his life on their behalf. One would think that it was due to Lot's *middah*, attribute, of *chesed*, that he was spared from the destruction of Sodom.

In commenting on the above *pasuk*, *Rashi* gives a different reason for Lot's rescue from the annihilation of Sodom. "Hashem remembered." What did He remember (about Avraham concerning Lot)? Hashem remembered that Lot was aware that Sarah *Imenu* was Avraham's wife (and not his sister, as he had asserted to the Egyptians), but Lot did not reveal the truth about Sarah, out of pity for Avraham. Therefore, Hashem took pity on him. Measure for measure. Lot "ignored" his

memory regarding Sarah; Hashem remembered this and spared Lot. The question is obvious: Why was Lot not spared as a result of his devotion to the *middah of chesed*? Surely, positive action trumps his remaining silent and not negatively revealing a secret that would have cost Avraham his life. Furthermore, the sin that catalyzed Sodom's destruction was the people's opposition to *chesed*. To them, kindness to others was an anathema. Thus, Lot, who fought against them, whose actions were the antithesis of what Sodom stood for, specifically deserved to be saved.

*Horav Aharon Kotler, zl*, quotes the *Alter, zl, m'Slabodka*, who says that Lot emulated Avraham's actions. Everything Lot did was imitation. Lot's *middas ha'chesed* was not part of his essence. It was an extrinsic activity performed to copy Avraham. After a while, he became accustomed to acting with *chesed*, but it was not part of his character – it did not define Lot. One can perform acts of kindness, but it does not mean that he is a kind person. Lot performed *chesed*, but he was not a *baal*, master, of *chesed*.

We may add that this concept applies to all *middos*. Just because a person acts humbly does not mean that he is a humble person. Some individuals present themselves as refined and humble until they are ignored or slighted. Then, their true selves comes to the fore. Perhaps the best way to describe this is as *Rebbetzin Shulamit Ezrachi* describes her father, *Chevronei Mashgiach, Horav Meir Chodosh, zl*. "His life was an open book, exposed to all eyes, day by day, and hour by hour. It served as an example and model for anyone who wished to learn from it. The students saw before them, day after day, the image of a man whose every action, speech, behavior and smallest gesture were all thought out."

*Horav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, zl*, was a *gadol* in Torah as well as *chesed*. His *rebbetzin*, the daughter of *Rav Yaakov Yosef Herman, zl*, was witness to *chesed* at its apex. Her home was the address for anyone who was in need of kindness. When the Hermans moved to *Eretz Yisrael*, their *Shabbos* table was the place where one could find any person who just needed a "place." To them, everyone was family. As I was perusing through a biography of *Rav Scheinberg*, I came across many stories of his extraordinary empathy for others. His acts of *chesed* were directed to anyone in need, be it: a *yeshivah* student; *kollel* fellow and his wife; members of the Jewish community; or the drunk and the homeless who were laying in the gutter on a cold winter night. (He would bring them hot soup which his *rebbetzin* prepared.)

One story particularly inspires me. I preface this with the notion that *chesed* does not only involve material benevolence. Emotional support is equally (and, in some situations, more) important. We can find *chesed* in Torah, helping someone who is in need of a boost in his Torah learning. The greatest *chesed* (in my opinion) is reaching out to someone who is floundering in his *Yiddishkeit*, whose religious observance is becoming more and more borderline. It is critical that one assesses the situation, find out the cause, and offer spiritual and emotional support. Now for the story:

One *Erev Shabbos* when *Rav Scheinberg* lived in the Lower East Side, a young married man asked him a *halachic* query (*shailah*) concerning a family purity issue. Although *Rav Scheinberg* felt that he had reason to *pasken muttar*, render a decision of permissible, to the man, he wanted to buttress his decision with a little research. He needed a certain *sefer*, volume of *halachic* responsa, which he did not own and would have to borrow. He told the young man that since it was almost *shkiah*, sunset, he would not be able to answer his *shailah* before the beginning of *Shabbos*. He did not bother telling the young man that the *sefer* was located in Williamsburg. Soon after *Shabbos* began, *Rav*

*Scheinberg* walked one hour across the Williamsburg Bridge and looked up the *sefer*. He confirmed that it was *muttar*.

He then returned to the Lower East Side, went up to the young man's apartment, knocked on the door and, when the man answered, *Rav Scheinberg* said, "Muttar." He did an about face and went home to make *Kiddush*. Two hours of walking, keeping his family waiting for him, all to answer a *shailah*. He knew that a young couple needed the answer. This is *chesed* at its zenith.

Having digressed, I return to *Rav Aharon*'s question: Why was Lot not spared as a result of his *chesed* activities? *Horav Yerachmiel Chasid, Shlita*, distinguishes between two *middos* which on the surface appear similar, but actually are quite different from one another. They are: *chesed* – kindness; and *rachamim* – mercy. *Rachamim*'s focus is to fulfill a need, a vacuum, something that a person is missing. Therefore, the benefactor is addressing the *chisaron*, deficiency/fault. When travelers appear at one's tent on a hot day, after trudging through the desert's grueling heat, what they need is shade, something to drink. Once these basic necessities have been addressed, they no longer need mercy. The immediate need has been filled. It is time to move on. *Avraham Avinu*, however, was not satisfied with *rachamim* alone. He was a *baal chesed* who brought three fresh tongues. He himself waited on the travelers, attempting to give them anything that would make life better for them. This is *chesed*: going beyond filling the need; doing more, acting with generosity of spirit, a smile, as if this is the only activity that one has to do that entire day. There is no limit to *chesed*. *Rachamim*, however, fills the gap. *Chesed* is non-judgmental. *Chesed* is inclusive – making a point to involve others. *Rachamim* can be selective: one must be sensitive to the person, the issue and feel pity for him/her. A *baal chesed* lives where he can perform acts of kindness. He does not make his home in Sodom, a city which featured the opposite extreme of *chesed*. *Avraham Avinu* manifest *chesed*. Lot was merciful. *Chesed* was beyond him. Therein lay the difference between the two.

#### *Va'ani Tefillah*

**וְכָל הַחַיִם יָדוֹךְ סָלָה – V'chol ha'chaim Yoducha Selah. Everything alive will gratefully acknowledge You, Selah!**

It is all about life. Without life, one cannot thank Hashem. With life – everything is possible. *Eitz Yosef* quotes two great leaders: *David Hamelech (Tehillim 146:2)*, "I will praise Hashem while I live; I will sing to my G-d while I exist"; and *Chizkiyah Hamelech*, who, when he recovered from his near-fatal illness, declared (*Yeshayah 38:18,19*), "The grave cannot thank You." We echo their praises when we say: "Everyone alive will gratefully acknowledge You." *Siach Yitzchak* adds: Even if our other requests have not been answered to our satisfaction, the mere fact that we continue to live is, in and of itself, the greatest gift and a compelling reason for expressing our gratitude.

The *Chiddushei HaRim* views this prayer as a clarion call to others to wake up and acknowledge Hashem's constant Presence and Providence. The fact that we know that He looks down on us, observes our every move and sustains us, should catalyze for an expression of gratitude. It is not enough for us to know it; we must arouse the world around us to acknowledge this verity.

*Dedicated in loving memory of our dear father and grandfather Arthur I. Genshaft - נפטר ח' חשוון תש"ט - צי' ח' חשוון תש"ל*

*Neil and Marie Genshaft*

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לע"נ

שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה  
ביליא בת (אריה) ליב ע"ה

## **PARSHAT VAYERA**

It is very comfortable to think of Sodom as a city of thugs and perverts. 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 Sodom 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 Sodom 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 Sodom.

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 Sodom 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 Sodom (& 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 Sodom - 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?]

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### **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 Sodom. As you study these psukim, note how they explain why God must first consult Avraham before destroying Sodom:

"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-nivrechu 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: **Sodom** 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-nivrechu 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 Sodom, 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 Sodom; 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 Sodom 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 Sodoms' - 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 Sodom must first 'plant the seeds' for the prevention of future Sodoms'.

Avraham makes this gallant effort to save Sodom, 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 Sodom, 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 Sodom is mentioned. As we explained in our shiur on Parshat Lech

Lecha, Lot's decision to leave Avraham and move to Sodom (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 Sodom 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 Sodom 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 Sodom, prefers to completely divorce himself from any resources originating from that city:

"Avram said to the King of Sodom: 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 Sodom 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 Sodom 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 Sodom, 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 Sodom, 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 Sodom 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 Sodom: **No guests allowed!** As Ramban explains, the Sodomites 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 Sodom, 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 Sodom 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 Sodom - 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 Sodom'. The attribution of this social philosophy to Sodom 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, Sodom 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 Sodom, and see therein the reason for their own forthcoming destruction.

As we will show, in every instance where Sodom 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 Sodom (i.e. the very same point discussed above concerning "hachnasat orchim"):

"...Your younger sister was Sodom... 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 Sodom** - 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 Sodom is even more explicit. As we all recall from the Haftara of Shabbat Chazon, Yeshayahu compares Am Yisrael's behavior to that of Sodom & Amora:

"Listen to the word of God - you [who are like] officers of **Sodom**, 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 oti], 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 oti] -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 Sodom (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 Sodom. 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 Sodom 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 Sodom'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 Sodom (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 Sodom' ('anshei Sodom' 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 Sodom.

#### 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 reprobation 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 Sodom 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 Sodom?

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 conclusions - 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'yeira itself, in the story when Avimelech takes Avraham's wife Sarah (see 20:1-18). Recall the reason that Avraham tells Avimelech, explaining why he had to lie about Sarah's true identity, and note the phrase "yirat Elokim":

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shmot 1:21 - re: the midwives killing the male babies

Shmot 18:21 - re: Yitro's advice re: the appt. of judges

Devarim 25:18 - re: the sin of the Amalek. ]

[Please review these before continuing.]

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

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

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

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

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

Instead of translating "ki" as 'that', one could use an alternate meaning of "ki" = 'even though!' [As in Shmot 34:9 - "ki am keshe oref hu", and Shmot 13:17 "ki karov hu" - see Ibn Ezra on that pasuk for other examples.]

If so, then this pasuk would be emphasizing precisely the point that we discussed in Part One, i.e. - EVEN THOUGH Avraham was a "ya'rey Elokim", he overcame his 'moral conscience' in order to follow a divine command. Thus, we could translate the pasuk as follows:

"And he [God's angel] said: Do not harm the boy - don't do anything to him, for now I know - Ki ya'rey Elokim ata - EVEN THOUGH you are a YAREY ELOKIM, you did not withhold your only son from Me."

Specifically because Avraham was a man of such a high moral nature, this test was most difficult for him. Nevertheless, his commitment to follow a divine command prevailed!

In reward, God now promises Avraham with an 'oath' (see 22:16) that he shall never break His covenant with them (even should Bnei Yisrael sin), as explained by Ramban and Radak on 22:16, and as we will now discuss in Part Three.

## PART THREE - THE OATH

At the conclusion of the Akeyda, God affirms His promise to Avraham Avinu one more time concerning the future of his offspring (see 22:15-19). Note however, that 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'bta'rim 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'bta'rim") to our relationship with God as a Nation, and our future conquest of the land of Israel ("v'yirash zaracha et shaar oyav" - 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 "idaat" 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 choftshit - 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 shoresh) means designation, being singled out for a specific purpose, a raison d'être, 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' - "ayleh toldot Terach," but we never find the expression: "ayleh toldot Avraham" throughout Sefer Breishit, even though we do find "ayleh toldot Yitzchak (25:19), and "ayleh 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 Yizchak" 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 Sodom 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 Karmei 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 TZEDAFAKA 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 TZEDAFAKA & MISHPAT - the antithesis of Sdom.

shabbat shalom  
menachem

# What Really Was the Sin of Sodom and Gomorrah?

## The need for needing one another

By Tzvi Freeman\*

Sodom and Gomorrah have come to represent the epitome of evil. After all, G d destroyed them with fire and brimstone. But, perhaps surprisingly, the Talmud does not associate Sodom principally with idolatry, murder, sexual impropriety, thievery, or even corrupt business practices.

Rather, the Talmud uses the term “Sodomite attitude” to describe an extreme form of isolationism. classic example:<sup>1</sup>

Joe owns a large tract of land that is not in use and that he doesn’t wish to lease. One day he discovers that some homeless individual is camping out on it. So he tells him to get off. The homeless individual takes him to a Jewish court. The court says to him, “Your fellow citizen gains and you lose nothing. Do you have a problem with that?”

Joe answers, “It’s my property. I want him out.”

Joe is infected with a Sodomite attitude. The Talmud even discusses whether the homeless camper can ask the court to prevent Joe from throwing him out—because the Torah says, “You must do that which is good and upright.”<sup>2</sup> What Joe is doing, in Talmudic eyes, is pure evil.

The final judgment is that we can’t legally compel Joe in this case, since that would be limiting the statutes of property ownership in ways that could lead to loss or inconvenience.<sup>3</sup> But there are cases in which property ownership is not diminished and no significant inconvenience is caused. In such instances, the court can indeed compel or restrain someone with a stubborn Sodomite attitude.

That would define a Sodomite attitude as the incapacity to bear another benefiting from your property. But there’s more to it than that.

There’s another description in the Talmud of the Sodomite attitude: One who says, “What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours.”<sup>4</sup> Or, as Rabbi Ovadiah Bartenura reads that, “I don’t want to give you anything, and I would appreciate it if you don’t give me anything.”<sup>5</sup>

Okay, so he’s not the kind of guy you want on your baseball team, but is he really the core of evil? He hasn’t ripped anyone off. He hasn’t lied to anyone. In fact, he’s brutally honest. He tells you his approach to life and sticks to it. He’s not running a corrupt business. He doesn’t want to engage in any commerce at all. He desires total independence and isolation. He says, “Let me be, and I’ll let you be.”

Yet it would seem from the Mishnah that the worst business you could be in is no business at all. But why?

### Sodomite Isolationism

A pinch of Lurianic Kabbalah could help us here. When the world was created, it was at first, as Genesis says,<sup>6</sup> “tohu.” Tohu is generally translated as “chaos.” Rabbi Isaac Luria, however, describes tohu as a state of isolated ideals.<sup>7</sup>

A world of tohu is a world where no two things can work together. A world where the weather is either hot or cold but never warm, where people are either super-friendly or hostile but never just chill, where either I run things or you run things but we can’t cooperate, where I don’t need you and you don’t need me and so no one has any business with the other.

Before this world was created, G d first created a world of tohu—a world of absolutes. Absolute benevolence, absolute justice, absolute light and absolute darkness. G d was not pleased with that world. But that was okay, because it rapidly erupted on its own. In Lurianic terms, “the light was too great for containment.” We moderns might say that when the parts of the whole work independently of one another, they generate far more energy than the whole can contain. In Rabbi Luria’s narrative, that eruption left fragments of tohu that fell to become our world, a world where harmony, or tikkun, is possible.

Now for some words from a more recent Kabbalist and chassidic master, Rabbi Sholom Dovber of Lubavitch, writing in

*The souls of the people of Sodom originated from the realm of tohu. That explains why they were isolationists, wishing neither to benefit anyone nor to receive from anyone. In this way their land was isolated from all other lands, and they managed their own resources so that they didn't need to receive any goods from any foreign land. Even amongst themselves, each one was isolated and independent.*

But when G d made the earth, He did so with wisdom, so that all the world functions in a way of tikkun—the diametric opposite of Sodom's isolationism. The world is made so that each region must receive its needs from some other region. Indeed, that is what trade is all about—that each land both receives from others and gives to others.

This is the meaning of the verse “And He established His agudah upon the earth.”<sup>9</sup> An agudah is a collaboration of individuals, such as a collective, in which everyone works together and no one is complete without the other. This is how G d created the world to operate.

But Sodom did not operate that way. No one would accept anything from anyone else. They said, “What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours.”

### **The Slippery Slope of Sodom**

How do we see this among the people of Sodom? Well, they weren't hospitable. Not only did they not take in guests, they couldn't even allow others to have guests stay in their home. That's the central point of the story with Lot, Abraham's nephew who lived in Sodom. When Lot had some guests over to his home, the people of Sodom staged a protest outside his door and threatened to harm the guests and their host.<sup>10</sup>

The Talmud tells more stories about Sodom and their nasty, even brutal, treatment of visitors. You can read some of them here.

How did Sodom get this way? The Talmud explains that as well:<sup>11</sup>

Sodom and Gomorrah, along with three other cities, formed a large settlement at the terminus of the Jordan River. It's a deep valley, and before these cities were overturned, the Jordan branched out into a delta, watering the earth well and sprouting rich, lush greenery. The earth was rich in nutrients as well as precious minerals. All in all, a virtual garden of Eden.

So the people who settled there decided, “We don't need to trade with anyone. We have everything we need right here. And we don't want them coming here, either. Why should we share any of this with anyone else?”

Next thing, they constructed a bridge at the gateway to their land and charged a toll to enter—even if you would choose to swim across. They established laws prejudiced against visitors, and found every way they could to discourage any passersby.

Things only got worse from there, until there was no friendship, no camaraderie even with each other. Eventually the people's treatment of merchants, transients, the homeless, the downtrodden and the needy became heartless and viciously cruel.

And so the prophet Yechezkel (Ezekiel) describes the sin of Sodom as “arrogance,” saying, “She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility, yet she did not support the poor and the needy.”<sup>12</sup>

Certainly there were many detestable sins in Sodom and her daughter cities. But it all began with a need not to need anyone.

### **The Need To Be Needy**

There's much talk today about whether capitalism is evil. After all, capitalism rests on the notion of private property. What is positive about removing property from the public domain to place it in the exclusive hands of an individual? Aren't we

better off sharing everything?

What we learn from the story of Sodom is that, yes, private ownership on its own can be very evil. It's commerce that redeems capitalism and makes it good—very good. Just the fact that one person sold and the other bought is good. Because people needing people is good. Being insufficient is good. Good for the world, good for the community and good for the individual.

Self-sufficiency, on the other hand, is a bad deal all around. We all say we want to be perfectly self-sufficient, but we recognize that would be a nightmare. With self-sufficiency, we have all the evil of private ownership with none of the good.

Ultimately, it's our interpersonal needs and the commerce between us that bind all of humanity together as a single, healthy organism. What's a healthy organism? A counter-entropic entity united by circulation of energy. And that is what makes a healthy human world as well: A world where people add value to life by discovering how much they need one another.

Perhaps it was the Talmudic take on Sodom that inspired David Ricardo, a great Jewish economist, to come up with his highly influential theory of competitive advantage, which explains why specializing and trading is beneficial not only for individuals but for nations as well.

Indeed, this seems to be a law that lies at the very foundation of the universe. You may have heard of the Pauli exclusion principle, that no two particles in the universe can be in precisely the same state—because if this principle were violated, there would be nothing to prevent the entire universe from collapsing upon itself. (Am I the only one who hears overtones of *tohu* there?)

It seems that the very existence of our universe is predicated on every particle contributing its unique properties to a single whole. It's all one big capitalist market out there.

The ancient Midrash<sup>13</sup> describes King David asking of G d, "Why couldn't You make everyone in Your world equal in means?"

G d replied, "If I would do so, how would kindness and truth be sustained?"

### **Perpetual Needs**

When someone wrote to the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory, that the final redemption cannot be complete until "the needy disappear from the earth," the Rebbe responded that he did not concur. People must always need one another. There will always be poverty and inequality.

But wait, it's true that the Torah states that "the needy will never disappear from the earth."<sup>14</sup> But the Torah also states that "there will be no needy person amongst you . . . because G d will bless you . . . when you will listen to His voice . . ."<sup>15</sup>

So the Rebbe explained that he wasn't referring to poverty of basic means—we will soon live in a prosperous world where "delicacies will be as plentiful as the dust."<sup>16</sup> Rather, there will always be a healthy imbalance of commodities that will require commerce for redistribution.

What are those commodities? One person may be richly steeped in abstract knowledge but poor in application, while another does not fare well in abstractions but has a knack for putting ideas to work. One has water while the other has bread. One has a fire inside him while the other stays cool. All have in common one thing: They all need one another for their own wholeness.

And it must be that way, the Rebbe wrote, because every person, every created being, indeed even the Creator and Manager of the universe, at times in some way must act not only as a provider but also as a recipient.<sup>17</sup> Neither role is less important than the other. It's that dynamic that makes a beautiful world.<sup>18</sup>

People need to need each other, not only in commerce but in every aspect of life. That's perhaps the most ignored but vital need of the human being: the need to be needed. Yet deeper—and even more vital—the need to need others.

"Acquire yourself a friend!" our sages taught.<sup>19</sup> People ask, "Why use the word acquire? That makes it sound like you have to buy friends. Why not just make friends?"

But now it makes sense. People are friends and stay friends because they need one another. A married couple evolves over many years into a single being because they learn to need one another. Even with all the love in the world, they are only truly bonded when they find a need for one another in their hearts. Make yourself a person who is needed, and you will acquire at least one true friend.

And allow yourself to need that friend. Really need.

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

1. See Talmud, Bava Kamma 20b, where this and several other examples are raised. Other instances are scattered throughout the Talmud, and also discussed in later halachic works. A complete discussion can be found in *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, s.v. *midat S'dom*.
2. Deuteronomy 6:18.
3. See Tosafot, Bava Batra 12b, s.v. *Kegon zeh*.
4. Avot 5:10.
5. Bartenura ad loc.
6. Genesis 1:2.
7. Etz Chaim 8:1. See also Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likkutei Torah*, *Emor* 37c ff and *Mattot* 87a ff.
8. Maamar Anochi 5674.
9. Amos 9:6.
10. Genesis 19:4–9.
11. Talmud, Sanhedrin 109a.
12. Ezekiel 16:49.
13. Shemot Rabbah 31:5, explaining Psalms 61:8.
14. Deuteronomy 15:11.
15. Deuteronomy 15:4.
16. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Kings* 12:5.
17. *Avodah tzorech Gavoah* ("work is a need of the High One"). The gamut of opinions and explanations of this concept is presented at length by Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz in his *Shnei Luchot Habrit* ("*Shelah ha-Kadosh*"), *Sha'ar ha-Gadol*.
18. *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 13, p. 234. Cited and discussed by Philip Wexler in *Social Vision* (Herder & Herder, 2019), p. 114.
19. Avot 1:6.

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[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/4554389/jewish/What-Really-Was-the-Sin-of-Sodom-and-Gomorrah.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/4554389/jewish/What-Really-Was-the-Sin-of-Sodom-and-Gomorrah.htm)

## 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 Cana'an; 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?

### I: WHAT MAKES LOT TICK?

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

### LOT'S VOLUNTARY AKEIDA:

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

### MEASURE FOR MEASURE:

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

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

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

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

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

## II: THE CHALLENGE OF THE AKEIDA:

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

### A SON IS PROMISED:

We start in Perek (chapter) 17. Last week, we spent some time on this section developing the idea that the Berit Mila is the eternal, national, historical covenant with Hashem, a covenant which all generations of Jews make with Hashem throughout history. Hashem changes Avraham's name from "Avram" to "Avraham" to symbolize his new status as an "av hamon goyyim," 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, 'Yitzhak.' Avraham circumcised Yitzhak at eight days old, as Hashem had commanded him. Avraham was 100 years old when Yitzhak, 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 Yitzhak!" 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 Yitzhak 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 "tzehek" 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 -- Melakhim 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 Sodom for the sake of the few possible righteous among them, even though most of them \*did\* deserve death.

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

3) How can a man kill his own son?

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

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

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

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

Morally, how could Avraham be willing to commit this act? How could the same person who pleaded for justice in the case of Sodom -- 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 Sodom, 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 Sodom. 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 Sodom." 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 Sodom'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

## 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 Liebtag 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'foro 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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# OH R NET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### Last in Line

**S**omething that always amazes me when I travel by plane is how competitive people are to get to the front of the line, whether it's for the security check, check-in, passport control or boarding. Human nature wants to be "the first." And even in these days of limited air travel and much shorter lines, people still want to be first in those short lines. When flying out of Tel Aviv the other day, I pointed this out to my wife and asked, "We're all going to get on the same metal tube and leave at the same time, so what does it matter who goes first?" "Well," she said, "they'll have more time for shopping." I said, "But the shops are all closed in the airport." So she said, "Even so, people want to just get through and sit down."

During the prayers of the *Yamim Noraim* – the Days of Awe – we pray to Hashem to put an end to competitiveness. Were it not for competitiveness, a person would be happy to live modestly, dress modestly and behave modestly. But, because we cannot bear the thought of someone being more than us, our lives become dedicated to out-doing our neighbors.

The difference between Capitalism and Communism is the kind of competitiveness their systems produce. The Communist says, "Your car is bigger than mine. I'm going to make sure you don't have a car at all!" The Capitalist says, "Your car is bigger than mine. I'm going to make sure that I have a car so big that I can put your car in my trunk and give you a ride!"

Arguably, the beginning of the Communist approach to competitiveness was in Sodom. The evil of Sodom and Amora was that they usurped a trait of Hashem. The deeper sources teach that their society was based totally on the characteristic of *din* – strict justice. The trait of *din* says, "You get what you deserve, no less, and certainly no more." In such a society there is no room for *chessed*, kindness, because we often receive *chessed* even when we do not necessarily deserve it. *Chessed* is "for those who are good and for those who are evil." When Hashem judges us with *din*, it is always to fulfill the purpose that His *chessed* should be of the best kind.

But, if competitiveness is part of human nature, it must have a positive application. The Mesillas Yesharim describes three levels of spiritual motivation. The second level is that we cannot bear the thought of getting to the next world and seeing our friend in a "better seat." The third level is that we cannot bear the thought that when we get to the next world we will see someone in a "better seat" and think to ourselves, "That could have been my seat!" It is not that we are jealous, that we want our fellow *not* to have that seat. It is just that we know that had we tried harder and been more competitive in the things that really matter, we could have the front row in the stalls of the World to Come. And that's significantly more painful than having to join the line at the back of the line at the airport.

# TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Eruvin 93-99

### When Exempt is not Excluded

*“King Saul’s daughter Michal would put on tefillin, and the Sages did not object; the wife of the Prophet Yonah made regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem during the three Festivals, and the Sages did not object.”*

**T**his beraita on our *daf* serves as a springboard and gateway for our *Rishonim* and *Poskim* to discuss a fundamental issue in Jewish Law.

We learn elsewhere in *Shas* that women are exempt from fulfilling a mitzvah when the mitzvah is *zman grama*, meaning that it is time-related. For example, the mitzvahs of shofar, lulav and succah are applicable only on specific days of the year – Rosh Hashana and Succot. Therefore, women are exempt from the obligation of fulfilling these mitzvahs.

This exemption raises two intriguing halachic questions. One is if a woman – who is exempt from time-bound mitzvahs – may nevertheless do them. Secondly, if she is permitted to do them. May she say the *beracha* for the mitzvah she is doing? I assume that many readers are cognizant of the fact that *many* women nowadays are careful to hear the shofar, take the lulav and sit in the succah – and also make the appropriate *berachas*.

From the behavior of Shaul’s daughter wearing tefillin (although it is a time-related mitzvah since it is not always obligatory, such as at night or on Shabbat), it appears clear that although a woman is exempt, she may do the mitzvah anyway. Similarly, the same proof may be brought from behavior of Yonah the Prophet’s wife doing the mitzvah of going up to Jerusalem for the Festivals despite this also being a time-related mitzvah. As the *beraita* notes, the Sages did not object to their deeds, despite a possible concern, explains Rashi, that doing a mitzvah that one is not obligated in might be a transgression of “do not add to the mitzvahs of the Torah.”

However, may a woman who does a time-related mitzvah say the *beracha* that a man would say: “Blessed are You, our G-d, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with His mitzvahs, and has commanded us to do the mitzvah of lulav/succah/shofar etc.”? May a woman say “and has commanded us” if she was not personally commanded to fulfill a time-bound mitzvah?

Rabbeinu Tam’s ruling, taught in *Tosefot* on our *daf*, is that she is permitted to say the *beracha*. Rabbeinu Tam avers that we should correctly assume that Michal said the *tefillin berachas* since the Sages did not object to her actions. The words “and has commanded us” are to be interpreted as her praising Hashem for commanding the Jewish People to perform this mitzvah.

Rabbeinu Tam adds an additional support for women saying a *beracha* when doing a time-related mitzvah despite their exemption from the mitzvah. There is a dispute between Rabbi Yehuda and the Chachamim regarding whether or not a blind person is obligated to fulfill mitzvahs that involve doing something – such as lulav, succah and shofar. Rabbi Yehuda says that the Torah exempts a blind man from doing mitzvahs. However, elsewhere in *Shas* we find that a blind man may say a *beracha* on any mitzvah he does – despite his exempt status. Based on this, it would seem that a woman should have the same “*beracha rights*” when doing a time-bound mitzvah.

Other *Ba’alei Tosefot*, however, challenge this proof. They argue that a blind man – unlike a woman – is obligated by Rabbinical Law to fulfill

the mitzvahs. Therefore, it is appropriate for him to say the *beracha* “and has commanded us.” He says this *beracha* since Hashem has commanded him to obey the Rabbis, who decreed for him to fulfill the mitzvahs. Women, on the other hand, are not obligated in time-bound mitzvahs even according to Rabbinical Law.

According to this distinction, one might ask: “Why did our Sages not obligate women in the time-bound mitzvahs, as they did the blind man in all mitzvahs? One answer that *Tosafot* offers is that women, at least, are obligated by the Torah to fulfill mitzvahs that are not time-bound. This obligation causes them to stand out as Jews, whereas a blind person, without the obligation decreed by our Sages, would be virtually indistinguishable from non-Jews due to their total exemption.

When it comes to halacha, however, a blind person is, in fact, obligated in all mitzvahs by Torah Law. This is the ruling of the Chachamim, who do not agree with Rabbi Yehuda’s ruling. The

rules in line with the view of the *Rambam* that they should not do so. The *Rema*, on the other hand, rules in accordance with *Rabbeinu Tam*, that women should say a *beracha*. (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 589:6)

Accordingly, there are differing practices in our various communities. However, it is the wide-spread custom to discourage women from the mitzvah of *tefillin*. Another mitzvah where we find the *Poskim* discouraging women from performing a time-related mitzvah is *tzitzit*, a mitzvah that is related to the day and not the night (see the *Rambam* and the *Rosh*). The issue with *tefillin* involves specific halachic requirements for *tefillin*, and the problem with women wearing *tzitzit* is that it is a daily mitzvah — unlike other mitzvahs that women are exempt from but nevertheless do. Therefore, they may be viewed by the community as desiring to “show off” and may appear as being haughty. Haughtiness (*ga’avah* or *y’hora*) is a trait that is extremely negative and is the polar opposite of one of the most desirable traits in existence — humility. (*Aruch Hashulchan Orach Chaim* 17)

• *Eruvin 96a*

halacha regarding women saying a *beracha* over time-bound mitzvahs is not entirely clear. The *Beit Yosef*

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## WHAT'S IN A WORD

### Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

#### Elephants Galore

(“torches”) and *aish* (“fire”) that appear side by side in *Nehemiah* 2:3. The word *pladot*, by the way, appears only once in the Bible, and is seemingly a metathesized version of the more familiar word *lapidot* (“torches”).

In addition to this etymology of *Pildash*’s name, there is another tradition concerning its meaning: *Rabbeinu Efrayim ben Shimshon* (to Gen. 22:22) explains that the name *Pildash* is a contraction of the Hebrew words *pil* (“elephant”) and *dash* (“threshes”), an allusion to

**A**fter the story of *Akeidat Yitzchak*, the Torah mentions that Avraham received a report of his brother Nachor’s progeny. In the list of Nachor’s children that was communicated to Avraham, the sixth son mentioned is named *Pildash* (Gen. 22:22). The etymology of this name is somewhat unclear, with some linguists explaining it as a portmanteau of the Hebrew words *pladot*

Pildash's superlative height that allowed him to "thresh" over those shorter than him. Besides this, the word *pil* does not appear anywhere else in the Bible. In fact, Biblical Hebrew seemingly has a different word for "elephant": *shenhav*. In this essay we will explore what, if anything, is the difference between the Hebrew words *pil* and *shenhav*.

The word *shenhav* appears twice in the Bible, both times in verses that list the items that King Solomon imported from overseas: "gold and silver, *shenhabim*, monkeys and parrots" (I Kgs. 10:22, II Chron. 9:21). The first part of this verse lists precious materials, while the second part lists exotic animals. In order to determine the true meaning of the Hebrew word *shenhav*, we must question whether it belongs to the first category or the second. The cantillation of the verses in question suggests that the word *shenhabim* is connected to the second part of the verse. Thus, it would seem that the word *shenhabim* refers to a species of exotic animals.

That said, the commentators do not unanimously agree to this. The Targumim (to both Kings and Chron.) render both instances of *shenhabim* into Aramaic as *shen d'pil* (literally, "the tooth of an elephant") – i.e. ivory. This explanation suggests linking *shenhabim* to the first part of the verse, which listed "gold and silver." Most of the standard commentaries (i.e. the Radak and Metzudos in Kings. and Chron., as well as Rashi, Rabbi Yosef Karo, and Ralbag to Kings.) follow this approach. Similarly, Abarbanel (to Kings. 10:22) writes that Christian commentators explain *shenhabim* as "pearls" – again explaining it as something more akin to "gold and silver" than to "monkeys and parrots."

However, the commentary printed under Rashi's name to Chronicles (not actually written by Rashi) explains that the word *shenhav* not only refers to an elephant's tusk, but also to the elephant itself. He thus links the word *shenhabim* in the aforementioned verse to the clauses before and after that word.

Moreover, Rabbi Yonah Ibn Janach (990-1055), in his *Sefer HaShorashim*, suggests that the word *shenhav* is a compound word derived from two words stuck together. Although he does not explain himself, it is safe to assume that he means that *shenhav* is derived

from *shen* ("tooth") and *hav* ("gives"). If so, then the term *shenhav* should refer to the beast who "gives" away "teeth" (i.e. tusks of ivory) that can be used for various purposes. Accordingly, he too seems to explain that *shenhav* does not refer to "ivory," but to the elephant itself. In an unpublished *piyyut* for Yom Kippur, HaKallir lists *shenhabim* as animals of exceptional height, implying that the word means "elephant." The 14th century Yemenite sage Rabbi Avraham ben Shlomo (in his commentary to Kings.) also writes that *shenhabim* means "elephants" and not "ivory."

Rabbi Dr. Ernest Klein (1899-1983) and others parse the word *shenhav* differently. They agree that *shen* means "tooth," but argue that *hav* is related to the Ancient Egyptian word *yev*, which means "elephant". (A famous example of this is the island of Elephantine in the Nile River, which is also known as Yev/Yebu.) Rabbi Dr. Klein also notes that the English word *ivory* is ultimately derived from the Ancient Egyptian word *yev* (by way of the Latin word for "ivory," *ebur*).

Although the word *pil* never appears in the Bible, it is a fairly common word in post-Biblical Hebrew. The word appears once in the Mishna (*Kilyaim* 8:6) in a discussion of which animals are considered a *behemah* and which a *chayah*. *Pil* (or its Aramaic equivalent *pila*) also appears multiple times in the Talmud. For example, when asserting that somebody never sees something in a dream that he has never seen in real life or has never thought about, the Talmud gives the example of "an elephant (*pila*) entering the eye of a needle" (*Berachos* 55b). There is even a discussion over whether seeing elephants in a dream is a good sign or a bad omen (see *Berachos* 56b-57a). If a person sees an elephant in real life, there is a special blessing to recite (see *Berachos* 58b).

As Rabbi Dr. Klein notes, the Mishnaic Hebrew word *pil* is related to the Persian *pil*, the Arabic *fil*, and the Akkadian *piru/pilu*. Dr. Chaim Tawil similarly points out that the Biblical Hebrew term *shenhabim* is a semantic cognate of the Akkadian term *sinni piri*, which means "elephant tusk." Parenthetically, *alfil* (Arabic for "the elephant") is the name of the original chess piece that eventually came to be known as a bishop. This piece was in the shape of an elephant

(hence, the name *alfil*) and, like the modern-day bishop, the *alfil* also moved diagonally (but unlike the bishop, the *alfil* could only move two squares at a time and could jump over any intermediate pieces).

Besides these foreign cognates, where does the word *pil* come from and why does it refer to an elephant?

Rabbi Yehoshua Steinberg of the Veromemanu Foundation notes that the Talmud (*Brachos* 56b, 57b) seems to associate the word *pil* with the Hebrew word *pele* (“wonder”). Of course, elephants certainly fit this bill, as they are “wondrously big.” Rabbi Yechiel Michel Stern (Rav of the Ezras Torah neighborhood of Jerusalem) connects the word *pil* to *nefilim* (“giants”), explaining that both elephants and giants cause fear to “fall” (*nofel*) upon those who behold them (see *Ber. Rabbah* 26:7). Rabbi Steinberg adds that Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor (to Gen. 6:4 and Num. 14:33) also connects the term *nefilim* to *pele*.

As farfetched as it might sound, I would like to humbly suggest another way to understand the basis of the word *pil*. The root PEH-LAMMED is often associated with death, as *neifel* (Iyov 3:16, Ps. 58:9) refers to a “stillborn baby” who died, and the act of *nefilah/hapalah* (“falling”) in the Bible is commonly a euphemistic way of referring to death (see Ex. 19:21,

Deut. 21:1, Jud. 3:25, 4:22). Now, regarding elephants, Rabbi Menashe ben Israel (1604-1657) writes that when they kill a person, they stand by the corpse until they can bury their victim. In fact, other researchers have noted that elephants bury all sorts of dead animals that they encounter, and seem to otherwise take a special interest in the concept of death. A *BBC World News* headline from 2014 reads, “Kenya elephant buries its victims.” In light of all this, it makes much sense that the Hebrew word for “elephant” would be related to the concept of “death.”

To summarize our findings: The Biblical term *shenhav* means either “elephant” or “ivory.” Even if it means “elephant,” this word focuses specifically on the elephant as the source of ivory. The post-Biblical term *pil*, on the other hand, refers to other properties of the elephant, such as its superlative mass or possibly its knack for burying the dead.

Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the suggestion that the English word *elephant* ultimately derives from the Hebrew word *elef* (“ox”), which itself might be related to *pil(a)* by way of metathesis. By the way, various common Jewish surnames like Helfand, Gelfand, Elfant all mean “elephant.” Remember these facts and don’t forget them, because an elephant never forgets!

For questions, comments, or to propose ideas for a future article, please contact the author at [rcklein@ohr.edu](mailto:rcklein@ohr.edu)

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# Q & A

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## VAYERA

### Questions

1. Why did G-d appear to Avraham after the *brit mila*?
2. Why was Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent?
3. What were the missions of the three angels?
4. Why did Avraham enjoin the guests to wash the dust off their feet?
5. Why did Avraham ask specifically Yishmael, and not someone else, to prepare food for the guests?
6. Why did the angels ask Avraham where Sarah was?
7. When G-d related Sarah's thoughts to Avraham, He did not relate them precisely. Why?
8. What "cry" from Sodom came before G-d?
9. How many angels went to Sodom?
10. Why was Lot sitting at the gate of Sodom?
11. Lot served the angels *matza*. Why?
12. Why did Lot delay when he left Sodom?
13. Why were Lot and his family not permitted to look back at Sodom?
14. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Why was she punished in this particular way?
15. In what merit did G-d save Lot?
16. Why did Avraham relocate after the destruction of Sodom?
17. Why did Avimelech give gifts to Avraham?
18. Why was Avraham told to listen to Sarah?
19. Why did G-d listen to the prayer of Yishmael and not to that of Hagar?
20. Who accompanied Avraham and Yitzchak to the *akeidah* (binding)?

*All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.*

### Answers

1. 18:1 - Avraham was sick, so G-d came to "visit" him.
2. 18:1 - He was looking for guests.
3. 18:2 - To announce Yitzchak's birth, to heal Avraham and to destroy Sodom.
4. 18:4 - He thought they were among those who worship the dust, and he didn't want any object of idolatry in his home.
5. 18:7 - To train him in the performance of *mitzvot*.
6. 18:9 - To call attention to Sarah's modesty, so as to endear her to her husband.
7. 18:13 - For the sake of peace.
8. 18:21 - The cry of a girl who was executed for giving food to the poor.
9. 19:1 - Two; one to destroy the city and one to save Lot.
10. 19:1 - He was a judge.
11. 19:3 - It was Passover.
12. 19:16 - He wanted to save his property.
13. 19:17 - As they, too, deserved to be punished, it wasn't fitting for them to witness the destruction of Sodom.
14. 19:26 - She was stingy, not wanting to give the guests salt.
15. 19:29 - Lot had protected Avraham by concealing from the Egyptians the fact that Sarah was his wife.
16. 20:1 - Because travel in the region ceased and Avraham could no longer find guests.
17. 20:14 - So that Avraham would pray for him.
18. 21:12 - Because she was greater in prophecy.
19. 21:17 - Because the prayer of a sick person is more readily accepted than the prayer of others on his behalf.
20. 22:3 - Yishmael and Eliezer.

# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## RISE & CHOOSE TO SHINE

### THE TORAH BLESSINGS: STARTING EACH DAY THE TORAH WAY

To be a religious Jew means that each day is carefully mapped out. We live our days within the framework of Jewish Law and customs. One of the very first things we do after waking up is recite what are known as *Birkot HaTorah* — the blessings over the Torah. In fact, these blessings are considered to be so fundamental that our Sages teach (Bava Metzia 85) that the Second Temple was destroyed because the Jewish People did not recite the “blessings for the Torah” before they commenced their Torah study. The Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehuda Loew (1520-1609), explains that our Sages are imparting to us a major principle. All the undesirable and negative actions that the Jewish People were involved in prior to the destruction were founded on the fact that the *Birkot HaTorah* were being neglected and not being recited!

It is clear from this precept that the blessings over the Torah are such an integral dimension of our psyche that they have a direct influence over the way we relate to our spiritual selves. And that, in turn, shapes the way we express ourselves, both verbally and physically. To the point that it became the underlying cause of something as calamitous as the destruction of the Holy Temple and an almost two millennia exile.

Indeed, so essential are *Birkot HaTorah* that we are instructed not to commence learning any Torah after waking up in the morning until they have been recited. For example, a person who gets up early to learn Torah before the morning prayers must recite these blessings upon arising. Even a person who wakes up while it is still dark outside to learn Torah must recite the Torah Blessings, despite the fact that he might be planning to pray only a few hours later.

With the help of G-d, over the next few weeks we will investigate the Torah Blessings together. We will endeavor to plumb the depths of their profundity and enhance our appreciation for these beautifully composed blessings. These blessings are both thought-provoking and intriguing in their construction and meaning.

While it is true that the blessing over washing hands and the blessing recited after having been to the bathroom are not an integral part of the Torah Blessings, these other blessings directly precede them in the order in which the blessings appear in the Siddur. Consequently, next week it is with them that we plan to embark on our voyage.

*Ohr Somayach announces a new booklet  
on The Morning Blessings  
by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer  
[www.ohr.edu/morning-blessings](http://www.ohr.edu/morning-blessings)*

# THE RARE CALENDAR PHENOMENA OF 5781

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

(Part 2 of a new mini-series)

5781 is a year that is chock-full of rare calendar phenomena that we will *iyH* be witnessing, or, more accurately, taking an active part in. Let us continue exploring what is in store for us.

## Five YaKNeHa"Zes

**A** record-breaking occurrence specifically this year is that there will be five (!) YaKNeHa"Zes over the course of the year for those in *Chutz La'aretz* (but only two for those of us in *Eretz Yisrael*). YaKNeHa"Z refers to the special hybrid *Kiddush-Havdalah* that is only recited when a Shabbat exits directly into a *Yom Tov*. This occurs more frequently in *Chutz La'aretz* than in *Eretz Yisrael* due to the prevalence of two-day *Yamim Tovim*.

In *Chutz La'aretz* this year these are the:

- Second night of Rosh Hashana
- Second night of Succot
- Night of Simchat Torah
- First night of Pesach (*Leil HaSeder*)
- Last night of Pesach

Yet, in *Eretz Yisrael*, there are only two YaKNeHa"Zes occurring, on the:

- Second night of Rosh Hashana
- First night of Pesach (*Leil HaSeder*)

The reason for this discrepancy is due to *Yom Tov Sheini*, which is observed in *Chutz La'aretz* but not in *Eretz Yisrael*.

Of course, along with each YaKNeHa"Z is the special *Havdalah beracha* addition recited in the *Yom Tov Maariv Shemoneh Esrei* when Shabbat is departing — *Vatode'ainu*,” which concludes with the not-too-common “*HaMavdil Bein Kodesh L'Kodesh*.”

The word YaKNeHa"Z is an acronym of the proper order of blessings in this *Kiddush/Havdalah*. It stands for *Yayin* (*Borei Pri Hagafen*), *Kiddush* (*Mekadeish Yisrael V'Hazmanim*), *Ner* (*Borei Me'orei Ha'Aish*), *Havdalah* (*Hamavdil Bein Kodesh L'Kodesh*), *Zman* (*Shehechiyanu*).

To help facilitate this special *Kiddush* that needs its own *Havdalah* candle(s) that will go out by itself/themselves (in order not to unwittingly transgress the prohibition of ‘*Kivui*’, extinguishing), several companies have recently started making “YaKNeHa"Z Candles” (a.k.a. “*avukalehs*”) — small candles containing several wicks (to be classified as an ‘*avuka*,’ a torch, for *Havdalah*, as opposed to the traditional one-wick candle) that go out by themselves after several minutes and are made to facilitate YaKNeHa"Z performance. It is reported that Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv’s “face lit up with joy” the first time someone brought him one of these YaKNeHa"Z candles, as it enabled him to properly perform this *Kiddush/Havdalah* without any potential halachic concerns. *Mi K'Amcha Yisrael!*

## Wabbit Season?

All of these *YaKNeHa*"Zes in one year makes this author ruminate about what is possibly the oddest connection to it. In what appears to be an interesting turn of phrase, many classic Ashkenazic Illuminated Haggadahs over the centuries, including the Cincinnati, Ashkenazic, Prague, Venice, and Augsburg Haggadahs, depict an interesting phenomenon next to the hybrid *Kiddush-Havdalah* of *YaKNeHa*"Z: A rabbit hunt! Yes, you read that right. Not even remotely related to either *Kiddush* or *Havdalah* (or in fact anything else in Yiddishkeit except possibly the *Noda B'Yehuda*'s famous responsum regarding hunting for sport or pleasure), a full-fledged rabbit hunt. Scholars theorize that the reason this picture is placed specifically at this point of the Haggadah is the similar-sounding German phrase "Jag den Häs," which translates to "Chase the Rabbit" or "Hunt the Hare." Apparently, this was an easy, albeit whimsical way to remind the various locales in their vernacular of the proper order of the blessings of this *Kiddush-Havdalah* on Seder Night.



*YaKNeHa*"Z depiction in the famous Illuminated 1629 Venice Hagaddah.

This author has recently heard a similar-type of explanation for the "minhag" to eat stuffed cabbage on Hoshana Rabba: "Kraut Mit Vasser" – "Cabbage (cooked) with Water" – sounds similar to the special prayer recited on Hoshana Rabba that is associated with the *klopping* of *Hoshanahs*: "Kol Mevasser."

## Megillah Mystery

Our unique calendar setup also means that this year there is no Shabbat Chol HaMoed, which ordinarily means more time for Chol HaMoed trips. (This was not too applicable under the Israeli *Chagim* lockdown, but hopefully we will have better luck over Pesach.) Yet, this also means that the Yom Tov days of both Succot and Pesach had/will have longer prayers. This is due to the special "Megillah readings" of *Kohelet* on Succot and *Shir HaShirim* on Pesach. As both of these Megillahs are ordinarily read on the Yom Tov's respective Shabbat Chol HaMoed, when there isn't one, they get pushed off to other days of Yom Tov. But there is another fascinating divergence between *Eretz Yisrael* and *Chutz La'aretz*. Without Shabbat Chol HaMoed, in *Eretz Yisrael* *Kohelet* gets pushed forward to Yom Tov *Rishon* of Succot, whereas in *Chutz La'aretz* it gets pushed off further to *Shemini Atzeret*. Meaning, although Ashkenazim all read *Kohelet* on a Shabbat Yom Tov day of Succot, in *Eretz Yisrael* it was read a full week (!) before it was read in *Chutz La'aretz*.

On the other hand, regarding Pesach, in lieu of Shabbat Chol HaMoed, everyone will be united in pushing *Shir HaShirim*'s reading off to *Shevii shel Pesach* – which will also be the only Shabbat during Pesach this year.

To be continued...

Written *l'zechus Shira Yaffa bas Rochel Miriam v'chol yotzei chalatzeha l'yeshua sheleimah teikif u'miyad.*

*This author wishes to acknowledge Rabbi Shea Linder's excellent article on this topic.*

# LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Hershman

## The Tzaddik Missing from Sodom

G-d deems Avraham worthy of being privy to His verdict regarding Sodom. And while he tries with all his soul to fathom the depths of G-d's judgment, there is one question that gnaws at him. It is *not* the question — as may be misunderstood from a superficial reading of the text — of why G-d would punish the righteous along with the wicked. Avraham has not the slightest doubt that the innocent will be saved from calamity — even the thought that it might be otherwise would be a defamation of G-d's name. *It would be a profanation for You to do such a thing, to kill the righteous along with the guilty*, Avraham declares. Even if there is complete annihilation, Avraham is certain that any innocent person — even one in a million — would be saved.

What, then, is his entire negotiation with G-d? *Will You save the city for 50 righteous people? 45? 40? ... 10?* And moreover, if Avraham was certain that no innocent man would perish, what is the meaning of his opening question, *Will You also sweep into ruin (tispeh) the righteous along with the wicked?*

Avraham knows the nature of the righteous. He knows how he would feel were he to stand in the place of the individual who merited saving himself from destruction that befalls the rest of the community. Anyone might experience survivor's guilt, but a tzaddik's pain in witnessing the destruction of his surrounding community is far greater. Avraham imagines that, had he been living in Sodom, he would have spared no effort and would have worked unceasingly to improve his fellow citizens who had deviated from the path. He would have suffered agony over the loss of every soul he had hoped and worked to save.

*also be swept into this ruin, as tormented witnesses? Isn't this consideration strong enough to bring G-d, for the sake of the righteous, to spare them the unbearable anguish — to pardon the whole community?*

We see that Avraham regarded the salvation of the whole community as the reward of the righteous who share in the suffering of the community. The tzaddik whom Avraham imagines in Sodom does not look on the moral ruin of his fellow countrymen with apathy. He does not isolate himself and say, *What have I to do with others' troubles? I have to spare my own soul.* Such a person would not merit the salvation of the entire community on his behalf, since the fate of the community is essentially, according to his own thinking, not his concern. If he had already abandoned them and separated himself, then their suffering and destruction do not touch his heart. He may even feel satisfaction at having escaped the harsh judgment by virtue of his seclusion.

Not so Avraham's tzaddik — whom he describes as dwelling "in the midst of the city." For that tzaddik — who lives connected with his environment and never ceases to teach and hope and aim for its rectification — the community would be saved.

- Sources: Commentary, Ber. 18:23-25

Avraham's question to G-d is this: *Shouldn't the pain of the righteous, in witnessing the tragic plight of their neighbors, be taken into consideration? Should the righteous*

# PARSHA OVERVIEW

Three days after performing *brit mila* on himself, Avraham is visited by G-d. When three angels appear in human form, Avraham rushes to show them hospitality by bringing them into his tent, despite this being the most painful time after the operation. Sarah laughs when she hears from them that she will bear a son next year. G-d reveals to Avraham that He will destroy Sodom, and Avraham pleads for Sodom to be spared. G-d agrees that if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom He will not destroy it. Avraham "bargains" G-d down to ten righteous people. However, not even ten can be found. Lot, his wife and two daughters are rescued just before sulfur and fire rain down on Sodom and her sister cities. Lot's wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot's daughters fear that as a result of the destruction there will be no husbands for them. They decide to get their father drunk and through him to perpetuate the human race. From the elder daughter, Moav is born, and from the younger, Ammon. Avraham moves to Gerar where Avimelech abducts Sarah. After G-d appears to Avimelech in a dream, he releases Sarah and appeases Avraham.

As promised, a son, Yitzchak, is born to Sarah and Avraham. On the eighth day after the birth, Avraham circumcises him as commanded. Avraham makes a feast the day Yitzchak is weaned. Sarah tells Avraham to banish Hagar and Hagar's son Yishmael because she sees in him signs of degeneracy. Avraham is distressed at the prospect of banishing his son, but G-d tells him to listen to whatever Sarah tells him to do. After nearly dying of thirst in the desert, Yishmael is rescued by an angel and G-d promises that he will be the progenitor of a mighty nation. Avimelech enters into an alliance with Avraham when he sees that G-d is with him.

In a tenth and final test, G-d instructs Avraham to take Yitzchak, who is now 37, and to offer him as a sacrifice. Avraham does this, in spite of ostensibly aborting Jewish nationhood and contradicting his life-long preaching against human sacrifice. At the last moment, G-d sends an angel to stop Avraham. Because of Avraham's unquestioning obedience, G-d promises him that even if the Jewish People sin, they will never be completely dominated by their foes. The Torah portion concludes with the genealogy and birth of Rivka.

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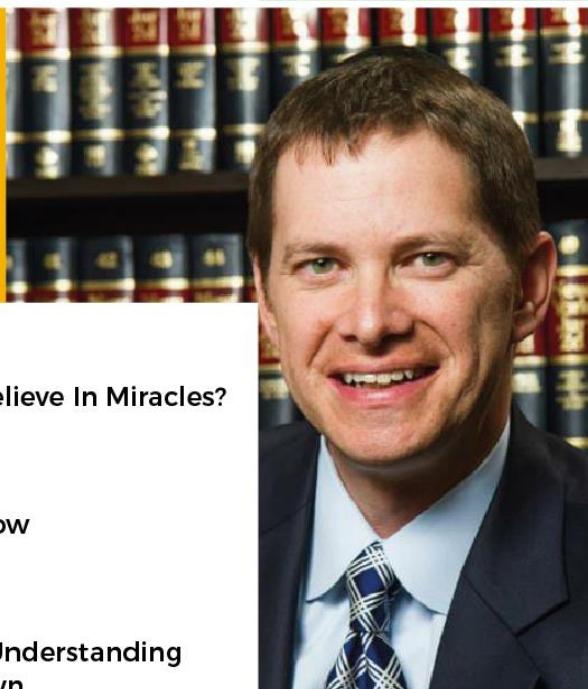
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