

**Potomac Torah Study Center**  
Vol. 10 #4, November 11, 2022; 17 Cheshvan 5783; Vayera 5783

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

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

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**Mazel-Tov to Dan and Amy Prywes in honor of the upcoming marriage of their son Sammy to Alison Epstein of Los Angeles**

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As I become older, my thoughts go more and more toward legacy. After my time, who will remember me, for what, and for how long? Concern with legacy runs throughout Sefer Bereishis, so I am in tune with this theme in early chapters of the Torah.

For the first ten generations of humanity, legacy proves to be a dead end. For the generations from Adam to Noach, only Noach and his immediate family survive. Every other generation, including Noach's father (Lemech), turn to so much evil that God decides to wipe the earth clean and start over. Most of the ten generations after Noach also turn to evil, and the few righteous people (such as Noach, Shem, and Ever) apparently do not gain followers to build on their good qualities. Only Avraham, in generation 20, reaches God's goal of influencing others to work toward chesed (kindness, including charity to the needy), plus tzedek and mishpat (a commitment to a just society). These goals remain top priorities for Jews even today, 3660 years since the death of Avraham.

The Torah focuses extensively on Lot, Avraham's nephew (and brother-in-law, because Sarah is Lot's sister). Lot comes in and out of Avraham's life. Even after they separate, Avraham comes or intervenes immediately whenever Lot has a problem (captured in a war and threatened with death in Sodom). Many commentators observe that Lot is a foil for Avraham. For example, Avraham chooses to live in the mountains in Israel, where one can only survive by trusting God to send rain in the proper season. Lot, however, chooses to live in Sodom, in the Jordan valley, where a river waters the desert (like in Eden and Egypt) – places where one can grow crops and live comfortably without cultivating a relationship with God.

While Lot tries to emulate Avraham, such as becoming a judge and by offering shelter and food for visitors, the details of his efforts show that he cannot carry through proper chesed or mishpat. For example, when the people of Sodom insist on his turning over his three guests for them to "know" the men, Lot offers instead to send his unmarried daughters to satisfy their sexual needs. The people of Sodom also prove by their treatment of Lot that they do not respect him or his efforts to promote a just society.

What I have not seen in other commentaries is an observation that several of Lot's actions parallel those of other significant individuals in the Torah. When Lot moves to Sodom, he seeks to create a legacy by becoming a judge and by providing chesed, especially to visitors. Shem, Ever, and Noach also seek to do good in the world – but none of them apparently gains followers. While Shem and Ever (according to chazal) establish a yeshiva that trains Yaakov (and presumably others), we do not read of their influence on any other students. Noach works for 120 years to build a very large ark, and he readily tells others what he is building and why. However, he also does not gain any followers. Both Noach and Lot end up getting drunk after their challenging experiences and then becoming victims of sexual sins

involving their children. Noach's grandson Canaan intervenes to prevent Noach from having a fourth child (9:24-25). (Canaan presumably castrates his grandfather.) Lot's daughters make him drunk and rape him to become pregnant through incest. While Noach has a few worthy descendants (such as Shem, Ever, and Ashur), Lot seems not to produce any distinguished descendants for many generations.

Noach, Avraham, and Lot all try to create a legacy. Noach, righteous in his generation and possibly on an absolute scale, saves his family and restarts population growth – but his primary legacy seems to be surviving the flood. Many of the next nine generations to follow him turn to evil, and it takes ten generations before his descendants produce Avraham, the first individual worthy of starting a nation based on chesed, tzedek, and mishpat. Lot tries to emulate what Avraham has been teaching him for decades, but his attempts fail, and he himself is probably unworthy of surviving Sodom other than in the merit of Avraham. Certainly none of his family members seems worthy of being saved – except that his older unmarried daughter's son by incest becomes Moab (an evil empire that somehow produces one righteous woman, Ruth, many generations later).

My beloved Rebbe, Leonard Cahan, z"l, influenced countless congregants to learn more about our religion and to increase our observation of mitzvot. Many children who grew up in Rabbi Cahan's congregations became rabbis, or leaders in the Jewish communities in other ways. Rabbi Cahan used much of his discretionary fund to bring Jewish books and art to Potomac and make them available to many of us in the years before the Internet was available for this purpose. His Shabbas and Yom Tov Torah discussions reinforced the lessons of chesed, tzedek, and mishpat. A person's Rebbe is like a father, and Rabbi Cahan filled that role for my entire family for many years. We are all part of his legacy – a legacy that goes back to Avraham and will continue forever thanks to God's promise to Avraham.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

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**Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during 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 Yehoshua Mayer HaLevi ben Nechama Zelda, Yonatan Ophir ben Ilana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, who need our prayers.** Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Hannah & Alan

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**Dvar Torah: Vayera: Abraham & Sons, Inc.**  
by Rabbi Dovid Green © 1997

The question has been asked regarding the purpose of the Book of Genesis: Since the laws we need to follow begin in the Book of Exodus, the Torah really could have started there. However, had we started there, we would lack the knowledge of the deeds of the Forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov. From their deeds and words we learn the foundations of having a relationship with The Creator.

The Chofetz Chaim points out that many righteous men lived in the days of Avraham. We know that Shem, one of the sons of Noach lived then. The Torah refers to him as a "servant of the high G-d." Shem and his descendant Aiver founded a school for people who flocked there to learn the ways of serving G-d, among them Avraham's son and grandson. Why then, asks the Chofetz Chaim, did none of them establish a family or a nation the way Avraham did? The Chofetz Chaim distinguishes the key difference. Avraham's sole desire was to bring about awareness of G-d into the world. Avraham

rebuked kings for the dishonesty of his subjects. “And he called in the name of G-d”, is a commonly found phrase regarding Avraham. Avraham was G-d’s public relations man, and he was completely given over to the ad campaign for his entire life. The others were faithful servants of G-d, but their efforts were concentrated on their personal service of G-d.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler explains the differences between Avraham and Noach. The Torah writes that Noach walked with G-d. Rashi quotes that Noach needed a help to support him. Noach walked with G-d. He lived with the awareness of G-d constantly. His awareness and resulting closeness to G-d preserved him in his righteousness. However, Noach needed the extrinsic stimulus of G-d’s awareness to strengthen him. Noach cared for the animals in the ark, feeding them at all hours around the clock. He spent an entire year doing so. It is impossible to voluntarily do such work without love and compassion for the animals. However, his motivation was to give the animals their needs. The extrinsic motivator of the needs of the animals moved Noach to feed and care for them. No doubt Noach was an elevated person, but this is not the character trait of Avraham; the trait of kindness.

About Avraham the Torah states that he walked before G-d. this means that his motivation was intrinsic. His essence was simply to perform deeds of kindness. Avraham’s whole person was to be a “giver”. When most people give time or money to a cause or an individual, it’s often because it hurts them to see the needs of the receiver. Giving takes away that pain. Sympathy and empathy are elevated levels, but they still fall short of the level of Avraham who gave with no further expectation of receiving in return; even easing his pain over the needs of his fellow.

Avraham’s efforts on behalf of mankind extended themselves to his children. He put great effort into raising his children to join “the family business.” He was an exemplary model to follow, and his children accepted the responsibility to plant the seeds of belief and faith in G-d.

Rabbi Dessler concludes that every Jew has sparks of his forefather Avraham in him. It is possible for these sparks to ignite a fire of kindness which can counteract selfishness, hatred, and greed. May we all merit to be recognized as part of Avraham’s family, by maintaining our connection with him through our deeds of kindness.

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5758-vayera/>

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## **Parshat Vayeira: Tzeddek and Mishpat**

by Rabbi Dov Linzer \* © 2020

This week, particularly right now when we are in an uncertain moment as a country, I’d like to share a thought on the parsha which touches on what the Torah believes to be the basic principles with which we should live our lives.

What are the principles that create the city and govern the polity in which we live? The Torah tells us that right before G-d reveals to Avraham His intention to destroy Sodom, He says (18:17-19):

*“Will I hide from Avraham what I’m about to do? Avraham will be a great nation! I know that he will command his household and pass on to his future generations.”*

What will he pass on?

*“To watch, to observe, to practice the way of G-d through Tzedaka – righteousness, and Mishpat – justice.”*

This is what Avraham is about; this is what he will pass down to his future generations. This is why Avraham goes through the world calling out in G-d’s name: to teach people that G-d exists and that the way of G-d is tzedaka and mishpat.

The idea of “the way of G-d” is something that the Rabbis particularly focus on in a verse that appears in Devarim (28:10): “we should live our lives by walking in G-d’s ways.” What are G-d’s ways? The Rabbis answer this in one of two ways. Sometimes they speak about the attributes of G-d, the personal character traits – loving, caring, giving. At other times

they talk about specific, concrete acts. G-d cares for the sick and welcomes the stranger, so you should visit the sick and you should welcome the stranger.

But this week's parsha is the only place where the Torah speaks about what the "way of G-d" actually is. It tells us how to act, not with specific or concrete examples, but rather by telling us the principles by which we should live our lives. These are the principles of tzedaka and mishpat.

**So what is the difference between tzedaka and mishpat?** Rabeinu Yonah says that mishpat is about justice and truth; it is a standard by which we live our lives and by which we deal with others. Tzedaka is about good, care, and kindness; it is about our responsibility to do good towards others. How does this play out? We see mishpat when Avraham challenges G-d (18:25): "Will the Judge of all the world not deal justly?!" If you punish the righteous along with the wicked, if you live by a principle of falseness and injustice, that is not mishpat. Mishpat says that the wicked are punished and the righteous are rewarded. It contrasts truth and falsehood, righteousness and wickedness. Mishpat is to know which is which and act to accordingly.

We do use the word tzedaka to express 'giving to the poor,' but it's not quite charity – it's tzedek – righteousness, obligation. The right way of the world is for those with more resources to take care of those who have fewer. That sense of obligation towards the other, of goodness towards the other, is the principle of tzedaka.

It is these exact two principles that were lacking in Sodom. The prophet Yechezkel (16:49) tells us, "This was the sin of Sodom... they had much wealth but they didn't care about the poor among them." They wanted only to accrue more wealth, with no care for anyone on the outside. Sodom's citizenry did not believe in the principle of tzedaka. The Rabbis tell us that they also did not believe in the principle of mishpat. The laws of Sodom were such that those who had resources put all of their burdens on those who did not. The responsibilities of the society were disproportionately and specifically given to those who had less means to fulfill those responsibilities. It was the poor, not the rich, who bore the greatest responsibilities – a perversion of mishpat.

The Torah is telling us that the correct way to live our lives is like Avraham, with two core standards: that of mishpat, truth, and that of tzedaka, obligation and responsibility to care for others. Ultimately, the verse in Micha (6:8) tells us:

*"What is it the Lord wants from you? Live a life of good and obligation towards others, not a life of taking for yourself. Live a life of mishpat, with your actions based on truth. And live a life of humility. Act in a way that says we are not the center, G-d is the center, other people are the center."*

May we live lives of humility, tzedaka, and mishpat.

\* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School. I am posting an archive Dvar Torah, because I did not receive a new Dvar Torah from YCT in time for my deadline this week.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2020/11/parshat-vayeira-tzeddek-and-mishpat/> Emphasis added.

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## **Sodom and the Me-Generation: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera**

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

One who says: "what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours" is an average person. Some say this is the characteristic of Sodom. (Pirkei Avot 5:14)

We could understand why such a person is "average," simply expecting people to be responsible for themselves. But why would such a person be accused of emulating the ways of the wicked city of Sodom?

In Biblical and rabbinic literature, Sodom is identified with egregious evil. Its people are corrupt, selfish, and hedonistic. Sodom is so wicked, the Almighty feels compelled to destroy the city with fire and brimstone.

What were the sins ascribed to the people of Sodom?

Greed: they looked out for their own prosperity but were cruel and inhospitable to others.

Sexual license: they sought their own pleasures without regard for the feelings of others. In the Torah's account, a mob of Sodomites sought to molest a male visitor who had entered Lot's home. Lot, the most "righteous" of the residents of the city, offered the mob his two daughters rather than give over his guest.

Uniformity: rabbinic tradition teaches that the people of Sodom had a bed and expected everyone to fit into it. Those who were too short were stretched. Those who were too tall were cut down to size.

At the root of these sins was the philosophy of me first, me mainly, me at anyone else's expense. The notion of social responsibility was conspicuously absent. The Sodomites wanted everyone to conform to their society's system...to fit in and not to raise questions or criticisms. What's mine is mine and I owe you nothing. You are responsible for yourself; if you need help, don't come to me. I don't share, I don't care. Sodom is not a society where the social fabric is based on mutual respect and responsibility; it's where each person takes as much as possible, and gives away nothing. Anyone who disagrees with this system is an enemy who must be cut to size.

Throughout history, and in our own time, some societies reflect the values of Sodom. People strive to amass as much wealth as possible without consideration for the needs of others. Social pressure leads some to cheat, lie, avoid paying taxes...whatever it takes for them to gain more.

In such societies, people place their own immediate pleasure above issues of morality. Sexual promiscuity becomes normal and widely accepted.

And like Sodom of old, such societies demand conformity to their system of materialism, hedonism, and hatred of outsiders. People mistrust and detest those who aren't part of their in-group.

Biblical Sodom was destroyed by the Almighty. But later Sodom-like societies tend to destroy themselves. Their corrupt values lead to a societal implosion. Greed creates simmering hostilities between the haves and have nots. Sexual license undermines the stability of family life. The demand for uniformity of thought and behavior leads to a cultural sterilization; it saps creativity, originality, constructive criticism.

But there's one more thing. The people of Sodom seem to have been entirely disconnected from their past, from any social or moral tradition. They were a "me-generation" whose goals seem to have centered only on themselves. Sodom, like other me-generation societies, sowed the seeds of its own destruction.

Carl Sandburg once observed: "We know that when a nation goes down and never comes back, when a society or civilization perishes, one condition may always be found. They forgot where they came from. They lost sight of what brought them along. The hard beginnings were forgotten and the struggles farther along." ("Remembrance Rock," 1948, pp.18-19)

Sandburg was pointing to a significant feature of a living civilization: it remembers its beginnings, it sees itself as an organic part of the past. The ancestors have an ongoing vote, albeit not veto power. When this connection with the past is lost, the civilization unravels and declines.

"What's mine is mine, what's yours is yours." Some say this is the philosophy of Sodom. They may well be right.

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

**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.**

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/sodom-and-me-generation-thoughts-parashat-vayera>

## Remembering Kristallnacht

Reprinted with permission from *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* \*

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

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

### **Jews Leaving Germany**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* Reprinted with permission from *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* (Yale University Press).

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

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## Vayeira – Legacy of Parenting

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \*

Our father Avraham was a wonder person. In a generation that wandered aimlessly from one god to another, he boldly taught of one G-d, creator of heaven and earth. In the environment of the selfishness of Sodom, Avraham and his beloved wife, Sora, overflowed with unbridled friendship in the form of generous hospitality. He was a prophet of note. He was a sage of his generation.

Yet, when the Torah wishes to identify the attribute of Avraham that set him apart, Hashem says, “He will instruct his children to follow in his ways.” For all of Avraham’s greatness, what truly was distinctive was that he had great parenting skills. Eventually he and Sara would be blessed with a son, Yitzchak, and Avraham would be able to parent and instruct him in a way that would create the Jewish people. We wonder: What was the nature of Avraham’s parenting style that made him so unique? What are the parenting perspectives that Avraham used that successfully instructed his descendants to follow in his ways?

At the conclusion of the Parsha, in what was perhaps the greatest bonding moment between Avraham and Yitzchak as they approached the Akeida, the Torah recounts how Yitzchak turned to Avraham with a question. Yitzchak said, “Father?” The Torah records Avraham’s response, “Hineini -- I am here ready for you.” The word “Hineini” is a word that is used to express a readiness to serve. “Hineini” is the word that Avraham used to respond to the directive of the Akeida. Likewise, it is the word which Moshe used at the burning bush. It seems odd for a revered father, Avraham, to use this word in response to his son addressing him with a question.

I believe that the Torah is giving us a glimpse into the parenting style of Avraham, and how he conducted himself all the time in mentoring his son. Avraham was focused on being supportive of his son. “Hineini,” I am ready to help you with whatever it is that you need.

This should not be misunderstood as some counter-culture disrespect where the older generation services the younger. Yitzchak revered his father. It is in the framework of that reverence that Avraham understood his responsibility to provide and support Yitzchak in his growth as a great person and the next Jewish leader. Avraham was available to Yitzchak to hear and respond to his questions, to guide and to train him. “Hineini,” was Avraham’s motto. “I am here for you.”

There are hierarchies in this world in which the people of a higher echelon expect to be served by those who are lower. The more children, servants, or serfs they have, the more people there are to serve them. Avraham followed a different parenting model. His was parenting of responsibility. His mission was to be a mentor and an instructor to guide his son to greatness. “Hineini” meant “I am available to you and dedicated to your success.”

In a practical sense, we get a glimpse of Avraham’s parenting style at the start of the Parsha. When Avraham attends to the needs of his three guests, he hustles to ready things and calls upon his son, Yishmael, as well, to assist. Rashi comments, “To train him in mitzvos.”

This was Avraham’s way. He role modeled good behavior in his own alacrity to do the mitzvos, and he called upon his child to do the same. “Hineini” is Avraham’s motto, to be focused on his child’s education and training.

In our time, society has somehow experienced the devaluation of raising healthy children in favor of valuing career. Just as an example: A psychologist who treats difficult conditions will be heralded as a success and be recognized with distinction for his or her credentials, while a father or mother who carefully raise healthy children with great dedication will be regarded by society as being quite ordinary.

The parenting legacy of Avraham is to train one's children with the motto of "Hineini." I am here for you to guide you, to challenge you, to assign responsibility to you, and to respond to the many questions you may have to the best of my ability. This is what Hashem found remarkable about Avraham, because in this dedication and focus lies the secret of Avraham's greatness. Avraham's greatness will become eternal through his descendants, instead of living and dying with him alone.

In our time the demands on parents are enormous. Jobs, health care, family life, and so many logistics pull at our time and emotional wherewithal. Yet, the legacy of Avraham is that we must stay focused and be available to our children. They struggle with life. They struggle to find themselves in the myriad of values and stresses that they are exposed to. Lucky is the person who makes time for children. Lucky is the person who -- not only to G-d, but also to his children -- declares "Hineini."

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

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

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## Parshas Vayeira

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer\* © 2020

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.

\* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, 5909 Bradley Blvd., Bethesda, MD 20814. Rabbi Singer's Devar Torah arrived too late for my deadline, so I am reprinting an earlier Dvar Torah from his archives.

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

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*He split firewood.* Ibid.

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

*Avraham travels with one donkey. Ibid.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Torah VeAhava (now SephardicU.com). Rabbi, Beth Shalom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD) and faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school). **New: Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets>**. The Sefaria articles include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

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By Raffi Levi \*

What can we do to easily create intentional motivation in our lives?

I often find that when I have trouble beginning an important and challenging task, the simple transition of taking a deep breath helps make the whole process much easier. I take a moment to settle my mind and create a moment of inner awareness. I remind myself of the task at hand and I feel the strength in my body and the strength of what I'm capable of.

In the beginning of Vayeira, Avraham greets three guests who come to visit him. Let us not forget Avraham's state of being. He has just received a milah and is healing from the procedure. As we know, despite the challenging state he is in, he is able to get up and run to greet guests whom he welcomes into his home. How does he do it?

In the second verse of the parsha it states:

*"Avraham lifted his eyes and he saw. And behold, three people were walking towards him. And he saw and he ran towards them to greet them outside his tent" (Gen. 18:2).*

One of the early Hasidic thinkers, the Noam Elimelech, sees this pasuk and reminds us of the following question. Why does the verse need to say that Avraham saw twice? Is this not redundant? Creatively, the Noam Elimelech suggests the following read. He suggests that the first time it says that Avraham saw, he looked inward to strengthen himself, to remind himself of that ultimate purpose in his life which is to serve HaShem. By looking inward, Avraham recognized his duty. And then, looking outward, Avraham knew exactly what to do. To run towards the guests and greet them He went out to serve God in the mitzvah of hachnasat orchim, of greeting guests in his home.

Avraham took a moment before facing that challenging opportunity to do a mitzvah and he took that breath. He made a moment for awareness, to be in his body for a moment and remind himself of his purpose. Once he knew that in his heart, he could easily find strength to do what needed to be done.

For this Shabbos, this week, may we all find those little sacred moments of awareness; of inner sight that brings us true insight.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Third-year semikha student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2022/11/emerging-from-the-flames/>

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### **Shavuon Vayeira**

By Rabbi Moshe Rube \*

*From the day we arrived on the planet and blinking stepped into the sun. There's more to be seen than can ever be seen. More to do than could ever be done.*

Those were the words I sung whilst atop Lion Rock in Piha. (I don't know how familiar New Zealand is with Disney movies. But just google the words and you'll find out why I chose them.)

Now if you've been following these weekly journals/essays/droshes of mine in this Shavuon, you'll know that I had already been escorted to Piha and Lion Rock before.

So why did I go back? Because it's a beautiful place and I had never climbed Lion Rock while there. Yes I had been there but even when you go to a place there's more to see than could ever be seen. There's another perspective waiting to be discovered. I discovered that beaches can be majestic while on the sand and from a high rock. I also discovered that wading in the water to get to the rock can be done even with a non-bathing suit pair of shorts.

And when I go back there, I'm sure I'll learn something else.

And is that not the whole point of reliving the Torah every year?

I know Abraham's story by heart now. I know all about the Binding of Isaac, Sarah's capture and angelic visits. But there's always more to be learned that can ever be learned.

That's why I've seen The Lion King more than once too.

Shabbat Shalom!

\* Rabbi Rube recently moved from Alabama to Auckland, NZ, where he is Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation.

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## **Rav Kook Torah**

### **Vayeira: The Journey to Moriah**

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

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

#### **The Greatest Challenge of the Akeidah**

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

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

Abraham needed to be ready to receive an additional prophecy. Only after three days would the exact location of the Akeidah be revealed to him. And that was the catch. Only a person who is at peace with himself, filled with joy and happiness, is a fitting vessel for prophecy. To complete the test, Abraham would require incredible reserves of spiritual fortitude to be able to receive that future prophecy. If Abraham was disturbed by misgivings and doubts, if his faith and equilibrium were shaken, he would not merit receiving God's instructions where to offer up Isaac. Without rock-solid faith in his mission, Abraham would never make it to Mount Moriah.

#### **Focused Yet Serene**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/VAYERA63.htm>

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### **Vayera: God and Strangers (5779)**

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

*God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men were standing over against him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent entrance, and bowed down to the earth... Genesis 18:1-2*

Thus Parshat Vayera opens with one of the most famous scenes in the Bible: Abraham’s meeting with the three enigmatic strangers. The text calls them men. We later discover that they were in fact angels, each with a specific mission.

The chapter at first glance seems simple, almost fable-like. It is, however, complex and ambiguous. It consists of three sections:

Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.

Verses 2–16: Abraham meets the men/angels.

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

The relationship between these sections is far from clear. Do they represent one scene, two or three? The most obvious possibility is three. Each of the above sections is a separate event. First, God appears to Abraham, as Rashi explains, “to visit the sick”[1] after Abraham’s circumcision. Then the visitors arrive with the news that Sarah will have a child. Then takes place the great dialogue about justice and the imminent punishment of the people of Sodom.

Maimonides suggests that there are only two scenes: The visit of the angels, and the dialogue with God. The first verse does not describe an event at all; it is, rather, a chapter heading.[2] It tells us that the events that follow are all part of a prophetic revelation, a divine- human encounter.

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

The interpretation of the chapter affects – and hinges upon – the way we translate the word Adonai in Abraham’s appeal:

"Please Adonai, if now I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by, I pray you, from your servant" (18:3). Adonai can be a reference to one of the names of God. It can also be read as "my lords" or "sirs." In the first case, Abraham would be addressing God. In the second, he would be speaking to the passers-by.

The same linguistic ambiguity appears in the next chapter (19:2), when two of Abraham's visitors – now described as angels – visit Lot in Sodom:

*And the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot sat by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low, he said, "I pray you now, adonai, turn aside to your servant's house and tarry all night and bathe your feet and you shall rise up early and go on your way."* Gen. 19:1-2

As there is no contextual element to suggest that Lot might be speaking to God, it seems clear, in this case, that adonai refers to the visitors.

The simplest reading then of both texts – the one concerning Abraham, the other, Lot – would be to read the word consistently as "sirs." Several English translations indeed take this approach. Here, for example, is the New English Bible's:

*The Lord appeared to Abraham... He looked up, and saw three men standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the opening of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. "Sirs," he said, "if I have deserved your favour, do not pass by my humble self without a visit."*

Jewish tradition, however, does not.

Normally, differences of interpretation of biblical narrative have no halachic implications. They are matters of legitimate disagreement. This case of Abraham's addressee is unusual, however, because if we translate Adonai as "God," it is a holy name, and both the writing of the word by a scribe, and the way we treat a parchment or document containing it, have special stringencies in Jewish law. If, by contrast, we translate it as "my lords" or "sirs," it has no special sanctity. Jewish law rules that in the scene with Lot, adonai is read as "sirs," but in the case of Abraham it is read as "God."

This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that Abraham actually interrupted God as He was about to speak, asking Him to wait while he attended to the visitors. According to tradition, the passage should be read thus:

*The Lord appeared to Abraham... He looked up and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them, and bowed down. [Turning to God] he said: "My God, if I have found favour in Your eyes, do not leave Your servant [i.e. Please wait until I have given hospitality to these men]." [He then turned to the men and said:] "Let me send for some water so that you may bathe your feet and rest under this tree..."* [3]

This daring interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: "Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine Presence." [4] Faced with a choice between listening to God, and offering hospitality to what seemed to be human beings, Abraham chose the latter. God acceded to his request, and waited while Abraham brought the visitors food and drink, before engaging him in dialogue about the fate of Sodom. How can this be so? It seems disrespectful at best, heretical at worst, to put the needs of human beings before attending on the presence of God.

What the passage is telling us, though, is something of immense profundity. The idolaters of Abraham's time worshipped the sun, the stars, and the forces of nature as gods. They worshipped power and the powerful. Abraham knew, however, that God is not in nature but beyond nature. There is only one thing in the universe on which He has set His image: the human person, every person, powerful and powerless alike.

The forces of nature are impersonal, which is why those who worship them eventually lose their humanity. As the book of Psalms puts it:

*Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands.  
They have mouths, but cannot speak,*

*Eyes, but cannot see;  
They have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils but cannot smell...  
They that make them become like them,  
And so do all who put their trust in them. Psalms 115:4–8*

One cannot worship impersonal forces and remain a person; compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving. Precisely because we believe that God is personal, someone to whom we can say "You," we honour human dignity as sacrosanct.

Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the Divine Presence when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the Divine Presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

In one of the most beautiful comments on this episode, Rabbi Shalom of Belz notes that in verse 2, the visitors are spoken of as standing above Abraham (nitzavim alav), while in verse 8, Abraham is described as standing above them (omed aleihem). At first, the visitors were higher than Abraham because they were angels and he a mere human being. But when he gave them food and drink and shelter, he stood even higher than the angels.[5]

By choosing the most radical of the three possible interpretations of Genesis 18, the Sages allowed us to hear one of the most fundamental principles of the life of faith: We honour God by honouring His image, humankind.

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

[1] Rashi on Bereishit 18:1; Sotah 14a.

[2] Moreh Nevuhim 11:42.

[3] See Shabbat 127a.

[4] Ibid. See also Shavuot 35b.

[5] Dover Shalom ad loc.; cited in Peninei Chassidut (Jerusalem) to Bereishit 18:2.

#### **Around the Shabbas Table**

1. If the third interpretation of this story is correct, do you think Abraham was justified in speaking to God in this way?
2. Do you think the main focus of Judaism is our relationship with God or with our fellow man?
3. According to Rabbi Sacks, there is a central philosophical message contained in this story, a polemic against the other religions of the time, and perhaps also of our time. What is it?
4. "We honour God by honouring His image, humankind." How can we do this? How can you do this in your life?
5. "To live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger". How different from you does the stranger need to be? Do you think there is a difference between doing chessed for a fellow Jew or a non-Jew?

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/god-and-strangers/> 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.

**Note: Monday, November 7, was two years since Rabbi Sacks, z"l, passed away (on the secular calendar).**

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#### **Euthanasia, Medical Morass, and the Wickedness of Sodom**

## **In Memory of Alta Fixler**

By Elisha Greenbaum \* © Chabad 2022

My son was struggling for life and then an unfeeling doctor made it even worse.

We feel nothing but gratitude for all the heroic doctors and nurses who supported our son, Yechezkel Nochum (may he rest in peace), throughout the time he spent in the hospital. They were uniformly professional and caring. They were respectful of the pain our family was going through and demonstrated through their actions and words that they would do anything to support him throughout his short life.

With one exception.

Yechezkel was less than a week old and had just had another “desat.” Without warning, his oxygen levels plummeted and his heart rate slowed. Sirens went off throughout the ward and doctors and nurses flooded into his room to resuscitate him. Leah and I stood there terrified and helpless, watching and praying, not knowing whether every second would be his last.

By the grace of G d, they managed to stabilize Yechezkel, and he resumed breathing on his own again. The staff all filed back out of the room, as we stammered our inadequate words of thanks. Everyone left, except for one doctor we had never seen before, who imperiously summoned us to join her in a small side room off the main ward.

She insisted we immediately sign a “Do Not Resuscitate” order that, in the event of a similar episode, would instruct the hospital staff to allow him to pass away. She was dogmatic and domineering. When we didn’t agree right away, she became even more assertive and accused us of causing our beloved son to suffer.

I am a rabbi. I have studied at length the weighty topic of when Judaism demands we take heroic measures to preserve life, given by the Almighty G d, and what medical interventions are considered essential. We were in constant consultation with a world-renowned expert on medical ethics and halachah. I have previously accompanied congregants through this terrible journey and was awake to the challenges and complexities of making such a heart-breaking decision. Working with Yechezkel’s doctors, we had just agreed a day earlier on a personal care plan that allowed us to abide by halachah, while doing our best to prevent needless suffering. But this doctor obviously decided that she knew better. Even I began to waver in the face of her strident insistence that we follow her instructions and sign the DNR immediately.

I will never forget the arrogant way in which she looked at us and declared, “We’ve had many religious people like you in here before, but in the end they always agree to do the right thing.”

Thank G d she finally allowed us to return to our son’s bedside and we took a time-out to call our son’s neonatologist. He was appalled by our report of the conversation and whole-heartedly encouraged us to abide by the tenets of our faith.

Our son passed away at home, in our arms, a few days later. At least we could be comforted with the knowledge that we had done everything possible for him during his short sojourn on this earth, protecting him and nurturing him, both physically and spiritually.

### **State-Sanctioned Murder**

I was reminded again of the unpleasant episode with that paternalistic doctor as I read the awful reports of the murder of 2-year-old Alta Fixler (may she rest in peace) on Monday, Oct. 18, 2021, in Manchester, UK. I grieve together with Alta’s parents, and I pray that they find comfort.

Whereas we only encountered one unpleasant doctor and the decision over our son’s best interest was ultimately left to us, in Alta’s case the entire UK medical and legal establishment banded together to murder her. The judges had no qualms about making decisions for Alta, against the express wishes of her parents and in defiance of the dictates of Alta’s religion.

Was there no room for G d? Has hope and faith, vital tools in both the doctors’ and patients’ path to healing, been legislated out of existence?

This was not a question of saving money for the British Health Service, as both Israel and America had agreed to accept her, and members of Alta's community were willing to fully fund the costs of her transfer and treatment. This was purely a case of the State asserting control over an individual, abrogating parental rights and deciding that the secular ideals and atavistic morality of some doctors and judges pre-empt the faith-based perspective of Alta's parents.

Alta was alive and breathed on her own for 90 minutes after her breathing tube was removed. According to Jewish law everyone has the right to hydration, nutrition and respiration and the removal of that breathing tube was tantamount to murder. I can accept that others might have different views, yet how could contemporary society not reciprocally respect another perspective on what constituted Alta's best interest?

It is shocking that in a world that trumpets individual rights and inclusiveness, the only outlook that doesn't seem to count are the timeless values of faith and trust in G-d. What did the judge use as the basis of his decision, other than a vague personal sense of what Alta might prefer? Why aren't the millennia-long traditions of Judaism and its bedrock principles of the sacredness of life not accorded at least equal respect as that of the personal morality of the judge? When did the values of society morph to the situation where the State accords to itself the sole right over life and death, in the face of every counterargument?

We read in the Torah the tragic story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). The Torah justifies G-d's wrath by explaining that the people of Sodom were "wicked sinners" (13:13). One of the traditional descriptions of the iniquities of the inhabitants of Sodom was that the judicial system was a law unto itself, with no higher moral value than the short-term personal interest of its judges. They abrogated property rights and used judicial fiat to take human life, without any need to justify themselves. There were no rule books, no statutes and no higher power, other than the fuzzy morality of contemporary mores. The State allocated to itself the prerogative over life and death, and the absolute right of decision-making for individuals.

Does that not sound familiar? Is this not a precursor to the direction in which society is degenerating? We now have euthanasia on demand. How long before we decline further into society enforcing the so-called mercy killing of individuals with disabilities?

Judaism has nothing to be ashamed of and no need to cower in the face of this new morality. We come from a tradition that values life and sees the value in every life. We proudly assert our beliefs and creeds and commit to shining the bright light of G-dliness into the dark corners of a decaying society.

We love people and believe in G-d. We are guided by a Higher Power and live lives of passion and purpose. Even when society judges us unkindly, we will not bow or break, and we look forward to a time when all those who were taken from us will be restored and redeemed by our righteous Messiah.

Dedicated to the memory of Alta bat Avraham.

\* Rabbi Elisha Greenbaum is spiritual leader of Moorabbin Hebrew Congregation and co-director of L'Chaim Chabad in Moorabbin, Victoria, Australia.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/5284563/jewish/Euthanasia-Medical-Morass-and-the-Wickedness-of-Sodom.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5284563/jewish/Euthanasia-Medical-Morass-and-the-Wickedness-of-Sodom.htm)

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### Vayeira: What's Real Hospitality?

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky \*

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

We can be sure that during the course of his conversation with G-d, Abraham was profoundly engrossed in the Divine

revelation that he was experiencing. After all, when we pray, we are enjoined to first clear our minds of any distracting thoughts.

The fact that Abraham noticed these men and tended to their needs, despite the intensity of his concentration, shows his extraordinary sensitivity to others.

This sensitivity is the key to hospitality.

When offering hospitality to guests, we must do much more than merely offer them a free meal.

We must focus fully on them and be attentive to their needs, displaying sincere concern for their welfare and comfort, taking a genuine interest in their conversation, and in general, making them feel at home when they are with us and that we were enriched by their company when we escort them on their way.

Abraham was the paradigm of such sensitivity to others: in the very midst of a conversation with G-d, he took notice of three travelers and excused himself from G-d's presence to tend to their needs.

– from *Daily Wisdom #3*

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society  
291 Kingston Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11213

\* A Chasidic insight that Rabbi Wisnefsky selected for the parsha.

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

#### Covenant and Conversation

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l**

#### Negative Capability

I have written about the binding of Isaac many times in these studies, each time proposing an interpretation somewhat different from the ones given by the classic commentators. I do so for a simple reason.

The Torah, and Tanach generally, regard child sacrifice as one of the worst of evils. Child sacrifice was widely practised in the ancient world. In 2 Kings 3:26-27, we read of how the Moabite king Mesha, in the course of war against Israel, Judah and Edom, sacrificed his eldest son to the god Chemosh. Had the point of the trial been Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, then in terms of the value system of Tanach itself he would have proven himself no better than a pagan king.

Besides this, the name Abram means "mighty father." The change of name to Abraham was meant to signify "father of many nations." God said that He chose Abram "so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to go in the way of the Lord," meaning that Abraham was chosen to be a role model of fatherhood. A model father does not sacrifice his child.

The classic interpretation given by most of the commentators is beautiful and moving. Abraham showed that he loved God more than he loved his own son. But for the reasons above, I prefer to continue to search for different interpretations. Unquestionably, there was a trial. It involved Isaac. It tested Abraham's faith to the limit. But it was about something else.

One of the most perplexing features of the Abraham story is the disconnect between God's promises and the reality. Seven times, God promised Abraham the land. Yet when Sarah died, he owned not even a burial plot and had to buy one at an exorbitant price.

At the very opening of the story (see parshat Lech Lecha), God called on him to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house, and promised him, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you." Without demur or hesitation, Abraham left, began the journey, and arrived in the land of Canaan. He came to Shechem and built an altar there. He moved on to Bet-El and built an altar there as well. Then almost immediately we read that "There was a famine in the land."

Abraham and his household were forced to go to Egypt. There, he found that his life was at risk. He asked Sarah to pretend to be his sister

rather than his wife, thus putting her in a false position, (conduct which Ramban intensely criticised). Where, at that moment, was the Divine blessing? How was it that, leaving his land and following God's call, Abraham found himself in a morally dangerous situation where he was forced to choose between asking his wife to live a lie, and exposing himself to the probability, perhaps certainty, of his own death?

A pattern is beginning to emerge. Abraham was learning that there is a long and winding road between promise and fulfilment. Not because God does not keep His word, but because Abraham and his descendants were charged with bringing something new into the world. A sacred society. A nation formed by covenant. An abandonment of idolatry. An austere code of conduct. A more intimate relationship with God than any people has ever known. It would become a nation of pioneers. And God was teaching Abraham from the very beginning that this demands extraordinary strengths of character, because nothing great and transformative happens overnight in the human world. You have to keep going, even if you are tired and lost, exhausted and despondent.

God will bring about everything He promised. But not immediately. And not directly. God seeks change in the real world of everyday lives. And He seeks those who have the tenacity of faith to keep going despite all the setbacks. That is what the life of Abraham was about.

Nowhere was this clearer than in relation to God's promise of children. Four times, God spoke about this to Abraham:

- [1] "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you." (Gen. 12:2)
- [2] "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted." (Gen. 13:16)
- [3] "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then He said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Gen. 15:5)
- [4] "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you." (Gen. 17:5-6)

Four ascending promises: a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth, as the stars of the sky; not one nation but many nations. Abraham heard these promises and had faith in them: "Abram believed the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

Then God gave Abraham some painful news. His son by Hagar, Ishmael, would not be his spiritual heir. God would bless him and make him a great nation, "But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." (Gen. 17:21).

It is against this background of four promises of countless children, and a further promise that Abraham's covenant would be continued by Isaac, that we must set the chilling words that open the trial: "Take your son, your only son, the son that you love – Isaac – and offer him up."

The trial was not to see whether Abraham had the courage to sacrifice his son. As we saw above, even pagans like Mesha king of Moab had that courage. It was widespread in the ancient world, and completely abhorrent to Judaism.

The trial was not to see whether Abraham had the strength to give up something he loved. He had shown this time and time again. At the very beginning of his story he gave up his land, his birthplace and his father's house, everything that was familiar to him, everything that spoke of home. In the previous chapter, he gave up his firstborn son Ishmael whom, it is clear, he also loved. Was there even the slightest doubt that he would give up Isaac, who was so clearly God's miraculous gift, arriving when Sarah was already postmenopausal?

The trial was to see whether Abraham could live with what seemed to be a clear contradiction between God's word now, and God's word on five previous occasions, promising him children and a covenant that would be continued by Isaac.

The Rabbis knew that there were instances where two verses contradicted one another until a third verse came to resolve the contradiction. That was Abraham's situation. He was faced with a contradiction, and there was as yet no further verse to resolve it. That was the test. Could Abraham live with uncertainty?

He did just that. He prepared himself for the sacrifice. But he told no one else. When he and Isaac set off on the third day on their own, he told the two servants who had accompanied them, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and

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then we will come back to you." When Isaac asked, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham replied, "God Himself will provide the lamb."

These statements are usually taken as diplomatic evasions. I believe, however, that Abraham meant exactly what he said. He was living the contradiction. He knew God had told him to sacrifice his son, but he also knew that God had told him that He would establish an everlasting covenant with his son.

The trial of the binding of Isaac was not about sacrifice but about uncertainty. Until it was over, Abraham did not know what to believe, or how it would end. He believed that the God who promised him a son would not allow him to sacrifice that son. But he did not know how the contradiction between God's promise and His command would resolve itself.

The poet John Keats, in a letter to his brothers George and Thomas in 1817, sought to define what made Shakespeare so great compared to other writers. He possessed, he said, "Negative Capability – that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Shakespeare, in other words, was open to life in all its multiplicity and complexity, its conflicts and contradictions, while other, lesser writers sought to reduce it to a single philosophical frame. What Shakespeare was to literature, Abraham was to faith.

I believe that Abraham taught us that faith is not certainty; it is the courage to live with uncertainty. He had negative capability. He knew the promises would come true; he could live with the uncertainty of not knowing how or when.

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

"Take your son, your only son, the one whom you love, Isaac, and dedicate him there for a burnt offering [or a dedication; literally, a lifting up] on one of the mountains which I will tell you of." (Genesis 22:2)

As we have seen, there are manifold possibilities of interpreting God's most difficult directive to Abraham. But in order for us to truly appreciate the eternal quality of Torah, let us examine how the martyrs of Jewish history have taken – and drawn inspiration from – this drama of the Akeda (binding).

In the city of Worms, in 1096, some 800 people were killed in the course of two days at the end of the month of Iyar. In The Last Trial, Professor Shalom Spiegel's study of the Akeda, he records a chronicle of that period that cites a declaration by one of the community's leaders, Rabbi Meshulam bar Isaac:

"All you great and small, hearken unto me. Here is my son that God gave me and to whom my wife Tziporah gave birth in her old age. Isaac is this child's name. And now I shall offer him up as father Abraham offered up his son Isaac."

Sadly, the chronicle concludes with the father slaying the boy himself, in the presence of his wife. When the distraught parents leave the room of their sacrifice, they are both cruelly slaughtered by the murdering Christians.

Spiegel quotes from a dirge of the time: "Compassionate women in tears, with their own hands slaughtered, as at the Akeda of Moriah. Innocent souls withdrew to eternal life, to their station on high..."

The biblical story of the binding of Isaac is replayed via the Talmudic invocation of the ram's horn (shofar) each year on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment and Renewal. The shofar symbolizes the ram substitute for Isaac on Mount Moriah; God commands that we hearken to the cries of this shofar 'in order that I may remember for your benefit the binding of Isaac the son of Abraham, and I shall account it for you as if you yourselves bound yourselves up before Me' (Rosh Hashanah 16a).

This message of the shofar has inspired Jews of all generations to rise to the challenge of martyrdom whenever necessary, transforming themselves into Abrahams and Sarahs, placing their precious children on the altar of Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of the divine name.

Indeed, there was apparently a stubborn tradition which insisted that Abraham actually went through with the act of sacrifice. After all, following the biblical command of the angel to Abraham (the *deus ex machina* as it were) – 'Do not cast your hand against the lad' (Genesis 22:19), where is Isaac? If, indeed, his life has just been saved, why doesn't he accompany his father, why don't they go together to the lads, why don't they – father and son – return home together to Beer Sheva and Sarah (as they have been described twice as doing – father and son walking together – in the context of the Akeda story)?!

Moreover, when they first approached the mountain of sacrifice, Abraham tells the young men to wait down below: 'I and the boy will go yonder; we will worship and we will come back to you' (Genesis 22:5).

So why does the text have Abraham return alone?

On the basis of this textual problem, Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) makes mention of an interpretation that suggests that Abraham literally followed God's command, slaying his son, and that God later miraculously brought Isaac back to life. It is precisely that stark and startling deletion of Isaac's name

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from the conclusion of the biblical account of the Akeda itself which gave countless generations of Jewish martyrs the inspiration for their sacrifice; and this is the case, even though Ibn Ezra felt compelled to deny the tradition as inaccurate: "Isaac is not mentioned. But he who asserts that Abraham slew Isaac and abandoned him, and that afterwards Isaac came to life again, is speaking contrary to the biblical text" (Ibn Ezra, Genesis 22:1).

Ibn Ezra is obviously making reference to a commentary which Jewish martyrdom would not allow to fall into oblivion.

The earliest reference to this notion of Isaac's actual sacrifice is probably the Midrash Hagadol which cites R. Eleazer ben Pedat, a first generation Amorah of the Talmud:

"Although Isaac did not die, Scripture regards him as though he had died. And his ashes lay piled on the altar. That's why the text mentions Abraham and not Isaac."

And perhaps one might argue that Isaac was so traumatized by the Akeda that a specific aspect of him did die, part of his personality which would always remain on the altar. After all, Isaac is the most ethereal and passive of the patriarchs, called by the Midrash – even after the binding – the *olah temimah*, the whole burnt offering.

But this psychological interpretation and Ibn Ezra's rejection notwithstanding, the penitential Slichot prayers still speak of the 'ashes of Isaac' on the altar, continuing to give credence to the version which suggests that Isaac did suffer martyrdom. And we have already cited recorded incidents of children who suffered martyrdom at the hands of their parents, who did not wish them to be violated by the pagan tyrants.

God's command to sacrifice Isaac, and Abraham's submissive silence, may actually help us understand how a people promised greatness, wealth and innumerable progeny comparable to the stars, find the courage and the faith to endure the suffering and martyrdom mercilessly inflicted upon them by virtually every Christian or Islamic society with which they come into contact.

The paradox in Jewish history is that unless we were willing to sacrifice our children for God, we would never have survived as a God-inspired and God-committed nation with a unique message for ourselves and the world. Perhaps that is why Mount Moriah, the place of the willingness to sacrifice, is the Temple Mount of the Holy City of Jerusalem: the place from which God will ultimately be revealed to all of humanity; the place of Jewish eternity.

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

**Trials and Tribulations**

There was a coffee shop in the town in which I once lived. It was part of a national chain, so that all kinds of people gathered there for their morning coffee and doughnuts. This particular shop was under strict kosher supervision so that many from the Orthodox community and the nearby yeshiva frequented it as well.

There was a time when I was a regular customer there. Besides the coffee and the irresistible doughnuts it was a great place to meet acquaintances from the local community.

There was one gentleman there who never missed a morning. He dressed in the clothes of a laborer: overalls, flannel shirt, and rubber boots. His head was covered by a baseball cap, which he removed as soon as he entered the café. Generally, we nodded good morning to each other, but that was the extent of our relationship.

One day, he broke the ice. Beckoning to me, he pointed to the seat across from him, and I hesitantly accepted his invitation. He spoke to me in a heavily accented English, and thus began a most memorable relationship. He said, "I am greater than Abraham!"

I could not determine whether he was teasing or being provocative. It even crossed my mind that he might be delusional, perhaps even psychotic. I decided to take his comment at face value and simply responded, "What do you mean?" He replied, "Abraham is praised in our tradition because he successfully withstood ten trials. I withstood many more trials than ten, before I succumbed."

Until that morning, it had never occurred to me that he was Jewish, let alone knowledgeable about Jewish tradition. Over the course of that morning's conversation, and the many mornings that followed, I learned much about him. He was a Hungarian Jew and born to a devout family. He was considered a prize Talmud student and attended a yeshiva during his teenage years. I had heard of that yeshiva and its prestigious dean, and I knew that the dean, his entire faculty, and most of the student body were killed in the furnaces of Birkenau. I was face-to-face with a survivor.

In due time, he told me more of his story. He left the yeshiva, hid for a while in a dozen hiding places, and eventually joined a partisan resistance militia. He was betrayed to the Gestapo by one of his fellow partisans. Because of his physical appearance and obvious strength, he was directed to a series of work camps and ultimately to Auschwitz. He witnessed the deportations of thousands of Jews and was forced to cooperate in the incineration of bodies removed from the gas chambers. Interviewing some of those Jews before their deaths, he learned the horrid details of the murder of his family, of his

fellow students, and of the rabbis with whom he had studied.

"My faith was tested ten times or more daily. But I persisted in my faith, prayed, and even studied in the small Mishnayos that I kept hidden with me. Eventually, my faith dissipated. It was a slow process, a gradual descent into a pit of despair and anger. I finally became convinced that I had to renounce everything I was taught to believe. Even Abraham himself was tested but ten times, I was tested a thousand times. That was too much for any man!"

I tell this story not because it has a happy ending. Shortly after I moved away from that town, I learned that my coffee-shop companion had died, had requested that his body be cremated, and left a brief will in which he expressed his stubborn adherence to his faithlessness. Of course, none of us can sit in judgment of such a person.

But to this day, and especially in the days before we read this week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayera (Genesis 18:1-22:24), I vividly recollect this gentleman and the conversations that we had. I struggle with many questions, not the least of which is the question, "What am I to learn from this man and the many like him?"

If one studies the Torah portions of this week and last and familiarizes oneself with the Abraham narrative, one cannot help but call to mind the passage in Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot), which reads: "Abraham our father was tested with ten trials and he withstood all of them, to make known how deep was our father Abraham's love of God."

Some of you may even have attempted to list the ten trials and have discovered that even the greatest rabbis do not agree upon the exact identity of all ten. But even if you can conclude that there were several more trials that Abraham experienced, you must agree, or at least sympathize, with my coffee-shop companion's contention that he suffered many more trials than Abraham did.

Personally, I have found it meaningful to remember my companion whenever I read the Abraham narrative at this time of year, but especially on Rosh Hashanah when we read of the most dramatic of those trials. For one thing, I find myself counting my own blessings in the realization that I have been spared the kinds of trials that Abraham experienced with enhanced faith, and certainly the trials which my unnamed companion suffered and lost his faith.

But I also find myself realizing that we all are faced with trials, hopefully far less traumatic than those of my Holocaust survivor-friend, but trials nonetheless. I especially recall, and contemplate repeatedly, the lesson I learned from one of the last surviving yeshiva deans of

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the previous generation. I had consulted him for advice when I was offered a particularly challenging, but extremely prestigious, rabbinic position. On the one hand, I was tempted to accept the position. But on the other hand, I knew that I would have to compromise some of my religious standards in the process. I sought out the counsel of this yeshiva dean. He encouraged me to take the position and even offered to stand by me throughout my tenure in the position with his support and guidance.

Nevertheless, I decided to ignore his counsel and turned the position down. Several weeks later, we met at a public event, and he asked me what had happened. I told him that I had concluded that the position entailed too many nisyonot, too many challenges, too many trials.

His retort still resounds in my ears: "Too many nisyonot?! Too many challenges?! Heshele (his pet name for me), there is only one place on Earth where there are no nisyonos, no challenges, no trials! And you don't want to go there!" He was referring, of course, to the cemetery.

We cannot avoid challenges. Perhaps this is the most important life lesson that Abraham taught us. We are all presented with trials, some ten like Abraham, some less, and some many more. But we must rise to challenges, cope with these nisyonos, withstand these tests, and overcome these trials with our faith intact.

This lesson is explicitly and eloquently taught to us by the great eighteenth century mystic and ethicist, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, in his masterpiece Mesilat Yesharim (The Path of the Upright). This is what he writes near the very beginning of this book:

The Holy One, blessed be He, has placed man in a world where there are many things that keep him distant from God. If a man follows the promptings of his physical desires, he gradually departs from the true good and soon finds himself engaged in a desperate battle. Man's circumstances, whether fortunate or unfortunate, are a source of trial. This is true of poverty and also true of wealth.

"Lest I be full and deny, and say, 'Who is the Lord?', or lest I be poor and steal, and take the name of my God" (Proverbs 30:9). Tempted both by prosperity and by adversity, man is in a sore predicament!

We must all be prepared for the trials of life. They are part and parcel of the human condition and cannot be avoided. Abraham taught us this, and Rashi on verse 22:12 envisions the Lord Himself proclaiming with satisfaction, "Now I am able to answer Satan and the nations of the world who wonder why I love you, Abraham. Now they can see for themselves what a God-fearing person you are!"

Abraham resolved the sore predicament. And so can we.

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

#### **Suspect Subtly, With Honor and Respect**

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

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

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

However, there is a different Rashi later on in the parsha [Bereshis 19:2], when the Malachim enter Sodom. Rashi asks on the expression “Take lodging and wash your feet”. Is it customary to first take lodging and only later to wash up? A person does not go to sleep and then take a shower; he showers and then goes to bed! Rashi there answers that Lot was afraid that the people of Sodom would come and find his guests all washed up from their travels and would suspect that he had already been hosting them for several days. He preferred that they remain dusty to appear like they had just arrived and had not yet had time to wash up. In Sodom, they did not take kindly to people who offered hospitality to wayfarers. If they would see that Lot had strangers in his house with clean feet, the Sodomites might fine him for violating their “zoning rules”!

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

The Tolner Rebbe’s second question is the following: Why does Rashi even mention Lot at the beginning of the parsha when explaining why Avraham said first wash and then seek lodging? That really has nothing to do with what Avraham told the Malachim. Let Rashi save his comments about Lot for the later

chapter in Chumash that deals with Lot’s interaction with the Angels! What is the need to raise the issue now?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rabbi Yehoshua commented: “Any person (who you don’t know) should be in your eyes as if he is a thief, and nevertheless you must honor him as if he were Rabban Gamliel.” So we learn in Maseches Derech Eretz. The

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succinct way in which the masses express this idea is “Kab’deihu v’chash’deihu.”

Similarly, in this parsha, Avraham Avinu is demonstrating how to properly be suspicious of your guest. In practical terms, how do you implement “Kab’deihu v’chash’deihu”? Do we need to ask for photo ID whenever someone shows up at our door? Should we ask all guests to leave us a credit card when they “check in” for our home hospitality “just in case we need to cover the incidental charges”? Is that how we are supposed to treat our guests? Or, when the guest is about to leave, do we ask to look through his luggage before he steps out of our house?

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

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

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

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

This answers all three questions: There is no contradiction between the Rashes because both of Lot’s reasons are true. Lot really did not offer them to wash first, because he wanted to make them look like they just arrived, as Rashi says over there. Avraham only offered a little water in order to be subtle about his suspicions that they worshipped the dust on their feet.

And the reason why Rashi also contrasts Avraham with Lot over here, is in order to point out that Avraham kept his suspicion of his guests so subtle that Lot did not even realize what was going on.

With this approach, the Tolner Rebbe says an incredible ‘chap’.

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

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

This explanation allows us to view Rabbi Yehoshua’s maxim “...and respect him like Rabban Gamliel” in a new light. He did not mean that a person should respect the suspected thief as if he were Rabban Gamliel. He meant a person should show respect to this person like Rabban Gamliel showed respect to me. Just like Rabban Gamliel did not make me eat on Yom Kippur even though he held I was wrong, but rather he had respect for my self-esteem and personal dignity – that is how you should treat everyone, even if you suspect their character and integrity. There is no mitzvah to crush people or to break them.

#### Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

##### Being kind is not good enough.

One of the greatest examples of altruism within the whole of Tanach is presented to us at the beginning of Parshat Vayeira. Avraham, who had just had his circumcision, was sitting in pain outside his tent in the heat of the day, looking for strangers. Eventually, he saw three strangers in the distance and he ran to them.

The Torah tells us how he brought them

towards his tent. We are told (Bereishit 18:6), “Vayemaher haohel, el Sara,” – Avraham “rushed to the tent, to Sara,” and he said to her, “Mahari!” – “Quick!” – We’ve got to get a meal going as soon as possible.

It is significant that the term ‘maher’ meaning quick is repeated. ‘Vayemaher’ – Avraham ‘rushed’ into the tent, and ‘mahari’ – ‘quick,’ we’ve got to get going, indicating that sense of urgency.

Avraham easily could have been relaxed at the time. After all, if not for his kindness, these three strangers would not even have known of his existence because it was he who ran after them. If not for that, they would still be walking along by themselves without anything to eat or drink. So he might well have thought: let them wait!

But that wasn’t his attitude. He and Sara went all out to guarantee that they would not have to wait one moment extra than was necessary in order to have something to eat and to drink.

There is a fascinating question which is asked with regard to the mitzvah of tzedakah, giving charity. Why don’t we make a bracha before this mitzvah? After all, it’s a mitzvah like all the other mitzvot of the Torah. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if, every time before I gave to charity, I recited a bracha? Wouldn’t that show how integral our responsibility to our fellow human beings is as part of our responsibility to God?

Yet there is no bracha. Quite a number of answers are given to this question, one of which is given by Reb Simcha Bunim of P’shischa, an 18th Century Chassidic master. He said as follows: Let’s say a poor person is standing in front of me at my door begging for food. Before I recite the bracha, I will probably want to wash my hands. I will be reciting God’s name, so I will stand up; I will build up sufficient kavanah, to have the proper intention; I will recite the blessing, every word with meaning; in the meantime the poor fellow might collapse and die!

You can’t wait when it comes to charity. There is always the element of urgency.

That’s why there is no bracha. That’s something that Avraham and Sara appreciated when they rushed to help those who were hungry and thirsty. From them we learn that being kind is not good enough when it is on our own terms. True kindness has empathy at its heart.

#### Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel Encyclopedia of Jewish Values\*

##### Visiting the Sick or Teaching

The first Rashi comment on the first verse in the Parsha is that God visited Abraham who was ill after his Brit Milah-circumcision (at age 99!!). However, Rashi is not wont to simply supply us with information. What

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bothered Rashi in the verse, to explain that God visited Abraham who was ill? Nechama Leibowitz explained that this is only time in the Torah where it is written *Vayera*-God appeared to someone, where is not followed by “God said to him or her” and this bothered Rashi why this is so. Rashi explains that the Torah is trying to teach us the unique importance of the Mitzvah-commandment to visit the sick, as God came to Abraham not to command Abraham or tell him anything, but merely to be with him, since Abraham was ill. But then we must ask: why is this particular Mitzvah so important that the Torah goes out of its way to teach this to us? What are the specifics of the “Jewish” way to visit the sick that are unique to Judaism? And how does a person fulfill this commandment today, when, unlike in past generations, most sick people are not at home, but, rather, in a hospital?

#### Commandment to Visit The Sick – The Basis and Obligation

Visiting the sick is not specifically mentioned as one of the 613 commandments in the Torah, even after the story in our Parsha, and yet the concept is found in all traditional Jewish sources throughout the ages. The Torah wants Jews to imitate God by following in His ways, and this seems to be a prime directive of the Torah (**Deuteronomy 28:9**). Godly activities complement keeping the commandments (**Deuteronomy 13:5**). How does a Jew, who is merely human, follow in God’s footsteps when God is purely spiritual? One way to follow God is to imitate the “actions” of God in the Torah, says the Talmud. Thus, the Talmud says that just as God visited the sick Abraham so too should each Jew visit anyone who is ill (**Sotah 14a**).

Maimonides lists this obligation of visiting the sick as one of the commandments received by Moses from God that is not written in the Torah but passed on to the Jewish people orally (**Maimonides, Book of Commandments, Shorash 1:2**). But in another one of his works, Maimonides describes the commandment to visit the sick as Rabbinic in origin, under the all-encompassing concept of “Love your neighbor as yourself” and the obligation of each Jew to do kind acts (**Maimonides, Hilchot Avel 14:1**). Since people generally want to be visited when they are ill, Jews should comply with their wishes. Tur cites many of the Talmudic sources and verses cited above as the basis of this commandment, but then adds that visiting the sick is a “great Mitzvah,” a phrase he only uses four other times in his entire four-set volume of Jewish law (**Tur, Yoreh Deah 335**). Thus, it is clear that visiting the sick, despite not being mentioned specifically in the Torah as a commandment, is an extremely important obligation for any Jew who wishes to follow Jewish law.

This unique Mitzvah of visiting the sick is so special and so important that the rewards for its fulfillment are numerous. Rav lists the

“compensation” for visiting the sick as 1) avoiding Gehinom/Hell, 2) gaining God’s protection from enemies and keeping the person alive who fulfills the commandment to visit the sick 3) obtaining God’s protection from acceding to one’s evil inclination 4) being saved from suffering and 5) gaining everyone’s respect and being honored by all (**Nedarim 40a**). Rabbi Yehudah bar Shila states that visiting the sick is one of the six special commandments in Judaism. Moreover, its reward is received in both this world and the Next World (**Shabbat 127a**). This passage was deemed so important that it was placed in the morning prayers recited each day by traditional Jews. Thus, although not a Torah obligation, this commandment is one of the most important in all of Judaism. Why is this so?

### Why is it so Important to Visit the Sick?

What makes this commandment so special, so much more “important” than many others actually written in the Torah? One main reason is that by visiting the patient, the visitor has the ability to help the ill person become healthier! One Talmudic passage ascribes this ability only to the sick person’s friends – that by their visiting the person who is ill, one sixtieth of the illness will be removed (**Bava Metzia 30b**). Another passage also states this power of a visit to a sick person but does not limit it to the ill person’s peers. Rather, this applies to anyone who visits the sick. Now we can understand why this commandment is indeed so important in Jewish thought. Just as every doctor has an obligation to heal a person who is ill because this can often extend life, as explained above, any person can function in some small way as a doctor with the power to heal by removing some of the sickness of the patient through a visit to him or her. Therefore, while a doctor can heal through his or her specific skills, each person can help heal a patient just by paying a visit and exhibiting concern. Thus, it is clear why every Jew has a special obligation to visit patients who are ill and help them get better through the visit. That same Talmudic passage stresses that a person can even visit one hundred times each day.

This statement, that a visitor can remove some of the patient’s illness, might have seemed absurd in the past. But recent studies have clearly shown that the mood of a sick person, both good and bad, affects his or her medical condition (**“Impact of Emotional Reactions on Patients’ Recovery from Physical Illness: Implications for the Medical Social Workers,” J. K. Mojoyinola, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria**). Patients who are depressed take much longer to heal than others with the same symptoms who are optimistic and full of cheer. Therefore, if a visit can cheer up a sick person even a little, that person’s medical condition may indeed improve as a result. The famous editor, Norman Cousins, proved this when he became a patient with a life-threatening illness. He

reasoned that if he laughed repeatedly, his sickness (and its symptoms) would decrease in severity as his mood improved. Against doctor’s orders, he repeatedly watched many comedy movies and his condition indeed improved due to what is now legitimately called “Laugh Therapy.” He lived another twenty-eight years after first being diagnosed with his critical illness.

Thus, the Talmudic statement does not seem so far-fetched now: visiting the sick, especially by friends and loved ones, can indeed help a person to heal faster. In fact, Rabbi Akiva admonished his colleagues for not visiting a student who was ill. After Rabbi Akiva visited with the student, the student felt that Rabbi Akiva’s visit caused him to recover from his symptoms. Afterwards, Rabbi Akiva stated that anyone who does not visit a sick person is the equivalent of a murderer. Rav Dimi reinforced this idea when he said that anyone who visits a sick person causes him or her to live longer, and anyone who does not visit causes an ill person to die earlier (**Nedarim 40a**). The Midrash also states that visiting the sick removes one sixtieth of a person’s sickness, while not visiting the sick (where one could have done so) adds another sixtieth to that person’s sickness (**Midrash Socher Tov, Tehillim 41**). These are not to be taken as hyperbolic statements as Maimonides codifies this concept into normative Jewish law and he indeed equates someone who does not visit the sick with a murderer, similar to a doctor that refuses to treat a sick patient (**Maimonides, Hilchot Avel 14:4**). Therefore, everyone has the potential to be a doctor, in part, with regard to his or her ability to somewhat heal an individual who is sick, and the obligation to visit the sick in order to heal them is no less than the obligation of a doctor to heal any individual who is ill.

### Jewish Etiquette and Jewish Law In Visiting The Sick Person

Judaism and Jewish law show an amazing sensitivity to the needs of the sick, as well as the psychology of both the patient and the person trying to fulfill this important commandment to visit the sick individual. These ancient sources will guide the Jew to understanding the proper “etiquette” of a proper Jewish visit to a sick patient.

There is a statement in the Talmud, which surprisingly is repeated by all the Jewish law authorities of Maimonides, Tur and Shulchan Aruch almost word for word, which conveys a profound understanding of the sick person and the visitors. It says that it is forbidden to visit a person who is sick with an illness of the stomach or the eye or the head because in all of these, it is difficult and embarrassing for this patient, who truly does not want visitors to see him or her in these circumstances (**Nedarim 41a, Maimonides, Hilchot Avel 15:5, Tur & Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:8**). This teaches us that the visit is not for the benefit of the visitor or to fulfill a commandment, but it

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must be for the benefit of the sick person. If the patient is embarrassed by his or her appearance (or the need to constantly go to the bathroom), visitors will not be welcomed by the patient, and the visit should therefore not be undertaken at all. This also teaches us that the visitor should always behave in a manner that will demonstrate a desire to benefit the patient and make him or her feel good about the visit, as only this kind of visit will remove one sixtieth of the sickness. In the same vein, therefore, the visitor must be sensitive to other needs of the patient. For example, some patients may simply not want visitors, even if they do not suffer from the maladies mentioned above. In that case, one should not visit. A phone conversation with the patient should always take place prior the visit in order to determine if the patient is up to having visitors or to determine when to visit, since at the time that doctors are making rounds or taking tests, it would be inconvenient to visit. Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein summarizes this concept by writing that the essence of this commandment is to be sensitive to the needs of the sick person and do whatever will benefit him or her (**Aruch HaShulchan, Yoreh Deah 335:3**).

As part of this goal of trying to make a patient feel better psychologically, a visitor should always practice a simple but effective gesture: knock before entering the hospital room. Every adult is used to some privacy and some control over his or her life. Entering a hospital takes away much of that person’s control. Just as no one would never enter a sick person’s home or room without knocking first, so too, a knock at the patient’s door in the hospital gives that patient a bit of dignity and control to decide when and if the visitor can enter. This is especially true if the curtain is drawn.

The Talmud says, and Maimonides codifies, that a sick person should never be told about another sick friend or relative who has died, because this will cause the patient to be very uncomfortable, especially considering his or her condition (**Moed Katan 26b, Maimonides, Hilchot Avel 8:4**). This also provides an insight into what kinds of conversations are permitted or forbidden with an individual who is ill. We should never discuss topics that will cause a patient distress, like announcing someone’s death. Similarly, criticizing the doctors or the care of the nurses will only diminish the confidence of the patient in the care that he or she is receiving, and should therefore be avoided. Inquiring about the details of the illness may bring some patients distress and should sometimes be avoided, but other patients love to speak about their sickness. A visitor should listen to the patient for cues about what he or she wishes to speak about. Patients generally do not want to hear about others that the visitor knows who had the same illness or hear a personal description of a different illness that the visitor once suffered from. A joke, story or anything that will bring a smile to the patient is

encouraged. Asking the patient about his or her interests or family usually causes the sick individual to perk up. Aruch HaShulchan says that a visitor must be both sensitive and wise in knowing what to speak about and what to avoid (**Aruch HaShulchan, Yoreh Deah 335:4**).

Maimonides and Shulchan Aruch also list other considerations that are subjective, depending on the individual patient and the particular situation (**Maimonides, Hilchot Avel 14:4-5, Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:1, 2, 4**). For example, they rule that a great person, like a great Rabbi or head of Yeshiva, both of whom are very busy, should take time to visit the sick, even to visit a child who is ill. It is also appropriate for a person to visit several times a day if that will bring cheer to the sick person. If it is clear that the patient has an illness that will continue for an extensive period, one should generally not visit during the first three days. If a sick person takes a turn for the worse and may be near death, the visitor should not delay, and see the patient immediately. Finally, one should not visit a patient early in the morning, during the first three hours of the day, as the doctors are usually busy with the patient during this time. (It seems that this practice has not changed much since the Middle Ages.)

Judaism is sensitive to the general needs of the entire community. Thus, part of the fulfillment of this commandment is a Mitzvah to visit non-Jews as well (**Maimonides, Hilchot Avel 8:4, 14:12, Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:9**). There are many sick people in every hospital who have no family and few friends, or people who are often afraid to visit. Therefore, a Jew should visit other patients in the hospital, both Jews and non-Jews, whom they do not even know, as this act will often cheer up these individuals even with an unannounced visit. (Of course, if a person sees that a visit from a stranger makes the patient uncomfortable, then he or she should leave quickly and tactfully.)

Although Maimonides mentions it, Shulchan Aruch expands upon the specifics of the prayers that are a necessary part of the fulfillment of the command to visit the sick. He writes<sup>11</sup> that the visitor (if he or she knows both Hebrew and English) can pray in any language to God while he or she is in front of the sick person but should pray only in Hebrew after the visit on behalf of the patient. Public prayer for the sick in the synagogue is appropriate, even on Shabbat, and most synagogues today publicly recite a prayer for the sick whenever the Torah is read, while it is removed of the Ark for Torah reading. The reason for this is that even if the individual sick person is not worthy, by praying for all the sick in the community and the Jewish nation, there is a better chance that God will bring healing to this individual as well. So too, in the merit of the Torah, the prayers might be answered more positively and more quickly.

<sup>11</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:5-6  
**\* This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at nachum@jewishdestiny.com**

### Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

#### Still Relevant to Our Own Times

##### Rabbi Shlomo Vilk

The story could have played out differently. Avraham could have turned to God in bewilderment with the question – how could God NOT destroy Sodom? Where are You, the God who listens to all cries, when the oppressed and robbed cry out to You? How is it possible that Sodom still exists and God keeps silent?

Avraham could have prayed to the Almighty, demanding that this dreadful desecration of God's name in the world be put to a stop right away; that a local flood wash away this ungodly city so that all the inhabitants of the world know there is a God who rules the world.

But our story is quite different. Avraham demands justice – not for the victims, but for those who have distorted justice. He firmly believes that Divine justice must discern between the righteous and the wicked; that the neighbor of the wicked man must not be punished – although woe to him who stands there in silence watching the injustice. Avraham expects the Judge of the World to show compassion for all, for the simple reason that there still are a few good people about. And a few good people always change the picture if one only believes in them.

We all know what happens at the end: God destroys Sodom and the surrounding cities. However, we are still left with something, and that something is Avraham, the defender of the wicked, who is not afraid to confront God Himself. Ultimately, the Judge of the World is convinced that even the wicked of the world deserve a fair trial, and even some compassion. Avraham asks God not to view those who have gone astray as representative of society at large; rather, God should focus on the righteous – for they give the truest reflection. It is not the murderers, the corrupt, the despicable that require scrutiny; rather – the few individuals, the quorum of good people in whose merit the world (including the wicked) exists.

If the story had played out differently and Avraham had prayed for Sodom's destruction, we would not be here today reading these words of Torah. Instead, we would be filled with sacred fury and pray that the world be demolished in the name of the all-consuming Divinity.

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If the story had taken a different turn, the Jewish descendants of Avraham would not be known for their kindness, compassion and humility; rather – they would be people consumed with hatred, fear and violence.

But the Jewish story has always been different. We are a people that even expressed gratitude to Pharaoh for "hosting" us in Egypt. We blessed the Caesar every Sabbath. We have always known that hatred and fear are traits that characterize the Gentiles; we, on the other hand, seek justice for all the inhabitants of the earth. Sometimes this justice is a distortion of the natural order of things, but we still prefer it to revenge and coarseness of spirit.

We have always visited the sick, both non-Jews and Jews; we have always given charity to the poor of the nations just as we have given charity to our own people because we have always known that the compassion of the Lord is upon all his creations, and peace is more powerful than fear and wickedness (Maimonides, Laws of Kings, Chapter 10). We were trusting and childlike, so much so that even if the poor and the sick we visited killed our people, we continued to believe that there is a better way: if only we behave better and show more faith, we may be able to find hope among the righteous of the nations. We may have been naïve and powerless, but because we believed in the good of mankind, we returned to Zion and to Jerusalem.

But sometimes voices of fear rise up from among us, fear that stems from the evil around us. And when our reality is filled with so much aggression and apprehension, people stop seeing the good; people no longer seek to do justice in Jerusalem; people may even volunteer to serve God with love so long they can avenge the wicked. In such case, Sodom may come to defeat Avraham and turn his descendants into a people driven by violence, hatred and fear; a people who no longer believes in the existence of good, but only await the day when things will be just the way we want them to be.

Indeed, one cannot show any sign of weakness in the Middle East. Nor can one be afraid of fighting and exhibiting strength. However, we know better. Avraham defeated Sodom by praying for the people of Sodom. The battles against evil may be fought on the battlefields, but the war is won by conquering hatred and giving hope. "Hearken to Me, you that follow after righteousness, you that seek the Lord; look unto the rock whence you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence you were dug. Look unto Avraham your father, and unto Sarah that bore you; for when he was but one, I called him, and I blessed him, and made him many." (Isaiah 51)

**Mizrachi Dvar Torah****Our Dual Commitment****Rav Doron Perz**

Circumcision seems to be a strange mitzvah – the first command given to Abraham to pass on to his children, which Jews around the world do today 4,000 years later. It is such an invasive act, such a seemingly harsh act, taking a baby barely a week old and inflicting a wound, a scar for life. It seems strange that this is the first religious act passed from the first Jew to his male children until today.

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch comments on this at the beginning of this week's Parasha – he explains that that is why the harsh, religious act of commitment to G-d is followed by the story of Abraham, suffering on the third day after his circumcision at his advanced age, with his kind and refined incredible acts of chesed that he and Sarah perform. While in such pain, he sits looking out for guests and demonstrates such remarkable hospitality bringing those guests into their home. Running around, Abraham and Sarah can't do enough for them, treating them like noblemen, even though they appear to be pagan wayfarers.

Rav Hirsch says this is coming to teach us a profound idea. Our absolute commitment to G-d should never bring us to be distant from refinement, softness and sensitivity to our fellow human beings. Indeed, it should enhance our commitment to the G-dliness in others. Therefore, he says, the hospitality of Abraham has to be juxtaposed to the harshness of the sign of the Brit Milah.

The Rambam concludes as Halacha that two of the three hallmarks of a Jew are mercy and kindness. So much so, if you see a Jew who acts without mercy and kindness, you have to question their genealogy. A Jew cannot act like that.

May we all continue to strive for this dual commitment – absolute commitment religiously and spiritually to G-d, to fulfil the values of what G-d has imbued Abraham and his descendants until today, but at the same time that should allow us to see the G-dliness in every human being, representing Abraham, being so deeply refined and sensitive to those around us. Deeply committed to G-d, and deeply committed to the G-dliness in all human beings.

**Weekly Parsha VAYEIRA**

**Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein**

**VAYEIRA**

Wars, family dysfunction, and the danger of future extinction are the challenges that confront our father Avraham and our mother Sarah in the narrative that dominates this week's Torah reading. In this era, correcting the past and editing personal biographies to make people's lives appear perfect, serene and smooth, is especially true. This methodology attempts to make the subject character the model and prototype for others to admire and perhaps even imitate.

Who wants to have a life of troubles, frustrations, domestic strife and risk of destruction – all for the sake of a noble but very unpopular cause? So, why would the Torah not wish to at least "pretty up" the story of Avraham and his family at least by omission if not by commission? Of course the Torah is the book of absolute truth and therefore brooks none of the human weaknesses that affect all of us when dealing – even in our most objective attempt – with narratives and biographies.

The message here is that truth is the most important value and outweighs all other considerations. The Torah is determined to teach us that life, even for the greatest of people, is oftentimes difficult, disappointing, and sometimes even cruel. And, that faith and commitment, goodness and morality are the supports that justify our very existence, no matter the challenges that constantly engulf human life. We are not bidden to emulate Avraham's life experiences. Rather, we are bidden to emulate his traits of belief and resilience, commitment and unwavering goodness.

We are taught that God's seal, so to speak, is truth. Truth is the gift that we ask God to grant to Yaakov and his descendants. Maimonides explains to us that we are not to serve idols, believe in superstitions and worship the dead, because all of these are false, little more than a pack of lies. And all of that is also applicable to belief in ideologies that have long lost any sense of truth, as to their goals and certainly as to their methods and policies.

Avraham sees that Sodom is to be destroyed because of its falseness. He recognizes that Avimelech cannot be trusted because he is a hypocritically false person. And Avraham reserves the right to serve the cause of God's truth even at the cost, originally, of his own life, and later that of his own beloved son. The Talmud describes our world as being "a world of falseness." Yet knowing that we inhabit a world of falseness is the first step towards advancing into a world of honesty and truth.

That is what is meant by the biblical admonition to attempt to go in God's ways. To be aware of the difference between falsehood and truth is the necessary ingredient for intelligent life and eternal faith. Avraham's difficulties in life point us towards the way of realism and truth. It knows no compromises or avoidances. It is eternal.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

**VAYERA :: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ZT"ל**

To Bless the Space Between Us

There is a mystery at the heart of the biblical story of Abraham, and it has immense implications for our understanding of Judaism.

Who was Abraham and why was he chosen? The answer is far from obvious. Nowhere is he described, as was Noah, as "a righteous man, perfect in his generations" (Gen. 6:9). We have no portrait of him, like the young Moses, physically intervening in conflicts as a protest against injustice. He was not a soldier like David, or a visionary like Isaiah. In only one place, near the beginning of our parsha, does the Torah say why God singled him out:

Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham is about to become a great and mighty nation, and through him all the nations on earth will be blessed. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of

the Lord by doing what is right and just, that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He spoke of for him."

Gen. 18:17-9

Abraham was chosen in order to be a father. Indeed Abraham's original name, Av ram, means "mighty father", and his enlarged name, Avraham, means "father of many nations".

No sooner do we notice this than we recall that the first person in history to be given a proper name was Chava, Eve, because, said Adam, "she is the mother of all life." (Gen. 3:20) Note that motherhood is drawn attention to in the Torah long before fatherhood (twenty generations to be precise, ten from Adam to Noah, and ten from Noah to Abraham). The reason is that motherhood is a biological phenomenon. It is common to almost all forms of advanced life. Fatherhood is a cultural phenomenon. There is little in biology that supports pair-bonding, monogamy, and faithfulness in marriage, and less still that connects males with their offspring. That is why fatherhood always needs reinforcement from the moral code operative in a society. Absent that, and families fragment very fast indeed, with the burden being overwhelmingly borne by the abandoned mother.

This emphasis on parenthood – motherhood in the case of Eve, fatherhood in that of Abraham – is absolutely central to Jewish spirituality, because what Abrahamic monotheism brought into the world was not just a mathematical reduction of the number of gods from many to one. The God of Israel is not primarily the God of the scientists who set the universe into motion with the Big Bang. It is not the God of the philosophers, whose necessary being undergirds our contingency. Nor is it even the God of the mystics, the Ein Sof, the Infinity that frames our finitude. The God of Israel is the God who loves us and cares for us as a parent loves for, and cares for, a child.

Sometimes God is described as our father:

"Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?"

Malachi 2:10

Sometimes, especially in the late chapters of the book of Isaiah, God is described as a mother: "Like one whom his mother comforts, so shall I comfort you." (Is. 66:13) "Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you." (Is. 49:15) The primary attribute of God, especially whenever the four-letter name Hashem is used, is compassion, the Hebrew word for which, rachamim, comes from the word rechem, meaning "a womb".

Thus our relationship with God is deeply connected to our relationship with our parents, and our understanding of God is deepened if we have had the blessing of children (I love the remark of a young American Jewish mother: "Now that I've become a parent I find that I can relate to God much better: now I know what it's like creating something you can't control"). All of which makes the story of Abraham very hard to understand for two reasons. The first is that Abraham was the son told by God to leave his father:

"Go – from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house..."

Gen. 12:1

The second is that Abraham was the father told by God to sacrifice his son: Then God said: "Take your son, your only son, the one whom you love – Isaac – and go to the land of Moriah. There, offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, the one that I will show you."

Gen. 22:2

How can this make sense? It is hard enough to understand God commanding these things of anyone. How much more so given that God chose Abraham specifically to become a role model of the parent-child, father-son relationship.

The Torah is teaching us something fundamental and counterintuitive. There has to be separation before there can be connection. We have to have the space to be ourselves if we are to be good children to our parents, and we have to allow our children the space to be themselves if we are to be good parents.

I argued last week that Abraham was in fact continuing a journey his father Terach had already begun. However, it takes a certain maturity on our part before we realise this, since our first reading of the narrative seems to suggest that Abraham was about to set out on a journey that was completely new. Abraham, in the famous midrashic tradition, was the iconoclast who took a hammer to his father's idols. Only later in life do we fully appreciate that, despite our adolescent rebellions, there is more of our parents in us than we thought when we were young. But before we can appreciate this, there has to be an act of separation.

Likewise in the case of the Binding of Isaac. I have long argued that the point of the story is not that Abraham loved God enough to sacrifice his son, but rather that God was teaching Abraham that we do not own our children, however much we love them. The first human child was called Cain because his mother Eve said, "With the Lord's help, I have acquired [kaniti] a man" (Gen. 4:1). When parents think they own their child, the result is often tragic.

First separate, then join. First individuate, then relate. That is one of the fundamentals of Jewish spirituality. We are not God. God is not us. It is the clarity of the boundaries between heaven and earth that allows us to have a healthy relationship with God. It is true that Jewish mysticism speaks about bittul ha-yesh, the complete nullification of the self in the all-embracing infinite light of God, but that is not the normative mainstream of Jewish spirituality. What is so striking about the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Bible is that when they speak to God, they remain themselves. God does not overwhelm us. That is the principle the Kabbalists called tzimtzum, God's self-limitation. God makes space for us to be ourselves.

Abraham had to separate himself from his father before he, and we, could understand how much he owed his father. He had to separate from his son so that Isaac could be Isaac and not simply a clone of Abraham. Rabbi Menahem Mendel, the Rebbe of Kotzk, put this inimitably. He said:

"If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you!"

God loves us as a parent loves a child – but a parent who truly loves their child makes space for the child to develop their own identity. It is the space we create for one another that allows love to be like sunlight to a flower, not like a tree to the plants that grow beneath. The role of love, human and Divine, is, in the lovely phrase of Irish poet John O'Donohue, "to bless the space between us".

#### **[Rav Frand - Kofin Al Midas Sodom - Forcing Kindness**

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1136 – I have a Toothache / Headache / Cold – Do I Still Have To Daven? Good Shabbos!

In Parsha Vayera, Avraham Avinu prayed for the people of Sodom, despite the fact that the Sodomites were polar opposites of him. Avraham Avinu was the Man of Chesed. The people of Sodom institutionalized "anti-chessed behavior." Avraham Avinu was renowned for his hospitality and practice of welcoming guests. Many Medrashim describe how they abused guests in Sodom. We know the fate of Sodom.

But we learn out a practical halacha from the Torah's narrative about Sodom. There is a principle called "Kofin al midas Sodom" – there are certain situations where Beis Din has the ability to force a person to do a chessed if non-performance of such a kindness would fall into the category of "Sodomite attributes." What is a classic example? "Zeh ne'heneh v'zeh lo chossar." (This person benefits and the other person suffers no loss.) Someone who refuses to let another person use his item, even though it will not cost him anything, is practicing Sodomite behavior. Beis Din is allowed to step in and force the owner of the item to bestow the favor to his neighbor.

For example, if Reuven is driving up Park Heights Ave and Shimon wants a ride in the same direction that Reuven is travelling, and it will

cause no extra wear and tear or extra time or gas consumption on Reuven's part, refusing to take Shimon would be midas Sodom. The Rambam wrote an interesting letter to one of his disciples on this subject. The Rambam wrote a sefer called Moreh Nevuchim (Guide to the Perplexed). It was a controversial sefer, and certain people viewed some of its ideas as heretical and condemned its author. Incredibly, they called the Rambam an Apikorus for what he wrote in the Moreh Nevuchim (and for some of what he wrote in other places as well).

A student of the Rambam took up his Rebbe's honor and fought against these people. The Rambam wrote a letter to him and told him to leave these critics alone. He argued, "This is an example of Kofin al midas Sodom." He said "What they say does not hurt me. It does not cost me anything. They want to do it, and they get pleasure from doing it." He said, "Let them go ahead, let them abuse me, let them call me a heretic. It makes no difference to me."

This is an incredible application of Kofin Al Midas Sodom.

#### **----- Prayer Has the Power to Nullify Heavenly Decrees**

"Hashem appeared to Avimelech in a dream at night and told him, 'Behold you are going to die for having taken the woman you took, for she is a married woman.'" (Bereshis 20:3)

Thinking that Sora was the sister rather than the wife of Avraham, Avimelech took Sora into his house. Hashem came to Avimelech in a dream and told him that he was deserving of death for this matter. The Almighty then added, "And now return this woman to her husband for he is a prophet and he will pray for you that you might live. And if you do not return (her) know that you will die..." (Bereshis 20:7)

The words "Behold you will die" spoken by the Ribono shel Olam in pasuk 3 are the equivalent of "YOU ARE A DEAD MAN!" If the Ribono shel Olam pronounces someone a dead man, is that not a Divine Decree? After a Divine Decree, should it not be a done deal? And yet, Hashem then instructs in pasuk 7, "Return this woman to her husband and he will pray for you so that you may live."

We see from this latter pasuk, that even if a person has a death sentence upon himself, prayer can nullify the death sentence. It does not always work. It does not always happen. But that is what this pasuk is saying: Behold you will die. You are a dead man. Nevertheless, he will pray for you. Prayer helps.

The same thing occurs in two other places in Tanach.

Yeshaya the prophet comes to Chezkiyahu, King of Yehuda, and tells him prophetically "You will die. You will not live." (Yeshaya 38:1) The very next pasuk says, "And Chezkiyahu turned his face to the wall and he prayed to Hashem." (ibid. 38:2) Guess what? Chezkiyahu lived for fifteen more years. What happened to the prophetic decree? The decree was prior to his prayer.

The primary example of this is Hashem's decree to Moshe: "You shall not cross this Jordan (River)" (Devorim 3:27). The Almighty decreed that Moshe Rabbeinu would not enter Eretz Yisrael. And yet the pasuk says, "And I prayed (Vo'Eschanan) to Hashem at that time saying..." (Devorim 3:24). Chazal say that Moshe davened the gematria (numeric value) of the word Vo'Eschanan, in other words, 515 times, after which Hashem told him, "Do not speak to me any more about this matter" (Devorim 3:26) because if you pray even one more time, I will need to let you enter the Land of Israel. What does that mean? He is the Ribono shel Olam! How can Moshe force His Hand? We see here again, that the Ribono shel Olam created an institution in this world called prayer. Prayer has a power—even to nullify a decree from Heaven.

#### **Splitting of Wood Foreshadows Splitting of Reed Sea – Measure for Measure**

The pasuk says "And Avraham got up early in the morning, he saddled his donkey, he took his two lads with him, and his son Yitzchak, AND HE SPLIT WOOD FOR THE OLAH OFFERING..." (Bereshis 22:3). He is on the way to the Akeida, during which he expects to offer Yitzchak as a korban. Offerings are burnt on a mizbayach. Wood is needed for the fire. In order to prepare the wood, he split the wood before beginning his journey (Va'Yevaka atzei Olah).

The Medrash says that Hashem proclaimed, "I will split for his descendants the Reed Sea in the merit of his having split the wood, as it

is written “Va’Yevaka atzei Olah” (Bereshis 22:3) and it is written “Va’Yebaku haMayim” (Shemos 14:21). The Torah uses the same root word by Krias Yam Suf to indicate splitting that it uses by Avraham’s splitting wood for the Akeida. In the merit of Avraham’s chopping the wood, the waters at Yaf Suf split!

If the Medrash would say that in the merit of the Akeidas Yitzchak the Yam split, I could understand that. The Akeida involved superhuman mesiras nefesh for Avraham to sacrifice his own son. But how does splitting the wood merit such a miracle? Avraham needed to cut the wood because he needed fire wood! What was so special about that action that merited the great miracle of Krias Yam Suf?

Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank (1873-1960; Chief Rabbi of Yerushalayim) interpreted the Medrash as follows: The Gemara says that it is easier to carry fifty pounds of gold than fifty pounds of feathers. Why is that? Is it not the same fifty pounds whether it is feathers or gold? The answer is that an ingot of gold is dense and compact and easy to carry. However, fifty pounds of feathers is very bulky, and is far clumsier to transport.

Now if you were Avraham Avinu and you needed to sacrifice your son, and you knew that you needed firewood, so you needed to take some with you in case you would not find firewood on site, what should you do? Does it make sense to take one compact log, or to cut up the log before leaving home and shlep all the fragments of twigs and wood that came out of the chopping activity? Obviously, it is much easier to take the hunk of wood and chop it when you get to your destination! Avraham travelled for three days carrying this clumsy sack of wood! Very inefficient!

Why did he do it that way? The answer is that when he arrived at the site of the Akeida and he put Yitzchak on the Mizbayach, he wanted to complete the job ASAP. He did not want to torment Yitzchak any more than necessary. If Yitzchak is lying there on the Mizbayach and then his father needs to begin chopping wood, Yitzchak may panic, or at the very least there will be inui ha’din (psychological trauma as a result of delayed implementation of judgement). Avraham Avinu did not want to prolong the agony of his son. He had the sensitivity and foresight to chop the wood before he left home so that when he arrived, everything would be ready.

Rav Tzvi Pesach cites a Medrash that when the Sea was split, they were supposed to step into the sea and then a little water would part. Then they would go further and more would part. With each step forward, more water would part. However, in the meantime, they would be surrounded by intimidating walls of water. The Ribono shel Olam said, “Avraham Avinu had the sensitivity to do the Akeida in a fashion that his act of chopping would not cause undue stress. So too, Va’Yibaku HaMayim, as soon as they entered the water, the entire sea split open, and they could immediately see the light at the end of the tunnel. This was the midah k’neged midah. The sensitivity of Avraham by the Akeida to not inflict any more anguish than necessary was replicated by the Almighty when He split the sea in a way which diminished the anguish of Bnei Yisrael.

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Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail [tapes@yadyechiel.org](mailto:tapes@yadyechiel.org) or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information.

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

### Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “Take your son, your only son, the one whom you love, Isaac, and dedicate him there for a burnt offering [or a dedication; literally, a lifting up] on one of the mountains which I will tell you of.” (Genesis 22:2)

As we have seen, there are manifold possibilities of interpreting God’s most difficult directive to Abraham. But in order for us to truly

appreciate the eternal quality of Torah, let us examine how the martyrs of Jewish history have taken – and drawn inspiration from – this drama of the Akeda (binding).

In the city of Worms, in 1096, some 800 people were killed in the course of two days at the end of the month of Iyar. In The Last Trial, Professor Shalom Spiegel’s study of the Akeda, he records a chronicle of that period that cites a declaration by one of the community’s leaders, Rabbi Meshulam bar Isaac:

“All you great and small, hearken unto me. Here is my son that God gave me and to whom my wife Tziporah gave birth in her old age. Isaac is this child’s name. And now I shall offer him up as father Abraham offered up his son Isaac.”

Sadly, the chronicle concludes with the father slaying the boy himself, in the presence of his wife. When the distraught parents leave the room of their sacrifice, they are both cruelly slaughtered by the murdering Christians.

Spiegel quotes from a dirge of the time:

“Compassionate women in tears, with their own hands slaughtered, as at the Akeda of Moriah. Innocent souls withdrew to eternal life, to their station on high...”

The biblical story of the binding of Isaac is replayed via the Talmudic invocation of the ram’s horn (shofar) each year on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment and Renewal. The shofar symbolizes the ram substitute for Isaac on Mount Moriah; God commands that we hearken to the cries of this shofar ‘in order that I may remember for your benefit the binding of Isaac the son of Abraham, and I shall account it for you as if you yourselves bound yourselves up before Me’ (Rosh Hashanah 16a).

This message of the shofar has inspired Jews of all generations to rise to the challenge of martyrdom whenever necessary, transforming themselves into Abrahams and Sarahs, placing their precious children on the altar of Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of the divine name.

Indeed, there was apparently a stubborn tradition which insisted that Abraham actually went through with the act of sacrifice. After all, following the biblical command of the angel to Abraham (the deus ex machina as it were) – ‘Do not cast your hand against the lad’ (Genesis 22:19), where is Isaac? If, indeed, his life has just been saved, why doesn’t he accompany his father, why don’t they go together to the lads, why don’t they – father and son – return home together to Beer Sheva and Sarah (as they have been described twice as doing – father and son walking together – in the context of the Akeda story)?!

Moreover, when they first approached the mountain of sacrifice, Abraham tells the young men to wait down below:

‘I and the boy will go yonder; we will worship and we will come back to you’ (Genesis 22:5).

So why does the text have Abraham return alone?

On the basis of this textual problem, Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) makes mention of an interpretation that suggests that Abraham literally followed God’s command, slaying his son, and that God later on miraculously brought Isaac back to life. It is precisely that stark and startling deletion of Isaac’s name from the conclusion of the biblical account of the Akeda itself which gave countless generations of Jewish martyrs the inspiration for their sacrifice; and this is the case, even though Ibn Ezra felt compelled to deny the tradition as inaccurate:

“Isaac is not mentioned. But he who asserts that Abraham slew Isaac and abandoned him, and that afterwards Isaac came to life again, is speaking contrary to the biblical text” (Ibn Ezra, Genesis 22:1).

Ibn Ezra is obviously making reference to a commentary which Jewish martyrdom would not allow to fall into oblivion.

The earliest reference to this notion of Isaac’s actual sacrifice is probably the Midrash Hagadol which cites R. Eleazer ben Pedat, a first generation Amorah of the Talmud:

“Although Isaac did not die, Scripture regards him as though he had died. And his ashes lay piled on the altar. That’s why the text mentions Abraham and not Isaac.”

And perhaps one might argue that Isaac was so traumatized by the Akeda that a specific aspect of him did die, part of his personality which

would always remain on the altar. After all, Isaac is the most ethereal and passive of the patriarchs, called by the Midrash – even after the binding – the olah temimah, the whole burnt offering.

But this psychological interpretation and Ibn Ezra's rejection notwithstanding, the penitential Slichot prayers still speak of the 'ashes of Isaac' on the altar, continuing to give credence to the version which suggests that Isaac did suffer martyrdom. And we have already cited recorded incidents of children who suffered martyrdom at the hands of their parents, who did not wish them to be violated by the pagan tyrants. God's command to sacrifice Isaac, and Abraham's submissive silence, may actually help us understand how a people promised greatness, wealth and innumerable progeny comparable to the stars, find the courage and the faith to endure the suffering and martyrdom mercilessly inflicted upon them by virtually every Christian or Islamic society with which they come into contact.

The paradox in Jewish history is that unless we were willing to sacrifice our children for God, we would never have survived as a God-inspired and God-committed nation with a unique message for ourselves and the world. Perhaps that is why Mount Moriah, the place of the willingness to sacrifice, is the Temple Mount of the Holy City of Jerusalem: the place from which God will ultimately be revealed to all of humanity; the place of Jewish eternity.

Shabbat Shalom!

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### [Essay Vayeira Angels & Mustard

#### What Angels Don't Understand About Holiness

Rabbi YY Jacobson

November 2, 2012 | 17 Cheshvan 5773

Class Summary:

Angels and Mustard - What Angels Don't Understand About Humans Out Of This World?

A man returning from the world's first wedding on Pluto seemed disappointed.

"What's wrong?" asked his friend. "The band was no good?"

"The band was great," he answered.

"The food was lousy?" asked his friend.

"Out of this world!"

"Nu! So, what was the problem?" asked his friend.

"There was no atmosphere."

Hospitality

The opening of this week's Torah portion[1], Vayeira, relates the tale of Abraham sitting during a hot day at the entrance of his tent and observing three men standing nearby. He ran toward them and insisted they come to relax in his tent.

Abraham was very specific[2]: "Let some water be brought and wash your feet, and recline beneath the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread so that you may sustain yourself."

The three men consent and accept Abraham's invitation.

At this point, the Torah gives us a detailed account of what transpired during the following moments[3]:

"Abraham rushed to the tent to Sarah [his wife] and said, 'Hurry! Three measures[4] of the finest flour! Knead it and make rolls!' Then Abraham ran to the cattle, took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the young man who rushed to prepare it.

"He took cottage cheese[5] and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed these before them; he stood over them as they ate under the tree."

"They asked him, 'Where is Sarah your wife? And he said, 'Behold — in the tent!'"

"I will return to you this time next year," said [one of the men], 'and your wife Sarah will have a son.'"

The continuation of the narrative makes it clear[6] that these three visitors were no simple men, but rather spiritual energies, or angels, manifested in the bodies and the guise of men. These angels were sent to carry out three monumental tasks described in the continuation of the story: A) to inform Abraham that Sarah would give birth to a child; B) to overturn the evil city of Sodom and, finally, C) to rescue Abraham's nephew Lot and his family who lived in Sodom[7].

Three Questions

The commentators raise a few questions.

1) Since two of the three angels came to carry out tasks unrelated to Abraham, why did these two angels come to Abraham's home first[8]?

2) Why does the Torah find it necessary to inform us of the exact words and tasks of Abraham upon greeting the guests, including the exact menu of what he served them? If the Torah wished to teach us about his extraordinary hospitality, couldn't it have simply stated that Abraham took care of all their needs?

3) The question the men asked Abraham — "Where is Sarah your wife?" — seems amiss, since after Abraham told them where she was, they did not proceed to address her, and continued speaking to Abraham. Why did they ask this question[9]?

Visiting A Rebbe

The Chassidic masters offer a moving homiletical interpretation of this biblical episode[10].

According to Jewish tradition[11], there exists in each generation a tzaddik, a great moral giant, who serves as the spiritual foundation of the world, as a bridge between heaven and earth. This is a human being who carries the burden of history on his shoulders and always has his finger on the pulse of the generation. While others plan their vacations and retirements, this person cannot sleep at night as long as there is one soul in G-d's universe hurting.

In his times, Abraham served as this tzaddik, the Rebbe (spiritual master) of the world. When three angels were dispatched to pay a visit to planet Earth, they were determined to visit this extraordinary human being. They longed to be touched by his soul, inspired by his spirituality, and ignited by his passion. The angels craved to encounter the majesty of holiness at its peak.

When the three angels approached Abraham's tent, they expected to discover a soul burning with a sacred flame, steeped in heavenly meditation, melting away in infinite ecstasy. They expected to find a spirit dancing with the Divine, free of any trace of the mundane, suspended above the crassness of the physical universe and its materialistic trappings.

The Shocking Moment

What was the reality the angels actually encountered?

"Let some water be brought and wash your feet, and recline beneath the tree," the great Rebbe, Abraham, declared. "I will fetch a morsel of bread so that you may sustain yourself," were the words that came out of G-d's ambassador to planet earth.

"Abraham rushed to the tent to Sarah [his wife] and said, 'Hurry! Three measures of the finest flour! Knead it and make rolls!' Then Abraham ran to the cattle, took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the young man who rushed to prepare it. He took cottage cheese and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed these before them; he stood over them as they ate under the tree."

A man of infinite ecstasy? No. A good chef who knows how to run a smooth kitchen — that is what they saw in Abraham.

"We thought we were coming to a Rebbe," they must have thought to themselves. "Instead, we ended up at a butcher."

In lieu of finding the light of the divine radiating from Abraham's tent, they discovered an old man running around, tongue and mustard in his hands[12]! "We must have come to the wrong location," the angels mused.

What About The Wife?

Then a thought came to their mind that perhaps when they heard in heaven that Abraham was the tzaddik of the generation, it was actually referring not to him but to his counterpart, Sarah. She might be the real master of the generation and Abraham merely her attendant.

So the narrative continues: "They asked him, 'Where is Sarah your wife[13]?' Perhaps we can get a glimpse of your wife and we will finally encounter the presence of authentic holiness.

"And he said, 'Behold — in the tent!'" What Abraham was telling the angels is that if they did not 'get it' henceforth, seeing Sarah wouldn't do the job either, for she is even more concealed than Abraham. She is concealed in the tent. Her true identity is not easily appreciated.

Angels Enlightened

At that moment, for the first time, the angels realized how deeply they had erred. In their longing to encounter holiness, they missed the ultimate point: that the authentic majesty of human holiness consists of a person's daily acts of love, selflessness, and graciousness performed amid the stress and lowliness of physical existence. The angels failed to recognize that the genuine experience of serving G-d means not to soar to the heavens searching for angels, but to be there for another human being in a very real and pragmatic way.

"Hurry! Three measures of the finest flour! Knead it and make rolls!" In this simple, mundane behavior, Abraham constructed a fragment of heaven on earth.

What Life Is Really Like

"I will return to you this time next year, and your wife Sarah will have a son," came the response of the angel. This was not merely a communication of G-d's earlier promise to Abraham; it was also a response of an angel in awe of the revolution that Abraham introduced to the world, in which a human being in his ordinary daily behavior can build a home for G-d. Abraham's revolution, the angel insisted, must have a future in the form of a family, and, ultimately, a people, charged with the mission to teach the world how to fuse heaven and earth. The angels never forgot that visit. Abraham gave them not only a sobering lesson in what real life is like but also a lesson of what it meant to be authentically spiritual.

True spirituality, Abraham was communicating to the angels, lies not in man's attempt to escape the trappings of the world, but rather in his commitment to

drawing down light and beauty into the darkness of life. It is only here -- not in Pluto -- that you can create the real atmosphere.

#### Above the Angels

This explains an enigmatic change in the language of the text. In the beginning of the narrative detailing the visit of the angels, we read: "vehinei shlosha anoshim nitzavim aluv," meaning that the angels were standing over him. Later, when the guests are being served by Abraham, we read: "vehu omed aleihem," meaning that Abraham stood over them[14].

It was through this act of hospitality that Abraham rose far and beyond the angels; he was now standing over and above them. Through simple human kindness practiced on earth that the human being reaches far beyond the most spiritual angels.

[1] Genesis chapter 18.

[2] Ibid. 18:4.

[3] Ibid. 18:6.

[4] Se'ahs in Hebrew. This is equivalent to around 30 cups or 9 pounds of flour!

[5] Chemah in Hebrew. See The Living Torah (by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan) for the various translations of the word.

[6] Genesis 19:1. Cf. referenced noted in the following footnote.

[7] These three tasks are explicitly stated in the biblical narrative. Our sages point out that the third angel who rescued Lot also healed Abraham after his circumcision at the age of 99 (Bava Metzia 86b; Bereshis Rabah 50:2; Rashi Genesis 18:2).

[8] According to the sources in the previous footnote, two of the angels were given tasks related to Abraham. Still the question remains, why did the third angel go to Abraham's home?

[9] See Rashi Genesis 18:9 (from the Midrash and the Talmud) for three possible answers to this question.

[10] The germ of the idea I heard from Rabbi Yisroel Twersky (Lakewood, NJ), who heard it from his relative, the distinguished Jerusalem Rabbi Baruch Shimon Schneerson (1912-2001), Rosh Yeshiva of Tshebin, and son-in-law of the famed Tshebiner Rav, Rabbi Dov Berish Weinfield (1881-1966). Later I found it in Chidushei Harim to Vayeira, in the name of Rabbi Yechiel Michel of Zhlotshov.

[11] See Talmud Yuma 38b (based on Proverbs 10:25); Bereishis Rabah 56:7; Tikkunei Zohar Tikkun 69 (p. 114a); Kesser Shem Tov, and many Chassidic sources.

[12] See Talmud Bava Metzia 86b; Rashi to Genesis 18:7: Abraham prepared three bulls in order to feed them three tongues with mustard.

[13] This also explains why the angels felt the need to specify to Abraham in their question that Sarah was his wife ("Where is Sarah your wife"?). Surely, Abraham, knew who Sarah was! Yet the angels were explaining why they could have erred in thinking that Abraham was the tzaddik, though it was really Sarah, since they were connected as one, as a husband and wife.

[14] See Degel Machane Ephraim on the verse.

My thanks to Shmuel Levin for his editorial assistance.

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## Insights Parshas Vayeira Cheshvan 5783

### Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

**Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig**  
This week's Insights is dedicated in memory of Mina Bas Yitzchak Isaac.

"May her Neshama have an Aliyah!"

#### That Healing Feeling

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

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

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

This seems a little odd. After all, Hashem Himself came to visit Avraham to do bikur cholim. Ostensibly, this would seem to be the highest level of "medical care" that one could hope to achieve. What

possible reason would there have been to also send the angel Raphael to heal him?

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

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

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

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

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

#### People in Glass Houses...

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

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

The Gemara goes on to say that the angels didn't appreciate Avraham suspecting them of such a thing and actually criticized Avraham in their response: "Did you actually suspect us to be Arabs that bow to the dust of their feet? First look at your very own son Yishmael (who regularly does that)?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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**Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parsha Insights**  
For the week ending 12 November 2022 / 18 Cheshvan 5783  
**Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - [www.seasonsofthemoon.com](http://www.seasonsofthemoon.com)**

**Parshat Vayeira**

**The Centrifuge Of Prayer**

*"Would You destroy the entire city because of the five?" (18:28)*

I always approach the prayers of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur with some trepidation. Why are they so long and repetitive? How many times do we have to say we're sorry to Hashem? On Yom Kippur we confess 10 times. We say the Yud Gimmel Middot, the 'thirteen traits of mercy' over and over again. Towards the end of Yom Kippur it seems like a race to squeeze in one more Yud Gimmel Middot before sunset brings the curtain down on the day. Why this seemingly endless repetition?

Building a nuclear weapon is a extremely difficult thing to do. Weapons-grade uranium is a highly unstable form of Uranium that makes up just 0.7 percent of the of uranium ore that is dug up. The United States nuclear weapons project – the Manhattan Project - employed more than 130,000 people and cost the equivalent of about \$23 billion today to build three atom bombs. Some 240 square miles of land were requisitioned by the US government. The Hanford atomic complex ran a fleet of 900 hundred buses for its 51,000 employees – more than the city of Chicago.

To extract the radioactive isotope U235 with the centrifuge method, it was estimated that producing a mere 2.2 lbs of uranium-235 per day would require up to 50,000 centrifuges.

Rav Moshe Shapiro, zt"l, one of the great Rabbis of our generation, would start saying selichot, the penitential prayers leading up to Rosh Hashana, at the beginning of Elul with a Sefardi minyan, even though his native Ashekanzi tradition was to start a few days before Rosh Hashana. And when the time came for the Ashkenazi selichot to begin, he would continue to say selichot with the Sefardim as well. When asked why he did this, he replied, "Yud Gimmel Middot."

The refining of the soul is like extracting Uranium 235 from Uranium ore. Like a centrifuge of the soul spinning and spinning, every repetition of the Yud Gimmel Middot, every vidui, every confession refines us and brings us closer to the critical mass of teshuva.

In this week's Torah portion, Avraham prays again and again to Hashem to spare the cities of Sodom and Gemorrah and the other cities of the plain. First, he beseeches Hashem to save the cities if there are a total

forty-five righteous people in all five cities, and Hashem would, so to speak, complete the required quorum of ten in each place. Rashi explains that Avraham then pleaded that even if there were not forty five as a total of all the cities, each city should be looked at separately and a group of ten even in one city would suffice even if that would not save the other cities. He then pleaded that even if forty righteous people were to be found, and then again if thirty are to be found, and then twenty, and then ten. The Ramban learns this to means that even ten spread out across all the cities would save them all.

Avraham kept praying and praying and praying. His every prayer was a hope to refine the middah of forgiveness in this world to its maximum.

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**Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

**Dvar Torah Vayeira: What will we become the parent of?**

**10 November 2022**

It is possible for your parent not to be related to you.

And this applies to everyone. In Parshat Vayeira (Bereishit 18:19), Hashem pays the ultimate compliment to Avraham Avinu, Abraham our Patriarch.

*"Lema'an asher yetzaveh et banav v'et beito acharav"* – "He shall command his children and his household following him,"

*"leshamru derech Hashem laasot tzedaka umishpat,"* – "so that they will follow the way of Hashem: to practise righteousness and justice."

There is one word which seems to be redundant. It is the word 'acharav' – 'following him.' Isn't that obvious? I believe that this is actually the key word in this entire statement. Fascinatingly, in Bereishit 4:21, we are introduced to a man by the name of Yuval, and Yuval is described as being

*"Avi kol tofes kinor veugav."* – "The father of everyone who holds a harp and a pipe."

Yuval was the father of music! He introduced music into the world and we see he is described as 'avi' – 'father.' He's the parent of all people who engage in musical activity, indicating that indeed somebody can be your parent, although you're not related to them: what they have introduced influences your way of life.

Truly, that is what we mean when we refer to Avraham as being Avraham Avinu, Abraham our father. Of course we are privileged to be physically descended from him but that's not the whole story. In addition, he introduced belief in Hashem into the world, and he went one step further. The text in Parshat Vayeira (Bereishit 18:19) tells us

*"veshamru derech Hashem laasot tzedaka umishpat."* – "So that they should keep the way of Hashem: to practice righteousness and justice."

Avraham didn't only 'parent' the concept of belief in Hashem. He 'parented' a concept of derech Hashem, a true religious way of life for all those who believe in Hashem, and that way of life must include tzedaka and mishpat. The legacy of Avraham therefore empowers us in our ways to always be mindful of our responsibility for tzedaka – righteousness, uprightness – to be considerate and to be compassionate at all times; and in addition, to guarantee that justice would always prevail.

And now there is a question we have to ask ourselves: What will we become the parents of?

*Shabbat shalom.*

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

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**Rav Kook Torah**

**VaYeira: The Salt of Sodom**

**Rabbi Chanan Morrison**

The Torah vividly contrasts the kindness and hospitality of Abraham's household with the cruelty and greed of the citizens of Sodom. When visitors arrived at Lot's home, the entire city, young and old, surrounded the house with the intention of molesting his guests. Lot's attempts to appease the rioters only aggravated their anger.

Washing after Meals

The Talmud makes an interesting connection between the evil city of Sodom and the ritual of washing hands at meals. The Sages decreed that one should wash hands before and after eating bread, as a form of ritual purification, similar to partial immersion in a mikveh (ritual bath). The rabbinical decree to wash hands before meals is based on the purification the Kohanim underwent before eating their terumah offerings.

The Talmud in Chulin 105b, however, gives a rather odd rationale for mayim acharonim, washing hands after the meal. The Sages explained that this washing removes the salt of Sodom, a dangerous salt that can blind the eyes. What is this Sodomite salt? What does it have to do with purification? How can it blind one's eyes?

#### The Selfishness of the People of Sodom

In order to answer to these questions, we must first understand the root source of Sodom's immorality. The people of Sodom were obsessed with fulfilling their physical desires. They concentrated on self-gratification to such a degree that no time remained for kindness towards others. They expended all of their efforts chasing after material pleasures, and no energy was left for helping the stranger.

#### Purifying the Soul While Feeding the Body

A certain spiritual peril lurks in any meal that we eat. Our involvement in gastronomic pleasures inevitably increases the value we assign to such activities, and decreases the importance of spiritual activities, efforts that truly perfect us. As a preventative measure, the Sages decreed that we should wash our hands before eating. Performing this ritual impresses upon us the imagery that we are like the priests, eating holy bread baked from terumah offerings. The physical meal we are about to partake suddenly takes on a spiritual dimension.

Despite this preparation, our involvement in the physical act of eating will reduce our sense of holiness to some degree. To counteract this negative influence, we wash our hands after the meal. With this ritual cleansing, we wash away the salt of Sodom, the residue of selfish preoccupation in sensual pleasures. This dangerous salt, which can blind our eyes to the needs of others, is rendered harmless through the purifying ritual of mayim acharonim.

(Gold from the Land of Israel. pp. 44-45. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. I, p. 21)

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#### Shema Yisrael Torah Network

#### Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Vayeira

פרק י"ד תשפ"ג  
אל תביט אחרך

#### Do not look behind you. (19:17)

Neither Lot nor anyone in his group of survivors was permitted to look back at the carnage that was taking place. Their merit in being spared was on condition that they not be in the midst of Sodom during its destruction. Thus, they could be saved before the upheaval began. Furthermore, they were not entitled to witness the destruction of Sodom while they remained unscathed. Lot's wife did not listen. When she turned around to see what was happening to her fellows, Hashem punished her.

A deeper meaning can be attributed to the words, "Do not look behind you," one from which we can all benefit. We all have questions after the fact. Could I have acted differently? Would the end result have been different? Rav Yaakov Galinsky, zl, quotes the Lomza *Mashgiach*, Horav Moshe Rozenstein, zl, who asks a meaningful question. One the one hand, we say and believe with complete faith that Hashem, *Asah, Oseh, v'Yaaseh es kol ha'maasim*, "He alone made, makes and will make everything." Only to Him may we ascribe events and how they will conclude. Nonetheless, it is up to us to endeavor and do whatever we can. If our *hishtadlus*, endeavoring, will not alter the course of the end result – why bother? Our actions are an exercise in futility. The *Mashgiach* explains that, indeed, we are charged with doing all that we can do. Nothing we do will affect whatever our fellow is destined to have. The businesses who compete with one another may throw all their efforts into achieving success. They should know, however, that no one else will lose due to his competitor's endeavor. He will have what is destined for him to have, and likewise, his competitor will not reap

greater benefit than that what is Heavenly-designated for him. He must act. Hashem will do the rest.

This is only, explains the *Mashgiach*, with regard to the future: We must do/act/perform. With regard to the past, however, what was already done/achieved, this we must know was already determined by Hashem. One should not ruminant over what was: "I could have done this or that differently. Had I worked harder, advertised better, used a different sales person, etc." This is where our belief in Hashem as the One Who decides what will be the outcome of every situation comes into play. We can and should do all that we can. What ultimately happens is from Hashem.

Survivor's guilt, which plays itself out in a scenario where one blames himself for not trying hard enough to save his fellow, is a classic case. Adult children quarreling over what is the best doctor/nursing home/health care to provide for an elderly parent is another. We must endeavor to provide the best care, do everything to help our fellow. After the fact, however, we should not point fingers. What has occurred was Hashem's will from the very beginning.

Rav Galinsky explains that this idea is intimated by Shlomo *Hamelech* (*Mishlei* 16:1), *L'adam maarchei lev, u'mei Hashem maaneh lashon*, "It is for man to arrange his thoughts/feelings, but eloquent speech is a G-dly-gift" (what he says depends on Hashem). In his commentary, *Rashi* explains, "Man prepares his words that he will articulate. (All of his thoughts and feelings are applied in preparing his message/response.) The actual words that he says, however, come from Hashem. At times, Hashem causes him to stumble with his words (say the wrong thing, which undermines his purpose), or, if he merits, Hashem prepares a good reply for him." In other words, Hashem is the final Arbiter of what we say.

Lot was instructed not to look back. This means that one should realize, acknowledge, appreciate and respect that Hashem is *Asah, Oseh, v'Yaaseh*. What is done – is done – by Hashem. There is nothing more to be done. Do not look back.

In *Kohelles Rabbah* (16:21), Rabbi Meir teaches, "When a person comes into this world, his fists are clenched as if to say, 'The entire world is mine; I will inherit it.' But when he departs the world, his hands are open as if to say, 'I did not inherit anything from this world.'" Rav Galinsky supplements this, applying the above idea. When a person enters the world, he thinks that he will conquer, control, create and do whatever he wants. When he leaves the world, he realizes that it was really Hashem Who did everything. We must endeavor to do what we can and to accept what will be.

וזהו קדשו נסח את אברהם

#### G-d tested Avraham. (22:1)

Avraham *Avinu* and his son, Yitzchak (*Avinu*), merited to achieve the highest level of serving Hashem: *Kiddush Shem Shomayim*, sanctifying Hashem's Name, with their preparedness to slaughter and be slaughtered for the sake of Hashem. In the end, Hashem dispatched a heavenly angel to instruct Avraham to desist. Heaven neither requires, nor encourages, human sacrifice. It is far better (and probably more difficult) to live a life of *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying Hashem, in our every demeanor, our every action, than to die for him.

The *Baal HaTanya* writes that in order to sanctify Hashem's Name, it is not necessary to give up one's life. Rather, living an exalted life of *Kiddush Shem Shomayim* is far more acceptable. We were sent down to this world to live, to glorify Hashem's Name. If circumstances demand – as they have throughout our tumultuous history – then, if necessary, we give up our lives for Him. The *Bais HaLevi* uses this idea (*kiddush ha'chaim*, sanctifying life) to explain why the *Akeidah*, Binding of Yitzchak, is considered Avraham *Avinu's nisayon*, trial, rather than Yitzchak's. It was Yitzchak who stretched out his neck to be slaughtered. He was the one who was prepared to die. He had a whole life ahead of him. He was not yet married and able to establish his legacy. To give it all up requires superhuman courage and devotion. Yet, his *nisayon* is viewed as secondary to that of Avraham.

The *Bais HaLevi* explains that while Yitzchak was willing to give up his life, it was a one-time test. Once he passed the test, it was

over, because his life would be over. Avraham, on the other hand, was relegated to live with his decision to sacrifice Yitzchak. The pain and suffering that he would endure was beyond belief. In addition, he would have to return home and explain to Sarah *Imeinu* what he did and why. He would have to face the community, his many students who probably could not understand his actions, and would look at him askance. Actually, by remaining alive under such conditions, Avraham would be dying a thousand times.

The survivors that were spared from the Nazis' Final Solution sanctified Hashem's Name in this manner. They returned to what was left of their towns and villages. In some communities, only a handful returned; in some, it was only one; and, in some, no one returned. After sustaining such a *potch*, "slap", from Hashem, after experiencing the most inhuman atrocities, it was a wonder that they returned sane. They went one step further. They returned fully committed, with their faith in Hashem intact and their determination to rebuild the Jewish People stronger than ever. This is *kiddush ha'chaim*. We are tested every day and with every step that we take. We do not know what the next moment will bring. Yet, we go about our lives with deeply rooted devotion to Hashem. *Kiddush ha'chaim*.

**והאלקים נסה את אברהם ויאמר אליו אברהם ויאמר הבני**

**G-d tested Avraham and said to him, "Avraham," and he replied, "Here I am."** (22:1)

Hashem called to Avraham *Avinu* and the Patriarch's immediate response was, *Hineni*, "Here I am." Hashem told him, "By your life, with that very expression (*hineni*), I will issue a reward to your descendants," as it says, *Hineni, mamtir lechem min ha'Shomayim*, "Behold! I will rain down for you bread from Heaven" (*Shemos* 16:4). In another place, *Chazal* teach that the actual *manna* was in the merit of Moshe *Rabbeinu*'s response, *Hineni*, when Hashem called out to him from the *s'neh*, burning bush (*Shemos* 2:4). We see from here the incredible value of, and merit derived, from saying (and meaning), *Hineni*. While this word is translated as, "I am ready and willing to do whatever You ask," there must be a deeper meaning to lend greater significance to *hineni*.

*Chazal* (*Pirkei Avos* 2:4) teach, *Bateil retzonecha mipnei retzono*, "Negate your will before His." Simply, this means that when one finds his will clashing with the views and directives of the Torah, undo yours, let it dissipate, and instead submit to the will of Hashem. Is this what *hineni* means? Does, "Here I am," mean submission? I think *hineni* goes one step further. When one responds, *hineni*, he intimates that he has no will at all. He is one with Hashem, and he has no selfhood. He wants whatever Hashem wants. He does not just agree – he wants it! The selflessness of Avraham and Moshe set the stage for the manner in which their descendants would serve Hashem. As far as our service to Hashem is concerned, the only will that we have is His will. We do not agree or acquiesce; we have no will of our own.

This does not mean that we go along and play our parts as submissive Jews. Absolutely not. We must manifest the same will, passion, and drive that we normally have for executing our personal endeavors in the way in which we serve Hashem. We should be excited and enthusiastic to carry out His will.

*Reb Yitzchak (Irving) Bunim*, zl, relates an anecdote that is pertinent to and underscores this idea. A man left his family in Poland, while he traveled to a distant country in search of means to support his wife and family. He was quite successful, and, over time, he amassed a small fortune - \$100,000. (This took place many years ago when such an amount of money was considered a small fortune.) Unfortunately, his success would be short-lived, as he became gravely ill, and the doctors despaired for his life. Understanding that the end was imminent, he sought a way to send the money back to his wife in Poland. No banks or wire transfers were available. He would have to be creative. He heard that a neighbor was traveling to Poland. The neighbor gave the impression of being honest. It was not as if the man had a plethora of choices. He would have to take his chances.

He told the man, "Please take my money back to Poland. Take for yourself what you want and give my wife what you want." The man

returned to Poland and, not wanting someone else's money burning in his pocket, repeated to his wife the exact words he heard from her husband and continued, "I have decided to keep for myself \$90,000 for my troubles and to give you \$10,000." The wife became enraged, "How dare you take so much of my husband's hard-earned money?" The man countered, "I am following your husband's instructions." The woman took him to a *din Torah*, halachic litigation, before the *Rav* of the community. He listened to both sides, then asked the man to repeat verbatim the instructions which her husband had given him. The man spoke slowly and carefully, "He said, 'Take for yourself what you want and give my wife what you want.'"

"If that is the case," the *Rav* said, "give her the \$90,000 and you keep the \$10,000." "Why?" the man cried out. "I did exactly what I was told to do."

"Not exactly," said the *Rav*. "You were charged with giving her the amount that you wanted. This means: Give her the amount of money that you want for yourself, which is \$90,000. That is what you want. Now, give what you want to her."

We must imbue the same fervor and enthusiasm in our *avodas ha'kodesh*, service to the Almighty, that we manifest when we are acting on our own behalf.

**ויאמר אביו ויאמר הבני בני**

**And he (Yitzchak) said, "Father," and he (Avraham) said, "Here I am, my son."** (22:7)

The dialogue between Yitzchak (*Avinu*) and Avraham *Avinu* seems superfluous. What does this exchange between father and child add to the narrative? The *Melitzer Rebbe, Shlita*, explains that when a Jew is in distress, when he is undergoing a physical, emotional or spiritual hardship, all he needs to do is cry out, "Abba, Tatte!" The cry should emanate from the innermost recesses of his being. When one does this sincerely, Hashem responds, *Hineni*, "I am here, my son." Furthermore, even if a Jew is unable to articulate his request properly, to convey the hardship that is overtaking and overwhelming him, the cry of *Abba* will suffice.

What a powerful thought. In *Parashas Mishpatim* (*Shemos* 22:26), the Torah writes concerning the poor man who needs the collateral he gave his lender to be returned to him at night, *V'hayah ki yitzaak Eilai v'shomaati ki chanun ani*, "And it will be that if he cries out to Me, I shall listen, for I am compassionate." When a person cries with sincerity, Hashem listens because He is a compassionate Father. As a father does not (should not) distinguish between the son who follows in his religious beliefs and the one who is wrestling with religious challenges, so, too, does Hashem not distinguish between Jews. When a Jew/child cries out, his religious persuasion does not determine Hashem's listening quotient. He is our Heavenly Father.

*Horav Mordechai Pogremansky*, zl, was a brilliant *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, whose erudition was eclipsed only by his *emunah* in Hashem. *Rav Mottel* (as he was endearingly called) walked into the *bais hamedrash* in Versailles, France (following World War II where a number of Holocaust survivors had gathered), and stood before a group of young men, ranging in age from 15 to 30 years old. These men were in transit, only there to rebuild their shattered lives, either in *Eretz Yisrael* or America. He stood before them, but he was in his own little world.

*Rav Mottel* began to speak to Hashem, as they listened into the "conversation." *Oy Tatte in Himmel, es iz nisht da kein ghetto, nisht da kein tatte, nisht da kein mamme, nisht da kein shtoob; nisht da kein mishpacha; nahr ein zach is geblichen: Es iz nohr Du un ich.* "Oy, Father in Heaven! There is no ghetto, no father, no mother, no home, no family. Only one thing remains: You and I. It is just You and I." These words were repeated over and over as he stood in a world far removed from the *bais hamedrash*, and the young men who were there, staring at him, enthralled by his otherworldly presence.

He finished speaking. Then he closed his eyes for a few moments, deep in thought. For five minutes, the students watched him. Then ten minutes. Finally, after fifteen minutes had elapsed, they realized that *Rav Mottel*'s body may be standing in front of them, but his

soul, his psyche, was in a place distant from this edifice. He was with Hashem. Having realized that all that he once had – family and home – were gone, he only had Hashem: *Du un ich*. You and I. This is all any of us really have. Sadly, we often do not realize this verity until we have exhausted all other avenues. Hashem is always there with us.

*Horav Yisrael, zl, m'Shklov* was one of the *Gaon, zl, m'Vilna*'s premier *talmidim*, disciples. As such, he led the third *aliyah* of the *Talmidei Ha'Gra (Perushim) to Eretz Yisrael* in 1810. *Rav Yisrael* was not just a *talmid*, he was also very close to his revered *Rebbe*, having attended to him in the final weeks of his life. He brought his intrepid group of settlers to Tzfas with the hope of establishing a strong Jewish community there. The poverty, however, was so intense that *Rav Yisrael* took it upon himself to return to Europe on a fundraising trip to support the hardy and brave Jews who had taken the initiative to live in the Holy Land, despite the physical hardships that it might entail. They knew that nothing of value comes easily, and that, after they established the community, life would return to normalcy.

Adversity was almost an accepted way of life for these emigres. In 1814 the Galil (of which Tzfas is a part) was struck by a terrible plague. The five hundred *Perushim* who lived in Tzfas deserted their homes in search of safe haven. *Rav Yisrael*, who had recently returned from his fundraising venture, was not spared the ill effects of this plague. He, too, left Tzfas, with Yerushalayim as his destination. Tragedy struck along the way when his wife succumbed to the plague. By the time he reached the gates of Yerushalayim, he had buried most of his children and he, too, had been stricken with the plague.

His health troubled him only because he knew that the future wellbeing of the community was riding upon him. He prayed to Hashem that he be spared, so that he could continue his *Rebbe*'s lofty goals. He had lost his wife, daughters, sons and sons-in-law, as well as his parents. His daughter, Sheindel, a young girl, lay ill beside him burning with fever. He writes: "I was lying there weeping bitterly, throwing myself about, pleading before our Father in Heaven to spare my Sheindel. My sorrow was great." He vowed to Hashem that if his daughter would be spared and he would live, he would write a comprehensive *sefer* on *Hilchos Eretz Yisrael*, the laws pertaining to the Holy Land. In the preface to this volume, entitled, *Pe'as HaShulchan*, he writes: "I wept until I was overcome with sleep. I dreamt that I was approached by someone who put his hand on me. I then awoke, well-rested, as if from a long night's sleep. This "being" stood over me and said, 'You have been stricken and now you have been healed.' I then felt Hashem's compassion and loving kindness shine upon me, and I knew that I would survive." His Father in Heaven had responded affirmatively to his plea.

I just came across the following inspirational story. A young couple, members of the Satmar community, had not yet been blessed with their own biological offspring. After a number of years visiting fertility specialists, participating in countless procedures and tests, they decided that the time had come to seriously consider adoption. They went to a bonafide agency and filed the forms. Now, the next hurdle was to meet with a social worker who would speak with them and decide if they were fit to be parents.

The social worker began the meeting by asking the husband to write on a piece of paper what/who he loves more than anything in the world. There was no question in his mind. He wrote, *Der Eibishter*, "The Almighty." Afterwards, she turned to his wife and asked her to write down what she loved most. She wrote, *Abba she'ba Shomayim*, "Father in Heaven." (The social worker was very devoted to her work, to the point that she did not cognitively process anything; she did not think on her own. She just followed the instructions she was given. Had she used her common sense, she would have realized that the young *Chassidic* couple that stood before her was different and had different values than the usual people that sought her help.)

"Now," the social worker said, "I must ask you to qualify what you wrote. If you were given a child, if our agency deemed you worthy of raising one of our children available for adoption, would you love the child more than what you wrote on the pad of paper?" (The woman neither knew what they had written on the paper, nor did she inquire

about it.) The question seemed legitimate. They both responded, "No." (In other words, their love of Hashem superseded all else.) "I warn you that a negative response quite possibly will undermine your efforts to adopt. We cannot place a child in a home in which the prospective parents will not place their love of the child over everything else." They replied that come what may, they were not inclined to change their response.

One year later, the young couple was blessed with the birth of twins; a boy and a girl. They had demonstrated their overriding, abiding love for their Father in Heaven and were rewarded in kind.

#### *Va'ani Tefillah*

**אשראי יושבי ביתך – Ashrei yoshei veisecha.**

The *Yesod V'Shoresh Ha'Avodah*, quotes the *Zohar HaKadosh* who teaches that reciting *Tehillah l'David (Ashrei)* after *Shemoneh Esrai* is a greater obligation than reciting it during *Pesukei d'Zimra*. (In other words, the second *Ashrei* holds greater significance than the first *Ashrei*.) Therefore, a person should take great care to be meticulous in reciting it properly with the appropriate *kavanah*, intention. Unfortunately (continues the *Yesod V'Shoresh Ha'Avodah*), we see that people ignore the seriousness of this *tefillah (Ashrei u'va l'Tzion)*. Although these same individuals pray passionately and with great fervor, when it comes to the conclusion of *Shacharis*, they no longer have patience. Some fly through the words, while others just find this to be a convenient time to leave the *shul*. This is a practice that unintentionally dishonors the prayer.

*Dedicated in loving memory of our dearfather and grandfather*

*צ'חק בן נחום שראל ז"ל – נפטר ח' חשוון תשנ"ט*

*Neil and Marie Genshaft*

*Hebrew Academy of Cleveland, ©All rights reserved*

*prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum*

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#### **Basar Bechalav**

#### **Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff**

*In this week's parsha, Avraham Avinu serves his guests milchig and then fleishig...*

Question #1: The Case of the Desperate Chef!

"I am frantically looking for a job. May I work in the kitchen of a KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken)? What if I have to flip cheeseburgers?"

Question #2: The Last Lapp

"I am in northern Norway, herding reindeer, and I want to know whether doe milk is kosher and milchig?"

Question #3: May I Smoke?

"May I smoke meat and dairy together?"

Introduction:

In three places the Torah teaches *lo sevashel gedi bachaleiv imo*, "Do not cook a kid in the milk of its mother." We all know that halacha prohibits eating milk and meat together and requires waiting after eating meat, before eating dairy. These latter are prohibited only *miderabbanan*, unless the meat and milk were cooked together.

Three and over

The Gemara (*Chullin* 115b) notes that the thrice mentioning of the Torah's prohibition can be violated three different ways, by (1) cooking, (2) eating the cooked milk-meat mixture or by (3) benefiting from this mixture.

Although we should be and are careful to observe all details of halacha, whether obligated *min haTorah* or *miderabbanan*, we are required to know whether a particular observance is Torah law or is only a rabbinic injunction (see *Avos Derabbi Nisson* Chapter 1:7 with commentary of *Binay Yehoshua*). In the case of basar bechalav, there is an additional reason to know whether something is prohibited *min haTorah* or because of rabbinic injunction. The prohibitions against cooking basar becholov and benefiting from it apply only to meat and milk that violate the law *min haTorah*. When the meat or the milk is prohibited because of a rabbinic injunction, the prohibition is limited to consumption of the product, not to cooking or benefiting from it (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 87:3; *Rema, Yoreh Deah* 87:1 and commentaries in both places; cf. *Yam shel Shelomoh, Chullin*, 8:100, who disagrees, but whose opinion is not accepted by the later authorities). Please bear in mind that, as always, the purpose of our article is to educate, and not to *pasken*; that is the responsibility of each individual's *rav* or *posek*.

Therefore, if meat and dairy were mixed together when cold, there is no prohibition of benefiting from the product. For this reason, it is not a violation of the law of benefiting from basar becholov to sell bagged pet food, even when it

contains both meat and dairy products, since they are not cooked together, but mixed together at room temperature.

We will soon see that there is much halachic discussion as to which animal species are included in the prohibition, both *min haTorah* and *miderabbanan*, and which types of food preparation or cooking are included. Most of these laws are derived from the unusual way that the written Torah teaches this mitzvah.

When teaching about most *ma'achalos asuros*, prohibited food items, the Torah usually states, in a very straightforward way, that something "may not be eaten." In the instance of *basar becholov*, the Torah does not say this, but simply commands not to cook kid's meat in its mother's milk. Therefore, we derive that only meat and milk "cooked" together is prohibited *min haTorah*, and only from species similar to goats.

#### Fowl play

There is a dispute among *tanna'im* whether the prohibition of *basar becholov* applies only to mammals or also to fowl. The conclusion is that the Torah prohibition of *basar becholov* does not apply to fowl, since they never have any type of "mother's milk." Milk is limited to mammals, not to avian creatures. Nevertheless, according to most *tanna'im*, *Chazal* prohibited consumption of milk and poultry. According to one *tanna*, Rabbi Yosi *Hagalili*, it is permitted, even *miderabbanan*, to eat milk together with poultry, even if they are cooked together (*Chullin* 116a). In his opinion, you may cook and serve your favorite chicken-in-cheese-sauce recipe. We have Talmudic statements that demonstrate that, in the era of the *Mishnah*, there were still communities that permitted eating poultry cooked in milk (*Shabbos* 130a; *Yevamos* 14a; *Chullin* 116a). However, since the time of the *Gemara*, Rabbi Yosi *Hagalili*'s opinion is not accepted, so eating chicken prepared this way is prohibited, and the pots and other equipment used to prepare and serve poultry cooked in milk become *treif* and require *kashering* to return them to kosher use.

#### The desperate chef!

At this point, let us examine the first part of our opening question: "I am frantically looking for a job. May I work in the kitchen of a KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken)?"

There is a *kashrus* issue here: KFC's breading includes dairy ingredients. Several years ago, a kosher branch of KFC was opened in Israel and required a specially formulated breading to be certified kosher and *pareve*. (The breading mix manufactured for KFC's other locations was kosher and dairy, although we well understand why the company never requested *kashrus* certification for it.)

Since consuming poultry cooked with dairy is prohibited only *miderabbanan*, it is permitted to cook poultry with dairy. However, there is another halachic issue here -- it is prohibited *lechatchilah* to seek earnings from foodstuffs prohibited *min haTorah*, such as non-shechted poultry. I would suggest that Desperate seek alternative employment better suited to a nice Jewish boy.

#### Non-kosher species

Since the Torah describes the prohibition as referring to "a kid in the milk of its mother," the *halacha* is that only kosher species are included in the prohibition, since "kid," *gedi* in Hebrew, usually means only baby sheep and baby goats, although, upon occasion, the word can refer also to calves (*Chullin* 113b).

Where the deer and the antelope roam

Reindeer are a kosher species and are milked in places where they are herded and raised as cattle, such as in northern Europe, including Lapland and northern Scandinavia. The Torah prohibition of *basar becholov* is limited to eating the flesh (also known as the meat) of a kosher animal that is categorized as a *beheimah* that was cooked in the milk of a *beheimah*, but does not include either the milk or the meat of a *chayah*. When either the meat or the milk is of a *chayah*, the prohibition to consume the mixture is only *miderabbanan*.

It is difficult to define the differences between *beheimah* and *chayah*. Although we know that *beheimah* includes cattle and sheep, whereas *chayah* includes deer and antelope, the common definition of *beheimah* as "domesticated kosher species," and *chayah* as "beast," "non-domesticated" or "wild species" is not halachically accurate. For example, reindeer, which qualify as *chayah*, are domesticated, whereas wisents, Cape buffalo, bighorn sheep and Dell's sheep, none of which is domesticated, are probably varieties of *beheimah*.

A more accurate description of *beheimah* is a genus or category in which most common species qualify as livestock, and *chayah* is a genus or category in which most common species are usually not livestock.

The halachic definitions of *beheimah* and *chayah* are dependent on the type of horn or antlers that the animal proudly displays. However, the terminology used by the *Gemara* to explain this is subject to disputes among the *rishonim*, and, therefore, the accepted halachic practice is to treat any species of which we have no *mesorah* whether it is a *chayah* or a *beheimah* as a *safeik* in both directions (see *Shach*, *Yoreh Deah* 82:1 and commentaries thereon). This is why bison (American buffalo) is treated with the stringencies of both *beheimah* and *chayah*, notwithstanding that its horns seem to fit the description of a *beheimah*. Don't cook your bison burgers in milk!

Last Lapp

At this point, we can address the next of our opening questions: "I am in northern Norway, herding reindeer, and I want to know whether doe milk is kosher and *milchig*?"

The answer is that it is not *milchig min haTorah*, but *miderabbanan* it is considered *milchig*. Therefore, a Jew may not eat reindeer venison cooked in milk, nor may he eat beef, veal or lamb cooked in reindeer milk. However, it is permitted to cook meat with reindeer milk or cheese, or cook reindeer venison with cow's, sheep's or goat's milk or cheese. It is also permitted to benefit from any of these preparations.

So our frum Lapp may cook and sell venison cooked in reindeer milk, if he shechted the reindeer first. If there is a market for such products in Lapland, perhaps Desperate should be in touch with him! But, remember that a Jew may not eat this product, because of rabbinic injunction.

#### Cheese

Since we mentioned cheese, I will add that, according to most authorities, cow's, buffalo's, sheep's and goat's cheese are *milchig min haTorah*. There is a minority opinion that holds that, just as lactose, a dairy by-product, is *milchig* only *miderabbanan* (a topic upon which I have written a different essay), so cheese is, also, *milchig* only *miderabbanan*. However, the vast majority of later authorities reject this position (see *Yalkut Yosef*, *Isur Vaheter*, Volume III, page 114).

#### Marinating

As I mentioned above, the prohibitions of eating cold meat and milk together or eating dairy shortly after consuming meat are only *miderabbanan*. The prohibition of *lo sevashel gedi bachaleiv imo* is violated *min haTorah* only by cooking meat and dairy together or by eating meat and dairy that were previously cooked together.

There are many methods of making food edible and very tasty that do not use heat, including salting, pickling and marinating. Preparing food this way causes the flavors of the different ingredients to blend together, which *halacha* calls *beli'ah*. When one ingredient is, on its own, non-kosher, everything salted, pickled or marinated together has now become non-kosher. If the *kashrus* prohibition is *min haTorah*, such as, meat that was not shechted, non-kosher fat (*cheilev*), blood, or non-kosher species, the other food that was salted, pickled or marinated together has also become non-kosher *min haTorah*.

However, since *lo sevashel gedi bachaleiv imo* includes only cooking meat and milk together, there is no prohibition to marinate or salt meat and milk together. The product manufactured this way may not be eaten, but only because of a rabbinic injunction (see *Nazir* 37a; *Pesachim* 44b). Furthermore, there is no prohibition, even *miderabbanan*, in manufacturing or in benefiting from this mixture (*Rema*, *Yoreh Deah* 87:1).

#### Grilling

At this point, we can examine the second part of Desperate's question, which opened our essay. "What if I have to grill cheeseburgers?" These products are not cooked in liquid, but are grilled. Is grilling, frying or broiling included in the Torah violation of cooking milk and meat together?

From the way *Rashi* and *Tosafos* explain the passage of *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin* 4b, it appears that frying dairy and meat together is not prohibited *min haTorah*. There is also strong evidence that the *Ran* (Commentary to *Rif*, *Chullin*, Chapter 8, on the *Mishnah* 108a c.v. *Tipas chalav*) held a similar, if not identical, approach. If this opinion is halachically correct, Desperate could work in a restaurant that uses kosher meat to make its cheeseburgers.

However, many authorities conclude that cooking *basar becholov* using any type of heat is prohibited *min haTorah* (*Pri Chadash*, *Yoreh Deah*, 87:2; *Peleisi* 87:2; *Chachmas Adam* 40:1). According to this approach, grilling cheeseburgers will land Desperate in hot water.

Other prominent authorities rule that consuming *basar becholov* prepared in these ways is prohibited only by rabbinic injunction (*Maharam Schiff* (commentary, end of *Mesechta Chullin*; *Pri Megadim*, introduction to *Basar Bechalav*, s.v. *Vehinei*). And then, there are some authorities that draw distinctions among the various methods of cooking with heat. For example, *Rav Yaakov Reisch*, a very prominent early eighteenth-century posek, rules that roasting (which presumably includes broiling and grilling) is prohibited *min haTorah*, but frying is not (*Soles Lamincha*, *Klal* 85:3). This approach is based on his analysis of the *pesukim* and the passages of the *Gemara*, but without explaining any reason for the distinction, other than the usage of the word *bishul*. (See also *Shu't Chasam Sofer*, *Yoreh Deah* #97, who has yet another approach to the topic.) Other prominent authorities reach the same conclusion (*Pri Megadim*, *Mishbetzos Zahav* 87:1). Among the late authorities, this issue is left as an unresolved dispute. Therefore, the halachic assumption is that we should be *machmir* in all of these disputed areas.

#### May I smoke?

At this point, we can explore the third of our opening questions: "May I smoke meat and dairy together?"

To the best of my knowledge, smoking meat and dairy is not addictive, contains no nicotine, and does not cause emphysema. The question is whether it violates the laws of *basar becholov*. In answer to the halachic question, it appears to have

been discussed in a passage of Talmud Yerushalmi (Nedorim 6:1): “The rabbis of Kisrin asked: What is the law of smoked food, in regard to the prohibition of bishul akum? Concerning cooking on Shabbos? What is its law regarding mixing meat and milk together?” The passage of Yerushalmi then changes the subject, without ruling on any of the three questions, something not unusual in the Talmud Yerushalmi.

Based on this unresolved question, the Rambam (Hilchos Ma’achalos Asuros 9:6) appears to rule that the issue is treated as a safek, a doubt, with the following conclusions: When our issue [of whether something is considered cooking] is a halacha that is min haTorah, we rule stringently. However, someone who violated this act would not be punished, since it remains unresolved whether this is indeed prohibited min haTorah. However, when the issue is a rabbinic question, we rule leniently and do not consider smoking to be cooking.

The Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 87:6) follows the same approach as the Rambam. Since the issue of whether it is permitted to smoke dairy and meat together is of Torah law, we rule stringently and forbid it.

The Pri Chadash (Yoreh Deah 87:2,3) and the Gra (Yoreh Deah 87:13) conclude that, although the Yerushalmi passage in Nedorim quoted above did not render a decision whether smoking qualifies as cooking or not, a passage of Talmud Yerushalmi in mesechta Shabbos does conclude that smoking is considered cooking. Therefore, they rule that smoking meat and dairy together is definitely prohibited min haTorah, and that the resultant food is certainly prohibited for benefit, min haTorah. Although several later authorities agree with the conclusion of the Rambam and the Shulchan Aruch, according to both approaches it is prohibited to smoke meat and dairy together. The practical dispute between the two opinions involves only more esoteric issues, such as whether the violator can still be a kosher witness.

#### Heavy smoker

We should note that the terms “smoking food” or “smoked food” can mean several different ways of manufacturing. The presumed case of the Talmud Yerushalmi is similar to the processing today of frankfurters and many other sausages, which are “cooked” in smoke, often in an appliance called a smoker. Rather than being cooked directly by the fire, or by water that is heated by fire, these foods are cooked by hot smoke. This is also a common way raw salmon is processed into lox.

#### Cured smoker

There is another method of preparing food that involves smoke, but where the food, itself, is processed without heat. Wood is burned inside a sealed room called a “smokehouse.” The food to be smoked is placed inside the smokehouse for several days or weeks, while the smoke, now cool, cures the food, providing it with a smoky flavor. Since the food production in this instance takes place in ambient temperature, this process should not be considered “cooking” for basar becholov purposes (see Perisha, Yoreh Deah 87:9). Therefore, the finished product is prohibited for consumption only miderabbanan, and there is no prohibition to cure meat and dairy together using this method or to benefit from the product. Thus, Desperate could engage in this line of work. We should note that there is one late authority who considers this method of producing food to be similar to cooking (Chadrei Deah, quoted by Badei Hashulchan, Biurim 87:6, s.v. Ha’me’ushan), but, to the best of my knowledge, this approach is rejected by all other authorities.

#### Smoke flavored

There is a modern method of providing “smoke flavor” to food that involves preparing food by steaming, cooking or broiling, and smoke flavor, a natural or synthetic ingredient, is added to provide smoke taste. Whether this is prohibited min haTorah or miderabbanan when processing meat and dairy together will depend on which method is used, and also on the above-mentioned disputes among halachic authorities. I do not recommend that Desperate seek employment in a firm that does this.

#### Conclusion

A well-known, non-Jewish criticism of Judaism is: “Does G-d care more about what goes into our mouths than He does about what comes out?” The criticism is, of course, both mistaken and conceited. Our development as avdei Hashem involves both what goes in and what comes out, and the height of vanity is to decide which is “more” important in His eyes. Being careful about what we eat and about what we say is a vital step in our growth as human beings.

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לע”ג

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה  
בillya bat (Avicha) Lieb U"h  
אנא מלכה בת ישראל 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?]

]

### **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

## 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'forno and R. Hirsh, in different styles, suggest a similar approach to understanding Avraham's negotiations).

Seeking the salvation of the citizens of S'dom, Avraham understood that there would need to be a community - small though it may be - that would serve as a shining example of righteousness and truth and that would then be a refuge for those S'domites who were thus attracted to the ways of truth and the paths of pleasantness.

Our challenge, within each of our local communities and throughout the world-wide covenantal community of Am Yisra'el, is to create and maintain a holy and righteous community which will serve as an example for all those around us - and which will be a safe environment within which everyone can grow in righteousness and sanctity.

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## Parshat Va-Yera: The Akeidah

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

### I: WHAT MAKES LOT TICK?

### II: THE CHALLENGE OF THE AKEIDA (BINDING)

Our questions this week:

1. Why does the Torah spend so much space telling us about Lot, Avraham's nephew? We hear that Lot accompanies Avraham on the journey from Ur to Haran to Canaan; that Lot chooses to move to Sodom and its environs to find grazing space for his growing flocks; that he is captured in a war and saved by Avraham; that angels come to warn him of Sodom's destruction; that he seeks refuge in various places and is tricked by his own daughters into sleeping with them. What are we meant to learn from Lot and his misadventures?
2. "Sacrifice your only son, the one you love," says Hashem, and Avraham obeys with silent alacrity. To appreciate the Akeida (Binding of Isaac), we need to understand Avraham's mentality in facing it: the substance of the test, after all, was whether he would be able to overcome his feelings. Since the Torah tells us nothing about Avraham's emotions throughout the ordeal, we must look for hints wherever the Torah drops them. How do the literary features of the way the story is told accent the difficulty of the test?
3. Believe it or not, since long before commanding Avraham to sacrifice his son, Hashem has been working hard to make this test even \*harder\*. What does Hashem do to make the test harder? Look for evidence both within Parashat VaYera and in the previous parasha.
4. What does the test of the Akeida show about Avraham, and what should we learn from it?  
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### I: WHAT MAKES LOT TICK?

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

### LOT'S VOLUNTARY AKEIDA:

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

### MEASURE FOR MEASURE:

As promised, Hashem destroys the city of 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 Cana'an 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 Yitzchak, HIS SON, was born TO HIM . . . .

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

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

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

We have already seen the word "me-tzahek," "laughing," fairly recently. Both Avraham and Sara laugh in disbelief when told that they will have a child together. Perhaps Yishmael's "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