

**Potomac Torah Study Center**  
Vol. 11 #4, November 3, 2023; 19 Chesvan, 5784; Vayera

**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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**Hersh ben Perel Chana, cousin of very close friends of ours, has been confirmed as one of more than 200 hostages to Hamas in Gaza. The Wall St. Journal featured Hersh and his family in a front page article on October 16. Chabad, OU, and many synagogues recommend psalms (Tehillim) to recite daily for the safety of our people. May our people in Israel wipe out the evil of Hamas, protect us from violence by anti-Semites around the world, and restore peace for our people quickly and successfully – with the help of Hashem.**

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**Omer Balva, a 2019 graduate from the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, MD, enlisted in the IDF immediately after high school. After the heinous Hamas terrorist attacks on Oct. 7, Balva purchased supplies for his fellow soldiers, boarded a plane, and rejoined the IDF. Hit by an anti-tank missile attack, Balva died while sending fellow soldiers forward to safety. Our local community joins all Jews in mourning our brave young neighbor.**

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Vayera opens the third day after Avraham circumcises himself and all the men in his extended household. God informs Avraham that He is about to destroy Sodom and a few surrounding towns because the people there are evil. Avraham understands that Hashem must have told him of these plans because He wants Avraham to argue and try to save the people. Avraham argues that God should save Sodom if there are fifty people in the town who are innocent of the evil crimes. (The Midrash explains that the primary evil is a total absence of kindness, justice, caring for the needy (chesed)). When God agrees, Avraham bargains him down to requiring only ten innocent adults to decide to save the town. (By saving the town, Avraham means not to destroy the city and everyone in it – thus saving the guilty along with the innocent. The reason is that the innocent people should have an opportunity to teach the others so that over time the guilty will repent and become worthy.)

Why does Avraham stop at ten innocent people and not bargain any lower? There must be enough worthy individuals to be role models to influence the guilty to become better people. The question is how many would be sufficient? We know from parshat Noach that he and his family were not enough to make a difference after the flood. The generations after Noach continue to sin until the incident at Shinar, or the Tower of Babel. God sees the people suppressing other cultures and languages to force a common language and culture. The people reject the natural gifts from God (such as stones for building), make their own substitutes (bricks), and build towers to glorify themselves rather than trying to come close to God. (See my discussion from Noach two weeks ago.) Noach and his family are eight individuals. Avraham could

conclude from this evidence that eight worthy individuals are not sufficient to influence an evil community to reform. Asking God to save Sodom if it has eight innocent people is a losing argument.

Avraham bargains Hashem down to ten innocent individuals. Lot's family consists of ten individuals: Mr. and Mrs. Lot, two unmarried daughters, two sons-in-law (thus two married daughters), and two sons. (Rabbi David Fohrman discusses evidence in the text to prove that the Lot family comes to these ten individuals.) By bargaining down to ten, Avraham provides a way for the Lot family to have an opportunity to survive and to save even the evil residents of Sodom. The story of Lot's interactions with the people of Sodom and with his family members shows that Lot is unable to convince even his own family members to reform, let alone the other residents of Sodom.

In his parsha class earlier this week Rabbi Nissan Antine raised the question of how the Sodom incident relates to the war against Hamas. We Jews believe that God can decide when a community is so evil that it must be destroyed, and when it is appropriate for God to destroy any innocent people along with the guilty. However, in the war against Hamas, it is the Israeli leaders and IDF who are making decisions and fighting Hamas. Do humans have the right to risk the lives of innocent civilians when trying to eliminate the evils of Hamas? We humans cannot tell whether any given individuals are terrorists or innocent civilians (except for known terrorist leaders).

Avraham, who tries to model his life on chesed (kindness) in every way, must join the war of the five kings against the four kings to rescue Lot, whom the four kings take hostage. To save Lot, Avraham must intervene and save the King of Sodom, an evil ruler in an evil city. Fighting evil sometimes requires good people to go to war, and sometimes the allies of good people are not themselves the best role models. Avraham refuses to accept any reward or payment for his part in winning the war. He only asks for Lot and his family. Lot, however, decides to return to Sodom rather than to return with Avraham.

Another issue of humans deciding whether they may engage in war arises in Yehoshua, chapter 2. God had promised Avraham that his descendants would take over Canaan when the current residents had become evil enough to be kicked out. That time comes with Yehoshua. Since humans lead this war, should they kill all the people or save the innocent?

Before initiating the invasion of Canaan after the death of Moshe, Yehoshua sends two spies to investigate the security of Jericho and the spirit of the citizens. The spies gain their information from Rahab, the inn keeper whose property is in the city walls. The spies decide that Rahab and her family are innocent and should be saved. Rahab provides information to save the spies and answers their questions in exchange for a guarantee to save herself and her family in the invasion. (Chazal state that Rahab converts, marries Yehoshua, and that her descendants include several prophets.)

Rabbi Antine in a previous shiur concluded that when humans lead a war against evil, halacha requires that they warn civilians (innocents) about their coming invasion and give them an opportunity to escape. The IDF is doing exactly what halacha demands by announcing in advance where and when it is attacking and telling civilians to leave those areas. Israel has been warning the people of Gaza to leave the area around Gaza city, where Hamas has built hundreds of miles of tunnels and left traps with explosives to kill invaders. Hamas has been building its military bases and weapon stockpiles under hospitals, schools, and nursing homes to use the weak and needy civilians as shields for the terrorists. The goal for Hamas is to guarantee that it will be impossible to wipe out terrorists without killing numerous civilians – especially babies, young children, nursing mothers, and elderly – in the process. Hamas is also hiding approximately 220 hostages, presumably in similar locations, to see than the IDF can only wipe out Hamas by killing hostages at the same time. While halacha requires doing all we Jews can to save innocent and defenseless civilians during war, Hamas tries to ensure that as many of the innocent as possible will be killed to fill television and newspapers will ugly stories.

The lessons of Vayera are as relevant today as they ever have been. I hope that this discussion proves useful when we encounter anti-Semites claiming that Israel's ill treatment of poor Palestinians has forced them to initiate the October 7 attack and that Israel is responsible for brutal deaths. The real evil in our world comes from "intellectuals" who argue that others deserve the land of Israel, that the Jews stole the land (ignoring that JNF started funding purchases of land from Arabs in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century), and that we Jews have no right to any of the land in the Middle East. Anti-Semites are physically attacking Jews all over the world, threatening college students, and making Jews afraid to go out in public.

During the time of the Nazis, and earlier during the times of the pogroms and the Crusades, Jews did not have a single place open to Jews. Today we have one safe home – Israel. We must save this home for us, our children, and our grandchildren.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, was a child when the allies fought the evil of the Nazis. He frequently identified and spoke out against evil in our midst, such as anti-Semitic incidents in our Maryland community and the oppression of our people for many years under the Soviet government. I suspect that Rabbi Cahan never imagined the brutality and evil that Hamas has illustrated in the past month or the extent of the uprising of anti-Semitic attacks all over the world. When I was young, I took for granted the concept that times are getting better and mankind is making progress. Looking back over recent decades, a time of increasing extremism in many aspects of life (such as politics and religion), and increased danger to our people and civilization in general from Hamas, Russia, China, and Iran – to name a few – it is difficult to remain optimistic. We need to call out against evil and set positive examples, hopefully to do our part to improve our world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Hersh ben Perel Chana (Hersh Polin, hostage to terrorists in Gaza); Eliezer Tzvi ben Etta (Givati infantry brigade); Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Arye Don ben Tzivia, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, 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; Renate bat Ilsa, Leah bas Gussie Tovah, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.**

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

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### **Vayera: Suicide Moms**

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky \* © 2001

[Although I ran this Dvar Torah last week for Lech Lecha, it is relevant enough to the Hamas war that I decided to run it again this week. It is especially relevant this year as people all over the world wonder how Hamas became so evil. The evil of Hamas goes 3700 years, as we read in the parsha this week. We can also wonder why so many others all over the world applaud Hamas and blame Israel for trying to provide one place on earth where Jews can live free of hatred. Boldface emphasis added.]

For the last seven years, I have patterned this d'var Torah in a standard way. I quote a verse, ask a question and then relate a story. I then conclude by explaining my answer to the Biblical question, hoping that the story I related has some enlightening or plausible connection.

In the topsy-turvy world we live in, I'd like to do something different this week. I'd like to relate a few stories first, ask a question on the almost incomprehensible stories, and then relate a verse from the Torah, with the hope that the Torah's prescience will help us to in some way understand them.

**Hussein Nasr was a failed suicide bomber.** He plowed an explosive-laden truck into an Israel army post. He wanted to kill himself along with as many Israeli soldiers as possible. He was only partially successful in his mission, as the only one blown to bits by his evil scheme was he himself.

Like proud relatives filming a family simcha (happy occasion), the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) took a video of his truck plowing into the Israeli post. Until Nasr's 71-year-old father, Hassan, heard of his son's actions, he said that he **had no idea his son belonged to Hamas.** But when he heard about the attack on Israeli radio, he declared, "I am proud of him. The whole world is proud of him. Even the land is proud of him here," he said.

Here's another story, that defines a new level of chutzpah.

**The proud mother of Iman Atalalla**, who killed Israeli soldiers by detonating a bomb-laden car, submitted forms requesting welfare payments of \$150 a month through the Islamic Rescue Committee — **regarded in Israel as a Hamas fund-raising group.** On the welfare application, the bomber's family wrote: "Died: September 12 1993; Place: Gaza; Circumstances of incident: suicide mission in booby-trapped car."

The terrorist was single, aged 20, and came from a family of nine. The family called Atalalla "polite and moral," and said he "fasted Mondays and Thursdays, prayed and read Koran." Describing his attack that killed two Israeli soldiers, the report said: "When 'his prey' approached he switched on the ignition, approached the enemy's vehicle and set off explosives, which sent a male and female soldier to [their deaths, and] the shahid (martyr) went to Paradise."

Finally, from The New York Times this past Sunday, 10/21/2001:

**"I named my son Osama, because I want to make him a mujahid.** Right now there is war, but he is a child. When he is a young man, there might be war again, and I will prepare him for that war. I will sacrifice my son, and I don't care if he is my most beloved thing. For all of my six sons, I wanted them to be mujahedeen. If they get killed it is nothing. This world is very short."

**The question is simple. Where does such moral depravity come from? How is it possible that parents consider their progeny heroes for blowing themselves up while killing others? How is it humanly possible for a mother and a father to be proud parents of monsters?**

In this week's portion, **Hagar, Avram's maidservant, is driven from his home by Avram's wife, Sara.** As Hagar wanders the desert, she is found by an angel who approaches her at a wellspring.

The angel prophesies, "Behold, you will conceive, and give birth to a son; you shall name him Ishmael, for Hashem has heard your prayer. And he shall be a wild man – his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and over all his brothers shall he dwell." (Genesis 16:11-12) Powerful words. Predictions of a fate that dooms Ishmael to a violent life, one that the commentaries interpret as "Ishmael being a highwayman and bandit, everyone will hate him, fear him, and battle him." Yet Hagar's response to this bestowing is as incomprehensibly baffling. **She lauds the angel and "she called the Name of Hashem Who spoke to her 'You are the G-d of Vision.'"** (Genesis 16:13).

Imagine. **Hagar is told that her son will be a wild man who attacks and terrorizes, yet she does not protest nor pray that his fate should be altered. Rather, she responds with praise and exaltation for a "G-d of Vision."** It sounds like she is content, even proud, and frankly I just don't get it. And though I'm clueless about Hagar's attitude, perhaps now I know why so many of her descendants don't think much differently.

It is obvious that not all of them do, of course. Everyone controls his or her own destiny. But maybe there is a national predisposition to violence. Maybe these parents are genetically infused with pride, knowing that the promise to their forebear has borne its rotten fruit. The values imparted from a nomadic matriarch have been transmitted like a deadly virus to her grandchildren, and Hagar's satisfaction is now theirs.

So this misplaced pride is not a new story. It's 3000 years old. And if you don't believe me, you can look it up. [ed. note: actually Sarah's expelling Hagar and Ishmael took place more than 3700 years ago.]

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/drasha-5762-lechlecha/>

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## Vayera: What Was Theirs Was Theirs

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5765

*So HASHEM said, "Because the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah has become great and because their sin has been very grave..." (Breishis 18:20-21)*

Why was Sodom destroyed? What was the "great outcry" that sealed their decree? Rashi references the Talmud, which tells the sad story of a young lady who met with a terrible fate at the hands of the "justice" system of Sodom. She committed the ultimate crime of feeding bread to the poor, and as a result she was punished with a cruel death. They covered her with honey and left her for the bees and other insects to devour her. (Sanhedrin 109B) The Mishne in *Pirke' Avos* gives us an insight into the ideology of that doomed city. It outlines four character types with regard to property.

- 1) One who says what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours is considered average and some say it is characteristic of Sodom.
- 2) Mine is yours and yours is mine is an unlearned person.
- 3) Mine is yours and yours is yours is scrupulously pious.
- 4) Mine is mine and yours is mine is wicked.

Why is the 1st category either average or Sodom-like? We would expect Sodom to be akin to the wicked one. What's so terrible about saying; "*What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours*"? Why is it possibly average? The answer is: #2 and #4 have no concept or respect for private property. They have little problem feeling deserved of another's stuff. In contrast #1 and #3 seem to understand; "*what's yours is yours*." However Sodom's commitment to respecting the property rights of others is based upon a sinister ulterior motive. Why would they pronounce in principle "*what's yours is yours*"? Because they want to insure the more important part; "*what's mine is mine*." They sinned not from impulsiveness but with a dispassionate intellect. That's worse! Why is that so?

The Maggid of Kelm said many decades before WWII, "*Because of Geiger's Reform Code of Jewish Law, another law will emerge from Germany. It will say that every Jew, without exception, must die. May G-d protect us!*" How could he say such a thing? Yet, how true it turned out to be! Was he speaking with prophecy? I don't think so! My point in mentioning that startling quote is not to stir the larger than life questions of "why?" with regard to the Holocaust but to look for the basis of the Maggid's logic. Let us say: Shimon comes to school day after day without his homework. Each time his teacher gives him that solemn look and pens a zero in the box marked "homework." Shimon and his parents are looking forward to a brutal PTA meeting. He is still, albeit failing, a member of the class.

Chaim comes to school and for the first time is missing homework. When asked for a reason, he declares, "*My parents say that I don't have to do any homework or school-work anymore.*"

The teacher calls the principal and has the child expelled from school. Why should that be?

He only missed one assignment and Shimon so many!

All the time that Shimon is missing his homework he is wrong, and behind all the clever excuses, he knows it. His teacher hopes that someday he'll rebound and become responsive to his duties. Chaim declares his conscience dead. He guarantees that he can feel no pangs of regret. In his mind he is now correct in all he does. Legalizing his laziness locks him in a world of limitations no school can overcome.

Similarly, when Sodom promulgated laws disallowing charitable behavior and then enforced it, they sealed their own fate. They could never hope to be better, to become givers as Avraham had attempted to teach. Where there is no hope there can be no life and in the end what was theirs was theirs.

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5765-vayera/>

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## The “Yes, Dear” That Really Matters

by Rabbi Dov Linzer

Rosh Yeshiva and President, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2021, 2023

The most important words in a marriage for a husband, the joke goes, are not “I love you,” but “Yes, dear.”

Whether for husband or wife, there are two types of “Yes, dear.” There’s a surface “Yes, dear,” and there’s a deeper “Yes, dear.” The difference between the two responses emerges when we compare two verses, one from this week’s parsha, and one from last week’s parsha.

In this week’s parsha, Vayeira, Sarah acts to protect Yitzchak from Yishmael and demands that Avraham drive out Hagar and Yishmael. *“And God said to Avraham, ‘Everything that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice — shema bi-kolah — because it is through Yitzchak that your offspring will be reckoned”* (Gen. 21:12). God is saying to Avraham: The nation of Israel will descend from Yitzchak, and it is through him that My promise to you will be fulfilled. His identification as your heir is paramount. Listen to Sarah’s voice.

The saga of Hagar and Yishmael begins already in last week’s parsha, Lech Lecha. Sarah, then named Sarai, says to Avraham — then Avram — that she is barren and that he should take her maidservant and have children with her. What was Avraham’s response? He did what she said: *“And Avram listened to Sarai’s voice — li-kol Sarai”* (Gen. 16:2).

These two verses of the pivotal act of listening to Sarah’s voice differ in one key letter. In the verse above, Avraham listens *li-kol Sarai*, to the voice of Sarai, with a lamed preceding the word *kol*, voice. This stands in contrast to God’s command to Avraham in this week’s parsha, where Avraham is told to listen *bi-kol Sarah* — to, or into, Sarah’s voice — with a bet as the first letter, not a lamed.

What is the difference between *li-kol* and *bi-kol*?

While generally in Tanakh there might not be a significant difference between the two, in this case, I think there is a profound one.

To listen to the voice — “*li-kol*” — means to obey. Avraham obeyed what Sarah said. This is a surface “Yes, dear.” It is the “Yes, dear” of the joke.

To listen *bi-kol* is different. The bet signifies going into something. It is to listen not to the person’s voice, but in or underneath the person’s voice. It is to listen closely and to understand what the person is really saying at a deeper level.

Sarah directs Avraham to have intercourse with Hagar, who will bear a child through her. And Avraham's response? He follows and obeys. "Take your maidservant? Yes, dear. Wonderful idea!"

But is this the response that Sarah wanted? Such a response is listening *li*, to the surface meaning of her voice. It is following her directive and nothing more.

At that moment, did Sarah want compliance, or did she want Avraham to empathize, to actively listen, to hear her pain? It would have made all the difference had Avraham started not with obeying her voice but with listening *bi-kolah*, to the anguish that lay beneath her words: "Sarah, I can't even imagine how you must be feeling right now. I know how much you want to have children and to do so with me. How could I ever be intimate with anyone else?" Whatever they would have decided in the end, Sarah would know that she was loved and that Avraham felt her pain.

Avraham later banishes Hagar and Yishmael. It is an act that can be seen as morally fraught and that will have damaging consequences. Here again he listened *li-kol* Sarah — to the surface meaning of her words. But God had told him to listen *bi-kol*, to their deeper meaning. As the verse explicates: "Everything that Sarah says to you listen *bi-kolah*." Why? "For in Yitzchak your progeny will be reckoned." Listen, God is telling Avraham, first and foremost to what Sarah is saying on a deeper level. She is trying to protect Yitzchak and the future of the Jewish people. It is that concern that you must heed. How you act to achieve that is a different question.

At that moment, maybe Avraham should not have listened *li-kolah*, should not have obeyed her specific request. But one way or the other, he needed to listen *bi-kolah*.

In marriage, we tend to operate on the *li-kol* level. One spouse might say, "You never take out the garbage! You never do the dishes!" In response, the other spouse is likely to shift into defensive mode, and to argue back about what is being said on the surface level: "What are you talking about! I did that just yesterday! You're so wrong!" And the situation deteriorates from there.

What is needed at that moment is to focus on what is really being said. We need to engage in *bi-kol* listening, because what is really being said underneath the words is something completely different. It might be: "I feel taken for granted. I feel unseen. My concerns don't seem to matter. I am feeling lonely. I need a hug."

If at that moment the other spouse were able to shift gears and delve into the voice and not reside on its surface, this exchange would likely bring about not fighting, anger, and a rigid entrenchment in one's position, but rather empathy, closeness, and perhaps even real change.

That would be a "Yes, dear" that really matters.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2023/11/vayeira5784/>

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## Naivety, Hope and Realism: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

God informs Abraham that the people of Sodom are so wicked that He has decided to destroy them. Abraham protests: "*Will You sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous people within the city, will You sweep away and not forgive the place for the fifty righteous that are in it?*" (Bereishith 18:23-24). The conversation continues until God finally agrees with Abraham to save the city if only ten righteous people are found within.

This episode is often cited as an example of how a religious person has the right to challenge God's decisions. Abraham certainly must have realized that if God planned to destroy Sodom, He had good reason to do so. Yet, Abraham courageously challenged God, demanding mercy for the city if even ten righteous people could be found there. God acceded. Victory for Abraham, right?

Wrong.

The city — as God knew full well — did not have ten righteous people within. God destroyed the city with fire and brimstone. Only Lot and his daughters managed to escape alive.

What were Abraham's assumptions when he negotiated with God? Why didn't he just ask God to spare the righteous of the city and let the wicked perish? Why did he think that ten righteous people in the city would justify God's sparing the entire city? The general explanation offered is that Abraham believed that a "minyan" of good people had the power to impact on the rest of the community. They would set a good example, they would teach, they would turn the masses into a moral and upright society.

Abraham was courageous in confronting God. But he was also naïve. He thought that a wicked society should be spared if only ten good people still lived among them. But God had already viewed the entire city and deemed it hopelessly wicked. Even if there were ten such individuals, God knew that they were powerless to change the overall wickedness of the whole society.

What were Abraham's thoughts after the destruction of Sodom? The Torah is silent on this. Abraham had negotiated with God in the hope of saving the city...but the city was destroyed. Abraham had gained nothing from his bargaining with God. Did Abraham learn anything from this episode?

Maybe he learned to be less naïve. Originally, he did not want to believe that a few righteous people were unable to change society for the good. He wanted to believe in the ultimate goodness within humanity. If we only speak nicely to the wicked people they will turn to righteousness. If we only give bad people a chance, they will come to their senses and become moral and just.

God taught him otherwise. The people of Sodom were absolutely corrupt, lacking elementary decency. Their society fostered and perpetuated evil. A few good people among them couldn't change them; but they would corrupt the few good people. Abraham learned that some wicked people are incorrigible. They are so steeped in evil, hatred and lies that they are beyond redemption.

But there is a twist to this story. Although God apparently wanted Abraham to be less naïve, He also appreciated Abraham's naïve belief in the possible salvation of even very wicked people. God wanted to temper Abraham's naivety but not eliminate it. After all, if Abraham was to teach monotheism and righteousness to the world, he had to maintain a belief that he could succeed in reaching everyone...or at least almost everyone.

The lesson: there are evil people in the world whose wickedness is so deep that they cannot be redeemed. Don't be a naïve believer in the goodness of all humans and in their capacity to change for the better. But don't completely give up your naivety. Keep trying, keep negotiating, keep challenging God and humanity.

Because once you lose that naivety, the fire within you dies...along with hope for the ultimate redemption of humanity.

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

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3176>

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### **Letter from Jerusalem, October 29, 2023: Beyachad nenetse'ach**

By David Olivestone \*

I've stopped asking people, "How are you?" Because the usual answers, "Baruch Hashem" or "Beseder Gamur" just don't roll off the tongue right now. Instead I ask, "How is your family doing?" because, more likely than not, anyone you speak to has one or more sons or daughters, sons-in-law or grandsons, serving in the IDF, and that is what is uppermost on their minds.

My wife Ceil and I were in Teaneck on October 7, having gone to spend Sukkot there with two of our sons and their families. Our flight home on El Al was packed, with so many people bringing extra duffel bags full of supplies for soldiers. We were warned by our friends here that we would be returning to a different Israel, and clearly the bubble has burst. We were living through one of the most fortunate times for Jews in all of our thousands of years of history — in our own land, strong and prosperous, fully confident of a bright future for our people. It turns out that we were overly confident, and it is going to be a long time until we will feel that way again.

Just about everyone here is a little nervous, but obviously the level of anxiety and how you deal with it depend on your personal circumstances. As instructed, we have stocked our mamad (safe room) with bottles of water and some food, as well as a battery-operated radio, and checked that the heavy metal closure for the window moves smoothly. But B"H, there were only one or two sirens sounded in Jerusalem near the start of the war, and there have been none since we returned.

However, my brother and sister-in-law in Rechovot, which is 20 miles south of Tel Aviv, have had to run to their mamad many times when they hear a siren signifying incoming rocket fire from Hamas. My brother keeps a bottle of scotch in the mamad, and takes a shot whenever he has to go in. We are betting on which will last longer — the war or the bottle.

The daily mincha/ma'ariv minyan in our apartment complex has moved from the courtyard to the lower level of our parking garage (I now call it the Marrano minyan.) After mincha we say tehillim, and tefillot for the IDF, the hostages, and the injured, and then we sing "Acheinu Kol Bet Yisrael." The sound of the voices of some 50 men and several women reverberating through the garage and up through the stairwells of all the buildings is very moving.

Our son Elisha lives in a yishuv just south of Kiryat Gat. His house is below the flight path of Israel's F16s on their way to Gaza, just 25 miles away. Moments after they pass overhead, he hears the booms in Gaza, and his whole house shakes. Today the family came to Jerusalem to celebrate our granddaughter's eighth birthday with pizza and ice cream on Ben Yehudah. Actually, life in Jerusalem seems very normal. But even though the cafes are busy, there are less people on the buses and, of course, no tourists, so many businesses are suffering. The hotels are filled with families evacuated from towns and villages both in the south and in the north, and Ceil is one of those helping to cook meals for them.

As for me, I am busy sending off what I hope are reasoned letters of protest to the editors of The New York Times and other such publications whose reports are so clearly one-sided. I have no illusions that my letters will get printed but it's something that I can do, and they have to be placed on notice, at least, that their prejudice is just not acceptable.

Israel's slogan for this war is Beyachad nenetse'ach — Together we will win. We will all play our part and with God's help, Israel will do what it has to do.

Beyachad nenetse'ach!

\* A former Teaneck resident, David Olivestone was director of communications at the Orthodox Union for many years. He retired in 2013, and he and his wife Ceil made aliyah and live in Jerusalem. David is production manager of our Institute's journal, *Conversations*. This article is reprinted from the Jewish Link of Teaneck, NJ.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3177>

## 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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## **Akeida and The Age of Rage**

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \*

The Akeida (binding of Yitzchak) stands out as a pivotal moment in what Judaism is all about. A human being has urges, desires, and first reactions. In the case of Avraham and Yitzchak, both wanted Yitzchak to live. Yet, both Avraham and Yitzchak went against their own predispositions and were prepared to listen to a higher calling.

In perfect hindsight, the experience was not meant to sacrifice Yitzchak; it was only a test. But it did leave an indelible impression on the spiritual genetics of the Jewish people. Although as humans we are alive with urges and desires, the legacy of the Jew is to control our urges and live by a higher calling. We practice mini-Akeidas daily in areas such as Kosher and other Mitzvos where we may have a desire or urge but choose to live by a higher calling.

Interestingly, the idea of living by a higher calling applies not only to actions, but even to attitudes and emotions. The Torah forbids us from coveting that which belongs to someone else; it forbids jealousy. Also, in the world of emotions, our sages teach that anger is so destructive, it is like worshipping idols. All of this points to an awareness that human beings can control urges and emotions and choose to solve, even vexing or challenging situations, through means other than our baser instincts.

The Torah is a system which guides us in handling the mini-Akeidas of life. Instead of anger, we are encouraged to discover benevolence, kindness, and even personal ambition. If someone else has something you value, wish them well. If you really desire that type of item for yourself, you may pursue such personal ambition by obtaining a similar item

through legitimate means. But anger, jealousy, and particularly hate and rage are not emotions which are meant to be pursued by human beings.

In our time, an age of permissiveness, not only do behaviors go unchecked, but emotions also go unchecked. Thus, we find movements that glorify rage, trashing buildings, and neighborhoods. The recent Hamas massacre brought the rage movement to a new level to include mass barbaric murder of civilians. There is a value system being touted. "If it bothers me enough, I can work myself into a rage, and justify any misbehavior that might follow."

The Torah warns us not to slip into the moods of the times. It encourages us to recognize that we can calm ourselves. We can control our animalistic impulses and urges. Every day we are called upon to live up to our mini-Akeida tests, to overcome our initial response and live by a higher calling.

Just as Jews throughout history were influenced by the architecture and music of the times and locale in which they lived, so we are at risk of being influenced by the attitudes, behavior, and rage that has emerged in recent times. There is a trend of boldness and bullying. It is scary to consider that we must make a conscious effort not to emulate those behaviors in the Jewish world.

We live in an age where rage is accepted by some as a form of communication. We must be careful not to allow those sentiments to seep into our culture, even in subtle ways.

Let us resolve to communicate more, to calm ourselves more, to overcome our initial response of anger when things aren't our way and try to pass our own mini-Akeida. Let us hope that in our unity and understanding we will see blessing and success and the enemies of Israel shall melt away forever.

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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## Va'eira - What We Don't Deserve

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer \* © 2021

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

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

Rash'i explains based on a Medrash )Bereishis Rabbah 49:8( that the Torah does not mean that Avrohom approached G-d in the traditional sense. Rather, the Torah is referring to a change in Avrohom's attitude as he began to pray. There are

three ways in which Avrohom “approached” G-d to ask Him to spare the people of Sodom – battle, appeasement and prayer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* Savannah Kollel; Congregation B’nai Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer will become Rosh Kollel next year.

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## Vayera

By Rabbi Herzl Heftner \*

]Note: Rabbi Heftner was unable to send me a Dvar Torah this week. As with all Israelis, Rabbi Heftner’s first priority is the safety of his family and students in Israel. Please think of the Har-el Beit Midrash for donations during this time of war against our people.[

\* Founder and dean of the Har’el Beit Midrash in Jerusalem. Rabbi Heftner is a graduate of Yeshiva University and was ordained at Yeshivat Har Etzion. For more of his writings, see [www.har-el.org](http://www.har-el.org). To support the Beit Midrash, as we do, send donations to America Friends of Beit Midrash Har’el, 66 Cherry Lane, Teaneck, NJ 07666.

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## **Selfish Sodom**

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

Many believe that the sin of Sodom was Sodomy. That word was coined after the events described in Genesis 19:1-10(

*The messengers came to Sodom and were greeted by Lot, took them home and offered them food and shelter. As they were getting ready to sleep, the townspeople besieged the house and demanded that Lot hand the guests to them to know them, in the biblical sense. Lot wanted to protect his guests and offered instead his two daughters, but the people would not hear of it and they staged an attack, which was blocked by the guests.*

A superficial reading would conclude that the Sodomites were interested in the guests for sexual pleasure, but the one biblical source which details the sin of Sodom disagrees with this reading:

*This was the sin of your sister Sodom, she and her daughters were arrogant with abundant food and tranquility, and they did not support the poor and the needy. )Ezek. 16:49(*

The prophet makes no mention of Sodomy, because the siege of the Sodomites on Lot's house, and their demand that he hand over his guests, were not the result of sexual desire but rather a manner of shameful punishment. A sexual assault as they were planning would have left the guests scarred for life and would deter other unwanted visitors from approaching Sodomites for hospitality. The Midrashic authors understood this very well, and they paint in vivid colors an image of a hostile, self-centered community, which distorts justice for all but its own select members. Even Lot, who has spent many years under the tutelage of his uncle Abraham, the defender of justice, has become corrupt since he moved to Sodom. While he rejects the demand for handing over his guests, he offers the attackers a horrifying alternative:

*"I have two daughters who have never known a man, let me bring them out to you, and you can do with them as you wish, just please leave these men alone since I have already given them shelter." )Gen. 19:8(*

Lot's moral values are skewed. He should have been willing to defend the guests to the last drop of blood, but it should have been his and not his daughters'. He treated them as property, as an object which could be sacrificed to protect what he believed to be the greatest value – hospitality.

The response of the townspeople confirms the interpretation of Ezekiel. They say: *"look at this one, who came as a sojourner, and now wants to be our judge!" )Gen. 19:9(*. They are not saying that he prevents them from doing as they wish or following their desires, but rather that he issues a ruling which contradicts their ruling. This description posits the ideology of Sodom as extreme capitalism, and as such it fits one of the story lines of Genesis, that of the evolution, or deterioration, of human society. The story line starts with Adam and the woman who breached what seemed to them as an arbitrary rule, with no victims, and continues with Cain who committed a crime of passion, deliberately killing another human being, his own brother. We then read of Lemekh who announces premeditated murder of anyone who will try to oppose or harm him.

From individuals, the Torah moves to societies. The flood era society was that of oligarchs, a small power elite called Bene HaElohim, who oppressed the rest of society, Bene HaAdam. That in turn led to anarchy and to injustice under disguise of legislation, which in biblical Hebrew is called onn – corruption and veiled injustice. As families and nations start dispersing after the flood, they decide to create a society where all be equal. One language, one ideology, and a monumental tower. They might have had good intentions, but God identified the potential evil of such a society, the epitome of socialism which becomes dictatorial, 1984 style. God prevents them from pursuing the goal of uniformity by introducing the diversity of languages.

Finally, the Sodomite society appears with the idea of extreme capitalism. To each his own, and you will enjoy only the

fruits of your toil. There is no charity or hospitality, and visitors are chased out or tortured. This society, too, is bound to fail, and since its seed is selfishness, it breeds destruction. It was into this succession of failed societies that Abraham was introduced. He is presented by God as the solution for the question of ideal government )Gen. 18:19(:

*I have chosen because he is one who will instruct his descendants to observe the path of God by doing loving kindness and justice.*

Abraham is chosen because he maintains a balance between fairness, or justice, and loving kindness, or social support, since a society cannot survive with either extreme justice or welfare systems. But the great secret revealed with the introduction of Abraham to the world is that every society relies eventually on the quality of the individuals. Abraham, the educator, will teach his descendants, who will hopefully emulate him and promulgate his teachings. Lot did not comfortably fit into this worldview, and so he chose to depart from Abraham and join the people of Sodom. Maybe he thought that he will be able to influence them, and he evidently retained some of Abraham's hospitality, but being the only Tzaddik in Sodom made his mission impossible. <sup>ii</sup>

The moment of truth came for Lot when he rushed in the wee hours of the night to speak to his sons-in-law, who thought that he is trying to trick them. They did not think that he lost his marbles, but rather, with their Sodomite upbringing, could not believe that Lot would seek to help them. They thought that he waned them to flee the city so he could appropriate their homes. We might have run once or twice in our lives into people who are so selfish that they cannot perceive altruism practiced by others, and the tale of Sodom and Lot serves as a reminder that the survival and success of humanity depends on the golden rule:

*Love yourself, be the best you can, and then use your talents and possessions to help others!*

Shabbat Shalom.

#### **Endnotes:**

- i. A must read is Ted Chiang's short Sci-Fi story "The Tower of Babylon."
- ii. Perhaps Abraham pleaded with God to save the Jordan valley cities if they had at least ten righteous but no less, because with five cities, that will afford two to each one. Even the most righteous person needs company and peers to maintain his righteousness, so with less than two people per city, there would be no hope.

\* Torah VeAhava. Rabbi, Beth Sholom 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 article includes Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

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## **Vayera: They Are Not Bargaining Chips**

by Rabbi Moshe Rube\*

Note: New Zealand families jointly paid for a fully page color ad in the New Zealand Herald last Sunday. The headline:

**"FREE the HOSTAGES. These are People, not bargaining chips. LET THEM GO."**

The poster includes color photos of 32 hostages. Among the hostages are two families each with four individual family members shown. The author of the ad is "Peace in the Middle East," the New Zealand Jewish Council.

The members of the Auckland Hebrew Congregation )Orthodox( continue to recite the following prayer each Shabbas morning:

Our Father in Heaven, Rock and Redeemer of Israel.

We come before You in prayer and supplication, stunned and heartbroken by the merciless atrocities carried out against our beloved State of Israel and its People, turning the Festival of our Rejoicing into a day of our suffering.

We mourn the loss of many hundreds of women, men and children brutally murdered in these attacks and pray for their souls.

We pray for the speedy recovery of the thousands who are injured. And may the Holy One, blessed be He, have compassion on those who are being held hostage and enable them to emerge from the darkness of the shadow of death to their freedom; may He break their bonds, deliver them from distress, and bring them swiftly home to their families' embrace.

Almighty God, protect the families of Israel from the threat of terror and give strength to the soldiers of the Israel Defence Forces, whose lives are in danger as they confront our enemies.

Put into the hearts and minds of Israel's political and military leaders the wisdom to make the right decisions to bring this conflict to a swift and successful conclusion, so that innocent civilians can resume their lives without the fear and threat of attack. Spread over the inhabitants of Your land the tabernacle of Your peace, as it is written:

*"I will grant peace in the Land; you will lie down and none shall make you afraid. And the sword will not pass through your land."*

May You, Almighty God, bless us all with security and tranquillity and grant a true, just and lasting peace in our Holy Land and across the entire world.

*"May He who makes peace in high places, bring peace for us and for all the people of Israel."*

This very special prayer will continue to be said, with heart, by our members every Shabbat morning. Come to shule and pray with us.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Rube

\* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera )Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel )Birmingham, AL(.

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### Rav Kook Torah Vayeira: Combating Evil

A careful reading of the Torah's account clearly indicates that Lot did not deserve to be saved on his own merits alone:

*"When God destroyed the cities of the plain, God remembered Abraham; and He sent out Lot from the upheaval when He overturned the cities in which Lot lived." )Gen. 19:29(*

Why was Lot not rescued on the basis of his own merits? He certainly did not participate in the infamous Sodomite cruelty towards visitors. Why was he allowed to escape only because "God remembered Abraham"?

## Challenging Sodom

The need for God to destroy Sodom shows the importance of chesed (kindness) in our world. It demonstrated the extent of ruin that results from a society lacking this critical trait.

In any ideological conflict, opposition to a particular position can take one of two forms. Some people may reject a position on the basis of its expected consequences. But if they only denounce and point out its negative aspects, they are only partially confronting the objectionable position. True opposition is only achieved when we can present a positive alternative that promises to govern society in a better and more just fashion.

The problem with Sodom was not just that the people of Sodom were cruel. Rather, the very fabric of the Sodomite society was corrupt, based on their abhorrence of kindness. They based their municipal regulations on an ideology of selfishness and self-interest.

## Lot and Abraham

To combat Sodom, it was not enough to merely reject their philosophy. It was necessary to present a comprehensive blueprint for a society guided by the traits of kindness and generosity.

Lot rejected the cruel ways of Sodom. By virtue of his association with Abraham, Lot recognized the importance of chesed. On a private level, he invited strangers and tried to protect them. But Lot was unable to present an alternative vision of society based on kindness.

Abraham, on the other hand, was a different story. His whole life was centered on developing and promoting the ideal of chesed. Abraham established chesed as a fixed and organized trait for both the individual and the community. As God Himself testified,

*“For I have known [Abraham], that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep God’s ways, doing righteousness and justice.”* (Gen. 18:19)

For this reason, Lot did not deserve to be saved from Sodom on his own merits. Unlike his uncle Abraham, he presented no alternative vision, and did not properly contest the Sodomite ideology of cruelty.

## How to Fight Evil

This is an important lesson for us. Our rejection of ideologies that contradict the Torah’s ethical ideals should not be limited to negative criticism. It is insufficient to merely point out the harmful or false aspects of an ill-conceived plan. Rather, we need to open an offensive front by presenting a positive outlook based on true values — just as Abraham and his vision of chesed stood in direct opposition to the Sodomites’ philosophy of egocentric cruelty.

*)Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 46-48. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. II, p. 250. (*

<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/VAYERA65.htm>

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## The Music of Ambivalence (5768)

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

The Torah does not have a word for ambivalence (the nearest is Elijah’s question to the Baal-worshipping Israelites: “How long will you waver between two opinions?”). It does, however, have a tune for it. This is the rare note known as the

shalshelet. It appears three times in Bereishit, each time at a moment of crisis for the individual concerned. )It appears a fourth time in Vayikra 8:23, where its significance is less apparent(. In each case it signifies an existential crisis. The agent is called on to make a choice, one on which his whole future will depend, but he finds that he cannot. He is torn between two alternatives, both of which exercise a powerful sway on him. He must resolve the dilemma one way or another, but either way will involve letting go of deeply felt temptations or deeply held aspirations. It is a moment of high psychological drama.

The shalshelet is an unusual note. It goes up and down, up and down, as if unable to move forward to the next note. It was the 16th century commentator Rabbi Joseph Ibn Caspi )in his commentary to Bereishit 19:16( who best understood what it was meant to convey, namely a psychological state of uncertainty and indecision. The graphic notation of the shalshelet itself looks like a streak of lightning, a “zigzag movement” )tenuah me’uvetet(, a mark that goes repeatedly backwards and forwards. It conveys frozen motion – what Hamlet called “the native hue of resolution sicklied o’er by the pale cast of thought” – in which the agent is torn by inner conflict. The shalshelet is the music of ambivalence.

One instance occurs in Genesis 24:12. Abraham has sent his servant )not identified in the text, but taken by the commentators to be Eliezer( to find a wife for his son Isaac. He goes to the city of Haran where Abraham’s family remained while he went on to the land of Canaan. Arriving at the town’s well, he proposes a test: the woman who comes to draw water, offers some to the traveller, and in addition gives water to his camels will be the one chosen by God for his master’s son. Over the “and he said” introducing his request of God that this test should succeed, the masoretic tradition has placed a shalshelet.

The commentators identify multiple sources of ambivalence at this point. First, was the test permitted? Jewish law forbids relying on “omens” )Deut. 18:10, Hullin 95b(, and Eliezer may have felt that his test was dangerously close to pagan practice )Ran to Hullin 95b, however, states that Eliezer’s conduct was legitimate; he sought not an omen but a sign of the woman’s character(.

Ibn Caspi himself suggests that Eliezer was unsure as to whether a single test like this was sufficient grounds on which to base so fateful a decision as the choice of a marriage partner for Isaac.

The Midrash )Bereishit Rabbah 59:9(, however offers the most insightful explanation. Eliezer had mixed feelings not about the test but about the whole mission itself. Until that point, says the Midrash, he had been “sitting and weighing whether his own daughter was suitable for Isaac.” He had hoped, in other words, that one way or another, Abraham’s estate would pass to him.

There are two cues that led the Midrash to this hypothesis. The first is that when Abraham first spoke to God about his childlessness, he said: “*O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus*” )Gen. 15:2(. Eliezer, at that time, had reason to hope that he would be Abraham’s heir.

The second is that when Abraham charges him with the mission to find a wife for his son, he replies, “*What if Julai[ the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land?]*” As Ibn Ezra notes )Commentary to Psalm 116:16(, the word ulai is not always neutral. Sometimes it signifies an eventuality one does not want to happen, but at others it indicates an event one does wish for. Eliezer’s “what if” may have been an unconscious expression of the fact that, with half his mind, he wanted the mission to fail. That would once again place him or his daughter in a position to be Abraham’s heir.

It was therefore with profoundly mixed feelings that he prayed for a woman to appear who would be God’s choice of Isaac’s wife.

More dramatic still is the case of Joseph. Child of a shepherd )Jacob(, an almost youngest son, hated by his brothers and sold by them into slavery, he finds himself in Egypt as head of household to one of its prominent citizens, Potiphar. Left alone with his master’s wife, he finds himself propositioned by her: “*Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master’s wife took notice of Joseph and said, ‘Come to bed with me.’*” The text continues: “*But he refused . . .*” )Bereishit 39:8(. Over this verb, tradition has placed a shalshelet.

We can imagine the conflict in Joseph's mind at that moment. On the one hand, his entire moral sense said No. It would be a betrayal of everything his family stood for: their ethic of sexual propriety and their strong sense of identity as children of the covenant. It would also be, as Joseph himself says, a betrayal of Potiphar himself:

*"With me in charge, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"*

And yet, the temptation must have intense. He was in an urban civilisation of a kind he had not seen before. It was his first experience of "bright lights, big city." He was far from home. No one could see him. After all the hostility he had suffered in his childhood, being propositioned by Potiphar's wife must have been flattering as well as seductive. It was a decisive moment. A slave, with no realistic hope of rescue, was he to become an Egyptian, with all the sexual laissez faire that implied? Or would he remain faithful to his past, his conscience, his identity?

The Talmud gives a graphic description of his inner torment:

*The image of his father appeared to him in the window and said, "Joseph, your brother's names are destined to be inscribed on the stones of the [High Priest's] ephod, and you will be among them. Do you want your name to be erased? Do you want to be called an adulterer?"*

The shalshelet is an elegant commentary to Joseph's crise de conscience. In the end, Joseph refuses, but not without deep inner struggle.

Which brings us to the third case chronologically the first, in today's sedra. Here the conflict is explicit. Two of the angels who had visited Abraham now come to Lot in Sodom. They tell him the city and its inhabitants are about to be destroyed. He and his family must leave immediately. But Lot delays:

*The two men said to Lot, "Do you have anyone else here-sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the Lord against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it."*

So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, "Hurry and get out of this place, because the Lord is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.

With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished." When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them.

Over "he hesitated" is a shalshelet.

Lot's hesitation goes to the core of his identity. We recall that earlier, when he and Abraham agreed to separate to end the quarrel between their herdsman, "Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar . . . So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east" (Bereishit 13:10-11) (He chose to make his home in Sodom, despite the fact that, as the Torah already states at that point, its inhabitants "were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord."

When we see Lot in chapter 19, he and his family have already become profoundly assimilated. His daughters have married local men. On the phrase at the beginning of the chapter, "Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city" the Sages said that "he had just been appointed as a judge" – the gate of the city being the place where, in Abrahamic times, the judges and elders sat to resolve disputes. Lot does not see himself, as did Abraham, as "a stranger and temporary

resident." He has decided to put down roots in the Jordan valley and the cities of the plain. This is henceforth where he belongs – so much so that the visitors have physically to drag him away.

Lot's sense of belonging, however, is either naiveté or self-deception. The text makes this clear at three points. The first is the attempted sexual assault on Lot's visitors (Bereishit 19:4-5). Evidently the people of Sodom do not take kindly to strangers. This is the first hint that perhaps Lot too is, in their eyes, a stranger. In fact, he is. The Torah, in its second indication, is brutally explicit:

*"Get out of our way," they replied [to Lot, when he begged them to respect his visitors]. Then they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them."*

The third comes when he tells his daughters' husbands that they must escape because the city is about to be destroyed, "*But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.*" Lot's elaborate new identity is about to come crashing down about him – not only because of the impending destruction but because he has discovered in successive blows that he has not been accepted in this place. Sodom hates strangers, they still consider Lot "an alien," and his sons-in-law regard him as a fool.

Yet despite this, he hesitates. He has invested too much of himself in the project of making his home among the people of the plain. He is a prime example of what Leon Festinger called "*cognitive dissonance*." According to Festinger, the need to avoid dissonance is fundamental to human beings; otherwise it creates unbearable tension. It is this tension that Lot cannot resolve – and which is signalled by the shalshelet over "he hesitated." It was the ultimate existential question, "Who am I?" Having tried so hard to become one-of-them, he finds it almost impossible to tear himself away. (There were, tragically, many Jews in Germany and Austria in the 1930s who refused to leave because they would not or could not believe the evidence around them, that Hitler was serious in his threats to destroy Jews).

Incidentally, Festinger's theory also explains the behaviour of Lot's wife who "*looked back [against the explicit instruction of the angels] and was turned into a pillar of salt.*" Festinger called this syndrome "*post-decision dissonance*." He predicted that the more important the issue, the longer the person delays a decision and the harder it is to reverse, the more he or she will agonise over whether they have made the right choice. They have second thoughts; they need reassurance; they "look back."

The shalshelet over Lot's hesitation is no mere detail of the biblical text. It is, in a real sense, the story of the modern Jew. Entering mainstream society for the first time, and yet encountering overt or covert anti-semitism, many nineteenth century European Jews became ambivalent about their identity. They tried to hide it and to assimilate. They became secular marranos. It did not work. The more they strove to be like everyone else, the more conspicuous they were, and the stronger anti-semitism grew. They themselves lost much in the process – not only their Jewish heritage itself, but also the simple capacity to know and take pride in who they were.

The lives of Lot and Abraham exemplify for all time the contrast between ambivalence and the security that comes from knowing who one is and why. Lot, who tried to become someone else, found himself regarded by his neighbours as an alien, an arriviste, an interloper, a parvenu. To his own sons-in-law he was a "joker." Abraham lived a different kind of life. He fought a war on behalf of his neighbours. He prayed for them. But he lived apart, true to his faith, his mission and his covenant with God. What did they think of him? Early in next week's sedra the Hittites call him "*a prince of God in our midst.*"

That equation has not changed. Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. They are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism. Never be ambivalent about who and what you are.

[No footnotes have been preserved for this Dvar Torah]

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/the-music-of-ambivalence/>

## Abraham's Ultimate Test

By Tzvi Freeman \* © Chabad 2023

Why do we give Abraham the credit for passing the test of the binding of Isaac? Isaac was the one who was ready to give his life.

Rabbi Mendel of Horodok explained:

*For lofty souls such as Abraham and Isaac, giving their lives to fulfill G d's command was no great test. The great test was for Abraham to refrain from "weighing the ways of G d."*

The Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, explained:

*Abraham, for many years of his life, built a ladder of reason. He was a skeptic, a man driven by what made sense to him, repelled by the irrational.*

The people around him lived in a chaotic world of many gods. They worshipped the sun, the moon, and the stars, as well as many other mythical beings. Abraham applied his mind to understanding these beliefs — and came to reject them all.

Abraham, the Midrash says, was like a man who traveled in the forest, found a mansion fully lit, and exclaimed, "Certainly there must be a master to this mansion!"

Where others saw a jungle, he saw an orderly universe, and he realized there must be something that transcends this order, creates this order, and directs it. With his keen, independent intellect, he came to the conclusion that there is a single G d who is beyond intellect. And so he fearlessly proclaimed to all the world.

And then G d pulled his ladder out from under him. The same G d who had promised him that Isaac, his son, would be his heir, that same G d commanded him, *"Take your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac, and raise him up for an offering on one of the mountains that I will show you."*

Reason had no place here. If you had asked Abraham at this point, *"How does this make sense? How can it be resolved?"* he would have no answer. Because there was no answer. There was no ladder that reached to this place.

And yet Abraham, the skeptic, the independent thinker, the man of reason who had rebelled against an entire civilization because they made no sense to him, kept walking to that place that flew in the face of all logic and reason.

Because it wasn't about reason. It wasn't about the ladder. It was about remaining bonded to the One who created all reason. For whom nothing has to be, and anything could be. And so, in that place, there are no contradictions. In that place, all is one.

That is why, when Abraham finally arrived at the vortex of his ultimate challenge, as he thrust out his hand to grasp the cold metal of the slaughtering knife, at that point all this challenge vanished into thin air.

*"You have brought him up to this mountain," G d said to him. "That is all I asked. Now take him down."*

Suddenly, there had never been a challenge. Suddenly, the ladder had never fallen. Because, in that place, there are no challenges. There is nothing but the One.

A tower built by the mind will always remain precarious. All it takes is one mind cleverer than your own to pull out a beam from here, a girder from there, and soon you're crashing downward, doubting there is anything beyond, doubting that anything you believed was true.

### **The Towers We Build**

You too, with your mind, can build a tall ladder. Even a tower. If you're smart enough, you can build your tower so tall, you can see from up there things that can never be understood. Such as the One who made the mind.

Your tower needs a foundation made by the same One who gave you your mind. Excavate deep inside yourself, uncover your true identity — that place where you unite in an inseparable bond with the One who made you.

Then the supports of your tower will be strong. If someone will question them, you will say, "So, another thing I don't understand. There are many."

And you will stay connected Above.

As with Abraham, so too with you. When you will stand firm when nothing seems right, when nothing makes sense, when the G-d you believe in seems to have disappeared and taken your ladder with Him, and yet you keep on climbing upward — you too will reach to a place where you will look back and say, "What was I thinking? There was no challenge. Everything was in place all along!"

\* Writer, author of books, articles, and "The Freeman Files." ,

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/6147688/jewish/Abrahams-Ultimate-Test.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6147688/jewish/Abrahams-Ultimate-Test.htm)

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### **Vayeira: The Jewish Role**

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky \*

#### **The Jewish Role**

As Ishmael grew up, Sarah observed how he began to taunt Isaac and engage in other unsavory forms of behavior. She therefore insisted that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away.

*Sarah said to Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son, for the son of this bondwoman will not inherit together with my son Isaac!"* (Gen. 21:10)

We are told that Ishmael, although still quite a young man, had started to fall into idol worship, illicit relations, and even murder! Yet, the main reason Sarah gave for demanding that Abraham banish him was because Ishmael failed to acknowledge that Isaac was Abraham's rightful heir, claiming that as the firstborn, he would inherit a double portion. This false sense of entitlement stemming from his haughty attitude led to his other forms of degenerate behavior, and Sarah recognized this as the root of his corruption.

Similarly, we see that so much of the moral degeneration that exists in the world is the result of a failure to acknowledge the unique role of the Jewish people in G-d's plan for humanity. The awareness that there is a G-d, that He has a plan for creation, and that it is the task of the Jewish people to educate the rest of humanity regarding how to fulfill that plan, is the foundation of all morality.

— from *Daily Wisdom 3*

May G-d grant a swift, miraculous and complete victory over our enemies.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society

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#### Covenant and Conversation

##### Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

###### 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.

#### What Does Judaism Say About ...

Podcast with Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel.

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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”.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fear of God is critical to the fabric of human existence. Those who love—either God or another human being—may sometimes rationalize away their own lapses and indiscretions with the sense that the beloved will understand, that those in love ‘need not say they are sorry.’ In contrast, fear of God brooks no exceptions, keeping us honest, constantly spurring us on to remain steady and steadfast despite the narrowness of life’s very narrow bridge.

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

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

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

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

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

It is at this crucial moment that a circle has been completed, an event that began in the land of Gerar and ends on the mount of

## **Likutei Divrei Torah**

Moriah. It was in Gerar that Abraham honed his fear of God, a necessity in a culture in which it was sorely lacking.

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

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

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

I read the story quite some time ago. It was told by a young woman who boarded an airplane early one winter Friday morning. She was on her way to Chicago from New York to spend a weekend there with friends.

She made herself comfortable in her seat, prepared some reading material, and was confident that the plane would take off more or less on time and that she would arrive at her destination in little more than an hour.

But that was not to be. Instead, she experienced what all “frequent flyers” are familiar with—unanticipated delays. At first, the pilot assured the passengers that the delays would be brief and that they would soon be on their way.

However, time dragged on, and the young woman, as well as the rest of the passengers, became a bit concerned. They all had appointments in Chicago, or flight connections to make, or were simply upset about the prospect of being strapped into an uncomfortable seat for a longer period of time than expected.

For some of the passengers, however, and our young woman was among them, there was a “higher” concern. It was a short Friday, and sundown was early, only six or seven hours away. Would they make it to Chicago in time to reach their ultimate destinations before the Sabbath?

The young woman who related the story described the scene. At first, the several Jews aboard the plane took no notice of each other, each minding his or her own business. However, as the delay became more protracted, and the possibility of being stranded became more real, the Jews present began to converse with each other and share their anxieties.

Finally, the plane took off. But the worries of the Shabbat observers were not over. About halfway through the flight the pilot announced that they would not be able to land in Chicago after all. Instead, they were being diverted to Milwaukee.

By this time, there were little more than three hours until sundown. The group of Shabbat observers huddled in the back of the plane, and two of them assured the others, and there were 10 or 12 others, that they knew several people in Milwaukee who could host them for Shabbos, if they would land in the Milwaukee airport in time.

They asked the crew if they could somehow call ahead and contact their acquaintances in Milwaukee. That was done, and the Milwaukee friends assured the group that they would not only put them up and feed them well, but they would have a van at the airport ready to speed them to their Shabbat accommodations.

The young woman had been sitting next to a non-Jewish couple who couldn't help but eavesdrop upon the entire conversation and the arrangements that ten passengers were making to spend a weekend with total strangers. They expressed their astonishment to the young woman, saying: "Are you all going to spend an entire weekend with people you don't know? And why would they put all of you up? Are you sure this is not some kind of a trap? Will you be safe?"

The young woman reassured her co-passengers with this one brief statement: "That's Jewish hospitality."

The reader of this column, who is surely familiar with Jewish hospitality, can anticipate the happy ending of the story. The plane landed with barely an hour to spare, the van appeared, the group was rushed to the Jewish neighborhood, everyone had comfortable accommodations, and the delicious Shabbat meals were especially lively as the group played Jewish geography and learned about the many connections they had with each other.

But the reader may want to know more about what the young woman told her non-Jewish companions, expanding upon the concept of Jewish hospitality.

She began by explaining to them that Jews read selections from the Bible in the synagogue each Sabbath. She told them that the selection which would be read tomorrow was Genesis 18:1-22:24. She introduced them to the vocabulary of the weekly Torah portion and informed them that the name of that week's parsha was Parshat Vayera.

She went on to briefly introduce them to the inspiring personality of Abraham, our forefather. But time was running out, and she could not even begin to narrate the stories in this Torah portion that describe Abraham's hospitality.

She told them that Abraham was the model for hospitality that all Jews try to emulate, and she shared with them one brief verse, which appears toward the end of the parsha:

"Abraham planted a tamarisk at Beer-Sheba, and invoked there the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God." (Genesis 21:33)

Of course, she had to define "tamarisk," which she did by telling them that it was a small tree or shrub. But then she went on to relate the following homily to them:

"I had a teacher at the Jewish parochial school I attended. He pointed out to us that the Hebrew word for tamarisk is aishel.

"The rabbis of old disputed the meaning of aishel. Some said that it meant an orchard. But others contended that it meant a hostel, an inn.

"Our teacher shared with us the deeper meaning of this dispute, as taught by a much more contemporary rabbi, Solomon Joseph Zevin. Rabbi Zevin held that orchard and inn represent the two qualities which comprise hospitality. The orchard symbolizes life, growth, nurturance, regeneration. This is the emotional component of hospitality, the provision of sustenance, of care and compassion, and, when necessary, sympathy and healing.

"The other quality is symbolized by the inn—a structure, solid, protective, safe and secure. The hospitable person, and Abraham was the archetype of such a person, provides his guest with both the life-giving sustenance provided by the orchard and the sense of security provided by the home, by the inn."

The two non-Jewish passengers thanked the young woman for the lesson. They added, however, the following remarks:

"We too study the Bible, and we remember that Abraham was called 'the father of the multitude of nations. He modeled hospitality for all mankind.'

"Nevertheless, we concede that there is something special about the Jewish hospitality that we are now witnessing and that you are apparently about to experience.

"The truly hospitable person opens his or her home even to the total stranger—so much so that total strangers can rely upon that hospitality. You are truly a blessed people, and, although we will never meet your hosts, we ask that you share with them our profound admiration."

When the young woman boarded that airplane, she expected a very ordinary experience. Instead, she was blessed with the opportunity not only to benefit from Jewish hospitality, but to share the lessons of hospitality with others in a way that achieved that highest of all spiritual objectives, a "sanctification of the name of God," a kiddush Hashem.

## Likutei Divrei Torah

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

### Kofin Al Midas Sodom - Forcing Kindness

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.

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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.

### Dvar Torah

#### Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

What will we become the parent of? 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?

### Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

#### Who comes first and why?

#### Rabbi Daniel and Simi Touito

There is a well-known debate among the exegotes on the third verse of the portion of Vayera:

“And he said: ‘My lord [adonay], if now I have found favor in thy [singular form in Hebrew] sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant.’[1]

There is no doubt that the speaker here is Avraham. But to whom is he talking? Who is the listener?

One might say that Avraham is turning to the most prominent of the group and invites him to enter his home, and the latter is then followed by the rest of “the people who stood beside him”. However, a more original interpretation presents itself: If one changes the second word in the verse [A-d-o-n-a-y] to a word denoting Divinity, the meaning changes completely. According to this rather daring, interpretation, Moshe turns to God Himself and says to Him that if He truly loves him, then He, with all due respect, should bear with him for just a few moments while he, Avraham, tends to the guests he has just found on the high road[2].

Now let us place what the Torah tells us in its proper context:

Avraham is a very old man, almost one-hundred years of age[3], and he has just been circumcised. In fact, our Sages tell us that the circumcision had taken place only three days prior to this episode[4], and that he was recuperating at the time these events unfolded.

If this is not extraordinary enough, or perhaps because of these very unique circumstances, God Almighty Himself pays Avraham a royal visit. But lo and behold, the minute Avraham notices a few passersby from afar (“And he lifted his eyes” gives us the sense that he was searching for something on the desert’s horizon), people who are rather simple-looking, maybe even idol-worshippers[5], Avraham takes leave of God, gets up from his comfortable shaded seat in the tent and runs out to the strangers to welcome them into his home.

True, Avraham is soon to become famous for his extraordinary hospitality; however, we cannot but ask ourselves the following question: If we were in a similar situation – old and sick in the middle of a scorching desert –

would we just get up and take leave of the most distinguished guest of all, the Creator of the world Himself, and run out to bring in strangers into our home?!

The answer is an unequivocal no. If we were to encounter a person acting in the manner just described, we would either consider him to be extremely rude. How is it then that Avraham, with no qualms whatsoever, apologizes to his Divine guest and with great agility rushes out to host human guests?

Perhaps the answer is that Avraham the Hebrew [Ha’ivri, which also means “from the other side”], our beloved Patriarch, lived with the clear notion and rather heavy realization that he was on one side, while all of humanity was on the other[6]. He felt as though he had only three friends in the entire world – Enar, Eshkol and Mamre[7], and of course one very close entity that was constantly watching over him and protecting him from all evil – God Almighty.

Avraham might appear to us to be an extremely lonely person; however, the very fact that the Torah points out the exact place Avraham was sitting when this episode took place, teaches us to what extent Avraham loved people. Our Sages teach us that the fact that God appeared to Avraham on Mamre’s property was a remuneration of sorts to Mamre for being Avraham’s true friend and for giving him the sound advice to circumcise himself immediately and not postpone the deed[8].

From this episode, as well as from other events in Avraham’s lifetime, it becomes quite clear that despite his theological loneliness, he was still a “people person.” In fact, he was an exemplary people person, the most human of people, a man filled with love and compassion for others; a man who consulted with his friends and knew how to repay their kindness.

This fits in beautifully with the words of our Sages describing the eshel [usually the name of a tree] Avraham planted, as mentioned in the verse, telling us that the eshel was actually an inn that Avraham built on the high road to cater to the nomads of the desert[9].

And yet, if we still insist on asking who Avraham ultimately preferred – human beings or God Almighty – the answer seems pretty clear cut from this chapter: Avraham prefers human beings. He prefers the company of people. It appears that as far as Avraham was concerned, going out to help a nomad, taking him in, feeding him and pampering him is more important than spending time with God who has come to do the mitzvah of bikkur cholim and pay a visit to the elderly sick man.

Still and all, what is the motivation behind Avraham’s choice? A sense of being completely subjected to God and fulfilling His mission, is surely the answer. Let us notice one word that Avraham uses when he asks God for

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permission to take leave: “...pass not away, I pray Thee, from Thy servant.” I am your servant, says Avraham, and, as such, I am taking leave and going out to welcome these passersby, driven by a sense of mission; with the knowledge that it is You that instructed me to spread the word of monotheism in the world.

It’s fascinating to see how God’s first ambassador in the world – Avraham Avinu – is one of the most compassionate human beings, who chooses to show kindness to a few nomads and feed them at his expense, and yet he still does this with a sense of mission. Don’t leave me, Avraham is supposedly saying to God, because I am going out to them in order to glorify Your name and to make Your name known in the world.

There is no better exemplary figure than Avraham, from whom we can learn about proper conduct and decision making as shlichim, emissaries: People come first. This means we engage with others on the highest level of compassion, no matter who the person is.

However, let us not get confused – as God’s emissaries, we are also His representatives in the world. He looks upon us and waits for us, taking great pleasure in watching us engaging in the work of God in this world, despite the limited human powers that we have. This precisely was the case with Avraham Avinu. Because he had taken leave of God Almighty Himself in order to open his home to guests, he merited great blessings from God, and was even given the promise that he would bear a son who would be his successor in every respect.

[1] Bereshit 18, 3

[2] See Rashi on this verse and the original source in Bereshit Rabbah, 28: 9-10 and the Babylonian Talmud, tractate of Shvuot, 35:2.

[3] Bereshit 16, 16

[4] Rashi on our portion, first verse.

[5] Babylonian Talmud, tractate of Bava Metzia, 86:2, Rashi on the words “verachatzu” [“and they washed”].

[6] Bereshit Rabbah 42:8

[7] Bereshit 14, verses 13 and 24

[8] Bereshit 18, 1, Rashi on the words “Be’elonei”

[9] Bereshit 21, 31, Bereshit Rabbah 54, Babylonian Talmud, tractate of Sotah 10:1 and Rashi on this verse quoting the two interpretations (Rav or Shmuel).

### Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

#### Rabbi Michael Rosensweig

#### Akeidat Yitzchak: Establishing the Standard for, and Interrelationship Between, Ahavat and Yirat Hashem

The episode of akeidat Yitzchak, perceived by Chazal (also reflected in the Yamim Noraim liturgy) as a pivotal event, a pinnacle of faith and commitment that intensified and transformed the bond between Hashem and Am Yisrael, constitutes the first explicit “nisayon” (Bereishit 22:1- “ve-HaElokim nisah et Avraham”) recorded in the Torah. The fact

that, according to most counts (excluding R. Yonah, Avot 5:3), the akeidah qualifies as the ultimate and climactic of 10 experiences that test and define Avraham Avinu's legacy reinforces its central import.

Yet, the Mefarshim were puzzled by the very purpose of nisyonot applied by an omniscient Hashem, especially with respect to figures like Avraham Avinu who already had an extensively documented track record for piety and devotion. In a previous essay (*YiratShamayim: When Potential is Not Enough*), I examined Ramban's perspective on the substantive transformative impact of actualizing latent potential in avodat Hashem. Avraham's extraordinary capacity for *yirat Hashem* was evident to Hashem, but it was nonetheless advanced and further deepened its actual and concrete realization. Rambam and Ran (see also R. Saadia, Radak, and R. Bachya), however, provide a different perspective on the akeidah and nisayon broadly that significantly supplements this truth.

Rambam dedicates a chapter in *Moreh Nevuchim* (3:24) to the principle of nisayon, a theme that he characterizes from the outset as theologically and philosophically problematic. He immediately identifies the akeidah as the preeminent of the Torah's six recorded nisyonot, as he engages both with the broader phenomenon and the specific character of the akeidah. He emphatically dismisses the contention that Hashem imposes painful yisurim or nisyonot in order to increase merit and reward as a notion that is incompatible with Divine justice ("Keil Emunah ve-ein avel, zadik ve-yashar hu"!).

Alternatively, Rambam argues that the akeida, and by extension other nisyonot, objectively established and likely even engendered an expansion and intensification of core spiritual boundaries and standards ("yeidu kol benei adam gevul *yirat Hashem* mah hu"). Revealing the extraordinary capacity of Avraham's religious devotion elevated these principles, imposed a higher bar for their absorption and implementation, and inspired the nation across generations with the aspiration of emulation. Nisyonot emerge as a powerful vehicle to embody and facilitate the legacy of great Jewish personalities. Rambam renders the term "*yadati*" ("atah *yadati ki yerei Elokim atah") as "*yeedati*" akin to R. Saadia Gaon's- "*nodati*", but not merely connoting that which has been publicized, but more forcefully that it has been "made known", entailing an impactful transformative knowledge, one that redefines the boundaries of commitment and piety. R. Hayim of Volozhin (*Nefesh ha-Chayim* 5:3- noting the appending of "Avinu" to Avraham in this context, in contrast to the previous mishnah) posits that Avraham's successful completion of the nisyonot implanted in his descendants an expanded capacity for mesirut nefesh, a remarkable legacy indeed!*

Rambam's perspective on the akeidah entails an added dimension. He underscores that this ultimate and most paradigmatic nisayon focuses on, redefines, and expands the standards of the two primary principles that define and motivate all of avodat Hashem, *ahavat Hashem* and *yirat Hashem* ("ki tachlit kol haTorah kulah be-kol mah shenichlal bah mi-tzivui ve-azharah ve-havtachah ve-hodaah eino ela davar echad, ve-hu liro mimenu yitaleh"). (For *ahavat Hashem*, see *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Teshuvah* ch. 10, *Sefer Hamitzvos*, aseh 3, *Perush Hamishnah*, end of *Makkot*, and ch. 10 of *Sanhedrin*). His presentation reinforces his broader view, consistently articulated throughout his works, that *yirat* and *ahavat Hashem* are not vehicles or means but constitute inherent and intrinsic manifestations of man's bond with Hashem, the very telos of creation and existence. That the akeidah crystallized and elevated these core categories of halachic life bespeaks of its significance.

Rambam's position on the akeidah is particularly noteworthy for this dual emphasis, for the integration of implicit *ahavat Hashem* in conjunction with more explicit accentuation of *yirat Hashem* ("atah yadaati ki yerei elokim atah"). While the mishneh (Avot 5:3) broadly attributes Avraham's successful completion of the nisyonot to "chibah yeterah", the particular circumstances and potential quandaries associated with the akeidah challenge, conceivably justify the Torah's own emphasis of Avraham's status as a "yerei Elokim" (compare *Yeshayah* 41:8- "Avraham ohavi", cited prominently in *Sefer Hamitzvos*, aseh 3 and *Hilchot Teshuvah* ch. 10).

Compliance with the akeidah imperative certainly entailed an impressive manifestation of *yirat Hashem*, but that it was also an exuberant expression of *ahavat Hashem* is even more extraordinary given the magnitude of the emotional and intellectual sacrifice involved. While Chazal do invoke the theme of *ahavat Hashem* to explain Avraham's apparent initial zeal - "vayashkem Avraham baboker" (22:3) - "ahavah mekalkelet et hashurah" (see Rashi's citation of Chazal ad loc.), Rambam's expansive assessment remains particularly consequential. Chazal posit the need for a three day journey designed precisely to test the staying power of Avraham's initial enthusiasm. Did the more reflective state of the actual akeidah still entail an outpouring of Divine love that characterized Avraham's initial response to Hashem's demand? Rambam's conviction that *ahavat Hashem* conjoined with *yirat Hashem* in this inimitable moment is a testament to his unshakeable confidence in Avraham's stature and character, as well as his profound understanding of the interrelationship of Divine love and awe.

In most cultures, love and fear constitute rival if not actually incompatible impulses. This perspective is articulated by Chazal and many mefarshim. The *Yereim* (no. 404) notes that love and fear can integrate only with respect to

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Hashem ("ein ahavah be-makom yirah, ve-ein yirah be-makom ahavah ela baHashem"). It is characteristic that Avraham Avinu, the father of Klal Yisrael, is depicted both as a "yarei Elokim" and as "Avraham ohavi". R. Bahya (Kad ha-Kemach, *ahavat Hashem*) suggests, following Rambam's path, that Avraham earned the "ohavi" designation by his response to the akeidah! Rambam's view of the akeidah issues from his position that *ahavat Hashem* and *yirat Hashem* are fully integrated and mutually enhancing. In the beginning of the second chapter of *Hilchot Yesodei ha-Torah* (2:1-2) the Rambam atypically formulates two mitzvot - *ahavat* and *yirat Hashem* - in tandem (rather than each mitzvah discretely), and then proceeds to examine their joint application ("keizad hi ahavato ve-yirato") and to demonstrate their mutual enhancing impact (see also *Avodat ha-Melech* op cit). Perhaps the akeidah's impact in expanding the parameters and elevating the aspirations of *avodat Hashem* entailed the ambitious integration of *yirat* and *ahavat Hashem*, as well!

[Rambam's integrative approach to the akeidah impacted other authorities, as well (see, in particular, Radak, R. Bahya, *Derashot ha-Ran*, derush 6, and *Ran Al ha-Torah ad loc*). Ran's view is especially striking. He projects *ahavat Hashem* as the primary focus of the akeidah, remarkably arguing that Avraham was presented with a choice-request rather than a demand. His exuberant *ahavat Hashem* motivated his volitional compliance! See, also Sheim mi-Shmuel's emphasis on the *ahavat Hashem* theme. I hope to elaborate on these perspectives elsewhere.]

While attainment of Avraham Avinu's lofty standard of both *yirat* and *ahavat Hashem*, as well as their conjunction, crystallized in the akeidah, remains a distant goal, the aspirations and ideal categories defined by the akeidah are concretely consequential to every *oved Hashem*. Moreover, it is noteworthy that intense and aspirational *ahavat* and *yirat Hashem* also manifest in core mitzvot, certainly accessible to every member of Am Yisrael. Rambam transitions from an intense articulation of *ahavat Hashem* in the culmination of *Sefer Mada* (*Hilchot Teshuvah* ch. 10) to *Sefer Ahavah* (the second volume of *Yad ha-Chazakah*, introduced by the verse "mah ahavti toratecha kol hayom hi sichati"), which focuses on core halachic institutions like *keriyat shema*, *tefilah* and *berachot*, that nurture and deepen our bond with Hashem in daily life. The mitzvah of *ahavat Hashem*, accentuates the full range of human resources in the pursuit of this ideal - "vehavtra et Hashem Elokecha bekol levavkih, bekol nafshekaha, u-vekol meodekaha" (see *Berachot* 61b, and Radak's linkage to the akeidah!). Finally, the ubiquitous obligation to represent *Yahadut* responsibly and with integrity, in a manner that spotlights its idealism and transcendence - "sheyehei sheim shamayim mitahev al yadecha" (*Yoma* 86a,

Rambam, Yesodei ha-Torah, end of ch. 5) - constitutes a concrete fulfillment of ahavat Hashem. The akeidah nisayon, a pinnacle of faith, commitment, as well as the embodiment of yirat and ahavat Hashem, remains as always a source of profound inspiration and impact.

### Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

#### Still Doing a World of Good

And HASHEM said, "Shall I conceal from Avraham what I am doing? And Avraham will become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed in him. For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of HASHEM to perform righteousness and justice, in order that HASHEM bring upon Avraham that which He spoke concerning him." (Breishis 18:17-19)

And Sarah said, "G-d has made joy for me; whoever hears will rejoice over me. "And she said, "Who would have said to Avraham that Sarah would nurse children, for I have borne a son to his old age!" (Breishis 21:6-7)

Sarah would nurse children: Why is "children" in the plural? On the day of the feast, the princesses brought their children with them, and she nursed them, for they were saying, "Sarah did not give birth, but brought in a foundling from the street." – Rashi

Why did HASHEM need to tell HASHEM about the destruction of Sodom in advance? The verse spells out the reason. It is somewhat clear but there are some important questions here. Avraham is a "partner" with HASHEM and he will instruct future generations in the ways of HASHEM. It needs to be clear to Avraham, so he could educate future generations that the elimination of Sodom was not even slightly unjust. That's the simple approach.

However, as a result of Avraham's hearing about the impending doom he launches into a lengthy prayer and dialogue with HASHEM, pleading his case for saving people of those condemned cities. Ultimately, he is unsuccessful and his prayer seems to be for no benefit. Why would HASHEM invite Avraham to engage in an exercise in futility like praying for a hopeless situation?! Is that how one deals with a trusted "partner"?

I heard an answer to this question, years back. No prayer goes unanswered. It was because Avraham would have righteous progeny that would be going in the ways of HASHEM. Sure, HASHEM prompted him to Daven but his prayers did not go for naught. They would be necessary to protect and preserve future generations in ways that we could never know. This may help account for the longevity and incredible durability of the Jewish People.

Similarly, we find that Sarah was barren and when she finally had a child, Yizchok she

declared, "Who would have said to Avraham that Sarah would nurse children..." That's peculiar! Sarah had only one child. Why does the Torah say "children", plural. Rashi explains that people from all over came to verify that Sarah had really given birth and so they brought their children to nurse by Sarah.

Here's another approach! Rashi explains why HASHEM made it so that the great mothers of the Jewish People were initially barren. He says that, "HASHEM desires the Tefillos of Tzadikim". What does that mean? From the beginning of creation, we find that HASHEM did not bring rain until there was a man to pray for and appreciate it. Certain life ingredients are not delivered unless there is a prior prayer, a requesting, entreating agent!

The Talmud tells us that HASHEM says about Chanina Ben Dosa, "Chanina My son, he survives on a handful of carobs, from week to week and yet the whole world is sustained through his prayers". That means that the poorest man who is praying for survival is actually feeding the world with his Tefillos. Amazing!

Since Sarah was praying for a child and the world was being populated with "children" due to the powerful appeal of her prayers. She is responsible for the blessing of children in the world, and her prayers were not just the people of her time but for future generations as well.

No prayer is lost! Every prayer is answered. Recently we lost a very dear friend. A world of Tehillim and Tefillos were launched to forestall what was happening but it happened anyway. I am sure many were disappointed thinking their prayers were not answered. At the Shiva I felt comfortable enough to share with the family and those who had organized the recitation of all those Tehillim, that the Niftar had lived a generous and selfless life and not one of those prayers was lost. They are being delivered, in his merit, to special places at critical times and they're still doing a world of good!

### Mizrachi Dvar Torah

#### Rav Doron Perz: What is so Funny?

Everything about Yitzchak seems to be about laughter. Everyone is laughing.

When Avraham is told he will have a child, he laughs! When Sarah overhears she will have a child, she also laughs! When she gives birth, Sarah says that G-d has made a joke of her!

Everybody is laughing but what is the laughing matter? Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch says all humor is built on the idea that we laugh at the absurdity of life, only when things turn out in an unexpected way. Every joke is one where we expect things to turn out in a certain way, and then there is an unexpected end. We laugh at the unexpected nature of life which can change in a moment. That is the nature of Jewish existence.

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There should not have been a Jewish people – Avraham and Sarah shouldn't have been able to have children, independently and together, yet that's the absurdity of Jewish life. They had a child, and that child had children who built and continue to build a better future for the Jewish people, and the world.

Perhaps that is why so many great comedians have been Jewish. There is something about Jewish life, the ability to laugh at oneself, to see life as unexpected, and to be able to celebrate the absurdity of life.

## Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet

### VAYEIRA 5784

**Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parsha Insights**

**For the week ending 4 November 2023 / 20 Cheshvan 5784**

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

**Parshat Vayera**

**Is Life Worthless Or Priceless?**

*"But the son of the slave-woman (Yishmael), as well, I will make into a nation, for he is your offspring." (21:13)*

Judaism says there is a G-d who controls everything; that nothing happens without Him wanting it to happen. Whether we like it or not, the massacre of Simchat Torah was part of His plan. How we can understand that? The beginning and the end of understanding is that Divine reasons are beyond the understanding of humans. That's the difference between faith and trust, between emuna and bitachon.

You can believe Hashem exists, but how much do you trust Him? Sure, you trust Him when you pray and you get what you want, but real trust is when things don't go the way you want them to, and you still say, "Hashem I trust You. I don't understand why You are doing this, but I know and believe that it is for my good and the ultimate good of the world."

The Jewish People have been subjected to the most savage, cold-blooded and murderous assault since the Second World War. This has shaken us from our complacency. We think that anti-Semitism is under control, that we are living in golden age, the army is invincible. That Saudi Arabia will tame the Arab world. If you look at the history of Jewish People, you will see that much of our exile has been one of being victims, fear and running for our lives. Why were so many Jews jewelers? Because you pack up your wealth in a small packet and run for your life. Why are so many Jews artisans? Because your livelihood doesn't depend on anything outside yourself, or being an entrepreneur for that matter.

In the Shema, the basic credo of the Jew and our declaration of faith before we leave this world, the second time we say the name of Hashem, one of our thoughts should be that I am prepared to put up with any pain or suffering, or to give my life to sanctify the Name of Hashem. That's what we are committing to. Perhaps, the most important thing in our lives is the way we leave this life.

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#### **Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

#### **Parshat Vayera: It's what you do that counts**

It's what you do that counts.

At the beginning of Parshat Vayera, Hashem appears to Avraham immediately after he had had his brit milah and Avraham subsequently saw some visitors on the horizon and the Gemara Masechet Sotah teaches us, 'Mikan shemidat Hashem levaker cholim.' From here we see that it is the way of the Almighty to visit the sick.

Hashem is setting us an example and similarly, towards the end of the Torah when Moshe sadly died, the Torah says 'Vayikbor otah bagai', 'he buried him in the valley'.

Who buried Moshe?

And there can be only one explanation, because nobody knows the burial place of Moshe to this day. So, it had to be Hashem, who served in the capacity of the Chevra Kadisha. Once again, Hashem was leading through example, teaching us the lesson. That what matters most of all is not what you say, but rather what you do.

It is in this spirit that during the current tragic war in Israel, I have been so inspired by the actions, by the practical elements of what so many people are doing.

Firstly, and foremostly, Chayalei Tzva Haganah LeYisrael, who are fighting for the future of the state.

Together with their partners right around the world, people who are giving Tzedakah, people are engaging in acts of Chesed, of loving kindness and people who are praying, reciting Tehillim.

I've been so moved to hear about so many wonderful initiatives.

Yes, this is a time for action.

In Anim Zemirot, we sing 'Dimu otcha v'lo k'fi yeshcha vayeshavucha l'fi ma'asecha.' 'God's greatness is not in what he thinks, but rather 'l'fe ma'asecha', in what he does'.

And that is the greatness of the Jewish people right now.

We are doing so much, and I want to thank all of you for all your efforts at a practical level, to help Am Yisrael, and may Hashem bless us all, with full peace as speedily as possible.

Shabbat shalom.

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

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#### **A small, lonely and eternal people**

**Even the cursory reader senses that Avraham and Sarah are up to something great – that this is no ordinary tale of pioneering and struggle.**

#### **Rabbi Berel Wein**

The first book of the Torah we are reading now proceeds from the general and universal story of humankind to concentrate on the particular and individual story of the founding of the Jewish people. The story of Avraham and Sarah, their difficulties and challenges, their loneliness and spiritual quest, form the essence of this parsha and the next one as well. In this life story they create the prototype for all later Jewish and familial society.

The Torah, unlike many more pious modern books of today, avoids painting for us a blissful picture of righteous people being blessed with serenity and perfection of character and behavior. Instead, it shows us the ever present challenges to faith in the Almighty, the difficulties of maintaining domestic harmony and of creating a positive worldview while surrounded by enemies, jealousy and an immoral general culture. Tradition and the Mishna crown Avraham with the laurel of having withstood and overcome ten major challenges in his lifetime. It is interesting that the great Jewish commentators to the Torah differ as to which ten challenges the Mishna is referring to. Thus, if we combine all of their opinions, there are a significantly greater number of challenges in the life of Avraham than just ten.

The Torah's portrayal of these events – the wandering and rootlessness of coming to the promised land of Israel, the disloyalty of Lot, the difficulties with Sarah and Hagar, the behavior of Pharaoh and his courtiers, to mention some of them – all portray for us a life of struggle, of pain, of striving and of hurdles to overcome.

In spite of all of these very troubling details and incidents as recorded for us in the Torah, there is a tenor and tone of optimism and fulfilled purpose that permeates the entire Torah. Even the cursory reader senses that Avraham and Sarah are up to something great – that this is no ordinary tale of pioneering and struggle. There are Godly covenants and blessings, commitments made that surely will be met and a vision presented of a great and influential people and of a holy land.

God's relationship with humankind generally will be centered in His relationship to the family and progeny of Avraham and Sarah. Nations and beliefs will vie for the honor of being the descendants and followers of Avraham. Millions will adopt his name and follow his monotheistic creed. He and Sarah will be some of the most influential personages in world history. They will not avoid trouble and travail in their personal and family lives but great will be their reward in spiritual and historical achievement.

As such, they truly are the forerunners of the story of the Jewish people – a small and lonely people, wanderers and beset by inner disloyalty and external persecution – which nevertheless is optimistic and vastly influential in a manner that belies its physical numbers and temporal power.

Generally, Avraham is the father of many nations and of all monotheistic believers. But particularly he is the founder and father of the Jewish people whose march through human history parallels the life of Avraham itself. And, the Godly covenant and blessings will assuredly

be fulfilled through the accomplishments of the Jewish people, its nationhood and land.

Rabbi Berel Wein

### On redeeming captives

**If we give in, terrorists will not worry about being caught, trusting that if in Israeli prisons, they will be freed in a prisoner exchange**

**Rabbi Eliezer Melamed**

Redeeming Captives

Over the generations, especially in the exile, on many occasions, Jews were kidnapped or taken captive, and large sums of ransom money were demanded for their release. The Sages of Israel were called upon to decide the proper response to this painful situation, and they formulated basic cardinal rules concerning the redeeming of prisoners, and the amount of money that could be paid toward their redemption.

Our Sages have taught that the redemption of captives is a great mitzvah for which a person should donate charity, placing it at the top of the list of worthwhile causes because the captive suffers greatly from hunger, medical problems, psychological trauma, and often subhuman conditions whereby his life is often in danger (Baba Batra 8B). Therefore, it is not proper to spare means in rescuing captives (Rambam, and Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 252:1).

Nonetheless, Chazal postulated the halakhah that it is forbidden to pay an over exorbitant amount for pidyon shluim (redeeming hostages), as is stated in the Mishna: "They must not ransom captives for more than their value, for the good of society" (Gittin 45A). The main reason given for this enactment, in both the Gemara and the Rambam, is to not create an incentive for highwaymen and kidnappers to seize more and more Jewish prisoners, since they know that we are willing to pay any price to set them free. There is another way of explaining this enactment – not to pressure the public to donate funds beyond their capability. However, most of the Rishonim, including the Rif, Rosh, Rambam, and the Tur, say the principle reason is not to encourage our enemies to kidnap more Jews, and this is the ruling in the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 252:4).

An example is told about Rabbi Meir from Rottenberg, one of the great Torah scholars of his time, who was taken hostage in Alsace about eight-hundred years ago. The evil emperor, Rudolph, requested a staggering amount of money for his release. The Rabbi's many students wanted to raise the funds in order to secure his release, since according to the halachah, in a case where a Gedol HaDor (leader of the generation) is taken captive, there is no limit to the amount that must be paid to set him free. Nevertheless, Rabbi Meir (known as the Maharam M'Rottenberg) instructed them not to agree to the emperor's demand, believing that if they handed over an enormous amount for his release, the enemies of the Jews would kidnap more rabbis and demand extravagant sums for their freedom. Thus, the Maharam M'Rottenberg sat in prison for seven years until the day of his death. Because of his greatness of soul and self-sacrifice for the welfare of Clal Yisrael, he prevented the capture of other leading rabbis, and the economic collapse which could have shattered many congregations.

However, the rule prohibiting an overly excessive payment of money to redeem hostages applies when it is the public who must supply the funds. In contrast, if a very rich person is captured, and he wants to redeem himself with his wealth, he is free to pay whatever price is asked. This is because his case does not represent a danger to the general community, but only to the rich person himself, since the kidnappers may think to kidnap him again since they now know that he is willing to pay handsomely for his freedom. This decision is the personal matter of the rich person (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 252:4). However, in a case where a member of a wealthy person's family is kidnapped, the rich man is not allowed to pay ransom more than the person's worth. Regarding his wife, if she is kidnapped, the authorities are divided in their opinions whether he is permitted to redeem her by paying an excessively inflated ransom.

Redeeming Hostages Whose Lives are at Risk

What is the law in a case where kidnappers threaten to kill the hostage if their monetary demands are not met?

There are poskim who say that the prohibition against paying exorbitant sums applies in normal situations when the life of the hostage is not immediately at stake. However, in a case of pekuach nefesh when life is threatened, since all of the commandments in the Torah are broken to save a life, the enactment of the Rabbis not to pay overly excessive sums of money in order to free a hostage is certainly not heeded, and everything must be done to redeem him.

In opposition, many poskim, including the Ramban, state that even in a case where the kidnappers threaten to kill the hostage, we don't give in, and it is forbidden to pay an exorbitant amount. The reason is, once again, that conceding to the kidnappers will only increase their incentive to kidnap other Jews and threaten their lives. Thus, out of concern for the overall welfare of the public, and because of the life-threatening danger to future captives, it is forbidden to surrender to the kidnapper's threats and demands.

In practice, this question was not definitely decided, and the leading halakhic authorities amongst the Achronim were also divided on the issue (Pitchei T'shuva, Yoreh Deah 252:4).

**Whether or not to Surrender to the Demands of Terrorists**

Since the founding of the State of Israel, on several occasions terrorists have kidnapped civilians or soldiers and threatened to kill them if we don't free large numbers of Arab terrorists in Israeli jails. In cases like these, are we to accept the demands of the kidnappers and free their imprisoned comrades in order to save Jewish life, or should we refuse? We previously saw that in a case where a hostage's life is in immediate danger, the authorities were divided on whether or not to give in to their demands. Some say it is proper to redeem him, even at a price greater than his worth because his life is threatened, while others say it is forbidden, out of general concern for the wellbeing of the public.

These opinions are applicable when the kidnappers are normal criminals seeking monetary gain. But in a case of ongoing war between Israel and terrorist enemies, it is forbidden to give in to any coercion on their part, for it is clear that if we were to concede, our enemies would view this as a sign of weakness, raising their morale and increasing their incentive to strike at us further. And we have learned that every time terrorists have succeeded in getting their way, this has motivated others to join them in their war against Israel.

Additionally, if we give in, terrorists will not worry about getting caught, trusting that if they are apprehended and put in Israeli prisons, they will be soon freed in the next prisoner exchange. Also, it is a proven fact that a percentage of the freed terrorists will return to carrying out attacks against Jews. Therefore, despite the pain of the matter, we are not to give in to coercion and pay an excessive price for the hostage, above and beyond the customary payment demanded in kidnappings, meaning a one-man-for-one-man exchange.

The rule is that during a war we do not give in to any demand from the enemy, and if they take even one Jew hostage, we go to war to free him. It is written in the Torah: "And when the Kenaanite, the king of Arad, who dwelt in the Negev, heard that Israel came by the way of Atarim, then he fought against Israel and took some of them prisoners" (Bamidbar, 21:1). Rashi cites Chazal who explain that only one handmaid was captured from Israel. The Jews didn't enter into negotiations to rescue her – they went to war. This is also what King David did when Amalek invaded Zeklag and took the women captive – he went to war to rescue the captives without bothering to negotiate first (Shmuel 1, 30.)

Even if the enemy came to only steal straw and hay, we wage war against them, because if we give in to them on a small thing, they will continue to fight against us with even greater resolve (Eruvin 45A).

All of this concerns terrorists and enemies who are perpetually at war against us. However, if the war has ended, it is permissible to exchange all the enemy prisoners in our hands for the Jews whom they have taken captive, even if the prisoners we set free substantially outnumber the Jews who are released. This is because exchanges of this sort are customary when ceasefires are formulated and all prisoners are set free. This is not considered paying more than the captives are worth on a prisoner-for-prisoner basis, and therefore we are not concerned lest the

return of prisoners will encourage the enemy to continue to war their against us. If the enemy does return to its former belligerency, it is most likely for other reasons (see *Tachumin* Vol.4, pg.108).<sup>2</sup>

2. However, see "Aseyah," Vol.7, pg.8; and "Chavot Benyamin," Vol.1:16, by Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli who writes that it is permissible to exchange many enemy prisoners for our captives, according to the rule that a man can pay an excessive sum of his own money to redeem himself. He reasons that any soldier who enlisted in Tzahal did so under the assumption that if he were captured, the army would redeem him at any price. Thus, it is the army who acts on his behalf in deciding the terms of his release.

However, we have seen in the past that it is not always possible to depend on the decisions of Tzahal commanders, since some of them are likely to change their opinions for political expediency. It is clear that the mass exchanges of terrorists that we have agreed to in the past have increased the morale of the enemy, and many of the released prisoners returned to perpetrate further acts of terror, until the Jews they went on to kill numbered more than the Jews who were released in the exchange. Therefore, the opinion of the Rabbis today is that any exchange of prisoners at an exaggerated price is forbidden.

In this light, Rabbi Ortner in "Tchumin," Vol.13, pg.262, writes that the claim that released terrorists are not certain to continue terrorist activity has been shown to be false. Therefore, as long as terrorism is waged against us, there is no permission to free terrorists at an exorbitant price. Rabbi Goren, in "Torat HaMedinah," pgs.424-436, agrees that it is forbidden to surrender to the coercion of terrorists. However, regarding soldiers who were taken captive while carrying out their military duties, he wrote that it stood to reason that the State of Israel had an absolute obligation to redeem the captives at any price, without considering the damage it might cause to the security and welfare of the country.

He further stated that the State was obligated to impose the death penalty against terrorists, for without this deterrence, terrorists would continue to murder, since they will be confident that if they are captured, they will be freed in a future prisoner exchange.

## The Binding of Isaac: A New Interpretation

### VAYERA

#### Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

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

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

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

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

Gen. 21:6-7

Then come the fateful words:

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

Gen. 22:2

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

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

He said, "Here I am."

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

Gen. 22:11-12

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

But it is deeply troubling. Why did God so nearly take away what He had given? Why did He put these two aged parents – Abraham and Sarah – through so appalling a test? Why did Abraham, who had earlier challenged God on the fate of Sodom, saying, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?" not protest this cruel act against an innocent child? The standard interpretation, given by all the commentators – classical and modern – is that Abraham demonstrates his total love of God by being willing to sacrifice the most precious thing in his life, the son for whom he has been waiting for so many years.

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

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

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

"They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal – something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind."

Jer. 19:5

And this is Micah:

"Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

Micah 6:7

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

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

2 Kings 3:26-27

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

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

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

"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine. You are merely migrants and tenants to Me."

Lev. 25:23

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

"Until Your people crossed, Lord, until the people You acquired [am zu kanita] crossed over."

Ex. 15:16

Therefore they cannot be turned into permanent slaves:

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

Lev. 25:42

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

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

Brachot 35a

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

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

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

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

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

Only the most dramatic event could establish an idea so revolutionary and unprecedented – even unintelligible – in the ancient world. That is what the story of the Binding of Isaac is about. Isaac belongs to neither Abraham nor Sarah. Isaac belongs to God. All children belong to God. Parents do not own their children. The relationship of parent to child is one of guardianship only. God does not want Abraham to sacrifice his child. God wants him to renounce ownership in his child. That is what the angel means when it calls to Abraham, telling him to stop, "You have not withheld from Me your son, your only one."

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

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

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

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

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

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## Home Weekly Parsha VAYERA

### Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The story of the miraculous birth of Yitzchak to his ninety-year-old mother Sarah is not only one of the highlights of the parsha but it is one of the foundation narratives of all of Jewish history. Without Yitzchak there simply isn't a Jewish people. The birth of Yitzchak is one of the triumphal moments of Jewish life, a reflection of God's mercy and guidance in creating His special people.

It is therefore all the more surprising – indeed shocking – that the story of Avraham sacrificing Yitzchak appears in this very same parsha. In effect, this story of the binding of Yitzchak on the altar of Mount Moriah completely negates the miraculous birth of Yitzchak. Of what necessity or purpose is the miracle of Sarah's giving birth to Yitzchak if the entire matter will be undone by the succeeding story of Avraham sacrificing Yitzchak? What is the point that the Torah wishes to teach us by unfolding this seemingly cruel sequence of events? Is not God, so to speak, mocking His own Divine Will and plans by this sequence of events, recorded for us in this most seminal parsha in the Torah?

Much ink has been used in dealing with this most difficult issue. It has been the subject of much commentary in Midrash and Jewish thought throughout the ages. Amongst the many mysterious and inscrutable issues that God raises for our analysis in His Torah, this contradiction between the miraculous birth of Yitzchak and the challenge of his being bound on the altar ranks high on that long list of Heaven's behavior that requires Jews to have faith and acceptance.

But is this not the nature of things in today's Jewish world as well? After the most negative of extraordinary events of sadistic cruelty that we call the Holocaust, miraculous positive events have occurred to the Jewish people. The old woman of Israel, beaten and worn, was revived and gave birth to a state, to a vibrant language, to myriad institutions of Torah learning and good deeds, to the miraculously successful ingathering of the exile communities to their homeland, to a scale of Jewish affluence unmatched in Jewish history. In short, the story of the Jewish people in its resilient glory over the last seventy-five years defies rational and easily explained historical logic. And yet the danger and tension of open hostility to the State of Israel, the threats to its very existence, the attempts to delegitimize it and boycott its bounty, all are evident in our current world.

In the story of Yitzchak, the Torah teaches that we have to live in a world of almost absurd contradictions. Logic plays a very small role in the events of history that occur to the people of Yitzchak. Yitzchak is a product of miracles and his very maturation and survival is also a product of supernatural stuff. So too is this the story of the Jewish people in our age. Just as Yitzchak survived and proved successful, so too shall we, his progeny, survive and be successful and triumphant.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

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## Strengthening in the Merit of Israel and the Covenant of Our Forefathers

### Revivim Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

The merit of our forefathers (*zechut avot*) is based on the education of our forefathers \* In a dangerous situation, one should not mention *zechut avot*, or our own merit \* The mitzvah of *Brit Milah* is meant to

reveal the inner spiritual reality of a Jew \* The mitzvot of Yishuv Ha'Aretz (settling the Land of Israel) and Brit Milah are equivalent to all the mitzvot \* The brit milah of the Ishmaelites is empty, lacking perfection \* We are commanded to strive for hostile non-Jews to leave our Land, including Gaza

Our teacher and mentor, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda HaKohen Kook ztz"l would often teach the divine virtue of Segulat Yisrael (Israel's unique virtue), which is the foundation for all the virtues and deeds of Israel. In times of distress, we must return to this great foundation, and rely upon it.

He would explain the short prayer our Sages composed to say in dangerous places, as the Mishnah states:

"Rabbi Yehoshua says: One who cannot recite a complete prayer because he is walking in a place of danger, recites a brief prayer and says: Redeem, Hashem, Your people, the remnant of Israel, at every transition [parashat ha'ibur]. May their needs be before You. Blessed are You Hashem, Who hears prayer" (Berachot 4:4).

Our Sages explained: "Even at a time when they transgress matters of Torah – may all their needs come before You" (Berachot 29b).

Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda asked: A Jew is in danger, afraid, wanting to appeal to God in prayer. What should he mention – Israel's transgressions, praying that even when Israel 'transgresses matters of Torah, may their needs come before You'? As if God helps satisfy the needs of one who transgresses – like eating pork?! This is shocking! In a dangerous situation, does he have nothing else to request besides God helping transgressors?! This is truly 'Do not place a stumbling block before the blind', 'assisting a transgressor'. Awesome, and terrifying!"

Merit of Our Forefathers vs. Covenant of Our Forefathers

He continued, explaining that when a person is in regular danger, he mentions "the merit of Torah, mitzvot, and good deeds, that it help him against the accusation of Satan". But if the accusation is greater, a greater merit is needed, mentioning the merit of one's grandfather, etc. When the accusation is even greater, zechut avot (the merit of our forefathers), Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is mentioned. But who knows, perhaps the accusation is even far greater, and there are halachic opinions that "the merit of the forefathers has exhausted" (Shabbat 55a). However, as Tosafot wrote: "The zechut avot is exhausted, but the brit avot (covenant of the forefathers) is not exhausted" (ibid.). For indeed, the covenant is "forever, and everlasting". Therefore, the prayer stems from the covenant.

The merit of the forefathers relies on the education of the forefathers. "But this is a human matter, unable to eternally endure, for the merit's foundation is the human holiness of our holy forefathers. Everything originating from man, can possibly cease. In contrast, the covenant of the forefathers is not human. A covenant, is a covenant of the Creator of the World." The covenant God made with Abraham at the 'Brit Ha'Betarim' (Covenant of the Parts), and with all Israel at Mount Sinai, is eternal. "A covenant is not a partnership. It is a heavenly, divine concept, unable to change. God's covenant exists internally, in the soul of Creation, it is eternal, continuing hitherto."

"Therefore, in a dangerous situation, one should not mention the merit of the forefathers, or one's own merit. Perhaps there is a Satan, so awesome and terrifying, that the merit of the forefathers is exhausted. One needs a segulah (unique virtue), which is an amulet for all situations," that "even in times of spiritual decline...even when the nation is laden with sins, nonetheless, You Hashem, have chosen us." Therefore, we pray in the plural, for even in difficult times of spiritual decline, a person should not panic. Rather, he should recall belonging to the People of Israel, and pray for Clal Yisrael (the entirety of Israel) "Redeem, Hashem, Your people, the remnant of Israel, at every transition [parashat ha'ibur]. May their needs be before You". (Based on the Introduction to 'Orot Yisrael' in the lectures of HaRav Tzvi Yehuda on the book 'Orot', recently published).

The Mitzvah of Brit Milah

The mitzvah of brit milah (circumcision) that we learn in this week's Torah portion, Lech Lecha, expresses the brit (covenant) between Hashem and Israel. It is so important, it precedes the Torah (Berachot

48b). For the covenant expresses the essential holiness with which Hashem sanctified His nation Israel, a holiness not dependent on our choice, and it is the foundation for receiving the Torah, that demands we choose good. Therefore, the Shulchan Aruch rules: "This mitzvah is greater than other positive mitzvot" (Yoreh Deah 260:1). For the brit expresses the deep connection to Judaism, and the great destiny of the Jewish people, to reveal holiness within reality, and add blessing and goodness to the world.

However, halachically, even a Jew not circumcised is fully considered Jewish. Moreover, an uncircumcised Jew is called circumcised, even though practically, he did not undergo brit milah (Nedarim 31b). In other words, the mitzvah of brit milah is meant to reveal the internal, spiritual reality of a Jew. One not fulfilling the mitzvah, does not reveal or express his holy, Jewish soul, but the intrinsic segulah, by virtue of which Hashem made a covenant with him, endures eternally.

Settling the Land and the Covenant

The mitzvah of yishuv ha'aretz (settling the Land of Israel) is connected to brit milah, as these two mitzvot express the special vision of the Jewish people – revealing holiness within earthly, physical reality. And regarding these two mitzvot, it is said they are equivalent to all the mitzvot (see Peninei Halakha 1:4).

Thus, we find that when Hashem elevated Abraham from the level of a tzadik prati (private righteous person), to the level of a tzadik clali (communal righteous person), and made a covenant with him that an entire nation would emerge from him, revealing God's word for all generations – He promised him the Land, and commanded him regarding brit milah, as it states in this week's portion:

"And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you for their generations as an everlasting covenant, to be God for you and your offspring after you. And I will give you and your offspring after you the land of your sojourns, the entire land of Canaan for an eternal possession, and I will be a God for them...As for you, you shall keep My covenant...This is My covenant that you shall observe...circumcise all males...And it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you" (Genesis 17:7-11).

This is what our Sages said: "If your children keep the mitzvah of circumcision – they will enter the Land, if not – they will not enter the Land" (Bereishit Rabbah 46:9). Therefore, Joshua was commanded to circumcise Israel before beginning conquering the Land (Joshua 5:2).

The Struggle with Ishmaelite's

Our Sages said: All circumcised, can inherit the Land (Zohar 2:23a). They also said: The children of Ishmael are destined to rule the Holy Land for a long time, when it is empty and desolate. This is because Ishmael was circumcised, and they will hinder Israel's return to their place. But since their circumcision is empty, without perfection (not circumcising on the eighth day, and not removing the fine membrane), therefore, the Land under them will also be empty and desolate. Ultimately, Israel, whose circumcision is complete, will merit it (see, Zohar 2:32a). The implication that their circumcision is empty without perfection means it contains only subjugation, stifling human creativity, whereas a complete brit with Hashem, enables revealing the Divine Presence, to the full extent of human creativity, in the Land.

Residence of Non-Jews in the Land of Israel

The great vision of the Jewish People in their Land, is for the Land to be settled by the People of Israel, with all aspects of national life conducted according to the Torah's directives, morally, and holily. And the Jewish people will be a light and blessing, for all the world's nations. To realize this vision, the entire Land must be settled by Jews, and only non-Jews interested in participating in the great vision of the Jewish people, could join in the status of ger toshav [resident alien]. But hostile non-Jews should not be allowed to reside in the Land, as the Torah says:

"They shall not settle in your land, lest they cause you to sin towards Me, that you will worship their gods, for it will be a snare to you" (Exodus 23:33).

And there is an additional, individual prohibition relating to each individual, not to sell land to a non-Jew, so as not to provide a foothold in the Land, as it states:

“Grant them no terms, and give them no quarter” (Deuteronomy 7:2). There are differing halachic opinions regarding decent non-Jews, not as gerim toshavim. However, regarding non-Jews supporting our enemies seeking to destroy the State of Israel, all poskim agree it is a mitzvah for them not to reside in our Land (see Peninei Halakha: Ha’Am ve’ Ha’Aretz 5:1, 3). The Torah further warned that if we allow them to remain in the land, we will greatly suffer from them, as it states:

“If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land before you, those you leave will be like thorns in your eyes, and stingers in your sides, and they will harass you on the land you settle” (Numbers 33:55).

#### Reasons Preventing Fulfilling the Mitzvah

Two main reasons prevent us from expelling the hostile non-Jews from the State of Israel:

1) The mitzvah of *yishuv ha’aretz* (settling the Land) and all it entails, obligates us to act according to the power we possess. When the non-Jews overpower us, or the international price will be too heavy, we are forced not to fulfill it (see Rambam, Laws of Avodah Zarah 10:6).

2) In recent generations, due to the moral influence of the Torah of Israel, the nations of the world have adopted laws protecting minority rights. And when Bnei Noach enact laws prohibiting expelling a hostile minority population, the Jewish people must also respect these laws, for they have the status of the Seven Noahide commandments, and there is a general halachic principle that something cannot be forbidden to Bnei Noach, yet permitted for Israel (Sanhedrin 59a).

#### Remembering the Mitzvah

Nonetheless, within the parameters of the law and power constraints, we are commanded to strive for hostile non-Jews to leave our Land, including Gaza. Sometimes, during war, an opportunity arises to organize comprehensive migration, or at least, create a situation encouraging migration, without clashing with the nations or international law, and we must not miss these opportunities. The state and military leadership, and shapers of public opinion, are obligated to remember this mitzvah, not miss opportunities arising on our path, and thereby, promote peace in Israel, and the world.

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#### Rabbi Yissacher Frand - Parshas Vayera

##### *Feeling a Need to Do Chessed*

In spite of the fact that Avraham Avinu is known for his attribute of “Chessed” (Kindness), the only actual story in the Torah in which we see Avraham engaged in an act of chessed is his welcoming the three “guests” at the beginning of Parshas Vayera. Chazal elaborate with many stories illustrating the propensity of the first Patriarch to engage in acts of kindness, but in terms of recorded Biblical evidence of this attribute of chessed, the story of Avraham’s hosting the Malachim (Angels) is the only example.

This is rather ironic because in fact, the “chessed” done by Avraham at the beginning of Parshas Vayera was an “unnecessary chessed”. In fact, his “guests” were really “Malachim” who do not get hungry and who do not eat. They really did not need all of his hospitality and graciousness. They came on a mission and could have carried out their mission without the welcome mat! This was almost like a “chessed in error”.

Why, then, out of all the various examples of Avraham Avinu’s chessed is this superfluous and unnecessary act of kindness the one that the Torah cites as the prototype of the chessed of Avraham?

On top of that, the Gemara (Bava Metzia 86b) says that it was a very hot day. The Ribono shel Olam did not want to burden Avraham Avinu with having to take care of guests, so he ensured that the weather that day would inhibit wayfarers from travelling on the road. The Gemara says that Avraham sent his servant Eliezer outdoors to see if he could find anyone to invite into Avraham’s tent. Eliezer went out to seek visitors, but returned and reported that he could not find any visitors. Avraham told Eliezer, “Eliezer, I don’t believe you.”

We will learn in Parshas Chayeis Sarah that Avraham Avinu had full trust in his loyal servant. He allowed Eliezer full control over his entire household (Hamoshel b’chol asher lo). Not only that, but when Avraham was looking to find a shidduch for Yitzchak, which was certainly the most important of matters, who does he send? He sends Eliezer. He

trusts him to take care of his portfolio. He trusts him to find a shidduch for his beloved son. But to go out and find orchim – suddenly, “I don’t trust you!” What is going on here?

I saw in the name of Rav Yitzchok Feigelstock, Zt”l, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Long Beach Yeshiva, that there are two types of chessed. There is a type of chessed where someone is in need and you take care of that person. You are motivated by the sense of compassion that Hashem put in most humans. When we see a disheveled person on the street in great need of help, most of us feel a natural sense of rachmanus, such that we are inclined to offer help, whenever possible. That is one type of chessed – the chessed you do to fill somebody else’s needs.

There is also another type of chessed. This is a chessed that I do not do because “You need it”, but rather because I need to do it! Hashem instructed us that this is why He created the world. Olam Chessed Yibaneh! (The world was created with kindness.) (Tehillim 89:3). Before this world was created, there was nothing lacking, but the Ribono shel Olam created the universe in order to do chessed. Hashem’s Chessed is not a function of compassion. He does not do it because He can’t stand to see a person suffering or anything like that. It is chessed for the sake of chessed – not because the recipient needs it, but because I need to do it!

In the final bracha of Shmoneh Esrei, when we say “for with the light of Your countenance You gave us, Hashem Elokeinu, the Torah of life and a love of kindness...” we are saying that the Ribono shel Olam gifted Klal Yisrael with something that no other nation has: Ahavas Chessed (love of doing kindness). We don’t do chessed because of the crying shame of the situation or because this unfortunate individual’s plight pulls at our heartstrings. We do chessed because we need to emulate the Ribono shel Olam, who did chessed in creating the world and we need to do it to make ourselves better people. This is a particularly Jewish quality.

Now we can understand the Gemara in Bava Metzia. Avraham tells his servant “Go out and see if there are any guests.” Eliezer comes back and reports, “Nope. No one needs anything. There are no guests out there.” Avraham says “I don’t trust you.” This was not because he suspected that Eliezer was lying to him. He really did trust Eliezer. Avraham is saying, “Eliezer, you do not understand! As wonderful as you are, you are not a Jew and you don’t have the same sensitivity that I have. You don’t understand that I don’t look for guests just because someone needs water or food. I do chessed because I feel a need to do chessed.”

That is why the Torah specifically highlights Parshas Vayera, where Avraham feeds Malachim who don’t even need food – in order to illustrate the nature of Avraham’s urge to do chessed: Avraham’s chessed was not merely addressing the needs of the recipients of his chessed. Rather, Avraham’s chessed was addressing his own need to perform acts of chessed. This is what is called Ahavas Chessed – the ultimate paradigm of Avraham’s attribute of kindness.

##### *Exploring the Depth of Heavenly Mercy*

The other observation I would like to point out is from the sefer Be’er Mayim Chayim. The Be’er Mayim Chayim is a Chassidishe sefer, which is usually not my forte, but he has a beautiful insight here, which I would like to share.

The Ribono shel Olam informs Avraham that He was about to destroy Sodom. Avraham starts pleading with Hashem: Will you destroy Sodom even if there are 50 righteous people there? “No!” What about 45? “No!” Do I hear 40? Do I hear 30?

The Be’er Mayim Chayim says this is beginning to sound like the shuk (where haggling over purchase prices in the Arab market is an everyday occurrence.) What is all this bargaining about? Avraham Avinu is not in the shuk. He is talking with the Ribono shel Olam! Why does it seem like an auction here – actually a ‘reverse auction’ where the numbers are going down rather than up?

The Be’er Mayim Chayim says that Avraham Avinu looked at this not only as an opportunity to save the people of Sodom. He viewed it as an opportunity to explore the extent of the rachamei shamayim (Divine Mercy). He knew “I need to emulate the Ribono shel Olam. I need to be

a rachaman.” Avraham wanted to see how deep and how profound the Ribono shel Olam’s rachmanus went.

Avraham gets into this “bidding” with the Ribono shel Olam not to “cut a better deal” or whatever. He does this to learn the depth of Heavenly Mercy. For that, Avraham Avinu says, “What about 45? What about 40? What about 30 and 20 and 10?

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## Perceptions

By Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Parshas Vayera

Why Yishmael?

Friday Night

IT IS AMAZING how quickly three parshios can pass by. This Shabbos will be a month since the Simchas Torah Arab invasion and atrocities. Unlike other Simchah Torahs from the past, this one will stay with us as we move forward in time because of the terrible bad that happened on it. Last week we learned about the origin of Yishmael, the source of all of our Arab problems today. He might not have existed as he does now had Sarah not insisted that Avraham have a child through Hagar, her Egyptian handmaid. Yishmael would not have existed as he does had the angel not met up with Hagar in the desert and told her to return to Sarah. What a different world it might have been for the Jewish people.

Maybe the birth was not the problem, nor that Yishmael had to receive Bris Milah at 13 years of age. Maybe it was being expelled from his home with his mother and few provisions. Maybe almost dying in the desert from illness and thirst pushed him to become the pere adam—wild man—he was prophesied to be. That had to create some resentment in them, though we see at the end of next week’s parsha, Hagar, a.k.a. Keturah, bore no hard feelings to either Avraham or Yitzchak.

And even had all that been necessary for some crazy historical reason that we cannot comprehend, did God have to go and make Yishmael the father of a massive nation, one that seems to keep growing? Hitler, ysv”z, rose up against the Jewish people for a period, did terrible damage, and then was gone. Haman, for all of his virulent anti-Semitic behavior lasted only 70 days, was killed, and caused a new very celebratory Jewish holiday. After thousands of years, the Arabs still hate Jews and try to annihilate them.

The Arabs have caused the Jewish people so much misery for millennia and just won’t go away. They have had a very limited negative impact on the Jewish population, thank God, in proportion to the Crusades and the Holocaust. But as happiness researchers have proven, a one-time broken leg can be much easier to cope with than an ongoing trick knee. One large boom can be handled better than an ongoing squeaky door that just wears you down over time.

According to the Gemora, the angels had been perfectly happy to let Yishmael die in the desert, knowing how bad he would later be to the Jewish people on their way into Babylonian exile. But God told them, “I judge a person by what they are like at the moment, and at this time he is righteous.” Well, righteous enough to be miraculously saved now to do evil another day.

But wait a second. Is that even true? What about the Ben Sorrer u’Moreh, the rebellious son, mentioned in Parshas Ki Seitzei. We are told to kill him today while he is still “innocent” to avoid having to kill him later when he becomes guilty. Shouldn’t the same ruling have been applied to Yishmael, saving him from all his future guilt and us from all our future grief?

Shabbos Day

THERE IS A difference. The Ben Sorrer U’Moreh is Jewish and is born with a portion in the World to Come. The concern is that he will lose it based upon his current path in life. What about the fact that he could also later do teshuvah, as many have done in the past? Not worth the risk, the Torah warns us, not for the Ben Sorrer U’Moreh or society, if he is already exhibiting certain signs of spiritual carelessness.

Not Yishmael though. He was not born with a portion in the World to Come that we need to save him from destroying in the future. On the

contrary, we’d rather not see him there at all. We’d rather let him use up any merit he might have in this world and be “one and done.”

That still leaves a very big question. What about the Jewish people to whom Yishmael will do so much of his evil? Doesn’t their sanity and security come into play at all? Surely there must have been a time in the last 3,300 years when Yishmael’s righteous status wore off and, the Arabs became worthy of a stricter Divine judgment, no?

Yes. But to understand why that doesn’t make a difference here, we have to first understand why God arranged for Yishmael’s birth at all. After all, it was God Who made Sarah barren, God Who compelled Hagar to leave Egypt with Avraham and Sarah after God had made them go down to Egypt in the first place...after seemingly promising Avraham the opposite! And it was God, in this week’s parsha, Who told Avraham to listen to Sarah to send Hagar and Yishmael away. Why? Because of this:

But God has taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people to Him, an inheritance k’yom—as at this day. (Devarim 4:20)

The Kli Yakar explains:

“Someone who purifies silver from all impurity until it is clean and pure makes it ‘clear like the sun.’ Similarly were you purified through the suffering in Egypt until you became ‘clear like the sun.’ Regarding this it says, ‘to be a people to Him, an inheritance, as at this day,’ like the ‘daily cycle’ (i.e., the sun). It is similar to what is written, ‘they that love Him (should be) as the sun when he goes forth in its might’ (Shoftim 5:31), and likewise, ‘Sell me k’yom—as of this day your birthright’ (Bereishis 25:31). K’yom is explained [by Onkeles] to mean: just as they are clear without waste, likewise sell to me [the birthright] as clear as the sun.” (Kli Yakar)

The point is, as the Leshem explains, everything since the sin of eating from the Aitz HaDa’as Tov v’Ra, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, is a combination of good and evil, including, and sometimes especially, the Jewish people. But that is only a temporarily reality for which the events of history are designed to bring about a permanent fix. Moshiach comes when all of the bad has been separated from the good, resulting in the complete elimination of the bad and salvation of all the good (Sha’ar HaGilgulim, Introduction 20). As it says in Sefer Yetzirah, “the bad separates out the good” (Ch. 6, Mishnah 5).

That’s why Avraham had to father Yishmael from Hagar. Impurities within Avraham had to go before Yitzchak could be born pure of all of them, and Yishmael was the product of those impurities. Once Yishmael was born, only Bris Milah remained to finish off Avraham’s purification process so that Yitzchak could finally be born spiritually perfect.

Seudas Shlishis

THAT DOESN’T EXPLAIN though why they are still here causing us as much trouble, even more than ever before. Perhaps not, but the answer is implied.

The process of separating precious metals is a slow and methodical one. If too much heat is used, the metal will liquify and evaporate. If too little heat is used, some metal may not separate from the waste. This is why it is often done in stages, each one carefully refining the precious metal a bit more. To make ten Menorahs for the Temple, Shlomo HaMelech put 1,000 kikaros of gold for each one in the smelting pot 1,000 times to finally end up with only one kikar of pure gold (Menachos 29a).

That has been the history of the Jewish people, which is why the punishment has often seemed to not fit the crime, at least from our perspective. It’s because it was more refinement than punishment to end up, at the end of history, with one “kikar” of pure Jewish people. That is the generation that will greet Moshiach and live into the next era.

When it comes to gold and silver, a kikar is a fixed amount (about 96 pounds). When it comes to humans, it can be quality over quantity, meaning that the final “kikar” of the Jewish people may be a lot of people after they have been refined. This doesn’t mean that some people won’t go; we have been losing so many over the last few decades alone (perhaps because they have been rectified enough to go to the next level of existence, not just of history). But it does mean that those who will be

remaining will have become purified in preparation for the Messianic Era.

Every nation the Jewish people have had to cope with over history has been the means for this process, just as Egypt was in its time. Now, with history closing out, the last nation to be part of that process seems to be the Arab world. At least, that is, until the War of Gog and Magog puts the finishing touches on a long history of tziruf v'libun—refinement and whitening.

Ain Od Milvado, Part 71

I WAS RECENTLY asked what you tell a mother who says that she can't believe in a God Who took her two sons. The answer, of course, is, nothing. All you can do is support her and do whatever you can do to comfort her, for as long as she needs and as long as you can. If by some miracle, she later finds it in her painfully sore heart to accept both, the early loss of her sons and a God Who can allow it to happen, amazing. If not, she will join the millions of Jews who, over the ages, gave up on God because they believed God had given up on them.

So much of the time when we talk about ain od Milvado, it is the context of recalling that nothing in the world has any power but God. God directs everything, arranges everything, and makes everything either succeed or fail. Free-will may be ours to use, but the results of our decisions are God's alone (Brochos 33b).

But ain od Milvado also applies to the most tragic of losses. Not many may have said it, but some certainly thought it. How could God allow the Hamas butchers to capture and torture Jews, especially on Shemini Atzeres, the day that celebrates the unique relationship between God and the Jewish people? Why would He allow their simchah of Torah to be turned into a day of dreadful fear and torture, perhaps for years to come? The only answer we have at present is, ain od Milvado. It means, we can't answer the questions specifically because we just don't know the answers. We just know that He did, and that He had His reasons. Beyond that, we're going to have to wait to find out more of the truth, perhaps after Moshiach has already come and fixed the world. Having ain od Milvado, not just in your mind but in your heart as well, is the only way for our belief in Him and all He does to remain intact until we reach that time, may it be quickly and in our time, b"H.

## TORAH SHORTS: Weekly Biblical Thoughts

by Rabbi Ben-Tzion Spitz

### A Fertility Strategy (Vayera)

Every charitable act is a stepping stone toward heaven. -Henry Ward Beecher

Three travelers, who turn out to be angels, stop by Abraham who is just recovering from having circumcised himself at the age of 99 years old.

Abraham rushes to greet them and give them water and food, as well as shade from the hot Canaanite sun. One of the travelers prophetically declares:

'I will certainly return unto thee when the season cometh round; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son.' Genesis 18:10

Abraham and Sarah are the classic biblical example of an infertile couple. After years of trying, after tearful prayers, after attempting every conceivable and even some unusual strategies, they frankly give up. When they reach advanced ages, it is naturally impossible for Sarah to conceive and unlikely for Abraham.

There are various rabbinic explanations given as to why they were tested in this fashion and why it took so long. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the Kli Yakar (1550-1619) on Genesis 18:6 explains why they finally had a child.

He compares the case to another hauntingly parallel story in the Bible. The prophet Elisha is given extravagant (for those days) hospitality by an older woman of Shunam who recognizes Elisha as a man of God (see II Kings 4:8-17 for the story). Though past child-bearing age, she is blessed with a son, in almost the same language and words as the prophetic announcement of Sarah's birth to Isaac:

'At this season, when the time cometh round, thou shall embrace a son.' II Kings 4:16

The Kli Yakar explains that a possible reason for their blessing and miraculous births was simply because of their great hospitality.

May our acts of hospitality give birth to many blessings.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Ben-Tzion  
Dedication

On the marriage of Atara Razin and Baruch Katz. Mazal Tov!

## Parsha Insights

By Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

Parshas Vayera

She Just Laughed...

This week we read the parsha of Vayera. "Vayera ailav Hashem {Hashem appeared to him (to Avrohom)}[18:1]." The passuk {verse} doesn't state the purpose of this visit nor does it state what Hashem said to Avrohom. Rashi therefore understands that this passuk is a continuation from the last passuk of the previous parsha which dealt with Avrohom's bris milah {circumcision}. Rashi teaches that the purpose of Hashem's appearance to Avrohom was 'bikur cholim' {visiting the sick}.

Avrohom lifted his eyes and saw three 'men' approaching. He, in spite of his pain, rushed to greet them and to invite them for a meal. They were in fact three angels, each with an individualized mission. One informed Avrohom that in one year's time, Sarah would give birth to a son.

Sarah was standing in a doorway behind the angel when she heard him make this pronouncement. She was a mere eighty nine years old at the time and Avrohom was ninety nine. "Sarah laughed wondering: After I've aged will I regain my youth? [18:12]"

"Hashem spoke to Avrohom saying: Why did Sarah laugh... Is there anything that is beyond Me? [18:13-14]"

"And Sarah denied it saying 'I didn't laugh.' And he (Avrohom) said: 'No, you laughed.' [18:15]"

This entire episode with Sarah's laughter and subsequent denial is very hard to understand.

The Ramban explains that, although Hashem had already told Avrohom that he was going to have a son, Avrohom had not relayed that prophecy to Sarah, thinking that Hashem would inform her Himself. Furthermore, in Sarah's eyes, these visitors were nothing more than idolatrous merchants who had perchanced past their tent. Therefore, there was really no reason that she should have attached any credibility to their seemingly ridiculous declaration.

If so, what was the complaint against Sarah that Hashem voiced to Avrohom?

The Ramban explains that the thought of having a child should not have been so astounding in Sarah's eyes. Instead of scornful laughter her reaction should have been along the lines of a heartfelt: 'From your lips to G-d's ears.'

The Ramban explains further that when Avrohom spoke to Sarah about her attitude, she thought that he was basing his censure on her not having shown happiness when she heard their declaration. She denied it. Once Avrohom stated in a definitive manner: "No, you laughed," she realized that he was basing it on what Hashem had revealed to him. She therefore remained quiet.

The Noam Elimelech explains in a different way which I think has some applications to us.

He writes that a person must aspire to reach such a heightened state of 'Hashem-awareness' that even an 'amazing' event won't be a cause for surprise. Hashem runs the world and can do anything He wants. On the contrary, the fact that Hashem conceals Himself behind the cloak of nature is very out of the ordinary and quite 'amazing'. Hashem breaking nature and doing His will regardless of what's considered normal is in fact a natural state of His existence and will.

He explains that Sarah laughed with gleeful surprise. What a miracle! Amazing!

Hashem complained to Avrohom: "Is there anything that is beyond Me?" Why was she so shocked? Was she being tricked by and falling into the clutches of nature's illusion?

Sarah was concerned that Avrohom shouldn't mistakenly think that she had scoffed at the thought of having a child. "And Sarah denied it saying 'I didn't laugh.'" "And he (Avrohom) said: 'No, you laughed.'" On your level, the surprised happiness that you exhibited was tantamount to a scoffing laugh...

We certainly are not on a level where we're expected to accept supernatural events as commonplace, yet there are things which we shouldn't find so surprising. We too are misled by the natural world and are 'surprised' and gleeful when scientific advances lead us right back to the knowledge we already had through the Torah. Of course, there should be no contradictions between science and Torah. One is the probing and revealing of the world's secrets through painstaking experimentation and observation. The other is the knowledge of those very same secrets through the Creator's revelations.

Maimonides, through his knowledge of the Oral Transmission of Torah, writes that the lunar month is exactly twenty nine and a half days, plus 793/1080 of an hour. This comes out to .732459 of an hour or .03059 of a day. The month is therefore 29.53059 days.

NASA, based on information gathered through the most sophisticated telescope they had, concluded that the length of the lunar month is 29.530588. Rounded up to the nearest one hundred thousandth this comes out to the identical number always known to us. When the scientist was told that the Jews already had that number, his response was: Good guess...

That's where we run into difficulties with science. When a monopoly of knowledge has been proclaimed...

However, we should accept these findings as commonplace.

The Talmud [Sotah] teaches that one should only pray for a specific gender during the first forty days of pregnancy. After that point, it's too late as the gender has already been set.

Newsweek reported that researchers at the Institute for Biomedical Research in Cambridge, Mass. 'discovered' that in the seventh week of pregnancy, the gene which determines the gender of an embryo launches a process that leads to sexual development.

Surprised?

Good Shabbos,  
Yisroel Ciner

## Drasha

**By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky**

Parshas Vayera

The Return of Abraham

This week we read of Avraham's experiencing both a humbling failure and stunning accomplishment. After he was informed of the wonderful news that a child will be born to him and Sora, Avraham is told bad news. Though it would not affect Avraham personally, Avraham took it personally.

Hashem informed Avraham that he was about to destroy the city of S'dom. That city's customs were diametrically opposed to every one of Avraham's principles and teachings. Where he espoused kindness, they preached selfishness. Where Avraham spoke of Hashem, S'domites promulgated heresy. Avraham should have reveled in their demise, but he did not. He pleaded with Hashem to spare them.

"Will You stamp out the righteous together with the wicked? "Perhaps," he cried "there are 50 righteous men in the city. Shall You not spare the city in the merit of the 50?" (cf. Genesis 18:23-24). But there were not 50, There were not 40. In fact, there were not even 10 and Avraham had no more bargaining chips. Hashem did not spare S'dom. Avraham lost his case. The Torah tells us that, "Hashem departed after he finished speaking to Avraham and Avraham returned to his place." (Genesis 18:33). What does the Torah mean, "Avraham returned to his place"? Where else should he go? To watch the fireworks that once was S'dom? This is not the only time that Avraham returns. At the end of the portion, we read of Avraham's great faith and fortitude. He is told by Hashem to

sacrifice his only son, Yitzchak up on a mountain the Akeida. Unquestioning and determined, Avraham embarks to fulfill Hashem's wishes. Before the knife reaches his son's neck, an angel stops Avraham AND tells him that he has passed the test of commitment. Hashem promises to increase Avraham's offspring like the stars, and declares that all the nations of the world will bless themselves by Avraham's offspring. After the remarkable incident the Torah tells us that "Avraham returned to his young men."

What does the Torah mean? Of course he returned. Should he stay on the mountain forever? Of course he returned!

Rabbi Dovid Koppleman tells the story of Rabbi Abish, the Rav of Frankfurt who was known for his extraordinary humility. In addition, he would often raise funds for the needy families of his city. Once he heard that a wealthy man was on business in town and went to the man's hotel suite to ask him for a donation. The tycoon was arrogant and assumed that the Rav was a poor shnorrer, and after a few moments drove him out of his room. A few minutes later the man went to leave his suite and looked for his silver cane. Noticing it was gone, he immediately suspected that Reb Abish took it during his brief visit.

Quickly, the man bolted toward the lobby of the hotel where he accosted Reb Abish. "Thief," the man shouted while pushing the Rav, "give me back my cane!" Reb Abish calmly pleaded. "I did not steal your cane. Please do not accuse me! Please believe me. I did not steal your cane!" The man was adamant in his arrogance and began to beat the Rav while onlookers recoiled in horror. Reb Abish, despite the pain, remained steadfast in his humble demeanor. "Please believe me. I did not steal your cane!" Finally, the man realized he was getting nowhere and left Reb Abish in disgust.

That Saturday was Shabbos Shuva. The entire community, including the wealthy visitor, packed Frankfurt's main synagogue for the traditional Shabbos Shuva Speech. Horror gripped the visitor as a familiar looking figure rose to the podium and mesmerized the vast audience with an eloquent oration. It was the very shnorrer he had accosted in the hotel! As soon as the speech ended, the man pushed his way toward the podium and in a tearful voice tried to attract the Rabbi's attention. He was about to plead forgiveness for his terrible behavior when Reb Abish noticed the man.

In all sincerity Reb Abish began to softly plead with him. "I beg of you please do not hit me. I truly did not steal your cane."

Avraham's greatness engendered his humility in every circumstance, in victory and defeat. After losing the case of Sodom, he returns. After his amazing accomplishment of the Akeida, he returns. Avraham returns home, never showing the haughty spoils of victory or the despondent embarrassment of defeat. He remained constant in his service to Hashem and in his attitude to his family and peers. Avraham does not revel in victory nor despair in defeat. He returns the same way as he leaves. Steadfast in faith and constant in character.

Good Shabbos

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Dedicated in memory of Milton Gluck by the Gluck Family

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## Parshat Vayera: Abraham's Silence

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

And it came to pass...that God did test Abraham and said to him, Abraham, and he said, Here I am! And He said, Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I shall show you. (Genesis 22:1-2)

When God presents Abraham with the most difficult and tragic command to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, Abraham rises early the next morning, loads his donkey, calls his servants and immediately starts the journey – without a word of protest. We find no indication that Abraham considered the possibility of remonstrating with the divine, asking for a reconsideration of the injunction, a reasonable reaction given that the Almighty had just guaranteed him: 'Through Isaac shall your seed be called.' Could God have changed His mind?

What makes this question even more poignant is that Abraham does stand up to God when he wants to. In one of the most memorable exchanges in the Torah, the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah brings out all of Abraham's oratorical skills as he pleads for the lives of the wicked inhabitants. 'Will the

judge of the world not act justly, will the Almighty destroy the innocent together with the wicked?" he provocatively asks. And if there are at least ten innocent residents, ought the country not be spared? If Abraham was willing to defend the wicked Sodomites from a mass death, couldn't he have done at least as much for his righteous, beloved and divinely promised son?

There are a number of directions to take in explaining Abraham's silence, and I'd like to suggest three.

First of all, there is a commentary suggested by Rabbi Joseph Ibn Kaspi reminding us of the historical context of the world in which Abraham lived. True, the Torah was given for all time, but it was also given within a certain contextual and historical frame. Abraham lived at a time when the pagan world demonstrated allegiance to the idol Molokh by ritually sacrificing children. Therefore, embedded within the mind of the patriarch was the terrible possibility that such a command may well reach him from his God. In a world of idolatry where children were often sacrificed to Molokh, Abraham may well have understood and even expected that he too could be commanded to do the same – and so he does not even attempt to argue. From this perspective, the command of the Akeda, and its subsequent cancellation, irrevocably makes child sacrifice unacceptable to the Jewish religion. From this perspective, the real test of Abraham comes with the second divine command emanating from the mouth of the angel, 'Abraham, Abraham... Do not send forth your hand against the lad and don't do anything against him...' [Gen. 22:12]. When the patriarch agreed not to sacrifice his son to his God, he demonstrated his break from the world of bloodthirsty idols and his true acceptance of the God of justice and compassion. This interpretation has special poignancy when modern Israelis witness the chairman of the Palestinian Authority using young children to sacrifice themselves in the front lines of battle – urging them and paying them to throw stones at Israeli citizens while shielding gun-toting Palestinians behind them to become suicidal homicide bombers. The imams promise them eternal bliss in Paradise. Clearly, such cynical use, or rather misuse, of precious children is absolutely biblically forbidden, as the final word of God at the conclusion of the Akeda story demonstrates.

Yet another offshoot of this interpretation is the all too common syndrome of overly ambitious, hyper-successful parents – worst case scenario in pursuit of fame and fortune, best case scenario hoping to save the world (this includes committed rabbis) – who sacrifice their children for God. In the case of a rabbi or educator, the student or congregation often come first, even at the Shabbat table.

The Almighty is ultimately teaching Abraham that he dare not sacrifice his son, not even for Him!

Secondly, I've written in the past of two types of prayer – national prayer on behalf of the world and personal prayer on behalf of oneself or one's family – based on two distinct ways in which Moses beseeches the Almighty. When it comes to a prayer on behalf of the entire nation of Israel – a prayer for forgiveness following the sin of the Golden Calf – Moses pleads for forty days and forty nights, beseeching, remonstrating and even demanding that the Almighty not forsake His covenantal people. However, when his own sister Miriam is sick, he utters only five words: 'O God please heal her.' After all, God's promise guaranteed the nation's eternity, but not necessarily the health of Miriam, Moses' own sister.

What's true for Moses applies equally to Abraham. When it comes to the destruction of an entire society, a possibility that innocents will die along with the masses, Abraham pleads with all his rhetorical gifts to alter the horror of the edict. But when it comes to Isaac, his own son, he can allow himself only the minimum of words and gestures. For a people he will plead, but for himself – and Isaac is really an extension of himself – he must remain silent.

And finally, perhaps, Abraham does not argue because he is in a different relationship with God than he was when he remonstrated on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, a more distant relationship which does not permit the camaraderie of questioning a divine order.

Fear of God (yirat haShem) and love of God (ahavat haShem) are the two fundamental attitudes one takes toward the Almighty. The first emanates from a sense of distance from God and the second from a sense of closeness to God. Maimonides looks upon the fear of God as emanating from the existential realization of one's own smallness in the face of the Infinite, inspired by the magnificent wonders of the cosmic universe. The one who fears God is overwhelmed by the mysterium tremendum of divine powers, and is filled with feelings of profound reverence and awe before the majesty of divine creation (yirat ha-romemut). In contrast, love of God, teaches Maimonides, emanates from the desire to cleave to God as a lover, who yearns to remove any separation from himself and his beloved, whose thoughts are totally involved with her at every moment and in every situation. In commenting on the verse, 'Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy,' Nahmanides insists that the individual who serves God from love is on a higher spiritual level than the one who serves Him from fear, which is why our Sages have ruled that a positive commandment (love of God) pushes aside and overrides a negative commandment (fear of God). Nevertheless, both relationships are necessary and complement each other.

Fear of God is critical in the fabric of human existence. Those who love – either God or another human being – may sometimes rationalize away their own lapses and indiscretions with the sense that the beloved will understand, that those in love 'need not say they are sorry.' The very closeness of the relationship can breed a 'taking for granted' attitude. Fear of God brooks no exceptions, doesn't allow anyone to take any advantage. Fear of God keeps us on our toes. It keeps us brutally honest, constantly spurring us on to remain steady and steadfast despite the narrowness – the abyss on either side – of life's very narrow bridge. Abraham was the great example of worshipping God from love.

He left the comfort of his homeland, birthplace and family and entered unknown territory in order to be with God – much as a lover following his beloved. The Talmudic sages suggest that he arrived at the God idea as a result of his own intellectual understanding – and for the great philosopher Maimonides, knowledge and love are synonymous. Abraham establishes altar after altar in the name of his beloved God, of whose ethical teachings and powers of creativity he never ceases to speak – and attempt to persuade others to accept. He is close to God and he understands God – even to the extent of his realization that the Judge of all the world will never perpetrate an injustice, will consider it an anathema to destroy the righteous with the wicked. Hence, he argues with the divine on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah.

He then sojourns to the land of Gerar where Avimelekh is king. Afraid that Sarah's beauty will endanger his life, Abraham instructs Sarah to say she is his sister. The king takes her into his harem, but then in a dream Avimelekh learns that he has overstepped his bounds, that Sarah is actually Abraham's wife. Explanations follow, and when Abraham is asked why he lied he explains, 'Surely the fear of God is not in this place....' Abraham believed that since the 'Gerareans' had no fear of God, they would be likely to murder him if he were indeed the husband of the beautiful Sarah. After all, the very first question they asked him – a stranger in town – was not whether he needed hospitality, but was about his wife!

In the end, Avimelekh makes Abraham a wealthy man. 'Behold my land is before you, dwell where it pleases you.' Abraham receives sheep, cattle, male and female slaves, even a gift of a thousand pieces of silver. Sarah is restored to Abraham. But the last words we read before the account of the Akeda is that Abraham lives in the land of the Philistines for many days. Indeed, the very introduction to the Akeda story begins: 'After these things...' – the last thing being Abraham in Gerar.

What was he doing there? Hadn't he just declared that 'surely the fear of God is not in this place...?' And nevertheless, he remained behind! What happened to his own fear of God? Was it affected? Could it possibly not have been affected? Each of us is affected by his/her environment. Should the first patriarch have lived for many days in a place absent of the fear of God? Abraham will have to be tested to determine if indeed he is still worthy of becoming the father of the Jewish people. As the events of the Akeda unfold, and Abraham lifts the slaughtering knife, what are the words of the angel of God? 'Do not harm the boy... For now I know that you fear God....'

A circle has just been completed, an event that began with Gerar and ends with Moriah. Abraham has proved that he still fears God despite his residence in Gerar. The entire incident of the Akeda bespeaks Abraham's fear of God, his unquestioning acceptance of a divine command he could not possibly understand. His experience in Gerar had apparently caused him to work overtime on his 'fear of God' – and perhaps neglect a bit of his 'love of God.'

From this perspective, entirely new light is shed on the manner in which the Sefat Emet interprets the verse that describes Abraham's approach to Moriah: 'And he saw the place [makom] from a distance.' We must understand this to mean that Abraham saw God (makom) is after all also taken by the Midrash as a synonym for God, who is every place) from a distance, an expression of fear of God, yirat ha-shem. Had Abraham perceived God from up close, he would have realized – argues the Sefat Emet – that the God of ethical monotheism could never possibly have wished for a human sacrifice!

Perhaps the basis for this fascinating insight of the Sefat Emet is the Talmudic interpretation of the prophet Jeremiah's denunciation of child sacrifice, 'which I (God) did not command, which I did not speak, and which did not approach my heart' [Jer. 19:5]:

'Which I did not command' refers to the son of Mesha the King of Moab...; 'Which I did not speak' refers to Jephthah; 'Which did not approach my heart' refers to Isaac, the son of Abraham... (Ta'anit 4a)

And this is very much in line with Rashi, who suggests that Abraham actually misunderstood the meaning of the command of the Almighty: 'I God, never said for you to slaughter [Isaac] but only for you to lift him up' – to dedicate him to Me in life and not in death! In other words, an Abraham steeped in the emotion of fear of God, as important as such an emotion may be, is too far away to have perceived the real intention of the divine. And certainly one who feels far removed from God is hardly going to be brazen enough to conduct intimate conversations with God, to dare to argue against a divine command!

And if the first commandment to go to Israel, with which Abraham initiates his election, expresses the first patriarch's love of God, this final commandment of the Akeda expresses his fear of God. Only an individual who combines both religious dynamics can be the father of the children of Israel.

Especially in light of this last interpretation, there remains yet one agonizing question: why was the divine command ambiguous, leaving room for Abraham's seemingly 'misguided' interpretation? I believe that our Torah understands only too well that the future history of our people will be fraught with tragedies of exile and persecution, a holocaust war against the Jews and liberation wars to acquire the Jewish State. All of these required and requires parents to see their children burnt on the stake, to accompany their children to the idf base... There is profound historic necessity for the fact that this last trial of Abraham pictures him as willing to silently take his only beloved son to be sacrificed on the altar of God, if he understood that such was the divine command. Given the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of the tear-drenched history of our people, Abraham and Isaac also had to serve as supreme models of those ready to give up life and future for the sanctification of the divine name.

Shabbat Shalom

## Parshas Vayeira

### Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in honor of Yitzzy Zweig.

A wonderful person and a great friend.

#### Selfish Giving

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

defines how true chessed is accomplished: through a diminishment of the benefactor.

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

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

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

#### An Amazing Sacrifice

And it happened after these words that Hashem tested Avraham [...] (22:1).

At the end of this week's parsha we find the famous story of the akeida, where Hashem asks Avraham to bring his beloved son Yitzchak as a sacrifice. This is the last and hardest of Avraham's tests from Hashem.

Just as Avraham passed the first nine tests, he perseveres in this test as well. Thus, he is accorded great righteousness and devotion for being willing to sacrifice his son at God's request. Obviously, Avraham's achievement is enormous.

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

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

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

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

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

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

לע"ג

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

#### ===== 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.

=====

## 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 "I'daat" in 19:7-9. This may (and should) point to a thematic connection between the events in Sdom and the story of Adam in Gan Eden where we find the "etz ha'DAAT TOV v'RAH. Note also how God is described by "shem Ha'vayah" in both stories.]

In relation to the translation of the pasuk itself - "Ki YeDA'ATIV lema'an asher yetzaveh et banav... ve-shamru derekh Hashem la'assot TZEDAKA u-MISHPAT....." (18:19), in our shiur we translated "yeda'ativ" as "I have singled him out." The term literally translates as, "I have 'known him.' This meaning, however, seems out of place in this context. If it simply means that God 'knows' that Bnei Yisrael will do "tzedek u'mishpat," how does Hashem 'know' this? What guarantee is there that Avraham's children will keep this mitzvah more than anyone else? Is there no bechira 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!

#### =====

#### 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 Bereshit: Eat Your Vegetables

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

### "Tzelem Elokim": Eat Your Vegetables!

Parashat Bereshit recounts not only the creation of humanity and the rest of the world, but also supplies our most basic ideas about the nature and mission of humanity. Humanity is created with special capabilities and commanded to develop and actualize them in specific ways. The whole world is fresh, totally unspoiled; all potentials await fulfillment. The infant world sparkles with innocence and energy, with the wonder of Creation.

But Creation is really not the only theme of our parasha. Creation is only the beginning; the genesis of the world shares the stage with the genesis and evolution of the relationship between Hashem and humanity.

### A BACKGROUND OF FAILURES:

Since we cannot take a detailed look at every event of the parasha, let's just make brief mention of one important event we're not going to look at this time: the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, which forever changes the way people live -- and die. Already moving beyond the theme of Creation, we encounter Hashem as commander ("Thou shalt not eat") and humanity as servant. Without much delay, humanity creates something Hashem had not created: failure. Blighting the beautifully ordered description of the construction of the cosmos, Adam and Eve's sin is humanity's first failure and Hashem's first disappointment (see Bereshit 6:6). This failure changes humanity and changes the world, as the "first family" is ejected from the garden and forced to struggle through life in the more difficult world outside. As this disappointment is the first of many disappointments for Hashem, this failure is the first of many failures for humanity. Many of the stories in the first few parshiot of the Torah are not about Creation, but about disappointment and failure and how they change the course of history by changing Hashem's plan for humanity.

### IMAGES OF GOD:

The specific topic we're going to look at this time is the theme of "tzelem Elokim," the idea that humankind is created in the image of Hashem. Our close look at this theme, and the conclusions we draw, should help us understand not only the events of our parasha, but also the development of the theme of all of Sefer Bereshit (Genesis).

"Tzelem Elokim" itself simply means an image or form of Hashem. What is this usually understood to mean? In what way are humans God-like? Some interpretations by mefarshim (traditional commentators):

- 1) Like Hashem, humans have intelligence (Rashi, Rashbam, Radak, Seforno).
- 2) Like Hashem, humans have free will (Seforno).
- 3) As Hashem is a "spiritual" Being, humans have a soul (Ibn Ezra, Radak, Ramban, Seforno).
- 4) As Hashem rules over the universe, humans rule over the lower world (R. Sa'adya Gaon, Hizkuni).
- 5) Like Hashem, humans have the faculty of judgment (Hizkuni).
- 6) Like Hashem, humans have an inherent holiness and dignity (a more modern perspective).

### MISSION STATEMENT I:

Although it is always important to see how mefarshim define terms which appear in the Torah, we can often gain additional understanding or a different perspective by examining the Torah directly and sensitively to see if the Torah itself defines the term.

The first time we find the term "tzelem Elokim" is just before the first humans are created:

BERESHIT 1:26-27 --

Hashem said, 'Let us make Man in our image [be-tzalmeinu], in our form; they shall rule over the fish of the sea, the bird of the sky, the animal, and all the land, and all that crawls on the land.' Hashem created the man in His image; in the image of Hashem [be-tzelem Elokim] He created him; male and female He created them.

What we have next is a short section with a very clear theme: humanity's mission:

## BERESHIT 1:28-30 --

Hashem blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the land and conquer it; rule over the fish of the sea, the bird of the sky, and all animals which crawl on land.' Hashem said, 'I have given to you all grasses which produce seeds on the face of the land, and all the trees which produce fruit with seeds -- it is for you to eat, and for the animal of the land, for the bird of the sky, and for that which crawls on the land which has a living soul; all the grassy plants are to eat.' And it was so.

What we have read so far begins with Hashem's plan to create a being in the image of Hashem and ends with this "mission statement," communicated to the being which has been created. The mission contains three charges:

- 1) Emulate Hashem's creativity by procreating.
- 2) Emulate Hashem's mastery of the universe by "conquering" the world and extending mastery over the lower creatures.
- 3) Emulate Hashem by eating the grasses, fruits, and seeds!

The last element of humanity's mission seems fundamentally different than the previous two elements ("One of these things is not like the other one . . ."): What does eating vegetation have to do with the lofty destiny of humanity? And since Hashem obviously does not eat vegetables, how does one emulate Hashem by doing so? For now, let us hold this question; we will return to it later to see how it adds to the tzelem Elokim mission.

In any case, one thing should be clear about tzelem Elokim which may not have been clear before: tzelem Elokim is not a \*description\* of humanity, it is a \*goal\* for humanity. We usually think of tzelem Elokim as a description of humanity's basic nature, which entitles humanity to certain privileges ("We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .") and expresses certain capabilities. But the Torah implies that tzelem Elokim is more than simply a description, it is a mission, a command: humanity must \*live up to\* tzelem Elokim! People are created with the potential to reflect God by achieving the tzelem Elokim missions -- procreation, mastery of the world, and, well, eating vegetables(!) -- but each person must \*become\* a tzelem Elokim by actualizing this potential.

If tzelem Elokim is a mission, of course, it can be achieved or failed. How well humanity fares in achieving this mission is the major subtext of the Torah from the creation of Adam until the selection of Avraham in Parashat Lekh Lekha.

We will now follow the history of the tzelem Elokim idea through the first generations of humanity's existence to see whether humanity lives up to the mission or not and whether the mission changes over time.

## THE FIRST MURDER:

Our first look at how tzelem Elokim plays out in history brings us to the story of the first siblings, Kayyin and Hevel (Cain and Abel). Hevel offers to Hashem a sacrifice of his finest animals; Kayyin offers his finest fruits. Hashem is happy with Hevel's offering but unsatisfied with Kayyin's. The Torah reports that Kayyin is deeply upset and angry at being rejected. Shortly thereafter, man creates again, as Kayyin invents murder by killing his brother Hevel, whose offering had been accepted. Kayyin then attempts to hide the evidence but soon learns that Hashem doesn't miss much:

## BERESHIT 4:3-9 --

It happened, after awhile, that Kayyin brought an offering to Hashem from the fruits of the ground. Hevel also brought from the firstborn of his sheep and from their fittest; Hashem turned to Hevel and his offering, but to Kayyin and his offering He did not turn. Kayyin became very angry, and his face fell . . . It happened, when they were in the field, that Kayyin rose up to Hevel his brother and killed him. Hashem said to Kayyin, 'Where is Hevel, your brother? . . . Now, you are cursed from the ground . . . you shall be a wanderer and drifter in the land.'

Kayyin's response to his punishment:

## BERESHIT 4:13-15 --

Kayyin said to Hashem, 'My sin is too great to bear! You have driven me today from the face of the land, and I will be hidden from Your face, a wanderer and drifter in the land; anyone who finds me will kill me!' Hashem said to him, 'Therefore, anyone who kills Kayyin will suffer seven times' vengeance.' And Hashem gave Kayyin a sign so that whoever found him would not kill him . . .

## MURDER, A FAMILY TRADITION:

We will now look at the continuation of what we've been reading about Kayyin. If you're not paying very careful attention, it seems like a collection of "random" events -- the Torah appears to be reporting "trivia" about Kayyin's post-punishment life. But there is much more here than there might seem at first. Our observations should shed light on the development of the tzelem Elokim theme.

## BERESHIT 4:17-19--

Kayyin 'knew' his wife; she conceived and bore Hanokh . . . and to Hanokh was born Eerod; Eerod bore Mehuyael, Mehuyael bore

Metushael, Metushael bore Lemekh. Lemekh took two wives, one named Ada and the other named Tzila . . . .

Kayyin has had children, and we hear about his descendants. A nice family story, but what is the Torah trying to tell us?

BERESHIT 4:23-24 --

Lemekh said to his wives, 'Ada and Tzila, hear my voice; wives of Lemekh, hear my speech; for a man I have killed for my wound, and a child for my injury. For Kayyin will be avenged seven-fold, and Lemekh seventy-seven.'

Apparently -- as all of the mefarshim explain -- Lemekh has killed someone. As he recounts the murder to his wives, he implies that although he expects to suffer punishment, as his great-grandfather Kayyin suffered for murder, he prays that Hashem will take seventy-fold revenge on anyone who kills him. He explicitly refers to the murder committed by his forebear Kayyin and to the protection extended by Hashem to Kayyin.

What the Torah tells us next is absolutely crucial:

BERESHIT 4:25-5:1-3 --

Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son; she called his name Shet, 'For Hashem has sent to me another child to replace Hevel, for Kayyin killed him' . . . . This is the book of the descendants of Adam. When Hashem created Adam, in the image of Hashem He made him . . . Adam lived thirty and a hundred years, and bore in his image, like his form, and he called his name 'Shet.'

Certainly, the order of this story -- Kayyin's murder of Hevel, then Kayyin's punishment, then Lemekh's murder, then the birth of another son to Adam and Hava -- is not at all random. What connections is the Torah trying to make?

Lemekh the murderer is a descendant of Kayyin, the first murderer. Not only is Lemekh a direct descendant of Kayyin, he even makes explicit reference to his great-grandfather's murderous behavior and hopes that he will benefit from the same protection as (or greater protection than) Kayyin received, despite the punishment he expects. What the Torah may be hinting is that Kayyin and his family do not sufficiently value human life. Kayyin kills his brother Hevel in frustration and jealousy; Lemekh kills an unnamed person in retaliation for a "wound and injury." For Kayyin, murder is an acceptable solution to problems or frustrations, and he passes his values on to his children. Lemekh's murder and his reference to Kayyin's similar crime manifest the moral failure of this family. One generation's failure to understand the value of human life plants murder in the heart of the next generation.

## **BEGINNING FROM THE BEGINNING AGAIN:**

The Torah next tells us that Adam and Hava have another child "because Kayyin killed Hevel." Actually, Adam and Hava are replacing not only Hevel, but both of their sons -- Hevel, because he is dead, and Kayyin, because his murder and his descendants' similar action shows that his behavior was not a freak incident, but a deficiency in values. By having another child, Adam and Hava begin again, attempting to produce an individual who really understands the mission of humanity as achieving the status of tzelem Elokim. By murdering his brother, Kayyin fails this mission (as we will explain). Lemekh's action shows that Kayyin has not learned from his mistake and has not successfully taught his children to respect human life.

This is why the Torah begins the story of humanity's creation "anew" with the birth of Shet, telling the story as if Adam and Hava had had no children until now:

BERESHIT 5:1-3--

This is the book of the descendants of Adam. When Hashem created Adam, in the image of Hashem He made him . . . Adam lived thirty and a hundred years, and bore IN HIS IMAGE, LIKE HIS FORM, and he called his name 'Shet.'

The Torah is trying to communicate that humanity is starting over, beginning from scratch. The first attempt, the one which produced a murderer and his victim, has come to a tragic close with another murder (Lemekh's). Adam and Hava realize that they must start anew, and the Torah makes this explicit by placing the literary structure of a "beginning" at the birth of Shet. The real "descendants" of Adam are only those who maintain "his image . . . his form", the image and form of tzelem Elokim.

But how has Kayyin failed as a tzelem Elokim? Has he not excelled as a conqueror of the earth, a tiller of the ground who brings fruits to Hashem as an offering? Has he not "been fruitful and multiplied," producing descendants to fill the earth? Have his descendants not exercised creativity like that of the Creator, inventing tools and instruments? True, Kayyin has murdered, and true, his great-grandson Lemekh has as well, but how is this a failure as a tzelem Elokim?

## **MISSION II:**

To answer this question, we must look to next week's parasha, where we again (and for the last time) find the term "tzelem Elokim." As the generations pass, humanity sinks deep into evil, filling Hashem's young world with corruption. Disappointed again, Hashem floods the world and drowns His creatures -- all except Noah and those aboard the ark with him. As the Flood ends and Noah and his family emerge from the ark to establish the world once again, Hashem delivers a message to Noah and his family at this point of renewal: a

"new" mission statement for humanity. Comparing it to the first mission statement (1:28-30), which was addressed to Adam and Hava, shows that the two statements are very similar. But there are a few very important differences.

**BERESHIT 9:1-2 --**

Hashem blessed Noah and his children and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land. Fear of you and fright of you shall be upon all the beasts of the field, and all the birds of the sky, with whatever the ground crawls, and all the fish of the sea; in your hands they are given.'

So far, nothing seems new -- humanity once again is blessed/commanded to procreate and is informed that the animals of the world are given to humanity to rule. But as Hashem continues, the picture of humanity's responsibilities and privileges changes radically:

**BERESHIT 9:3-4 --**

All crawling things which live, they are for you to eat, as the grassy plants; I have given to you everything. But flesh with the soul -- blood -- do not eat.

Although previously, humanity had been given permission to eat only vegetable matter, now Hashem permits humans to eat animals as well, as long as they do not eat the "soul" -- the blood. But is that all? Can it be that the main difference between the first mission and the second mission is vegetarianism versus omnivorism? When humanity failed as vegetarians and filled the world with corruption and evil, Hashem decided to fix everything by allowing the eating of meat? Certainly not. As we read on, the picture becomes clearer:

**BERESHIT 9:3-6 --**

All crawling things which live, they are for you to eat, like the grassy plants; I have given to you everything, EXCEPT the flesh with the soul -- blood -- you shall not eat; and EXCEPT that your blood, for your souls, will I demand; from the hand of any beast I will demand it, and from the hand of Man; from the hand of EACH MAN'S BROTHER will I demand the soul of Man. He who spills the blood of Man, by Man will his blood be spilled, for \*IN THE IMAGE OF GOD HE MADE MAN.\*

The animals are promised that Hashem will punish them for killing people, and humanity is warned that people will be punished by execution for killing other people -- since people are created be-tzelem Elokim.

### **THOU SHALT NOT KILL:**

What is the theme of this new mission?

Originally, humanity had been charged with the mission of reflecting Hashem's characteristics. That mission included three different elements:

1) Creativity: humanity was to emulate Hashem as Creator by having children. This mandate of creativity may have also included creativity in general, not merely procreation, but it focused most specifically on procreation.

2) Conquering: humanity was to emulate Hashem as Ruler of Creation by extending control over nature, and over the animals in particular.

3) Eating vegetative matter. The point of this command was not that eating vegetables somehow is an essential part of imitatio Dei (emulating Hashem), but that eating vegetables means \*not\* killing for food.

This third element -- not killing for food -- was an oblique way of expressing the prohibition of murder. If even animals could not be killed for the 'constructive' purpose of eating, humans certainly could not be killed. Kayyin either never understood this element of the mission or found himself unable to meet its demands. But as a murderer, he renounced his status as tzelem Elokim, for the third element of the mission of tzelem Elokim is to emulate Hashem as a moral being. And the most basic expression of morality is the prohibition of murder.

Eventually, even Shet's descendants fall prey to the same weakness, filling the world with evil and violence, and Hashem decides that the entire world must be destroyed. The fact that immorality is the area of their failure is hinted not only by the Torah's explicit formulations ("For the world is full of violence before them," 6:11 and 6:13), but also by the way the Torah formulates the new mission commanded to Noah and his family as they re-establish the world after the Flood:

**BERESHIT 9:5 --**

... from the hand of each man's \*brother,\* will I demand the soul of Man . . . .

This is clearly a hint to the first murder, that of Hevel by his brother, and a hint as well that the failure of those destroyed by the Flood was in interpersonal morality, since this mission is delivered to those about to re-found the world on better foundations.

This new mission, which makes the prohibition of murder explicit, is a more clear version of the first mission, which merely hinted at the prohibition. But it is much more than a repetition/elaboration. It also expresses implicit disappointment in humanity: before, humanity had

been forbidden to kill even animals; now, animals may be killed for food. Hashem recognizes that humanity cannot maintain the very high moral standards originally set, and so He compromises, permitting killing of some creatures (animals) for some purposes (food). But the prohibition of eating the blood of these animals seeks to limit humanity's permission to kill; blood represents the life-force, the "soul" (the blood-soul equation is one the Torah makes explicit several times later on), and humanity must respect the sanctity of life and recognize its Maker by not consuming the symbol of that life-force. In other words, humanity has permission to take life for food, but this permission comes along with a blood-prohibition, a reminder that even life that can be taken for some purposes is sacred and must be respected.

#### **CAPITAL PUNISHMENT:**

Next, this new mission asserts that animals and people will be punished for killing people. The penalty for murder is death. Why? The Torah itself supplies the reason: because man is created be-tzelem Elokim. Usually, we understand this to mean that since humans are created in the image of Hashem, it is a particularly terrible thing to destroy human life. This crime is of such enormity that an animal or person who murders a person must be punished with death.

But perhaps the reason there is a death penalty for humans who kill is not only because the \*victim\* is created in Hashem's image, and destroying an image of Hashem is a terrible act, but also because the \*murderer\* is created in Hashem's image! Murder merits the death penalty because it destroys two tzalem Elokim: the victim and the perpetrator. The murderer was charged with the mission of tzalem Elokim, emulating Hashem in exercising moral judgment, but he has failed and renounced that mission. And the mission is not an "optional" one -- it is the entire purpose of humanity's existence, the whole reason people were created, as Hashem makes clear in discussing His plans to create humanity. The punishment for rejecting this mission of tzalem Elokim is therefore death, because Hashem grants Hashem-like potential to humans only on condition that they attempt to reflect His qualities. Humanity does not have two options, one being accepting the mission and the other being rejecting it and becoming an animal. A person who rejects the mission of emulating Hashem cannot continue to exist and profane the image of Hashem.

Tzalem Elokim mandates our becoming creators and conquerors, but it also mandates our behaving morally. It means that we have the potential, unlike animals, to create, to rule, and to be moral. But it does not guarantee that we will develop that potential. Tzalem Elokim is something we can \*become,\* not something into which we are born.

Shabbat shalom