

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

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

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**As Israel's primary focus turns from Hamas to the evils of Iran, Gaza, Hezbollah, and their allies, we pray that Hashem will protect us during 5785. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world.**

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My impression is that Vayera contains more direct interactions between Avraham and God than any other parsha. Vayera opens three days after Avraham circumcises himself and all the males in his household, when he is 99 years old. God is visiting Avraham when three "men" (whom we later learn are angels) come by. Avraham asks God to wait while he invites the "men" to stop, let him bring water to wash their feet, and give them water, a dairy meal, and then a meat meal. One of the men tells Avraham that Sarah will have a child by this time next year. Hashem then tells Avraham that He is about to destroy Sodom and Amorah because of the sins of the people of these cities.

Avraham realizes that God is telling him about the upcoming destruction of Sodom and Amorah because He wants Avraham to intervene. Avraham asks whether Hashem would destroy the city if there were fifty righteous men (who might influence the evil residents to perform teshuvah). God agrees, and Avraham bargains Hashem down gradually until He agrees to save the city if there are as few as ten righteous men. Why does Avraham stop at ten and not go down to a lower number? With too few righteous individuals, the probability of turning a city toward kindness and justice would be too low. God saves Noach's family, a total of eight individuals, from the flood. Lot's family – Mr. and Mrs. Lot, their two married wives and their husbands, two unmarried daughters, and two sons – comes to ten. As the angels soon discover, not all of Lot's family members deserve to be saved, so Hashem destroys both cities.

The next episode has Avraham and his family move to Gerar, where he tells the local ruler (Avimelech) that Sarah is his sister. (Avraham is afraid that Avimelech would kill him and marry Sarah if he thought that Sarah was his wife.) This deception always troubles me. With God's many promises to protect Avraham, why does he not trust that Hashem would protect him and his family in Gerar? Indeed, once Avimelech takes Sarah into his harem, God closes up the body parts of the men of Gerar, speaks to him in a dream, tells him that he will die if he approaches Sarah, and informs him that she is Avraham's wife. Avimelech immediately releases Sarah, gives Avraham substantial gifts, and invites him to settle anywhere he wishes in Gerar. Avraham prays for the men of Gerar, and they recover their health.

After Sarah and Avraham have a baby boy (Yitzhak), Ishmael mocks her and implies that she is too old to be his mother. Ishmael continues to act inappropriately toward Ishmael, and Sarah insists that Avraham send Hagar and Ishmael into exile. God tells Avraham to listen to Sarah. The story of Sarah and Hagar returns in later generations. Four generations later, Yaakov's children end up in Egypt (Hagar's country of birth and early life) during a famine. Hagar's descendants oppress Sarah's descendants for a few hundred years. Those who fail to treat others with kindness (Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael) end up reversing conditions in later generations. The Torah reminds B'Nai Yisrael not to seek revenge on the Egyptians after the years of oppression and the Exodus, because the Egyptians welcome the Jews with kindness when

Yaakov's family goes to Egypt to escape a famine. Vayera opens with God interrupting his conversation with Avraham so he can offer hospitality to strangers. The incidents between Sarah and Hagar return in later generations and become Torah mitzvot to treat others with kindness and, in particular, not to seek revenge on Egyptians.

I have discussed the Akeidah in details in recent years, so this year I shall only mention a few points that relate to my words above. Avraham seems not to show complete faith in Hashem while in Gerar. Thirty-seven years later, when God tells Avraham to take his son, his only son, the son that he loves, and sacrifice him at a place that Hashem will show him, Avraham obeys immediately and completely. Finally Avraham obeys God without question, with no mention of a reward for doing so. Avraham and Sarah, aged 137 and 127 years old, wait many decades for a son together. Avraham knows that Hashem had promised him that his legacy would be tremendous and would come through Yitzhak. Avraham gets up early to obey Hashem's order and heads off without informing Sarah. Yitzhak follows Avraham, not knowing what to expect, not objecting. When Avraham and Yitzhak climb up the mountain, with Yitzhak carrying sticks on his back for a fire, he realizes that there is no lamb for a sacrifice. In the only conversation the Torah records between Avraham and Yitzhak, the beloved son realizes that he is to be the sacrifice. All the time, their reaction to each other and to Hashem is "Hineni" ("Here I am"). They go up to the mountain, and Avraham ties Yitzhak to the stake – with no protest. Avraham does not know how God will keep his promise to make a great legacy for Avraham and Sarah through Yitzhak – while also having Avraham sacrifice Yitzhak. Avraham finally shows complete faith in Hashem – but Yitzhak also shows complete faith in both Hashem and his father. Chazal learn that Avraham comes out of the Akeidah as a hero – but to me, Yitzhak also comes out as a hero, also with complete faith.

I cannot imagine a Jew today going through a challenge of faith like the Akeidah. We no longer have an active tradition of sacrifice, so the idea of a father and son going to a sacrifice ceremony together is difficult to appreciate today. The lesson of the beginning of the parsha, the importance of caring for the ill, is certainly a high priority in our time, and Bikur Cholim is a very important priority for mitzvot today. (For more, see the Dvar Haftorah below from Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander.) Vayera also reinforces the importance of chesed, kindness to others. Hagar expresses thrilling joy (in Lech Lecha) learning from the angel that her son Ishmael and his descendants would be violent thugs who terrorize others. Hagar's reaction is close to the opposite action of Jews – we go all over the world to help others in need. Meanwhile, many enemies of Jews throughout the world celebrated the anniversary of Kristallnacht a week ago by starting a new pogrom in Amsterdam and several other parts of the world. We have a long way to go to fulfill God's goal of having Avraham's descendants bring Hashem's mitzvot to the rest of the world.

God tells Avraham "lech lecha" – obeying His calls will be good for Avraham. My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, taught me many times that trusting in Hashem and taking advantage of unexpected opportunities would be good for me. Moving east from California, taking an unexpected job, and several other surprise opportunities worked out well for me over the years. Hopefully my grandchildren will learn to follow nudges from Hashem – and learn that these nudges will be good for them as well.

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 Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat**

**Leah, Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel.** Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

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### **Haftarat Parshat Vayera: Coaxing divine miracles to heal our wounded**

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander \* © 5785 (2024)  
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

*Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, for the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.*

As Israel's hospitals continue to treat thousands wounded in the war, a story from this week's haftara, of Elisha and the Shunamite woman's son, offers powerful lessons about healing, miracles, and our responsibilities to the injured.

A desperate Shunamite woman races to find the prophet Elisha, the same prophet who had blessed her with the miracle of motherhood – but now that young son lies lifeless on his bed. When Elisha arrives at her home, he does something unexpected. Instead of merely uttering prayers or blessings from a distance, he takes direct action: he climbs up onto the bed and lies down on the boy, breathing over him until warmth returns to the child's body. Gradually – miraculously – the boy regains his breath and life returns to him.

Elisha's choice of healing method, mirroring that of his teacher Eliyahu in I Kings 17, is puzzling. When the son of a widow in Zarepta fell ill, Eliyahu similarly stretched himself over the boy's body and prayed to God until the child revived. The need for Elisha to press his own face and body against the Shunamite child is not immediately clear from the story in our haftara. To address this, Rav David Kimchi (Radak, II Kings 4:34) offers two interpretations, each with insights that resonate today as we grapple with our own wounded.

One of Radak's interpretations is theological. He writes that while God's power and abilities know no limits, it is still the divine preference that even when particular moments in human history call for divine intervention, events should still unfold with as little divergence from the natural order as possible. In this reading, the reason for Elisha's actions is clear; what Elisha did was nothing other than a prototypical version of resuscitation, using his own breath and body heat to revive the child.

We, too, have witnessed no shortage of medical miracles over this past year, masked as standard medical procedures. Wounded soldiers and civilians, whose lives were hanging in the balance, have been saved by divine grace only visible to the spiritually-inclined eye that looks beyond the talented medics, emergency surgeries, innovative drugs and other procedures. While the best practices of doctors, nurses, and medics do not break with the laws of nature, their work is often miraculous.

The story of Elisha reminds us to not forget to look for miracles and be incredibly grateful to God as well as to those doctors, nurses and medics whose work has allowed so many wounded to survive, heal, recuperate, and return to their prior lives at least partially, if not fully or more robust than before.

At the same time, the same has, unfortunately, not been true for everyone. Of the approximately 12,000 wounded soldiers treated in Israel since Oct. 7 of last year, many still face long roads to recovery. Some are learning to live with prosthetic limbs or vision impairment, while others haven't yet regained the ability to breathe independently. Radak's other

interpretation of Elisha's actions in healing the child contains valuable insights and lessons in how we should treat these patients, those still undergoing long and arduous journeys of healing, including those whose condition remains uncertain. He suggests that Elisha's physical closeness to the child is in fact a fulfillment of a halakhic principle – that when praying for a person in need, being physically present enhances empathy and focus in one's prayer. This approach to the mitzva of Bikur Cholim, visiting the sick, shared by Radak and others )cf. Nachmanides Torat ha-Adam Sha'ar HaMeichush( highlights that close proximity to the ill person empowers one's prayer on their behalf. Like Elisha, we must combine faith in miracles with direct, personal action. Our wounded defenders need not only our prayers; they need our presence, support and commitment to walk alongside them on their journey to recovery. This is a concept that medical professionals recognize today. Studies have demonstrated that having visitors helps patients recover more quickly; and that those patients who lack visitors fare worse than those with visitors. As those who have been protected by these wounded soldiers' sacrifices; it's our obligation to honor them through the mitzva of Bikur Cholim – to actively show up for them and create the conditions for healing. By being there for them, we not only rely on hidden miracles, but help to make them happen.

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

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## Vayera: What Was Theirs Was Theirs

By Rabbi Label Lam © 2007, 2014

*And he took cream and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and he placed ]them[ before them, and he was standing over them under the tree, and they ate. )Breishis 18:8(*

Okay, Avraham fed some guests, and they ate. What's the big news? As it turns out, we are told, these were not regular men; rather they were angels. Their home address was 1 Heaven Avenue. They don't need to eat. How or why did they eat! The Talmud, Bava Metzia, is troubled by this question, and it offers a few approaches.

We learn from the principle that a person should not deviate from the conduct of the place where he is staying. When Moshe went to Heaven, he didn't eat bread during that 40 day period, because that is not a place of eating, and when these angelic figures were visiting earth, by the house of Avraham and Sara, they were required to and they did eat.

The Talmud then goes on to describe that whatever Avraham did by himself resulted in a direct delivery of that good for the Jewish People in the desert, without agency. Avraham fetched and fed the angels bread, and as a reward, the entire nation was supported by Lechem Min HaShemaim, Manna -- Bread from Heaven – for 40 years.

What is the connection between Avraham's deed, then, and the later generation meriting Manna? Surely Avraham and Sara were involved with continuous acts of kindness. Why is this one singled out? Why does he win the lottery for his children's sake by feeding angels? Was it that Avraham happened to feed angels and therefore because of this single event his children became beneficiaries?

I recently heard an amazing explanation of a well known piece of Talmud. The Gemorah in Brochos detects a seemingly irreconcilable contradiction between two verses, both statements made by King David in Tehillim.

One verse says, as we say in Hallel, "The Heavens are the Heavens of HASHEM, and the earth is given over to man..." In contradistinction, the other verse reads, "To HASHEM is the earth and its fullness..." What's the deal here? Does the earth belong to HASHEM or to man? The Talmud answers, "Here it is before the Brocho and here is after the Brocho!"

The classic explanation is that before a person makes a blessing, it belongs to HASHEM. After he makes a blessing, it

belongs to him. Just as a person is in a grocery store; the food belongs to the proprietor until the shopper swipes his credit card, acknowledging the owner and then he can eat conscience free. Noshing in the store prior to that is stealing. Once we admit and recognize the source, that it is HASHEM's, with a blessing, then it's ours.

There is an alternative approach I recently heard that literally turned the world inside out for me. The Talmud is nonspecific about which is which for before and after. Therefore we can understand that before a person makes a Brocho, it is his, an earthly apple, but after he recites a Brocho, it is a Heavenly apple. The entire world and its fullness are electrified with the knowledge of HASHEM because of that seemingly banal recital of a blessing. Wow!

I do believe that this notion is reflected in the interchange between the tent of Avraham and Sara and their angelic guests. After eating from Avraham and Sara's kitchen, it became Heavenly bread, lighting up the world, and revolutionizing the universe!

They realized that Heaven finally finds even a small place here on earth, a spiritual oasis in an otherwise lonely and arid wilderness. As a result Heaven was invited to reciprocate to host and feed the children of Avraham and Sara when they were stuck in a physical wasteland, serving us real heavenly bread, actual angel food.

\* <https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5775-vayera/>

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## Vayiera: Killing in the Name of God?

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

Is it ever permissible to kill an innocent person in the name of God? Both our religious and ethical intuitions scream "no"! Halakha and Torah values consistently underscore the sanctity of human life and the injustice of allowing harm to come to innocent people, and from an ethical standpoint such an act is the very definition of murder. We only need to look at the evening news or the morning paper to see the hundreds, sometimes thousands, of lives that can be destroyed when people believe that they have a divine warrant, or worse, a divine mandate to kill for a religious cause. For us Americans, the horror of this hit home 12 [now 23] years ago on September 11th, and for people in certain countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East such horrors are suffered on an almost daily basis.

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

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

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

But this is not how the test has been understood in our tradition, and particularly not in our liturgy. The refrain in our tefillot is: *"Just as Avraham overcame his compassion to do Your will with a full heart, so should Your compassion overcome Your anger against us."* That is to say: Avraham's great achievement was not obedience to God when it contravenes

morality, it was obedience to God when it contravenes fatherly love. Avraham was being called upon to give up his only son from Sarah: “*your one son, your only son, the one whom you love*” To do this, he had to give up what was most dear, and to do so at an unimaginable psychic and emotional toll. **The message then for us is that we too, when called upon by God, should be prepared to do what is most difficult, no matter the hardship, no matter the cost.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom!

]Emphasis added[

\* President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah

Note: copied from my archives

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### **Remembering Kristallnacht**

From *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* \*

[Ed.: Anti-Semites throughout the world observed Kristallnacht earlier this week with a flood of pogroms and violence. Thugs attacked fans from Israel and elsewhere at a soccer match in Amsterdam – and then continued the violence throughout much of the city. Vandals threw stones and shattered glass at Char Bar, an upscale Kosher restaurant in Washington, DC, early on Shabbat morning. Much of the world continues to be dangerous for Jews.]

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).

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\* Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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

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## On the Threshold: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

*"And the Lord appeared to him [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day" (Bereishith 18:1).*

The Torah presents an amazing scene. Abraham was sitting at the opening of his tent and the Lord appeared to him. We can imagine the overwhelming experience of Abraham's confronting the presence of God. But as Abraham was on this spiritual high, his eyes drifted outside his tent and he saw three strangers. He thought they may need hospitality.

Abraham sat at the threshold of his tent. Inside was the presence of God. Outside were three strangers. What should be done—remain in the presence of God or go out to greet three passers-by?

Abraham decided: he rushed to the strangers and offered generous hospitality. He asked his wife to bake cakes. He himself ran to the herd, fetched a tender calf and instructed his servant to prepare it. Then Abraham brought the meal to

his guests.

We might have thought that Abraham made the wrong choice. How did he dare to leave the presence of God in order to greet three total strangers? Wouldn't the Almighty be "insulted" to have been left behind?

But after this episode, God demonstrated great appreciation of Abraham. Instead of being angry or insulted, God saw Abraham's gesture of kindness to strangers as a virtue. God chose to inform Abraham that He will soon destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. He wanted to confide in Abraham because He knew that Abraham would command his children and household to do righteousness and justice.

This episode teaches something important about the Jewish approach to spirituality. While we yearn for closeness to the presence of God, we also keep our eyes on the needs of fellow human beings. Our spirituality is located on a threshold; we balance the interiority of meditative relationship with the Almighty and the exteriority of connecting with human beings. But the tilt is toward humanity—and that is how God wants it!

A Midrash (Eicha Rabba Petichta 2) cites a statement attributed to Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba, who commented on a verse in Jeremiah (16:11): "They deserted Me and did not keep My Torah.' If only they deserted me but kept My Torah!'" In a sense, God prefers that we observe the Torah and mitzvoth rather than focus directly on a relationship with Him. By living righteously according to the Torah, we will thereby come closer to God. Acts of lovingkindness are not a diversion from God's presence but an entryway to the Divine. (See also Jerusalem Talmud, Hagiga 1:7.)

We sit at the threshold. We seek the presence of God through prayer and meditation. But our eyes wander outside to our fellow human beings. When we leave the threshold to help others, we aren't actually leaving God's presence. We are coming closer to Him and His will.

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

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## Vayera – Showing Up

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \*

*Dedicated in Memory of Mr. David Rhine Sholomo Dovid ben Avraham Yitzchak z.l.*

It was a test that only G-d, Himself, could have orchestrated. Avraham was instructed to bring his son, Yitzchak, up on an Altar. Avraham, as a prophet, was given the clear impression that he was to sacrifice his son. He thought that Yitzchak would die. In reality, this unique test was designed to actualize Avraham's readiness to show up for G-d, totally. Avraham emerged from this test as a person who was willing to sacrifice all that was meaningful to him for G-d's word. It was from this event, where Avraham was able to negate his personal ego and agenda, that the Jewish people would be built. Yitzchak would live; he would bring that greatness to the nation that would emerge from him.

The way Avraham was tested is something that we can learn from. In most situations of life there is some sort of equitable exchange which sweetens the deal, something that we get in exchange for what we do. An employee will work, and the

employer will pay. Spouses support each other in so many ways. Neighbors will be neighborly and then be there for each other. We certainly are giving, but it is very beneficial giving. As one contemporary writer explains, “*You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours. Let's be friends for always.*”

But it is possible for a person to show up for another altruistically. In Hebrew we call this, “*Chessed Shel Emes- Kindness of truth.*” This refers to a kindness that the giver does not expect to be paid back for, such as caring for the burial of the deceased. The dead person can't even say, “*Thank you.*” Such kindness is an illustration of showing up truly for the other.

When we consider how Avraham showed up for Hashem, we need to appreciate the kind of relationship Avraham had with Yitzchak. Besides loving Yitzchak, and having a special parent-child bond, Yitzchak was Avraham's everything. Avraham knew he would eventually pass on. More than anything, Avraham wanted a successor who would carry on his achievements to the next generation and create a nation. To sacrifice Yitzchak — the child finally bestowed upon him and Sara in their old age — would go against everything Avraham desired. There was no redeeming factor here, nothing that he could capitalize on. (This is dramatically unlike a certain culture of today where some leaders are excited to have their children die, thinking it will further their cause, to activate Western sympathies.) For Avraham to sacrifice his child would put an end to everything Avraham represented, personally and to the world. Avraham had reached the people of the world with a message of kindness that resonated with them. He had spoken of a benevolent G-d, who sustains all. Avraham had role modeled kindness to all, even praying for Sodom asking G-d to give them another chance. Sacrificing Yitzchak would negate everything personal to Avraham. This Akeida test was set up by G-d to enable Avraham to actualize his readiness to set aside any personal agenda, and just show up for G-d.

Fortunately, the reality is that Avraham's personal agenda was very much aligned with G-d's. Elevating Yitzchak on the Altar did indeed occur with Yitzchak being elevated; yet remaining very much alive. Through this experience, Avraham infused all of us with the ability to sometimes put aside our personal agenda and simply show up altruistically in a relationship.

Many relationships require reciprocity to remain healthy. But sometimes we are called upon to show up in a relationship at our best without any recognizable compensation. Examples of this are common in parenting and mentorship. When we guide or reprimand those placed in our care, we must strive to filter what we say and what we do through the lens of altruism, truly having the child or student's best interest in mind. At times we are caught up in the pressures of life, personal agendas, or impulsiveness. When we parent or mentor those placed in our care, what we say, do, and expect should be part of an effective and altruistic parenting program.

The Chazon Ish (1878-1953), a recognized sage and leader of his generation, was once standing in the Beis Medrash (study hall) when a group of young boys who were playing around ran into him and toppled him. The fathers of the boys promptly chased after the boys to reprimand them, but the Chazon Ish called the fathers back. The Rabbi said, “*What are you going to rebuke them for? For playing?*” Then after a pause, the Rabbi added, “*This isn't about me. And it isn't about your embarrassment that your son toppled your Rabbi. It is a Chinuch (education) moment. Only what serves the child's education should be said.*”

Showing up for someone is a deep and moving experience. It means that for some precious moments we truly reach out and think about the needs of the other person. For each of us, this is our Akeida, our opportunity to truly show up for someone else.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos.

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

## Vayeira – The Right Reason

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer\* (5783)

In a striking display of G-d's love and respect for Avrohom, the Torah tells us that G-d was not willing to destroy Sodom and its environs without first telling Avrohom of the plan. The Torah even shares with us G-d's thoughts and why G-d loves Avrohom:

*"And the men rose from there and looked out on the face of Sodom, and Avrohom went with them to send them off. And Hashem said, 'Am I hiding from Avrohom that which I am doing? And Avrohom will surely be a great and vast nation and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. Because I love him for that which he will command his children and his household after him and they will safeguard the path of G-d to do righteousness and justice in order that G-d should bring on Avrohom that which he spoke for him.'") Bereishis 18:16-19(*

G-d states several points in these verses: that Avrohom will be a great nation, G-d loves him, Avrohom commands his household in G-d's ways, and G-d will fulfill His promises to Avrohom. Rash'i explains that G-d is stating that His love for Avrohom is clearly unique, because Avrohom has been chosen to become the father of a great nation which will be the source of blessing. G-d loves Avrohom because he instructs his children and his household to follow in G-d's ways in order that G-d should bring upon Avrohom what He promised him.

The reason G-d loves Avrohom is not only because Avrohom taught those around him to serve G-d. The manner and way

in which he taught and instructed them is also significant and a critical reason for G-d's love. He taught them what they should do, and he gave them a reason to serve G-d. They should serve G-d in order that G-d can give Avrohom the great gifts that He had promised him - that he would be a great nation and that he would inherit the land of Israel. Avrohom understood that both of these promises were contingent on raising a righteous and worthy family. He, therefore, cautioned them and encouraged them to serve G-d in order that they be worthy of receiving these great blessings.

Rash'i's explanation requires some further discussion. Why would G-d love Avrohom specifically because he told his household to serve G-d for reward? This seems to be a very basic level of serving G-d. The Sifsei Chachamim (ibid.) adds that this seems to be completely out of character for Avrohom. We learn of Avrohom loving G-d and devoting his life to G-d from a very young age. Why would he instruct his household to serve G-d specifically in order to receive reward?

The Sifsei Chachamim explains that Rash'i is teaching us an eye-opening lesson in our service of G-d. These rewards which Avrohom was focused on were given to him for a very specific purpose. His large family was going to be a vast and mighty nation in order that they could sanctify G-d's name in this world. The land of Israel was being given to him because it is an especially holy land, with unique opportunities to serve G-d and where we have a greater ability to connect with G-d and serve G-d.

The message that Avrohom was giving to his household was that if we serve G-d properly we are guaranteed gifts which will enhance our ability to connect with Him and develop our relationship with Him. We, therefore, must be careful to serve Him properly so we are worthy of that relationship.

This is why G-d has a unique love for Avrohom. Avrohom's greatest desire was to connect with G-d and to have a relationship with Him. This desire to merit a relationship with G-d is even more important to G-d than the service itself. As Avrohom's descendants, we are that great nation and have been given many mitzvos and a vast Torah to study, all in order that we can have that connection with G-d. As we engage in mitzvos and Torah study, we are connecting with G-d. Every mitzvah we do, every word of Torah that we study, enhances that relationship. This is even more valuable to G-d than our service itself.

\* Rosh Kollel, Savannah Kollel, Congregation B'nai Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

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## The Rule of the Responsible Individual

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

*While all other sciences have advanced, government is at a standstill -- little better practiced now than three or four thousand years ago." -- John Adams*

If the art of government had improved, then war, disease and poverty inflicted by the tyranny and selfishness of man, as well as the corruption of leaders, would not claim so many lives each minute, each second, around the globe. Man's quest for a perfect form of government started at the dawn of civilization and is still far from conclusion.

The Bible describes the failure of monarchy, and history has proven that theocracy usually leads to fanaticism or hypocrisy. Even democracy boils down eventually to decisions made by individuals, and as long as it depends on the wisdom and discretion of one or several humans at the helm, it can take disastrous turns.

A system of checks and balances can put democracy back on track, but we must admit that stumbling, falling, hitting the ground and getting up again to repeat the process is not the ideal form of walking.

In the words of historian Barbara Tuchman: *"Mankind, it seems, makes a poorer performance of government than of almost any other human activity.... Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests? Why does intelligent mental process seem so often not to function?"*

In the early chapters of Genesis, the Torah denounces different forms of government. The anarchy of the generation of Noah started with a corrupt oligarchy, the elite group of Bene Ha'Elohim, or the Sons of the Judges. The attempt of the builders of the Tower of Babel to create a totalitarian society, with communism as its flag and *"one language, one ideology"* as its motto, resulted in the dispersion and diversification of mankind.

In this week's portion, we read about the destruction of Sodom, which came about not because of sodomy but rather because of its total abandonment of the weaker layers of society, as the prophet Ezekiel declares: *"Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy"* 16:49(.

The model of Sodom was that of capitalism to the max. If you cannot make a living, don't turn to me for help; it's a free country, try harder.

In the midst of that political mayhem, there appears our first patriarch, Abraham. He is plucked by God out of nowhere. He is not a king or a chieftain when he is addressed by God. Why was he chosen to be the forefather of Israel? What was special about him? The answer is disclosed by God: *"I have chosen Abraham -- or better yet: I have made Myself known to him -- because I know that he will instruct his household members and his descendants in future generations to observe the path of God and to do justice and charity"* 18:19(.

Abraham is chosen because he can prepare the ground for a utopian society, one in which every individual is raised with the understanding that the boundaries of law must be respected and justice must be pursued. At the same time, that charity, lovingkindness and understanding of other human beings are crucial to maintaining these very boundaries.

The path of God is remembering that all humans were created in God's image and therefore all have equal rights. The perfect government, therefore, starts with the individual governing himself.

A short while ago, two friends with the help of many bloggers created katrina.net, a powerful Web tool for locating missing Katrina victims. As Discover magazine reports, it was *"the kind of data management effort that could have taken a year to execute if a corporation or a government agency had been in charge of it."* The PeopleFinder group managed to pull it off in four days for zero dollars.

The activism of Bono and the philanthropy of Bill Gates are but two examples of what inspired and dedicated individuals can achieve despite the shortsightedness of governments. Theirs is a world where the responsibility of justice and lovingkindness lies first and foremost on the shoulders of the individual.

The goal still seems tantalizingly distant, but inspired by the eternal message of the Torah, we are allowed and obligated to dream of a perfect world. Translate the dream to action. Assume leadership of yourself first and then exercise it, combining justice and lovingkindness in order to help your family, your community, your neighborhood and eventually, the whole world. Imagine....

\* First appeared in the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles

\* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD). Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school. **Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets>**. The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

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

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### **Avraham's Surgery**

By Rabbi Moshe Rube \*

Having surgery is always challenging. And the older we get, the greater the challenge.

So I think Abraham deserves recognition for having his circumcision performed at the age of 99 years old.

In fact, his pain was so great, that God himself came to visit him at the beginning of our Torah portion to lift his spirits and help him heal.

But when Abraham saw that there were strangers on the road who needed a meal, he left God's presence and raced to care and cook for his guests despite his pain.

Our Sages highlight a key feature of this episode. Abraham went to take care of guests even though God was with him. So we learn that to welcome guests and feed them has greater mitzvah status than being in the Divine Presence. God has greater joy when we take care of others than when we spend time in and with prophetic visions.

I know many of us would appreciate having a powerful prophetic experience. But maybe we can have something better than that. We can enjoy the experience of inviting a friend, community member or someone we don't know into our homes or into our beautiful Remuera centre for a meal or good times.

That beats prophecy.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* 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: The Salt of Sodom**

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

### **Washing after Meals**

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

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

### **The Selfishness of the Sodomites**

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

### **Purifying the Soul When Feeding the Body**

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

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

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

<https://ravkooktorah.org/VAYERA59.htm>

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## **Vayera (5770, 5773) – Even Higher Than Angels**

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, Former UK Chief Rabbi,\*

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

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

- Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.
- Verses 2-16: Abraham and the men/angels.
- Verses 17-33: The dialogue between God and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The same ambiguity appears in the next chapter )19:2(, when two of Abraham’s visitors )in this chapter they are described as angels( visit Lot in Sodom:

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

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

The simplest reading of both texts – the one concerning Abraham, the other, Lot – would be to read the word in both cases as ‘sirs.’ Jewish law, however, ruled otherwise. In the second case – the scene with Lot – it is read as ‘sirs,’ but in

the first it is read as 'God.' This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that Abraham interrupted God as He was about to speak, and asked Him to wait while he attended to his guests. This is how tradition ruled that the passage should be read:

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

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

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

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

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

*Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils but cannot smell... Their makers become like them, and so do all who put their trust in them. Psalm 115*

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

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

\* <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/even-higher-than-angels/> Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar. Footnotes are not available for this Dvar Torah.

## Life Lessons from the Parsha: What to Do When Your Soul Runs Dry

By Yehoshua B. Gordon, z"l \* © Chabad 5785

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### A Small Flask of Oil

This is where the storyline of our haftarah picks up:

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

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

"I have nothing," she responds. "All I have left is a small flask of olive oil. That's it."

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

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

She ran to Elisha and asked, "What's next?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The neshama is saying, "I'm going through spiritual bankruptcy. G d, I need Your help."

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

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

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

What is the nature of oil? If you mix olive oil with water or with any liquid, the oil rises to the top. Olive oil is pure; it's

essential. Olive oil represents the spark, the essence, which can never be diluted, lost, or assimilated.

### **Just Do It!**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **FOOTNOTE:**

1. I Kings, Chapter 4.

\* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons that Rabbi Gordon presented in Encino, CA and broadcast on Chabad.org. "Life Lessons from the Parshah" is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley, published by Chabad of the Valley and Chabad.org.

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## **Vayeira: The Golden Rule**

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky \*

### **The Golden Rule**

*"Because we are about to destroy this place, for its outcry before G-d has grown great, and G-d has sent us to destroy it."* (Gen. 19:13)

There were five cities that G-d intended to destroy on account of their wickedness. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire that descended from heaven; Admah and Tzevoyim were overturned by an earthquake; Tzo'ar was spared at Lot's request that it serve as a refuge for him and his daughters.

The reason why Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by heavenly fire while Admah and Tzevoyim suffered a less horrific fate is because the former two cities were guilty of having made mistreatment of their fellow human beings an essential part of their culture.

The latter two cities, in contrast, sinned primarily against G-d, and less so against their fellow human beings.

This teaches us that G-d is more concerned with our treatment of our fellow human beings than He is with our respect for Him. As the Talmudic sage Hillel said, treating your fellow human being as you would like to be treated is the essence of the Torah; all the rest is commentary.

— from *Daily Wisdom* 3

**May G-d grant resounding victory and peace in the Holy Land.**

Good Shabbos.

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society

\* A Chasidic insight by the Rebbe on parshat Ma'sei, selected from our *Daily Wisdom*, by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

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#### Covenant and Conversation Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

##### The Binding of Isaac: A New Interpretation

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.

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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" [1] – 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." [2]

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

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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.

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

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

### Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

#### The Ultimate Sacrifice

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

As we have seen, there are manifold possibilities of interpreting God’s most difficult directive to Abraham. But in order for us to truly appreciate the eternal quality of Torah, let us examine how the martyrs of

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Jewish history have taken – and drawn inspiration from – this drama of the Akeda (binding).

In the city of Worms, in 1096, some 800 people were killed in the course of two days at the end of the month of Iyar. In *The Last Trial*[1], Professor Shalom Spiegel’s study of the Akeda, he records a chronicle of that period that cites a declaration by one of the community’s lead- ers, Rabbi Meshulam bar Isaac:

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

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

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

The biblical story of the binding of Isaac is replayed via the Talmudic invocation of the ram’s horn (shofar) each year on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment and Renewal. The shofar symbolizes the ram substitute for Isaac on Mount Moriah; God commands that we hearken to the cries of this shofar ‘in order that I may remember for your benefit the binding of Isaac the son of Abraham, and I shall account it for you as if you yourselves bound yourselves up before Me’ [Rosh Hashanah 16a]. This message of the shofar has inspired Jews of all generations to rise to the challenge of martyrdom, whenever necessary, transforming themselves into Abrahams and Sarahs, placing their precious children on the altar of Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of the divine name.

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

mountain of sacrifice, Abraham tells the young men to wait down below: 'I and the boy will go yonder; we will worship and we will come back to you' [Gen. 22:5]. So why does the text have Abraham return alone? On the basis of this textual problem, Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) makes mention of an interpretation that suggests that Abraham literally followed God's command, slaying his son, and that God later on miraculously brought Isaac back to life. It is precisely that stark and startling deletion of Isaac's name from the conclusion of the biblical account of the Akeda itself, which gave countless generations of Jewish martyrs the inspiration for their sacrifice; and this is the case, even though Ibn Ezra felt compelled to deny the tradition as inaccurate: 'Isaac is not mentioned. But he who asserts that Abraham slew Isaac and abandoned him, and that afterwards Isaac came to life again, is speaking contrary to the biblical text' [Ibn Ezra, Gen. 22:1]. Ibn Ezra is obviously making reference to a commentary – which Jewish martyrdom would not allow to fall into oblivion.

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

"Although Isaac did not die, Scripture regards him as though he had died. And his ashes lay piled on the altar. That's why the text mentions Abraham and not Isaac.[2]"

And perhaps one might argue that Isaac was so traumatized by the Akeda that a specific aspect of him – the part of his personality which would always remain on the altar – did die. After all, Isaac is the most ethereal and passive of the patriarchs, called by the Midrash – even after the binding – the olah temimah, the whole burnt offering. But this psychological interpretation and Ibn Ezra's rejection notwithstanding, the penitential Slichot prayers still speak of the 'ashes of Isaac' on the altar, continuing to give credence to the version which suggests that Isaac did suffer martyrdom. And we have already cited recorded incidents of children who suffered martyrdom at the hands of their parents, who did not wish them to be violated by the pagan tyrants.

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

The paradox in Jewish history is that unless we were willing to sacrifice our children for God,

we would never have survived as a God-inspired and God-committed nation with a unique message for ourselves and the world. Perhaps that is why Mount Moriah, the place of the willingness to sacrifice, is the Temple Mount of the Holy City of Jerusalem, the place from which God will ultimately be revealed to all of humanity, the place of Jewish eternity. [1] S. Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (Woodstock, vt. 1993) [2] Midrash Hagadol, Margulies edition, p. 360

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

#### **Optimism Pays**

It may not have been the first day I reported to my new job, but it was not many days later that I first met Richard Hood. I had joined a team of new PhDs, some trained as psychologists and some as educators, whose assignment it was to breathe new life into a very old-fashioned, one might even say backward, school system in suburban Washington, D.C.

It was a rapidly changing community that had been semi-rural up until the late 1960s. At the time I joined the school system advisory staff as senior school psychologist, the area was becoming much more diverse. On the one hand, high-level government employees were beginning to move there, finding the real estate prices more attractive than the neighboring counties. But at the same time, there were a number of areas that were depressed socio-economically and were spillovers from the teeming African-American ghettos of our nation's capital. It was not long before that Washington had experienced the riots of 1968.

I have many stories to tell about the years I served in that environment. But I want to focus this week's discussion upon the personality of this one colleague, Richard Hood, a tall, burly man in his early thirties with a Southern drawl that originated in small-town Mississippi. His politics were liberal; he was open-minded, tolerant, and most empathetic. But he was a cynic. His favorite word was "irredeemable." "This school system is 'irredeemable,'" he would say. "The government is irredeemable." "Mankind is irredeemable." "The world is irredeemable." His attitude to life was best expressed in the sign that hung above his desk: "Pessimism Pays."

He felt that people were essentially evil, that a life of pain and frustration awaited us all, that man was fated to suffer. His spiritual mentor was the philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, whose writings have been described as the "Bible of pessimism."

Richard had a bone to pick with Western culture, child-rearing, and public education. He felt that we deceive our children into believing that the world is basically a benign and safe

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environment, that success could be achieved by hard work, and good health guaranteed by clean living. He maintained that "we indoctrinate our youth into the belief that the world is a rose-garden, whereas in reality it is a snake pit."

I had long one-on-one discussions with him, because he was fascinated by Jews and Judaism. In those discussions, he came to believe that "you Jews are the worst of all. You just emerged from the hell of the Holocaust, and you still tell your children that all we be well if they just cling to your tradition."

I think of Richard often, and was sad to learn that he passed away several years ago after having returned to his Mississippi origins upon his retirement from a university teaching post. I especially remember him whenever this week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayera (Genesis 18:1-22:24), rolls around.

Why Vayera? Because it is this week that we read the story of the akeda, of Abraham's obedience to God's command that he bind his son, Isaac, upon a mountain-top altar and offer him as a human sacrifice to the Lord. This is surely one of the most troubling passages in the entire Bible, and traditional Jewish commentaries as well as great secular philosophers have struggled to understand it. How could Abraham, who so valued human life that he stood up to God Himself pleading the case of wicked Sodom and Gomorrah, unhesitatingly obey God's command that he slay his own son?

That is not a question I will even attempt to address within the limits of this column. But another aspect of the story has always troubled me. At the beginning of the story, Abraham was unaware of its happy ending. He did not know that at the last moment, an angel would order him to desist from sacrificing his son. As far as he knew, a terrible, unspeakable tragedy was about to unfold. But in his words to the servants who accompanied him, he was completely reassuring and gave them no inkling of the catastrophe that was about to occur: "You stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."

And he gave Isaac no hint about the fate that awaited him. Did he not owe the lad a glimpse of his imminent death, a chance to prepare himself to meet his Maker? Was it not the height of duplicity for Abraham to reassure his son that all would be well? I could just hear Richard ask these piercing questions. Although, to my recollection, he and I never discussed the Bible, he was raised as a Southern Baptist and surely knew the story of the binding of Isaac.

To me, the answer to these questions lies in this phrase, repeated twice in the narrative, for emphasis: "And the two of them walked on together". Abraham conveyed to Isaac this message: "I am with you. I will hold your hand. I will be there for you despite the horror that awaits us both." This is the attitude that Jewish parents have conveyed to the children throughout all of the tragedies of Jewish history. Yes, there are persecutions and pogroms and torture and worse. But I will be there with you. I will be close to you.

This is one of the themes of so many of the Psalms. Rarely is the Psalmist assured that "everything will be alright." More often, he is told, "I, God, am with you." I am with you in your exile, in your wanderings, in your suffering. I am with you in the hell of Auschwitz and Treblinka. The Psalmist asserts, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me."

The Talmud teaches us that the Shechinah, the Holy Presence, is in exile alone with us. Most eloquently, Asaf in Psalm 73 expresses the consoling power of the awareness of God's closeness in the most dire of circumstances: "I have been constantly afflicted, each morning brings new punishments... Yet I was always with You, You held my right hand... As for me, nearness to God is good..."

Abraham felt that his duty to obey God took priority over the love for his beloved son. That is one central lesson of the story, although it remains a disconcerting lesson for us. But this much we can comprehend: his behavior reflected reassurance and trust, optimism and hope. At the end of the story, that hope proved justified.

Richard could never fathom Abraham's lesson. To remain hopeful in the face of threatening doom, to be able to see beyond the dark clouds of fate, to continue to pray even when "the sharp sword dangles over one's neck;" that is Abraham's lesson and that is the Jewish way.

More than just the "Jewish way," this capability is the secret of Jewish survival. It is a secret that we all must learn, especially in our times, when many challenges sadly still beset us. We can be confident that the Shechinah is there for us, but we must be sure that we are there for each other.

#### Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

##### 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 Metziah 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 Chayei 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.

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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 Metziah. 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 Chassidic 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 shemayim (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?

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

It's what you do that counts. At the beginning of Parshat Vayeira, 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.

*[Excerpted]*

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

#### **Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg**

#### **Expressing Love for Hashem Through Sacrifice**

In the haftarah of Parshas Lech Lecha, Hashem offers words of comfort to the Jewish people. "But you, O Israel," he says, "...children of my beloved Avraham (Avraham ohavi) ...do not be afraid for I am with you" (Yeshaya 41:8,10.) Why does Avraham Avinu deserve to be called ohavi, the beloved of Hashem, more than any of the other avos?

The Chasam Sofer (introduction to Teshuvos Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah) is quoted as saying that the answer to this question is hinted to in Parshas Vayera. Before Hashem sends the angels to destroy Sodom, He wonders, "Is it proper for Me to conceal from Avraham what I am about to do? ...For I love him (ki yeda'ativ) because he commands his children and his household after him that they should keep the way of Hashem, acting with righteousness and justice..." (Vayeira 18:17,19). Rashi explains that the word yeda'ativ is an expression of love. Hashem declares that he feels a special closeness to Avraham Avinu because Avraham spent his entire life teaching his family how to live by the dictates of the Torah and he inspired all those he encountered to recognize Hashem's presence in the world.

But to do that, says the Chasam Sofer, Avraham Avinu had to sacrifice his own spiritual growth. There were others before him, like Chanoch and Noach, who reached high spiritual levels by separating themselves from society and connecting with Hashem in their own personal ways. But Avraham was the first to sacrifice his own development in order to draw others closer to Hashem. And it was that selfless sacrifice for Hashem that made Avraham Avinu so beloved in the eyes of the Ribono Shel Olam.

Avraham demonstrated this middah of self-sacrifice (mesirus nefesh) in many of the ten tests he underwent. Avraham was willing to give up his life in the fiery furnace after declaring his allegiance to Hashem by breaking the idols of his father. He left the comforts of his family and birthplace in search of an unknown destination just to follow Hashem's command. He risked his life in battle with the four mighty kings to save his wayward nephew who had gotten himself into trouble by associating with the wrong crowd. And at the akeida, Avraham showed that he was prepared to sacrifice his own son and forfeit his entire life's mission, i.e. promoting the values of kindness and mercy, just to do the will of G-d.

Avraham's willingness to sacrifice for Torah values both bein adam l'makom and bein adam l'chaveiro, as well as his acceptance of all ten

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tests without complaint, are a testament to his love for Hashem, and that selflessness is the reason he was so beloved in the eyes of Hashem. This mutual affection is what Chazal refer to in the mishna (Avos 5:3) when they say that the ten tests showed "the love (chibaso) of Avraham Avinu." The ten tests were designed both to demonstrate how far a person must go to show his love for Hashem (Meiri) and to reveal why Hashem loves Avraham and his children so much (Tosafos Yom Tov).

To implant the middah of mesirus nefesh within the Jewish people, Hashem gave the mitzvah of bris milah to Avraham and his descendants. While the basic mitzvah is to remove a foreskin, Chazal explain that part of the mitzvah involves drawing blood from the area of the foreskin (hatafas dam bris). This aspect of the mitzvah was not given to all of Avraham's descendants, only to the Jewish people (see Rashi, Shabbos 134a, based on Zecharia 9:11). Blood symbolizes the soul, the essence of a person or an animal. As the posuk says, "For the soul (nefesh) is in the blood" (Re'eh 12:23). One who draws blood from a person or an animal on Shabbos violates the melacha of netilas neshama (taking a life). Even if there is no death, the drawing of blood itself is considered like taking a nefesh.

The drawing of blood that is inherent in the mitzvah of bris milah instilled within the Jewish people the middah of mesirus nefesh, the ability to sacrifice for the honor of Hashem. Sometimes this necessitates giving up one's life, to die al kiddush Hashem. But there is another, no less important, type of mesirus nefesh that bris milah symbolizes, and that is sacrificing one's desires, comforts and conveniences for avodas Hashem. The term nefesh sometimes means ratzon - one's will - as in "im yesh es nef'shechem - if it is your will" (Chayeis Sara 23:8). Surrendering one's own will to fulfill the will of the Ribono Shel Olam is the ultimate avodas Hashem.

This middah of mesirus nefesh, in all its forms, is something the Jewish people inherited from Avraham Avinu, who sacrificed throughout his life in order to fulfill the ratzon Hashem. And it is this middah that we invoke when we beg Hakadosh Boruch Hu to have mercy on the Jewish people. Every day, after reading the passage of the akeida, as well as on Rosh Hashana at the conclusion of the section of Zichronos in Mussaf, we ask Hashem to remember the akeida and how Avraham Avinu "suppressed his mercy (kavash rachamav) to do your will wholeheartedly," and we plead, "So may your mercy suppress your anger from upon us." We ask Hashem to control his anger, so to speak, in the merit of Avraham's sacrifice.

The current war that the Jewish people are waging is challenging on so many fronts, but one thing is clear: we need to awaken Hashem's mercy in order to be successful. And Chazal tell us how to do that. The mishna advises, "Treat His will as if it were your own will, so that He will treat your will as if it were His will. Nullify your will (bateil retzoncha) in the face of His will, so that He will nullify the will of others in the face of your will" (Avos 2:4). Moreover, Chazal say, "One who forgoes his account with others for injustices done to him, the heavenly court forgoes punishment for all his sins" (Rosh Hashana 17a).

When we emulate the middah of Avraham Avinu and we sacrifice our time and comforts for additional moments of Torah, tefilla and chessed, while at the same time we ignore past injustices we have suffered and commit to move on, we can hope to awaken Hashem's mercy and cause him to nullify the plans of our enemies and shower us with only brachos and yeshuos. May we see yeshuas Hashem b'karov.

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

##### **We Are Never Alone**

And the land did not bear them to dwell together (yachdav), for their possessions were many, and they could not dwell together (yachdav). (Breishis 13:6)

And Avraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder, and we will prostrate ourselves and return to you." And Avraham took the wood for the burnt offering, and he placed – upon his son Yitzchok, and he took into his hand the fire and the knife, and they both went together (yachdav). And Yitzchok spoke to Avraham his father, and he said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Avraham said, "G-d will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And they both went together (yachdav). (Breishis 22:5-8)

and they both went together (yachdav): Avraham, who knew that he was going to slaughter his son, was going as willingly and joyfully as Yitzchok, who was unaware of the matter. — Rashi

And although Yitzchok understood that he was going to be slaughtered, "they both went together (yachdav)," with the same heart. — Rashi

There is an expression that sounds counterintuitive but as time goes by, it is making more and more sense to me; "Nothing fails like success!" Lot provides for us a classic example. Once he became wealthy, suddenly there was not enough room in all of

Eretz Yisrael for his shepherds and Avraham's shepherds to dwell together. From here we see that all it takes is one unscrupulous partner to disrupt the peace.

It's fascinating that the verse uses the same expression two times, "They could not dwell together (yachdav)." Now, every time a word is used in the Torah it is conceptually connected to other places where the same word or cluster of words is used. Here we have a perfect sample with regard to the term "yachdav" – "together". On the way to the Akeida that term shows up again two times but in a positive way, "VaYelchu Shneyem Yachdav".

One time is in praise of Avraham who is keeping pace with Yitzchok who is unaware of the goal of the mission, and the second time is in praise of Yitzchok even after he is aware of where he is heading to.

Rav Hirsch points out that in Jewish living there is no such thing as a "generation gap". Parents and children for thousands of years since, and Jewish families have been loyally and dutifully keeping Shabbos, donning Talis and Tefillin, and praying for generation after generation.

When money or power, or any selfish agenda is the goal of even one party then togetherness becomes impossible. When people have the same spiritual ambition there is no space between their hearts. When there's room in the heart there's room in the home. The Talmud in Tractate Sanhedrin says poetically, "When we had love we could live on the edge of a sword!"

At some point Avraham, the man of kindness, had to part ways with Lot and when he did HASHEM prophecy returned, as it says, "And HASHEM said to Avram after Lot had parted from him, "Please raise your eyes and see, from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your seed to eternity. (Breishis 13:14-15) Keeping company with Lot caused more than strife. It blocked Avraham's spiritual reception.

On the way to the Akeida Avraham had been walking for three days with Yitzchok, but there were companions escorting them, Eliezer and Yishmael. Only after they separated, "And Avraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder...," does the Torah tell us about the unity of their hearts in a common mission. Bilaam prophetically described the Jewish People as, "Am levaded yishkon" – "a nation that dwells alone". "Alone" here means separate from the influences of the nations of the world. We are a unified nation with a

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singular mission under the direction of HASHEM Echod! So, while we may seem alone and living on the edge of a sword, yet in the most important way we are never alone.

#### **Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot**

##### **The Prerequisite For Greatness [1952]**

Now that the debates are all over and the smoke from the verbal battles of the recent campaigns cleared, we can begin to seriously analyze some of the moral overtones of what has been thought, said and done. One issue which can stir the imagination of a religious teacher is that of "greatness." Both candidates have been described as "great" even by their opponents. And both have spoken reverently of the "greatness" which is the future of America.

May I use this issue not as a text, but as a pretext; I wish to discuss with you not the greatness of nations but the striving for greatness in individuals and in institutions. No man worth his salt, and no institution worthy of its members, will ever be satisfied with remaining mediocre, half-baked and only half-good-- because half-good means also half-bad. A real man will, in all humility, strive for greatness. This desire for greatness may be only a dream, but it is human to dream. No animal or machine ever dreams, or daydreams. Shakespeare writes: "But be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." This morning we are not going to discuss those who are born great- for that is a gift of G-d. Nor are we going to discuss those who have greatness thrust upon them- that is the gift of society. We are more interested in the second class: those who achieve greatness. And our problem is, how does one achieve greatness? Or better, realizing that greatness is not something that happens to you suddenly, but acquired slowly and painfully, we should ask: how does one mature into greatness? In short, what, according to religion, is the prerequisite for greatness?

Our Rabbis found the answer to that question in today's Sidra; and they had some remarkable things to say on that matter. Remember how G-d, in that dramatic revelation, promised Abraham a son; well, Sarah bore that son unto Abraham, and the child was called Isaac. And then, the Torah tells us: "Vayigdal hayeled vayigamel," usually translated as: "And the child grew up and was weaned." Our Rabbis, however, gave another meaning to that verse, and they indicate that it means not that Isaac became a big boy, but that he became a great man; that "vayigamel" means not weaned, but matured. The Bible, believe the Rabbis, is not speaking about infants growing into childhood, but about men maturing into greatness. In fact, some of our

Rabbis thought that that event referred to what might today be called graduation from a university. For, they said, Abraham had written many books on "Yichud Ha'shem," about the unity of G-d, and Isaac had spent many years studying them. "Vayigdal hayeled vayigamel" refers to the completion of this intensive study by Isaac, and the beginning of his own creative work. So, then, the Rabbis see in this verse a reference to the maturing into greatness of Isaac. And how was this accomplished? How did he become great?

A Palestinian Rabbi of the Midrash, commenting on our text, supplies an astonishing solution. He says: "vayigdal hayeled vayigamel - she'nigmal mi'yetser ha'tov le'yetser ha'r'a." He was weaned from the "yetser tov," from the Good Desire, to the "yetser hara," the Evil Desire. The sign that Isaac had become great was that he developed a strong yetser hara, a powerful Evil Desire. What a remarkable statement to come from a great Rabbi: Is acquiring a Yetser Ha'r'a really a sign of greatness and maturity?

And, my friends, lest you think that this is an isolated opinion, or that there must be some printing mistake, listen to this statement by another great Sage: commenting on G-d's reaction to the world He created as "hineh tov meod," he adds: "hineh tov - zeh yetser tov; hineh tov meod- zeh yetser hara." G-d said "Behold, it is very good," and this Sage added, "it is good" refers to the Yetser Tov; but when G-d says "very good" He refers to the Yetser Hara. And when the other Rabbis expressed astonishment at this remark, he explained:

ולא אשה ולא נשה, לא בנה אדם בית, אלולוי ציר הרע  
ולא נושא ולא נון בסחרה, הולידי בנים

"If not for the Evil Desire, men would not build homes, they would not marry and they would not engage in business activities." What our Rabbis meant is obvious, and it bespeaks a brilliant insight into human nature. When they refer to the Yetser Hara, to the Evil Desire, our Rabbis do not intend the doing of evil; rather, they refer to the energies and the zeal and the enthusiasm spent in pursuing those evil goals. If a man took the initiative which he uses to build a reputation, the passion with which he pursues physical pleasure and the drive he uses for business and profit, and he used all that energy for good and constructive purposes, then "hineh tov meod," then that is indeed "very good" - it is superb!. That Yetser Hara has such tremendous power, such infinite might, that if only a portion of it were used properly, the world could become a wonderful place to live in. Imagine what would happen if our scientists and military men would use their tremendous zeal for creating bigger and better atom bombs for the purpose of combating disease. That Yetser-hara power would probably find the cure for cancer in a year. Imagine what would happen

if the finest brains at the U.N. would use the energies of their Yetser-haras for finding a real formula for Peace-why we would be the luckiest generation in the world.

The tragedy is that for medicine, for peace, for learning for all constructive matters, we use only our Yetser Tov. The word "tov" means not so much, "good" as "goody-goody." There is no human being who would not declare himself in favor of good health or world peace. But how many people are there who would be willing to offer more than their lip service; who would be willing to offer, for it, their most powerful drives and passions and initiative? Every Jew likes a synagogue, but how many Jews are willing to work for it with the same Yetser Hara with whom they work for their own profits? Every Jew thinks that the study of the Torah is good. But how many are willing to apply the same Yetser Hara to education that they do to studying the complex tax-laws which affect them personally? The Yetser Tov will not do; it is too lazy, too apathetic, too indifferent. Maturity and greatness require the giant forces of the Yetser Hara.

It is this awakening of the Yetser Hara, and harnessing it for constructive purposes, what the psychologists call the "sublimation of the libido," which is the prerequisite for greatness. It was this Yetser Hara, expressed as stubbornness and unrelenting determination, that made Isaac rise to the occasion of the Akedah, the attempted sacrifice atop Mt. Moriah. It was the Yetser Hara, in the form of arrogance and pride which made Mordechai stand up to and defy a Haman. It was this Yetser Hara, as contempt for danger and passion for country, which created a State of Israel. The Yetser Tov would never have sufficed; only the Yetser Hara can accomplish such things.

I remember, several years ago, when I first began to study under the famous Rabbi Soloveitchik at Yeshiva University, that he one day gave his opinion on a matter of Halacha or Jewish Law. No one of the students questioned him, we readily accepted the scholar's verdict. The next day he came to class and announced that he had made an obvious and glaring error, and he was extremely irritated at our failure to notice it; and, in a moment of anger, he rebuked us and said, "the trouble with you is that you come here with your Yetser Tov and you check your Yetser Hara at the door. Never mind the Yetser Tov, I want the Yetser Hara here." The sages of the Talmud, similarly, said: "Ha'gadol me'chaveiro, yitsro gadol heimenu" - he who is greater than his friend, his Yetser Hara is also greater.

My dear friends, on this, my first official Shabbos with you, I come armed with dreams of greatness. Not for me, not for you, but for

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us. From now on, our destinies are linked, and the growth of one will parallel that of the other. And I regard it as my mission, therefore, to awaken within us the untapped sources of the Yetser Hara. The Yetser Tov, with its "goody-goody" indifference and lethargy, cannot and will not do. In order to achieve the "vayigdal...vayigamel," maturity and greatness, we must be prepared to outgrow our yetser tov and exploit the latent powers of the yester hara. There is an ancient Talmudic maxim, "Im paga bach menuval zeh, mushchayhu le'beis hamidrash," if you meet that scoundrel, the Yetser Hara, pull him into the synagogue. Yes, draw him into the synagogue, but to convert him and put him to work, not to get rid of him. For no Beis Midrash, no synagogue, no center can grow and mature into greatness without the Yetser Hara. Pull him into shul, and let the passions previously used for business and profit and pleasure be used "lehagdil Torah u'le'haadirah," for the furtherance of the Torah and Judaism.

To that purpose of awakening and harnessing the Yetser Hara, to that end of galvanizing and electrifying and shaking our fellow Jews out of their long sleeps, must we dedicate ourselves today. I can do no more than pledge that I shall do my utmost to accomplish this prerequisite for greatness. And I ask you to join with me on this great adventure. For this is the time for greatness. Pettiness and smallness should find no harbor with us. Great opportunities beckon us on to, with G-d's help, a future - filled with greatness.

### BENEDICTION Our Great G-d,

We offer to Thee our prayers that Thou will bless this nation with its new government with the wisdom to marshall its mighty powers and forces to achieve that greatness for which we so fervently hope. Amen.



BS"D

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

to: [ravfrand@torah.org](mailto:ravfrand@torah.org)

date: Nov 13, 2024, 1:35 AM

subject: Rav Frand - **Maintaining Inspiration**

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1311 – I Had Eggplant Parmesan for Lunch Friday: Can I Have Fleishig for the Shabbos Seuda? Good Shabbos!

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

Avraham excuses himself for speaking to the Master of the Universe when he himself is "only afar v'efer" (dust and ashes). Rashi here notes that "afar v'efer" is not merely a colloquial expression. Rashi interprets: "and behold I should have already been nothing more than dust as a result of my battle with the kings." Avraham Avinu had just engaged in war with the mightiest army in the world. They should have crushed him; pulverized him into dust – and yet he emerged victorious. Furthermore, "I should have already been ashes as a result

of my encounter with Nimrod (who threw me into the fiery furnace in Ur Kasdim)."

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

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

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

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

Now, almost a year later, the effect of the experience dissipated. By his own admission, he does not feel the same way. What is the key to a person maintaining that same feeling of hakaras hatov and gratitude to the Ribono shel Olam, thus enabling the person to maintain the kabalos he accepted upon himself at the time of the "salvation"? The key is to keep the day of the crash in mind. Live in THAT time frame rather than in the present. That is what Avraham is saying: Right NOW I consider myself afar v'efer because I should really be a dead man! I remember to this day the moment I entered into the fiery furnace and I didn't burn up. That miracle is ever-present in my mind.

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

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

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

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

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

Put differently, Pete Rose famously once said "You are only as good as your last at-bat." That also is a treife hashkafa. A person must constantly be makir tov. This certainly is a challenge. It is human nature to feel otherwise. It is a chessed that the Ribono shel Olam blessed us with shikcha (forgetfulness) because if people would be obsessed for the rest of their lives with the impact of 'the crash,' they would go crazy. That is why we were granted shikcha. The Gemara says in Pesachim that there are three things without which the world could not exist, and one of them is shikcha.

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

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

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

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Vayeira is provided below: A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail [tapes@yadyechiel.org](mailto:tapes@yadyechiel.org) or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2023 by Torah.org. Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 2833 Smith Ave., Suite 225 Baltimore, MD 21209 <http://www.torah.org/> [learn@torah.org](mailto:learn@torah.org) (410) 602-1350

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## Revivim

### Divination: What's Forbidden, and What's Permitted

#### Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Divination: What's Forbidden, and What's Permitted November 14, 2024 Revivim One who transgresses the prohibition of divination, nullifies the commandment to act with simplicity before God \* It is forbidden to use divination or sorcery even for promoting good purposes \* For true prophets, it is permissible to inquire about the future, because all their words are true, and meant to guide us along the path of the Torah \* It is permissible to ask a child for a verse \* It is better not to use the method of opening a book to make decisions, including the method called 'the Gra's lot.'

Q: Is it permitted to predict the future using various divination tools – by asking a child for a verse, or by opening the Bible randomly – to decide how to act in the future?

A: To answer this, we must first explain the prohibition of menahesh (divination).

The Prohibition of Divination It is written (Deuteronomy 18:10-13): "There shall not be found among you... a necromancer, a soothsayer, a diviner, or a sorcerer... for anyone who does these things is an abomination to the Lord... You shall be wholehearted with the Lord your God." The term "diviner" comes from the root meaning 'to hasten' (Ramban). Naturally, a person does not know what will happen in the future until it happens, whereas the diviner wants to hasten, and know the future based on events that happen to him now, without any logical or causal connection between what has happened, and what he predicts will happen. As our Sages said (Sanhedrin 65b), a diviner is one who says, "If my bread falls from my mouth," and then takes precautions based on that, worrying that something bad will happen that day. "If his staff falls from his hand, if his son calls him from behind, if a raven caws, if a deer crosses his path, if a snake is on his right, or a fox on his left" — these are all considered bad omens. If he had planned to go on a journey, or do business, he should avoid doing so. Similarly, there are other signs, such as seeing a black cat, which some people consider a bad omen, even though there is no rational basis for such beliefs. In summary, anyone who refrains from doing something he planned, due to these superstitions, transgresses the prohibition of divination.

Also, "those who divine through rats, birds, fish, or stars" violate the prohibition of divination (Sanhedrin 66a). That is, there was a superstition that if a person saw certain things in birds, fish, or stars, it would be a sign for him, either to proceed with something, or to avoid it.

Wholeheartedness with God One who transgresses the prohibition of divination, as well as other prohibitions related to magic and sorcery, for the purpose of knowing the future, also negates the commandment to act with wholeheartedness before God, as it is written: "You shall be wholehearted with the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 18:13). This means that it is a commandment to act with simplicity before God, trusting that everything is for the good. Even though a person may long to know the future, he is commanded to restrain himself, and wait until things happen naturally. If a hardship comes upon him, he should not try to escape it through unnatural means, but should face it according to God's guidance in the Torah, and the natural laws He established. Through this, he will purify and elevate himself, and progress genuinely. This also includes praying to God, as prayer is one of the means God gave man

to draw closer to Him and to correct himself, and through this, God will bless him. Even to advance good goals, it is forbidden to use divination or sorcery, because Israel must add goodness and blessing to the world through the way of the Torah, which, though it may be long, brings about deep and foundational correction, gradually leading to the perfection of man, and the world. Nonetheless, with true prophets, it is permissible to inquire about the future, because all their words are true, and meant to guide us on the path of the Torah. Asking a Child for a Verse It is permissible to ask a child for a verse, as is mentioned in the Talmud (Chulin 98b). Our Sages would sometimes, when uncertain whether to go on a journey, or do something, ask a child studying Scripture: “Give me your verse” — meaning, “Tell me the verse you studied today,” and based on the verse, they would resolve their uncertainty.

It is also told of Rabbi Yochanan, one of the greatest Sages of his time, who, uncertain whether to go to Babylonia to meet Rabbi Shmuel, asked a child, “What is the verse you have learned?” The child replied: “And Samuel died, and all Israel mourned for him...” (1 Samuel 28:3). From this, Rabbi Yochanan concluded that Samuel had passed away, and he did not go to Babylonia. However, the Gemara concludes that in fact, Samuel was still alive, but in order to prevent Rabbi Yochanan from making the trip, Heaven arranged for the child to recite that particular verse (Chulin 98b).

Similarly, it is told (Gittin 68a) that Rav Sheshet, who was blind, feared that the servants of the Exilarch (Reish Galuta), would try to kill him. He asked a child for a verse, and the child replied: “Turn to the right or to the left” (2 Samuel 2:21). Based on this, Rav Sheshet turned toward the wall, and avoided falling into the pit they had prepared to kill him.

Some Halachic Authorities Say Not to Rely on the Verse According to Rambam (Maimonides), it is forbidden to act based on the verse a child says, except to rejoice if the verse is a good one, and to be strengthened by it, as a good sign concerning something already done (Mishneh Torah, Avodah Zarah 11:5). This is also the opinion of the Tur (Yoreh De’ah 118:4), and the Sefer HaBativim (33). According to their view, it should be explained that Rabbi Yochanan was already hesitant to go to Babylonia because of his advanced age, and in his heart, he had decided not to go, and the verse from the child merely reinforced his decision. Similarly, regarding Rav Sheshet, it was his understanding of the situation that led him to be cautious, suspecting the Exilarch’s servants wanted to harm him, and the verse simply served to strengthen his resolve (Kesef Mishneh, there).

Most Authorities Permit Acting Based on the Verse However, according to most authorities, it is permitted to act based on the verse that the child says, as long as the guidance derived from it does not contradict the Torah’s teachings, or logic. This is the opinion of the Sefer HaMitzvot Gadol (Negative Commandments 51), the Ran (Chulin 98b), the Meiri (Sanhedrin 68a), and many others. They explain that there is no prohibition of divination here, because divination involves relying on signs that lack rationality, while asking a child for a verse is akin to receiving a small prophecy. As our Sages said (Bava Batra 12b): “Since the destruction of the Temple, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to fools and children.” This is the view of most later authorities (Levush 118:4; Prisha 11; Turei Zahav 3; Shakh 5; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 165:2).

It should be noted, however, that throughout the generations, most rabbis did not rely on asking for a verse, but rather, made decisions based on their understanding of the Torah, and their own reasoning. Opening a Book Just as our Sages sometimes resolved doubts by asking for a verse, sometimes they did so by randomly opening a Torah scroll and looking at the verse that appeared at the top of the page. It is also told in the Talmud (Chulin 98b), that the Amora Shmuel would occasionally open a book at random, to see which verse appeared to him.

However, as mentioned, according to Maimonides (Mishneh Torah, Avodah Zarah 11:5), it is forbidden to act based on this, except to rejoice if a good verse appears, and be strengthened by it, as a good omen for something already done. However, according to most authorities, it is permissible to act based on the verse that appears, as long as the guidance derived from it does not contradict Torah, or logic.

The Gra’s Lot In recent generations, some rabbis used a sophisticated method of opening a book, known as “the Gra’s lot” (goral HaGra). According to this method, a Torah scroll or Bible is opened at random, and seven pages are counted from the opening. The eighth page is then examined, and guidance is sought from the eighth line of the eighth column.

However, it seems that there is no source for this method from the Gaon of Vilna, since for many generations, there is no record of his students using this lot. The rumor that this was a method of the Gaon of Vilna only began to spread over 100 years after his passing. Additionally, the term “lot” seems to be a mistake, as it is ruled in the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh De’ah 118:1) that it is forbidden to use lots, and this method is indeed not considered a “lot,” but rather, a sophisticated version of “opening a book.”

In practice, during the difficult times of World War I and II, some rabbis from Lithuania used this method to decide whether to flee or stay, among other things, including the Chafetz Chaim, Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, and Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler. They would pray before opening the book, asking God to guide them through it. On the other hand, some rabbis, such as the Chazon Ish and his brother-in-law, Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, opposed this practice, and Rabbi Kanievsky even rebuked those who used it, saying, “I know people who have made their lives miserable through the answers they received from this method” (‘Orchot Rabbeinu’ Vol. 1, pg. 218).

Is It Appropriate to Use These Methods? In practice, it is preferable not to use the method of opening a book to make decisions, including the method called “the Gra’s lot.” First, because it is not a reliable method for decision-making, and historically, most rabbis did not use “opening a book” or “asking for a verse,” but rather made decisions based on the Torah’s guidance as understood through their intellect. Second, some authorities hold that it is forbidden to make decisions based on opening a book (Maimonides and the Tur), even though most authorities are lenient in this regard. Ideally, one should be stringent.

Only in special circumstances, when both options are equally reasonable and there is no way to decide, can those interested use these methods, as was the practice of the Chafetz Chaim.

Rabbi Aryeh Levin ztz”l In cases where the decision is not about the future, but is intended to prevent great sorrow, there is room to use the method called “the Gra’s lot.” This was done by Rabbi Aryeh Levin ztz”l, when, after a year, the bodies of the 35 holy soldiers from the convoy that went to rescue Gush Etzion during the War of

Independence were brought, and there was no way to identify the fallen. Rabbi Frank, the Rabbi of Jerusalem, turned to Rabbi Aryeh Levin ztz"l, to perform a lot to determine the identities of the fallen soldiers, and place a tombstone on their graves (see *Ish Tzaddik Hayah*, pp. 113-117).

This article appears in the 'Besheva' newspaper and was translated from Hebrew.

### Parsha Potpourri Parshas Vayeira – Vol. 20, Issue 4 Compiled by Rabbi Ozer Alport

... והנה שלשה אנשים נצבים עליו וירא וירץ ל夸רתם מפתחה האל וישתחו ארץה (18:2-4) Avrohom excelled in the mitzvah of hachnasas orchim (hosting guests). Three days after he circumcised himself at the age of 99, Hashem did not want Avrohom to burden himself with taking care of guests, so He brought a powerful heat wave that deterred all travelers on that day. Still, the weak Avrohom's greatest concern was that the scorching weather would deny him the merit of welcoming guests, so he decided to sit at the entrance of his tent in the hopes that he might spy a stray traveler. When Hashem saw Avrohom suffering over his lack of guests, He sent three angels in the guise of people. Rejoicing at this improbable turn of events, the elderly and frail Avrohom personally ran to invite them to his home and proceeded to serve them a lavish and abundant feast. Rav Yissacher Frand recounts a powerful story regarding the importance of the mitzvah of hachnasas orchim. One morning in Toronto, a local man noticed a visiting meshulach (charity collector) and invited him to his home for breakfast. He asked the fundraiser about his itinerary, to which he responded that he intended to spend most of the day circulating around Toronto, after which he would move on to his next destination that evening.

The local man begged the meshulach to change his plans and to sleep in his house that night instead. The collector resisted, explaining that his time was extremely limited and he could not afford to spend another night in Toronto. The host persisted and told the collector that if he stayed with him that evening, he would give him a larger check than he would ever receive in the next city, an offer to which the fundraiser acquiesced. The following morning, the host gave his guest an extremely generous check as promised, jotted down his contact information, and sent him on his way. A year later, the host in Toronto called the meshulach and informed him that he would be making a bris for his newborn son the following week and would be sending an airplane ticket so that the collector could fly in for the occasion and serve as sandek (person who holds the baby during the ceremony). The meshulach was speechless. He barely knew the man and could not fathom why he wanted to fly him in and honor him as sandek. Nevertheless, the host was determined, and the incredulous fundraiser ultimately agreed to come in for the occasion.

After the bris, the new father called over the collector to explain his actions. He said he had been married for many years, but had not been blessed with children. He shared his plight with Rav Avrohom Yaakov Pam, who advised him that the mitzvah of hachnasas orchim is a segulah (an action that can change one's fortunes) for having children.

When he came to the synagogue and saw the meshulach, he saw his opportunity and prevailed upon him to sleep in his house that evening. As Rav Pam had told him, the host's wife became pregnant, and that is the reason he insisted that the collector attend the bris that he helped make possible and be honored as sandek. While this is

certainly a fascinating story, where did Rav Pam get this segulah? In Tefillas Geshem (the prayer for rain said on Shemini Atzeres), we invoke the water-related virtues of our righteous ancestors and beseech Hashem to grant us water in their merits. The stanza about Yitzchok begins, זכור הנולד בברורת יקח נא מעט מים – Remember the one who was born with the tidings of, "Let some water be brought." Avrohom and Sorah were married for many years without children, yet after they hosted the angels with tremendous self-sacrifice, their guests immediately informed them that at this time the following year, they would have a son.

Rav Frand suggests that this may be the source for Rav Pam's advice that just as the heretofore barren Avrohom and Sorah were blessed with the news of Yitzchok's birth through their hachnasas orchim, so too would the merit of the hospitality of the couple in Toronto enable them to have a long- awaited child of their own.

### Tidbits • Parshas Vayeira 5785 Klal Gavoah In memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz ZT"L

Ira Zlotowitz <Iraz@klalgovoah.org> Parshas Vayeira • November 16th • 15 Cheshvan 5785

As of Maariv on Wednesday, November 20th, Shemoneh Esrei will have been recited ninety times with the inclusion of Mashiv HaRuach U'Morid HaGeshem. Therefore, after this point, one who is unsure if he added Mashiv HaRuach can halachically be presumed to have said it correctly, and need not repeat Shemoneh Esrei. (Applicable for Nusach Ashkenaz; Nusach Sefard mispallem [who say Morid Hatal in the summer months] never need to correct.). Note: One who served as a sheliach tzibbur during this period may count his chazaras hashatz towards his count of ninety. The final day of BeHaB is this Monday, November 18th. The final opportunity for Kiddush Levana is Friday night, November 15th (ideally it should be recited prior to Friday night). Daf Yomi - Shabbos: Bavli: Bava Basra 144 • Yerushalmi: Bikkurim 16 • Mishnah Yomis: Bava Basra 3:1-2 • Oraysa: Next week is Beitzah 20a-22a Chanukah begins on Wednesday evening, December 25th.

VAYEIRA: Hashem appears to Avraham, who, despite his weakened condition and the unbearable heat, seeks to welcome guests •

Avraham rushes to greet three "nomads" • An angel foretells that Sarah will bear a child, Sarah laughs • Two angels leave for Sodom • Hashem tells Avraham that He intends to destroy Sodom • Avraham (unsuccessfully) pleads with Hashem to spare Sodom • The angels arrive at Sodom, Lot hosts them • The people of Sodom attempt to attack the guests • The angels extract Lot's family from the doomed city, commanding them not to look back at the destruction • Lot, his wife and two unmarried daughters escape the city • Lot's wife looks back and turns into a pillar of salt • Lot and his daughters settle in a cave • Lot's daughters get their father drunk and bear their father's children, naming them Ammon and Moav • Avimelech takes Sarah, Hashem appears to Avimelech in a dream • Avimelech returns Sarah along with gifts • Yitzchok is born, and then circumcised at eight days old • Sarah worries about Yishmael's influence on Yitzchok • Hashem commands Avraham to heed Sarah and banish Hagar and Yishmael • Yishmael is saved from death in the desert; an angel promises that Yishmael will be a large nation • Akeidas Yitzchok • Avraham is promised great blessings for passing the test • Rivkah is born to Avraham's extended family. Haftarah: Avraham Avinu is renowned with his great acts of chessed. The haftarah discusses chessed which was performed by Elisha on two occasions (Melachim

Beis 4:1-37). Both Ovadiah's widow and the Isha Hashunamis who benefited from Elisha's chessed performed chessed in kind with others. Parashas Vayeira: 147 Pesukim • No Mitzvos listed “וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְיוֹן אֵיךְ שָׂרָה אֲשֶׁר וַיֹּאמֶר הָנָה בָּתָּהּ” “They said to him, ‘Where is Sarah your wife?’ [Avraham] said, ‘She is in the tent’ ” (Bereishis 18:9) The Gemara (Bava Metzia 87a) explains that the Malachim knew of Sarah's whereabouts; yet they inquired in order to endear her to her husband by bringing attention to her excellence in the middah of tznius. Rashi adds that in this attribute Sarah was a Tz'nuah Yoser Meichavroseha, that her trait was extraordinary amongst her peers. Rav Elya Baruch Finkel zt”l explains that even beyond complimenting a trait of Sarah's, the Malachim highlighted a unique characteristic that she possessed. One can continually strengthen a relationship with others by focusing on their unique attributes and abilities. This leads to genuine admiration and appreciation. Rabbi Zlotowitz z”l would point out that we are discussing two of the greatest people in history, Avraham and Sarah, who at this point were married for many, many years. Yet still, the Torah notes that a Malach sought to compliment her to her husband. How much more careful and proactive must spouses be nowadays in fostering mutual endearment!

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### Considering the Perspective of Others

#### Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh

(Transcribed and adapted by a talmid, with the help of internet-based AI tools, from the YUTORAH shiur presented at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on November 3, 2023) There is a peculiar Rashi at the beginning of this week's Parsha. The pasuk says, Va-yikach ben bakar, rach va-tov, va-yiten el ha-naar, va-yimaher la'asos oso. We would have said that ben bakar rach va-tov simply describes a young bull that was soft and good. However, Rashi asks, Why is this so wordy? And he replies, It is a remez that shlosha parim hayu—Avraham actually shechted three animals. Now, that is a very expensive investment to regale only three guests. And how much did they eat? One cow is plenty to feed a considerable amount of people. So Rashi says that Avraham did this le-haachilan shalosh leshonos be-chardal. Avraham wanted to give each one tongue. Tongue is a delicacy. Nowadays, it is not as popular. But once upon a time, it was a big delicacy—especially with mustard. And there was not enough tongue for three people in one animal, so he shechted three animals to give each guest the shpitz, the most delicious, fanciest dish ever. And why did he do that? I understand he was very much machshiv the mitzvah of Hachnasas Orchim. But why did he have to go that far? Rav Pam, the Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vodaas, was known for his focus on Bein Adam la-Chaveiro and his sensitivity and understanding of other people. He asks, What is this Rashi trying to teach us? And Rav Pam answers, Do not imagine Avraham Avinu as some Bedouin in the desert someplace who happens to excel at hospitality. Avraham Avinu was the Gadol ha-Dor. He taught everyone about the existence of Hashem. On his own, Avraham

understood and intuited kol ha-Torah kula—even the need to make Eruv Tavshilin. And what did Avraham think of food? You do not have to be Avraham Avinu. Even if you ask a contemporary rosh yeshiva what he thinks of food, he will say, It's just nutrients you need to serve Hashem. It is not to get hana'ah or to be fancy. It is not to have a culinary experience. You eat to live; you do not live to eat. What do I care about what I eat? If it has carbs and proteins, I will have the strength to learn Torah and be oved Hashem. Avraham clearly had the proper Torah perspective on food, and he would never have a hava aminah to order tongue for himself. If you are a ben Torah, you must be someone who is a little removed from gashmiyus. You think to yourself, I am not so machshiv gashmiyus. I do not care about restaurants and all these fancy dishes and choice cuts of meat, etc. So when you relate to other people, you tend to feel that gashmiyus is not so important. And what is truly important is the Divrei Torah and ruchniyus. However, this approach often results in a lack of proper care for other people. Imagine a situation where I am only machshiv ruchniyus, and my guest is machshiv gashmiyus. If I invited them to my house, I would give them lots of ruchniyus—Divrei Torah and zemirot. But where they are holding, they feel like no one understands them, no one cares about them, no one is mechabed them. From my perspective, I care about them so much. I give them Divrei Torah instead of fancy food! But because I do not understand where they are coming from, they feel neglected, unseen, and not understood. So Rav Pam says, Avraham Avinu was on a madreiga of va-yeira eilav Hashem. Hashem came to visit him—Kabbalas Pnei Shechina. And now Avraham needs to leave that exalted madreiga for Hachnasas Orchim and think to himself, These guys would appreciate the fancy-schmancy prime grill and shalosh leshonot be-chardal—and not just regular meat. And the gadlus of Avraham Avinu was that he could be on this high madreiga on the one hand and yet understand what other people need to feel mechubad, valued, and cared about—on their madreiga—on the other hand. And if that means giving them fancy meat, then that is what he would do—and the Divrei Torah would come only afterward. I know this certainly comes up a lot. Often, I get she'eilos, and my initial thought is, Who cares? Just be machmir. Why is it even a she'ela? Why do you need this in the first place? Is it not more important to just be a little more makpid than to have this shtus? And that may be the right answer for the Rabbi. But that is not being machshiv and seeing people where they are. And from Avraham Avinu, we see that it is a hard balance to be on a madreiga and to really understand other people's perspective. But part of being talmidim shel Avraham Avinu is not just Kabbalas Pnei Shechinah and not just taking a break for Hachnasas Orchim but really being able to relate to people where they are. Stop and think, This is my head, but where is their head? Instead of thinking, What would I need if I were in their place? Ask yourself, What do they need, and how can I give it to them with all the physical and psychological comfort that comes with that? And if you can really strike that very delicate balance and do it properly, then you are following the Derech of Avraham Avinu. Shabbat Shalom

<https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/1115332> YUTORAH IN PRINT •  
 Vayeira 5785 [www.yutorah.org](http://www.yutorah.org) The Two Sides of the “Coin” of Life **Rabbi Efrem Goldberg** The Gemara in Maseches Bava Kama (97b) states that Avraham minted his own coin. One side of this coin featured the images of an elderly man and woman, and on the other

side, the images of a young man and young woman appeared. What might be the meaning of this coin? How did these images express the teachings and legacy of Avraham Avinu? Rav Yisroel Meir Druck, in Lahavos Eish, cites his father, Rav Mordechai Druck, as explaining that the message of this special coin relates to the lure and temptation of wealth. Certain temptations and vices are common and pronounced during one's younger years, but less so when he grows older. Conversely, there are some moral and spiritual challenges which are more difficult in one's older years than during his youth. The lust for money, however, is ever present. It affects us all equally at all ages. Both young and old are vulnerable to this vice – the obsessive pursuit of wealth. This, Rav Mordechai Druck suggested, is the meaning of Avraham's currency. The coin bore the images of both young and old as a warning that at all ages, we must struggle to overcome this dangerous temptation. Rav Yisroel Meir, however, offers a different explanation. He writes that this coin was intended to teach us that at either stage of life, we must look at the other side of the coin. When a person is young, he must be mindful of the advent of old age, of his mortality, of his limited time on earth. Often, young people make the mistake of thinking that they have all the time in the world, that this most precious of all resources – time – will never run out. Young people need to look to the other side of the coin, to the reality of old age, and recognize that their time is limited, and that they must therefore use every day wisely. We can never retrieve lost time. If we waste a day, or even an hour, on vanity or nonsense, we will never get it back. Even in our younger years, when it seems as though we have so much time left, we need to use all our time as productively as possible. Conversely, those in the advanced stages of life must look to the other side, at the energy and opportunity of youth. As people grow older, they might decide that they have nothing left to achieve or to strive for, that the time has come to relax, without striving to accomplish more. Avraham's coin calls upon those in advanced stages of life to draw inspiration from the other side, from youth, to realize that even in their older years, they have the capacity and the opportunities to achieve and to contribute. Youthfulness depends not on age, but on one's mentality. There are people of all ages who are still young in the sense that they have not stopped accomplishing. This is the message of Avraham's coin – that the young must be aware of the eventuality of old age, and that the aged must harness the "youth" within them to continue striving for greatness.

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### **The Salt of Sodom**

#### **Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein**

The fugitive came and told Avram, the Ivri. (14:13) The Gemara in Maseches Chullin (105b) discusses the mitzvah of mayim acharonim (washing the hands after partaking of a bread meal, before reciting bircas hamazon), explaining that it is on account of the salt of Sodom. This salt, which was typically on the table during the meal in Talmudic times, is especially strong and can impair a person's eyesight if it touches his eyes. Therefore, having finished one's meal, there is a requirement to clean one's hands of any traces of this salt. Interestingly, the Talmud elsewhere also discusses mayim acharonim. In Maseches Berachos (53b) the gemara adduces the verse *שְׁמַרְתֶּן הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְיִמְצָא בְּמִזְבֵּחַ קְדֻשָּׁה מִזְבֵּחַ*, You shall sanctify yourselves and you shall be holy, (Vayikra 20:7) commenting as follows: You shall sanctify yourselves – this refers to washing the hands before

eating. • And you shall be holy – this refers to washing the hands after eating (mayim acharonim). One cannot help but notice that the background offered in the second Gemara differs drastically from the first. After all, attaining holiness and removing dangerous salt from one's hands are both worthwhile endeavors, but they are not the same thing! How are we to relate to two such differing approaches to this mitzvah? Indeed, it seems as one's approach to mayim acharonim will primarily be a based on when he joined the Daf Yomi cycle! Rav Kook (Commentary Ein Aya to Berachos) explains that, in reality, these two Gemara's are talking about the same idea; with one addressing the cause and the other the result. The idea of salt represents added taste or enjoyment to the staples of life. Indeed, even the austere menu in Pirkei Avos (6:4) for the one toiling Torah consists of bread with salt. In reasonable measure, enjoying one's material assets is a good and positive thing. However, it is possible for this idea to exceed its healthy boundaries, with enjoying one's resources becoming one's primary focus in life. At this point, one's relationship with can undergo a drastic deterioration, for they may be perceived as those who might interfere with or detract from his enjoyment of life. This pathological course is reflected in the story of the inhabitants of Sodom, who were infamous for their acts of cruelty towards strangers. From where did this abhorrent policy originate? The midrash informs us that the plains of Sodom, which were extremely fertile, led its inhabitants to become obsessively protective of their city's bounty, ultimately resulting in their institutionalized cruelty toward anyone who would seek to diminish those assets. Indeed, says Rav Kook, everyone needs some "salt" in life, representing added taste and enjoyment to one's activities; however, the "Salt of Sodom," which represents a view to enjoying one's material assets to the point of fixation, is not healthy at all. In fact, it is so harmful it can "blind the eyes," leaving one unable to see anyone else and be cognizant of or sensitive to their needs. This is something that is of ongoing concern, expressing itself especially as a person finishes a meal. Having just partaken of one's material assets, a person needs to assure himself that he will not retain traces of Sodom Salt on his hands, blocking out the needs of others. Yet, how does one do this? With the first Gemara having identified the problem, what is the solution? The answer is in the second Gemara – "And you will be holy." As long as a person has a mundane and limited vision of life, material pleasures may fill his horizon, and his compulsive desire to protect and enjoy his assets may blind him to other people and any needs they may have. Achieving holiness involves attaining a higher vision of life, including a higher vision of his own possessions. With this worldview, enjoying one's assets is not the highest value, but rather, it takes a healthy and subordinate role within a more elevated vision of those assets – being able to use them to help others. Therefore, says the Gemara, having finished one's meal, one should wash his hands, removing from them any traces of food. This signifies his insistence that his actions not be hampered or controlled by his involvement in physical matters, but will rather partake of a higher view of those very involvements. In this instance, as the Gemara informs us, the key to maintaining this perspective is at our very fingertips. This is a truly illuminating idea, whereby, one of the primary markers of holiness is developing a world-view which enables one to see other people and their needs – and to respond with kindness and graciousness. Here, too, we see how a man and God relationship should ultimately elevate a person's relationship between himself and his fellow man. And indeed, as we

know, the ones who give in life are not always the ones with the most to give, but the ones with the most giving ingrained into their outlook. In other words, the extent to which one will be inclined to share what he has with others will ultimately be determined, not by the size of the premises in which he lives, but by the quality of the premises upon which he lives.

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### **Not Hearing Morning Kiddush**

by **R. Daniel Mann**

Question: At a shul Kiddush, I wasn't able to hear the beracha but answered amen when I heard others answer. Was I yotzei? What should I have done?

Answer: The answer to your question depends on two issues – how morning Kiddush works; the status of one who knows a beracha was made but did not hear it.

At nighttime Kiddush, the main beracha is Mekadesh Hashabbat. Borei Pri Hagafen, whose point is to make it permitted to drink the wine of Kiddush (and similarly, of Havdala) is of minor importance (see Living the Halachic Process VII, C-16). Therefore, if one did not hear Borei Pri Hagafen, he is yotzei anyway (see Shulchan Aruch, OC 271:4; Mishna Berura 296:33).

The problem is that the morning Kiddush consists only of Borei Pri Hagafen (see Pesachim 106a). The p'sukim we recite are a late and not required addition (see Mishna Berura 289:2). So if one did not hear Borei Pri Hagafen, in what way did he take part in Kiddush?! There are two approaches in the Rishonim as to the nature of this abbreviated Kiddush that does not even need to mention Shabbat. The Ran (Pesachim 22b of Rif's pages) suggests that it connects to the night's full Kiddush, and posits that its beracha functions along the same lines as Kiddush of the night. Rabbeinu David (Pesachim 106a) says that given its content, it cannot serve as a real Kiddush; rather, its function is to elevate the meal's stature via the wine. Therefore, the drinking is more important than the beracha, which just permits the drinking.

If the drinking is the important thing, why don't we all have to drink the required amount? Many quote the Brisker Rav as requiring everyone to drink at the morning Kiddush. However, this position encounters difficulties with classical sources (see Tosafot, Pesachim 106a) and contemporary minhag (see Shemirat Shabbat K'hilchata 50:9). The Netziv (Ha'amek She'ala 54:4) explains that others connect to the drinking of the one who drinks the requisite amounts, who sets the proper tone for the joint "meal." Based on this, we might argue that since the "meal" you attended was elevated, missing Borei Pri Hagafen did not preclude your fulfilling Kiddush. On the other hand, the Ran's approach appears to be more accepted (this column, Bechukotai 5784).

Let us now look at your connection to the beracha to which you answered amen. It is forbidden to recite an amen yetoma (Berachot 47a), e.g., answering without hearing the beracha (Rashi ad loc.). On the other hand, the mishna (Sukka 51b) tells about the davening in the amphitheater in Alexandria, in which they raised flags to prompt people to answer amen. The two main distinctions raised (see Beit Yosef, OC 124) to reconcile the sources are as follows: 1. If one plans to be yotzei with a beracha, he must hear it and must not answer if he does not, but he may answer a beracha he does need to

"use for himself" (one answer in the Rosh, Berachot 7:17). 2. The problem is when one does not know which specific beracha was recited, but if he knows, he may answer even if he did not hear it (Rashi & Tosafot, Berachot 47a). The Beit Yosef implies that the two answers are separate – it is not that either factor suffices or that both factors are needed; rather there is one deciding point, with a machloket about which is correct. According to #2, your amen was fine because you knew to what beracha you were answering, and you apparently were even yotzei. According to #1, your amen was an amen yetoma if you intended to be yotzei, and so the beracha could not be motzi you. The Shulchan Aruch (OC 124:8) rules like #1 (admittedly, this is not a unanimous ruling – see Rama and Be'ur Halacha ad loc.).

The best idea was to make your own Kiddush, after first speaking (to ensure Borei Pri Hagafen was necessary). Under extenuating circumstances (e.g., insufficient wine or insulting to the mekadesh, and it was important to eat), there is room for leniency to eat based on the Kiddush (we have to leave out a lot of sources/analysis). If so, Kiddush before your meal at home would be called for, whatever your regular minhag.

לעילוי נשמת יואל אפרים בן אברהם עוזיאל זלצמן ז"ל

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web: <http://ohr.edu/11877> For the week ending 16 November 2024 / 15 Cheshvan 5784 Taamei Hamitzvos - The Roots of Amon and Moav

from: Ohr Somayach <ohr@ohr.edu>

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### **Taamei Hamitzvos - Reasons Behind the Mitzvos**

By **Rabbi Shmuel Kraines**

"Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a mitzvah is more beautiful when it emerges from someone who understands its significance." (Meiri, Bava Kama 17a)

Mitzvahs #561-562 (Devarim 23:4-7)

Parashas Va'eira records the births of Lot's two sons, the forebears of the nations Amon and Moav. Centuries later, when the Jewish people left Egypt and passed by the lands of these two nations on their way to Eretz Yisrael, they refused to offer the Jewish people food and drink and Moav even hired Bilaam to destroy them (see also Ramban). This cruel conduct bore evidence of the faulty character of Amonite and Moavite men, but not of the women, because it is not the way of women to go out and bring refreshments for wayfarers (Yevamos 76b). As a result, the Torah commands us in Parashas Ki Seitzei not to allow the male members of these nations to marry into our people, even if they convert. Moreover, while we are usually required to seek peace with other nations, we may not accord this merciful treatment to Amon and Moav. Sefer HaChinuch explains that their cruel conduct revealed them as being despicable in the core and undeserving of our mercy. These Mitzvos thus educate us about the importance of kindness and compassion.

If we explore the history of Amon and Moav, we gain further insight into these Mitzvos. Lot was an orphan; his father Haran died in Ur Kasdim. His illustrious uncle Avraham took him under his wing and shared with him the good fortunes which he merited on account of his righteousness. When Lot's city was conquered by an axis of world powers, Avraham came to rescue him; when his city Sodom was overturned, it was only in Avraham's merit that he survived. Lot's descendants Amon and Moav are not only at fault for lacking compassion, but also for repaying with cruelty the immense kindness

that the forebear of the Jewish people dealt to their ancestor (Ramban and Bechor Shor). The Torah refers to an ungrateful person as a naval, a despicable person (Devarim 32:6). Indeed, someone lacking the sensitivity to even recognize the kindness of others is surely rotten at the core. In contrast, the great men of our nation are well-known for possessing a fine sense of gratitude to others, and above all, to Hashem.

The ungrateful streak of Amon and Moav would continue for all generations; the Sages call them "the bad neighbors of Yerushalayim." They relayed to Nevuchanetzar that the Jewish prophets were predicting the destruction of Yerushalayim and urged him to come and conquer it, and they gleefully joined his forces (Sanhedrin 96b).

If we ponder the matter at its roots, it appears that the irreversible spiritual blemishes of these two nations began from the time of their conception. When Sodom and its sister cities were destroyed, Lot's daughters, thinking that the entire world had been destroyed, had an incestuous union with their father to perpetuate mankind, for the same reason Kain and Hevel were allowed to marry their sisters. Lot, though, had been told by the visiting angels that only that region would be destroyed, and he knew good and well that there was no such permissibility. The Gemara (Horayos 10b) remarks about this act of incest that it was considered virtuous for Lot's daughters and at the same time shamefully sinful for Lot. Amon and Moav emerged from those unions. Since only the male participant in those unions sinned, the male descendants would emerge blemished and forbidden from entry into the Jewish people, while the female descendants would emerge pure (Rabbeinu Avigdor HaTzarfati to Horayos ibid.). Indeed, the entire Davidic dynasty, including the Mashiach, emerged from Rus, a Moavite woman.

The above-stated law, that the ban against marrying Moavites is limited to male Moavites, is an oral tradition, which was a matter of dispute when Rus converted and Boaz sought to marry her. Boaz eventually did so, with the consent of the Beis Din of Beis Lechem. Rav Shlomo Alkabetz wrote a commentary to Megillas Rus called Shoresh Yishai. In his introduction, he suggests that this Megillah was written in order to publicize the authenticity of this oral tradition, which was necessary to legitimize the Davidic dynasty. Based on what we have written above, we may add that Megillas Rus substantiates the ruling of the Beis Din of Beis Lechem by describing the kindness and compassion of Rus in detail, thus demonstrating that the cruelty that characterizes Moav is clearly not shared by its female members.

It emerges that the moral sensitivities are largely dependent on the pureness of the soul and on spiritual genes that pass on from generation to generation. That is why it is strictly forbidden to mix the pure seed of Avraham, in whose spiritual genes are embedded kindness, compassion, and bashfulness (Yalkut Shimoni §82), with the impure seed of Lot's male descendants.

In closing, it is fascinating to note that Avraham himself eventually decided to separate himself from Lot upon observing his twisted values (see Panim Yafos to Bereishis 13:9). The impure roots of Amon and Moav had sprouted forth even before they were born.

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## PARSHAS VAYEIRA 5785

### CHESSED—GREATER THAN GREETING THE SHECHINAH!?

By Rabbi Moshe Krieger, Yeshivas Bircas HaTorah

Parshas Vayeira teaches us a surprising rule: hachnasas orchim (taking in guests) is so important that it takes precedence even over greeting the Shechinah! This principle is derived from the episode that begins the parshah: Avraham Avinu was sitting at the entrance of his tent, waiting for someone to appear on the horizon so he could try to fulfill the mitzvah of hachnasas orchim. However, before anyone appeared, Hashem appeared to him. Even though the Shechinah was before him and in spite of acute pain due to his bris milah three days earlier, Avraham stood up and ran when he saw three nomads in the distance. We learn from this episode that taking in guests takes precedence even over greeting the Shechinah (Shabbos 127a).

One may wonder, though—is this really so? Suppose a prominent Rosh Yeshivah comes to visit you. Should you abandon him to tend to some needy person you see walking by on the street? Of course not! How could Avraham have chosen the guests over the Shechinah? Furthermore, Avraham's efforts in hachnasas orchim seem exaggerated. It says in Avos D'Rebbe Nissan (chap. 7, 1) that Hashem contrasted Iyov's chessed with Avraham's, saying to Iyov, "You didn't attain Avraham's level of chessed. You gave people only what they needed, but Avraham gave people even more than what they needed." Though Iyov served his guests the foods that they were accustomed to, Avraham introduced his guests to finer and more expensive foods as well. Avraham was constantly involved in kindness. The Sages teach (Sotah 10a) that he ran a free hotel in Be'er Sheva.

Why did Avraham Avinu expend such effort in hachnasas orchim, even seeming to go above and beyond the norm by preparing dishes that people weren't even expecting? The Alter of Slobodka explains that there are two forms of chessed. The first involves seeing to a fellow man's needs. The Rambam (Hilchos Aveilus 14:1) states that acts of kindness such as hachnasas orchim are included in the mitzvah of loving your neighbor as yourself (Vayikra 19:18). This form of chessed finds expression only in areas in which a fellow man is discernibly lacking. In the second form of chessed, a person is so caring that he is always looking for ways to be helpful. He assesses and re-assesses a situation until he finds a way to assist his fellow even when no lack is apparent. This was the chessed of Avraham Avinu, and it stemmed from his desire to emulate Hashem. Just as Hashem created the world in order to bring into existence beings that could receive His goodness, so too Avraham looked for ways to bestow goodness on others. If a person was not used to meat and wine, Avraham would introduce him to these dishes, so that he could then give him even more. This is chessed in its complete, G-dly form (as explained by the Rambam, Hilchos Dei'os 1:6).

This also explains how Avraham Avinu could have left the Shechinah when he saw the wayfarers. He was not, in fact, leaving the Shechinah at all! Receiving the Shechinah is indeed a form of connecting with Hashem, but one that is merely external. By emulating Hashem, though, Avraham was bringing Hashem into himself.

Rav Dessler notes that external forms of connecting to Hashem, even something as lofty as prophecy, are not a guarantee that a person will remain on a high spiritual level. For example, Hashem spoke to

Kayin, who then killed his brother Hevel. Connecting externally is much less valuable than actually doing what Hashem wants. When we follow in Hashem's ways, we are making Him a part of ourselves. This has a much greater impact on us. Many people do chessed in an incomplete manner. They feel that they have to do it, or they want the reward in Olam Haba. Some people do chessed as an investment, with the expectation that the recipient will owe them a favor in return for their act of kindness. Other people feel uncomfortable seeing the plight of a poor man and do chessed simply to alleviate the pain his situation causes them. While such acts may fulfill the command to love your neighbor as yourself, chessed in its ultimate form exists only when done completely—solely for the goodness of giving to another. This is the type of chessed we can learn from Avraham Avinu's actions.

In addition to his stature as a gadol b'Yisrael, Rav Avraham Chaim Brim was also known for his love of chessed, often going out of his way to assist others. He was constantly looking for worthy causes and needy people for whom he could collect funds or aid in other ways. He noticed people whom he thought needed a kind word of encouragement, and he was always there for others in their times of grief. Like Avraham Avinu, who was pained by his inability to do chessed (on the third day after his bris milah when Hashem took out the sun from its case to prevent anyone from traveling and causing the tzaddik to strain himself), Rav Brim once commented when he was sick in the hospital that though he was able to learn and daven, he was unable to do chessed, and that pained him.

Whenever he traveled by taxi, Rav Brim added money to the fare, because many passengers complain to drivers about poor service or high fares, and he wanted to offset that by showing the taxi driver that he was satisfied with his service. Once, an appreciative taxi driver looked at the money Rav Brim was offering him and said: "Rabbi, this extra sum is the only money that I want. You can keep the fare. This sign of appreciation is worth more to me!" May we be zocheh to go in Hashem's ways, and bestow goodness on the world!

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from: **Rabbi YY Jacobson** <rabbiiyy@theyeshiva.net> reply-to: info@theyeshiva.net date: Nov 14, 2024, 4:27 PM subject: Don't Run Away from Your Past - Essay by Rabbi YY Jacobson

### Don't Run Away from Your Past

#### Abraham's Search for Truth Was Also Part of Truth

By: **Rabbi YY Jacobson**

#### Nearing the End

A priest and a pastor from a local church were standing by the road pounding a sign into the ground that reads: The End is Near! Turn Yourself Around Now Before It's Too Late!

As a car sped past them, the driver yelled, "Leave us alone you religious nuts!"

From the curve, they heard screeching tires and a big splash. The priest turns to the pastor and asks, "Do you think the sign should just say 'Bridge is down'?"

#### Coming in Days

The Torah relates in this week's portion, Vayeira:

וְאַבְרָהָם קָנָם בְּנָם וְשָׂרָה קָנָה בְּנָם...  
And Abraham and Sarah were old, coming on in days. [1]

In the following portion the Torah says again:

חִיָּה שָׂרָה כֹּד, אַבְרָהָם זָלוּ בָּא בְּנָם...

"And Abraham was old, coming on in days."

What do these words mean? If the meaning was simply that Abraham and Sarah grew old, it could have just said: Abraham and Sarah were old ("zekeinim"). Why the need for the extra words "baim bayamim," "coming on in days?"

[Indeed, while many, including Abraham, achieve the title of "old" (zakein) in the Hebrew Bible, the particular words "baim bayamim" or "ba bayamim," literally "coming on in days," only appear in connection with four people: Abraham, Sarah, Joshua (Joshua 13:1 and 23:1) and David (I Kings 1:1). Such selective application of words triggers our attention.]

The Zohar offers a lovely, if problematic, interpretation. [2] The literal translation of the words "baim bayamim" is "coming with their days." ("Bayamim" can both mean in their days, or with their days.) What the verse is saying is that "Abraham and Sarah were old, coming with all of their days." Abraham and Sarah did not only grow old. That happens to many people. But rather they "came with all their days," they showed up with each of their days. Each day was accounted for; each day was lived to the fullest; each day was wholesome, meaningful, and complete. "They came with all their days." No day had to be left behind.

Yet, there is a problem here. For the first period of his life, Abraham was steeped in pagan idolatry. Following the path of his father Terach, he was committed to the pagan beliefs and practices of the time. [3] What is more, as the genuine person he was, Abraham was sincerely entrenched in the world of the pagan belief system, more than others who just conformed to the masses. [4]

It was only later in life that Abraham discovered the truth of Monotheism, the truth of a unified universe fashioned by a single Creator with moral expectations from His creation. The Torah does not give an age, and the Rabbis in the Talmud and Midrash argue over it. One Midrash says that Abraham was 48 years of age when he recognized the one and only true G-d. [5] Another Midrash and Maimonides [6] put him at the age of 40. The Talmud [7] cites a view that he was three years of age when he became aware of G-d. (Perhaps, it has been suggested, they are not arguing; there were different phases in Abraham's intellectual and spiritual development. [8] )

But whatever the case, one cannot possibly say that Abraham "came with all of his days," that each and every day of his life was morally complete and wholesome, because for years or even decades he was steeped in his father's and his society's idol practices.

The fact that Abraham made a remarkable transition in his life at the age of 40, 48 or 3, is, of course, astounding. One man stood up against an entire world because he cared for Truth. Yet this precisely was the greatness of Abraham: that he had the courage to tear himself away from a youth spent in error; that he could start all over again when discovering his mistakes. How then can the Torah state, according to the Zoharic interpretation, that all of his days were spiritually unblemished?

The same question, of course, applies to Sarah, about whom the Torah also states "she came in her days."

What is more, concerning Sarah, the Torah states, [9] "And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years; [these were] the years of the life of Sarah." The last words, "these were the years of Sarah," are superfluous. The Midrash and Rashi explain them to teach that "All of them were equally good." But how can we make such a claim about Sarah? The beginning of her life was consumed by idolatry. Her Judaism was discovered later in life.

How can we say that all of her days and years were equally good, worthy, and wholesome?

It was during a public address (a "farbrengen") on Shabbos Parshat Vayeira, 15 Cheshvan 5748, November 7, 1987, when the Lubavitcher Rebbe offered the following explanation. [10] I was only 15 at the time, but I can still recall the brilliant life-changing insight I heard that day.

#### The Paradox

The Lubavitcher Rebbe first introduced a paradox in Jewish law. [11] Every Jew becomes obligated to fulfill all of the mitzvos of the Torah at the age of 13 for a boy, and at the age of 12 for a girl (since girls mature faster than boys). Yet, the Torah does not obligate a father or mother to train their children to perform the mitzvos before the age of bar or bat mitzvah, so that they can be well-rehearsed by the time they reach that moment of duty. The sages did impose an obligation on every Jewish father to train his children to perform all of the mitzvos, [12] once they reach the appropriate age; [13] but that is a rabbinic obligation, not a biblical one. [14]

We are thus faced with a paradox: There is no way that one can suddenly, on the day he turns 13 (or she turns 12), observe all of the mitzvos perfectly, without previous practice and rehearsal. It would be like asking a youngster to suddenly join a big-league (or even a little-league) football team without a day of practice!

How can one suddenly master the art and intricacies of all the mitzvos without previous rehearsal? Can I suddenly, in a few minutes' notice, become an expert in donning tefillin, prayer, grace after meals, and all of the negative commandments?

What is more, many of the mitzvos require much work before you can fulfill them: One needs to craft or buy tefillin; weave or purchase tzitzis; form or buy a shofar for Rosh Hashanah; purchase material to build a sukkah, etc.

That is exactly why the Rabbis introduced the rabbinic mitzvah of "chinuch," educating our children to rehearse all of the mitzvos years before their bar-mitzvah. Yet the Torah itself does not demand this? [15]

There is an enigma here. Either we should not make them obligated on the day they turn 13, or give them some prep time beforehand? Maybe there is a simple answer. The Torah need not state the obvious. It is a given that you have to prepare your child beforehand if you want him/her to take on the task. If the Torah would tell me that at 13 my son needs to play professional football, it need not tell me that I should teach him and practice with him beforehand. It is obvious! Just as the Torah does not state that you have to buy a shofar before Rosh Hashanah, or buy tefillin, or buy wood to build a sukkah. Why not? Because it is obvious. The Torah tells you to build a sukkah. How can you build a sukkah if you don't purchase lumber? How can you blow the shofar if you don't have one? Ditto with rehearsing the mitzvos with your children.

Yet this answer does not hold sway. If this was the case it would mean that educating our children in the practice of mitzvos is somewhat of a biblical obligation—it is so obvious that the Torah does not even have to state it. Yet, the Talmud and all of the halachic authorities state unequivocally, [16] that training our children in the practice of mitzvos (chinuch) is a rabbinic obligation, not a biblical one.

Yet this seems senseless. If you are obligating these kids on the day they turn 13 to perform 613 mitzvos, how does the Torah expect them to know them all?

#### Training is Part of Service

It was here that the Rebbe introduced an incredibly perceptive insight into Judaism (I still recall the passion and excitement in the Rebbe's words when he presented this message.) From the Torah's perspective, practice, trial, and error are all integral components of the mitzvah itself. When the Torah obligates the 13-year-old boy and 12-year-old girl to begin observing all of the mitzvos it does not mean that on that day they should suddenly perform them all perfectly. Rather, the Torah is obligating them to begin the process of mitzvah observance, knowing full well that it is a process that takes time and will inevitably be less than perfect for a while.

Here is a simple illustration. In Israel, every 18-year-old is drafted into the army for three years. But before they can actually become full soldiers on duty protecting the land and the people, six months of basic training is required. They need to learn how to hold a gun, how to use it, how to protect themselves and others, how to enter into combat. They must also perfect their bodies to be able to handle the grueling tasks of the soldier. Those that enter elite units need far more time for training. Do these months of practice count as part of their service in the army? Of course. They may be still making mistakes; they may not be doing the job well; they are not yet drafted to the front lines because of their inexperience; they still need time to perfect their performance. Yet that is the way things work. To become a soldier, you need training. When the country mobilizes you into the army for three years it knows that you can't become a soldier overnight, and the time for training is considered part of your army service.

This is also true with Judaism. At the age of 13 or 12, the young Jew is "drafted" into the "adult army" of the Jewish people. Now we must begin the training—and that takes time, trial, error, and repetition till you get it right. In the famous expression of the Talmud, "the Torah was not given to angels!" It was given to humans, and humans need time and effort to master a new lifestyle and get it right. That necessary "training time" is part and parcel of the very mitzvah. When the Torah tells the 13-year-old, "start performing all of the mitzvos," it means: Begin the process. The time you will need to purchase your mitzvah items, to master the practices, to learn the nuances, and to perfect your performance, that is all included in the package. And if on day one you can't do it all perfectly, that is not a flaw; it is an intrinsic part of the mitzvah.

It was the Rabbis, however, who introduced the mitzvah of "chinuch," to begin the training far earlier, so that at the age of 13 or 12 our youths are ready to "shoot!"

#### Abraham and Sarah's Discovery Process

This is the answer to our original question, how can the Torah describe all of the days of Abraham and Sarah as spiritually wholesome, despite them worshipping idols in their youths.

There is a profound message here—and it is at the heart of Judaism. Abraham and Sarah were not born in an environment of Torah. On the contrary, they were born and raised in ancient Ur Kasdim, a city in Southern Iraq, dominated by idolatry and the cult of kings as demigods, in which the gods were perceived as blood-thirsty jealous titans. Now, G-d—the real G-d—did not expect Abraham and Sarah to turn their lives upside down in a single day! People are not robots or computers. Humans need the time and mental space to inquire, investigate, research, question, and slowly evolve in their consciousness. The road to truth is paved by trial and error, again and again, and yet again.

Just as with any scientific discovery or theory, it does not come with a snap of the finger. The scientist spends months or years in research, in speculations, doubt, uncertainty, and experimentation, until he or she may discover the truth. Is all that research time not considered part of scientific progress and discovery? Is it seen as a futile waste of time? Of course not! It is the only way to reach any type of truth. This, exactly, was the journey of Abraham and Sarah. In the words of Maimonides: [17]

"He began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think incessantly throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the planet to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve. He had no teacher, nor was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother, and all the people around him were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. However, his heart was exploring and gaining understanding.

"Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his acute comprehension. He realized that there was one God who controlled the planet, that He created everything, and that there is no other God among all the other entities. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake... Abraham was forty years old when he became aware of his Creator. When he recognized and knew Him, he began to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them that they were not following a proper path... When the people would gather around him and ask him about his statements, he would explain them to each one of them according to their understanding, until they turned to the path of truth. Ultimately, thousands and myriads gathered around him."

This is why the Torah tells us that Abraham and Sarah "came with all of their days." From G-d's perspective, all of their days were perfectly wholesome. Of course, many of these years included theological blunder and false pagan beliefs. But that was part of their search for truth. The road to perfection must lead through imperfection. The road to truth runs through error. The road to awareness travels through failure. They were not entrenched in idolatry because they were careless and gluttonous; they were seeking the truth and in our complex world, you often embrace the wrong before you discover the right. For Abraham and Sarah, their path to G-d had to lead through other paths, because without that they could have never discovered Monotheism.

Even their "bad days" were "good days," for all of their days were part of "training," even if it included error and failure.

#### Our Journeys

The same holds true, at least to some degree, for all of us. Churchill said, "Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." I can view my errors, shortcomings, setbacks, and failures as the bad days of my life; I can view my traumas as my prison sentences, those experiences which paralyzed me.

Some of us have traveled through many roads which "diverged in the forest," and at times we took the less-wiser one. We journeyed, physically and mentally, to distant locations, geographically and existentially. On the road, we encountered potholes and ditches. We stumbled. We fell. Sometimes we got badly bruised and made some foolish mistakes. Some of us, in our trauma or ignorance, hurt our loved ones along the way.

Sometimes we look back at our stories and feel dejected. We feel that we wasted so many years. We look back at our lives, review the unwise decisions we made for ourselves, or our loved ones, due to our ignorance, pain, confusion, anxiety, and cluelessness, and we become demoralized. The pain and the regrets cripple us. We wish we would have discovered what we know now far earlier.

But when the Torah says that "Abraham and Sarah came with ALL of their days," or that "all of Sarah's years were identical in goodness," it is suggesting a deeper perspective. Life isn't something that should be edited. The only way we discover our soul is through going through the processes we did. Every pitfall, every mistake, every confusing moment, is an integral part of our journey toward our own truth. We must embrace them all. Even the bruises are somehow part of our ultimate destination.

Of course, at times I need to grieve, and at times I need to apologize and make amends to the best of my ability. Yet my focus can be to redefine my traumas as the springboards that allow me to become the person I am capable of becoming and empower me to cast my unique light on our planet.

Many of us have discovered the truth, majesty, and depth of Judaism at a later point in life. We did not all have the privilege of growing up with it. Until we found our Jewishness we engaged in all types of behaviors that seem today to be empty and foolish. We are filled with shame, and often are terrified of anyone discovering our past. But authentic Judaism see it differently. Your mistakes are all part of your search for G-d. They too constitute a glorious part of your journey toward oneness and wholeness.

#### Turn Around

There is an interesting and strange Jewish custom, which raises many an eyebrow for synagogue newcomers. On Friday night, when we conclude the "Lecha Dodi" poem, the entire congregation makes an "about-face." Why? [18]

We are making the same point. In life, some of us are lucky enough to discover the "Shabbat." We discover our G-d, our faith, our love partner, our soul, or space of serenity. For some of us, it means we discover a new destiny, a new appreciation for Judaism, new happiness, a new lifestyle. As we do so, some of us tend to say goodbye to our past. We want to shake off our past experiences; we are ashamed by them; we feel contaminated by them. Some of us even cut off ties with former friends and family members.

But Judaism sees it differently. At the end of Lecha Dodi, as we are about to welcome the Shabbat and enter into 24 hours of spiritual transcendence, we turn around! We do not detach from our past. We turn around, we acknowledge it, we embrace it, we take it along with us on our journey. Because our past is never to be cast away; it is to be seen as the path through which we arrived at our present destination.

Or as a wise man once said, "The closest thing to perfection is imperfection."

Yes, when we discover the truth we must have the courage, like Abraham and Sarah, to smash the idols of falsehood and the gods of stupidity. Yet we must still look at compassion for the time we were "outside," looking in, trying to find our way, our soul, our G-d. When imperfection leads to perfection it is imperfectly perfect.

[1] Genesis 18:11 [2] Zohar Chayei Sarah 129a. 224a. Cf. Maamar V'Avraham Zaken 5738 and 5746. [3] See Midrash Rabah Bereishis 39:8. Rambam, Mishnah Torah, Laws of Avodah Zarah 1:3 [4] See Sidur Eim Dach Shaar Halulav. [5] Midrash Rabah Bereishis 30:8.

Kesef Mishnah to Rambam ibid. [6] Midrash Rabah ibid. Rambam ibid. [7] Nedarim 32a [8] See Likkutei Sichos vol. 20 p. 14 [9] Genesis 23:1 [10] Likkutei Sichos vol. 35 Vayeira pp. 61-69. Sefer Hasichos 5748 Vayeira. [11] For all the references to the following points, see Likkutei Sichos vol. 35 ibid. [12] There are a few exceptions. For example, Tefillin (because it requires a clean body throughout, and complete concentration); fasting a full day on Yom Kippur (due to weakness). [13] See Shulchan Aruch HaRav Orach Chaim 343 and all references noted there. Encyclopedia Talmudis entry of Chinuch. Likkutei Sichos vol. 35 ibid. [14] To be sure, there is a biblical obligation on a father to teach his son Torah. But that does not include the practice, training, and rehearsal of any mitzvos. For example, biblically, I never have to teach my son how to bentsch; I do not have to prepare for him tefillin before his bar mitzvah and teach him how to put them on; etc. [15] There are a noted few exceptions: We are obligated to teach Torah to our children (but that does not include practicing with them the observance of mitzvos); we are obligated on Passover to relate the Exodus story to our children (but that does not include them eating matzah etc. in which they are not obligated biblically); we are obligated to bring them to Hakhel once in seven years. [16] See Likkutei Sichos vol. 35 ibid. for all the references. [17] Mishnah Torah, Laws of Avodah Zarah 1:3 [18] On the simple level, we turn around for the verse in which we welcome the Sabbath Queen, ending with the words, "Come O Bride, come O Bride, come O Bride O Sabbath Queen." As we welcome the Sabbath, we turn to greet her as we would any special guest. This is a throwback to the time when people would actually go outside greet the Sabbath Queen exclaiming, "Come O Bride, come O Bride!" The holy Arizal taught his students—the mystics of the city of Tzefat—that when greeting Shabbat in the field, they should face the setting sun with closed eyes and serenade the Shabbat bride. (See Talmud, Shabbat, 119a; Code of Jewish Law, O.C. 262; Shaar Hakavanot, Derushay Kabalat Shabbat, 1) One of the early Chassidic masters explains that on Sabbath even the souls who are being punished and are "pushed out," are welcomed in for a respite. When we turn around, we welcome them to their Shabbat rest. (Tiferet Shlomo Metzora.) The following explanation in the essay on why we turn around is based on the writings of Reb Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin.

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from: **Rabbi Berel Wein** / The Destiny Foundation

<info@thedestinyfoundation.ccsend.com>

date: Nov 13, 2024, 3:09 PM

subject: Parshat Vayera 5785 Newsletter - Rabbi Berel Wein

Weekly Parsha VAYERA

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

God appears to Avraham in the opening verse of this week's parsha. How does God appear to him? The rabbis teach us that He appears to him in the form of a visitor there to cheer him in his illness and pain after the rite of circumcision. The Jewish value of visiting and cheering the sick stems from our imitation of this Godly virtue as first revealed to Avraham. In this instance, God reveals Himself to Avraham through three Bedouin Arabs who are apparently searching for a place to rest, eat and drink.

The apparent Arabs are angels and messengers of God. It is one of the great attributes of the house of Avraham and Sarah that visitors can enter their home as Arab desert dwellers and leave as angels. It is these wayfarers that deliver to Avraham and Sarah the message of

continuity and eternity of Jewish life. Sarah will give birth to Yitzchak after decades of being a barren woman.

Earlier, God informed Avraham of this momentous news directly. Yet Sarah, the direct recipient of this blessing, He somehow chooses to inform in an indirect manner through the unknown strange visitors that arrive at her tent and that she hospitably feeds. There is a great insight in this chosen method of God, so to speak, in delivering the message to Sarah through seemingly human auspices. God often, if not constantly in our times, talks to us through seemingly human messengers. If we are able to listen carefully to what others say to us, oftentimes we will hear a divine message communicated to us through a human conduit.

I think that this also explains why Sarah was initially bemused by the words of the angel. She evidently thought that it was just a throw-away promise of a wandering Bedouin Arab and reacted accordingly. At the outset she did not hear the voice of God in the words of the angel that addressed her. Therefore she did not take those words seriously. God reprimands her for this attitude and asks "Why did Sarah not take these words seriously?"

Avraham who heard the tidings from God directly realized that the message was true and serious. Sarah had to believe what she thought was a human wish and therefore discounted it. But God demanded from her, as He does from each of us, that we pay proper attention to what other humans say to us. Perhaps in their statements and words we can realize that God Himself, so to speak, is talking to us. God has many messengers and many ways of reaching us individually but we must be attuned to hear the messages that emanate from Heaven. They should never be allowed to fall on deaf or inattentive ears and minds. To a great extent this ability to listen to the otherwise unheard voice of Heaven is the measure of a Jew and of his ability to accomplish in life. Eventually Sarah hears and believes - and through this Yitzchak is born and Jewish continuity is assured and protected.

Shabat shalom. Rabbi Berel Wein

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web: <http://ohr.edu/11874>

Parshat Vayera

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

Voting for the Existence of the World

"...and all the nations of the world will bless themselves by him (Avraham)" (18:18) How valuable was your vote on November 5th? In 2020 political spending, including rallies and TV ads, billboards etc. was 14.4 billion dollars. This year OpenSecrets predicts it will have been at least 15.9 billion. 16 billion dollars! How important is our vote to them? How much do they value your time? What they are asking you to do is to leave work, leave your family, leave whatever you'd rather do - and vote. Maybe it will take you half an hour – maybe less. The question is how much do they value your time? Well. Let's do the math. If you divide 15.9 billion dollars between 186.5 million people – that's the number of Americans who are registered to vote as of September 2024 - you will be giving each one of them 85 dollars and 25 cents. Not bad for half an hour of your time! But let's look at your time another way. Nefesh HaChaim says that the reason Hashem created the world as a sphere was that it would always be day somewhere. Somewhere on the globe, people will be awake, and there will be a Jew burning the midnight oil toiling in Torah. Because, if there would be one split

second when no Jew was learning Torah, the world would return to Tohu u'vohu. Without that constant energy of Torah learning and observance, the whole world would return to primordial emptiness. The Worldometer's World Population Clock says that right now there are 8.2 billion people in the world. On Erev Rosh Hashana the year before last, the Jewish Agency said the number of Jews worldwide stood at approximately 15.7 million compared to 15.6 million in the year before that. More conservative estimates put it nearer 14 million, but whichever way you look at it, we are little more than 0.2 per cent of the world. But it doesn't stop there. According to the Institute for Jewish Policy research in 2022, only one in seven Jews are religious. In other words, there are only 2 million people giving life to the 8.2 billion inhabitants of this planet.

If you do some simple math, every second you learn Torah, or you do a mitzvah, you just gave life to 4000 people. Four Thousand. And if, G-d forbid, Jews would suddenly take a day off all together, stop doing the mitzvahs, learning, davening, giving, the world – 8.2 billion people - would, quite literally, cease to exist. It's quite impressive how powerful our actions are! Not just in the next world, not for just our children, but for the world to exist today, for all of Mankind. Those who keep the Torah — less than a tiny 0.2 percent of the world – are supporting 8.2 billion people.

Politicians may value your vote at 85 dollars and change, but a religious Jew breathes life – the most valuable gift in the world - into 4000 people every single second.

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From: **TorahWeb** <torahweb@torahweb.org> date: Nov 14, 2024, 8:47 PM subject: **Rabbi Yakov Haber - Jewish Stardust**

Rabbi Yakov Haber

Jewish Stardust

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This past painful year for the Jewish people has demonstrated to all of us all of the blessings bestowed upon Klal Yisrael as stars, as sand and as dirt. The acts of individual heroism of those who rushed to the front - many of whom were not classically connected to halachic lifestyles as well as ongoing chessed projects spearheaded by dedicated individuals bringing both the spiritual armor of tzitzit, tefillin and siddurim to those on the front, and the physical armor of helmets, bullet-proof vests, night-vision goggles and more to the tune of millions of dollars, can only be described as "stellar" examples of our people. A religious soldier brought one of the Gedolei Yisrael to tears when, after losing both of his legs and one arm, asked him three questions. First, on which hand shall he place tefillin now? Second, how should he hold his lulav and esrog? Third, should he say the shehecheyanu on his prosthetic limbs when he receives them or when he first uses them? When hearing such stories, one can only think of the verse in Iyov (13:15): "הַנִּקְטְּלֹנִי, לֹא אֵיחַל" - even if He kills me, I will still long for Him!" Stories of soldiers diligently continuing Torah study in respites from battle abound.<sup>[5]</sup> At a shiva house, I recently heard from the father of a fallen soldier that his son<sup>[6]</sup>

finished two masechtos while serving in Gaza! Stories of selfless kindness also have proliferated. As one example, a soldier, finding he was a match for a 3-year old leukemia patient, found the time to donate bone marrow in between battles!

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

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

[1] See Asufas Ma'arachos (Bereishis, "Birchas Haribui"). The editor (Rav Goldwicht's son-in-law, Rav Meirnik z"l) notes that the essay was not actually presented in this form by Rav Goldwicht, but it is based on his teachings. [2] A paraphrase from Rav Soloveitchik's majestic Lonely Man of Faith.

[3] Current scientific knowledge, of course, wholly concurs with this midrashic teaching. Also see the Midrash for many other comparisons between the righteous and the stars. [4] An interesting story is told of a secular, Israeli father who sued his son and his Yeshiva in Israeli court for becoming religious and causing him suffering. The presiding judge, who recognized the father from Europe as someone who gave up religion and caused his parents much sorrow, chided the father, "Just as you rebelled against your parents and caused your parents pain, your son is doing the same! Case dismissed!" [5] One is reminded of Chazal's interpretation of the rebuke of the angel to Yehoshua (5:14), "*עתה באתִי - על ביטול תורה*" - "Now I have come" - concerning the stopping of Torah study (see Megilla 3a). Radak wonders, "War is not the time for Torah study!" Many of our courageous soldiers have followed the simple message of our Sages! [6] Hillel Eliyahu Ovadya Hy"d. [7] I recently noticed on a carton of a popular brand of eggs in a local makolet the following note: "We proudly continue to supply these eggs even though we are under constant fire from Lebanon!" © 2024 by TorahWeb Foundation. All Rights Reserved Copyright © 2024 TorahWeb.org, All rights reserved. Our mailing address is: TorahWeb.org 94 Baker Ave Bergenfield, NJ 07621-3321

<https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-vayera-rabbi-brander/> 11-10-24

**Haftarat Parshat Vayera: Coaxing divine miracles to heal our wounded – by Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander** (Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone)

As Israel's hospitals continue to treat thousands wounded in the war, a story from this week's haftara, of Elisha and the Shunamite woman's son, offers powerful lessons about healing, miracles, and our responsibilities to the injured.

A desperate Shunamite woman races to find the prophet Elisha, the same prophet who had blessed her with the miracle of motherhood – but now that

young son lies lifeless on his bed. When Elisha arrives at her home, he does something unexpected. Instead of merely uttering prayers or blessings from a distance, he takes direct action: he climbs up onto the bed and lies down on the boy, breathing over him until warmth returns to the child's body.

Gradually – miraculously – the boy regains his breath and life returns to him. Elisha's choice of healing method, mirroring that of his teacher Eliyahu in I Kings 17, is puzzling. When the son of a widow in Zarepta fell ill, Eliyahu similarly stretched himself over the boy's body and prayed to God until the child revived. The need for Elisha to press his own face and body against the Shunamite child is not immediately clear from the story in our haftara. To address this, Rav David Kimchi (Radak, II Kings 4:34) offers two interpretations, each with insights that resonate today as we grapple with our own wounded.

One of Radak's interpretations is theological. He writes that while God's power and abilities know no limits, it is still the divine preference that even when particular moments in human history call for divine intervention, events should still unfold with as little divergence from the natural order as possible. In this reading, the reason for Elisha's actions are clear; what Elisha did was nothing other than a prototypical version of resuscitation, using his own breath and body heat to revive the child.

We, too, have witnessed no shortage of medical miracles over this past year, masked as standard medical procedures. Wounded soldiers and civilians, whose lives were hanging in the balance, have been saved by divine grace only visible to the spiritually-inclined eye that looks beyond the talented medics, emergency surgeries, innovative drugs and other procedures. While the best practices of doctors, nurses, and medics do not break with the laws of nature, their work is often miraculous.

The story of Elisha reminds us to not forget to look for miracles and be incredibly grateful to God as well as to those doctors, nurses and medics whose work has allowed so many wounded to survive, heal, recuperate, and return to their prior lives at least partially, if not fully or more robust than before.

At the same time, the same has, unfortunately, not been true for everyone. Of the approximately 12,000 wounded soldiers treated in Israel since Oct. 7 of last year, many still face long roads to recovery. Some are learning to live with prosthetic limbs or vision impairment, while others haven't yet regained the ability to breathe independently. Radak's other interpretation of Elisha's actions in healing the child contains valuable insights and lessons in how we should treat these patients, those still undergoing long and arduous journeys of healing, including those whose condition remains uncertain. He suggests that Elisha's physical closeness to the child is in fact a fulfillment of a halakhic principle – that when praying for a person in need, being physically present enhances empathy and focus in one's prayer. This approach to the mitzva of Bikur Cholim, visiting the sick, shared by Radak and others (cf. Nachmanides Torat ha-Adam Sha'ar HaMeichush) highlights that close proximity to the ill person empowers one's prayer on their behalf.

Like Elisha, we must combine faith in miracles with direct, personal action. Our wounded defenders need not only our prayers; they need our presence, support and commitment to walk alongside them on their journey to recovery. This is a concept that medical professionals recognize today. Studies have demonstrated that having visitors helps patients recover more quickly; and that those patients who lack visitors fare worse than those with visitors. As those who have been protected by these wounded soldiers' sacrifices; it's our obligation to honor them through the mitzva of Bikur Cholim – to actively show up for them and create the conditions for healing. By being there for them, we not only rely on hidden miracles, but help to make them happen.

## Parshat Va-Yera: The Akeidah

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

### I: WHAT MAKES LOT TICK?

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

Our questions this week:

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

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### I: WHAT MAKES LOT TICK?

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

### LOT'S VOLUNTARY AKEIDA:

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

## **MEASURE FOR MEASURE:**

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

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

Although very enthusiastic about copying behavior he has seen modeled by a good person, Lot is deaf to the values spoken by his actions. Either he has never understood the values which motivate Avraham's virtuous actions, and so he never arrives at a proper balance of those values, or his living in Sodom has corrupted his values, leaving him with only the memory of Avraham's virtuous behavior but without the proper hierarchy of values to guide that behavior. Action not motivated by sensitivity to the values underlying it can easily pervert those underlying values and accomplish great evil in trying to ape good behavior. Lot, for example, can offer his daughters for rape in place of his guests. Lot's acts of hesed express his values to the same degree that a parrot's jabberings express its thoughts: neither a parrot's gracious "Hello" nor the ensuing stream of verbal filth express its thoughts, since all the parrot can do is imitate. In the same way, we are impressed by Lot's kindness in welcoming the guests, but when we stay to hear the end, it's clear that he has no real understanding of hesed. He can only imitate the behavior of a good person. But doing good is not just a particular behavior or pleasant habit, it is the expression of internalized and well-balanced values.

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

## **II: THE CHALLENGE OF THE AKEIDA:**

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

### **A SON IS PROMISED:**

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

### **BERESHIT 17:15-21 --**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **MORE LAUGHS:**

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

#### **BERESHIT 18:10-14 --**

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

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

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

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

This conversation with Avraham accomplishes two things: one, it communicates to Sara and to Avraham that Hashem will no longer be as patient as before with their doubts of His promises, and two, it reinforces in Avraham the promise that he will have a son with Sara. The fact that Hashem specifically sends messengers to repeat this promise, which He had already made before, and the fact that a date is set for this event, communicate to Avraham that the birth of this child is an

event of paramount significance. Hashem takes great pains to clear up any doubts that might remain about Yitzhak's birth. The result is a tremendous buildup of expectation as the time approaches.

### **AND YET MORE LAUGHS:**

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

#### **BERESHIT 21:1-12 --**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Imagine Sara's frustration and fury with this mother-son pair, Hagar and Yishmael. Long ago, when Sara realized she could not have children and gave Hagar to Avraham as a wife, Hagar became pregnant and began to lord it over Sara. The same group of people who laughed at Sara before because she *\*\*couldn't\*\** have children, are still laughing at her even now that she *\*\*has\*\** had children. No matter what she does, she can't escape their laughter. She demands that

Avraham get rid of them.

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

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

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

### **THE BINDING OF YITZHAK:**

We now move to the Akeida itself:

#### **BERESHIT 22:1-18 --**

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

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

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

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

The Akeida presents several challenges at once:

1) It is immoral to kill. This test is therefore particularly painful for Avraham, so merciful and just a person that he pleaded

with Hashem to save the people of Sodom for the sake of the few possible righteous among them, even though most of them *\*did\** deserve death.

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

3) How can a man kill his own son?

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

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

What do we learn from the fact that Avraham was prepared to sacrifice Yitzhak without questioning what had happened to all of the promises he had received? Last week, we saw that Avraham *\*does\** question Hashem's promises of land and children; in response, Hashem reassures him. Why doesn't Avraham question Hashem this time?

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the same way, later on in the Torah, we find that Moshe often challenges Hashem: Hashem, infuriated by some Israelite act of disobedience or outright rebellion, turns to Moshe on several occasions and says, "Stand aside and let Me blast them to smithereens!" This is Moshe's cue to stand directly in the way at all costs and prevent Hashem from destroying the people. Moshe asks himself the same question Avraham asks himself: "Why does He need to tell *\*me\**

this?" He concludes that Hashem does not really need him to stand aside in order to pulverize the people; he understands that what Hashem is hinting is that He wants him to intercede, to beg for mercy, to resist the decree.

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

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

Shabbat shalom

## **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.

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## PART TWO - YIRAT ELOKIM & 'NATURAL MORALITY'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Please review these before continuing.]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## PART THREE - THE OATH

At the conclusion of the Akeyda, God affirms His promise to Avraham Avinu one more time concerning the future of his offspring (see 22:15-19). Note however, that when God first explains why He is making this oath in 22:16, He explains specifically because "lo chasachta et bincha" - that Avraham did not hold back his son - and NOT because he was a "yarey Elokim". This provides additional support to our discussion in Part Two (above).

In this oath (see 22:16-19), we find the repetition of themes from Brit Bein ha'bta'rim such as "kochvei ha'shayamim" and "yerusha", as well as a repetition of God's original blessing to Avraham from the beginning of Lech L'cha.

It is interesting to note that this blessing relates (as does "brit bein ha'bta'rim") to our relationship with God as a Nation, and our future conquest of the land of Israel ("v'yirash zaracha et shaar oyav" - your offspring will conquer the gates of its enemies/ see 22:17). It is specifically in this context that Bnei Yisrael will later face this moral conflict as discussed in Part I.

However, the most special aspect of this blessing is the "shvuah" - the oath that God makes that He will indeed fulfill this promise. See Ramban & Radak on 22:16, noting their explanation how this oath takes God's commitment to His covenant one step higher. Now, no matter how unfaithful Bnei Yisrael may be in the future, even though God will have the right to punish them, He will

never break His covenant with them and they will always remain His special nation.

With this in mind, it is interesting to note that the story in Chumash that precedes the Akeyda also relates to a covenant and an oath (see 21:22-34). Recall how Avimelech approaches Avraham to enter into a covenant, while Avraham insists that Avimelech must remain honest in relation to the wells that his servants had stolen.

At the conclusion of that agreement, as Avraham now gains the respect of the local sovereign power, we find once again how Avraham 'call out in God's Name'. Foreshadowing the time period of David and Shlomo, Avraham is now in a position where he can successfully represent God before the other nations of the world.

That setting provides a significant backdrop for Avraham Avinu's ultimate test at the Akeyda.

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#### MISC TOPICS -

##### [Relating once again to Sdom vs. Avraham Avinu]

#### PART FOUR - YEDA & YI'UD

In the shiur we sent out yesterday, we discussed the importance of 18:18-19, showing how God's goal for the nation of Avraham would come true through the establishment of a society characterized by "tzedaka u'mishpat".

Recall how that pasuk began with "ki y'DAATIV", which implies to KNOW, but the key word carried a deeper meaning throughout the entire narrative of Lot being saved from Sdom. [Note also the use of the word "rah" (and "tov") as well as "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!

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#### PART FIVE - TOLDOT TERACH

Parshat Va'yera informs us not only of the birth of Yitzchak, but also of several other grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Terach, such as the twelve children of Nachor, and the two children/grandchildren of Lot. [See 19:30-38, 22:20-24.]

These stories form an integral part of Sefer Breishit for technically speaking, Parshat Va'yera is still under the title of TOLDOT TERACH (see 11:27 with TOLDOT SHEM (see 11:10 and our shiur on Parshat Noach).

[It is interesting to note when considering 11:26-32 that we find a 'header' - "ayleh toldot Terach," but we never find the expression: "ayleh toldot Avraham" throughout Sefer Breishit, even though we do find "ayleh toldot Yitzchak (25:19), and "ayleh toldot Yaakov" (37:2). This may relate to Avram's name change, so there can't be TOLDOT AVRAM when he is

first introduced, since AVRAM as AVRAM never has children from Sarah! This may also explain the need for the additional phrase "Avraham holid et Yizchak" in 25:19!]

Furthermore, many (female) descendants of Terach later 'weave' their way back into the family of Avraham Avinu, such as Rivka, Nachor's granddaughter, and her brother Lavan's daughters Rachel & Leah. [See also part five below in regard to Ruth from Moab.]

[Recall that Terach was the first 'zionist', i.e. it was his idea to attempt aliyah to eretz Canaan (even though he never made it). It may have been in that zchut!]

[Note also the number (and type) of wives and children born to Nachor (in 22:20-24)! Which of the Avot does this bring to mind? [8 + 4 !]

Who else in Sefer Breishit has twelve children [8 + 4] ?

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#### PART SIX / 'MITZAR' - A sad but fitting ending

As Lot escapes from Sdom, a somewhat peculiar conversation ensues between him and the angel concerning the city of TZOAR. What is it all about?

For those of you who don't remember, here's a quick recap:

After taking Lot out of Sdom, the "malachim" instruct Lot to run away 'up to the mountain' ["he'hara hi'malet" /see 19:17]. Lot defers, claiming that 'up in the mountain' poses potential danger. He requests that instead the angels spare one city, which will serve as a "MITZAR," a small place of refuge. The Torah then informs us that this is why the city is named TZOAR (see 19:17-22).

Why do we need to hear about all this?

To appreciate this story, we must return to the first reference to Sodom in Chumash. When Avraham and Lot decide that the time had come to part ways, Lot decides to move to the KIKAR HA'YARDEN (the region of Sdom), rather than the mountain range of Canaan, where Avraham resided.

Recall from our shiur on Parshat Lech L'cha that Lot's choice reflected his preference of the 'good-life' in KIKAR HA'YARDEN (where the abundant water supply alleviated the need to rely upon God's provision of water) over Avraham's lifestyle in the MOUNTAINS (where one depends upon rainfall for his water supply).

Let's take a closer look at the key pasuk of that narrative. [I recommend you read this pasuk in the original Hebrew to note its key phrases. Pay particular attention to the word "kol":]

"And Lot lifted his eyes, and he saw KOL KIKAR

HA'YARDEN - the ENTIRE Jordan River Valley - that it was FULL of water... like God's Garden, like the land of Egypt, UP UNTIL TZOAR." (13:10)

The final phrase of this pasuk - BO'ACHA TZOAR - appears superfluous. Why must we know the exact spot where the KIKAR ends?

When we consider the origin of the city's name - TZOAR - from the story of Lot's flight from Sdom, this short phrase takes on a whole new meaning. The Torah appears to be taking a cynical 'jibe' at Lot. He wanted EVERYTHING - "et KOL Kikar Ha'Yarden" [see also 13:11: "And Lot chose for himself KOL KIKAR HA'YARDEN..."], and thus chose to settle in Sdom. But when it's all over, Lot finds himself begging the "malachim" for a small hideaway - a MITZAR (the city to be named TZOAR). Lot wants EVERYTHING - KOL Kikar ha'Yarden - and ends up with 'next to nothing' - BO'ACHA TZOAR! [Thanks to Danny Berlin - ish Karmei Tzur - for this insight.]

With this background we can better understand Lot's conversation with the "malachim" when he flees from Sdom. Note their original instruction to Lot:

"And it came to pass when they had brought them out [of Sdom], they told him: Escape for your life, do not look behind you, do not stay behind B'KOL HA'KIKAR. Rather, run away to the MOUNTAIN, lest you be consumed." (19:17)

Once again, the Torah establishes a direct CONTRAST

between KIKAR HA'YARDEN and the MOUNTAIN. Lot is commanded to return to the MOUNTAIN - to the area of Avraham, from where he never have left in the first place. Lot, however, refuses to return. He knows that if he returns to the mountain, he will not be able to 'survive' living in the shadow of Avraham Avinu. He will no longer be the righteous among the wicked, but rather the wicked among the righteous. He therefore begs them for a refuge:

"And Lot begged them - please no. Behold if I have found favor in your eyes...I cannot run away to the MOUNTAIN, lest some evil will take me and I die. [Rather,] there is a city nearby [at the edge of Kikar ha'Yarden] and it is MITZAR - a little one. Let me escape there and my SOUL will live...[They concede to Lot's request,] and that city was therefore named TZOAR. Then the sun rose over the land and Lot arrived in TZOAR..." (see 19:18-24)

Finally, after Sdom and the other cities of the KIKAR are destroyed, Lot changes his mind. He decides to leave TZOAR and settle with his daughters in the MOUNTAINS (see 19:25-30). However, instead of reuniting with Avraham, they HIDE AWAY in a CAVE. The rest is history - i.e. the history of AMON & MOAV, whose descendants have not even the common decency to offer bread & water to Am Yisrael (their kinsman) as they pass Moav on their way from Egypt to Eretz Canaan (see Devarim 23:4-5). It's no coincidence that they never learn the lesson of "hachnasat orchim" - welcoming guests. Sdom was destroyed, but unfortunately, its 'legacy' continued.

One spark of good does, however, come forth from Moav. Ruth the Moabite joins the tribe of Judah - through an act of "chessed" (see Megillat Rut) - and she becomes the great-grandmother of David ben Yishai, the king of Israel. Predictably, Sefer Shmuel summarizes his reign as follows:

"And David reigned over all of Israel, and David performed MISHPAT and TZEDAFAKA for his entire nation."

(see Shmuel 8:15)

[Recall that David had earlier hidden out in a CAVE in the area of the Dead Sea (Ein Gedi), where he performed an act of "chessed" by not injuring Shaul - see I Shmuel 24:1-15; note especially 24:12-15! See also Yirmiyahu 22:1-5!]

Malchut David constitutes the "tikun" for the descendants of Lot: his kingdom was characterized by the performance of TZEDAFAKA & MISHPAT - the antithesis of Sdom.

shabbat shalom  
menachem

## Parshas Vayera: Avraham's Negotiation

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

### I. WILL NOT THE JUDGE OF THE EARTH ACT JUSTLY?

Our Parashah includes one of the most famous negotiations in history. In Chapter 18, beginning with verse 23, we find Avraham pleading before - and demanding of - God, who is the judge of all the earth, to act justly. What is this just action? Not to destroy the wicked with the righteous. Avraham then proposes that if there are fifty righteous people in the wicked cities of S'dom, God should spare the entire area on their behalf. When God accedes to this demand, Avraham raises the stakes - if there are forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty - even ten righteous people to be found, God should not destroy the cities. Rather, He should bear the [sins of] the place on behalf of the righteous.

I would like to address two questions raised by Avraham's negotiating style:

Why is the only just action for God to take - from Avraham's perspective - to spare the cities? Why not send the righteous out - and then destroy? We find this Heavenly approach used in the case of Noach - why not ask for it here? On the other hand, if the presence of the righteous causes the injustice of destroying the city - sweeping away the good with the bad - then why did Avraham stop at ten? Isn't the presence of even one righteous person enough to justify staying the punishment? Wouldn't it be equally unjust to destroy a town of wicked people among whom one righteous man lived? Isn't the punishment of innocents, by virtue of their association and proximity to the guilty, unfit and unseemly for the Judge of all the earth?

In short - Avraham's tactic is difficult from both sides - if the presence of innocent, righteous people should render punishment unjust - why stop at ten? And if there is a way to save the righteous while meting out punishment to the wicked (e.g. by sending the righteous away in advance) - why not achieve justice in that manner?

### II. BIRKAT AVRAHAM - BY WHAT MERIT?

In order to address these questions, we need to explore a more fundamental question relating to Avraham and the great blessings bestowed upon him by the Almighty.

When we first meet Avraham, God commands him:

Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and I will curse the one who curses you and through you all families of the earth will be blessed (B'resheet 12:1-3).

Avraham is promised these great blessings - and we have absolutely no idea why! Granted, the Midrashim describe mighty battles, debates and challenges - along with philosophical greatness - by which Avraham distinguished himself in Ur of the Chaldeans before the "call"; but why is the text silent on this matter?

This is not the style of the Torah; Before God commanded him to build the ark, we are told that:

Noach found favor in God's eyes...Noach was a righteous, wholehearted man in his generations; Noach walked with God. (B'resheet 6:8-9).

Why, then, does Avraham's "call" come like a bolt from the blue, with neither rhyme nor reason to explain this great blessing?

### III. CHAPTERS 1-11: AVRAHAM'S BACKGROUND

Much has been written (including in this forum) as to the implications of the first chapters of B'resheet - and the purpose of the entire Sefer (see Rashi and Ramban in their opening comments on the Torah). There is, along with all of the other fine (and not-so-fine) answers, one that will help us answer our questions:

Given that the Patriarchal narratives are essential in order to understand our national history, claim on the Land etc., the first eleven chapters (including Creation, the Garden, the exile, the Flood and the Dispersion at the Tower) comprise a

necessary backdrop against which to view the behavior and activities of the Patriarchs. While this may sound like an attractive approach, some explanation is necessary.

## A BRIEF RECAP...

When God created mankind, He called him "Adam" - since he was from the Adamah (earth - note the last phrase in B'resheet 2:5). Indeed, man was so much "of the earth" that his failures caused the earth to be cursed (3:17). This tie was further severed when his son committed the first murder. Not only was he "cursed from the ground that opened its mouth to receive the blood of your brother", but he was uprooted and made to wander (4:11-12).

When humanity continued to descend into a storm of moral depravity and violence, God decided to wipe them out (6:7) - and to begin the process anew with Noach (note the similarities between the charge given to Noach upon his exit from the Ark in Chapter 9 and those given to Adam in Chapter 1).

Just as the name Adam connotes a symbiotic relationship with the earth, implying a static harmony with nature, similarly the name Noach implies a type of respite and calm amid the storm of corruption around him. The Torah provides this explanation for his name, crediting his father, Lemekh, with this prayer/prophecy (6:29). Noach was to be at rest (a close literal translation of his name) and, indeed, that is how he behaved. While the storm of corruption - and, later, the storm of Divine justice - swirled around him, he was calm and at rest. From the Divine perspective, there was every reason to utilize this method of "starting over"; since not only every corrupted being was wiped off the face of the earth, but even the memories of their sinful behavior were eradicated. There was every possibility for a "fresh start". The worldview behind this perspective is that if man is created with goodness, then, if he remains "at rest" (status quo), he will continue to be good and upright.

This approach, as we know, did not succeed. Almost immediately after coming out of the Ark, descended into becoming a man of the earth (9:20; the intent is clearly pejorative - see B'resheet Rabbah ad loc.) After his drunken interaction with Ham (or K'na'an) and the subsequent curse, his progeny continued to behave in an unworthy manner - culminating with the scene at the Tower of Shin'ar.

## IV. THE TOWER AT SHIN'AR: THE BACKDROP AGAINST WHICH TO VIEW AVRAHAM

At the beginning of Ch. 11, we meet the builders of the great tower at Shin'ar. We know that their behavior was considered sinful - for why else would God disrupt it?; but what was their terrible sin?

The P'shat (straightforward) reading of the text reveals only one crime:

Come, let us build a tower with its spire in the heavens and make a name for ourselves, lest we be spread throughout the land. (11:4)

God had commanded Noach and his children (in the same manner as He had commanded Adam) to: be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...spread throughout the earth and multiply in it (9:1,7).

The Divine purpose would be met by mankind's populating the earth, settling many lands and creating diverse civilizations. These sons of Noach chose to do the exact opposite - to build a tower that would support their ill-fated unity.

As is well known, however, the Rabbis read much worse intentions into their behavior - understanding that they desired to compete with God, to fight against Him etc. Where are these ideas in the text? (not that they need be; but it is always more impactful when we identify textual allusions which support Midrashic threads). Truth to tell, we can only identify these textual allusions after our introduction to Avraham, as we shall see.

It was onto this particular stage of humanity, a species which desired nothing but to avoid spreading out and preferred to "sit still", that this great hero, Avraham Avinu, made his powerful entrance. In a world where everyone was satisfied to stay put, Avraham unquestionably and immediately accepted God's call to: Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house. Not only did he leave - he continued his wanderings long after reaching the place that I will show you. Everywhere he went, he built an altar and called out in God's Name (whatever that may mean; prayer, education, declaration). He was clearly a mover and shaker in the most literal sense of the phrase:

He moved from place to place in order to shake the people from their spiritual and intellectual complacency. Note how S'forno (12:8-9) explains Avraham's route (north and south, between Beit-El and Ha'Ai) -

between these two large cities, in order that many people would come to hear him call out in God's Name... when he traveled from place to place as is the custom of the shepherds, he didn't go from east to west, in order not to abandon either one of these cities where some of the people were already drawn to him.

We now understand Avraham's greatness which earned him (and we, his progeny) the great blessings promised throughout his life: When God told him to wander, he took it upon himself to go against the lifestyle in which he grew up, to fight the complacency and "status quo" of the world around him - and to tirelessly bring the word of God to those around him.

## **V. BA L'LAMED V'NIM'TZA LAMED**

Sometimes a model is utilized to inform about a new situation - and our learning enhances our understanding of the model itself! This process, known in Midrashic terminology as Ba l'Lamed v'Nim'tza Lamed (it comes to teach and ends up "learning") can be applied to the relationship between Avraham and the Tower.

From the Noach orientation of the men of the tower, who wanted to avoid movement and dispersion, we learn of the greatness of Avraham, who was willing to continue moving so long as God's Name was not yet recognized and revered in the world. Conversely, from a refrain found several times in the Avrahamic narratives, we can understand the sin of the Tower on a deeper level.

Everywhere that Avraham built an altar, he called out in God's Name. This stands in direct apposition to the plan of the Tower-builders - Na'aseh Lanu Shem - let us make a name for ourselves! Against Avraham's desire to publicize the Almighty, the men of the Tower wanted to publicize their own power. From the Tower, we appreciate Avraham's wanderings; from Avraham, we understand the depth of the sin of the Tower, who wanted to rival God and substitute his Name with theirs. (This last point was suggested by R. Menachem Liebtag in several of his shiurim on Sefer B'resheet.)

This explains - and provides the textual allusion to - the Midrashim which focus on the "battle with God" implicit in the construction of the Tower.

## **SUMMARY**

We now understand the greatness of Avraham - and the worldview which he needed to challenge. Whereas the world around him was satisfied with the way things were, symbolized by the goal of remaining in one place, Avraham set out to move among princes, warriors and travelers and to shake them at their ideological roots.

## **VI. AVRAHAM AND NOACH**

The difference between these two righteous men lies not only in their actions - but also in the mission each had to fulfill. Whereas Noach was called to "start over" - and thus could afford to be "Noach" - at rest and in stasis, Avraham was called for a much more difficult mission.

After the Flood, God promised that he would never again destroy the world. How, then, would Divine Justice be meted out if the world was again deserving of the same fate? Instead of destruction, God would send His messengers to teach, instruct and correct the behavior of mankind. Avraham could not afford to "sit still" because the world he faced was not a fresh one, recently reborn, like the one faced by Noach. Avraham's world was already old, corrupt and confused. This reality does not allow for complacency if the Divine plan is to be implemented; it takes change - radical change - and a charismatic, powerful, saintly person to effect that change.

We now understand Avraham's mission: To bring awareness of the One God - the God whose "traits" are justice and compassion - into the world by teaching others and effecting their Teshuvah. Destruction of the wicked is not the Avrahamic model - it belongs to the "Noach" orientation.

## **VII. AVRAHAM AND S'DOM**

We can now return to our original questions: Why did Avraham ask God to spare the cities - and not just allow the righteous to leave? And why did he stop his negotiations at ten?

Keep in mind that the destruction of S'dom is presented in the Torah with deliberate parallels to the Flood story. Note that a questionably righteous person (Noach, Lot) is saved from the utter destruction of the area - after which he becomes drunk and is involved in sexually disgraceful behavior with his children. I believe that the Torah is suggesting a parallel so that we can better appreciate the Hiddush (innovation) of Avraham's approach, over that of Noach.

Based on everything that we saw, it is clear that Avraham was not praying for the salvation of the righteous - it was the wicked people of S'dom who were the focus of his plea. If there are fifty righteous people there - there is good reason to hope that they will be able to instruct, persuade and enlighten the wicked populace regarding their evil ways. "Is it your way, God, to destroy them together - before the one group has been given every chance to correct and educate the other group?" God's response confirms Avraham's approach - "If I find fifty righteous people, I will bear the entire place for them." In other words, I will tolerate the evil - not on account of the merit of the righteous, but because of the potential for change which their presence suggests.

As the negotiations tighten, Avraham is asking for much more - he is asking that God accept a far-fetched possibility, that ten righteous people might be able to save the city and to educate the populace. Why did Avraham stop here? Why not eight, six, four, two - why not one righteous person?

From personal experience, Avraham recognized the importance of community. He had needed to leave his own community in order to commune with God - and he understood the depths of courage required to do that. He well understood that one - or even a handful - of righteous people could never turn things around. As idealistic as we may be about our ability to educate, to "spread the word" and to draw people close to the word of God - the hard reality is that a holy environment, a sanctified setting and the safety of numbers is essential towards promoting spiritual growth. Avraham could not ask for less than ten, because less than ten is not a community (witness the minimum number for a minyan) - it is a handful of individuals. (S'forno and R. Hirsh, in different styles, suggest a similar approach to understanding Avraham's negotiations).

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

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

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# AVRAHAM: THE EARLY YEARS

by Yitzchak Etshalom

## I INTRODUCTION

As we mentioned in the preface to last week's essay, the series of analyses on Sefer B'resheet will focus on fundamental issues of our relationship with the text of T'nakh. In future issues we will explore the relationship of traditional biblical scholarship with archeology, geography and other disciplines. In this issue, we will visit an older problem, one which addresses the entire enterprise of tradition and its reliability.

That genre of Rabbinic literature commonly known as "Midrash" has been widely misunderstood - and has taken a proverbial "beating" in more than one circle of late. In order to properly assay the issue and begin our inquiry, we must first clarify and distinguish between two terms which are often confused in discussions of Rabbinic homiletics.

The term "Midrash", which means exegesis, a particular type of textual expansion and application, is properly used to describe any of a number of exegetical methods. Generally speaking, there are two types of Midrash - Midrash Halakhah and Midrash Aggadah.

Midrash Halakhah is an exegetical analysis of a Halakhic text with a normative result.. For instance, when the Midrash Halakhah infers from the word *בָּהָמָה* (of the animals) at the opening of the laws of offerings (Vayyikra 1:2) that not all animals are fit to be brought to the altar (and then goes on to list which are excluded), that is Midrash Halakhah. Since the results of a Halakhic discussion are practical, the exegetical method is (relatively) tightly defined and is subject to challenge and dispute.

Midrash Aggadah can be loosely defined as any other sort of exegesis on T'nakh text. This includes exhortative, poetic, prophetic, narrative, epic and any other non-normative text in T'nakh. As expected, the range of texts available for Midrash Aggadah is much broader and the methodology is less strictly defined than Midrash Halakhah. In addition, multiple approaches can be tolerated and even welcomed since there is generally no Halakhic implication to the inference. Even in those cases where such an inference may be claimed, the general methodology of the study of Midrash Aggadah allows (indeed, encourages) a wider range of approaches and perspectives. As such, we may find a series of alternate Midr'shei Aggadah on a given passage (e.g. the "test" of Avraham in B'resheet 22:1) which, although representing different perspectives, do not necessarily preclude one another.

Hence, the term "Halakhah" when standing alone (and describing a type of Rabbinic statement) would most properly be associated with a normative statement independent of the text. The word "Aggadah" refers to a statement which is non-normative and, again, is not derived from or associated with a given text.

The study of Midrash Aggadah has always been challenging - to identify which interpretations are interpretive and an attempt to discern the straightforward meaning of the text, which are polemic (typically against the early Christians), which are veiled attacks (e.g. on the Roman Empire), which are traditional lore that the homileticist is "hanging" on a particular text etc. Much of the derision shown by many towards statements in the Midrash Aggadah (indicated by phrases such as "it's **only** a Midrash") is rooted in an inability (or unwillingness) to rigorously address the text and analyze its various components; understanding that some are intended as literal interpretations and an actual retelling of history while others are poetic and artistic devices intended to drive home a critical point. R. Avraham ben haRambam neatly divided the students of Aggadah into three groups - those who take everything literally, who are fools, those who take nothing literally, who are heretics - and those who wisely analyze each passage and discern how each passage ought to be studied. A proper and incisive approach to the study of Midrash Aggadah - knowing which passage to approach with which perspective - consistently rewards the student with a discovery of depths of wisdom and profound sensitivity.

A proper presentation of the various facets of Midrash Aggadah is well beyond the scope of this forum; however, that does not exempt us from, at the very least, reexamining our attitude towards this central branch of Rabbinic literature and strengthening our awareness of the sagacity and trust of Haza"l which is, after all, one of the forty-eight methods through which Torah is acquired.

To that end, we will assay a famous Midrash Aggadah (which is, *prima facie*, nearly bereft of Midrashic method) whose point of origin is an oblique reference at the end of our Parashah. The central thesis here is that there is, of course, much more to the Midrash Aggadah than meets the eye - the fuller thesis will be presented after the text, below.

## II THE MIDRASH

### **A: PREFACE**

One of the central figures - if not the pivotal one - in Sefer B'resheet is Avram/Avraham. We are given rich descriptions of his interactions with kings, family members, angels and G-d Himself - but all of that begins with his selection at age 75. We are told nothing, in the text, about his early life. The few sketchy verses at the end of our Parashah help little (if at all) in explaining why this son of Terach, scion of Shem, was selected as the progenitor of G-d's people.

There are several well-known Aggadot which partially fill in the "missing years" of Avraham's youth. Perhaps the most well-known Aggadah appears in several versions and has, as its point of departure, a minor difficulty in the Torah's retelling of Avraham's family life:

*And Terach lived seventy years, and fathered Avram, Nachor, and Haran. Now these are the generations of Terach; Terach fathered Avram, Nachor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. And Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Avram and Nachor took wives; the name of Avram's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nachor's wife, Milkah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milkah, and the father of Yiskah. But Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terach took Avram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Avram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the land of K'na'an; and they came to Charan, and lived there. And the days of Terach were two hundred and five years; and Terach died in Charan.* (11:26-32)

The death of Haran (not to be confused with the place Charan, located in northern Syria or southern Turkey) during the life (literally "in the face of") his father was a first. Although Hevel died before Adam, we're not given any information about the relationship between the bereaved father and his murdered child. Here, the text clearly marks the death of Haran as happening before the death of Terach - the first recorded case of a child predeceasing his father where we can actually place the two of them in any sort of relationship.

The question raised by anyone sensitive enough to note the irregularity here is why, of all people, the future father of our people would claim as father and brother the first instance of such tragedy. The Midrash addresses this problem - the premature death of Haran - and, along the way, does much to inform us of Avraham's life before the command of "Lekh Lkha" (12:1).

### **B: THE TEXT OF THE MIDRASH** (B'resheet Rabbah 38:16)

*And Haran died in front of Terach his father.*

R. Hiyya the grandson of R. Ada of Yafo [said]:

Terach was an idolater.

One day he went out somewhere,

and put Avraham in charge of selling [the idols].

When a man would come who wanted to purchase, he would say to him:

"How old are you?"

[The customer] would answer: "Fifty or sixty years old".

[Avraham] would say: "Woe to the man who is sixty years old

And desires to worship something one day old."

[The customer] would be ashamed and leave.

One day a woman came, carrying in her hand a basket of fine flour.

She said: "Here, offer it before them."

Abraham siezed a stick,

And smashed all the idols,

And placed the stick in the hand of the biggest of them.

When his father came, he said to him:

"Who did this to them?"

[Avraham] said: "Would I hide anything from my father? a woman came, carrying in her hand a basket of fine flour.

She said: "Here, offer it before them."

When I offered it, one god said: "I will eat first,"

And another said, "No, I will eat first."

Then the biggest of them rose up and smashed all the others.

[His father] said: "Are you making fun of me? Do they know anything?"

[Avraham] answered: Shall your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?

He took [Avraham] and handed him over to Nimrod.

[Nimrod] said to him: "Let us worship the fire".

[Avraham] said to him: "If so, let us worship the water which extinguishes the fire."

[Nimrod] said to him: "Let us worship the water".

[Avraham] said to him: "If so, let us worship the clouds which bear the water."

[Nimrod] said to him: "Let us worship the clouds".

[Avraham] said to him: "If so, let us worship the wind which scatters the clouds."

[Nimrod] said to him: "Let us worship the wind".

[Avraham] said to him: "If so, let us worship man who withstands the wind."

[Nimrod] said to him: "You are speaking nonsense; I only bow to the fire.

"I will throw you into it.

"Let the G-d to Whom you bow come and save you from it."

Haran was there.

He said [to himself] Either way;

If Avraham is successful, I will say that I am with Avraham;

If Nimrod is successful, I will say that I am with Nimrod.

Once Avraham went into the furnace and was saved,

They asked [Haran]: "With which one are you [allied]?"

He said to them: "I am with Avraham."

They took him and threw him into the fire and his bowels were burned out.

He came out and died in front of Terach his father.

This is the meaning of the verse: And Haran died in front of Terach.

### C: THE OVERALL QUESTION

Reading this Aggadah, one is immediately struck by the non-Midrashic style. There is absolutely no association with text here. Instead, there is a detailed story, down to the specifics of the debate between Avraham and Nimrod, the manner in which Avraham would shame his customers and the story he concocted to explain the decimation of the "inventory" to his father. The question one must pose here is one of source - from where did the rabbis derive this information? How do they know that Terach was an idol-salesman; that Avraham spoke this way to his customers, the other way to his father, in such a manner to Nimrod - and why would we even think that Avraham and Nimrod ever met?

The one answer which is always available and seems an "easy way out" is "Mesorah". To with, the rabbis had a reliable tradition going back to Avraham himself that this is how this particular series of events played out. That is appealing - although anyone embracing this approach would have to contend with variations in alternate versions - yet there are two serious problems with this response. First of all, if this was a reliable tradition dating back to Avraham, why isn't that mentioned in the text of the Aggadah? After all,

when the Rabbis have reliable traditions dating back to a much more recent time, they indicate this (see, *inter alia*, M. *Peah* 2:6) or, at the very least, refer to the statement as “Gemara” or *הלכה למשה לסיini* or, in Aggadic contexts - *דבר זה מסורת בידינו* - (BT *Yoma* 21a). Second of all, why is the entire Aggadah credited to one authority (R. Hiyya the grandson of R. Ada of Yafo)? Shouldn’t it be presented as an anonymous text?

There is another direction - perhaps as much to the “skeptical” side as the first answer was to the “believer” side - that has its roots in some rabbinic scholarship, although certainly not the mainstream. Some will suggest that this Aggadah reflects a polemic against idolatry, is a product of its time in the sense that it stakes no claim to knowing anything about Avraham’s actual activities, but uses Avraham as a convenient foil for “making a point” about principles, idols, loyalty etc. As stated, this is not as foreign an idea as one might think and is sometimes the most appropriate way to view an Aggadah - but is often another “easy way out” of contending with the difficult question of “how did they know this”?

I would like to suggest an alternative approach to understanding this Midrash, one which maintains the integrity of the report and its association to the historic character of Avraham, while defending against the two challenges raised above to the “Mesorah” argument noted above.

#### **D: THE THESIS**

Although direct derivations are not found in this Aggadah (albeit the opening and closing lines anchor the Aggadah in a Midrashic attempt to identify the reason for Haran’s early demise), I’d like to suggest that the entire reconstruction of Avraham’s life here is the result of Parshanut - textual interpretation. In other words, every one of the major components of this selection is the result of a reasonable read of *T’nahk*.

In order to accomplish this, each text in the Avraham narrative (and other selections which shed light on this period) must be read carefully, keeping an eye out for parallel texts and allusions to related passages.

### **III RECONSTRUCTING THE MIDRASH**

There are six principle components to the Aggadah; we will demonstrate that each of them can be supported by a sensitive and careful read of the Avrahamic narrative and related texts:

- A: *Terach the idolater*
- B: *Terach the salesman*
- C: *Avraham’s style of argumentation*
- D: *Avraham’s meeting with Nimrod*
- E: *Avraham in the fire*
- F: *Haran and “Pascal’s Wager”*

#### **A: Terach the Idolater**

The source for this one is an explicit text (Yehoshua 24:2). At the end of his life, Yehoshua related a historiosophy to the people, which began with a line familiar to us from the Haggadah:

*And Yehoshua said to all the people, Thus said Hashem, G-d of Yisra’el, Your fathers lived on the other side of the river in old time, Terach, the father of Avraham, and the father of Nachor; and they served other gods.*

Even though this translation renders the last pronoun unclear, such that we do not know who worshipped foreign gods (it may have been Nachor and Avraham, which would give us a whole different history...), the Ta’amei haMikra (trope marks) make it clear that those who worshipped foreign gods are “your fathers”; Terach is the representative of that group mentioned by name.

When the Aggadah begins by stating “Terach was an idolater”, it isn’t innovating a new idea or revising history - this is the infor-

mation found in Yehoshua's farewell address.

### **B: Terach the Salesman**

This one is not as straightforward and accessible as Terach's idolatrous affiliation. A few pieces of information about the ancient world which can be inferred from the text will help us.

First of all, society in the ancient world was not transient. People stayed in one area for generations except for cases of war or famine (which is why the call to Avraham of "Lekh L'kha" is so extravagant and reckoned as the first of his tests.) Only people whose livelihood allowed them to move easily did so - and, as the text tells us, Terach took his family from Ur towards K'na'an, getting only as far as Charan. Terach was the first person to uproot from one location to another without direct Divine intervention (such as Adam, Kayyin and the people in Shin'ar who were exiled). Hence, he must have had a profession which allowed him to easily move - which leaves him either as a shepherd, an artisan or a salesman. As we demonstrated in an earlier shiur (V'shinantam 3/6), Avraham and Ya'akov were traders whose chief livelihood and fortune were made in that fashion.

In addition, we have other records of idolaters who were, in addition to devotees of the pagan religion, men who engaged in the sale of ritual objects. In Shoftim 17-18, we are told the story of Mikhah who lived on Har Ephraim. He took money given to him by his mother and had an idol fashioned which he then set up in a temple. When his idol, its appurtenances and his priest were seized (by members of Dan - a story we will revisit next week), the townspeople chased after the thieves to try to restore their goods. Although not stated explicitly, it seems that the reason for their distress at the loss of the idol and its "support system" was an issue of livelihood. Evidently, the temple was a source of revenue for the town; whether as a result of travelers staying there or because they sold Traphim (household gods); in any case, the association between idolatry and trade seems clear.

### *C: Avraham's style of argumentation*

At three points in the Aggadah, Avraham engages in some form of theological debate (or rebuke) - with the usual customer, with his father and with Nimrod. His style of arguing is consistent - at no point does he come out and state his beliefs, strong though they may be. Instead, he elicits information from his disputant, and then, in classical Socratic fashion, turns his own words against him, using his disputant's premise to bolster his own argument.

For instance, he doesn't ridicule or rebuke the customer for purchasing a "god fresh from the kiln"; rather he asks him (seemingly off-handedly) as to his age. One almost gets the sense that Avraham's response is muttered under his breath - "how ridiculous, a man of fifty worshipping a day-old idol" - and then, in shame, the customer slinks out of the shop.

That we have every reason to believe that Avraham would have worked to promote the belief in one G-d is evident from the verses which highlight his selection (12:1-3) and his activities in K'na'an (calling out in the name of G-d). We don't need to look far to find sources that support the content of his interactions - but how do the authors of this Midrash Aggadah know his somewhat unconventional form of argumentation?

The answer can be found, I believe, in the interaction between Avraham and Avimelekh (Chapter 20). Unlike the first "wife-sister" episode (in Egypt), which was necessitated by the famine, there is no reason given for Avraham's descent to G'rар (20:1). Avraham knew, in advance, that he would have to utilize the "wife/sister" ruse in order to spare his life (v. 11) - but why go there at all?

Note that in that interaction, Avraham does not rebuke the king (and, indirectly, his constituents) for their moral turpitude until they come to him, ready to hear an explanation for his curious behavior. If he went to G'rар in order to spread the word and attract more adherents (see Rashi at 12:5 and S'foro at 12:9), why didn't he immediately come in and decry their low standards? Alternatively, if he knew that Sarah would be endangered as a result, why go there at all?

It seems that Avraham went there in order to engage in debate, a debate which could only begin once the people challenged him

and were receptive (as a result of their great fear) to what he had to say. It seems to have succeeded, at least partially, because Avimelekh (or his son) recognized G-d's support for Yitzchak (26:28), implying that they had some understanding of - and respect for - the G-d of Avraham.

Utilizing the one instance we have of argumentation and chastisement in which Avraham participated which is explicit in the text, the Ba'alei haMidrash are able to apply that style to earlier interactions in Avraham's life.

(The claim here is not that each of the specific events - or the details, such as the age of the customers - can be inferred from the text, nor that we need accept each of them as an exact historic record; the thesis is merely that the general information and messages of the Aggadah are the result of a careful reading of text).

#### **D: Avraham's meeting with Nimrod**

The Torah is not only silent about any meeting between these two, the entire Nimrod biography (10:8-12) is completed well before Avraham is even introduced in the text. From where did the Ba'alei haMidrash get the notion that Nimrod and Avraham had any direct interaction?

One feature shared by these two men is power - both were recognized as kings. Indeed, Nimrod was the first person to be considered a king:

*And Kush fathered Nimrod; he was the first on earth to be a mighty one. He was a mighty hunter before Hashem; therefore it is said, As Nimrod the mighty hunter before Hashem. And the beginning of his kingdom was Bavel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar.*

Avraham is also considered royalty:

*And the Hittites answered Avraham, saying to him, Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince among us... (23:5-6)*

There is one more component to the Nimrod story which is vital for understanding the Aggadah. The attitude of the T'nakh is generally negative towards human rulers - note Gid'on's response to the people of Menasheh in Shoftim 8, and Sh'mu'el's diatribe against the people's demand for a king in I Sh'mu'el 8. Nimrod being the first self-declared king, he was also the first to form a direct challenge to the Rule of the one true King, haKadosh Barukh Hu. Avraham's entire life was dedicated to teaching the world about the one true G-d and to encouraging everyone to accept His rule. As such, Avraham and Nimrod are natural combatants and antagonists. Since Nimrod's life overlapped that of Avraham, and he ruled in the district where Avraham operated (at least during part of his younger years), the land of the Chaldeans, it is most reasonable that the two of them would have interacted. Once we add in the salvation from fire (see next section), following the model of the latter-day king of the same area (Nevukhadnezzar) throwing loyal monotheists into the fire, their meeting is almost a foregone conclusion.

#### **E: Avraham in the fire**

When G-d addresses Avraham in anticipation of the first covenant (chapter 15), He states:

*I am Hashem who took you out of Ur Kasdim (15:7).*

Before assessing the allusion to a later verse, we need to clarify the meaning of "Ur Kasdim". The word "Ur" may be a place-name (hence "Ur of the Chaldeans" in most translations); alternatively, it may mean "the UR which is in Kasdim" - the word UR meaning furnace (cf. Yeshaya 31:9, 50:11). Even if it is a place name, it may have been named after a great furnace found there.

In any case, G-d took Avraham out of this place - how do we understand the verb *הצאתיך*? (*I took you out*)? Does it refer to the command to *Get thee from thy land...*? Does it allude, perhaps, to a more direct and interventionist evacuation?

The only other place in the Torah where the phrase *הצאתיך* appears is in the first statement of the Decalogue:

*I am Hashem your G-d who took you out of the Land of Egypt... (Sh'mot 20:2, D'varim 5:6)*

In that case, the “taking out” was accomplished through miraculous, interventionist means.

If we accept the theory (which we have explained and used countless times in this forum) that unspecified terms in T’nakh are best clarified through parallel passages in T’nakh where those same terms are used, then we have a clearer picture of the “exodus” of Avraham from Kasdim. G-d intervened, miraculously, to save him, in some manner which would later be approximated in Egypt.

While we have much information about the miracles leading up to the Exodus, there is little in T’nakh to describe the servitude from which we were redeemed. There is, however, one description of the Egyptian sojourn which appears in three places in T’nakh. In D’varim 4:20, I Melakhim 8:51 and Yirmiyah 11:4, the Egypt from which we were redeemed is called an iron furnace (כור ברזל). So...if G-d presents Himself, as it were, to Avraham, with the words “that took you out” and we have no information as to what it was from which Avraham was saved, we can look at the parallel passage and, using the description of Egypt found throughout T’nakh, conclude that Avraham was saved from - a furnace!

#### **F: Haran and “Pascal’s Wager”**

The final point in the Midrash which we will address is the role of Haran here. He engages in what is commonly referred to as Pascal’s Wager. Blaise Pascal (1623 - 1662), a French mathematician and logician, suggested that it is a good idea to believe in G-d, based on “the odds”. If one doesn’t believe in G-d and turns out to have erred, he will be eternally damned. If, on the other hand, he is right, he will achieve salvation. If, on the other hand, he believes in G-d and turns out to have erred, he will have lost nothing...

Haran’s faith, unlike that of Avraham, is depicted as opportunistic. The point of this segment of the Aggadah is quite clear - declarations of faith are not cut from one cloth and the faith which can withstand the furnace is one which has already been forged by the crucible - not one of momentary convenience.

How do the Ba’alei haMidrash know that this was Haran’s failing? Why couldn’t he have predeceased his father for some other sin?

Since we have no other information about Haran in the text, we have to go to the next best source - Lot, his son.

As we find out throughout the Avrahamic narratives, Lot is someone who always took the easy path and the most convenient road - even if it affected the society he would join and his family.

When Avraham and Lot needed to separate, Avraham offered Lot his choice: “If you go to the left, I will go to the right; if you go to the right, I will take the left” - meaning that they will divide up the mountain range between north (left) and south (right). Avraham abjured Lot to remain in the mountains, a place of greater faith and solitude (see, inter alia, D’varim 11:10-12). Instead, Lot chose the “easy life” of S’dom, which, at the time, appeared as “the garden of Hashem, the land of Egypt” - lush and fertile. We have discussed the attitudinal implications of his choice elsewhere.

When fleeing from that selfsame city, he begs the angels to allow him to stay nearby, as he cannot go further - and that leads to the shameful scene in which his daughters get him drunk and become pregnant.

We don’t know a lot about Haran, but his son bears the shameful badge of an opportunist - hence, the first child to predecease his father (aside from murder) dies as a result of that opportunistic attitude when applied to the great faith of Avraham.

**כִּי טוֹבִים דָּזִיד מֵין  
אָמְרָה כְּנַסְתִּין יִשְׂרָאֵל לְפָנֵי הַקָּבָ"ה:  
רַבְשׁׁ"ע עֲרִיכִים עַלִי דְּבָרֵי דָזִיד  
זֹהַר מִינָה שֶׁל חֻרָה.**

