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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.

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

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We mourn those of our people who have perished since attacks have resumed. May the IDF and the U.S. soon force Iran to seek peace, and may 5787 bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

Vayera opens as Avraham is recovering from his circumcision at age 99. God appears to Avraham, who then notices three men who also appear. Avraham excuses himself from Hashem so he can prepare a meal for his guests. God then tells Avraham that He is about to destroy Sodom and Amorah, two evil cities in the plain to the east. Avraham realizes that God only tells Avraham these plans so he will argue and try to save the cities. Avraham argues that God should not destroy a city if it has a minimum number of righteous people who might encourage wicked people to become righteous. Avraham starts with 50 and bargains down to 10. (Since Lot lives in Sodom, and he has 10 members of his family, Avraham is giving Lot and his family an opportunity to demonstrate that they are worth saving.)

Avraham, Lot, Sarah, and Hagar, the main characters in Avraham's environment at this point, experience several episodes that echo other incidents in Sefer Bereishit and reappear in other contexts throughout the Torah. Lot and Avraham separate in parshat Lech Lecha – because Lot's shepherds will not keep their flocks from grazing on property of other land owners. Rather than moving north or south (as Avraham offers), Lot decides to go to the east, to the Jordan valley, where the Jordan River provides a constant source of water to irrigate the fields but where the people in the area are evil. Lot tries to emulate Avraham's hospitality – but when the men (angels) visit Lot and the citizens of Sodom swarm in to protest, Lot's response is both comic and horrible. Lot infers that the men of Sodom want to "know" the visitors (sexually), so he offers to let the neighbors rape his two unmarried daughters if they will leave his visitors alone. When the visitors tell Lot to gather his entire family to leave before God destroys the city, neither of his two married daughters, their husbands, or his unmarried daughters' fiances will leave. Instead of finding ten righteous family members, the visitors are only able to gather Mr. and Mrs. Lot and their two unmarried daughters to leave.

What is the worst sin of the people of Sodom? Rabbi Haim Ovadia refers us to Ezekiel:

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

Micah clearly presents what Hashem wants from us:

> *. . .what Hashem seeks from you: only to perform justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.* (6:8)

The most lasting legacy of Avraham is probably *"chesed u'mishpat,"* kindness and justice. This theme reappears throughout the Torah and Navi (prophets).

Throughout the parsha, God continues to educate Avraham. In Lech Lecha, Avraham moves to Egypt temporarily because of a famine. Because of a fear that Paro would kill him and marry Sarah, he tells Sarah to pose as his sister. When Paro and his men take Sarah, God infects the Egyptian men so they cannot rape Sarah. Paro has Avraham pray to cure the men, and then he sends Avraham away with great wealth, but also with a daughter of his, Hagar. When Sarah hears that God has promised children to Avraham but she has not become pregnant, she encourages Avraham to go to Hagar to conceive a child that Sarah can raise as her own. Hagar belittles Sarah for not getting pregnant, and Sarah reacts by oppressing Hagar. God protects Hagar and the child (Ishmael) – but then warns Avraham that his descendants will be strangers in a foreign land for 400 years. The land ends up being Egypt. "Hagar" is Hebrew for "stranger" – and that is the status of the Jews in Egypt.

Rabbi David Fohrman raises another *deja vue* issue. The sin of the people of Shinar (the Tower of Babel) is that they focus on building a legacy for themselves rather than promoting Hashem. Avraham enters the Torah while marrying one niece and encouraging his brother to marry the other niece – to build a legacy for their deceased brother rather than for themselves. When Avraham tries to select Lot to carry on his legacy, and when Sarah tells Avraham to impregnate her servant to give her a child by proxy, they are trying to create a legacy rather than waiting and trusting Hashem. These efforts do not work.

Avraham's son through Hagar, Ishmael, has a dozen sons who become princes of various Arab tribes – and many of these tribes cause problems for Jews in later times.

Lot is not worthy of being part of Avraham's legacy – however, his two daughters who survive Sodom both seduce Lot and become pregnant. The daughters' children, Ammon and Moab, survive. Later, during the period of the judges, Elimelech and Naomi leave Beit Lechem (Bethleham) for Moab during a famine. Elimelech and his sons die in Moab. Naomi returns to Beit Lechem with her daughter-in-law Ruth, who meets and marries Boaz (a relative of Elimelech's). King David is a great grandson of Ruth.

Incidents in the Torah appear in new contexts – and this pattern continues, especially in the form of vicious attacks against our people. A thug attempted (fortunately unsuccessfully) to burn down the Young Israel of West Hempstead, New York last week. One of my closest friends, an active member of the shul, will be speaking at the shul's annual Kristallnacht commemoration about his work exploring the lives, deaths, and music of Jewish composers during the Nazi period. His nonprofit organization, Chamber Music Experience, is presenting a concert of music by Dick Kattenburg, an outstanding young composer from Amsterdam, who hid for much of the Nazi period (thanks to heroic Jewish and non-Jewish families). The Nazis eventually discovered Kattenburg and murdered him at Auschwitz when he was only 24 years old. The free concert, Sunday, November 15, at 2 p.m. at the Hewlett-Woodmere Public Library, will feature Juilliard faculty and other professional musicians. May we remember the horrors from Kristallnacht 88 years ago, honor those who lived and died during the Nazi horrors, and press on with our efforts to prevent similar horrors from returning.

We are the proud owners of a woven metal tallit representing the burning of the holy books, part of the Holocaust series by our dear friend and prominent Judaic artist, Renate Chernoff. Our friend who is speaking at the Holocaust program at Young Israel has a preview tallit from the series – a study that Renate did before making her final museum version. These cherished works, from an artist whose family were among the last able to leave Germany before the Nazis closed the gates, are special treasures for both of our families.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, grew up during the Nazi period. Rabbi Cahan spent much of his adult life as a Navy chaplain. He was very proud of our son Evan, who served in the Air Force for more than a decade. Evan studied for his fellowship in nephrology at Walter Reed during the period when Rabbi Cahan had weekly chemotherapy infusions. Rabbi Cahan inspired us and our sons when they were growing up, and he was thrilled to attend Evan's graduation ceremony for his fellowship.

May the horrors of vicious attacks against our people go down dramatically. When I was growing up fifty plus years ago, anti-semitism did not reach my life. Now it is dangerous to wear a kippah in many parts of the United States as well as in all other countries outside Israel. My our grandchildren grow up in a world where attacks against Jews and Israel are bad memories rather than daily events.

Shabbat Shalom,

Alan & Hannah

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. 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. 2026 has been an especially difficult year for AlephBeta.org, so please consider donating now.

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

Haftarat Parshat Vayera: Here I Am, My Son

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone 5787 (2026)

Parshat Vayera and its haftarah tell two stories of a child granted through a miracle, brought to the brink of death, and ultimately returned to his parents. In a year when so many Israeli parents have watched their children go out to the front lines, these stories become our own in a way that is both excruciating and uplifting.

On the plain reading of the Akeda, Yitzchak was not killed; it came terribly close, but the act did not take place. Yet other texts in our tradition suggest otherwise. The Gemara (Zevachim 62a) offers the visceral image of Yitzchak's ashes gathered on the altar, and in another tractate, it speaks of God remembering those ashes (Taanit 16a). The Shibbolei Haleket, a 13th century compendium of Jewish law, invokes the same image (Tefilla 18), as do the kinot of Tisha B'Av and the Ashkenazi Rosh HaShana piyyutim. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra rejects the idea outright (see commentary on Genesis 22:19), but other commentators including Rashi (Genesis 22:14), still hint that Yitzchak was in fact sacrificed and then revived.

One explanation for such a fantastic tradition may be historical. Many who concluded that Yitzchak was killed and then came back to life lived in the shadow of the First Crusade and in the face of its unimaginable violence, slaughtering of and attempts to forcibly convert Jews. They looked to the Torah for a hero who embodied that price. The same historical experience may also have shaped how later generations remembered Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom: some of the Talmud's most vivid descriptions of his death entered Talmudic manuscripts only after the Crusade.

But there may be a deeper meaning to interpreting the story as involving the death, then revival, of Yitzchak. Such a view reflects the struggle to live within two commitments at once – the willingness to sacrifice for God and the willingness to sacrifice for our children. When God calls Avraham, he answers, *"Here I am"* (Genesis 22:1). Hineni is vocalized here with a tzerei vowel under the first nun, and in that form it is addressed upward: **I am here for whatever You ask of me, God. What God asks is that Avraham offer up his only son. And so Avraham saddles his donkey** (v. 3) – a gesture that in Tanakh often foreshadows a journey whose original purpose will never be realized. [emphasis added]

Father and son walk on together, *yachdav,* of one mind. Then Yitzchak speaks, and Avraham answers, *"Here I am, my son"* (v. 7). It is almost the same word, but now the first nun carries a segol vowel – a vocalization found only twice in Tanakh (Genesis 27:18), both times in Bereshiet, both times when a father speaks to his son**. In this form, hinehni means: I am here for you, my son.** The central question of the Akeda is whether Avraham can hold both commitments at once – being wholly present for God, ready to pay any price, while remaining faithful to his child. [emphasis added]

The haftarah asks the same question through the eyes of a mother. The Shunamite woman, who asks nothing for herself, prepares a room for the man of God. The prophet Elisha promises her a son *"at this time next year"* (II Kings 4:16), echoing the angel's promise to Avraham in the parasha (Genesis 18:14). The child grows, but takes ill one day in the fields. He is carried home and dies on his mother's knees at noon.

One can only imagine the crisis of faith burning in his mother's heart as she lays her child on the bed of the man of God and closes the door. Is this God's will? Is this the sacrifice she is meant to make? Possessed by inspiration, she refuses to accept that this is how the story must end. Like Avraham, she saddles a donkey (v. 24) and rides out to Mount Carmel. To those who ask, she offers only a word – shalom, *"All is well"* (vv. 23, 26).

Only at the prophet's feet does her anguish break through: *"Did I ask my lord for a son?"* she said. *"Did I not say, 'Do not lead me on?'"* (v. 28). She will not accept the loss, and yet she will not let go of the prophet: *"As the LORD lives, and as you live, I will not leave you"* (v. 30). Her faithfulness to God and her faithfulness to her son are not two contradicting loyalties, but one unrelenting devotion. Perhaps it is this unimaginable strength of conviction that provides the spiritual power that allows Elisha to bring the boy back to life.

That, I believe, is the message of Yitzchak's ashes. The willingness to give everything for God has carried enormous power throughout our history. But recent generations have taught us that **commitment to God and commitment to our children need not stand in contradiction. One can say hineni to God and hinehni to one's child, and mean both.** [emphasis added]

We can be wholly committed to God and the duty and responsibility to send our children to war to protect Israel, but we can also acknowledge the pain and risk in that and desperately hope our children will survive, physically, mentally and emotionally? Yitzchak's ashes stand for all who have sacrificed in this war – the fallen, the wounded, and those who carry spiritual and emotional scars invisible from the outside. The lesson is not that the loss of a child is a sacrifice that parents must accept without question, but that devotion to God does not require parents to suppress their love for their children. We are both in a state of Hineini and Hinehni. We are privileged to raise such children, and our commitment to God strengthens both them and us as we confront the risks and sacrifices this moment demands. A parent can be shattered by the possibility of loss and still draw strength from faith.

The Shunamite woman shows us how to stand in that place: to support our children as they defend our values, to refuse despair, and to hold fast to the hope that their lives and sacrifices will continue to inspire future generations. As Avraham told his son on the way up the mountain*, "'God will see to the lamb, for the burnt offering – my son.' The two of them walked on together"* (Genesis 22:8).

Shabbat Shalom.

* President and Rosh Yeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone.

https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-vayera-rabbi-brander-5787

Remembering Kristallnacht

From *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* *

[Ed. note: An attempt to burn down the Young Israel shul of West Hempstead, NY last week reminds us that the spirit of Kristallnacht still encourages our enemies to attack us and destroy our property. One of my closest friends will be a featured speaker Sunday, November 8, as the shul continues to cope with the impact of violence against our people. In this spirit, ***Chamber Music Experience,*** *a nonprofit dedicated to bringing the joys of chamber music to youth and remembering Jewish composers killed by the Nazis, is offering a free concert featuring the music of Dick Kattenburg, an*

outstanding young composer from Amsterdam, murdered at Auschwitz when he was only 24 years old. Hopefully many of you in the New York area will attend the program at Young Israel on Sunday and the memorial concert Sunday, November 15, at 2 p.m., at the Hewlett-Woodmere Public Library. Concert performers include Juilliard faculty. More information at cmexperience.org.]

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

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

Jews Leaving Germany

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

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

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

Desecrated Synagogues, Looted Shops, Mass Arrests

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

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

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

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

The vast November pogrom had considerable economic consequences. On November 11, 1938 Heydrich, the head of the security police, still could not estimate the material destruction. The supreme party court later established that 91 persons had been killed during the pogrom and that 36 had sustained serious injuries or committed suicide. Several instances of

rape were punished by state courts as Rassenschande (social defilement) in accordance with the Nuremberg laws of 1935.

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

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

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

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

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Parshat Vayera: "Do not stretch out your hand against the boy…"

By Ofer Marciano * (November 10, 2024)

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

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

God tests Avraham through ten trials, each more challenging than the last. He and Sarah face immense suffering, tests, and profound trials of faith before they are finally blessed with Yitzhak. Leaving behind everything familiar, they embark on a journey to an unknown land, guided solely by their faith in the Creator. In this land, they encounter famine, forcing them to descend to Egypt. Sarah is taken twice by kings — Pharaoh and Avimelech — while Avraham engages in a battle against four kings and, in his old age, undergoes circumcision.

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

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

If we attempt to relate this monumental trial to our own era, we can imagine it as akin to those wrenching moments when wives bid farewell to their husbands as they depart for war, risking their lives; when parents send their children to the frontlines, knowing they are endangering their lives to protect the homeland and its people, and to assert before the world

our right to exist as a nation and as a Jewish state in this land. Yet even with such modern parallels, we still find ourselves asking: how could a father bind his own son with his own hands, driven by unwavering faith and loyalty to God alone?

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

Amid the sorrow, voices of resilience emerge, voices rooted in a belief in the justice of our cause, our right to exist, and our right to live here. Just as Avraham rose after his circumcision to perform acts of kindness and to welcome strangers, we too witness acts of kindness across the land — memorial initiatives, support for soldiers and their families, and a united national spirit of mobilization.

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

* Alumnus of Ohr Torah Stone's Derech Avot High School in Efrat(2007), where his oldest son is now in seventh grade. He currently works as a Project Manager at the CloudX company and pursues his passion for music.

https://ots.org.il/ofer-marciano-vayera/

Parshas Vayera: Where Are You?

by Rabbi Label Lam (5768)

And it was as they took them out that one said, *"Flee for your life! Do not look behind you or stop anywhere in all the plain Flee to the mountain lest you be swept away!"*…….Now HASHEM had caused sulfur and fire to rain upon Sodom and Gomorrah, from HASHEM, out of heaven. He overturned these cities and the entire plain, with all the inhabitant of the cities and the vegetation of the soil. His (Lot's) wife peered behind him and she became a pillar of salt. (Breishis 19:17- 26)

This is one of the most famous incidents of the Torah. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Why? Why did she look there? Why was she punished so severely? What's so bad about look back to survey the destruction?

Fritz Schultz was a German industrialist who, seeing an opportunity to make great profit employing Jews as laborers ran a large group of factories in the Ghetto that provided supplies to the German army. The work was considered essential to the war effort, so the lives of the workers were temporarily spared. Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Shapiro was assigned work in a shoe factory that Avraham Hendel had owned before the war and that Hendel now managed for Schultz.

Besides providing reprieve from deportation, the shoe factory enabled Rabbi Shapiro and the other scholars to continue their studies right under the noses of their taskmasters. The atmosphere in the factory has been described by an eye witness, Hillel Seidman, in his Warsaw Ghetto Diary:

> "Now I am in Schultz factory; I have come at the time when people are both hammering in nails and reciting Hoshana prayers. Here are gathered, thanks to one of the directors, Mr. Avraham Hendel, the elite of the Orthodox community; Chassidic Masters, Rabbis, scholars, religious community organizers, well-known Chassidim.
>
> Sitting behind the anvil for shoe repairing… is the Koziglover Rav, Yehuda Aryeh Frimer, once Dean of Yeshivat Chochmei Lublin. He is sitting here but his spirit is sailing in other worlds. He continues his studies from memory, without interruption his lips moving constantly. From time to time he addresses a word to the Piaseczner Rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Shapiro, the author of Chovos HaTalmidim, who is sitting opposite him, and a subdued discussion on a Torah topic

ensues. Talmudic and Rabbinic quotations fly back and forth; soon there appear on the anvil, -or, to be precise, on the minds and lips of these brilliant scholars- the words of Maimonodies and Ravad, the author of the Tur, Rama, earlier and later authorities. The atmosphere in the factory is filled with the opinions eminent scholars, so who cares about the S.S., the German overseers, the hunger, suffering, persecution and fear of death? They are really sailing in the upper worlds; they're not sitting in a factory on Nowolopie 46, but rather in the Hall of the Sanhedrin…" (The Holy Fire by Polen)

The Baal Shem Tov had said, "Wherever a person's mind is, that is where they are entirely." The mind then is both an extremely useful and dangerous tool. This is perhaps where Lot's wife went wrong. She seems to have left her "heart in San Francisco," as the song goes. When she looked back she betrayed her longing for what was left behind which was in the process of being destroyed. Since this is where her mind was, that's where she was entirely and so she too became a petrified piece of the historical landscape.

With this, maybe now we can try to comprehend what was meant by the words spoken to Adam and Chava after they nibbled on the fruit of the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" and because of what entered their minds they hid. The Almighty approached and simply asked, **"Where are you?"**

Good Shabbos

https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5768-vayera/

Seeing (as) God

By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2014, 2019

As our parasha opens, God appears, va'yeira, to Avraham while he is sitting by the opening of his tent. Immediately thereafter, Avraham sees, va'yar, three men standing near him. He sees them again, and he runs to greet them.

This pairing of God appearing and Avraham seeing brings us back to the beginning of Parashat Lekh Lekha. There, God tells Avraham to go to the land that God will show him, *asher arekha.* Later, when Avraham is passing through the land of Canaan, God appears to him and tells him that this is the land that God will give to Avraham's descendants. God's appearing to Avraham enabled Avraham to see that his was no ordinary land, but the Promised Land.

Although God spoke to Adam and Eve, to Cain, and to Noah, God never appeared to them. The first person that God appears to in the Torah is Avraham, and God does so again and again. It is thus no coincidence that Avraham is also the first person commanded not just to follows God's words, but to see what God was showing him. **God appears to Avraham so that Avraham may learn how to see what is Godly in the world, how to see God in the world.** [emphasis added]

After God appears to Avraham in our parasha he begins to see more clearly. He notices things; he looks at the strangers not once, but twice. He sees that these are not just travelers, but people in need. He pays attention to details – according to the midrash he notes how they are standing and how they are addressing one another. He puts himself in their place, sensing what they need and how they must be feeling even before they have spoken. And he understands how to speak to them so they feel welcomed and embraced.

Avraham's encounter with God allows him to see what is Godly in others, not just in the world. In fact, when he first speaks to the men he addresses them with the word *adon-ai,* "my lords," the same word that is used to refer to God. The ambiguity should be understood as purposeful. After seeing God, he was able to see these nomads not merely as men but as human beings created in the divine image.

Seeing God in the world is what allows us to see properly. It is a corrective to how we as humans too often see – through the lens of self-interest and desire, a seeing which leads to a taking. This, as I have recently discussed here, is what constitutes primordial sin: Eve sees the fruit, and she takes it: va'teira… va'tikach (Breishit 3:6). The "sons of God"

see the human women, and they take them: va'yiru… va'yikachu (6:2). And later, in last week's parasha, it was the servants of Pharaoh who saw Sarai and took her: va'yiru… va'tukach (12:15).

God's appearing to Avraham is meant to reverse this way of seeing the world. In fact, it is now that we read how the act of taking can been transformed and become a tikkun of this primordial sin.

It begins after the flood. Ham sees his father's nakedness and goes out to tell his brothers. He sees the nakedness, but they are the ones who do the taking. They take the cloak so that they should not see, vi'ervat avi'hem lo rau, "and the nakedness of their father they did not see" (9:23). If human seeing leads to taking, then the simplest solution is to make sure that one does not see. It's a lot easier to diet if there is no ice cream in the house, and it's a lot easier to avoid sin if one closes one's eyes to the outside world.

But one cannot go through life with her eyes shut, no more than she can go through her life without eating. Dieting can actually be much harder than, say, quitting smoking. One can avoid owning cigarettes or even being around others who smoke, but one cannot avoid eating. The true tikkun is not to learn how to not see, but to learn how to see correctly.

It is thus that God begins to teach Avraham how to see. "Go thyself… to the land that I will show you, arekha" (12:1). And the taking that follows this seeing is a taking in the service of God: "And Avram took, va'yikach, Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all the wealth that they had amassed… and they set forth to the land of Canaan" (12:5). **Far from taking to serve oneself and amass wealth, Avraham takes his wealth to serve God.**

Similarly, after God appears to Avraham in the beginning of our parasha, Avraham's seeing of the men is followed by a very particular type of taking: *"… let a little water be taken that you may wash your feet"* (18:4). It is not a taking for oneself, but a taking of one's efforts and one's own resources in order to give to others.

We would expect that the akeida, the taking of Yitzchak as a sacrifice, is the ultimate expression of this taking to serve God. Surprisingly, however, this is a taking that was not preceded by a vision. God speaks to Avraham and commands him to perform the akeida, but in those verses God never appears to Avraham. And unlike the first lekh lekha, Avraham here is commanded to go to the place that God will tell him, quite pointedly not the place that God will show him.

There was indeed a divine command to offer up Yitzchak, but it was never part of the divine plan that this should come to fruition. Offering Yitzchak was not part of the divine vision, and God would never show Avraham how to see in this way.

Although not following a divine vision, Avraham does see for himself: *"And he saw the place from a distance…"* (22:4). And this does lead to a taking, a taking that could well result in the sacrifice of Yitzchak: "And Avraham took the wood for the burnt offering… and he took in his hand the fire and the knife" (22:6). And yet, inasmuch as God has not appeared to him or shown him the way, we, and quite possibly Avraham, are left to wonder if Avraham is seeing things as God would have him see them. Is this a proper seeing? Avraham's response to his son is telling: "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering" (22:8). What God sees, what God wants Avraham to see, is yet to be made clear.

It is at the critical moment that the Avraham realizes what it is that God wants him to see. The angel speaks to Avraham and stays his hand, telling him, "For now I know that you fear God" (22:12). The word fear, yi'rei, evokes the word to see, roeh, and this is made explicit two verses later, "And Avraham called the name of the place 'God sees,' yireh, as it is said to this day, on the mount of the Lord it shall be seen, yei'raeh." Fearing God is intertwined with seeing God, and if Avraham now fears God, it is also because he has now seen God.

It is now, after this fearing/seeing, that Avraham can see correctly:

> *And Avraham lifted up his eyes, and he saw, va'yar, and behold, behind him, there was a ram caught up in the thicket by its horns, and Avraham went and he took, va'yikach, the ram, and he offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.* (22:14)

He looks clearly; he looks twice, lifting up his eyes, looking behind him. **The vision of God has pushed him to see better, to see broadly, not narrowly, to look to see a deeper truth. He now sees the "sheep" that God has seen is not his son but the ram, and the taking that God wanted was not the taking of his son but the taking of the ram.**

There are many forms of seeing and taking in the world. When one sees through his or her own eyes, one sees for oneself and one takes for oneself. It is our goal to strive to see through God's eyes, to learn to take what is ours in order to give to God. But we must always be on guard that this taking for God not be twisted into a violent fundamentalism, into taking the property of others or even the lives of others in the name of God. To see like God is to see that God wants the ram, not the son. It is to see the godliness in every human being. It is ultimately to give to others and to give to the world, to act in all ways so that God will be more seen in the world.

[boldface is my emphasis, not in original]

From my archives.

Insights from Chassidic Tradition
Vayera: Guests Come First; God Can Wait?

By Rabbi Ysoscher Katz *

In this week's parsha, Parashat Vayeira, Avraham's decision to interrupt a visit from God teaches us something surprising about closeness to Him.

God comes to visit Avraham Avinu as he recovers from his brit milah. During the visit, three strangers appear. Avraham asks God to wait while he goes to welcome them. Chazal draw a remarkable conclusion from his decision: Welcoming guests takes precedence over being in God's presence.

Anyone who has spent some time in yeshiva has probably heard the question: we learn this from Avraham, but how did Avraham know? God is visiting him, and he gets up to attend to three strangers. What made him so certain that this was the right thing to do?

A familiar vort connects this question to another statement of Chazal: Avraham observed the entire Torah before it was given. But how could he possibly have known what to observe? There had been no Mattan Torah, no revelation of the commandments. What told him what was permitted and what was forbidden, what God wanted him to do and what He wanted him to avoid?

The answer usually offered is that Avraham's spiritual refinement allowed him to intuit God's will. Our appetites, ambitions, and self-interest can make God's will difficult to hear. Avraham had learned to quiet those demands so that his own preferences no longer clouded his understanding of God's will. His purified body and soul could sense what God would later command at Sinai. That same inner clarity told him that welcoming these strangers took precedence over receiving the Shechinah.

The same vort also helps explain a puzzling line in Dayeinu, the familiar poem from the Haggadah: had God brought us to Har Sinai without giving us the Torah, that would have sufficed. What, though, would have been gained by arriving at Sinai without receiving the Torah?

Chazal teach that when the Jewish people stood at Sinai, their spiritual impurity ceased. According to this explanation, that purification would itself have enabled them to intuit God's will. Standing at Sinai could have given them the clarity Avraham had achieved through his own efforts. Even without receiving the Torah, they would have been able to recognize its demands.

Drawing on the teachings of talmidei HaBaal Shem Tov, I would suggest another way to understand Avraham's decision to leave God's presence and welcome the guests. We usually understand a hierarchy that welcoming guests is more

important than receiving the Shechinah. But perhaps Chazal are telling us something about how we encounter God. Welcoming guests can offer a deeper encounter with Him than a direct experience of His presence. The very act of feeding another person can bring us closer to God than remaining alone in His presence.

The Chassidic understanding of the nitzotz Eloki, the divine spark in each person, suggests how this could be possible. There is something of God in the person we welcome into our home. As they eat, relax, and enjoy the company around them, something of that sacredness can become perceptible. A person who arrived hungry or ill at ease begins to feel comfortable and wanted. Their satisfaction grows into a joy that allows the divine spark within them to find fuller expression. The host who has helped bring about that joy can share in it and encounter something of its sacredness. Feeding someone becomes a way of coming close to the Godliness within them.

Avraham is no longer choosing between God and his guests; he is choosing how to encounter God. The divine visit gives him an experience of God's presence. Hospitality allows him to help that presence find fuller expression in another person's life. He encounters God through the joy he has helped bring about. Welcoming guests can offer a deeper encounter with God than receiving the Divine Presence.

A story told about R. Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, gives this idea a practical expression. He was once hosting a guest who made considerable demands. R. Yisrael went to great lengths to satisfy them, much to the surprise of one of his students. "Rebbe," the student asked, "so much *gashmiyus*? So much concern with material things?"

Yisrael replied: "Someone else's *gashmiyus* is my *ruchniyus*." Someone else's material needs are my spirituality

The guest needs a meal or a comfortable place to sleep. Those are material concerns, and the host has to take them seriously as such. For the person providing them, attending to those needs is spiritual work. The guest's gashmiyus becomes the host's ruchniyus.

The Chassidic approach gives that ruchniyus a further dimension. The host encounters something sacred in the person whose needs he meets. The guest's pleasure in a good meal and relief at having a place to rest can awaken a joy the host shares. **In helping another person feel more fully alive, the host becomes receptive to the divine spark within them. The spiritual encounter grows out of the care itself. Providing a meal and a place to rest becomes a way of encountering God.** [emphasis added]

We make time to learn and daven because we seek closeness to God. Vayeira asks us to recognize that possibility in the person who needs a meal or a place to stay. Their needs deserve our full attention, and meeting them can make us receptive to the sacredness within them. Someone else's gashmiyus becomes our ruchniyus because, in welcoming them and sharing in their joy, we encounter something of God.

[note: my software issues converting Hebrew to English across software requires me not to include Hebrew text and required a slight editing to keep the original meaning in the English. Original, with Hebrew, on line.]

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https://library.yctorah.org/2026/10/guests-come-first-god-can-wait/

Abraham Our Father: Thoughts on Parashat Vayera

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

> *"And the Lord said: shall I hide from Abraham that which I am doing; seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through him? For I have known of him that he will command his children and his household after him, that they will keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice…"* (Bereishith 18:17-19).

Rabbi Hayyim Angel has pointed out that Abraham was not the first monotheist. Adam and Eve, Hanokh, Noah and others also recognized one God. Abraham was not the first *"Jew,"* since there were no Jews (Israelites) until generations later. Rather, **Abraham's distinction is that he is the first figure in the Bible to be identified as a teacher. God describes him as one who conveys the ideals of righteousness and justice to his family and followers.** [emphasis added]

In Jewish tradition, Abraham is generally known as Avraham Avinu, Abraham our father. He and Sarah — through Isaac, Jacob and succeeding generations — were the founders of the extended family that ultimately became the people of Israel. Abraham's role was not merely as the biological progenitor of the people but as their teacher of righteousness and justice.

Over the centuries, all converts to Judaism have been designated as children of Abraham. They have become members of Abraham's family. In his famous letter to the proselyte Obadia, Maimonides assured the convert that he was a son of Abraham, as fully Jewish and fully a member of the Jewish family as any Jew born into the Jewish People.

While Abraham is known as Avraham Avinu, Moses is known as Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our rabbi. Abraham is the father of our People; Moses is the conveyer of Torah to our People. Abraham is the founder of our family; Moses is the founding rabbi of our religion.

All Jews are members of Abraham's family by birth or conversion. All Jews are bound by the religious teachings of Moses as reflected in Torah and halakha. Jewish identity sometimes seems confusing because it entails both Abraham our father and Moses our rabbi.

Ultimately, though, tradition links our identity to our father Abraham. Even Jews who do not observe the Torah of Moses, or even those who repudiate it, are still Jewish by virtue of being in the family of Abraham. All Jews — religious or not — are members of the same family even if they strongly disagree with each other or even dislike each other.

It is significant that converts are named as children of Abraham, not Moses. Although converts are expected to study and observe Torah, their conversion is actually their way of joining the family of our People.

Abraham our father taught us *"to keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice."* Generations later, Moses our rabbi taught us the Torah, expanding on the foundations set by Abraham. We are blessed to be heirs of spiritual greatness of the highest order.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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Passion for Compassion: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The opening paragraph of the Amidah, recited as the central prayer of our daily liturgy, refers to the *"God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob."* And yet, when the blessing is actually recited at the end of this passage, it praises God as "the Shield of Abraham." Only Abraham's name is mentioned. Why?

One explanation is that Abraham is identified in rabbinic tradition with the quality of Hesed, compassion. While both Isaac and Jacob had other important qualities associated with them, Abraham is the special exemplar of kindness. By singling out Abraham in the first blessing of the Amidah, our sages were thereby underscoring the unique importance of Hesed.

This week's Parasha begins with the story of Abraham's remarkable hospitality to three strangers (who later turned out to be angels!). Abraham not only instructs the members of his household to prepare a meal for the guests, but he himself rushes around to see that things are done properly. Abraham demonstrated that Hesed is manifested in good intentions and more especially in actual deeds of kindness.

Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (1724-1806) referred to the quality of Hesed as a vital principle of halakhic decision-making. Proper halakhic rulings take into consideration the human predicament, how halakhic rulings will impact on people's lives. Halakha is not a cold, hard system of inflexible laws, but is a meaningful framework for happy and constructive living.

Hesed entails empathy for others. It eschews judgmental and extreme positions.

From time to time I receive comments from Institute members about new "humrot" (stringencies) which are being introduced at their synagogues. In one case, the congregation engaged a new rabbi who promptly raised the mehitza, forbade women's hakafot on Simhat Torah, and took a "black hat" approach to other issues. A group of congregants became so fed up that they quit the synagogue and started their own modern Orthodox congregation.

In another case, a new rabbi discarded long-established congregational practices with the claim that he wished to "raise halakhic standards." Although this has caused grief among congregants, people think that there's nothing they can do to alter the situation. After all, the rabbi is trying to make them "more religious."

In yet other cases, rabbis have chosen to avoid getting involved in conversions, telling candidates that they should go to the RCA. These rabbis do not wish to take responsibility in this important area, preferring to pass the buck to the RCA…and its many "humrot" in matters of conversion. The resultant frustrations and alienations are painful beyond words.

One disgruntled person told me: "Our rabbi is introducing stringencies and he is too frum."

I replied to this person: A rabbi who introduces stringencies does not thereby gain the title of being "frum." On the contrary, being "frum" is most aptly demonstrated when the rabbi makes halakhic decisions that demonstrate sensitivity to the needs of the community. To declare something forbidden is far easier than to declare something permissible. A really frum rabbi (or lay person) is most often characterized by a spirit of compassion, intellectual openness, and a desire to expand, rather than contract, legitimate religious observance. A frum person demonstrates respect for established customs and practices and seeks to support rather than undermine them. While it may happen that halakhic considerations will lead to added stringencies, changes should be made only with the utmost care, when there is no valid halakhic alternative, and with due consultation with those who will be affected.

What is severely missing in much of modern-day Orthodox Judaism is Abraham's example of Hesed. A prevailing view seems to equate strictness and exclusionary attitudes with true religiosity. If people dress the dress and shuckle the shuckle, they are deemed to be "frum;" otherwise, they are thought to be somehow deficient in their religiosity.

Rabbi Rafael Aharon ben Shimon, a great rabbinic figure of the early 20th century, wrote: "Our fathers and rabbis have taught us a great principle: to hide one's deeds if they are in the category of excessive piety. One may act as he pleases in

the privacy of his own home, and may take on stringencies and pious niceties. But when he is among friends, he should blend in with them…."

External shows of excessive piety may often be the result of egotism, or abject conformity to the "frum" crowd. A truly pious person serves the Lord as humbly and inconspicuously as possible. The quality of Hesed motivates a pious person to want to associate lovingly with others, not to stand out and separate himself/herself from the community.

When we recite the Amidah, we need to focus a bit more on the first blessing that singles out Abraham as a religious exemplar. The quality of Hesed is at the core of piety and righteousness.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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Vayeira: The Wandering Jew

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

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

Hagar had a remarkable life journey. She was born a princess in Mitzrayim. But when her father encountered the nobility of Avraham and Sara, he said, *"Better you should be a maidservant in their house than a princess in mine."*

Over time she absorbed the G-dly approach of Avraham and Sara, and she even mothered a son to Avraham, Yishmael. Yet, as Yishmoel grew, he displayed tendencies towards immorality and was becoming a bad influence on Yitzchak. Hashem instructed Avraham and Sara to send Yishmoel away. And so, Hagar and Yishmoel were sent away, and eventually found themselves traveling in the desert.

Interestingly, at first the Torah describes Hagar as *"Vateilech,"* she went. But then the word, *"Vateisa,"* wandering, lost in the desert, is used. Rashi (based on Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer 30) records that at first she was travelling with the memories and allegiances to the house of Avraham and Sara, but then she reverted to the idol worship of her youth.

Rav Shalom Schwadron explains that the second term, *"Vateisa"* being lost, is only true of someone who does not believe in Hashem. It is a term used to describe her wandering precisely after she dropped her allegiance to the house of Avraham and Sara. But one who maintains the allegiance remains in Hashem's hands. A Jew is never lost.

Rav Schwadron illustrates this concept with a beautiful story. In the early 1900s Rav Mordechai Pogramansky was once travelling with another Jew who was a Mohel. They boarded a train and were so engrossed in conversation that they missed their stop. When they realized their mistake, they got off the train and found that there were no trains going in their direction until the next day. Rav Pogramansky's companion fretted that they were lost, but Rav Pogramansky insisted that a Jew is never lost. "Hashem has a plan," he insisted. *"Hashem guides us wherever we are."*

They asked at the train station where the Jewish community was, and they were told that there was none in this town. "But there is a lone Jew who lives in the outskirts."

When they found the house of the local Jew, they knocked on the door, and he opened the door, clearly shocked and overjoyed. The man asked, "Are you the Mohel?" Rav Pogramansky's companion said, "Yes, I am a Mohel."

"Good," the man said. "I knew you would come. Last week, my wife gave birth to a boy and today is the eighth day. I couldn't leave my wife to travel and get a Mohel, so I have been davening that somehow Hashem should work things out and send me a Mohel."

Rav Pogramansky's companion indeed performed the Bris, after which the Rav told him, "I told you, 'A Jew is never lost.'" Everything is with a plan. We just need to pay attention to find out what Hashem intended.

When Hagar first left the house of Avraham and Sara, she was described as "Vateilech," she was going. But when she is described as "Vateisa," wandering aimlessly, it alludes to her losing her moral compass. She felt lost when she chose to return to the idol worship of her youth. At that point she no longer saw herself as being in Hashem's hands.

Too often we see the world in black and white. There is what we expect to happen, and it may contrast greatly with what is actually happening. If we insist on seeing the world in black and white we might think to ourselves with frustration, "I expected one thing and Hashem is doing something different."

But if we have the wisdom to see the grey, the space of real life between our expectations and what Hashem apparently wants, there is plenty of room for curiosity. We can ask thoughtfully, "I know what I wanted. But what is Hashem's plan and how will it emerge?" It is in that grey space between what I thought would happen and what Hashem actually makes happen, that greatness lies.

As Rabbi A.J. Twerski suggested: When you fall, make every effort to pick yourself up. But as you do, pay attention. Ask yourself: Is there something new to be learned, or a new opportunity that emerged because of the fall?

In Tehillim (73) we say: Hashem does only good to the Jew, provided that we have purity of heart. When we feel in our hearts that we are in Hashem's hands, our wanderings take on a sense of mission and purpose. A Jew is never lost.

For Family Discussion:

– Rav Pogramansky said "Hashem has a plan" before he knew what it was. Is that faith, or is it just being optimistic? What's the difference?

– Think of a time something went differently than you expected. Looking back, what was in that "grey space" between what you wanted and what happened?

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos,

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of over 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 and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, or to help sponsor his Torah insights, 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.

From my archives.

* Rav at Sha'arei Tefilla and the co-founder of the RI Torah Network in Providence, Rhode Island. For several years, Rabbi Singer was the Rabbi at Am HaTorah Congregation in Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer's recent Devrei Torah normally come as podcasts rather than texts.

Selfish Sodom

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

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

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

they staged an attack, which was blocked by the guests.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, the Sodomite society appears with the idea of extreme capitalism. To each his own, and you will enjoy only the fruits of your toil. There is no charity or hospitality, and visitors are chased out or tortured. This society, too, is bound to fail, and since its seed is selfishness, it breeds destruction. It was into this succession of failed societies that Abraham was introduced. He is presented by God as the solution for the question of ideal government (Gen. 18:19):

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

Abraham is chosen because he maintains a balance between fairness, or justice, and loving kindness, or social support, since a society cannot survive with either extreme justice or welfare systems. But the great secret revealed with the introduction of Abraham to the world is that every society relies eventually on the quality of the individuals. Abraham, the educator, will teach his descendants, who will hopefully emulate him and promulgate his teachings. Lot did not comfortably fit into this worldview, and so he chose to depart from Abraham and join the people of Sodom. Maybe he thought that he

will be able to influence them, and he evidently retained some of Abraham's hospitality, but being the only Tzaddik in Sodom made his mission impossible. [ii]

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

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

Shabbat Shalom.

Endnotes:

i. A must read is Ted Chiang's short Sci-Fi story "The Tower of Babylon."

Ii. Perhaps Abraham pleaded with God to save the Jordan valley cities if they had at least ten righteous but no less, because with five cities, that will afford two to each one. Even the most righteous person needs company and peers to maintain his righteousness, so with less than two people per city, there would be no hope.

* Senior Rabbi, Congregation Ramath Orah (New York, NY); Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Previously, 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 include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats. Rabbi Ovadia retains all rights (copyright) to this and all other Devrei Torah that he permits me to share.

A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz *
Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation **

This morning (Thursday), I had the great honor and pleasure of addressing Kadimah School at their Tanakh ceremony, where the Year 6 students receive their Tanakh.

After months of learning about the characters of Tanakh, the students chose their own heroes and heroines, leaders of the Jewish people, and created some amazing projects about them. It brought me great pride to see that 1st and 2nd place winners were AHC families, first place Emma Arieli and second place Arielle Shenkin, who both chose the amazing heroine Miriam, the sister of Moshe and Aaron. Mazal tov to Emma and Arielle and to their families!

Miriam is a fascinating character, and there is so much we can learn from her. Yet, the Torah tells us relatively little about her, and she can sometimes seem to be pushed to the sidelines while the focus is on the main characters of the story.

Something similar happens in this week's parsha. While Avraham is our main focus, we turn our attention to Lot, a much less popular character in Tanakh. Through Lot, we learn a powerful lesson: sometimes, one individual's decision to do what is right can change the course of history.

Lot opens his home to guests and stands up against the angry mob outside his door. He refuses to accept that just because everyone else is doing something, it must be right.

Especially today, with everything happening in the world, the politics and confusion surrounding Israel, we need to remember this lesson. Standing up for what is right, especially when it is difficult and unpopular, is what Hashem and the

Torah demand of us. As the Jewish people, we are not called upon simply to follow the crowd, but to have the courage to do what is right, even when it is hard.

Sometimes, the greatest heroes are not the main characters of the story, but the people who have the courage to stand up for what they believe in when it matters most.

B'ahavat Yisrael,
Rabbi Netanel

[Ed.:] On Simchat Torah, the AHC shlichim, Roni and Ariel, Tomer and Arbel HaCohen, said good-bye to the shul after three special years in Auckland, as they return home to Israel. Roni and Ariel left Israel for New Zealand on October 8, 2023 – almost immediately after one of the worst days in the history of our people – and quickly became a part of the AHC community. The new shlichim, Nadav, Hodaya and Tzur Pearl, have arrived in Auckland, and the community welcomes them this Shabbat.

The annual Kristallnacht Commemorative Concert in Auckland on November 10 will celebrate the extraordinary Holocaust survivors and refugees who found sanctuary in New Zealand and transformed the nation's classical music landscape.

* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobe, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is now Rabbi of the ACT Jewish Community in Canberra, the capitol city of Australia. I hope to be able to include his Torah insights soon.

** Rabbi Kaszovitz is now posting his Devrei Torah and classes on You Tube: https://youtube.com/c/TheNairobisher .

Rav Kook Torah
Vayeira: Hidden and Revealed Holiness

A Paradoxical Blessing

After Abraham passed the test of the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, an angel informed him:

> *This is what God says: I have sworn by My Essence, since you performed this act and did not withhold your only son, I will bless you greatly and increase your descendants like the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will possess their enemies' gate. And all the nations of the world will be blessed through your descendants.* (Gen. 22:16-18)

This blessing appears to contradict itself. On the one hand, Abraham is promised that his descendants will be victorious over their enemies: *"Your offspring will possess their enemies' gate."* On the other hand, his descendants will be prized and cherished by other peoples: *"All the nations of the world will be blessed through your descendants."*

What will be the lot of Abraham's descendants: hostility and strife from the nations, or love and respect?

Also: why did God compare the Jewish people to both the stars and the sand?

Two Realms: Internal and External

In fact, an angel appeared to Abraham not once but twice. The first time, an angel appeared just as Abraham was about to offer up his son, commanding him:

> *Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God.* (Gen. 22:12)

Why were there two messages from God?

We all live in two realms. There is our external world of action and deed; and there is our hidden inner life, our thoughts and desires. Often there lies a wide discrepancy between our outward actions and our inner thoughts and intentions.

The Akeidah occurred differently in these two realms. In the realm of actual deed, Abraham offered a ram on Mount Moriah. But in his inner thoughts and emotions, in his extraordinary dedication and love for God, Abraham offered up his own son. The Midrash writes:

> *As he performed each stage of offering [the ram], Abraham prayed: 'May it be Your will that this act should be considered as if it was done to my son: as if my son was slaughtered, as if his blood was sprinkled, as if my son was flayed, as if he was burnt and reduced to ashes.'* (Rashi, based on *Tanchuma Sh'lach* 14)

The two calls from heaven, as well as the dual blessing, correspond to the two aspects of the Akeidah: in deed and in thought; the actual and the potential; the revealed and the hidden.

The first call from heaven stopped Abraham from physically carrying out the Akeidah. *"Do not lay your hand on the boy."* This summons related to Abraham's inner state of holiness, fully revealed only to God. *"For now I know that you fear God."* Only God truly knew the nobility of Abraham's soul. This level of hidden holiness could not be expressed in action. *"Do not do anything."*

After Abraham offered the ram in place of his son, a second angel appeared. Abraham's inner devotion had been expressed also in the realm of action. Now, the angel informed Abraham, his blessing was no longer limited to himself, to his own inner spiritual world, but extended to all future generations of his descendants. Abraham had succeeded in revealing his inner holiness in the physical realm. The angel emphasized that Abraham had realized his love for God in deed and action, "since you performed this act."

What is the meaning of this unusual oath, *"I have sworn by My Essence"*? This short phrase refers to both the inner and revealed dimensions. God's Essence is, of course, the deepest, most profound secret. An oath, on the other hand, is a promise to take action, to act upon an inner decision.[1]

Dual Blessing

This dichotomy of the hidden and the revealed explains Abraham's dual blessing. Why were his children likened to both the stars and the sand? They will reach for the stars as they strive to realize their inner aspirations. At the same time, they will be like the sand, with a down-to-earth holiness, expressed with practical mitzvot.

The story of Abraham's descendants among the nations also reflects this dual nature. In the beginning, the Jewish people made their appearance as yet another nation in the world, struggling against enemies and foes. Their inner sanctity was hidden and unrecognized. At this stage in their history, the Jewish people require the Divine blessing of "possessing their enemies' gate."

But in the future, God's hidden light on the Jewish people will be revealed to all. The nations will recognize that this is no ordinary nation; Israel is the revelation of God's will in humanity and the entire universe. They will acknowledge Israel's inner sanctity: *"All the nations of the world will be blessed through your descendants."*

(Adapted from *Olat Re'iyah* vol. I, pp. 94-96)

Endnote:

1. The word “oath” (shevu'a) has the same Hebrew root as the word “seven” (shev'a), thus corresponding to the seven days of creation and the physical world.

https://ravkooktorah.org/vayera61

Vayera: To Bless the Space Between Us (5776, 5783)

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

[Ed. note: November 7 will be six years since the passing of Rabbi Sacks]

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

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

Then the Lord said:

> *“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham is about to become a great and mighty nation, and through him all the nations on earth will be blessed. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He spoke of for him.”* Gen. 18:17-19

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

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

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

Sometimes God is described as our father:

> *“Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?”* Malachi 2:10

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

Thus our relationship with God is deeply connected to our relationship with our parents, and our understanding of God is deepened if we have had the blessing of children (I love the remark of a young American Jewish mother: *"Now that I've become a parent I find that I can relate to God much better: now I know what it's like creating something you can't control").*

All of which makes the story of Abraham very hard to understand for two reasons. The first is that Abraham was the son told by God to leave his father:

> *"Go – from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house..."* Gen. 12:1

The second is that Abraham was the father told by God to sacrifice his son:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Around the Shabbat Table (Questions to Ponder)

1. How does God make space for us to be ourselves?

2. Do you think it is hard for parents to make space for children to be themselves? Why?

3. Does this approach prevent parents (and God) from protecting their children from making mistakes? Do you think this is a good approach, or is it too risky?

Because Likutei Divrei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, among other compilations, reprint columns by Rabbi Sacks for the current and last year, I select a different Dvar Torah from a different year.

https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/to-bless-the-space-between-us/

What Do You Do When You Are Really Desperate?

By Eliezer Shemtov *

One of the great causes of both anxiety and depression is finding oneself in an extreme situation with no apparent way out.

Imagine this scenario: a mother and her son are stranded in the desert. The child is dying of thirst, and there is no water source in sight.

In this week's portion, Vayera, the Torah describes exactly this situation. Hagar, dismissed from Abraham's home, set out into the desert with her son, Ishmael. When the water in her canteen ran out, she placed the dying boy under a bush, moved away about the distance of a bowshot so as not to witness his death, and wept aloud. An angel called out to her, telling her not to despair; G d had heard the child's cry: *"Arise, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make from him a great nation."*1 G d opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She filled the canteen and gave the boy a drink. G d watched over the young man as he grew; he settled in the desert and became an archer.

It is hard to imagine a more desperate situation. Hagar's reaction is entirely understandable. Facing her son's imminent death, she gave up and distanced herself so as not to witness the fulfillment of a mother's worst nightmare. She preferred to imagine it rather than see it.

Every detail of this episode contains teachings. Let us look at one that applies to our search for tools against anxiety and depression:

The Torah does not say that a water source miraculously appeared. It says that at a certain moment, Hagar saw a well of water that she had not seen before. What changed so that she could now see what she had previously missed?

A change of attitude

The moment the canteen ran dry, Hagar concluded that her son's death was inevitable. But why did she limit herself to the water in the canteen? Why didn't she do anything about her problem?

Perhaps it simply did not occur to her to look.

"Arise," said the angel, *"lift up the boy. Hold him by the hand, for I will make from him a great nation."* In other words: raise your gaze. Redefine yourself and the situation before you. Don't see him merely as a vulnerable child who will die because you cannot provide water. Invert the relationship between cause and effect: your success depends on his need. If you cannot accept the possibility that he might die of thirst, you will search until you find what you need. You will discover the water that was always there.

G d does not perform miracles in vain. G d does not do for us what we ourselves can and must do. Only after we have exhausted our own resources does the miracle appear — if it is needed. But there is far more we can achieve on our own than we often realize.

The tool for this week: Never give up. If the goal is worthy, keep striving — without yielding. Success depends on G d; the effort depends on you.

Footnote:

1. Genesis 21:18.

* Chabad-Lubavitch emissary in Montevideo, Uruguay.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/7558015/jewish/What-Do-You-Do-When-You-Are-Really-Desperate.htm

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Vayeira: Marriage and Selflessness

By Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

Rebecca was born to Bethuel. (Gen. 22:23)

Abraham's greatest challenge came 37 years after his son Isaac was born. G-d commanded him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham obeyed implicitly, and G-d then rescinded His command. After this, Abraham heard that Rebecca, a suitable match for Isaac, had been born.

The juxtaposition of the narrative of the binding of Isaac with that of the birth of his future wife, Rebecca, demonstrates that self-sacrifice is an integral component of a healthy marriage. When we marry, and especially when we start to have children, our primary focus becomes the immediate tasks of supporting our families and dealing with the material world and its attendant mundane matters. No longer are we free to focus as intensely on our personal spiritual development. Whatever degree of self-orientation characterized our focus before marriage, even very spiritual self-orientation, it must be largely replaced by selfless devotion to others and preoccupation with prosaic matters after marriage.

It is imperative that, as this happens, we keep in mind that marrying and raising a family are just as much a part of fulfilling our Divine mission to make the world into G-d's home as are more explicitly spiritual pursuits. In fact, making a Jewish home, filled with the knowledge of the Torah and the performance of G-d's commandments and good deeds in general, is the primary way that we transform the world at large into G-d's true home.

– From *Daily Wisdom 3* *

* Insights by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on the weekly parashat from Chabad's *Daily Wisdom 3* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

Gut Shabbos.

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
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on his yahrzeit, 21 Cheshvan,
by Arlene Pianko Groner and family

Volume 33, Issue 4 **Shabbat Parashat Vayera** **5787 B"H**

Covenant and Conversation
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Even Higher than Angels

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

The chapter seems simple. It is, however, complex and ambiguous. It consists of three sections:
Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.
Verses 2-16: Abraham and the men/angels.
Verses 17-33: The dialogue between God and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening while Lot was sitting by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low he said, "I pray you, sirs, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night there and bathe your feet." Gen. 19:2

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

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

The Lord appeared to him . . . Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. The moment he saw them, he ran from the opening of his tent to greet them, and bowed down low to the ground. [Turning to God] he said: "My Lord, if I have found favour in your sight, please do not pass by your servant [i.e. Please wait for me until I have given hospitality to these men]." [He then turned to the men and said:] "Let a little water be brought so that you may wash your feet and rest under the tree…" Genesis 18:1-5

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

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

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

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

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

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

One of the most beautiful comments on this episode was given by Rabbi Shalom of Belz who noted that in verse 2, the visitors are spoken of as standing above Abraham [nitzavim alav]. In verse 8, Abraham is

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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.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Isaac and Ishmael – Two Shared Destinies?

"…And you shall call his name Ishmael…and on the face of all his brothers shall he dwell" (Genesis 16:12) The relationship between Isaac and Ishmael is one of the most complex – and ambiguous – in the Bible. Will they, can they, ever achieve a rapprochement? Who is really at fault – and how will their rivalry ultimately, if ever, conclude? On the one hand, the story of the Akeda – the Binding of Isaac – when God commands Abraham to bring his only son to Mount Moriah as a burnt offering – is one of the most difficult episodes in the entire Torah. The command to sacrifice the very child without whom there would be no descendants of Abraham and Sarah, no heir to spread the ideal of ethical monotheism, and no future nation, was a paradox that defied comprehension.

However, if we pay attention to the use of God's name in the unraveling story, the paradox becomes a little clearer. As we know, the two different names of God represent two different divine attributes; Elokim expresses justice and the strict letter of the law, while the YHWH four-letter name of God expresses mercy and compassion.

Throughout the beginning of this episode, the Torah only uses the name of Elokim, but in the final denouement, when Abraham is commanded to refrain from the sacrifice of his son, the four-letter name of God is invoked: 'Lay not your hand upon the lad…, 'commands the angel of YHWH. Why the change in attributes? What of the initial command to offer up his son? Did that only emanate from one aspect of God, from the demand for justice? And if so, why?

The Akeda account opens with the words: "After these things…"

What are these things? The penultimate biblical story before the Akeda is the account of Hagar and Ishmael sent off to the desert with minimal provisions by Abraham. I would suggest that the suffering of this mother and son is being replayed in the suffering of the father and son – Abraham and Isaac – when they ascend to Mount Moriah. Of course, there are transcendent reasons why Abraham must now undergo this particular test involving the sacrifice of his son, but the fact remains that, given the principle of 'measure for measure – ' the tit-for-tat approach of biblical Jewish theology – we can discern a cause-and-effect link between the explicit torment of Hagar and Ishmael and the implicit torment of Abraham and Isaac.

Sarah was concerned about Ishmael's negative influence: "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had born unto Abraham, mocking." The word used for mocking is 'metzachek', the present tense of the future form of Yitzhak (Isaac). According to the commentaries, Ishmael's act of mockery was linked to adultery, idolatry and murder – immediate hedonistic gratification with no thought of ensuing punishment. Therefore, Sarah decides that Hagar and Ishmael are to be sent away, Yitzhak (delayed joy) dare not be mixed with the metzachek (joy now), and God Himself commands Abraham to listen to his wife. However, neither God nor Sarah insisted that the banished mother and son receive only minimal provisions for their desert sojourn. It was Abraham who sent them off with only "bread and a skin-vessel of water." Rashi notes that, at the very least, Abraham should have sent them off with gold and silver. Abraham was condemning his concubine and son to an inevitable death, and indeed they would have died had it not been for the angel who showed Hagar the well of water after hearing her and her son's cries of desperation.

A careful reading of the biblical text strengthens the parallels between Hagar's journey with Ishmael and Abraham's journey with Isaac. The exact same phrase, "And Abraham rose up early in the morning (va-yashkem Avraham ba-boker)," is used when Abraham rises to give Hagar her supplies, and then again, when Abraham rises to start his journey with Isaac toward Mount Moriah. Abraham places the bread and jug of water on Hagar's shoulder, and Abraham places the wood on Isaac's back. Hagar wanders in the desert with Ishmael and Abraham goes to an uncertain place for the binding. An angel in the guise of a deus ex machina saves Ishmael's life and an angel in the guise of a deus ex machina saves Isaac's life. The striking parallelism between these accounts would suggest that the God of Justice makes Isaac the vehicle that enables Abraham to empathize, albeit only later, with the very anguish that Hagar must have experienced with Ishmael as a result of Abraham's insensitivity.

The interconnection between Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael is a recurrent biblical theme. Even before the banishment, once Hagar became pregnant, she began to treat Sarah condescendingly: 'her mistress (Sarah) was despised in her eyes. 'When Sarah complains to her husband, Abraham tells her that she can do whatever she wants with her maid – and Sarah over-reacts: 'And Sarah dealt harshly with her (Hagar) and she fled from before her.'

The commentaries pay particular attention to Sarah's harsh behavior and Abraham's benign neglect. Radak writes as follows:

"Sarai acted neither in accordance with the trait of ethical conduct, nor in accordance with the trait of piety; she was unethical because, even though Abraham relinquished his own honor and said to her, 'Do with her (Hagar) what is good in your eyes, 'she should have stayed her hand out of respect for Abraham, and not have caused (Hagar) to suffer. And she didn't act out of piety or goodness of soul because it's not proper for a person to exercise all one's power against another who is in his service. A wise man says, 'How goodly is forgiveness whenever it is possible. 'And therefore, what Sarai did was not good in the eyes of God. And Abraham didn't stop Sarai from treating Hagar badly, even though he knew it was wrong, in order to maintain domestic peace in the house. This entire narrative is written in the Torah in order to teach a person to 'keep away from the bad'…" (Radak on Gen. 16:6)

Radak refuses to condone Abraham and Sarah's behaviour toward Hagar, and his commentary reminds us how we are not to behave. Nahmanides concurs with the Radak, and goes one step further, insisting that Ishmael's descendants will do to us what Sarah did to his mother. On the verse, 'And Sarah dealt harshly with her, 'he writes:

"Our mother (Sarah) transgressed by dealing harshly, and Abraham also transgressed by allowing her (Sarah) to do so. And so, God heard her (Hagar's) affliction and gave her a son who would be a 'wild ass of a man, 'to afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all kinds of torments." (Nahmanides, ibid.)

Long before the Akeda, Isaac and Ishmael are intimately connected with each other. Not only are they – and only they – both given names by God, but they both become significant patriarchal figures. We know that the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be blessed, but the fact is that Abraham's son Ishmael is blessed even before he is born. 'And the angel of God said unto her (Hagar), "I will greatly multiply your seed, and they shall not be numbered for multitude. '"Isaac's son, Jacob, may become the father of twelve tribes, but this privilege is also granted to Abraham's other son: 'And as for Ishmael…behold I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly, twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation '(Gen. 17:20).

The Torah hints that Isaac was aware of the injustice committed toward Hagar and

Ishmael, and identified closely with God's consideration and compassion for Ishmael. The geographical location where Ishmael's life was saved and where God revealed Himself to the banished mother and son was Be'er-lachai-ro'i. This place becomes significant throughout Isaac's life. Rebecca initially meets Isaac, her future husband, as he emerges from his meditations in the fields "from the way of Be'er-lachai-ro'i…"

What was Isaac doing in Be'er-lachai-ro'i? And why is it important for the Torah to tell us this now? According to Rashi, Isaac had gone there to bring Hagar back to Abraham so that he could marry her. It was almost as if Isaac attempted to compensate for the pain she (and Ishmael) had been made to endure previously. His mother Sarah had been instrumental in sending Hagar away, but now Isaac is instrumental in bringing her back. And Rashi goes on to inform us that the identity of Abraham's second wife, Keturah, is indeed Hagar, suggesting that Isaac had successfully started the process of reconciliation.

Furthermore, after Abraham's burial, which was taken care of by both brothers equally, we read an extraordinary verse, "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son, and Isaac dwelt by Be'er-lachai-ro'i." It is as though the text is teaching that Isaac becomes worthy of the ultimate blessing only after he atones for the injustice done to Hagar and Ishmael at Be'er-lachai-ro'i.

Isaac's son is Jacob – Israel, father of the covenantal nation of twelve tribes, inheritor of the Promised Land. And there is room in that land for Isaac and Ishmael together as long as the 'wild ass of a man, whose hand is against every one, 'ceases to be a metzachek, one who lusts after immediate gratification. And indeed, the Sages of the Midrash teach that Ishmael does return to his father Abraham in penitence, as the Bible records: "And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him at the Machpela Cave…" (Gen. 25:9, Rashi ad loc).

Conversely, God will continue to hear the pain of the descendants of Ishmael until the descendants of Isaac act toward the descendants of Ishmael in righteousness (Yisra-el, yashar-el, God is righteous). The destiny of Israel is apparently a function of how the descendants of these two brothers learn to relate to each other. And the ultimate destiny of our nation and the world will only be realized when the two sons of Abraham live together in peace, 'and on the face of all his brothers shall his (Ishmael's) portion fall ' (Gen. 25:18).

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Dystopia

I never thought that I would begin a discussion of the weekly Torah portion by referring to a person who was canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church. Never, that is, until I sat down to write this week's Person in the Parsha column.

The person in question is Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), the great jurist and counselor to the notorious King Henry VIII, who was beheaded because of his insistence that the Catholic Church was his supreme religious authority, and not King Henry.

I have long admired Sir Thomas because of his courage and also because of his wisdom. One example of the latter is the following quotation, which remains one of my all-time favorites: "The ordinary arts we practice every day at home are of more importance to the soul than their simplicity might suggest."

Although those words of wisdom could themselves serve as the basis for an essay, it is another one of More's contributions to the world's culture that prompts me to begin this column by mentioning him. More earned a prominent place in the history of world literature because of his classic work, Utopia. In this work, More imagines the ideal society, one that is perfectly just and fair. Indeed, More coined the word "utopia," which has become part of our everyday parlance.

Centuries after More's martyrdom, at least two of his countrymen found it necessary to seek a word which would signify a perfectly evil society. They searched for an antonym to "utopia." In the early 19th century, Jeremy Bentham introduced the word "cacotopia," defining it as a nightmare society in which morals mean nothing. Bentham's follower, the philosopher John Stuart Mill, preferred the term "dystopia." It is Mills' term that has prevailed as the antonym of choice for "utopia." Subsequent philosophers have found it ironic that this nightmare world often results from attempts to create an ideal society.

This week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayera (Genesis 18:1-22:24) tells the story of what was the world's first "dystopia," Sodom. We first encounter this "nightmare society" in last week's parsha, Parshat Lech Lecha. There, we read of Lot's decision to leave his Uncle Abram's company and "pitch his tents near Sodom." Immediately, the Torah interjects: "Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked and sinful against the Lord." (Genesis 13:13) The careful reader of this phrase wonders, "What exactly did they do to deserve such a malignant biblical review? What behaviors were so wicked and sinful?"

The rabbinic commentators, from the Talmud and Midrash down to our very own times, expand upon this description of Sodom and fill in some of the details for us. Rashi briefly summarizes some of the Talmud's views: "They were wicked with their bodies, sinful with their material possessions, and were intentionally rebellious against God." They violated sexual mores, were unethical in their business dealings, and based their behavior upon a corrupt theology.

The great medieval commentator, Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher, elaborates even further by referring to a passage in the Book of Ezekiel that provides us with some further background as to the nature of Sodom. The passage reads: "Behold, 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. In their haughtiness, they committed abominations before Me; and so I removed them, as you saw." (Ezekiel 16:49-50) The prophet informs us that Sodom was an affluent society which could easily have been charitable to others; yet they enacted laws against charity. They were untroubled, at peace because of their military power, yet they isolated themselves from less fortunate neighboring societies. They committed moral abominations.

Rabbenu Bachya continues, "Although the Torah had not yet been revealed, simple human reason demands charitable deeds and moral behavior. It is despicable that one human would stand idly by as another human suffers from hunger. How can one who has been blessed with bountiful wealth not alleviate another person's poverty? How much more despicable is he who ignores one of his own people, one who dwells within his own community."

Our Sages assert that Sodom and the three cities that were her cohorts were denied a place in the World to Come. It was not because they were a lawless society that they deserved this extreme punishment. Quite the contrary—they had an elaborate legal and judicial system. But their laws were based upon intolerance, selfishness, and cruelty. Our Sages tell us that their laws were enforced by means of the most sadistic tortures imaginable.

Abraham's weltanschauung was the polar opposite of Sodom's. Is it not astounding, then, that he pleaded with the Almighty for Sodom's salvation? After all, if the antonym for utopia is dystopia, then Abrahamism is the antonym for Sodomism. Yet Abraham prayed for Sodom!

Commentators throughout the ages have sought to understand why Abraham supposed that there might be fifty, or even ten, righteous

men in such a thoroughly corrupt society. One approach to this problem is attributed to Rabbi Isaiah Jungreis, author of the work Chazon Yeshayahu, a profound and original thinker whose life was snuffed out by the Nazis in 1944.

He argues that, paradoxically, the comprehensiveness and totality of Sodom's evil was precisely what Abraham used in its defense. He puts these words into Abraham's mouth: "Almighty Lord! Is it not conceivable that there are indeed fifty individuals in Sodom who recognize the cruel and evil nature of their society but who cannot protest, because their own lives would then be in danger? Surely these well-intentioned but impotent individuals deserve to be considered righteous individuals in whose merit all of Sodom should be saved!"

Rabbi Jungreis suggests that the Almighty's responded as follows: "Yes, dear Abraham. He who opposes evil but does not protest because he fears for his own life is a righteous person. But there were not fifty, nor even ten, individuals in all of Sodom with troubled consciences. It was not the coercive nature of their environment that prevented them from speaking out. It was their evil and sinful behavior."

I am not qualified to debate Rabbi Jungreis, a keen student of biblical texts and a kadosh, a martyr, of the Holocaust. I concur with his hypothesis regarding Abraham's argument. Abraham may very well have argued that those who fail to protest in order to protect their own lives should be considered righteous men.

But I take issue with his conjecture regarding the Almighty's response. I find the following Divine response more likely: "Abraham, dear Abraham! A person who finds himself in an evil society must voice protest, whatever the cost, if he is to be considered righteous. There may very well have been ten, or fifty, or perhaps even more, residents of Sodom who were aware that theirs was a morally corrupt environment. Arguably, those men should not be considered evil. But there is no way that they can be considered righteous. A righteous person speaks out courageously against the evil that surrounds him. Trust me, Abraham, had anyone in Sodom broken the conspiracy of silence which allowed evil to persist, I, the Lord Almighty would have hastened to assist him in his cause."

It was not only Sodom's evil that God could not tolerate. It was also the silence in the face of that evil. And that silence ultimately excluded all of Sodom from the World to Come.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Passions Corrupt Good Judgement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Divine Benefit of the Doubt

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

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

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

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

As the Rambam writes (Gerushin 2:20), every Jew wants to do the right thing. It is only our yetzer harah (evil inclination) that sometimes gets in the way of our positive intentions. The Rambam paskens that when Beis Din decides that a person is obligated to give a get (divorce document) to his wife and he refuses to do so, they can whip him "until he says 'I agree to do so.'" Under normal circumstances, a "coerced get " is invalid. The Rambam explains why this is a valid get. He explains that deep down, the Jew wants to be part of the Jewish people and fulfill all the mitzvos and distance himself from aveiros. However, he is overcome by his yetzer harah. When he is beaten by Beis Din, that weakens the hold of the yetzer harah over him, causing his true will, to follow the will of Hashem, to come to the fore.

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

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

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

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

The Most Irrelevant Instruction?

In Jewish law, this appears to be the most irrelevant instruction. In the Shulchan Auruch, Orach Chaim, chapter 218, we are given details of blessings, and our sages tell us that when one is standing at a place where a terrible tragedy took place, we should recite the bracha of Dayan Ha'emet, blessing God who is the true judge. And then if one is standing at a place where a great miracle took place, one recites the blessing in which one praises God for saving people's lives.

It is in that context that the Shulchan Auruch says, if you happen to be in the area of the Dead Sea and you come across the pillar of salt which was once Lot's wife, then you recite two blessings. First of all, Dayan Ha'emet, because that is where she died and it is in that area that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah and other cities perished. But also, you should recite a blessing through which we praise God, who performed a great miracle, because it was right in that place where Lot and his daughters were saved.

Now, what are the chances that you, or I, or anybody, might actually come across the pillar of salt which used to be Lot's wife? I think it is practically zero! Yet, this is a halacha in our code of Jewish law!

But actually, here our Rabbis are imparting an exceptionally important message to us about the rhythm of life.

In Jewish history, tragically, we have had so many awful experiences and at the same time, God has continued to bless the Jewish people always. Is that not what we have experienced since Shmini Atzeret, 7th of October of 2023? And right now, we continue to mourn the loss of people, to identify with former hostages and others who have suffered so bitterly. We look Heavenwards and we say God, You are the Dayan Emet, You are the true judge. But together with this, we recognise how many extraordinary miracles have happened to individuals, to families, to communities, to the state of Israel and to the Jewish people. This is what the rhythm of Jewish life is all about.

So, at those moments when we feel so low, when we contemplate the awful scenarios which we have endured, let us not forget to highlight the incredible extent to which Hashem has truly been with our people, and has saved us. From that pillar of salt, let us draw inspiration by recognising how great Almighty God is, to guarantee that Am Yisrael Chai.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

When Excess Light Causes Blindness

Rabbi Yoni Hollander

A close look at the episode of the angels and the destruction of Sodom can teach us something profound about human nature — what each of us can learn from it, and what we must be cautious about.

The Torah tells us that the wicked people of Sodom surrounded Lot's house, demanding that he bring out the guests who had come to him. In response, they were struck with blindness and wearied themselves trying to find the entrance. It is worth noting that in modern Hebrew, the word sanverim (blindness) connotes an excess of light that obscures vision — an interpretation that aligns with the mystical reading of the Zohar:

"When the supernal light is revealed, the eyes of those below are blinded" (Zohar, Vayera 105b).

In other words, when Divine light shines forth too intensely, it overwhelms those unable to receive it. (This stands in contrast to the literal commentators, who interpret sanverim simply as blindness unrelated to light.)

In any case, this extraordinary phenomenon should have naturally infused fear into the people of Sodom. And so, it is surprising that immediately after this miraculous infliction, Lot went out to speak to his sons-in-law, warning them that the city was about to be destroyed — yet they scoffed at him: "But he seemed as one speaking in mockery unto his sons-in-law."

The Shem MiShmuel (Rabbi Shmuel Bornsztain of Sochaczew, 1856–1926) asks:

"'He seemed as one speaking in mockery unto his sons-in-law' — and one surely marvels at this reaction, for they saw with their own eyes a great wonder, that the entire city, from young to old, was struck with blindness and could not find the entrance though they stood right beside it. Surely this should have aroused some fear in their hearts — perhaps worse might still befall them! Why then did his words seem as mockery in their eyes?"

Why indeed did Lot's warning seem like a jest? Had they not already witnessed the

people of the city struck with blindness? How could they not suspect that Lot might be right?

The Shem Mishmuel's answer is striking:

"It appears that this too was part of the infliction of blindness — just as physically they saw yet could not find the entrance, so too in the inner sense they saw the wonder yet could not really take it to heart."

In other words, their blindness was not merely physical but also cognitive — they could see, yet failed to pay attention to what they saw. Thus, Lot's sons-in-law remained complacent and dismissive.

The Shem MiShmuel continues:

"This is a lesson for man — there are many times and circumstances when, if one were to truly pay attention, one would see the wondrous deeds of God Almighty, and take notice of His providence as well as His system of reward and punishment. But when a person, in the stubbornness of his heart, walks in darkness, he becomes struck with blindness — seeing, yet not seeing. And in our own times, anyone can behold the wonders of the changing of eras, the turmoil of nations, the fall of kingdoms, and the wondrous individual providence hovering over every person — therefore one must guard himself from the plague of blindness."

These words were written by the Rebbe of Sochaczew in 1920, two years after the end of World War I. He spoke of the need to take note of the great shifts in the world's geopolitical order following the war — and how such awareness should deepen one's faith in Divine providence and in God's system of reward and punishment.

Today, one hundred and five years later, we are privileged to read his words after witnessing the fall of so many nations and kingdoms and the dramatic upheavals of recent years. We too must take these words to heart — and not become blinded by the overwhelming light of Divine kindness.

Indeed, our Sages foresaw this very danger. A well-known Midrash — which in recent years has been set to song (Anavim) — describes how Eliyahu stands atop the roof of the Beit HaMikdash and proclaims to the people of Israel (Yalkut Shimoni on Yeshayahu 499):

"Our Rabbis taught: At the moment when the Mashiach comes, he will stand upon the roof of the Temple and proclaim to Israel, saying: 'Humble ones, the time of your redemption has come! And if you do not believe — see My light that shines upon you.'"

There lies a danger that the very light of redemption — shining upon the people of Israel in the time of redemption — might itself blind them, leaving them unable to recognize it for what it is.

The Shem MiShmuel teaches us that it is possible to be spared from this blindness; one can learn how to truly see, to notice, to give thanks for the great miracles. We believe that it is not enough to stand aside and merely witness this vision with gratitude — we must also become partners in spreading that light throughout the world.

May we merit to behold the new light that shines upon Zion — and may we not be blinded by it.

"The time of your redemption has come; and if you do not believe — see My light that shines upon you."

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Hershel Schachter

We Need to Daven

In Parshas Breishis (2:5), the Torah tells us that no vegetation was growing yet because there was no rain. Rashi quotes the Medrash Breishis Rabbah which explains that Hakodosh Baruch Hu withheld rain until he created Adam Harishon, who would understand the need for rain and offer a tefillah.

There is an old minhag recorded in Shulchan Aruch to recite parshas ha'mon every day. The basis of the minhag is that we should always keep in mind the fact that parnasah comes directly from Hashem. Hashem wants people to daven not because He needs their tefillos but rather because man needs tefillah. When we daven, we recognize that Hashem is in full control of everything and that we have the ability and the right to ask Him to take care of all of our needs.

In the opening chapter in Sefer Shmuel the story is told of Elkonah who had two wives, Peninah, who had seven children, and Chanah, who had no children. The Gemarah (Bava Basra 16A) interprets the passuk to mean that Penina would tease Chanah and aggravate her l'shaim Shomayim to get her to offer tefillos to have children.

In Parshas Vayera (18:17) the Torah tells us that Hashem thought to himself that it is not proper that he should destroy Sodom and Amorah without first notifying Avraham Avinu. In the commentary Pitochei Chosom by Rabbi Abuchazirah, this is understood to imply that Hashem wanted Avraham Avinu to pray for the people of Sodom. Avraham did so, and according to the Midrash, it is only because of the prayers of Avraham that Lot and his two daughters were spared. The daughters of Lot thought that the entire world was destroyed, they and their father were the only survivors, and for that reason they thought that they had to act to preserve mankind. But the Torah tells us explicitly (19:29) that they were only spared in the zechus of Avraham. Avrohom's tefillos did not help to save the rest of the people who lived in the five cities, but his prayers did accomplish saving Lot and his two daughters.

Sometimes Hashem will see to it that an individual should be elected to an official capacity in order that we should realize that we all have a need to daven. Throughout our lives we ought to daven for what we need - single people have to daven that they get the proper shidduch (Tehilim 32:6), married people have to daven for healthy children, etc. And now we should all daven that government officials should be given the wisdom to treat the Jewish people properly.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah
by Rabbi Label Lam

NU!?

And HASHEM appeared to him in the Orchards of Mamre and he was sitting by the opening of the tent in the heat of the day… (Breishis 18:1-3)

Can we find a greater portrait and all-time model for generosity than the team of Avraham and Sara!? It's no wonder they were chosen as the founders for a new world order built on the principle of doing acts of kindliness for others. Where did Avraham learn the importance of Hachnasis Orchim, sheltering guests and caring for their needs? I asked this question at the Shabbos table thinking it would stump everyone, but one of our little granddaughters answered immediately and without hesitation, "From HASHEM, Who hosts us in his world!" Avraham observed about the world that everything in creation has a precise plan and purpose, and he wondered to himself, "What is the purpose of me being aware of this?" He came to the conclusion that his function and our purpose is to emulate the Creator, to the greatest extent possible, and serve other people. That was the genesis of his career in hospitality.

Many years ago, when I was to leave the holy walls of the Yeshiva to venture out to New York City for work, I was confronted with a problem. How was I to arrive at an early enough time having already prayed the morning prayers? We have a solution to that challenge. It's called the "Davening Bus"! No, the bus doesn't Daven for us. We Daven on the bus! My first time doing this, I mistakenly strategized that I would meet the bus at the last stop before the highway. I realized how wrong this was.

I was the last person to get on and there was one seat left. It was a window seat and the fellow in the aisle was a man two or three times my size. He stepped out so I could take my place. Immediately when I sat down it became clear to me why this seat was still available. There were no springs in the cushion and so I sank almost to the floor. Then I reached up to that little light that sends a laser like beam on your small travel Siddur only to discover it didn't work either. In that dark and cramped corner, I struggled to put on my Talis and Tefillin.

By the time I was as set as I could be, the bus was on the highway and in high gear and so was the Minyan. I was saying some preliminary blessings and they were already deep into "Pesukei D'zimra". By the time I was up to that point they were already saying "SHEMA!" I was still trying to catch up.

When I finally reached "SHEMA!" and I was grasping and kissing the Tzitzis with love and devotion something unexpected happened. The bus came to a grinding halt by the side of the highway so everyone could comfortably stand for the silent Amida. The giant of a fellow who had been pressing up against me stood up and I immediately felt great relief but then for some reason he turned to me and asked with an almost hostile urgency that two-letter question that Jews ask each other all over the planet, "NU!? NU!?"

I looked up at him with wonder. I thought to myself, "What does he want from me? Have I been pressing him against the window for the past 25 minutes?" He persisted, "NU!? NU?!" Then it dawned on me that I was kissing his and my Tsitsis together."

I whimsically shared with a well-known Hebrew language linguist a cute theory I have about that expression, "NU?!" Words that express "us" tend to end with "nu" like the word for "us" "anachnu". We usually use that nudging expression, "NU!?" when someone is acting like an "I" and there's a pressing need to remind him of others, "NU!? I think he liked the idea and he said to me approvingly, "Nu-Nu!"

The Gemara tells us that after 120 we will have to answer 6 questions. One will be, "Were you busy in being fruitful and multiplying?" The Maharal explains that it is not about how many children a person had but rather about whether one was "YACHID or RABIM". Were we self-involved or "others"- oriented. Some of our greatest people never had children of their own, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Chazon Ish, the Ribnitzer Rebbe, but what if we were to ask, "Were they YACHID or were they RABIM?" NU!?

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez - Why G-d Tests Us

In this week's parasha, we read: "VeHaElokim nisa et Avraham" – G-d tested Avraham. Why must faith be proven through challenge? Why must we, as individuals and as a people, endure so many tests?

As the last members of Daniel's tank crew are finally brought home, Rav Doron reflects on this question. The trials faced by Avraham Avinu – and by Am Yisrael – are not punishments, but opportunities to reveal hidden strength.

The Ramban teaches that a nisayon allows a person to draw from the deepest recesses of the soul – to discover faith, courage, and resilience they didn't know they had. The Rambam adds that a nisayon also raises a nes – a banner – showing others what faith and strength can look like, even in the darkest times.

Over these past years, the Jewish people have faced extraordinary trials – yet have revealed extraordinary strength. We don't choose our tests. We can only choose how we respond to them.

May Hashem bless all the families who have endured so much.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

Tradition and Innovation

I find myself returning again and again to the theme of tradition and innovation in Judaism. We are incessantly bombarded by shrill cries for change from the religious Left, as if a truncated tradition is equivalent to progress, as if "adaptation" is a magic word that will solve all our problems. At the same time, I am perplexed and even vexed by the doctrinaire inertia and resistance in some circles to the least change, as if the fact that something never has been done is sufficient reason never to do it. I am proud and happy to be part of an unbroken tradition of law and teaching and worship and philosophy that overarches the generations, that links me through my parents and grandparents with the Rishonim and Tannaim on to Moses and Abraham. But I am distressed when "tradition" becomes an excuse for insensitivity to new needs, for refusing to confront new issues.

The whole subject of change is, of course, too large to discuss within the confines of a sermon. So let us set down certain axioms: we are not talking about the Halakhah. In Halakhah, change is generally not the accepted rule. The few places where it can take place require a high degree of technical competence, and cannot be decided by plebiscite. But I am concerned by the tendency of some people, especially religious folk, to act as if the world never changes, who evince symptoms of the hardening of cultural and social arteries, and who fear that any deviation in procedure – which they themselves may have set down some years earlier – will wreak havoc in the Upper Worlds. What ought to be said about these other, non-halakhic aspects of our problem?

First, it is important to stress that while there is little likelihood of significant change in the Halakhah, it demands of us that we change! When you stop changing, you stop growing, and when you stop growing, you in effect stop living. Of course, tradition – the Tradition – encourages innovation and change within us, and calls it, teshuvah, repentance. Spiritually, the Jew must always be in a state of flux, in movement, in dynamic progress.

Furthermore, not only individuals spiritually, but institutions organizationally should always be open to change. I am often aghast at the institutional inertia of Jewish organizations in the United States. Why, for instance, should an organization that was successful 20, 30, and 40 years ago in absorbing Jewish immigrants in this country, insist that the same techniques and the same approaches must be used for Russian Jews today – ignoring the profound changes in the nature of immigration?

In my travels, I have come across many synagogues. Sometimes, I chance upon a synagogue which openly flouts sacred Jewish law, which treats with studied neglect the cumulative wisdom of the most profound minds of jurists and philosophers and saints and sages of the centuries. Halakhah is ignored casually, and Jewish law is dismissed cavalierly. Yet the slightest deviation from the accepted procedure that the Board of Directors or some synagogue committee or some rabbi set down a number of years ago, as to how the Cantor marches or the Rabbi dresses or the President sits or the Chairman of the Board conducts meetings – such a deviation is considered dangerously radical and psychologically unnerving, and is often the cause for major crisis and trauma, frequently resulting in part of the membership breaking off and forming a new synagogue.

I see the signs of such senseless fixations, although in the extreme, in today's Sidra. When the angels hurried Lot and his family out of Sodom, prior to its being ravaged by fire and brimstone, Lot and his family were warned not to look backwards upon Sodom while it was being destroyed. The wife of Lot was unable to suppress her curiosity and she violated the command of the angels, whereupon ותהי לנציב מלח, she became a pillar of salt. The Rabbis of the Midrash, quoted by Rashi, wonder why this specific punishment, that of salt, was chosen. They say: במלח חטאה אמר לה תני מעט מלח לאורחים הללו. ובמלח לקתה.

אף המנהג הזה אתה בא להנהיג במקום הזה, אמרה לו? Lot, when the angels came to him disguised as human guests, asked his wife to serve the guests a bit of salt. She responded: "Since when do you want to establish this new, evil custom in this place?" And so, since she sinned with salt, she was punished by being turned into salt.

I see in this more than a just criticism of inhospitality. The wife of Lot was conservative to the point of being reactionary. She was so fixated upon old and conventional patterns of conduct that she became mindless and heartless, insisting upon them even when they violated the most elementary rules of human conduct and ethical living, Sodom had an old custom of turning away strangers, and she resented the effort of Lot to change the "sacrosanct ways of her community. Not only was salt a sin and punishment, but it was also the symbol of her psychological attitude. Salt is a crystalline chemical which is very difficult to change. Whether you heat salt or freeze it, dissolve it or mix it, it is unchanging and inflexible and immutable. Salt it was, and salt it remains. Salt symbolizes the lifeless rigidity of Lot's wife. No wonder the Torah describes the event with the words ותבט אשתו מאחריו, "his wife looked behind him." She was always looking backwards, consulting the unchanging past as a guide to an equally unchanging, hide-bound future.

But while it is fairly simple to agree that, spiritually and institutionally, innovation and change and renewal are important, the real problem of tradition vs. innovation in Judaism takes place in the realm of minhag, sacred custom.

Consult yourself, your own attitudes and experience, and you will appreciate that most of us are ambivalent about revered custom. In Jewish literature, too, you find elaborated two general opinions or attitudes. Thus, we frequently hear such words as מנהג הלכה היא (custom becomes halakhah); מנהג אבותינו תורה (the custom of our ancestors becomes Torah); or the words of the Jerusalem Talmud, מנהג מבטל הלכה(custom can nullify a halakhah). And yet, on the other side, we often hear great rabbis refer to particular customs as מנהג שטות, silly or stupid or foolish customs. Rabbenu Tam, the famous Tosafist, in reply to another French rabbi who tried to prove his point by appealing to local usage, said that מנהג למפרע גהנם, when you rearrange the four Hebrew letters that make up the word מנהג, you emerge with the word גהנם, Hell!

Judaism, all religion, all tradition – whether Halakhah or minhag – are necessarily conservative. That is the way religion has to be, and that is the way it ought to be – for at least two good reasons: first, psychologically it gives us a sense of continuity amidst all the flux and vicissitudes of life. Second, there is an innate wisdom in this conservatism of the tradition. It understands, and teaches us, that not all changes in custom and lifestyle and manners and thinking and mores are worthy or even permanent. Make an experiment: look through the last 15 or 18 years of Time magazine, and you will notice the extremely rapid succession of ideas and fashions and fads. The closer you come to today, the shorter the lifespan of each fashion in any field, whatever. And then look in their "Religion" section, and you will become convinced of the pitiful and almost comic attempts of religious leaders to "keep up" and become the most "trendy" segment of society! The result is what has been called "mood theology," and there is hardly anything that is more ludicrous.

Yet, there are areas where perceptions change, where style and not principle is involved, where the issues are neither halakhah nor sacred minhag-that-is-Torah – but simply old usage that was lucky enough to survive without much to commend it. In such cases, to be immovable is to be unthinking, and to be unbending is to risk repelling new faces and new ideas, and losing Jews.

I, for one, do not aspire to be "with it." But neither do I regard it as a virtue to be without it, or outside it…

An example of an area where we must decide between tradition and innovation is the institution of Bat Mitzvah. I am speaking, of course, within the realms of halakhic permissibility. Thus, I refer to a Bat Mitzvah ceremony which is not performed in the synagogue proper, and in which an appropriate Torah spirit prevails. But what of the idea itself, what of the celebration as such?

One of the great decisors of our generation, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, א"שליט, is unhappy about the Bat Mitzvah ceremony. If he permits it, it is only with the greatest reluctance. The late, eminent halakhic scholar, Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, of blessed memory, writes that some people are opposed to it simply because it is an innovation: "because it is against the custom of earlier generations which did not establish his tradition." But he himself adds the following:

כי בדורות הראשונים לפנינו לא, אבל באמת אין זו טענה הצטרכו לעסוק בחינוך הבנות וכמעט שינקו את היהדות משדי אימותיהן. נשתנו הדורות. שורת ההגיון הישר וחובת העקרון הפדגוגי מחייב כמעט לחוג גם לבת היגעתן למצוות.

But in truth, this is no argument, because in the generations that preceded us, there was no need to worry about the education of girls, for they absorbed Judaism with their mother's milk. But times have changed. Straight reasoning and pedagogical understanding almost obligate us to celebrate for girls the occasion when she becomes bat mitzvah.

My own feeling is that I would once have discouraged it, even though it is halakhically unobjectionable. Today, I accept it cheerfully – provided the young lady recites divrei Torah so as to distinguish it from an ordinary birthday party – but I neither encourage nor discourage it. Some day in the near future, I suspect, I may actively encourage young ladies to celebrate the Bat Mitzvah.

Thus, I feel that this is an innovation which is becoming more meaningful and will have to be accepted.

Yet I would also confess this publicly: I would prefer to undo the whole thing! And not only this, but I would like to discourage, actively and resolutely, both the Bat Mitzvah and the Bar Mitzvah! Both of them entail too much hilul Shabbat (Sabbath desecration), too much exhibitionism, too much expense, too much vicarious spending and conspicuous consumption – and too little Torah, too little piety, too little seriousness, too little continuity.

Finally, with regard to local customs and usages that we find in any institution, my rule is this: if it has value, keep it. If it no longer has much value – keep it anyway. But if it is counterproductive, remove it without giving it a second thought. A מנהג שטות is an unnecessary burden, and it is foolish to retain it.

For instance, to take a rather trivial subject, but one that externally distinguishes services at The Jewish Center: the formal clothing we wear, as part of our Western European heritage. If these formal בגדי שבת(Sabbath clothes) have any meaning, let us continue them. I believe it has such value. This particular outfit lends distinction to our perception of the holiness of the Sabbath, and it esthetically enhances our כיבוד שבת, our reverence for the Sabbath, which, according to the Rabbis, is expressed in special clothing. Were it to lose such meaning, I would keep it anyway, because continuity even in externals has a certain psychological value that we ought not ignore. But were it somehow – because of changing circumstances and differing styles and insights – to work against the idea of Torah and Shabbat, to injure the image of Judaism, I would have no hesitation in abandoning it in favor of some other form that is more functional in expressing our true and genuine religious sentiment.

So the parameters are fairly well set. In Halakhah, we almost always prefer tradition over innovation. Spiritually, we must always be changing and progressing. Institutionally, we should prefer innovation over tradition as a

way to endless renewal. In the area of minhag, we must make responsible and informed choices at all times. I am biased towards the general preservation of traditional forms, but not towards מנהג שטות, foolish customs. I am in favor of the beauty and sometimes the sanctity of ancient usage, but I am aware too that simple repetition of any act over a period of time can mortally weaken our reactions and sensitivities, and can cause the dead hand of the past to strangle any initiative of the present. I do not look with favor upon that kind of minhag about which Rabbenu Tam said, מנהג למפרע גהנם.

So, I want the past to be alive, not dead, and the new to be religiously significant – not just change for novelty's sake.

All of this can be summed up in the famous words of the sainted Rav Kook: הקדוש יתחדש והחדש יתקדש, "The sacred shall be renewed, and the new shall be sanctified."



BS"D

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Adapted and summarized by CS based primarily on ***הגות בפרשיות התורה by R' Yehudah Nachshoni*** *and* ***עיונים חדשים בספר בראשית*** *by* ***Prof. Nechama Leibowitz***

Why Did Hashem Appear to Avraham?

The parsha begins וַיֵּרָא אליו ה' באלני ממרא - *Hashem appeared to him at Eilonei Mamre* (Vayeira 18:1). But the Torah does not tell us why Hashem appeared. There is no command, no words and no message. The next thing that happens is that Avraham sees three visitors and runs to greet them.

That is unusual. Elsewhere in the Torah, when Hashem appears to one of His servants, there is a purpose: a command, a promise, a blessing, a warning or some other message. The revelation leads to something. Here the Torah simply says וירא אליו ה'. What was the purpose of Hashem's appearance if He apparently said nothing to Avraham?

1. Hashem Came to Visit the Sick

Rashi, following the Gemara in Sotah 14a and Bava Metzia 86b, gives Chazal's answer: לבקר את החולה - *to visit the sick*. Avraham was on the third day after his *bris milah*, and Hashem came to visit him. The Gemara in Sotah derives the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim* from this very pasuk: הקב"ה ביקר חולים דכתיב וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא אף אתה בקר חולים - *Hashem visited the sick, as it says, "Hashem appeared to him at Eilonei Mamre"; so too, you should visit the sick.*

Rabbeinu Bachya sees this connection in the wording itself. The Torah does not say וירא ה' אל אברהם - Hashem appeared to Avraham. It says **אליו** וירא - *He appeared to him*. אליו refers us back to the end of Lech Lecha, where Avraham had just circumcised himself and his household. The opening of Vayeira is therefore a continuation of the previous parsha. Avraham performed the *milah*, and Hashem came to visit him.

This point becomes especially important in understanding the approaches that follow. וירא אליו ה' may not be beginning an entirely new story. It may be telling us what happened because of what Avraham had just done.

2. The Milah Raised Avraham to a New Level

The **Malbim** points out something different in the unusual circumstances of the revelation. Avraham was not secluded and preparing himself for *nevuah*. He was sitting פתח האהל - *at the entrance of the tent*, among other people. It was כחם היום - *in the heat of the day*, and he was still weak from the *milah*. Yet Hashem appeared to him there. The Malbim understands these details as showing the level Avraham had reached. The *milah* had raised him to a point where he could experience the Shechinah even without the conditions normally associated with *nevuah*. He did not have to withdraw from the world and prepare himself in solitude. Hashem appeared to him while he was sitting at the entrance of his home. Contrast this with Bilam, who describes himself as נפל וגלוי עינים - *fallen, with uncovered eyes* (Balak 24:4). Hashem appeared to Bilam only at night and while he was fallen on his face. Avraham, after entering the *bris*, merited וירא אליו ה' while sitting at the entrance of his tent in broad daylight.

3. The Revelation Itself Was the Reward and Honor

Rabbeinu Chananel also connects the revelation to the milah, but adds that Hashem's appearance was not only bikkur cholim. It was also a reward for the mitzvah Avraham had performed.

The **Ramban** develops this idea much further and gives an answer that goes directly to our original question. Hashem did not need to appear in order to tell Avraham something. The appearance itself was the purpose.

Avraham had just performed the mitzvah of milah with mesirus nefesh. Hashem appeared to him למעלה ולכבוד לו - *to elevate and honor him*. Ramban describes the revelation as גמול במצוה הנעשית כבר - *a reward for a mitzvah that had already been performed*. Hashem's appearance showed that Avraham's act had been accepted.

Ramban compares this to the dedication of the Mishkan, where ויצאו ויברכו את העם וירא כבוד ה' אל כל העם - *they went out and blessed the people, and the glory of Hashem appeared to the entire people* (Shemini 9:23). The Shechinah did not appear there to give another command. Its appearance showed that Hashem had accepted what they had done.

The **Midrash Rabbah** (48:4) cited by Ramban makes the same point. מזבח אדמה תעשה לי וגו'... מה אם זה שבנה מזבח לשמי הריני נגלה עליו ומברכו אברהם שמל עצמו לשמי על אחת כמה וכמה וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא - *If*

one who built an altar for My name merits that I reveal Myself to him and bless him, Avraham, who circumcised himself for My sake, all the more so.

Nechama Leibowitz explains that this gives a deeper meaning to Chazal's לבקר את החולה. A visit does not always need some practical purpose. Sometimes the visit itself says what needs to be said: I am here with you.

According to Ramban, then, the fact that Hashem says nothing is not a difficulty. It is the answer. Hashem came not because He had something more to ask of Avraham, but because He wanted to honor him for what he had already done.

4. A New Bris

Sforno connects the appearance even more directly to the meaning of *milah*. Avraham had not simply performed another mitzvah. *Milah* was the sign of the *bris* between Avraham and Hashem. Avraham and his household had now entered that *bris*, and Hashem appeared to him as part of completing that relationship.

The Torah describes other covenants in similar terms: אתם נצבים היום כלכם לפני ה' אלקיכם לעברך בברית ה' אלקיך - *You are standing today before Hashem your God to enter the covenant of Hashem your God* (Nitzavim 29:9-11). Entering a *bris* means standing before Hashem. That may be what is happening here as well. Avraham performed the physical act of *milah* at the end of Lech Lecha. Vayeira begins with the other side of the *bris*: וירא אליו ה'. Avraham entered the covenant, and Hashem drew closer to him.

This also adds another dimension to Rashi's *bikkur cholim*. Hashem did not merely visit someone who was sick. He visited Avraham immediately after Avraham had entered the *bris* with Him. The visit itself expressed that new closeness.

5. From Receiving the Shechinah to Receiving Guests

This understanding of וירא אליו ה' gives special meaning to what happens next. Avraham is experiencing *kabbalas pnei haShechinah*. Hashem has appeared to him, according to Ramban, simply to honor him and show that his actions had found favor before Hashem. Then Avraham raises his eyes and sees three strangers.

Chazal in Shabbos 127a derive from what follows: גדולה הכנסת אורחים יותר מקבלת פני השכינה - *welcoming guests is greater than receiving the Shechinah.*

That statement is remarkable. Avraham is in the midst of an extraordinary experience of closeness to Hashem. Yet when he sees people who may need food, water and a place to rest, he does not remain absorbed in that experience. He runs toward them.

The Torah emphasizes this with repeated words of haste: וירץ לקראתם - *he ran toward them*. וימהר אברהם האהלה אל שרה - *Avraham hurried to the tent to Sarah*. מהרי שלש סאים קמח סלת - *hurry, prepare three measures of fine flour*. ואל הבקר רץ אברהם - *Avraham ran to the cattle*. וימהר לעשות אתו - *he hurried to prepare it.*

The Torah could have told us simply that Avraham served his guests. Instead, it repeatedly tells us that he ran and hurried. The Torah presents his hachnasas orchim as something done with extraordinary energy and urgency. He did not merely interrupt his encounter with the Shechinah because the guests needed him; he threw himself into caring for them.

This also gives the sequence of the pesukim a special meaning. Hashem's appearance had brought Avraham to a new level of closeness, but that closeness did not turn him inward. The moment he saw three people who needed him, his response was וירץ לקראתם - *he ran toward them*. Perhaps that is part of what Chazal mean when they say that hachnasas orchim is greater than *kabbalas pnei haShechinah*. The highest spiritual experience is not meant to remove a person from the needs of other people. In Avraham, closeness to Hashem expressed itself in how quickly he turned toward another person.

6. A Different Approach: Moreh Nevuchim

Rambam in ***Moreh Nevuchim*** II:42 understands וירא אליו ה' differently. It is not a separate appearance of Hashem before the angels arrive. Rather, it introduces the prophetic vision that the Torah then describes: Avraham looks up and sees the three angels. On this reading, the question of why Hashem appeared without saying anything does not arise in the same way. וירא אליו ה' introduces the vision, and the Torah then tells us what Avraham saw.

Conclusion

The main approaches above connect the opening of Vayeira to the *milah* at the end of Lech Lecha. Hashem came to visit Avraham in his illness. His appearance was a reward and an honor. The *milah* had raised Avraham to a new level and had established a new *bris* between him and Hashem.

Ramban gives particular meaning to the silence of וירא אליו ה'. Hashem did not need to say anything. The revelation itself was the honor. And at that moment of extraordinary closeness, Avraham saw three strangers and ran toward them. His closeness to Hashem did not draw him away from other people. It made him run toward them.

Adapted from

Minchas Asher, Vayeira

Bikur Cholim: The Mitzvah of the Visit Itself

The parsha begins וירא אליו ה' באלני ממרא - *Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre* (Vayeira 18:1). Rashi explains לבקר את החולה אמר רבי חמא בר חנינא יום שלישי למילתו היה ובא הקדוש ברוך הוא ושאל בשלומו - Hashem came to visit Avraham when he was ill; it was the third day after his milah, and Hashem came to ask how he was doing.

Why the Third Day?

The *Gur Aryeh* asks why Hashem waited until the third day after the milah. Avraham was certainly in pain before then. He explains that only on the third day was Avraham considered a חולה כל גופו - *a person whose whole body is affected*. This would suggest a major chiddush: perhaps the formal mitzvah of bikur cholim applies only when a person is a חולה כל גופו, and not when he is suffering only from one particular part of the body.

But this is difficult. Such a limitation is not stated by the poskim, and it is not obvious why there should be no mitzvah to visit someone who is suffering from a serious problem simply because it affects only one part of the body. The Yerushalmi does say about the third day after milah בהיותו כואב לא נאמר אלא בהיותם כואבים מלמד שכל איבריהם כואבים עליהם - *the Torah does not say "when he was in pain," but "when they were in pain," teaching that all their limbs were hurting*. That supports the idea that by the third day Avraham's whole body was affected, but whether bikur cholim is limited to such a case remains a chiddush.

The Gemara in Sotah 14a learns from Avraham the mitzvah of bikur cholim. On the pasuk אחרי ה' אלקיכם תלכו - *You shall follow Hashem your God*, the Gemara asks how it is possible for a person to follow Hashem. It answers that we are commanded to follow His middos: מה

הקדוש ברוך הוא ביקר חולים דכתיב וירא אליו ה' באלני ממרא אף אתה בקר חולים - *just as Hashem visited the sick, as it says, "Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre," so too you should visit the sick*.

We find other sources as well. The Gemara in Bava Metzia 30b says והודעת להם זה בית חייהם את הדרך זו גמילות חסדים ילכו זה ביקור חולים - *"You shall make known to them" refers to their livelihood, "the way" refers to gemilus chasadim, and "they shall walk" refers to bikur cholim*. Nedarim 39b also speaks of a רמז לביקור חולים מן התורה - *a basis in the Torah for bikur cholim*.

There is a dispute, however, whether the specific mitzvah of bikur cholim is itself מן התורה. The Behag and Ramban understand bikur cholim to be a Torah obligation. The Rambam (Hilchos Avel 14:1), on the other hand, writes מצות עשה של דבריהם לבקר חולים ולנחם אבלים - *visiting the sick and comforting mourners are positive mitzvos instituted by Chazal*. He then adds that אף על פי שכל מצות אלו מדבריהם הרי הן בכלל ואהבת לרעך כמוך - *although these particular mitzvos are מדבריהם, they are included in ואהבת לרעך כמוך*.

According to the Rambam, there is no contradiction between these sources. The basic obligation is the Torah mitzvah of ואהבת לרעך כמוך and gemilus chasadim. Chazal then gave that general obligation particular forms, including bikur cholim and nichum aveilim. The specific mitzvah of bikur cholim is therefore מדבריהם, while its basic foundation is מן התורה.

What is the purpose of bikur cholim?

The Ramban, as quoted by the Beis Yosef (Yoreh Deah 335), describes several parts of the mitzvah. He writes that bikur cholim is כדי שיכבדו וירבצו לפניו ויעשו לו צרכים הצריכים לחליו וימצא נחת רוח עם חביריו ועוד כדי שיכוין דעתו לרחמים ויבקש עליו - *so that the visitor will see that the choleh is properly cared for, attend to what he needs, give him comfort through the presence of his friends, and daven for him*.

The Tur similarly writes ומצוה גדולה היא לבקר שמתוך כך יבקש עליו רחמים ונמצא כאילו מחיה אותו וגם מתוך שרואהו מעיין בענינו אם יצטרך לשום דבר משתדל בו להמציאו לו - *it is a great mitzvah to visit, because by seeing the choleh the visitor will daven for mercy for him, as though he has helped give him life, and he will also see whether the choleh needs anything and try to provide it*.

We therefore find several parts to bikur cholim. One is to take care of the choleh's needs. Another is to give him comfort. A third is to daven for him.

The Beis Yosef even writes המבקר את החולה ולא ביקש עליו רחמים לא קיים מצוה זו - *one who visits the choleh but does not daven for him has not fulfilled this mitzvah*.

But this requires explanation. If tefillah is an absolute requirement, what about someone who visits and davens but does nothing to help with the practical needs of the choleh? The Ramban himself first says that the visitor should see what the choleh needs and help him. Would we say that he also has not fulfilled the mitzvah?

It seems that the Ramban and Tur are describing the full nature of bikur cholim, not saying that every one of these elements is essential to the basic mitzvah. The visitor should help the choleh, give him comfort and daven for him. That is the proper fulfillment of bikur cholim. But there is also a mitzvah in the visit itself.

There is support for this in the Chafetz Chaim, who writes that if one does not fulfill these different parts of the mitzvah לא קיים המצוה כדין - *he has not fulfilled the mitzvah properly*. He does not say that no mitzvah was fulfilled at all. The visit itself is a kiyum mitzvah, even though the mitzvah is not complete unless the visitor also tries to accomplish its different purposes.

Visiting someone who does not want to see you

This question also comes up in an unusual case. The Beis Yosef quotes the Maharil that even a person who is an enemy of the choleh should visit him. The Darkei Moshe disagrees. If the choleh will be upset to see him, the visit may cause pain instead of giving comfort. One might have thought that their disagreement depends on the main purpose of bikur cholim. If the main point is to daven for the choleh, even someone he dislikes can visit and daven for him. But if the purpose is to strengthen the choleh and give him comfort, the visit may do the opposite.

But the issue is more basic. Bikur cholim has several purposes, and the visit itself is also a mitzvah. Still, if it is known that the choleh will be upset by seeing a particular person, there is no mitzvah to cause him distress during his illness. The mitzvah is for the benefit of the choleh, not the visitor.

Even a גדול must visit a קטן

The Gemara in Nedarim 39b says that bikur cholim applies אפילו גדול אצל קטן - *even a great person must visit someone of lesser stature*. The question is what the chiddush is. Why should the stature of the visitor make any difference?

The Chafetz Chaim explains that we might have compared bikur cholim to hashavas aveidah, where there is a rule of זקן ואינו לפי כבודו - *an older or distinguished person for whom the act is beneath his dignity*. Perhaps a גדול would similarly be exempt from visiting a קטן. The Gemara therefore teaches that there is no such exemption from bikur cholim.

The Shitah Mekubetzes and the Perishah explain that this can be learned from our parsha, because Hashem Himself came to visit Avraham. If the mitzvah is modeled on Hashem's own conduct, a person cannot say that visiting another Jew is beneath his dignity.

There is another point as well. When an act is clearly a mitzvah, there is no lack of kavod in performing it. The mitzvah itself is his kavod. And if the purpose of bikur cholim were only to take care of what the choleh needs, the גדול could often send someone else. But part of the mitzvah is that he himself comes. The fact that a person makes the effort to come can itself give the choleh chizuk.

What if the choleh is sleeping?

This may also explain a striking statement of the Rosh. He writes יש לו לאדם לבקר החולה ואפילו לא ידבר עמו דבר כגון שמצאו ישן וניחא לו כאשר יגידו לו לחולה כי בא פלוני לראותו עושה לו נחת רוח - *a person should visit the sick even if he does not speak to him, such as when he finds him sleeping, because when the choleh is later told that so-and-so came to see him, it gives him comfort*.

At first glance, what did the visitor accomplish? He did not speak to the choleh. He may not have found out what he needed. He did not give him chizuk at the time because the choleh was sleeping. Nevertheless, when the choleh later hears פלוני בא לראותו - *so-and-so came to see me*, that itself gives him נחת רוח.

We see from here that there is a separate value in the visit itself. A sick person can feel cut off from everyone around him. Everyone else continues with his regular schedule, while the choleh is confined to his home or hospital room. When he hears that someone made the effort to come see him, he knows that he has not been forgotten.

There is, however, another view. The *Maggid Meisharim* writes דלא אפשר ביקור חולה בלא מילולא - *bikur cholim cannot be performed*

without speaking. According to that view, merely coming while the choleh sleeps would not be enough. The Rosh, however, clearly holds that the knowledge that someone came to see him can itself give the choleh נחת רוח.

Can bikur cholim be fulfilled by telephone?

This brings us to a practical question discussed by Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 1:223): can one fulfill bikur cholim by telephone?

Several parts of the mitzvah can certainly be accomplished by telephone. One can give the choleh chizuk. One can find out what he needs. Most importantly, after hearing his condition one can daven for him.

Nevertheless, the main mitzvah of bikur cholim cannot be fulfilled by telephone. Even אם שייך לחזק רוחו על ידי שיחת טלפון - *if it is possible to strengthen the choleh through a telephone call*, Chazal still said that a person should בקר את החולה - *visit the sick*. The mitzvah has a particular form, and that form is an actual visit.

The word ביקור itself does not necessarily mean "visit" in the modern sense. It can mean to examine or check, as in ביקור קרבן. But once Chazal established that one goes to the choleh, that became the form of the mitzvah.

Therefore, even if the different purposes of bikur cholim can sometimes be accomplished by telephone, אין בזה עיקר מצות ביקור חולים - *this is not the main mitzvah of bikur cholim*. Of course, when a person cannot visit, he should certainly call. It is an act of chesed to strengthen the choleh, find out what he needs and daven for him. But it does not fully replace the visit itself.

This also fits very well with the Rosh. If there is value in coming even when the choleh is sleeping and the visitor never speaks to him, then the mitzvah cannot depend only on the conversation. There is a separate value in the fact that the visitor came.

When there is a danger of infection

There is, however, an important limitation. The Rema discusses visiting a person with a contagious illness. A person is not required to place himself in serious danger in order to fulfill bikur cholim.

A distinction must be made between an ordinary concern and a real danger. Where there is only a remote possibility that the visitor may become ill, that does not necessarily exempt him from the mitzvah. But במקום חשש גמור - *where there is a real concern of danger*, he is exempt. A person is not required to risk his health, and he should not simply rely on the merit of the mitzvah to protect him.

When an actual visit cannot safely be made, the other forms of chesed remain. He can call the choleh, arrange what he needs and daven for him.

The lesson of Hashem's visit

The mitzvah of bikur cholim begins in our parsha not with a command to bring food or provide medical help, but with וירא אליו ה' באלני ממרא - *Hashem appeared to Avraham in the plains of Mamre*. Chazal tell us that Hashem Himself came לבקר את החולה - *to visit the sick*.

The Ramban and Tur teach us what the visit should accomplish. A visitor should look at the needs of the choleh, try to help him, give him comfort and daven for him. He should not simply come in, exchange a few words and leave without thinking about what the choleh actually needs.

But there is another lesson as well. Even when there is little that the visitor can do, the visit itself matters. The Rosh tells us that even if the choleh is sleeping, he will later have נחת רוח from knowing that someone came to see him.

Sometimes we can help a choleh in a practical way. Sometimes we can give him chizuk. We should always daven for him. But sometimes the main thing we can give him is simply the knowledge that we cared enough to come.

Adapted from

לויית חן** by **Rebbetzin Chiena Kossowsky

The Akeidah: Emunah with a Clear Mind

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The test before the Akeidah. The strength of the *Akeidah* was not in the *Akeidah* itself, but in the preparation for it. The Torah emphasizes בנך את יחידך אשר אהבת - *your son, your only son, whom you love*. Before Avraham could place Yitzchak upon the *mizbeach*, he first had to overcome all the natural feelings of a father toward his beloved son. In that sense, by the time Avraham raised the knife, the deepest part of the *nisayon* had already taken place within him.

Avraham had passed nine earlier *nisyonos*, and Chazal describe how on the road to the *Akeidah* the Satan confronted him repeatedly, presenting one argument after another in an effort to stop him. Avraham had to overcome his natural mercy, his questions, and every obstacle that might cause him to turn back.

There was another difficulty as well. Avraham had spent his life opposing those who sacrificed their children to Molech, and now he was setting out to offer his own son. My husband, Rav Michel Kossowsky zt"l, once observed that one of the hardest things a person can be asked to do is the very thing he has opposed throughout his life. Avraham could not understand how this command fit with what he knew and had taught. But the question did not weaken his obedience. He knew that this was Hashem's command.

The Satan, the ram, and my father's question. There is a particularly striking background to what happened when Avraham saw the ram. The Gemara in Sanhedrin 89b describes how the Satan repeatedly tried to stop Avraham on the road to the *Akeidah*. When his earlier arguments failed, he claimed to have heard the truth from behind the heavenly curtain: השה לעולה ואין יצחק לעולה - *the sheep is for the olah, and Yitzchak is not for the olah*. Avraham refused to listen, answering that such is the punishment of a liar, שאפילו אמר אמת אין שומעין לו - *even when he tells the truth he is not believed*.

That makes what happened afterward especially puzzling. The malach stopped Avraham, and the Torah then tells us וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא והנה איל אחר נאחז בסבך בקרניו - *Avraham lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, a ram was caught in the thicket by its horns*. But how did Avraham know that the ram was genuine? The Satan had specifically told him that a sheep, rather than Yitzchak, was intended as the korban. Perhaps this ram was simply his final and most convincing attempt.

My father, Rav Eliyahu Benzion Garber HYD, asked me this question when I was young, and I answered him as follows. The ram was נאחז בסבך בקרניו - *caught in the thicket by its horns*. Avraham had

to make an effort to free it. The very fact that it was entangled and difficult to reach was evidence that it was genuine. Had the ram been a device of the Satan, the Satan would have made the alternative easy and placed it directly before Avraham. Instead, Avraham had to struggle to reach it.

This answer reflects something fundamental about Avraham Avinu. He did not accept an apparent sign merely because it gave him the result he desperately wanted. Even after the malach had told him not to harm Yitzchak, he still had to determine what Hashem wanted from him next.

Emunah was not blindness. Avraham's *emunah* was firm and thoughtful, not blind faith without understanding. His greatness was not that he ceased to think. It was through his clear mind that he had come to recognize Hashem. Even before the Torah was given, Avraham understood much of what Hashem wanted from man and lived accordingly.

But clear thought does not mean that a person expects to understand everything. There comes a point at which human understanding reaches its limit. Once Hashem commanded Avraham, he fulfilled the command because it was Hashem's command, whether or not he could explain it. Avraham thought and sought to understand as far as a human being could. When his understanding could go no further, his *emunah* did not weaken. He understood that the limitation was in human understanding, not in the command of Hashem.

That was the greatness of the *Akeidah*. Avraham's love for Yitzchak and his natural compassion remained real, as did the questions raised by the command. Yet none displaced the command itself. He continued with complete *mesirus nefesh*, until the Torah tells us וישלח אברהם את ידו ויקח את המאכלת לשחט את בנו - *Avraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son*. As far as Avraham was concerned, nothing more remained to be done.

Only then did the malach call out אל תשלח ידך אל הנער ואל תעש לו מאומה כי עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלהים אתה ולא חשכת את בנך את יחידך ממני - *Do not stretch out your hand against the lad and do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear Hashem, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me*. The *nisayon* was complete.

After the malach called. One might imagine that after three days of unimaginable strain, after binding Yitzchak upon the *mizbeach* and raising the knife, Avraham would simply embrace his son and hurry home. But even then, Avraham remained composed. Rashi describes him asking אם כן לחנם באתי לכאן - *If so, did I come here for nothing?* Hashem explains that He had commanded Avraham to bring Yitzchak up, not to slaughter him. Avraham had fulfilled what had been commanded.

Yet he still did not simply leave. וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא והנה איל אחר - *Avraham lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, another ram*. He understood that although Yitzchak was not to be sacrificed, there was still a korban to be brought.

The Torah then says וילך אברהם ויקח את האיל - *Avraham went and took the ram*. Avraham certainly knew how to run. Earlier in the parsha, when guests appeared, ואל הבקר רץ אברהם - *Avraham ran to the cattle*. When another person is hungry or in need, there are times when one must run. But here the Torah says וילך אברהם - *Avraham went*.

Even now, Avraham proceeded deliberately, not in confusion. He had been prepared to offer Yitzchak because that was how he understood Hashem's command; when the malach told him not to touch Yitzchak, he stopped; and when he saw the ram, he understood that this was now the korban before him. His purpose throughout was the same: to do precisely what Hashem wanted.

He therefore approached the ram not merely with relief, but באותה מסירות באותו כובד ראש כמו את בנו לעקידה - *with the same devotion and the same seriousness with which he had brought his son to the Akeidah*.

תחת בנו - In Place of His Son. The Torah then says ויקח את האיל ויעלהו לעלה תחת בנו - *He took the ram and offered it as an olah in place of his son*. Rashi asks what is added by the words תחת בנו - *in place of his son*. We already know that Avraham offered the ram. Why emphasize that it was in place of Yitzchak?

Rashi explains על כל עבודה שעשה ממנו היה מתפלל ואומר יהי רצון שתהא זו כאילו עשויה בבני - *With every act that he performed with the ram, Avraham prayed: May it be Your will that this be regarded as though it were being performed with my son.*

Avraham did not allow the ram to become merely an easier substitute. Hashem had commanded him not to sacrifice Yitzchak, and therefore he would not sacrifice him. But the inner sacrifice that had brought him to Har HaMoriah remained intact. תחת בנו meant more than one korban physically taking the place of another. Avraham placed into the ram the readiness and *mesirus nefesh* with which he had brought Yitzchak.

The lesson of the Akeidah. This is perhaps the central lesson of the entire *Akeidah*. Avraham's *emunah* did not require him to surrender his mind. It required him to know the limits of his mind. He could think deeply, ask questions, and seek to understand. But once he knew what Hashem required, his inability to understand did not become a reason not to obey.

And this is what Avraham Avinu taught his children: להביא את קרבנותינו ולהרגיש כאילו אנו מקריבים את עצמנו - *to bring our korbanos and to feel as though we are offering ourselves*. A korban is not measured only by what is placed upon the *mizbeach*. Its true measure is how much of ourselves we place into it.

Adapted from

Ruach Eliyahu by Rav Elya Svei (1924-2009)

Blinded, Yet Still Searching for the Door

Still Searching for the Door. The Torah describes what took place outside Lot's house after the *malachim* arrived in Sodom. The people of Sodom surrounded the house and demanded that Lot hand over his guests. When they tried to break down the door, the *malachim* pulled Lot inside, ואת האנשים אשר פתח הבית הכו בסנורים מקטן ועד גדול וילאו למצא הפתח - *they struck the men at the entrance of the house with blindness, from small to great, and they wearied themselves trying to find the entrance* (Vayeira 19:11).

The last words are astonishing. Every one of them had suddenly become blind. Ordinarily, if a person suddenly loses his sight, whatever he had been thinking about a moment earlier disappears. He is frightened. He wants to understand what happened. Yet here, even after they were struck blind, וילאו למצא הפתח - *they continued struggling to find the entrance*. They still wanted to get inside.

The Sforno points this out. ואף על פי שהיו מוכים בסנורים טרחו למצא הפתח כדי לשבור הדלת - *although they had been struck with blindness, they continued struggling to find the entrance in order to break down the door*. He connects this with the statement of Chazal רשעים אפילו עומדים בפתחו של גיהנם אינם חוזרים בתשובה - *even when the wicked stand at the entrance to Gehinnom, they do not repent* (Eruvin 19a).

But there is something more here. Even if they did not understand the blindness as a punishment from Shamayim, the blindness itself should have stopped them. Yet it did not. A *taavah* can become so powerful that even when a person's entire world changes before his eyes, the desire remains exactly where it was.

Bilam's Donkey Speaks. We find the same thing with Bilam. Imagine that an animal suddenly began speaking to a person and rebuking him. Surely he would stop. He would understand that something extraordinary was happening and that Hashem was trying to tell him something.

Yet Bilam did not stop. ויפתח ה' את פי האתון - *Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey* (Balak 22:28). The Sforno explains that Hashem caused the donkey to speak כדי שיתעורר בלעם לשוב בתשובה - *so that Bilam would awaken and do teshuvah*. Hashem was showing Bilam that the power of speech itself comes from Him. If Hashem could give speech to a donkey, He could also take speech away from Bilam.

Chazal tell us that פי האתון - *the mouth of the donkey* was one of the extraordinary creations prepared at the beginning of Creation (Avos 5:6). Something prepared from the six days of Creation was now placed directly in Bilam's path to stop him. Yet his desire for the wealth and honor offered by Balak was so strong that he continued. There are forces within a person that can prevent him from seeing even what Hashem places directly before him.

Lot Goes Back to Sodom. We see the same thing with Lot. Lot looked at the Jordan plain and saw כי כלה משקה - *that it was entirely well watered*. ויבחר לו לוט את כל ככר הירדן - *Lot chose for himself the entire Jordan plain*, and ויאהל עד סדם - *he pitched his tents as far as Sodom* (Lech Lecha 13:10-12). The richness of the land drew him away from Avraham Avinu and toward Sodom.

Not long afterward, Lot was captured in the war of the kings. The Torah says ויקחו את לוט ואת רכושו בן אחי אברם וילכו והוא ישב בסדם - *they took Lot and his possessions, the nephew of Avram, and departed, and he was living in Sodom* (Lech Lecha 14:12). Rashi asks why the Torah adds והוא ישב בסדם. מי גרם לו זאת ישיבתו בסדום - *What caused this to happen to him? His dwelling in Sodom.*

Lot had now been shown very clearly what his choice had cost him. He had left Avraham and gone to Sodom, and that brought him into danger. Avraham then came and rescued him. What should Lot have done next? Surely he should have gone back with Avraham. The attraction of ככר הירדן שכלה משקה - *the Jordan plain that was entirely well watered* should no longer have looked quite the same. Yet Lot went back to Sodom.

That is remarkable. Lot had lived with Avraham Avinu. He had seen where his choice had led him, and he had seen who saved him. Yet the same force that had drawn him to Sodom in the first place was still strong enough to bring him back.

The King of Sodom's Self-Deception. Perhaps the sharpest example is the king of Sodom. During the war of the kings, the king of Sodom fled and fell into one of the pits in the Valley of Siddim. ועמק השדים בארת בארת חמר וינסו מלך סדם ועמרה ויפלו שמה - *the Valley of Siddim was full of pits of clay, and the kings of Sodom and Amorah fled and fell there* (Lech Lecha 14:10).

Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains that the king of Sodom miraculously escaped. Until then, some people had doubted that Avraham had really been saved from the furnace of Ur Kasdim. When they saw the king of Sodom emerge from the clay, they now believed that Avraham too had been miraculously saved.

The Ramban asks an obvious question. Why should a miracle performed for the wicked king of Sodom make anyone believe in the miracle performed for Avraham? The Ramban suggests that the king of Sodom emerged when Avraham approached. Everyone could see that his rescue had occurred in Avraham's *zechus*. Everyone, apparently, except the king of Sodom.

The Midrash says that when he came out to meet Avraham, התחיל לכשכש לו בזנבו - *he began wagging his tail before him*. He told Avraham מה אתה ירדת לכבשן האש וניצלת אף אני ירדתי לחמר וניצלתי - *You went down into the fiery furnace and were saved, I too went down into the clay and was saved* (Bereishis Rabbah 43:5).

Instead of recognizing that he had been saved in Avraham's *zechus*, he compared himself to Avraham. Avraham had his miracle, and he had his.

The Ohr HaChaim explains the remarkable expression מכשכש בזנבו - *wagging his tail*. The king of Sodom had already been defeated. His kingdom had been shattered, he had fled into a pit, and Avraham had accomplished what he could not. שאחר שרואה עצמו שניטל ראשו עדיין הוא מכשכש בזנבו - *even after he sees that his head has been taken away, his tail still wags*. The head was gone, but the tail could still move. A person can lose everything that should support his sense of importance and still find some way to preserve it.

When the Torah Is Talking About Us

It is easy to learn these stories and understand what was wrong with the people of Sodom, Bilam, Lot or the king of Sodom. The harder question is what the Torah is teaching us about ourselves.

Each of us has forces within us that can distort what we see. A *taavah*, a desire for honor, or an attachment to something we have already chosen can become so strong that even when events show us that we are wrong, we find a way to explain them away and continue as before.

This is one of the lessons the Torah repeatedly teaches us in Sefer Bereishis. The Torah does not merely tell us what happened to people thousands of years ago. It shows us the forces hidden within the human *nefesh*, how easily a person can become attached to a course of action and how difficult it can be to recognize what is really driving him.

The challenge is therefore not only to see where the people of Sodom, Bilam, Lot and the king of Sodom went wrong. It is to stop from time to time and ask whether something similar, even in a far smaller form, may be happening within ourselves. Are we seeing what is actually before us, or only what we want to see? Otherwise, a person can be certain that he sees clearly while, like the people of Sodom, he is still searching for the door while blind.

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from: TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>

Rav Hershel Schachter - Bikur Cholim & True Love

Many years ago, I attended Shabbos sheva brochos on Shabbos Parshas Vayera. The chosson and the kallah were talking to each other all the time even when rabbonim were speaking. At the beginning of the parsha (Bereshis 18:1), the Torah tells us that Hashem came to Avraham Avinu to be mevaker choleh after he had his bris milah (Rashi ibid.), but we are not told that He carried on any conversation with him at all. When one is together with a dear friend, even if no words are spoken at all, the presence of the friend gives

one chizuk and puts him in a cheerful mood.
The Gemarah (Nedarim 39b) tells us that reason for the mitzvah of bikur cholim is to heal the patient. Rabbi Akiva had thousands of students, and he noticed that one of the students was absent for a few days in a row. He went to his dormitory room, gave him a clean pair of pajamas, cleaned the floor, opened the window to get fresh air, and gave him medication (ibid. 40a). The Rema (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:4), the comment of the Ramban on that Gemarah is quoted which says that if one visits a choleh and does not offer a tefillah that he should get better, he has not completely fulfilled his mitzvah of bikur cholim. One is obligated to do the maximum he can do in order help the patient recover. Today if someone is sick in the hospital, the medications, the cleaning of the floor, the change of clothing, etc. are all being taken care of by the doctors and nurses. We know that if a patient is in good spirits, he will recover sooner than if he is depressed. The only thing left for us to do for the mitzvah of bikur cholim is to cheer up the patient and to offer a tefillah. When Hashem comes to visit the patient, that itself cheers up the choleh even if no words are spoken at all.
If the chosson and kallah are really in love with each other, just by sitting next to each other, even if no words are spoken, they are cheering each other up. The Gemarah seems to imply that on the sholosh regalim there is a mitzvah of simcha because we are all obligated to visit the Shechinah in the Beis Hamikdash, i.e. to be oleh leregel. The Gemarah (Moed Katan 14b) states that a kohein gadol all year long has the mitzvah of simcha which the rest of the Jewish nation only has on sholosh regalim because the kohein gadol has the responsibility to be in the Beis Hamikdash all day long to supervise the hakrovas ha'korbonos. Just being in the presence of Hashem, even when no words are spoken, puts one in a state of simcha. In Tanach (e.g. Ruth 2:4) we find that when one would greet a friend, one would say "Hashem imochem". Today we say shalom aleichem because Shalom is a nickname for Hashem (Shabbos 10b). When the Shechina is with someone, its presence will put him in a happy mood even if no words are spoken.
When it was my turn to deliver a drasha at that sheva brochos, I had a yetzer harah to say this dvar Torah, but I realized that it would not help because the young lovey-dovey couple would be chatting with each other through my drasha as well!

Adapted and summarized from
דרך ה' ודרך הצדקה והמשפט by **Rav Yaakov Medan**
https://www.etzion.org.il/he/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-vayera/vayera-way-god-and-way-righteousness

The Way of Hashem: Chesed, Mishpat and the Test of Avraham
At first glance, the beginning of Vayeira seems to contain a number of separate stories. Hashem appears to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei. Three visitors arrive, and Avraham leaves the Shechinah, as it were, to take care of them. They tell him that Sarah will have a son. The Torah then turns to Sedom, where Avraham argues with Hashem over the destruction of the city. Later in the parsha comes the Akeidah, where Avraham, who argued so strongly over Sedom, does not argue at all. He answers only הנני - Here I am. But these are not separate stories. They are all part of one lesson. The Torah is teaching Avraham what it means to walk in דרך ה' - the way of Hashem. That way includes chesed, but it also includes mishpat. It includes asking questions and trying to understand, but it also includes knowing that there are times when a person cannot understand and must still trust Hashem.

Avraham's Tent
The parsha begins: וירא אליו ה' באלני ממרא והוא ישב פתח האהל כחם היום - Hashem appeared to him at Elonei Mamrei while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day (Vayeira 18:1). Rashi explains that Hashem came to visit Avraham after his bris. Hashem made the day unusually hot so that travelers would not be outside and Avraham would not have to trouble himself with guests. But Avraham was upset that no one was coming. When he saw three men, וירא וירץ לקראתם - he saw and ran toward them (Vayeira 18:2). Chazal learn from here: גדולה הכנסת אורחין מהקבלת פני שכינה - Welcoming guests is greater than receiving the Shechinah (Shabbos 127a). This is a remarkable idea. Hashem has come to Avraham, and Avraham leaves to take care of strangers. Why is that not a lack of respect for the Shechinah? The answer is that this itself is what Hashem wants from him. Serving Hashem does not mean only standing before Hashem. It also means learning how Hashem wants us to treat other people. Hashem visits Avraham when he is weak, and Avraham immediately gets up to take care of others. Hashem shows chesed to Avraham, and Avraham turns around and shows chesed to someone else.
This happens immediately after the bris. The bris separates Avraham and his children from the nations. But that does not mean that Avraham closes himself off from other people. Just the opposite. At the very moment that Avraham is marked as different, his tent is open to everyone. There may also be a reason why the Torah tells Avraham again here that Yitzchak will be born. Avraham had already been told this before the bris. But now Yitzchak is announced again while Avraham is busy with hachnasas orchim. Yitzchak will not only be the son of the covenant. He will be the beginning of a nation that must learn to live in the way Avraham is now demonstrating.

From Avraham to Sedom
From Avraham's tent, the narrative follows angels to Lot in Sedom. The contrast is immediate. Avraham sees strangers and runs to meet them. In Sedom, the arrival of strangers creates danger. Lot is living in Sedom, but when the angels arrive, he still reacts in a way that reminds us of Avraham: וירא לוט ויקם לקראתם וישתחו אפים ארצה - Lot saw them, rose to greet them, and bowed with his face to the ground (Vayeira 19:1). He urges them to come into his house and gives them food. Whatever else was wrong with Lot's decision to live in Sedom, he had learned something from Avraham. He knew that a stranger had to be welcomed.
The Midrash shows how far Sedom had gone in the opposite direction. It tells of a young woman who secretly brought food to a poor man. When the people of Sedom discovered what she had done, they killed her in a cruel way. Her cry rose before Hashem. This tells us what was wrong with Sedom. It was not simply that there were bad individuals living there. The whole society had turned cruelty into a rule. In Avraham's house, feeding a stranger was a mitzvah. In Sedom, feeding a stranger could be treated as a crime. That is why the move from Avraham's tent to Sedom is so important. The Torah has first shown us what the way of chesed looks like, and now it shows us a society built on the opposite idea.

Why Tell Avraham About Sedom?

Before destroying Sedom, Hashem says: המכסה אני מאברהם אשר אני עשה - Shall I conceal from Avraham what I am doing (Vayeira 18:17). Why does Avraham have to know? Hashem gives the reason: כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך ה׳ לעשות צדקה ומשפט - For I have known him, so that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of Hashem, to do tzedakah and mishpat (Vayeira 18:19). Usually we read this as praise of Avraham. Hashem chose Avraham because Avraham will teach his children tzedakah and mishpat. But in this story the pasuk is also explaining why Avraham must be told about Sedom. Avraham is going to teach his children דרך ה׳ לעשות צדקה ומשפט. But what do those words mean when there is a real case in front of him? Sedom deserves punishment. But what if there are righteous people living there? Should they die together with the wicked? Can their righteousness save the rest of the city? These are not theoretical questions. If Avraham is going to teach future generations about Hashem's justice, he himself has to think about what justice requires. The Midrash goes even further. It pictures Hashem, as it were, standing while Avraham sits like a judge. Of course Avraham is not literally judging Hashem. The Midrash is teaching us that Hashem is bringing Avraham into the discussion. Avraham has to ask the questions because he is going to teach others what mishpat means.

Will the Judge of the Whole Earth Not Do Justice?

Avraham begins: האף תספה צדיק עם רשע - Will You indeed sweep away the righteous together with the wicked (Vayeira 18:23). Then he says: חללה לך השפט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט - Far be it from You, shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice (Vayeira 18:25). This is a very strong statement. Avraham is speaking to Hashem Himself and asking how this can be justice. What exactly is he asking? There seem to be two questions. First, even if Sedom deserves to be destroyed, what about righteous individuals who live there? Why should a tzaddik die because the city around him is wicked? But Avraham asks for more than that. He asks whether the righteous might save the entire city. אולי יש חמשים צדיקם בתוך העיר - Perhaps there are fifty righteous people in the city (Vayeira 18:24). If there are enough righteous people, perhaps the whole city should be spared because of them.

Hashem accepts that argument. If there are fifty righteous people, the city will be spared. Avraham continues: forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, ten. Hashem agrees each time. If there are ten righteous people, Sedom will not be destroyed. But Avraham stops at ten. This shows that there are really two different questions. Ten righteous people can save the city itself. Fewer than ten cannot. But that does not mean that the individual righteous person may simply be killed together with everyone else. This is where Lot becomes part of the answer to Avraham. Lot cannot save Sedom. There are not enough righteous people to change the judgment of the whole city. But Lot himself must be taken out. The city deserves destruction, yet the individual who does not deserve that punishment is not simply included in the fate of the city.

That is an important part of the lesson Avraham is learning. A community can deserve judgment as a community, but Hashem still judges the individual. The guilt of the many does not erase the difference between one person and another. This is the meeting of tzedakah and mishpat. Mishpat means that evil cannot simply be ignored. Sedom had built a society on cruelty and injustice, and that society could not continue. But tzedakah means that justice must also look at the individual. The innocent person cannot disappear inside the judgment of the whole. That is why the Torah uses both words: לעשות צדקה ומשפט - to do tzedakah and mishpat. They are not opposites. Both are part of דרך ה׳.

But Can Avraham Always Question?

Still, there is a danger here. Avraham argues with Hashem. He asks questions. He wants to understand how Hashem's judgment is just. That is proper here because Hashem Himself has brought Avraham into the discussion. Avraham is supposed to learn from it. But a person can take this too far. He can begin by asking because he wants to understand, and end by deciding that he will accept only what he himself can understand. If so, who is really the judge? Vayeira therefore does not end with Sedom. Later in the same parsha comes the Akeidah.

Sedom and the Akeidah

At Sedom, Avraham argues. At the Akeidah, he does not. The Torah says: ויהי אחר הדברים האלה והאלקים נסה את אברהם ויאמר אליו אברהם ויאמר הנני - After these things G-d tested Avraham and called to him, Avraham, and he said, Here I am (Vayeira 22:1). The command makes no sense to Avraham. Yitzchak is the son through whom all of Hashem's promises are supposed to be fulfilled. Hashem had told him כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע - Through Yitzchak your offspring will be called (Vayeira 21:12). Now Hashem tells him to bring Yitzchak as an olah. Avraham could have asked an even stronger question than he asked at Sedom. How can both things be true? How can Yitzchak be the future if he is now to be offered on the altar? But Avraham says only הנני.

This does not mean that the lesson of Sedom was wrong. Avraham is not being taught never to ask. He was supposed to ask about Sedom. Hashem brought him into that discussion because he had to learn what tzedakah and mishpat mean. The Akeidah teaches the other half of the lesson. A person must try to understand Hashem's ways, especially when he has to live by them and teach them. But he must also know that he will not understand everything. At some point, faith means trusting Hashem even when the answer is hidden. Avraham therefore has to be able to do both. At Sedom he says השפט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט - Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice. At the Akeidah he says הנני. The two responses are not contradictions. Together they make Avraham who he is.

To Know the Way of Hashem

We can now return to the words כי ידעתיו - For I have known him. Why is Avraham the one who will teach דרך ה׳? Because Avraham is learning what that way means. He sees Hashem visit the sick and learns chesed. He practices hachnasas orchim. He is then brought into the judgment of Sedom and learns what tzedakah and mishpat require. Finally, at the Akeidah, he learns that trying to understand Hashem's ways does not mean that man becomes the final judge of those ways.

A similar idea appears later with Moshe. Moshe asks Hashem: הודעני נא את דרכך ואדעך - Make Your way known to me, so that I may know You (Ki Sisa 33:13). The words are striking. Moshe wants to know Hashem, and therefore he asks to know His דרך - His way. To know Hashem means, as much as a human being can, to understand the way He acts and the way He wants us to act. That is also what Avraham is learning in Vayeira. Yirmiyahu later says: כי אם בזאת יתהלל המתהלל השכל וידע אותי כי אני ה׳ עשה חסד משפט וצדקה בארץ כי באלה חפצתי - Let one who glories glory in this, understanding and knowing

Me, that I am Hashem Who does chesed, mishpat and tzedakah in the land, for in these I delight (Yirmiyahu 9:23).

Knowing Hashem is connected to chesed, mishpat and tzedakah. It is not enough to speak about faith in Hashem while ignoring how Hashem wants man to live. That is the line running through Vayeira. It begins with Avraham sitting at the entrance of his tent and running to take care of strangers. It continues with Sedom, where he must learn how tzedakah and mishpat work together. And it reaches the Akeidah, where he learns that even after trying to understand the way of Hashem, there are times when the servant of Hashem must simply answer הנני.

Adapted from

The commandment of Torah study - for women as well

By Rav Eliezer Melamed Oct 27, 2026,

Q: Is it true that women are exempt from the commandment to study Torah, and that the Torah belongs to men rather than women?

A: No. Women are obligated to study Torah, and the Torah belongs to women just as it belongs to men. Men do have a broader obligation, but at the foundation of the relationship with Torah, women even precede men.

The Similarities and Differences Between Men and Women

There are two parts to the mitzvah of Torah study. The first is to know the Torah's guidance for one's life. The second is to delve deeply into the Torah and encompass it in its entirety, including areas not directly relevant to one's own life.

In the first area, men and women are equally obligated (Sefer Hasidim 313; Semak, introduction; Agur, Prayer 2; Rema, Yoreh De'ah 246:6; Levush 6; Rishon LeZion 1). The Torah was therefore given at Sinai to all Israel. Hashem told Moshe: "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob, and declare to the children of Israel," and the entire nation answered together, "Everything that the Lord has spoken, we will do" (Shemos 19:3-8). Chazal explain: "'The house of Jacob' — these are the women; 'the children of Israel' — these are the men" (Mekhilta, ad loc.). In this respect, the women were addressed first.

The second obligation is to encompass the entire Torah and continue examining and analyzing it. This obligation applies specifically to men, as Chazal derive from "And you shall teach them to your children" — "and not your daughters" (Kiddushin 29b). Nevertheless, a woman who voluntarily studies beyond what is necessary for the guidance of her life fulfills a mitzvah and receives reward (Sotah 21a).

The Blessings over the Torah and Hakhel

Because women are obligated to learn the Torah necessary to guide their lives, they recite the blessings over Torah study each day just as men do (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 47:14; Bach 4; Magen Avraham 14; Shulchan Aruch HaRav 10; introduction to Responsa Beit HaLevi).

Chazal relate that King Chizkiyahu intensified Torah study throughout Israel until "they did not find a boy or a girl, a man or a woman, who was not knowledgeable in the laws of ritual impurity and purity" (Sanhedrin 94b).

Likewise, women participated in Hakhel together with men: "Assemble the people — the men, the women, the children… so that they may hear and learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe and perform all the words of this Torah" (Devarim 31:10-12).

The Extent of the Obligation Depends on the Generation

In earlier generations, when daily life required far more time and physical labor and literacy was uncommon, women generally learned the Torah necessary for their lives from their parents and from rabbinic sermons on Shabbos and Yom Tov. Girls were therefore not ordinarily taught to read to the same extent as boys, although exceptional women became Torah scholars and prophetesses.

In recent generations, literacy and general education have become widespread. Women study, work in every profession, participate in public life and encounter competing ideas concerning faith, society, family and human nature. General Torah knowledge and a basic familiarity with practical halachah are therefore no longer sufficient. Women today must study substantially more Torah than women generally studied in earlier generations.

The Chofetz Chaim and the Rabbis of Eastern Europe

The Chofetz Chaim wrote that once traditional Jewish life had weakened, girls often lived away from their parents and studied secular subjects in school, "it is certainly a great commandment to teach them the Five Books of Moses, as well as the Prophets and the Writings, and the ethical teachings of the Sages," so that their faith would remain firmly rooted (Likutei Halachot, Sotah 21a, note).

In a letter supporting a girls' school, he wrote even more strongly that "all the concerns and doubts regarding the prohibition against teaching Torah to one's daughter are of no concern whatsoever in our times."

With the support of leading Torah authorities, institutions providing serious Torah education for girls were established, most prominently the Beit Yaakov movement founded by Sarah Schenirer in 1918.

Rabbi Zaken Aharon ruled that funds donated for Torah study could be redirected to a Beit Yaakov school because its studies constituted a great mitzvah (Responsa Zaken Aharon 2:66). Rabbi Tzirelson ruled similarly (Responsa Lev Yehudah, Yoreh De'ah 56).

Rabbi Sorotzkin went further regarding the study of Torah Shebe'al Peh in Beit Yaakov, describing such study in contemporary circumstances not merely as permissible but as an "absolute obligation" (Moznayim LaMishpat 42). Similar positions were expressed by Rabbi Waldenberg (Tzitz Eliezer 9:3), Rabbi Malka (Mikveh HaMayim 3, Yoreh De'ah 21), Rabbi Chaim David HaLevi (Aseh Lekha Rav 2:52), and Rabbi Eliyahu (Ma'amar Mordechai 1, Yoreh De'ah 11).

Rabbis of the Modern World

As women's participation in education, professional life and society expanded, rabbinic authorities increasingly called for broader Torah education.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that because women are exposed to outside influences, they must receive a serious Torah education that includes Torah Shebe'al Peh, the reasons behind halachos and even the give-and-take of Torah discussion, so that their intellectual abilities develop within the world of Torah (At Alit, pp. 45-46).

Rabbi Soloveitchik likewise taught that in an age when women participate fully in academia and public life, they must understand Torah from its sources in Tanach and the Talmud. Without serious study of Torah together with the commentaries of the Rishonim, he warned, authentic Judaism could not be preserved (Peninei HaRav, p. 167).

Some authorities of the previous generation disagreed and maintained that women should be taught primarily practical halachah (Divrei Yatziv, Yoreh De'ah 139-140; Shevet HaLevi 6:150). Some also opposed teaching Mishnah (Igrot Moshe, Yoreh De'ah 3:87; comments of Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv on Sotah 21b).

These authorities lived in communities that deliberately distanced themselves from modern culture and therefore believed that more limited Torah instruction remained adequate. Even that education, however, was far more extensive than what had generally been provided to girls two centuries earlier.

Women who participate fully in modern society, by contrast, encounter intellectual and spiritual challenges that require substantially broader Torah knowledge.

The Obligation of Women to Study in Our Times

To know how to live according to Torah today and to understand its guidance concerning faith, ethics, family, the individual and society, women must broaden and deepen their study of Torah and halachah and understand the inner logic of Torah as developed in the Talmud and its commentators.

This includes a general understanding even of mitzvos that have no direct practical relevance, so that the Torah's overall vision can be understood. It also includes the foundations of emunah and the history of the revelation of faith through Israel, as explained in Tanach, Chazal, the Rishonim and the later authorities.

The greater a woman's intellectual abilities and the greater the challenges she encounters, the more deeply she must study Torah.

In the *Peninei Halakha* series, I have attempted to present Torah at a breadth and depth suitable for both men and women. Regarding mitzvos specific to men, such as tefillin and tzitzis, women need only learn their general principles.

In practice, because the study of halachah, emunah and ethics required for women has expanded so greatly, the practical difference between the obligations of men and women has narrowed considerably. Indeed, many men today do not succeed in mastering even all the material that women themselves are obligated to learn.

With Hashem's help, the next column will discuss the voluntary mitzvah of women continuing to delve more deeply into Torah and Talmud, the difficulties that arose concerning this subject in the past and today, and possible solutions.

Adapted from

פרשת דרכים (Drashos 1-3) by **Rav Yehudah Rosanes** (1657-1727), aka the Mishneh Limelech.

Available on Sefaria & Wikitext

The Avos Before Sinai: Bnei Noach or Yisrael?

The Basic Question

The question. The Mishnah in Kiddushin 82a states מצינו שעשה אברהם אבינו את כל התורה כולה עד שלא ניתנה - *we find that Avraham Avinu fulfilled the entire Torah before it was given*. The Gemara in Yoma 28b says the same and adds ואפילו עירובי תבשילין - *even eruv tavshilin*. Chazal also describe Yaakov observing Shabbos, Yosef preparing for Shabbos in Mitzrayim, and Yaakov and Yosef studying *eglah arufah*. But first we must clarify a more basic question. When the Avos observed the Torah before Matan Torah, what was their halachic status? Did they remain *Bnei Noach* who voluntarily accepted additional Torah obligations, so that they could add stringencies but could not use Torah law to escape a law already binding upon them? Or did Avraham and his descendants leave the category of *Bnei Noach* and acquire the status of Yisrael, even where Torah law was more lenient? Many passages in Chazal turn on this question.

The Proof from Shabbos

Shabbos as a test case. **Rav Shmuel Yafeh Ashkenazi (16th century) the author of a commentary Yefeh Toar on the Midrash Rabbah**, appears to hold that Avraham and his descendants left the category of Bnei Noach entirely, even לדקל - where the status of Yisrael produced a leniency. Chazal learn from ויחן את פני העיר - *he encamped before the city,* that Yaakov observed Shabbos before it was given. Yosef likewise said וטבוח טבח והכן - *slaughter and prepare*, understood as preparation on Friday for Shabbos. Yet בן נח ששבת חייב מיתה - *a Ben Noach who observes a day of complete rest is liable,* based on ויום ולילה לא ישבתו - *day and night they shall not cease.* If Yaakov and Yosef were still Bnei Noach, how could they keep Shabbos? Their Shabbos observance therefore indicates that they had left that status.

Why Torah study is different. The fact that Yaakov and Yosef studied *eglah arufah* proves less. The prohibition against a non-Jew studying Torah is learned from תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה - *Moshe commanded us the Torah as an inheritance*. Before the Torah was given through Moshe, that particular status of Torah as the inheritance of Yisrael had not yet arisen. Shabbos is different because the prohibition of a Ben Noach resting already existed.

The Re'em: Bnei Noach Where the Law Was Stricter

The opposite approach. **Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi**, the **Re'em** (c. 1450–1526), appears to hold otherwise. When Moshe was traveling to Mitzrayim and had not yet performed the *milah* of his son, Rashi explains that performing the *milah* and then immediately traveling would have endangered the child. The Re'em asks what permitted Moshe to postpone the mitzvah because of danger. The Torah had not yet been given, and therefore וחי בהם - *you shall live through them*, had not yet been stated. It follows from his reasoning that pre-Sinai Torah observance could add obligations but could not remove an obligation that already applied to a Ben Noach.

The central distinction. Thus everyone agrees that the Avos observed the Torah before it was given. The dispute is what that observance meant. According to the Re'em, לא יצאו מכלל בני נח להקל עליהם מדין בני נח אלא להחמיר עליהם מדין תורה - *they did not leave the category of Bnei Noach to receive its leniencies, but accepted the Torah to add its stringencies*. Their Torah observance could make them stricter, but it did not erase a stricter law that already bound them. According to the Maharash Yafeh, however, the status itself changed, and once they were Yisrael the laws of Yisrael governed even where those laws were more lenient.

The Dispute Among the Rishonim

Chachmei Tzarfat and Ramban. The same dispute appears among the Rishonim. The Torah describes the *megadef* as the son of an Egyptian man and a Jewish woman, and the Toras Kohanim says that he converted. The **Chachmei Tzarfat** (the French Baalei Tosafos) explain that because he was born before Matan Torah, his status followed his Egyptian father and he later required *geirus*. The **Ramban** rejects this: כי מעת שבא אברהם בברית היו ישראל ובגוים לא יתחשבו - *from the time Avraham entered the covenant they were Yisrael and were no longer reckoned among the nations*. The Chachmei Tzarfat therefore fit the first approach; the Ramban fits the second. [The Ramban on Bereishis 26:5 also writes that Avraham learned the entire Torah through *Ruach HaKodesh* and observed it כמי שאינו מצווה ועושה - *as one who was not commanded but nevertheless performed it*, and that this observance applied in Eretz Yisrael. Thus, having the status of Yisrael before Sinai did not necessarily mean that all 613 mitzvos had already been formally commanded.]

Esav as a proof. There is a powerful proof from Esav. The Gemara entertains ודילמא ישראל מומר שאני - *perhaps an apostate Yisrael is different*. If Avraham's descendants remained ordinary *Bnei Noach* until Sinai, how could Esav be called a ישראל מומר - *an apostate Yisrael*? The very expression assumes that the category of Yisrael already existed before Matan Torah.

Avraham's chazakah. Avraham's acquisition of Eretz Yisrael points the same way. Hashem told him קום התהלך בארץ לארכה ולרחבה - *arise and walk through the land in its length and breadth*, and Chazal understand his walking as an act of *chazakah*. Yet a non-Jew does not acquire property through *chazakah* in the same manner. If Avraham were still only a Ben Noach, what was accomplished by his walking? This again indicates that Avraham already possessed *din Yisrael*.

Yaakov and the two sisters. This also gives one answer to the famous question of how Yaakov could marry Rachel and Leah if the Avos kept the Torah. If Avraham's descendants had left the category of *Bnei Noach*, Rachel and Leah could enter through *geirus*, and גר שנתגייר כקטן שנולד - *a convert who converts is regarded as newly born*. Their former family relationship would no longer create the ordinary prohibition of two sisters. The **Ramban** gives another answer: the Avos observed the Torah in Eretz Yisrael, whereas Yaakov married Rachel and Leah in *chutz laaretz*. That distinction is important, but it cannot resolve every problem, since Yitzchak himself was forbidden to leave Eretz Yisrael. The underlying question of status therefore remains necessary.

Reuven, Moshe, and the Status of Yisrael

Reuven and Bilhah. The same issue appears in the episode of Reuven and Bilhah. Bilhah was Yaakov's *pilegesh*. Under the Torah law of Yisrael, a *pilegesh* without *kiddushin* does not have the same marital status as a wife acquired through *kiddushin*. Among *Bnei Noach*, however, the marital relationship itself creates the bond. If Yaakov's family still had *din Bnei Noach*, Bilhah was Yaakov's wife and Reuven's act involved אשת איש ואשת אב - *another man's wife and his father's wife*. If they had already acquired *din Yisrael*, that particular prohibition would not apply in the same way. [Rashi, however, following Chazal, explains that Reuven did not literally have relations with Bilhah; he moved Yaakov's bed and the Torah treated him as though he had done so.]

Why Moshe resolves Reuven's case. This explains the Midrash in which Yaakov says that he will neither distance Reuven nor fully bring him close, but will leave the matter until Moshe. Moshe would also confront the same underlying question. When he saw the Egyptian striking a Hebrew, the Gemara says that a non-Jew who strikes a Yisrael is liable. If the Hebrews were still merely *Bnei Noach*, the Egyptian had struck another Ben Noach and that reasoning would disappear. Moshe's act therefore rested upon the premise that Avraham's descendants already had *din Yisrael*. Likewise, Moshe was able to say יחי ראובן ואל ימת - *Let Reuven live and not die*.

Yosef and His Brothers

Eiver min hachai. Yosef accused his brothers of eating *eiver min hachai*. They were not eating meat cut from a living animal in the ordinary sense, but meat from an animal after *shechitah* while it was still *mefarkeses*, moving before death. For Yisrael this was permitted, whereas under *din Bnei Noach* there was room to prohibit it. The brothers held that they had left the status of *Bnei Noach* and followed the law of Yisrael. Yosef held that they could not invoke a Torah leniency against a stricter law still binding upon them as *Bnei Noach*. Their dispute was therefore about their own halachic identity.

Kiddush Hashem

A challenge to the Re'em's proof. The second *drasha* returns to the Re'em's proof from Moshe's son's *milah*. If a Ben Noach is not commanded in *kiddush Hashem*, why should וחי בהם be necessary to permit him to avoid danger? And in Moshe's case, it was the child who would be endangered. Why should Moshe endanger another person to perform his mitzvah? Thus the Re'em's general position may remain, but this particular proof requires further study.

Ur Kasdim. The question becomes sharper with Avraham and Nimrod's furnace. The Midrash describes Avraham standing firm against Nimrod and allowing himself to be cast into the furnace rather than abandon Hashem. But if a Ben Noach is not commanded in *kiddush Hashem*, who permitted Avraham to risk his life? If he still had only the status of a Ben Noach, perhaps he was not required, and according to some opinions not even permitted, to die rather than submit.

The rescue becomes the proof. This difficulty itself can become a proof that Avraham had already left the category of *Bnei Noach*. Hashem says אני ה אשר הוצאתיך מאור כשדים - *I am Hashem Who brought you out of Ur Kasdim*. If Avraham's act had been halachically improper, why would Hashem perform a miracle to save him from its consequences? His rescue from Ur Kasdim therefore indicates that he already possessed the status for which *kiddush Hashem* could require self-sacrifice. What began as a question on Avraham becomes evidence of his status.

Ein Mazal L'Yisrael and Yosef

Avraham and the stars. Avraham looked at the stars and saw that he would not have a son. Hashem answered צא מאצטגנינות שלך - *leave your astrology behind*, because אין מזל לישראל - *Yisrael is not governed by mazal in the same manner*. But why was Avraham frightened by what he saw? Surely Hashem could overturn the natural order.

The answer is that Avraham himself was uncertain about his status. If he remained a Ben Noach, he remained subject to the ordinary order of *mazal*, and what he saw in the stars was indeed frightening. Hashem's answer was that Avraham was no longer counted among the nations: אין מזל לישראל. The promise of children therefore revealed not only what would happen to Avraham, but who Avraham had become.

Yosef goes outside. This explains a striking Midrash. When Yosef fled from Potiphar's wife, the Torah says וינס ויצא החוצה - *he fled and went outside*. Chazal connect these words with Avraham, ויוצא אתו החוצה - *He brought him outside*. Why should Yosef's flight from Potiphar's wife be linked specifically to Avraham being brought outside to look at the stars? Potiphar's wife could bring about Yosef's death. If Yosef were a Ben Noach not required to die rather than commit *giluy arayos*, why risk his life? Avraham's ויוצא אתו החוצה supplied the answer: Hashem had already taught Avraham אין מזל לישראל. Yosef therefore knew that Avraham's descendants had the status of Yisrael, for whom *giluy arayos* is יהרג ואל יעבור - *one must give his life rather than transgress*. Yosef's וינס ויצא החוצה thus follows from Avraham's ויוצא אתו החוצה.

Reward and Punishment

Were the mitzvos binding? Even if the Avos kept the Torah, were they punished from Heaven for failing to observe mitzvos beyond the seven already commanded to *Bnei Noach*? The **Re'em** appears to say there could be Heavenly punishment even though there was not yet punishment through a human *beis din*. The **Maharash Yafeh** disagrees: if they had not been commanded, there should be no punishment for failing to perform them.

The two questions should be one. This should depend upon the earlier dispute. If the Avos truly left *din Bnei Noach* even where Torah law was more lenient, it is difficult to say that Torah law was optional whenever it imposed a stringency. But if they remained *Bnei Noach* and merely added Torah observance, they were אינו מצווה ועושה - *one who performs without having been commanded*: מקבל שכר על הדרישה ואינו נענש על הפרישה - *he receives reward for seeking to perform the mitzvah but is not punished for refraining from it*.

גדול המצווה ועושה

Avraham's fear. This explains אל תירא אברם אנכי מגן לך שכרך הרבה מאד - *Do not fear, Avram, I am your shield; your reward is exceedingly great*. Chazal say that Avraham feared the miracles already performed for him had consumed his reward. But why should his reward have been so great in the first place?

גדול המצווה ועושה. The Gemara teaches גדול המצווה ועושה יותר ממי שאינו מצווה ועושה - *greater is one who is commanded and performs than one who performs without being commanded*. Tosafos explain that the person who is commanded worries that he may fail. The אינו מצווה ועושה always has the option of walking away; the commanded person does not. That pressure and fear give the mitzvah greater weight.

Avraham therefore feared that perhaps he remained a Ben Noach, performing the Torah only as an אינו מצווה ועושה. His reward would then be more limited, and perhaps the miracles Hashem had already performed had consumed it. Hashem answered שכרך הרבה מאד - *your reward is exceedingly great*. You are not merely volunteering; you are a מצווה ועושה - *one who is commanded and performs*. This also explains מה רב טובך אשר צפנת ליראיך - *how abundant is the good You have stored for those who fear You*. Why ליראיך - *for those who fear*? Because the commanded person fears transgression precisely because the mitzvah is no longer voluntary.

Conclusion

What changed? קיים אברהם אבינו כל התורה כולה עד שלא ניתנה - *Avraham Avinu observed the entire Torah before it was given* raises a deeper question than how Avraham knew the future mitzvos. Did the Avos remain *Bnei Noach* who voluntarily accepted the Torah, or had Avraham and his descendants already acquired the status of Yisrael before Sinai? Once that question is asked, Yaakov and Yosef keeping Shabbos, Ur Kasdim, אין מזל לישראל, Yosef and Potiphar's wife, Esav, Reuven and Bilhah, Yosef and his brothers, and even Avraham's fear over his reward all become different expressions of the same issue. Matan Torah had not yet taken place, but perhaps Klal Yisrael had already begun.

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PARSHAT VAYERA

It is very comfortable to think of Sedom 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 Sedom was a city with culture, boasting a society not very different from our own.

In the following shiur we'll examine this possibility, as we analyze the contrast between Sedom and Avraham Avinu, while considering the very purpose for why God chose a special nation.

INTRODUCTION

Our series on Sefer Bereishit has been following the theme of 'bechira', i.e. God's choice of Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of His special nation. In last week's shiur, we discussed **why** God chose Avraham Avinu - i.e. to create a nation that will bring the Name of God and His message to all mankind. However, we did not discuss the Torah's plan for **how** this nation can ultimately achieve that goal? In this week's shiur, we attempt to answer this question as we study of the story of God's consultation with Avraham Avinu before He destroys Sedom.

To better appreciate how the Torah presents its message through these events; we begin our shiur by paying attention to the lack of any 'parshia' divisions in this entire narrative.

AN EXTRA LONG 'PARSHIYA'

Using a Tanach Koren, follow the segment from the beginning of Parshat Vayera (18:1) until the conclusion of the story of Sedom at the end of chapter 19. Note how this unit contains **two** unrelated topics:

1) The news that Sarah will give birth to Yitzchak;
2) The story of God's destruction of Sedom (& Lot's rescue).

Nonetheless, this entire narrative is recorded uninterrupted by any 'parshia' break. By including both of these events in the same 'parshia', the Torah is already alluding to a thematic connection between these two events.

One could suggest that these events are recorded together for the simple reason that the same "mal'achim" [angels or messengers] are involved in both stories. However, this itself raises the same question from a different angle, i.e. why are the same mal'achim who are sent to destroy Sedom - first instructed to inform Avraham about the forthcoming birth of Yitzchak?

[If we adopt Rashi's position (see 18:2) that each angel was assigned only one mission, then we would re-phrase our question: Why must all three travel together, or why doesn't each angel travel directly to fulfill his own mission?]
]

THE DEEPER 'CONNECTION'

The answer to this question can be found (right where we would expect) at the transition point between these two stories. Simply take a look the Torah's 'parenthetical' comment, inserted as Avraham escorts his guests on their way to Sedom. As you study these psukim, note how they explain why God must first consult Avraham before destroying Sedom:

> "And God said: Shall I hide from Avraham what I am about to do? For Avraham is to become a great nation [goy gadol], and through him, all other nations will be blessed [ve-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: **Sedom** relates directly to the destiny that he has been charged to pass on to his son - **Yitzchak**. But the thematic connection between these two topics goes much deeper. Let's explain how and why.

Review these three psukim once again, noting their textual and thematic parallels to the first three psukim of Parshat Lech Lecha (see 12:1-3), where the Torah details God's original choice of Avraham Avinu:

> "... ve-e'escha le-goy gadol - and I will make you a great nation - and bless you and you will be a blessing [to others] - "ve-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 Sedom, for they will serve as a 'model nation' from whom they can learn.

This can explain why the Torah records Avraham's petition that God spare the doomed city. Avraham does not ask that God simply save the tzaddikim in Sedom; he begs instead that the **entire** city be saved - for the sake of those tzaddikim! [See 18:26.] - Why?

Because - hopefully - those tzaddikim may one day influence the people in Sedom towards proper 'teshuva', just as the nation of Avraham is destined to lead all mankind in the direction of God.

This also explains when Avraham's petition ends. After God agrees to save the city for the sake of 50 righteous men, Avraham continues to 'bargain' for the sake of 45, 40, 30, etc. - until he reaches ten (see 18:23-32). He stops at ten, for there is little chance that such a small number would ever be able to exert a serious influence upon an entire community.

> [This may relate to the concept of a 'minyan' - a minimum amount of people capable of making God's Name known. Note as well the influence the ten 'spies' have on the entire nation in the incident of the 'meraglim', and how Chazal learn the number ten for a minyan from that incident!]

It is God's hope that, in the future, Avraham's nation would prevent the emergence of 'future Sedoms' - by creating a model society established on acts of tzedaka u-mishpat. As Yitzchak is the son through whom this tradition will be transmitted, it is meaningful that the same angels assigned to destroy Sedom must first 'plant the seeds' for the prevention of future Sedom's.

Avraham makes this gallant effort to save Sedom, as this reflects the very purpose for which he has been chosen. Despite his failure at this time, it will be this tradition that he must pass on to his son Yitzchak, and later to all future generations.

AVRAHAM VS. SDOM

Even though at this point in the narrative, we are not yet aware of the precise sin of Sedom, this 'prelude' certainly suggests that it must relate in some manner to a lack of "tzedek u-mishpat".

Now, we will attempt to determine more precisely what their sin was, and how it represents the antithesis of everything for which Avraham stands.

Chapter 18 is not the first time in Sefer Breishit when Sedom is mentioned. As we explained in our shiur on Parshat Lech

Lecha, Lot's decision to leave Avraham and move to Sedom (13:1-18) reflects his preference not to be dependent on God and to dissociate himself from his uncle. It is in that context that we are told: "The men of Sedom were very wicked to God" (see 13:13).

Furthermore, after rescuing Lot from the 'four kings' (see chapter 14), Avraham refuses to keep any property belonging to Sedom which was recovered in that victory. Although he rightfully deserves his 'fair share' of the spoils from the battle which he himself fought and won, Avraham Avinu, expressing his opposition to anything associated with Sedom, prefers to completely divorce himself from any resources originating from that city:

> "Avram said to the King of Sedom: I swear to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth: I will not take so much as a thread or a shoe strap of what is **yours**, so you can not say: It is I who made Avram rich" (14:22-23).

Based on this backdrop, it would be safe to assume that the sin of Sedom must relate in some manner to a lack of " tzedek u-mishpat". Therefore, we must read that ensuing story (in chapter 19) in search of that theme.

A GOOD HOST

Review the first three psukim of chapter 19, noting how the Torah goes out of its way to describe how insistent Lot is to provide these two 'unknown travelers' with a place to stay:

> "And the two mal'achim came to Sedom towards evening, and Lot was sitting by the gate of the city, as he saw them he approached them... And he said -
>
> > 'Please come stay at your servant's house, for lodging and washing up, then you can continue on your way in the morning';
>
> but they declined. But Lot **very much insisted**, so they came to his house; he gave them to drink and baked for them matzot [wafers] to eat." (see 19:1-3).

Clearly, the Torah is emphasizing Lot's very own 'hachnasat orchim' [hospitality] as the opening theme of this narrative.

One could suggest that this same theme continues in the Torah's description of the city's reaction to Lot's harboring of his two guests:

> "..They [his two guests] had not lain down yet when the townspeople, the men of Sedom, gathered outside his house - from **young** to **old** - **all** the people until the edge [of the city]. And they **protested** [outside his house] and shouted: **'Where** are those men who came to visit you this evening? Take them **out** of your house so we can **know** them [ve-nei'da'em]" (see 19:4-5).

Most of us are familiar with Rashi's interpretation, that the gathering consisted of merely a small group of the lowest social and ethical stratum of Sedom, who wanted to 'know them' in the Biblical sense (i.e. sodomy, based on 19:8 and 4:1). However, recall that the Torah only states that the demonstrators wanted to 'know them', which is open to a wide range of interpretation.

NO GUESTS ALLOWED

Ramban (and Rasag) advance a different interpretation, explaining that the **entire** town did indeed join in this protest (as the simple reading of this pasuk implies), for they had all gathered outside Lot's house, demanding to 'know' **who** these guests were.

Why are they protesting? As Ramban explains so beautifully (see his commentary on 19:5), the people of Sedom are protesting against Lot's hospitality to these strangers - as they would call for a mass protest anytime there was a fear that someone in their town was 'harboring' guests!

There appears to have been a strict **law** in Sedom: **No guests allowed**! As Ramban explains, the Sdomites didn't want to ruin their exclusive [suburban] neighborhood. Should Lot accommodate guests this evening, tomorrow night more guests may come, and by the end of the month, the city streets could be flooded with transients and beggars. Should the 'word get out' that there is 'free lodging' in Sedom, their perfect 'country club' would be ruined.

> [One could even find a warped ideology in this type of city policy. For example, one could reason in a similar manner that no one should help the needy, for if everyone agreed not to take care of them, then they would ultimately learn to take care of themselves.]

Hence, should any citizen of Sedom bring home a guest ['chas ve-shalom'], the city's 'steering committee' would immediately call for a public protest. [See also Sanhedrin 109a.]

There may have been mishpat, in Sedom - a standardized system of laws - but it was terribly warped. Not to mention the fact that tzedaka had no place whatsoever in this bastion of amorality.

> [Chazal remark in Pirkei Avot that the social norm of 'sheli sheli, shelcha shelcha' - what is mine is mine, what is yours is yours - is a 'custom of Sedom'. The attribution of this social philosophy to Sedom reflects this same understanding (see Pirkei Avot 5:10 - 'arba midot ba-adam...').]

TZEDEK U-MISHPAT VS. SDOM

This interpretation explains why, throughout Nevi'im Acharonim, Sedom is associated with the absence of tzedek u-mishpat. In fact, the three most famous of the Nevi'im Acharonim - Yeshayahu, Yirmiyahu, and Yechezkel - all of whom foresee and forewarn the destruction of the first bet ha-mikdash, compare the corrupt society in Israel to that of Sedom, and see therein the reason for their own forthcoming destruction.

As we will show, in every instance where Sedom is mentioned by the prophets, it is always in reference to a society lacking social justice, and **never** in reference to illicit behavior such as sodomy.

Let's start with a quote from Yechezkel in which he states explicitly that this was indeed the sin of Sedom (i.e. the very same point discussed above concerning "hachnasat orchim"):

> "...Your younger sister was Sedom... Did you not walk in her ways and practice her abominations? Why, you are more corrupt than they in all your ways... **This was the sin of your sister Sedom** - she had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquillity, yet she did not support the **poor** and the **needy**. In her haughtiness, they sinned before Me, so I **removed** them, as you saw..." (see Yechezkel 16:46-50).

In Yeshayahu, the connection between the lack of tzedek u-mishpat and Sedom is even more explicit. As we all recall from the Haftara of Shabbat Chazon, Yeshayahu compares Am Yisrael's behavior to that of Sedom & Amora:

> "Listen to the word of God - you [who are like] officers of **Sedom**, pay attention to the teachings of our God - you [who are like] the people of **Amora**. Why should I accept your many offerings... Instead, learn to do good, devote yourself to justice, aid the wronged, uphold the rights of the orphan, defend the cause of the widow... How has the faithful city, once filled with **mishpat tzedek**, now become a city of murderers..." (Isaiah 1:10-21, see also 1:3-9!)

Recall also how Yeshayahu concludes this nevu'a: "Tzion be-**mishpat** tipadeh, ve-shaveha bi-**tzedaka** - Zion will be redeemed by our doing "**mishpat**"; her repentance - through our performance of **tzedaka**.

In chapter five - Yeshayahu's famous 'mashal ha-kerem' [the parable of the vineyard] - the prophet reiterates God's initial hope and plan that Am Yisrael would perform tzedaka u-mishpat, and the punishment they deserve for doing exactly the opposite:

> "va-yikav le-**mishpat** - ve-hiney mispach"
> [God had hoped to find justice, and found instead injustice],
> "li-**tzedaka** - ve-hiney tze'aka." (Yeshayahu 5:7)
> [to find "tzedaka," and instead found iniquity]
> [note amazing parallel with Breishit 18:19-21!]
> (See Isaiah 5:1-10, as well as 11:1-6.)

Perhaps the strongest expression of this theme is found in Yirmiyahu. In his powerful charge to the House of David [whose lineage stems not only from Yehuda but also (& not by chance) from Ruth the Moabite, a descendant of Lot!], Yirmiyahu articulates God's precise expectation of the Jewish king:

> "Hear the word of God, King of Judah, you who sit on the throne of David... Do **mishpat u-tzedaka**... do not wrong a stranger, an orphan, and the widow.." (Yirmiyahu 22:1-5).
> [See also 21:11-12.]

Later, when Yirmiyahu contrasts the corrupt king Yehoyakim with his righteous father Yoshiyahu, he admonishes:

> "... Your father (Yoshiyahu)... performed **tzedaka u-mishpat**, and that made him content. He upheld the rights of the poor and needy - is this not what it means to **know** Me [la-da'at 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 Sedom (in Breishit 18:19) unfolds as a primary theme throughout Tanach!

LA-DA'AT - THE KEY WORD

It is not by chance that Yirmiyahu (in the above examples) uses the Hebrew word 'la-da'at' in the context of following a lifestyle of tzedek u-mishpat. As we have already seen, the shoresh 'daled.ayin.heh' has been a key word throughout the narrative concerning Sedom. First and foremost in a positive context: "ki yeda'tiv lema'an asher... la'asot tzedaka u-mishpat..." (18:19), but also in a negative context: 've-im lo eida'a' (see 18:21!).

However, this same word also surfaces in a rather ambiguous manner later on in the story. As noted briefly earlier, Rashi and Ramban dispute the meaning of 've-neida otam' (see 19:5 - when the protesters demand that Lot surrender his guests). From this pasuk alone, it is not at all clear what this phrase implies.

Rashi explains that the men of Sedom wanted to 'know them' in the Biblical sense (to 'sleep' with them 'mishkav zachar' - see 4:1 & Chizkuni on 19:5). Ramban contends that they wanted to 'know' their identity in order to 'kick them out of town,' in accordance with their city ordinance prohibiting visitors.

Clearly, Ramban takes into consideration the psukim from Yechezkel (which he cites explicitly, and most probably also took into account Yeshayahu chapter 1) that clearly identify Sdom's [primary] sin as their unwillingness to help the poor and needy. In light of the direct contrast drawn between Avraham's devotion to **tzedek u-mishpat** and the character of Sedom (as in 18:17-19), we can readily understand why Ramban sought to interpret 've-neida otam' as relation to 'kicking out' unwanted guests.

Rashi (and many other commentators) argue that ve-neida otam implies mishkav zachar (sodomy - and hence its name!). This opinion is based primarily on Lot's reaction to the protestors' 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 protestors are interested in sodomy) stems from their sheer number. From 19:4 it appears that the group that gathers outside Lot's house includes the entire city, most likely hundreds of individuals, young and old! If they are simply interested in sodomy, pardon the expression, how could two guests 'suffice'?

> [Rashi, in light of this problem, offers a somewhat novel explanation for 19:4, that only the 'thugs of Sedom' ('anshei Sedom' implying a specific group and not the entire city) banged on Lot's door. The Torah mentions the rest of the population - 'from young to old' - only in regard to the fact that they did not protest the gang's depraved behavior. Rasag (on 19:4) disagrees, proving from 19:11 that both young and old had gathered outside Lot's house.]

Ramban combines both explanations, criticizing Lot's own character for foolishly offering his two daughters in exchange for the protection of his guests. However, this explanation of 19:8 is also quite difficult, for how (and why) should this offer appease this mass crowd who claim (according to Ramban) to be interested only in expelling unwanted guests!

One could suggest an explanation for Lot's remarks that solves all of the above questions, leaving Lot's character untainted, while keeping the focus of these events entirely on the lack of tzedek u-mishpat in Sedom.

GIVING MUSSAR

Lot's statement must be understood in light of the crowd's reaction. Note how the crowd responds to Lot's 'offer':

> "And they said to him: **Go away** [gesh hal'ah - move a far distance, you have just (recently) come to dwell (in our city) and now **you judge us**! Now we will deal with you worse than with them..." (see 19:9).

What did Lot say that prompted such a severe reaction? If he simply had offered his daughters, why couldn't they just say: No, we prefer the men? Instead, they threaten to be more evil with Lot than with his guests. Does this mean that they want to 'sleep' with Lot as well?

One could suggest that when Lot pleads: "My brothers, don't do such evil [to my guests], here are my two daughters..." (see 19:6); he is not seriously offering his daughters at all. Rather, he makes mention of them as part of a vehement condemnation of the people. In a sarcastic manner, Lot is telling the crowd that he'd rather give over his daughters than his guests! He has no intention whatsoever of giving them over to a mass mob.

[Note how Reuven's statement to Yaakov that he would kill his own two sons... etc. (see Breishit 42:37) could be understood in a similar manner; i.e. not that he would do that, but to emphasize his seriousness to his father.]

Furthermore, as we mentioned above, how could two women 'appease' such a large crowd! Instead, it would make more sense to explain that Lot is making this harsh statement as a form of rebuke, emphasizing how important it is that they allow him to keep guests. It's as if he said, "I'd **sooner** give you my daughters than my two guests."

[Note as well that Lot does not bring his daughters with him when he makes this so-called 'offer.' In fact, he actually closes the door behind him (see 19:6) afterward, he leaves to negotiate with the rioters. Had Lot really wanted to 'appease' them with his daughters, he should have taken them outside with him! Also, from the conclusion of the story, it seems that his two daughters were married (but their husbands didn't come along)]- v'akmal.]

This explains why the crowd becomes so angered by Lot's remarks. They are taken aback by his harsh rebuke of their 'no guest' policy.

Based on this interpretation [that Lot is 'giving them **mussar**' and not 'making a deal'], we can better understand the mob's response to Lot's offer (19:6-8). They neither accept nor reject Lot's proposal. Instead, they express their anger with Lot's rebuke:

"One has just come to live by us - va-yishpot shafot - and now he is **judging us**; now we will deal more harshly with **you** than [we planned to deal] with **them**!" (see 19:8).

[In other words: they seem to be saying: 'HEY, you're just a newcomer here in our town, and you already think you can tell us what to do! No way - we're gonna kick you out of town now, together with your lousy guests!']

[This would also explain what they mean by - "Now we will do more evil to you than to them" (see 19:9). In other words, before we only wanted to expel you guests from town, now we are going to expel you and your family as well!]

What do people mean by "you are **judging us**"? Apparently, there is something in Lot's response that suggests a type of character judgment - but is it only his request that they 'not be so mean' (see 19:7)?

One could suggest that they consider Lot's sarcastic offer of his daughters instead of his guests as a moral judgment of their 'no-guest' policy; a reprehension of their unethical social system. If so, then this is exactly to what 'va-yishpot shafot' refers to. They are angered for Lot has 'judged' their character. No one likes being told what to do, especially by 'newcomers'; hence their angry and threatening reaction to Lot's remarks.

This interpretation of 'shafot' in relation to rebuke is found many other times in Tanach. See for example I Shmuel 7:6, where Shmuel (at Mitzpa) rebukes the entire nation for their behavior. We find a similar use of the verb 'lishpot' in I Shmuel 12:7, when Shmuel rebukes the nation for not appreciating God's salvation when asking for a king to lead them instead! [See also Yirmiyahu 1:16, and its context.]

If this interpretation is correct, then it may be that Sedom's sin involved **only** social justice (as Yechezkel 16:48-49 implies), and had nothing to do with 'sodomy' at all! And for this reason alone, God found it necessary to destroy that city.

Difficult as it may be to understand, this conclusion should be seriously considered as we set our own values and determine our lifestyle and community priorities.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

1. See Rambam in Sefer Zra'im, Hilchot Matnot Aniyim, chapter 10, the first halacha. Note how he explains that the mitzva of tzedaka requires the highest priority, and he supports his statement from Breishit 18:18-19, as we discussed in our shiur.

2. In Parshat Ki Tetzeh (see Devarim 23:4-5), the Torah forbids the marriage of a Jew with a 'mo'avi ve-amoni' [Moabite or Ammonite], the descendents of Lot. But note the reason, "for they did not greet you with bread and water when you were traveling through the desert...".

Once again we see the theme of hachnasat orchim in relation to Sedom and Lot.

Note as well how Ruth the Moabite does return one strain of Lot back into Am Yisrael, which will later lead to David ha-Melech. However, in that story, Ruth's entry is replete with incidents relating to acts of tzedaka.

PARSHAT VA'YERA - the AKEYDA

In Part Two of this week's shiur, we present a six short 'mini-shiurim' that discuss the Akeyda and misc. topics in the Parasha.

PART I - A CONFLICT BETWEEN IDEALS

In the story of the Akeyda (Breishit chapter 22), we find a conflict between two ideals. From the perspective of 'natural morality', there is probably nothing more detestable to man's natural instinct that killing his own son, even more so his only son. On the other hand, from the perspective of man's relationship with God, there is nothing more compelling than the diligent fulfillment of a divine command.

In an ideal world, these two ideals should never conflict, for how could God command man to perform an act that is immoral? However, in the real world, individuals often face situations where they are torn between his 'conscience' and his 'religion'. How should one act in such situations?

One could suggest a resolution of this dilemma based on the special manner by which the Torah tells the story of the Akeyda (chapter 22). On the one hand, God ["b'shem Elokim"] commands Avraham to offer his only son Yitzchak. Avraham, a devout servant of God, diligently follows God's command, even though this must have been one of the most difficult moments of his life. In this manner, God tests Avraham's faith (see 22:1). However, it is impossible that God could truly make such a demand. Therefore, at the last minute, He sends a "malach" [b'shem Havaya/ see 22:11] to stop him.

Was Avraham correct in his behavior? Should he have not questioned God's command, just as he had questioned God's decision to destroy Sedom?

There is no easy answer to this question. In fact, hundreds of articles and commentaries have been written that deal with this question, and even though they are all based on the same narrative, many of them reach very different conclusion - and for a very simple reason! The story of the Akeyda does not provide us with enough details to arrive at a concrete conclusion.

One could suggest that this Biblical ambiguity may be deliberate, for the Torah's intention may be that we do not resolve this conflict, rather we must ponder it. In fact, it is rather amazing how one very short but dramatic narrative (about ten psukim) has sparked hundreds of philosophical debates over centuries. [This is the beauty of the Bible.]

In other words, it is important that we are internally torn by this conflict, and make every effort to resolve it, while recognizing that ultimately a divine command could not be immoral.

This conflict becomes more acute when we face a situation when is not so clear precisely what God's command is, and when it is not so clear what is considered moral or immoral. When

those situations arise, not only must we ponder, we must also pray that God send a "malach" to help guide us in the proper direction.

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PART TWO - YIRAT ELOKIM & 'NATURAL MORALITY'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shmot 1:21 - re: the midwives killing the male babies
Shmot 18:21 - re: Yitro's advice re: the appt. of judges
Devarim 25:18 - re: the sin of the Amalek.]

[Please review these before continuing.]

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

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

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

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

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

Instead of translating "ki" as 'that', one could use an alternate meaning of "ki" = 'even though'! [As in Shmot 34:9 - "ki am 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 the when God first explains why He is making this oath in 22:16, He explains specifically because "lo chasachta et bincha" - that Avraham did not hold back his son - and NOT because he was a "yarey Elokim". This provides additional support to our discussion in Part Two (above).

In this oath (see 22:16-19), we find the repetition of themes from Brit Bein ha'btarim such as "kochvei ha'shayamyim" 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'btarim") to our relationship with God as a Nation, and our future conquest of the land of Israel ("v'yirash zaracha et shaar oyvav" - your offspring will conquer the gates of its enemies/ see 22:17). It is specifically in this context that Bnei Yisrael will later face this moral conflict as discussed in Part I.

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Further troubling is the usage of the construction "yeda'ativ," rather than the expected, "yeda'ati" - see mefarshim al atar.)

In answer to this question, Rav Yoel bin Nun explained in a shiur several years ago that the word "yeda'ativ" should be understood not as 'yeda' - to know - but rather as "ye'ud" (switching the last two letters as in keves-kesev; salma-simla). Ye'ud (a similar shoresh) means designation, being singled out for a specific purpose, a raison d'etre, a destiny. Thus, "yeda'ativ" here should be read not as, "God knows..." but rather, "God set them aside for the purpose... (that they keep tzedaka and mishpat)." The point is not that God KNOWS that bnei Avraham will do tzedaka & mishpat, but that God chose Avraham in ORDER that his children will do tzedaka & mishpat!

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PART FIVE - TOLDOT TERACH

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

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

[It is interesting to note when considering 11:26-32 that we find a 'header' - "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 Sedom in Chumash. When Avraham and Lot decide that the time had come to part ways, Lot decides to move to the KIKAR HA'YARDEN (the region of Sdom), rather than the mountain range of Canaan, where Avraham resided.

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

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

"And Lot lifted his eyes, and he saw KOL KIKAR HA'YARDEN - the ENTIRE Jordan River Valley - that it was FULL of water... like God's Garden, like the land of Egypt, UP UNTIL TZOAR." (13:10)

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

When we consider the origin of the city's name - TZOAR - from the story of Lot's flight from Sdom, this short phrase takes on a whole new meaning. The Torah appears to be taking a cynical 'jibe' at Lot. He wanted EVERYTHING - "et KOL Kikar Ha'Yarden" [see also 13:11: "And Lot chose for himself KOL KIKAR HA'YARDEN..."], and thus chose to settle in Sdom. But when it's all over, Lot finds himself begging the "malachim" for a small hideaway - a MITZAR (the city to be named TZOAR). Lot wants EVERYTHING - KOL Kikar ha'Yarden - and ends up with 'next to nothing' - BO'ACHA TZOAR! [Thanks to Danny Berlin - ish 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 TZEDAKA for his entire nation."
>
> (see Shmuel 8:15)
>
> [Recall that David had earlier hidden out in a CAVE in the area of the Dead Sea (Ein Gedi), where he performed an act of "chessed" by not injuring Shaul - see I Shmuel 24:1-15; note especially 24:12-15! See also Yirmiyahu 22:1-5!]

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

shabbat shalom
menachem

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 then ten, because less than ten is not a community (witness the minimum number for a minyan) - it is a handful of individuals. (S'forno and R. Hirsh, in different styles, suggest a similar approach to understanding Avraham's negotiations).

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

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

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Parshat Va-Yera: The Akeidah

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

I: WHAT MAKES LOT TICK?

II: THE CHALLENGE OF THE AKEIDA (BINDING)

Our questions this week:

1. Why does the Torah spend so much space telling us about Lot, Avraham's nephew? We hear that Lot accompanies Avraham on the journey from Ur to Haran to Cana'an; that Lot chooses to move to Sedom 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 Sedom'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 Sedom 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 Sedom 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 Sedomite neighbors surround his house and demand that he send out his guests so they can abuse (and perhaps rape) them, Lot says something so ridiculous that it would be funny if it weren't so disgusting: "Now, look, you don't want to do anything evil! [Al na, ahai, ta-re'u!] These are my guests, and I must guarantee their safety. Instead, I will send out my two daughters -- both virgins! -- and you can do with them whatever you like." Like Avraham, Lot feels responsible for the welfare of his guests; like Avraham, Lot is willing to sacrifice even his children for an important purpose. But while Avraham is willing to sacrifice his son only in response to a direct and excruciatingly specific divine command ("Take your son, your only one, the one you love -- Yitzhak"), Lot is a volunteer, offering his daughters for sacrifice in place of his guests. This, he suggests to the crowd of louts surrounding his house, is a good way to avoid "doing evil"!

MEASURE FOR MEASURE:

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

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

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

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

II: THE CHALLENGE OF THE AKEIDA:

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

A SON IS PROMISED:

We start in Perek (chapter) 17. Last week, we spent some time on this section developing the idea that the Berit Mila is the eternal, national, historical covenant with Hashem, a covenant which all generations of Jews make with Hashem throughout history. Hashem changes Avraham's name from "Avram" to "Avraham" to symbolize his new status as an "av hamon 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 fufilled not through Yishmael, but through Yitzhak. Everything Avraham has been promised will be channeled to Yitzhak. Hashem responds to Avraham's love for Yishmael by also giving him a blessing, but the special relationship with Hashem and with the Land is reserved for Yitzhak. Hashem firmly plants the idea in Avraham's mind that his successor will be Yitzhak.

MORE LAUGHS:

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

BERESHIT 18:10-14 --

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

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

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

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

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

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

AND YET MORE LAUGHS:

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

BERESHIT 21:1-12 --

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Avraham get rid of them.

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

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

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

THE BINDING OF YITZHAK:

We now move to the Akeida itself:

BERESHIT 22:1-18 --

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

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

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

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

The Akeida presents several challenges at once:

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

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

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

3) How can a man kill his own son?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shabbat shalom