



God said, "Will I keep hidden from Abraham that which I plan to do?" Abraham displayed intelligence by abandoning idolatry and discovering monotheism. What was hidden in the justice of Sodom that revelation would be the only way for "Abraham's learning of God's justice"?  
(See this week's article by that title)

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## Vayera

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"And the two messengers came to Sedom in the evening. And Lote sat at the gate of the Sedom. And Lote saw and he rose to greet them. And he bowed to the ground." (Bereshit 19:2)

Hashem sends three messengers to Avraham. One has been assigned the responsibility of healing Avraham from his recent milah – circumcision. Another is to tell Avraham that Sara

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## The Destruction of Sodom

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Transcribed by Students

When G-d advised Abraham of His decision to destroy Sodom, Abraham vigorously tried to prevent the destruction. He seemed to question G-d's judgment and seek some sort of reprieve for the people of Sodom from such an ostensibly harsh verdict. However, when Abraham was commanded to take his beloved son Isaac as a sacrifice for the alter, he attempted to fulfill G-d's will with alacrity. This puzzling contrast can be explained by analyzing G-d's system of justice with respect to mankind.

When a mortal judge sentences a criminal, the severity of the sentence is commensurate with the harshness of the offense. In pragmatic terms, the judgment is seeking to protect society and not benefit the criminal. However, G-d's punishment generally seeks to benefit man, so as to elevate the individual to act upon a higher moral plane. There are exceptions to this principle, as illustrated by the destruction of Sodom. G-d's decree to destroy Sodom was evidently not the type of judgment intended to benefit them. Rather, it was a determination by G-d that the people of Sodom were no longer deserving existence. The corruption of their lifestyles was without any merit that could justify their continued existence. However, Abraham's great love of his fellow man propelled him to be an advocate

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Lot's wife is punished for identifying with Sodom by viewing their fate, against God's command.

## We Are the Image of God

RIVKA OLENICK

"And God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Bereshis 1:27

This is a very confusing statement, and what is the purpose of reading the above idea twice, or is it two separate ideas? I want to focus on the concept of tzelem, "image." How is it possible for male and female to be created in the "image of God?" God has no image; no image has God. In fact, if we were to conjure up in our mind a defined image, form or picture of God, this is considered avoda zara, idol worship. It is considered avoda zara because to create our own "picture" of what we think God is, we create a distorted or incorrect picture or image because there is NO picture of God. Children always ask: "What does God look like?" The brain needs to create an image automatically in order to identify it. However, God should have no form that is perceived by our brain, which becomes visible to our mind. If we read the pusuk as it

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# We Are the Image of God

RIVKA OLENICK

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is, and let our imagination wander we would create this one image of God that is male and female. "in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them," is not a simple visual perception. Image does not become images in creating "them." God and His created being/s are two completely different entities.

So what does tzelem, "image" mean? We read later in the Bereshis 2:7, it states that God formed man from the ground and breathed into his being, making man a living human being with a character and personality. Even further into the chapter we read that God formed woman from man, but their tzelem, their "image" had already created. What is the difference between form and image? Are we saying that "them" meaning male and female were created, in an image only, but without form or existence? In the dictionary it says: Image: To represent or form an image of; to figure, to portray, to delineate. For form it says: "To shape, figure or form. The particular way of being that gives something its nature or character; the combination of qualities making something what it is." Here we have an insight into the difference between form and image. It seems that an image is something that is not yet active. Although God formed Adam, he was still basically lifeless, only when God "breathed" into Adam, did He give him his character, the natural way Adam would be. His tzelem would make him, a "living soul," speaking, perceiving and doing according to the Ramban.

But, how does the Torah define image or "tzelem"? The tzelem or image does not refer to the physical aspect of man. Tzelem or image is defined as the intellectual aspect of man. As the Ramban said: "Perceiving, perception of knowledge by way of the intellect." God gave us the capacity to perceive Divine intellect, His wisdom as this is what "in his image" means. At the same we are to understand clearly that God has no physical form and we don't imagine that He does. We do not apply image in the physical sense, to God. The Torah defines image as the divine intellect given to us by God; that only man has and which animals do not have. Man was given the ability to distinguish good from evil, true from false and in doing so that becomes man's intellectual pursuit. Animals have no such pursuit. At the same time we were endowed with a body, our physical self, made out of flesh and blood that we need.

However, God's essence and existence is perfect with no need for any physical form. Yet the part of us that is our "Godly self" is the part, the "tzelem" that God gave us to perceive His wisdom, His knowledge.

Further God created the human form, the body for a specific purpose, which is to be holy. Our "moral self" meaning our holy self is activated by our body. Without our body and its urges and forces we cannot possibly sin. With our body God commands us to dedicate ourselves to the removal of sin. "Sanctify yourself and be holy." God gave us the opportunity to live an elevated existence through our body, and our tzelem, the Divine aspect of our intellect. Male and female He created them. Male and female individually are to live their life in pursuit of knowledge and truth. Male and female together as one live in harmony in the pursuit of knowledge and truth. Samson Raphael Hirsch explains so beautifully: "Keeping the body holy is the foundation of all ennoblement of the spirit, and the preparatory condition for all spiritual greatness; and the higher spiritual and mental greatness is reached, the more serious are the demands made for the control and dedication of the body. The bond of God with Israel to rebuild a purer mankind begins with mila, circumcision dedicating the body to God. A whole list of God's commands have the definitely expressed purpose of begetting, feeding and keeping the body pure and fit for the spiritual, mental and moral likeness of God in Man, that he remains a "tzelem elokim." □

## Merit for the Dead

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Reader:** have you heard the idea of a maylitz yashar? I know we don't have intermediaries. Can the idea of maylitz yashar be explained rationally? Also, how is it possible to learn in somebody who died's z'chus? Isn't there perfection finished once they die? I thought of a possibility that when you learn in someone's z'chus, it means that you have been influenced by the way they lived their life. If the way someone lived his life affects other people, that is a z'chus for him. But I am kind of stumped because how can his perfection change after he is dead? I appreciate any light you can shed on this.

**Mesora:** A "maylitz yashar" (good speech or defense) refers to a go between for us, a soul who would plead our earthly cause. Not that earthly people affect a dead person's perfection. Either one is incorrect.

I will give you my reasons why we cannot improve someone's status once they are dead:

1) Practical reason: There cannot be

perfection after one dies. By definition, perfection is the good man does during his existence as a human being. Death concludes the ability to perfect oneself.

2) Divine reason: God said, we have reward or punishment based on our OWN actions, not based on another person's acts - certainly after death

3) Rational reason: Our actions do not reflect a dead person's perfection, they are due to our own decisions, not his. Therefore, our actions have no affect on someone else's perfection.

4) Historical reason: One was either good or evil during his life. History cannot change. □

## Angels Receiving Punishment

**Reader:** Do angels have free will? (non-Jews say yes). What are archangels?

**Mesora:** I will explain angel's will below.....Archangels are not a Jewish phenomena.

**Reader:** Once Hashem creates an angel for a specific purpose, is it destroyed when its mission is completed?

**Mesora:** You could say so, when referring to the definition that an angel is a natural force. One could term the cessation of such a force (upon a mission completed) that it is "destroyed". But a better description is, it was created for a specific time frame, not to exceed that time. So its "life" was destined from the outset. G-d did not discover something new, realized it is no longer needed, and then destroyed it.

**Reader:** If your answer to the question of angels having free will is negative, how about the "fallen angels" of Genesis 6:2. What are they?

**Mesora:** I am not certain about free will. The Torah does seem to depict angels as having will, as the Torah discusses Lot and Abraham talking with them, and they respond. One is even punished as he ascribed the miraculous phenomena of overturning the city to himself, and not to G-d. The Rabbis

wrote that statement to teach a problem with ascribing miracles to anything but G-d.

I would explain the first two Rashis (Gen. 19:22) as teaching us exactly that. The angel really didn't ascribe phenomena to himself, but the rabbis have license to write medrashim-stories, teaching us fundamentals. Perhaps here they desired to teach here that G-d alone caused the destruction of Sodom. The "angle being punished" according to Rashi teaches that a "force of nature", like fire, will sometimes appear as having a mind of its own, claiming responsibility for destruction as a natural occurrence. But as Rashi said, the punishment of that angel was that "it didn't move from that place until it admitted that it had no ability of its own to perform the destruction". The angel - the force - didn't necessarily talk. This means that the force of nature causing the destruction of Sodom had to have its appearance corrected. There was something about what took place that onlookers might ascribe a natural disaster to Sodom, thereby losing the lesson that it was a divine punishment. Hence, no deterrent for future generations would exist. Angels, or natural forces, can only function by will of G-d, and not itself. The destructive appearance somehow had to be altered so a warning to others would have the desired effect.

The next Rashi says "two angles are not sent for one mission". This means that angels are forces of nature, as such, have specific properties. Therefore, water cannot burn, and fire cannot moisten. Each having its own properties, each has a "singular mission".

We see from these medrashim that the Rabbis desired to teach us insight into the truth of things, but did so in a manner that only those intellectually prepared will understand them. Someone of infantile thinking will at the least, remember these amazing stories due to their startling, manifest content for a future time when ready to interpret them.

Regarding your last question, Rashi says "bnay elohim" is not fallen angels, but is a term for sons of officers, people in high position. Perhaps this pasuk attesting to the seeds of error of the generation of the flood which ensued. Those seeds of error were egoistic drives, stemming from their high positions in government. □



# Abraham Learning God's Justice

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

How did Avraham know what G-d's justice was prior to G-d's communication with him?

As he had no Torah, nor communication with God as of yet, by what means did Avraham arrive at a true understanding of God's will? God said "hamichaseh ani mayAvraham.....", "will I keep hidden from Avraham...?" What knowledge was Avraham bereft of, why couldn't he acquire this knowledge on his own, and what was it in G-d's words which introduced Avraham to this new concept?

Without the Torah, Avraham first posited that there is a Cause for all existences.

The sciences which relentlessly guide matter were all too well organized - catering precisely to the world's daily needs - that it should exist without a Designer. There is a God. One initial Cause. Monotheism.

Avraham saw man as part of creation. He concluded that man is not merely to live his life without self guidance, drifting aimlessly with no goal. The existence of man's mark of distinction - his mind - taught Avraham that the Creator desired man to engage this faculty. It was given only to man, and thus, it must be God's will that the mind is to be used by man above all other faculties. Avraham therefore thought into all matters. Essentially, Avraham thought, "how does this Creator desire I live my life?"

Avraham understood that the primary acknowledgement of man's thinking must be his acceptance of monotheism. To this end, Avraham debated with many individuals and proved through rational arguments that dualism and atheism are false notions.

Once Avraham saw the involvement in wisdom as God's desired goal for man, Avraham pondered many aspects of the world. They included natural law, and laws of government. Avraham thought, as God desires many men to populate the world, and all men have the goal of learning, man must work together with others so as to ensure a safe haven geared towards that goal of obtaining wisdom. Therefore, moral codes must be followed, i.e., man must not interfere with another's pursuit of the good.

As Avraham proceeded to teach his neighbors, God desired that Avraham have the correct ideas. Avraham was able to understand a great amount on his own, but evidently he could not grasp everything without Divine intervention.

This brings us to God's statement, "will I keep hidden from Avraham..." God therefore introduced some new idea to Avraham. But what was it? God spoke very few words. He said, (Gen. 18:20):

"The cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I (God) will go down and see if in accordance with their cry they do, and I will destroy them, or not, I will know."

In these words alone was the lesson to Avraham about a new concept. (It is essential when learning to isolate wherein lies the answer.) Upon hearing this

prophecy from God, Avraham thought, "God knows whether they deserve to be destroyed, He knows all, so he knows their sin. However, God is saying that there are two possibilities here, destroying Sodom, or sparing them." Avraham then responded:

"will you wipe out these cities if there are 50 righteous souls there? It is mundane that You should kill a righteous person with a wicked, and the righteous will suffer the same as the wicked, the Judge of the entire world won't do justice?!" God then responds, "If find 50 righteous in the midst of the city, I will spare the entire place for their sake".

What did Avraham ask, and what did God respond?

Avraham made a few statements, but one was not a question. When Avraham said:

"It is mundane that You should kill a righteous person with a wicked, and the righteous will suffer the same as the wicked, the Judge of the entire world won't do justice?!",

He was not asking, but rather he was stating, "this is not how You work". Avraham repeats the concept of justice in that passage, teaching us that he was only talking about justice in the statement. Avraham had no question on this, a righteous person should live, and a wicked person should die. Justice demands this.

What Avraham was asking on was tzedaka, whether God would even save ALL the wicked if enough righteous people were present in the city. And this is precisely what God answered Avraham:

"If find 50 righteous in the midst of the city, I will spare the entire place for their sake".

The question is, where did Avraham get this idea, that God would not only work with justice, but would engage traits over and above pure justice, something we would call charity, or tzedaka?

Avraham got this idea from God's few words. "I (God) will go down and see if in accordance with their cry they do, and I will destroy them, or not,...". God said there was an option here, meaning, although God knew Sodom and Amora were sinful, and He knew the exact measure of their sin, nonetheless, there was an option regarding their fate. Avraham deduced from God's words that there are other criteria than the sinners' own flaws, which God views to evaluate the sinners' fate. This is precisely what God intended Avraham to learn. This is not something a person can determine from his studies. And since Avraham was to be a "mighty nation", and that he was going to "teach his household to keep the ways of God", (Gen. 18:18-19) Avraham needed to be instructed in those ways. (Note: Here we see God teaches man through engaging man's mind, and not simply spelling out the idea. God made Avraham use his reasoning to learn the concept.)

What does this idea represent, that God will spare even the wicked provided righteous people are present? I believe it teaches us that God will tolerate the wicked,

provided there are proper influences with the potential to change the wicked. In such a case, the wicked are not doomed to a failed existence, not yet, provided a possible cure is close by. This teaches us the extent to which God endures sinners. "God does not seek the death of the sinner, but in his return from his ways...."

We even see earlier that God has the consideration that Avraham should know both charity and justice, (Gen. 18:19) "...and he will keep to God's ways to do charity and justice...".

What is the difference between these two, and why is charity-tzedaka-so essential, that God had to make sure Avraham had this concept? Justice, we understand, is necessary for any society to operate. Deterrents must exist to prevent people from outletting their aggression and destroying society. Where does tzedaka come in?

I believe tzedaka is necessary for the individual, as opposed to justice, which is for the society. What I mean is that with justice alone, if someone is in the wrong, they must make amends. But what if the person has had a tortured existence up to this point, and now faces penalties from a system which treats him as everyone else? Won't this person have the potential to break at some point? Even commit suicide? Without tzedaka, he feels no one has concern for his specific situation.

It is man's nature when things go bad, to close in on himself, feeling that a streak of misery is upon him. This feeling strips him from all hope. He eventually feels alienated from society at large which seems to be 'doing fine', and the "why me" attitude sets in and he begins a downward spiral. Without another person showing him pity, and a desire to assist, he is doomed.

This is where I feel tzedaka plays a vital role in society. If we are to ensure the well being of society with the aforementioned goal of securing mankind's haven for intellectual pursuits, we need to recognize more than justice, but we must also recognize that man needs individual attention in the form of sympathy, empathy, care, hospitality, generosity, and all other forms. The fortunate among us must also initiate such care, and not wait until the fallen person calls out, for it might be too late, and he never calls out, but ends matters drastically. For this reason, the shulchan aruch teaches that giving tzedaka is not simply giving money, but we are obligated to sit down and commiserate with the unfortunate soul. The uplifting of his countenance is the goal, and money is only one item on the list by which we accomplish this goal.

Maimonides states that the highest level of man is when he is concerned with his fellow man.

Man's nature is that he needs to be recognized as an individual, by another. Without this recognition, man feels no integrity, and will not move on with his life. Therefore, tzedaka is essential to a society's laws.

Justice serves the collective group, tzedaka addresses the individual. Both are essential. □

# The Destruction of Sodom

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

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on their behalf. Abraham was questioning whether this type of punishment from G-d, clearly detrimental to the people of Sodom, was just. In Genesis chapter 18, verse 25, Abraham questioned "That be far from Thee to do after this manner to slay the righteous with the wicked; that be far from thee; shall not the Judge of all the earth, do justly." Abraham was questioning the justice in G-d's execution of this detrimental punishment. He was not questioning G-d, but rather trying to comprehend G-d's administration of justice. Could it be that G-d would slay a righteous person together with a wicked person. G-d's punishment of Sodom was obviously not beneficial to man, and Abraham was attempting to comprehend the method in which G-d's justice was being performed.

When Abraham was commanded by G-d to slaughter Isaac, no questions were asked. It was evident to Abraham that this was a punishment from G-d intended to benefit man. Isaac was not a wicked person deserving extinction. On the contrary, Abraham realized that this commandment was being executed for the benefit of man. Thus, Abraham could not ask any questions. He realized that it is humanly impossible to comprehend how G-d's action is intended to benefit man. A person cannot question the manner in which a punishment from G-d benefits man. The benefit may be the punishment itself. However, if a judgment is of the kind that is meted out not for the benefit of man, but rather because man no longer deserves to exist, then a person can try to analyze the implementation of G-d's justice. Abraham, motivated by his great love of his fellow man and his intellectual nature, felt compelled to comprehend G-d's justice in destroying the entire city. However, this cannot be misconstrued as questioning how G-d's actions are just. This is beyond human comprehension.

The destruction of the city of Sodom also led to the rescue of Lot and the attempted effort to rescue his wife. This incident is a vivid example of the unfortunate manner in which people view many of the events recited in the Bible. People are overwhelmed with the miraculous fable-like qualities of these stories, which when learned in their youth are so appealing. All too often people do not overcome their childhood impressions of the Torah, and fail to appreciate the insightful teachings of the Torah. An analysis of the story of Lot and his wife can help us learn to value the beauty of the Torah's teachings.

Lot's wife was punished after she looked back at the destruction of the city of Sodom. Genesis



chapter 19, verse 26 states, "And his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt." To comprehend this punishment, we must also understand what was so terrible about her looking back.

Chazal, the Rabbis, teach us that she was turned into a pillar of salt because G-d's punishment is measure for measure. Whenever guests were invited to the house, she didn't give them salt for their food. This is the reason she was turned into a pillar of salt. We must analyze the significance and the relationship between these two factors to appreciate G-d's justice being measure for measure.

The decree was that Sodom and all its citizens must be destroyed. Lot, however, was not truly a citizen of Sodom. The people of Sodom were not hospitable. Lot was. He greeted the angels and extended to them the courtesy of welcomed guests. In fact, Lot felt such compassion for his guests that when the people of Sodom wanted his guests to be handed over to them, Lot refused. His kindness to his guests even extended to his offering his daughters to the people of Sodom in their stead. However, he insisted that no harm be visited upon his guests. Thus Lot was charitable and deserved salvation since in spirit he was not truly a resident of Sodom. His kindness though seems misplaced. He was kind to his guests at the expense of being promiscuous with his daughters. This seems to be an awkward type of kindness and rather immoral behavior.

However, we must appreciate Lot as an individual. The Torah is telling us about his exploits because he obviously was a worthy individual. He was not simply an eccentric fool, or the Torah would not elaborate the details of his salvation. Lot was a relative of Abraham,

and was a member of his household. He learned the importance of kindness from Abraham and was a true *bal chessed*, charitable person. Lot, though, did not adopt Abraham's concept of kindness. Lot was drawn to Sodom because of his instinctual desires. Genesis chapter 13 at the conclusion of verse 12 states "... and pitched his tent towards Sodom." Lot was attracted to the sexual permissiveness that pervaded Sodom. Although Lot espoused the concept of loving kindness, he had no concept of sexual morality. Therefore, his behavior was understandable. His theory was to treat his guests with the utmost kindness, even if it compromised the sexual integrity of his daughters. This to Lot was completely logical. It was entirely within his framework. However, it evidences that he was completely divorced from any sense of *kedusha*. This attests to the fact that Abraham's concept of kindness itself was totally different from Lot's. Kindness for Abraham was based upon his sense of justice. Abraham was the first person to recognize G-d as creator of the universe and possessed a great intellect. His kindness for his fellow man stemmed from his wisdom.

Lot had no philosophical basis for his kindness. It was just emotional goodness based on his sense of being nice. Thus, *kallot rosh*, levity was not inconsistent with his philosophy. He had no concept of sanctity whereby man was to live his life based upon a higher intellectual plane of *kedusha*. However, Lot was worthy of salvation. He practiced kindness to his fellow man and was not a consummate citizen of Sodom. Therefore, God sent the angels to save him from the destruction of Sodom since the decree was directed against the citizens of Sodom..

Lot's wife did not share her husband's value of kindness. The Rabbis tell us that she never gave her guests salt. This is really indicative of her nature. Her withholding salt was just an expression of her emotional state. She was a vicious person who disdained her fellow man. She really did not desire to accommodate guests that visited her house. However, because Lot was a kind person, she had no choice. But she felt compelled to withhold something, not to be totally giving to a fellow human being. Lot's wife was truly a citizen of Sodom. The Rabbis tell us that she partook. She was unable to be happy if another person was enjoying himself. However, since she was Lot's wife, G-d gave her an opportunity for salvation. If she did not look back at the destruction of Sodom, she would be saved. Lot's wife was very happy in Sodom. She shared the values of its citizens and totally identified with them. However, G-d gave her a chance to do ideology. If she repented and realized her wrongdoings and was capable of emotional kindness towards her fellow man as was Lot, then she would be spared. If she did not look back at Sodom's destruction, it would reflect that she no longer identified with that evil society, and thus was worthy of salvation. However, she looked back. She still identified with the people of Sodom and felt badly that they were being destroyed. Therefore, her fate was sealed. She was destined to turn into a pillar salt. This reflected the salt that she was unable to share with her fellow man. Thus, G-d's method of punishment is measure for measure.

Abraham also returned to the site of the destruction the following morning. Abraham also desired to look upon the destruction of Sodom. However, his looking was different than Lot's wife. Genesis chapter 19, verse 28 states, "Vayashkaf.....", Abraham looked, he investigated. "Vayashkaf" indicates not merely looking, but rather viewing with an intellectual curiosity. Abraham had no identification with the people of Sodom. He came to view the destruction after its conclusion the following morning. His looking was the viewing of a wise individual who wanted to observe the manifestation of G-d's justice. The Torah is contrasting the method in which an emotional person views the event to the observation of a sinner. The former looks out of a sense of despair, yearning, and commiseration. Abraham looked to investigate, to comprehend, and to analyze the manner in which G-d's justice works. □



# AKEIDAS YITZCHAK

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

*"...The second category (of commandments) are commands which are hidden, and there is not explained why they were commanded. And God forbid, God forbid that there should be any one of these commands which goes against human intelligence. Rather, we are obligated to perform all that God commands, be it revealed to us the underlying "Sode" (principle), be it hidden from us. And if we find any of them which contradict human intelligence, it isn't proper that we should understand it as implied. But we should consult the books of the wise men of blessed memory, to determine if such a command is a metaphor. And if we find nothing written (by them) we (must) search out and seek with all our ability, perhaps we can fix it (determine the command). If we can't, then we abandon that mitzvah as it is, and admit we are ignorant of it". (Ibn Ezra, Exod. 20.1)*

**Reader:** According to Ibn Ezra you quoted, "abandon that mitzvah as it is", refers to commands which do not comply with human reason. My question is why Abraham accepted the command of slaughtering his only son. Isn't this in opposition to human reason? To kill your own child? This question is strengthened as the Ibn Ezra's very example of incomprehensible laws is the command "circumcise the foreskin of your hearts". This is a matter of killing as well, but here, Ibn Ezra says it is impossible that we should take this literally, i.e., to cut out our hearts. If this is so impossible on the literal level, what made Abraham so willing to sacrifice his son? Shouldn't he abandon the command from God, just as Ibn Ezra says we should?

**Mesora:** Your question is very good. There is one distinction I would make. Regarding the Ibn Ezra, if a command FOR ALL JEWS would exist as literally "circumcise the foreskin of your hearts", this would cause the end of Jewish people, a direct contradiction that Jewish people should exist. Additionally, the second half of that verse reads, "and your necks shall no longer be stiff". This means that the command of "circumcising the foreskins of your hearts" must result in an improvement in man's nature, where he is no longer stubborn. Clearly, the command of "circumcising the foreskins of your hearts" is not a directive to kill ourselves, but rather to improve our ethics - to eradicate our stubborn nature in connection with Torah adherence.

**Reader:** That is not the reason that the Ibn Ezra says though. He doesn't mention the last part of the Posuk or anything about it contradicting another part of the Torah, namely that the Jewish people should exist to perfect themselves.

**Mesora:** But that last half of the Posuk does in fact exist, and is divinely connected with the first half. We do not require all to be written by Ibn Ezra. You must learn the Ibn Ezra, not simply read him, and you must use reasoning. If God placed two ideas in one posuk, they are inherently intertwined and related.

**Reader:** Ibn Ezra says, "does He (Hashem) wish to murder us like a cruel person?" In other words there would be no benefit what so ever in taking the commandment literally, just the opposite it is totally destructive and makes no sense, and so it goes against reason. It is for this reason alone that he mentions the example of "circumcise the foreskin of your hearts". He doesn't say that if one commandment goes against another part of the

Torah that we have to reinterpret it. He says if it goes against "reason" we can't take it literally. That is his point.

**Mesora:** But isn't that which opposes another part of the Torah something which you consider going against reason? Of course. So we must look at the entire verse, and the entire Torah.

**Reader:** So my question on the Akeida stands. Forget about the example of "Umaltem". The fact is the Ibn Ezra (and not just him, Rav Saadia Gaon as well as many others mention this) says that if our understanding of a Mitzva goes against reason "it is not proper to believe it literally". So my question on the Akeida stands.

**Mesora:** A command to Abraham to slay his son doesn't contradict anything. It is not unreasonable for him to kill his son at God's command. He is only killing one person, and not the entire nation. A Rabbi taught, Abraham questioned God upon His decision to destroy Sodom. Why did Abraham question God on Sodom, but at the command to kill his own son, Abraham did not question? The Rabbi answered that in terms of determining God's justice, man may investigate and arrive at reasons. What God administers to man must be appreciated in man's terms of justice. But how killing Isaac would perfect Abraham, here, Abraham felt, "God may have a method unknown to me just how this will benefit me. If God commands me in this act, it must have a perfection somewhere, although I may not be able to see it. My ignorance does not remove the perfection of this act." Punishment is a different story, it is meted to man as a result of his actions, as a lesson to man or mankind. As such, "lesson" means that there is comprehension, there is understanding. Therefore, Abraham inquired about areas of justice - Sodom's destruction - but did not inquire into the command to kill Isaac. A command is God's knowledge, far beyond that which mortal man comprehends.

Again, nothing in the act of killing Isaac contradicted reason - but wiping out the entire nation by taking literally "circumcise the foreskin of your hearts" is unreasonable, and must be interpreted. We do not allow our ignorance to question God's commands. However, contradictions are different, and that which is contradictory cannot be followed. God gave us a mind to lead our actions, This means by definition that contradiction goes against God's wish for man's actions. Abraham slaughtering Isaac presented no contradiction. Jews following a command literally

of "circumcising the foreskins of our hearts" is a contradiction to God's plan that mankind endures. Now, you might say it contradicts God's very promise to make Abraham's seed as numerous as the stars and the sands. Perhaps Abraham thought there were new considerations to which God reacted, altering His original plan.

**Reader:** How can Hashem change his mind? First He tells Abraham to bring his son as a sacrifice, then He tells him not to. Either Hashem changed his mind or, Chalila, one of the commands was not true since contradictory statements cannot both be true! (Even Hashem can't do that, that's not possible). Many commentaries ask this question.

**Mesora:** God altered His plan to have man live forever. After the first sin, man caused death to become a reality. Why cannot God alter His plan? Ibn Ezra teaches that just as God initially desired the firstborns to serve in the Temple, but were exchanged for the Levites subsequent to their sin of the Golden Calf. Here too God changed His plan. In reality, God never intended that Isaac die, only that Abraham be tried by God's command. Once Abraham prevailed, just before cutting Isaac's throat, God told Abraham the truth, that Isaac is not to be killed, but that it was a trial.

**Reader:** Another question could be asked. If Hashem came to you and asked you directly to sacrifice your son would you be able to refuse? What was such a great test that Abraham went through?

**Mesora:** Jona refused God's command, anyone can refuse. The greatness of Abraham is that he didn't refuse, and was willing to sacrifice his beloved son.

**Reader:** The Ralbag points out that really there can be two understandings of Hashem's initial command to Abraham. 1) Bring him as a sacrifice. 2) To bring him up the mountain to bring a sacrifice with him, to educate him in bringing sacrifices. Using this insight of the Ralbag I would suggest that Abraham was in a dramatic dilemma. Should he interpret Hashem's words literally and go against his reason? Or should he use his reason to reinterpret Hashem's words? Abraham simply did not know what to do! Don't forget, for the first period of his life Abraham discovered God using his intellect alone as the Rambam so beautifully describes. Then he merited prophecy later in life. But now these two "chords" that attached him close to Hashem contradicted each other! What should he do? Now Abraham could have taken the easy way out. He could have reinterpreted Hashem's command to fit with reason. But he didn't! This was Abraham's great test! He figured that, if in doubt, he should show the maximum sacrifice to Hashem. This shows Abraham's Yiras HaShem.

**Mesora:** The Talmud (Sanhedrin 89b) presents the story of Abraham traveling to the mountain to kill Isaac. Satan - a metaphor for Abraham's own instincts - is recorded as trying to convince Abraham to abandon God's command, now that following God will prove to be the death of Isaac. What was the Satan (Abraham's instincts) saying? He was saying a principle we hear so often, "Why



serve God when things go bad?" Satan was saying that adherence to God is worthless unless life is 100% good. But we know this life cannot be 100% good, as God gave all mankind free will. At some point in life we must be confronted with the harmful effects of corrupt individuals using their free will to harm others. But this is exactly what King David said in Psalms, "Many evils befall the righteous, but they are saved from them all". This means that although due to free will, many evils must exist, nonetheless, God will remove their harmful effects from reaching the righteous. God does not alter the free will of the evildoers - this cannot be. But God does protect the righteous. Satan (Abraham's emotions) was attempting to avoid killing his precious son. However, Abraham prevailed over Satan's arguments.

Abraham struggles further with his instincts, and posed another possibility to himself, as you suggest, (the Talmud continues), "Satan said, 'I heard behind the curtain (in heaven)' the sheep for a sacrifice, and not Isaac". Again this illustrates what Abraham was feeling inside himself. That perhaps he is to merely sacrifice an animal, and not Isaac. It seems the Talmud entertains the idea that Abraham was unsure whether he was to actually kill Isaac, or a sheep. What was Abraham's response? "This is the punishment of a liar, that even when he tells the truth, he is not listened to." Abraham actually considered killing the sheep to be a very real possibility of the command's intent. But when he said to Satan (to himself) "that even when Satan tells the truth, he is not listened to", Abraham was saying that since this idea came from his instincts, its veracity is inconsequential. As this thought originated from the instincts, it is not trusted. Abraham completely denied any value that his emotions tried to produce through these rationalizations to spare Isaac. Abraham prevailed over Satan - over his strong emotions.

Another thought: When faced with the emotional appeal that an animal was to be killed and not Isaac, Abraham reasoned, "It is purposeless that God would make a statement so vague, allowing me to be doubtful as to which one I shall slaughter. If He wished an animal, He would say so clearly." Perhaps Abraham saw that his confusion is just the workings of the emotions, and he did not heed to his emotions. This is what is meant by, "that even when Satan tells the truth, he is not listened to.", that is, "even when my emotions say rational possibilities, I cannot follow them (the emotions)." □

# Vayera

RABBI BERNARD FOX

(continued from page 1)

would soon bare him a son – Yitzchak. A third malach will tell Avraham of the coming destruction of Sedom. After fulfilling his responsibility, the angel that foretold the birth of Yitzchak leaves Avraham and the others. His job is done. The remaining two messengers proceed to Sedom. One will destroy the city. The other will save Lote and his family. In our pasuk, the messengers of Hashem approach the city. Lote rises to welcome them. The Torah uses two different terms in referring to these messengers. Previously, the messengers appeared before Avraham. In that instance, the Torah described them as "men." In our pasuk, the messengers appear before Lote. Here, they are referred to as malachim. This term has a dual meaning. It can be translated as "messengers." It can also be translated as "angels." Why does the Torah use two different terms in describing these messengers?

Rashi raises this question and offers an answer. He begins with the assumption that, in the context of our passages, the term malachim means "angels." He explains that Avraham possessed great spiritual power. He was accustomed to encountering angels. The Torah wishes to allude to Avraham's familiarity with these heavenly messengers. Therefore, the Torah refers to them as men. Lote did not share Avraham's spiritual greatness. He did not commonly encounter angels. To Lote, heavenly messengers were alien. Therefore, in reference to Lote, they are referred to as malachim, or angels. Rashi's comments are very difficult to understand. It is true that Avraham was not awed by the visit of these guests. This implies that such visits were commonplace. However, Lote had a similar reaction to encountering these messengers. He hospitably greeted them. Like Avraham, Lote does not seem to be particularly awed by these guests. There is a further problem. Certainly, Avraham was a spiritual giant. However, there is no indication from the Torah that he regularly saw angels. We must begin by realizing that Rashi's comments cannot be understood literally.

It is clear from the pesukim that neither Avraham nor Lote were shocked by the appearance of these messengers. Both – at least initially – treated their guests as mortals. Indeed, it seems that they both initially assumed that these travelers were mere mortals! Rashi's intention is to indicate that

there is an additional message communicated by the passages. This message concerns the spiritual perfection achieved by Lote and Avraham. Rashi is not claiming that this spiritual perfection actually impacted upon their respective responses to the messengers. However, the passages allude to Avraham and Lote's perfection. It remains for us to understand this message imbedded in the passages' phraseology. As we have explained, the term malach means messenger or angel. These two meanings are related. An angel is the perfect messenger of the Almighty. A perfect messenger carries out the orders of its master without deviation. Its will is completely subservient to the will of the master. Angels meet these requirements. Humans rarely achieve this level of devotion to Hashem. We cannot easily push aside our egocentric natures. We work to devote ourselves to the Creator. But, this devotion battles with our dedication to ourselves. We are not perfect messengers.

However, some special individuals do approach the level of devotion attributed to angels. Moshe came the closest. Hashem describes Moshe as His servant. This term describes complete subservience to the Almighty. Avraham was not as great as Moshe. But, he also approached the perfection of the angels. We can describe this perfection. We can discuss it. However, we cannot really visualize or relate to it. Individuals like Moshe and Avraham were personally familiar with this remarkable level of spiritual achievement.

We can now understand Rashi's comments. Avraham was familiar with angels. He saw them regularly. This does not mean that Divine angels visited Avraham on a weekly basis. Avraham did not need these visits to be familiar with angels. Angels symbolize the concept of complete devotion to G-d. Avraham was intimately familiar with this concept. He could relate to and visualize this concept. To Avraham, it was achievable by humans. Lote, like us, could understand the concept of complete devotion. However, to Lote, it was the domain of the angels. He had not achieved the personal spiritual perfection of Avraham. He could not readily relate to the perfection represented by angels.

"Behold please, I have two daughters who have never known a man. I will bring them out to you. And do to them as is fit in your eyes. But do not do anything to these men – for they have come under my roof." (Beresheit 19:8)

Hashem sends two melachim - messengers - to Sedom. One will destroy Sedom. The other will save Lote and his family. Lote takes

these strangers into his home. The people of Sedom surround Lote's home. They command Lote to send out his guests. They tell Lote that they wish to "know" his guests. The commentaries understand this phrase to allude to homosexual assault. Lote refuses. He offers his daughters to the people. He tells the mob that they may do to his daughters as they please. However, they should not harm his guests. He is obligated to protect these strangers who have taken refuge in his home. Lote's offer to exchange his daughters for the safety of his guests is difficult to understand. It is admirable that he felt obligated to protect these strangers. But certainly, he was also obligated to care for his daughters' wellbeing! Sforno offers an interesting explanation of Lote's behavior. He explains that Lote was attempting to create confusion and dissention within the mob. His daughters were already engaged. Lote expected that his offer would be accepted. This would alarm his future sons-in-law. They would turn against the mob. They would probably attract sympathetic supporters among the people. The mob would be split and turned against itself.

**And He said, "Do not send your hand against the young man and do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear G-d and you did not withhold your special son from me." (Beresheit 22:12)**

Hashem commands Avraham to offer his son Yitzchak as an olah sacrifice. Avraham take Yitzchak to the mountain that Hashem indicates. He prepares to sacrifice Yitzchak. The Almighty speaks to Avraham and tells him he should not slaughter Yitzchak. Through his willingness to sacrifice his son, Avraham has shown his devotion to the Almighty. Rashi explains that Avraham was confused by the Almighty's command to sacrifice Yitzchak. Hashem had promised Avraham that his descendants would become a great nation. Yitzchak was to be the beginning of this nation. Then, the Almighty commanded Avraham to offer Yitzchak as an olah sacrifice. Now, Hashem tells Avraham not to harm Yitzchak. The Almighty does not change. He cannot give contradictory commands and promises. Avraham asked Hashem to reconcile these various prophecies. The Almighty responds that these prophecies were not in conflict. He had never commanded Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak. He had told Avraham to offer Yitzchak. By placing Yitzchak on the altar, this was accomplished. The fulfillment of the command did not require Yitzchak's slaughter. Rav Chaim Soloveitchik Ztl notes that Rashi's comments are difficult to

understand. This incident – the akaidah – was one of the Avraham's trails. The Almighty subjected Avraham to this test. Yet, according to Rashi, Hashem did not really construct this test. The trail was a result of Avraham's misunderstanding of the Almighty's command to offer Yitzchak as an olah sacrifice. Avraham erroneously assumed this required Yitzchak's slaughter. In fact, the command only required Yitzchak's placement upon the altar. In addition, it seems odd that Avraham would misunderstand the prophecy and make this mistake. Rav Chaim explained that Avraham did not misunderstand. He had been commanded to offer Yitzchak as an olah sacrifice. The slaughter of the sacrifice is an essential component of the service. Avraham was correct to assume that the command required Yitzchak's death. Hashem told Avraham not to sacrifice Yitzchak. This was not a clarification. This command excluded Yitzchak from the normal parameters of the olah service. Without this prophecy, Avraham would have been required to sacrifice Yitzchak. In short, Avraham understood Hashem properly. The final prophecy was not a clarification. It was an exclusion of Yitzchak from the general requirements of the olah service. ■

Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 19:1. [Sefer BeMidbar 12:7. Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 19:8. [Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 19:8. Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 22:12. [Meir Hochberger – editor, Meorai HaMo'adim MeBait Brisk, pp. 114-115.]

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