

Akeidas Yitzchak Love of God

God asks Abraham to sacrifice a son for whom he longed, so he might actualize his potential: so mankind might learn how far we can excel in our love of God. We are created for this very purpose – “Love of God”. We have but one life. Take to heart your mission.

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Houston	6:26	Phoenix	5:29
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Weekly Parsha

Vayerah

RABBI BERNIE FOX

A Study in the Chesed of Abraham

And Hashem appeared to Avraham at Eylonai Mamreh and he was sitting at the opening of his

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Weekly Parsha

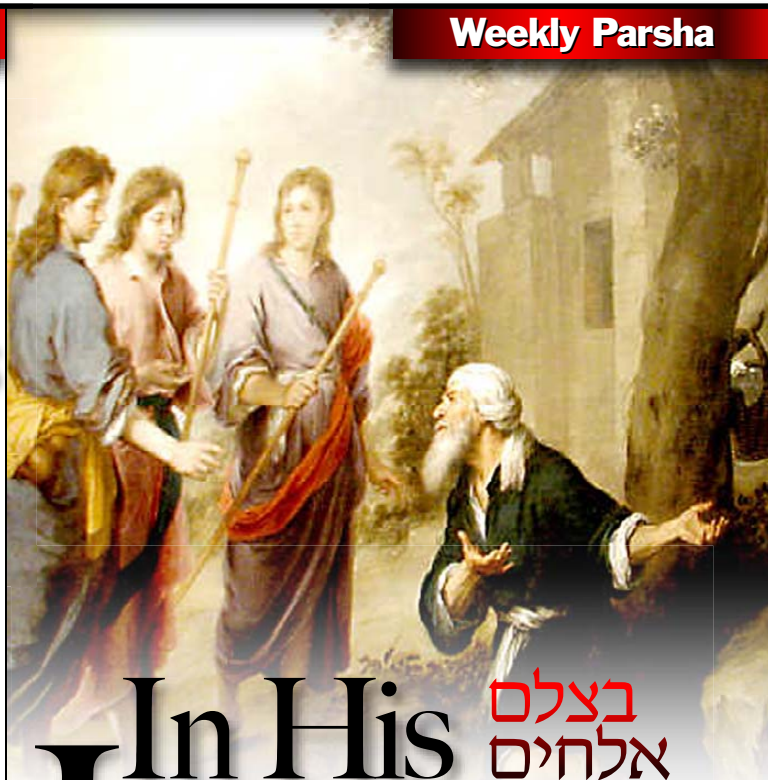
Gratuitous Gesture – OR – Generous Gift?

RABBI DR. DARREL GINSBERG

Parshas Vayera is filled with monumental events in the history of our religion, including the birth of Yitzchak and the subsequent akeidah. The precursor to Yitzchak's birth involves the incident that occurs in the beginning of the parsha, where the Torah details the visit of the three “guests” to Avraham. As we all know, one of their missions was to bring the news about the future birth of Yitzchak. Amidst an event of crucial import, it's intriguing to note the attention paid to what would seem to be the least significant part of the visit — the preparation of the meal. From the exhaustive description of the food to be served to the numerous mentions of the great haste Avraham applied to the meal's preparation, no detail is spared. Many commentators offer the explanation that this demonstrated Avraham's dedication towards hachnasos orchim, the

(continued on page 5)

Weekly Parsha



In His אלהים Image

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's parsha, Vayera, begins with Avraham receiving a Revelation from Hashem. According to the Rabbis this occurred on the third day after his Brit Milah and was a gesture of Bikkur Cholim from the Creator. This basis of our ethical code is not mundane “humanitarianism” but a resolve to emulate the ways of G-d. Hashem visits and comforts the sick and, thus, demonstrates for us the significance of this mitzvah. This should inspire us and remind us of the great importance of tending to the needs of those who are ill. It is not only the patient we are helping when we pay him a call. We are also elevating ourselves by modeling our behavior in accordance with the “attributes” of Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

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(Vayerah cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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tent as the day became warm. He lifted his eyes and three men stood before him. He saw them; he ran to them from the opening of his tent and he bowed to the ground. He said: My masters. If I have now found grace in your eyes, do not now pass from before your servant. Take now a little water; wash your feet and rest under the tree. I will take bread and you will satisfy your hunger. Afterwards you will pass on for it is for this reason that you have come to pass by your servant. And they said: You will do as you have spoken. (Beresheit 18:1-5)

Two explanations of the Chumash's reference to the day's warmth

The first passage of the parasha begins by telling us that Hashem appeared to Avraham. The Chumash does not seem to explicitly describe the nature of Avraham's vision. This omission is the foundation of an extensive discussion and debate among the commentaries. The passage continues by relating that the events being described occurred as the day grew warm. Then, the passages describe Avraham's encounter with three travelers. Avraham sees the travelers and beseeches them to briefly pause from their journey and allow him the privilege of hosting them in his home. They agree to Avraham's request.

Our Sages note the unusual reference in the first passage to the weather. Why does the passage mention that the events unfolded as the day grew warm? Rashi quotes one of the responses. These events occurred while Avraham was recuperating from his recent circumcision. Avraham was always eager to entertain travelers and share his home with them. Hashem wanted to assure that Avraham was spared the burden of caring for guests during his recuperation. Therefore, Hashem caused the sun to wax in order to discourage travelers.

Of course, our Sages realize that this explanation for the Torah's reference to the hot weather is contradicted by the very next passage. Three travelers appear before Avraham. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that these travelers are messengers of Hashem. Why did Hashem increase the intensity of the sun to save Avraham from the burden of caring for travelers

and them send three travelers? Rashi explains that the Sages resolve the contradiction. Hashem wished to relieve Avraham from the responsibility of caring for guests. But Avraham responded with disappointment. He wanted to be able to offer his hospitality to travelers, but because of the intense heat the roads were abandoned. In order to appease Avraham, Hashem sent him His own messengers to whom Avraham would extend his welcome. [1]

Rashi's comments are drawn from a discussion in the Talmud.[2] The Midrash is also troubled by the Torah's reference to the weather but offers a different explanation. It explains that the warmth of the sun is an agent for healing. Hashem brought forth the sun's warmth to assist Avraham's recovery.[3] The appearance of three travelers sent by Hashem does not contradict this

explanation and requires no explanation. In other words, Hashem provided Avraham with the warmth of the sun to aid his healing and three messengers to share a message with Avraham.

If these two explanations are compared, it seems that the Midrash's account for the description of the weather is the easier to understand. The Talmud's explanation seems needlessly convoluted by comparison. According to the Talmud's explanation, Hashem first brings forth the sun in order to discourage travelers and then realizes that the absence of travelers will disappoint Avraham.

Hashem then adjusts His plan and sends His own messengers to visit with Avraham. The Midrash's explanation is simpler and avoids unnecessary complexity.

However, there is a more serious problem with the Talmud's explanation. According to the Talmud, Avraham was disappointed by the absence of travelers. Their absence denied Avraham of the opportunity to extend his hospitality. This is a strange reason for Avraham to become frustrated. True, in the absence of travelers, he could not extend his welcome, but no travelers required his hospitality! In other words, apparently, Avraham was disheartened because he could not practice chesed – kindness. But kindness is a response to a person in need. If one has the opportunity to practice chesed and does not take advantage of the opportunity, then this

(continued on next page)

person has a reason to be disappointed in himself. But it is ridiculous for a person to bemoan the fact that there is no one in need of his help!

Avraham's concern with the welfare of travelers. This is not the only occasion on which Rashi discusses Avraham's intense desire to serve travelers. The Torah explains that after the destruction of Sedom and the surrounding cities, Avraham relocated his camp and resettled in Gerrar – located between Kadesh and Shur. Rashi explains that with the destruction of Sedom and the surrounding region, travelers abandoned the routes in the area. Avraham could no longer extend his welcome to travelers. Therefore, he relocated to a more densely populated region. This allowed him to renew his practice of accommodating travelers.[4] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno offers an explanation for Avraham's relocation to Gerrar, that at first, seems to be an alternative to Rashi's explanation. He explains that Avraham was dedicated to teaching the truths he had discovered. His mission was to reintroduce Hashem to humanity and to vigorously oppose all forms of idolatry. Avraham could only fulfill this mission in a populated area. The region of Sedom had served as an ideal location for Avraham. It was a relatively densely populated region containing a number of cities. Avraham reached out to the people of the region and taught them and helped them escape the insanity of idolatry. With the destruction of this region, Avraham was forced to relocate in order to continue his mission. He chose Gerrar as his new headquarters.[5]

However, there is not necessary any disagreement between Rashi and Sforno. Sforno is explaining Avraham's mission. But Rashi is describing his strategy. Avraham's mission was to salvage humanity and return it to Hashem. His strategy was to reach people through acts of kindness.

Two paradigms of chesed

The Torah commands us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.[6] This seems like an impossible task. But although it is very difficult to achieve this level of empathy, we can strive to be constantly cognizant of the sanctity that is shared by every human being. We are all the work of Hashem. Each of us is created in His form. How do we constantly remind ourselves of this shared sanctity? We achieve this recognition through the acts of loving kindness that we perform for one another. By treating our fellow human beings with sensitivity and kindness –

even those with whom we are not familiar and those of whom we are not fond – we remind ourselves that despite all of our deficiencies, we are each the work of Hashem and a reflection of His Divine essence.

This form of chesed is fulfilled through responding to those in pain, who are suffering, or are in need of our assistance. Chesed practiced, as an expression of this paradigm, requires that we respond to those who need our assistance. It may even require that we seek out those in need. But this form of chesed is purely a response to need and in the absence of need, it is not practiced.

There is another paradigm for chesed. Chesed was employed by Avraham as a means of drawing people back to Hashem and away from idolatry. Avraham's chesed was a concrete expression of his love of Hashem and his desire to serve Him through reaching out to humanity. Avraham did not welcome strangers into his home merely to satisfy their appetite for food. As Sforno explains, Avraham's mission was to satisfy the spiritual hunger of humanity. Each guest was fed and also drawn into a discussion in which Avraham probed, posed questions, made observations, and gradually penetrated the thinking of the idolater encouraging him to rethink his convictions and abandon his prejudices. Through this process, Avraham drew his guests towards Hashem and away from the folly of idolatry.

Chesed that is an expression of this paradigm – an expression of love of Hashem – is not merely a response to need. Its end is not solely to provide relief. Instead, it treats need as an opportunity to address a more fundamental issue. Need provides the opportunity to reach out to another human being and to be received. It provides an opening into the recipient's heart and mind. This form of chesed begins with addressing the need identified by the recipient, but this is only its starting point. Its ultimate objective is to reshape the recipient's thinking, free him from his religious prejudices, and rescue him from the foolishness of idolatry. But this form of chesed does require need in order to gain expression, and in the absence of need, it cannot be performed.

Now, Avraham's response to the absence of travelers can be understood. The travelers had abandoned the roads to seek shelter from the heat. They did not need Avraham's assistance. But Avraham was unhappy. Because his assistance was not required, he was deprived of the opportunity to practice chesed and thereby reach out to his fellow human beings. As the sun waxed

brightly, Avraham perceived that no one would enter his home on this day and he would lose the opportunity to teach his fellow human being. No new person would be encouraged to abandon idolatry and no one would be drawn into the service of Hashem. Hashem responded to Avraham's distress by sending him three guests. Avraham seized the opportunity to bring these strangers into his home and into his religious community.

Furthermore, the comments of the Talmud are not longer convoluted. They are an eloquently formulated homiletic teaching. The message communicated is that Avraham's chesed was not only a response of kindness to those in need. Avraham was unhappy when he could not perform acts of chesed. This frustration – emphasized by the Talmud – indicates the true nature of Avraham's chesed and identifies the paradigm that it expresses. The message communicated is that Avraham regarded need as an opportunity to reach people. As a result, he bemoaned the absence of this opportunity. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 18:1.

[2] Mesechet Baba Metzia, 86b.

[3] Yalkut Shimoni on Sefer Beresheit, 18:82.

[4] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 20:1.

[5] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 20:1.

[6] Sefer VaYikra 19:18

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Letters

God's JUSTICE: Sparing *the* Wicked

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Rivkah: In Egypt, the Egyptians would punish the Jews if they did not produce their quota of bricks by taking their babies and putting them in the wall they were building to fill in where a brick should have been. When the question was asked by a Jew why Hashem allowed this, Hashem answered that He permitted this because if the baby was to live he would be a rasha – an evil person. But, when Ishmael was sent out of Abraham's house by Sarah and the angels told Hashem that he should not be saved because he would be destroying the Jews in the future, Hashem answered the angels that He would judge Ishmael on his "current" sins and merits, not on what would happen later on.

There is a conflict there...why?

Rabbi: God didn't kill the Jews in Egypt, the Egyptians did. So there's no question about God killing them due to their latter end. God merely didn't step in to save them. God was inactive. A Rabbi taught that those Jews were idolatrous and deserved this fate. Rashi agrees, stating that four fifths of the Jewish population were killed in the Plague of Darkness. Evidently, that Jewish population was corrupt beyond repair.

In the case of Ishmael God did perform salvation based on "As he was there" ("ba'asher hu sham" – Gen. 22:17) meaning Ishmael's current status as righteous. Thus, he was not deserving of punishment, but salvation. Rashi (ibid) records your cited medrash that the angels asked God that since Ishmael's descendants would pain the Jews, why save Ishmael?

So why did God determine Ishmael should be saved, while the Jews in Egypt should not be saved? Was there not inevitable evil God could

thwart in Ishmael's case too? So why treat Ishmael differently and save him, while letting the infants die?

One difference is that in Egypt, it was inevitable that the very infant would have become an evil person, so saving him would be futile. But Ishmael was not the one who would perform the evil in the future – it was his offspring.

A second difference – located in the Rashi above – is that Ishmael was now over 13 (Gen. 17:25) and he had merits. Whereas an infant has no merits. There was no claim of righteousness that could have been used to defend those infants, but regarding Ishmael, he already matured and made righteous decisions, thereby earning him God's providence. So God saved him.

"As he was there" ("ba'asher hu sham") – meaning judging one on his current merits – is applicable only to Ishmael and not to the infant Jews in Egypt.



But what is truly strange, is why the angels asked God to let Ishmael die, based on the sins of Ishmael's descendants! Don't angels know the truth, that Ishmael was righteous at that point in time? And don't they know Torah...that God only punishes a man for his "own" sins? (Deut. 24:16) How then can they consider Ishmael to be at fault an deserving of death?

Rabbi Joshua Maroof: Perhaps judging a person is "ba'asher hu sham" but Hashem's judgment is also with reference to his ultimate plan for humanity's development, in which case the fact that descendants will be bad does greater damage to the overall hashgachic plan than destroying the innocent yachid would (this was the "hava amina" of the malakim).

Rabbi: Well said Josh. Rabbi Israel Chait said the same idea regarding Moses killing the Egyptian. Rabbi Chait quoted Yonasan ben Uzziel, that Moses "looked here and there" – meaning Moses looked with divine knowledge to determine if a penitent or converted man would issue from this Egyptian. But Moses saw no good progeny, and therefore he killed him due to his sin.

Rabbi Joshua Maroof: There does seem to be a difference. Moshe was looking for a reason to exonerate a sinning person and exempt him from punishment based on his unwitting instrumentality to a greater good. In the case of Ishmael he was righteous at the moment and this would have been referencing the future to indict somebody innocent. This is also what hazal say about Hizkiyahu, that he didn't want to have children because he knew they would be wicked in the future and Yeshayahu told him we base our actions on the current halakic obligation, nothing else.

Rabbi: Excellent answer. In fact, both cases are consistent with the concept of "V'hitz-diku haTzaddik", a mandate to seek justice more than guilt. So to sum it up, when seeking to exonerate, we go to the far reaches of God's ultimate knowledge of one's progeny or perhaps all areas than can acquit (Moses' case) but when indicting, we wish to dismiss any evidence of wrong in one's progeny (Ishmael's case). Why then did the angels suggest to rely on God's ultimate knowledge, and indict Ishmael due to his progeny? Perhaps this is because angels, as created being, have distinct missions and govern only those laws limited to their natures. The Rabbis teach, "One angel does not perform two missions". (Rashi, Gen. 18:2) For an angel to be merciful, would mean it would not follow its nature. This is something only God can do. Thus, God was merciful to Ishmael. The angels could not be so. ■

welcoming of guests. In fact, there is no doubt that this incident served as a model for how one should treat his guests. However, there is another, lesser known rationale for this detailed description derived from Pirkei Avos.

In Pirkei Avos (1:15), we are taught as follows:

“Shammai said: Make your study of the Torah a fixed habit. Say little and do much, and receive all men with a cheerful face.”

It is the idiom “say little and do much” that is the focus here. Nearly all the commentators on this statement point to the above mentioned story as the prototype of this behavior. The question of course is, how so?

After first offering some water for cleaning and some shade, Avraham says as follows (Bereishis 18:5):

“I will get bread and you will sustain your hearts. Afterwards you will continue on your way, because it is for this reason that you have passed by your servant.”

The offer of “bread” then transformed into (ibid 6-8):

“Avraham hurried to Sarah's tent and said, ‘Hurry! [take] three measures of the finest flour; knead it and make cake-rolls.’: Avraham ran to the cattle, and took a tender, choice calf. He gave it to the lad and hurried to prepare it.: He took butter, milk, and the calf he had prepared, and set it before them. He stood over them under the tree, and they ate.”

As one can obviously see, much more than a piece of bread was being given to the guests. It is from this very gesture, the initial offer of bread to the complete meal, that we derive this concept of “say little and do much.”

The Rambam, in his commentary on Pirkei Avos, goes a little further (1:15, #14). He explains that it is the trait of the righteous (tzadikim) to say a little but do a lot. Avraham personified this in his offer of bread and his ensuing delivery of a sumptuous meal. On the other hand, it is the trait of the evil (reshayim) to say a lot, yet fail to do anything at all. He cites the example of Efron, the man from whom Avraham purchased Ma'aras



HaMachpelah in Parsha Chayei Sarah. At first, Efron offered Avraham both the cave and the entire surrounding plot of land at no charge. Yet, at the end, he ended up selling it to Avraham at a standard rate.

“Say little and do much” – as an expression, it has such a nice, simple ring to it. A basic message to be taught to kids, a friendly reminder for adults not to, in common parlance, just “talk the talk.” Yet, to just treat this message, along with all others written by Chazal (the wise Rabbis) as moral advice and nothing more is a clear disgrace to the reality that there is always tremendous chachma to be gleaned from the writings of Chazal. There must in every instance be a deeper message, and looking at the two examples offered by the Rambam might help uncover the idea Chazal presents.

There are a few basic premises to be understood before proceeding into the explanation. The first involves the nature of the speech being discussed here. The two examples indicate that Chazal are not referring to everyday conversations. Instead, the one common theme between the two is the offer made to the other party. In other words, as seen in the commentary of Rabbeinu Yonah on this very piece, the conversation here is, in reality, a promise of sorts being made by Avraham to the guests and by Efron to Avraham. This being the framework of the “saying” and “doing,” the next clarification has to do with the quantification expressed through “little” vs. “much”. It would

not make sense to treat these as literal, quantitative descriptions. One could therefore assume that rather than referring to a literal enunciation of words, the idea of “little” and “much” refers to the nature of the offer.

With these assumptions in place, let's take a look at the example of Efron first. Efron, when approached by Avraham to purchase the cave, responded in front of a large audience and in a very public manner, insisting Avraham take the land free of charge. As the story progresses, Avraham counters that he cannot accept that proposition. Efron then responds that he will sell it to Avraham for 400 pieces of silver, and the deal is finalized. How does the Rambam, based on the idea of Chazal, see the “evil” in this action? It could be the Rambam is telling us that Efron's motivation in making the offer to Avraham is where his flaw was exposed. Efron made an incredible offer, one that would seem to be the epitome of statesmanship. Yet his real desire was self-serving, to inflate his ego and show off his benevolence in front of his people — thus the insistence on making this offer in public. This is a familiar scenario, when one makes an offer guided by some self-serving emotion. Inevitably, when someone does this, the emotion begins to fade and regret naturally enters into the picture: “did I really just promise that???” Avraham, through countering Efron's offer, created an opening for Efron to escape his regret, still appear magnanimous and respond with the

offer he truly intended. We can now see the concept a little clearer. When a person makes a promise guided solely by a self-serving emotion, once the feeling wears away, a sense of remorse for the promise sets in and he looks to escape the responsibility. This is the trait Chazal are emphasizing – when an offer to assist is really there to serve the ego.

Obviously, Avraham would have to be the opposite of Efron. Rather than being guided by some self-serving drive, Avraham was genuinely interested in the welfare of his guests. This fits into Avraham's overall personality. He lived his life trying to encourage people toward monotheism, using his tent as a way station of chachma – wisdom. When he saw these three travelers, he understood both the physical and psychological discomfort that emerges through journeying. He pledges them food, but it is a general offer since his focus was on their comfort, not on impressing them with his largesse. His ego played no part in his desire to serve them and, as such, there would be no grandiose gestures and no subsequent feelings of regret. Furthermore, it meant there were no limitations to what he would prepare; his attention was on bringing them what he thought would satisfy them prior to the next step in their journey. Avraham's haste in bringing the meal further shows that he had no resistance to accomplishing his stated objective, resistance that is often felt when someone offers more than he is prepared to give. The offer was guided by the correct ideas; the result was a sumptuous meal that transformed them from travelers to guests.

As we can now see, the details of the first episode in Parshas Veyara help bring to light some very important and universal ideas. We see yet another insight into the personality of Avraham, how he constantly serves as the epitome of rational thought and proper middos. Through the words of Pirkei Avos, we see that even when self-serving actions are hidden in benevolence they remain self-serving. Avraham's behavior reveals to us that true gestures of kindness require us to focus solely on the needs of others and not make promises our egos can't keep. ■

However, something strange happens in the course of Hashem's visit. During his conversation with G-d, Avraham spots three "travelers" going by. He then pleads with G-d not "to depart" until he has extended hospitality to the unexpected guests. Avraham then leaves Hashem "waiting" while he provides the strangers with shade, water and a generous meal. On the surface this behavior is extremely puzzling. Welcoming guests is a great mitzvah. However, one should have his priorities in order. Avraham had been fortunate to receive a visit from Hashem and was engaged in dialogue with Him. Can there be any greater experience than communion with the Divine presence? Was it not unthinking, or even disrespectful of Avraham to interrupt the conversation in order to tend to the needs of strangers? The Rabbis address this issue and establish an important principle i.e. "Greater is the welcoming of guests than greeting the Divine presence." If one were to choose between "conversing with G-d" and tending to those in need he should do the latter first. The lesson being taught here is very significant. One's relationship to G-d cannot be separated from his treatment of His creatures. One who has disdain for others but is exceedingly scrupulous in his personal religious duties such as prayer and ritual is not relating to Hashem in the most appropriate manner. If one truly "loves" Hashem he must nurture a genuine concern and compassion for all who were created in His Image. When one helps others and improves them as human beings he affirms the Tzelem Elokim (Divine Image) and honors it. This constitutes the most exalted service of G-d. Our parsha contains a very important teaching. We must always remember that every human being is created "Betzalmo" (His Image) and the manner in which we treat people reflects, in a profound way, the true character of our reverence for Hashem.

-Shabbat Shalom.



TALMUDIC
METAPHOR

Talmud Sanhedrin 89b: "And it was after these things, and G-d tested Abraham." (Genesis 22:1 regarding G-d's command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac).

"Rabbi Yochanan said in Rabbi Yosi ben Zimra's name, 'after these things' refers to 'after the words of Satan'. As it says, 'the lad grew and was weaned.' Upon which Satan said to G-d, 'Master of the world, this old man (Abraham) you graciously gave a child at 100 years of age. At all his feasts, did he not have one turtledove or one pigeon to offer to you?' G-d said, 'Has he done this only for his son? If I would say sacrifice your son before me, he would do so. 'Immediately G-d tested Abraham saying take 'na' (please) your son....' Rabbi Simeon ben Abba said 'na' refers only to a pleaded request. 'This is allegorical to an earthly king who fought many wars and was victorious through the help of a great warrior. In time, the king was faced with a very strong battle. He pleaded with the warrior, 'stand with me in this battle, so my previous battles won't be disparaged saying there were no previous successes'. So too is the case here, G-d pleaded with Abraham, 'I tested you with many trials, and you were triumphant in them all. Now, stand though this test so they should not say there were no real triumphs in your previous trials.'"

Was does it mean that G-d pleaded with Abraham? What is the concept being taught that the purpose in Abraham's trial required sacrificing his son? It seems it is only a response to Satan. Who does Satan represent here?

Sometimes, Satan refers to the person himself, i.e., Abraham, his own instincts. But this is not the case here. Abraham was telling G-d something negative about himself. To whom can Satan refer? I believe it is the people of the land, those who seek to mock Abraham.

Upon Abraham "celebrating" his son's physical maturity, this raised suspicion among the people as to Abraham's true level of perfection. The people (Satan) harbored feelings that Abraham was not as great as he made himself out to be. Perhaps they were astounded at his ability to have a child at 100 years of age. The people of the land were jealous of G-d's divine intervention with Abraham. Why did this pose such jealousy? People saw someone as righteous as Abraham, being successful in all of his trials. His trials were undoubtedly publicized as the allegory teaches, and such perfection in Abraham conveyed to them by contrast, their own lack of perfection. They were jealous and felt animosity towards Abraham.

Why jealousy and animosity? They sought to degrade his perfection, portraying him no better than they are. Belittling Abraham's triumphs over G-d's trials, they can now live with themselves. They no longer feel less than perfect, as Abraham himself is not perfect. They can say, "If Abraham couldn't pass the hardest test, he probably didn't pass the easier ones". The people - referred to here as Satan - harbored the notion that Abraham would not sacrifice Isaac and he could not achieve ultimate perfection. In order to substantiate to the world that man can indeed reach perfection, G-d commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. G-d's will is that His desired lifestyle for man be displayed as achievable, not something so lofty that no man can succeed. To teach the world that man can reach the heights of perfection, G-d instructed Abraham in this most difficult trial. It is recorded as G-d "pleading" with Abraham, to teach us that such a trial is essential for mankind to witness.

We learn that this trial of sacrificing Isaac was not only to actualize Abraham's own perfection, but it was also designed to teach us that G-d's desired perfection for mankind is within reach. When the world sees a man who can perfect himself to such a degree, it removes all rationalizations posed by weaker peoples, which justify their continued laziness and lack of perfection. But now that Abraham passed this test too, the world must admit that G-d's plan for man is achievable - by all mankind. Abraham's ultimate trial teaches such a valuable lesson; that G-d's will is achievable.

Our metaphor means that Abraham - the warrior - made G-d's system successful on many occasions. He followed and taught G-d's monotheism, and perfected his character traits. But people still felt if Abraham doesn't stand the toughest test, he is nothing. They sought justification for their immoral lives. G-d 'pleaded' with His warrior to help Him succeed in this great battle - sacrificing Isaac. G-d could not win the battle Himself, as the only victory (G-d proving His system as perfect and within man's reach) must be through mortal man and the use of his free will. Only by a man - Abraham - displaying such devotion to G-d, will G-d's system emerge victorious, and achievable. ■

Satan
&
ABRAHAM

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Weekly Parsha



the Naming of YITZCHAK

RABBI ARI GINSBERG

The naming of Yitzhak Avinu is a significant event that reflects the culmination of several other occurrences depicted in both Parshas Lech Lecha and Vayera. The evolution of his name is littered with seeming inconsistencies that if left unresolved make the story quite perplexing. However, the Torah's presentation of these events is undoubtedly deliberate to teach us valuable lessons about our patriarchs and matriarchs, as well as to encourage our own incorporation of these concepts into our lives.

In Lech Lecha, (17:17 – 20) Avraham is told by Hashem that he and Sarah will have a son that will inherit his legacy and ultimately lead to a great nation. His response to this news is falling to the ground and “vayitzchak”, regarding his and Sarah's ability to procreate despite their old age. Onkelos and Rashi both interpret the word “vayitzchak” in this verse to mean, in a state of happiness and joy. In the next pasuk, Hashem informs Avraham that he will name his future son Yitzhak, and Rashi notes that this is an allusion to Avraham's reaction to the wonderful news. In contrast, (Breishis 18: 10 – 15) Sarah overhears from the angels who had visited Avraham that she will have a son. Her reaction from a literal reading of the verse is almost identical to Avraham's reactions. It says “Vatizchak” at the beginning of this verse, but Rashi and Onkelos translate “Vatizchak” in a negative manner. They explain (Breishis 17: 17) that “Vatizchak” means to mock, and that Sarah was unconvinced of the possibility of having a child, since she had already passed the age of potential conception. She is then admonished by Hashem through Avraham for questioning Hashem's infinite abilities. When confronted with her flaw, she immediately denies her initial reaction, but Avraham once again forces her to admit her response of disbelief. Finally, after Avraham names Yitzhak, Sarah confirms this name (Breishis 21:6) by noting that God has given her joy, and that everyone will be happy for her. The words “Tzechok” and “Yitzchak” in this verse are universally translated as happiness.

A number of questions emerge in analyzing these verses with Onkelos' and Rashi's commentaries. First, how could our matriarch, Sarah, who had already witnessed miracles, acknowledged her husband's prophecy, and prophesized herself, question the ability of God to perform this miracle? Also, why was it necessary for the Torah to inform us of Sarah's realization of her flaw? Additionally, what is the importance of Sarah's affirmation of Yitzhak's name? Last, the Torah appears to go out of its way to express both Avraham's and Sarah's reactions with the same linguistic root. Why does the Torah emphasize

their inconsistent responses with similar wording?

Perhaps the difference in Avraham and Sarah's reactions was sourced in their distinct perspectives on having a child. Avraham understood that having a child with Sarah was beneficial to accomplishing his goals of spreading monotheism and being the progenitor of a nation devoted to the worship of God. As such, he always left open the possibility of having a child despite his old age, and responded to the news with the reaction of bliss and joy. However, Sarah had already concluded that it was impossible for her to have a child, because she approached the prospect of having a child from the standpoint of personal fulfillment. Therefore, her sense of happiness could not be articulated appropriately and was expressed cynically, because she had preemptively ruled out any possibility of having a child. The Torah's portrayal of these viewpoints translates to present times as well. Many people who are engrossed in difficult situations such as losing a job, getting divorced, or having fertility problems, cannot fathom ever escaping their current situations. They have irrationally given up any hope, and are therefore cynical when they are confronted with good news. However, other people recognize how these events may be temporary, and may even fit into a broader life plan. These latter individuals are more equipped to deal with positive outcomes. The reactions of both Avraham and Sarah were rooted in happiness, but Sarah had already accepted her pregnancy as impossible. Her emotions were therefore distorted and her response was inappropriate.

The Torah therefore teaches us through Avraham's confrontation with Sarah, and her subsequent affirmation of Yitzhak's name, that it was imperative that Sarah change her outlook. It was necessary for Sarah to parent Yitzhak with a proper understanding of his role in the plan that had been set out for them by Hashem. Only then could she make appropriate decisions for her son. This is seen clearly in her decision to banish Hagar and Yishmael, because of their negative influence on Yitzhak. Although personally she may have felt guilty, nevertheless, it was the correct parenting choice.

The evolution of Yitzhak's name reflects important concepts in approaching troublesome life scenarios, as well as the philosophical level of Avraham and Sarah. Preemptive negative conclusions are often emotionally appealing, but should however be avoided. Sarah's ultimate transformation demonstrates that it is possible to change this hopeless attitude into a more realistic outlook. ■

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



Eve's Punishment

OT: In Genesis when God spelled out the punishment for Adam and Eve, "Unto the woman He said: 'I will greatly multiply thy pain and thy travail; in pain thou shalt bring forth children'. God also commanded man to conquer the earth. With all the period pains and the menses, does conquering the earth mean that it is possible to stop these pains for the woman?"

Rabbi: No, conquering Earth means to harness all God created, but not that man can change natural law.

OT: So how is a period pain different from say, a disease or a headache, for which one can take a pain killer?

Rabbi: Headaches and all other conditions/sicknesses were not programed into nature to be regular maladies, as is the menses.

In this manner, menses, labor pains, and pregnancy pains are all deemed "punishments" as they are fixed cycles of nature for the gender, and not chance occurrences like headaches, based on one's constitution or circumstances. ■

Rachel's Tomb

Levi: I was just wondering, with everyone flocking to the tomb of Rachel and people claiming the news that "she has a word with Hashem, and He answers "better" because of her merit – God listens to her". The whole thing upsets me. Are we saying we can pray to or talk to the dead to intercede for us? Do you condone this? Or am I missing something here!? I thought we prayed to God and God alone. Many say, "Oh we don't pray to her..." But the masses do...they simply do, and admittedly on every TV channel. Many thanks.

Rabbi: You are 100% correct. Judaism does not have the need for intermediaries, since God says "In any place that you call My name, I will come to you and bless you". (Exod. 20:21) Thus, God is aware of all people, and their prayers. Location plays no role. Maimonides states in Laws of Idolatry 2:1 that it is prohibited to create an intermediary between one's self and God. Furthermore, Maimonides classifies one as a "min" (heretic) anyone who "worships a star, a constellation or anything else, that it should be an "advocate" between him and God." (Laws of Repentance, 3:7) Intermediaries expresses the idea that God is not independently sufficient, i.e., He requires an intermediary or assistant.

This theory destroys the Torah Fundamental of "Reward and Punishment". For God teaches that we receive His good providence based on our internal perfection, not based on accidental circumstances or location. In his Laws of Repentance (2:3) Maimonides equates one who repents in his mouth but not his heart, with one who ritually immerses but cleaves to an insect in his hand. Just as one is not cleansed as long as he holds onto the insect, one is not forgiven until he/she repents: an internal, true repentance. Therefore it is a violation of Torah to follow the practices of paying to have prayers recited on our behalf, praying at Rachel's tomb or the Western Wall, assuming these are effective.

Websites like www.westernwallprayers.org and all who promote such sites violate Torah, in exchange for money. Today, Jews are more interested in a quick dollar, than in following God's word. If any of these organizations would study the sources for 5 minutes, they would admit they have sinned greatly. But no one studies. People simply follow the masses.

Regarding prayers at Rachel's tomb, or any grave, another sin is performed. The Torah forbids consulting the dead. God tells us "[do not] inquire of the dead. For it is an abomination to God, all who do such things, and on account of these abominations, Hashem your God wiped

them out from before you." (Deut. 18:11,12) God prohibits that which is false. The dead can do nothing, and even if they could, is not God more capable, and to whom it is more worthy to pray?

Rabbis who fail to denounce these Torah prohibitions are doing a grave disservice by encouraging idolatrous practices. Their silence is deafening. ■

"Sam's" Error

Sam: "Listen, it can't hurt to wear a red bendel to protect me from evil. I don't now if it does anything, I can't prove it one way or the other...maybe it works, maybe it doesn't...but in case it does work, I will wear it. I'm not taking it off."

Rabbi: "Sam" is the generic Jew who doesn't follow Jewish ideas. He/she believes that to be protected from unwanted occurrences, one need not perfect his/her character. Sam assumes God's system of reward and punishment to be false, and feels that even a wicked person can be saved from punishment, simply by wearing something. You must know that a major lesson in the book of Job was that evils befell him until he perfected his thinking, and abandoned his ignorance.

God will not reinforce foolishness by protecting us from evil, because one wears a string. God reinforces truth, as God says, "Jerusalem will then go out and cry out to the gods to whom they burn offerings, but they will not save them at all at the time of their misfortune. For as the number of your cities was the number of your gods....." (Jerem. 11:12,13)

Whether one cries to false gods or seeks protection from created objects, it's one and the same crime. And just as false gods "have no eyes to see, no ears to hear, no mouths to speak", red bendles are equally inanimate. Powerless. Fake.

Sam also demonstrates a lack of conviction in either position, "Maybe it works, maybe it doesn't". Thus, he/she does not value truth, but instead, hedges his/her bets, fearing failure. Sam lives as the backward, superstitious tribal colonies; not as the intelligent Jewish people God intended, who evoke the response from other nations, "What a wise and understanding people is this great nation". (Deut. 4:6) ■

the WISDOM of the Verses

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Lately, I have been concentrating on articles that focus on how to learn the Torah's verses. I have been compelled to do so, as more and more often I hear others repeating what they've learned, and it is disappointing. Disappointing because they have not been exposed to God's brilliant method of revealing ideas through the very text. I hear notions that do not fit the text, and notions that are not true. Teachers themselves are not aware of how God hides and reveals Torah insights. This forfeits the transmission and the delight possibly imparted. The only way to correct this problem is through many examples. Once a Torah student is exposed to the precise and insightful methods God uses in constructing the verses, that student will become imbued with an appreciation for Torah over all else he or she encounters. This is what we call "Love of God". We cannot know "Him" so as to love Him, but we can know some of His wisdom, on a human level. We love God through seeing His wisdom. And although it is minute wisdom, to us, it can be remarkable. For this reason, we must not be satisfied with mediocre explanations and mere possibilities; we must insist on understanding why each word is found in each verse. I intend to show such an example now.

In this week's parsha God says the following:

"Shall I keep hidden from Abraham what I plan to do? And Abraham will surely become a great, mighty nation, and all nations of the land will be blessed due to him. For he is beloved on account that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will guard the path of God, performing charity and justice, so that God will bring upon Abraham what He has spoken.

And God said [to Abraham], 'the cry of Sodom

and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I will descend and see if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me I will annihilate them; and if not, I know'." (Exod. 18:17-21)

We understand from the following verse 18:25 that Abraham had a clear understanding of God – God would never kill the righteous on account of the sins of others: "Far be it to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, and the righteous and the wicked would be equal, far be it...the judge of the Earth would not do justice?"

Abraham was correct in this exclamation. This was Abraham's knowledge of God all along: the wicked deserve punishment, and the righteous do not. This is justice.

However, God said earlier "Shall I keep hidden from Abraham what I plan to do?"

This is the first lesson: there are areas of knowledge which man cannot penetrate. And this is rightfully so, for man cannot possess all knowledge; only God does. Therefore, God expresses a sentiment to the Torah reader that if He does not disclose His wisdom on this topic of 'justice', Abraham will remain in the dark...it will be "hidden" from Abraham.

God also expressed His reasoning for inviting Abraham to investigate this matter: "Abraham will surely become a great, mighty nation, and all nations of the land will be blessed due to him. For he is beloved on account that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will guard the path of God performing charity and justice..." That is, God wishes the world to increase in their knowledge of Him. And since Abraham teaches his household of God's ways

(and greatly benefits other nations by rebuking their idolatry, as Sforno states), God imparted to Abraham greater knowledge of morality. Examining the world or theorizing moralistic philosophy cannot uncover the secret we are about to discuss. That is the meaning behind the phrase "Shall I keep hidden". God therefore opened up a new area of knowledge so that Abraham should learn, and teach others.

The glaring question is this: If God decides 'not' to hide this secret, where in this account do we see God informing Abraham of it?

Somehow, Abraham knew to ask God whether He would spare the wicked, based on numbers of righteous people. This mercy was not what Abraham knew before...this was the new piece of information God disclosed and did not hide. He assured Abraham that if at least 10 righteous people were in Sodom, He would spare all of them, even the wicked.

So we now know the secret: previously, Abraham assumed the wicked must die – no exceptions. But now Abraham understood that God's mercy can allow wicked people to remain, provided there exists the influence of at least 10 righteous people can turn them back towards repentance and God. We understand this.

But again: from where did Abraham derive this new concept of mercifully sparing the wicked people on account of the righteous? God does not say this in the entire account!

However, God does talk. The hints must be in what He told Abraham. Read it again:

"And God said [to Abraham], 'the cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I will descend and see if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me, I will annihilate them; and if not, I know'."

This is from where Abraham derived the new concept that God will spare the wicked.

Do you see the hint?

Do you see any questions?

I have one: If their sin is "greatly heavy", why should they not receive punishment? This is compounded by God's very words, "if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me, I will annihilate them". God is saying that in accordance with their corruption, they deserve annihilation. Yet, God says there exists the possibility of Him 'not' annihilating them! Now, if their current state of sin requires God's punishment, for what reason would God abstain? There is only one possibility

(continued on next page)

where the merit to save them exists: the righteous inhabitants.

Abraham listened to God's words, "in accordance with their state, they deserve annihilation." But God also said a possibility exists that they will be spared. In God's very words was the clue. Abraham now realized a new concept: God does not work with strict justice, but He also performs charity, "tzedaka". Abraham knew about tzedaka, but he did not know all of its applications. It was necessary that God teach him this specific case. We might even add that God's concluding words "I know" are meant to indicate to Abraham that this knowledge is what "God" knows, and not man. It is concealed until God imparts it through this prophecy. God intended to teach that this idea is of a concealed nature. He taught this to us through the future-given Torah narrative "Shall I keep hidden", and He taught this to Abraham through the words "I know".

Thus, God taught Abraham a new idea in justice that man could not arrive at alone: the wicked could be spared. And He also taught him that there are ideas, which are concealed if God does not offer man clues.

We learn that God presented just enough clues in His words to allow Abraham to think into the matter. Once he realized this new concept, the next question was how many righteous people are required to save the wicked.

But why did God inform Abraham in such a subtle manner?

God does so as this increases a person's intelli-

gence, his reasoning power. Just as a Talmudic scholar is not born with his skills, but gains them over decades of practice...Abraham too grew in his capacity to reason for himself through this experience. With thought, Abraham questioned his current beliefs and principles. Abraham moved beyond his previous boundaries, and excelled to greater wisdom.

Many times we prevent ourselves from alternative choices, simply because we are incapable of reasoning out all possibilities, or due to false assumptions. For example, a student may accept all ideas in books, simply due to his mind being crippled by the false notion that "all books must be true". People are quite impressed by authors and feel each author knows about what he or she writes. But once the student sees an error in one book, this broadens his horizons and he will never again blindly accept any notion, just because it's printed.

A wise Rabbi once cited Rav Moshe Feinstein's critique of the Ramban. Ramban condemned Abraham for leaving Canaan and descending to Egypt due to the famine. Rav Moshe zt"l said that Ramban's comment should be torn out of the Chumash. The lesson: even Ramban can be wrong. But we incorrectly tend to shy away from such statements. We fear reputations. But you must know that the greatest of our teachers – Maimonides – openly invited anyone at all to correct his errors. Maimonides did not feel infallible; he admitted that those below him in wisdom could correct him. No one is always correct.

People sometimes say, "Who am I to argue with Ramban?" This means they credit Ramban, or any Rabbi, as possessing tools to attain accurate understanding. But God did not give Ramban alone the Tzelem Elokim – intelligence. God gave it to every human. He did so in order that we engage it, and not make such statements. If we continually refrain from challenging our teachers, we reject God's will that we employ this great gift of intelligence. Of course we are respectful of all Torah scholars and teachers. But as one Talmudic Rabbi said, he cherished questions on his words more than words of support.

Furthermore, any

person who assesses the Rabbis as brilliant thereby admits he can accurately determine truth, i.e., that they are brilliant. And if he can determine truth, he then contradicts himself when saying he cannot argue with them. For if one can determine truth, and does so in a specific case, he must disagree with anyone who opposes that truth. Regardless of who it is. It is a false humility, or a corrupt mind that will at first passionately support his view, and then back down when he learns a Torah scholar holds the opposite. If he was firm on his understanding at first, he must be honest and say he disagrees, regardless of whom he opposes. Again, the Torah commentaries disagree with each other, and do not blindly accept even the words of those far greater than them. A Talmudic Rabbi once said, "Had Joshua bin-Nun said it, I would not hear it". (Tal. Chullin, 124a)

Although I carried an awe of the Rabbis from youth, once I heard Rav Moshe's critique of Ramban's words, I realized that no one is infallible. This was one of the greatest lessons that had the most dramatic affects on my studies. Furthermore, there is no Torah obligation to accept any idea outside of halacha. In matters of philosophy, there is no "psak" – ruling. Many times people say, "Maimonides is only a minority view, I need not follow him". Their error is in applying halachik principle of "majority rule" to hashkafa – philosophy. The Torah teaches, "According to 'law' that they will teach you and the judgment that they will tell you, you should behave. You should not deviate from that which they tell you to the right or left." (Deut. 17:11) This means the Rabbis have authority on 'laws' and nothing more. Not philosophy.

Additionally, a wise Rabbi once taught that no one – not even great Rabbis – can tell you what you think. Meaning, it is impossible that anyone be compelled to believe something, which they do not. Yes, in halacha I can be compelled to 'act'. But philosophy is all about our beliefs. Thus, there cannot be a ruling on philosophy. This is something we come to on our own. Either we accept a belief, or we don't. And if I do not believe something, no one can possibly force that belief.

The refusal to accept popular opinions was Abraham's greatest trait. It was through questioning what he was taught, that he discovered the error of his father and that entire idolatrous generation. This trait led him to discover God after 40 years of study on his own. There were yet areas that Abraham could not penetrate, but God assisted him. God also assists us in the form of His Torah. And if we continue to question the Torah, as is God's will, we will then unlock numerous other 'hidden' treasures. The verses are truly astonishing. ■



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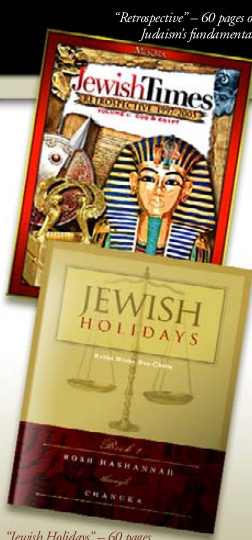
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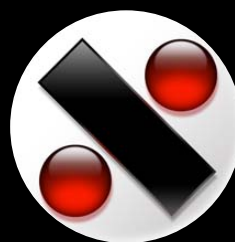
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The Orthodox Union Singles Connection and Young Professionals Network

We will be hosting three events in Manhattan between October 25 and November 9, customized for the enjoyment of participants of various ages and interests. The events are organized by the OU Department of Community Services.

Singles ages 40+ are invited to Shalom Bombay, a new glatt kosher Indian restaurant under OU kosher supervision, on Monday, October 25 at 7:00 p.m. for a full buffet of delicacies, including: chicken tandoori, beef curry, basmati rice, assorted salad, chutneys and breads, dessert and soda. Pre-paid registration is mandatory; no walk-ins will be allowed. The restaurant, located at 344 Lexington Avenue (between 39 and 40 Streets), has been reserved exclusively for the OU.

Young professionals ages 25-35 are invited to an evening of shared laughs and networking with theatre games and improvisation at 9 p.m. on Saturday night, November 6 at Congregation Ramath Orah, 550 West 110 Street. Whether someone is an extrovert who can't wait to act-out, or a quiet observer who likes to sit back and watch the activities, all can enjoy the interactive entertainment, led by acting teachers Isa Freeling and Shellen Lubin. Admission is \$15 in advance, \$20 at the door. Light refreshments will be served.

Goldy Krantz, author of the book "The Best of My Worst" will present a lighthearted and introspective view on the dating world for singles in their 40's and 50's at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, November 9 at the Park East Synagogue, 164 East 68 Street. Light refreshments will be served. Admission is \$10.

To register and for more information, call 212.613.8300.