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ON **VAYEIRA** - 5769

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To: weeklydt@torahweb2.org Subject: Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky - Ethics and Religion - the Legacy of Avraham
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Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky

Ethics and Religion - the Legacy of Avraham

Two episodes occur in parshas Vayeira involving Avimelech, the king of the Pelishtim. When Avraham arrives in Avimelech's land, he takes Sara not realizing that she is a married woman. Later in the parsha he approaches Avraham to enter into a treaty with him and Avraham confronts him concerning the wells Avimelech's servants had stolen. Although these two events appear unrelated, their similarities suggest that they be analyzed together.

Twice Avimelech is party to a sin which involves taking something from a fellow man. In the case of Sara, he takes a married woman away from her husband. His servants take wells away from their rightful owner. Both sins are fundamentally violations of mitzvos that govern our relationship with out fellow man; there doesn't appear to be anything "religious" in nature about either sin. When Avimelech is confronted with these violations, his response is almost identical in both cases. When Hashem appears to him accusing him of taking Sara, he responds that he is not to blame as he had no idea she was actually the wife of Avraham; he pleads ignorance. When he is confronted by Avraham regarding the theft of his wells, he again pleads ignorance, claiming that this is the first he has heard of the theft.

Although the nature of the two accusations and Avimelech's defenses are almost identical, Avraham's response is different. Concerning the taking of Sara, Avraham tells Avimelech that what prompted the sin was the spiritual

climate that existed in the land of the Pelishtim, "Rak ein yiras Elokim bamakom hazeh - there is no fear of Hashem in this place" (Breishis 20:11). However, after confronting Avimelech regarding the theft of the wells, Avraham doesn't elaborate on the root cause of this sin. Avraham has already identified the problem that led people to "mistakenly" take other's property, and thus there is no need to repeat this message. It was obvious that a society whose lack of fear of Heaven would allow for the taking of another's wife would also condone the stealing of another's wells.

How does "rak ein yiras Elokim" explain a sin that is an ethical breach in nature? Even without yiras Hashem one could presumably set up a society that respects other people's rights. With his response, Avraham dispels that notion. The root cause of an unethical society is the absence of yiras Hashem. Avimelech, as the king, was the one ultimately responsible for the spiritual character of his kingdom. It may have been true that he didn't realize that Sara was married and he didn't know about the theft of the wells, but it was the atmosphere devoid of yiras Hashem that enabled such things to occur. In a society permeated with yiras Hashem one need not fear that he will be killed so that his wife can be taken. In a culture of yiras Hashem it is inconceivable to steal another's wells. These two occurrences exposed the fundamental flaw in the kingdom of Avimelech for which he was held accountable.

Avimelech, as the ruler of a land lacking yiras Hashem, stands in contrast to Avraham who is described after akeidas Yitzchak to be a "yirei Elokim - one who fears Hashem" (Breishis 22:12). This praise of Avraham is especially significant in light of what Avraham personified. Avraham is singled out for his commitment "la'asos tzedaka umishpat - one who acts with righteousness and justice" (Breishis 18:19). The legacy of Avraham is one of gemilas chassadim - performing acts of loving-kindness to his fellow man. Yet, the crowning glory of Avraham is his being described as a yirei Elokim - one who fears Hashem. The Torah is giving us the correct perspective on interpersonal conduct. Ultimately, the only assurance of a commitment to justice and kindness is when these ideals are part of a commitment to yiras Hashem. If ethics and morality are defined by man, what today may be unethical may tomorrow become acceptable behavior. A society will only be a lasting, just, and kind one if it is rooted in yiras Hashem.

The best guarantee that Avraham would successfully transmit to his descendants his commitment "la'asos tzedaka umishpat" was his dedication to yiras Hashem. When his great-grandson Yosef is faced with his greatest challenge, he draws upon the legacy of Avraham. Responding to the temptation of the wife of Potiphar, Yosef first responds with an ethical argument, stating that to sin with Potiphar's wife would violate the trust he had in Yosef. Finally Yosef cries out, "v'eich e'eseh hara'ah hagedolah hazos v'chatai l'Elokim - how could I do this great evil and sin against Hashem" (Breishis 39:9). The severity of this sin from the vantage point of a breach of trust against his fellow man is not sufficient to prevent this act. It is only the realization that this would be a sin against Hashem that serves as the ultimate deterrent.

Halacha identifies yiras Hashem as the guarantee for the veracity of testimony in beis din. Not only is one who sins against his fellow man not believed to testify truthfully, but even the otherwise "ethical" individual who violates prohibitions within the realm of bein adam lamakom - laws between man and Hashem - is disqualified from serving as a witness. Ethics which are not grounded in yiras Hashem cannot be guaranteed.

The survival of the legacy of Avraham can only be assured if it is adhered to in its entirety. Total dedication to the teachings of kindness and justice must be based on total commitment to yiras Hashem. It is only through this dual commitment that we can truly be the followers of Avraham Avinu.

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Rabbi Frand on Parshas Vayeira These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #611, Shalom Aleichem on Friday Night. Good Shabbos!

Avraham Provides A Little Water With A Lot of Bread and Meat. Why?

A famous story is told regarding Rav Yisrael Salanter that is connected with this week's parsha. The founder of the Mussar movement was once invited to the home of a distinguished community leader for a meal. The host noticed that when his guest washed netilas yadayim before eating bread, he only washed up to the point where the fingers meet the palm. He was surprised that Rav Yisrael did not adhere to the preferred practice of pouring water on his hands up to his wrists (ad ha'perek). During the course of their meal, he asked the great rabbi why he sufficed with the minimal standard of washing. Rav Yisrael explained that it is very nice to be stringent (machmir) and wash until one's wrists. However, that is all fine and good if one does not have to worry about someone having to transport the water for him.

In those days, before the development of running tap water, there was a whole industry in Europe of manual labor to bring barrels of water from the source to private homes. Rav Yisrael was not willing to make someone else need to bring extra water to the house just because of his own piety or desire to fulfill mitzvos in the most optimal way. The principle he practiced was "Don't be a tzadik (righteous person) on someone else's calculation."

The Shemen HaTov notes that the source of this anecdote is in our Parsha. Parshas Vayeira is the parsha of hospitality (hachnasas orchim). Avram sees 3 passing wayfarers and can not do enough for them. He prepares a tremendous amount of food – meat and bread – for their comfort. Everything he does for them is in great quantity. The one exception is when he provides them with water. He requests: "Let a bit of water be taken and wash your feet, and recline beneath the tree." [Bereshis 18:4]

Why is Avram suddenly stingy with water, when he was expansive with meat and bread? The answer is that the Talmud relates [Bava Metziah 86b] that Avram had the water brought for the guests via messenger (shliach). When he was preparing the food himself, he spared no effort or quantity. However, because the mitzvah of providing the water was done through a shliach, Avram did not want to trouble the shliach more than necessary and sufficed with providing "a bit of water". Who says the comfort of the guests is any more important than the comfort of the person who has to transport the water?

What this points out to us is that the Chessed (kindness) of Avraham Avinu was based on the fact that he perceived G-d's Image in every human being. He had the capacity to treat people in such a gracious fashion, because he saw a portion of Divinity in everyone. This is not always an easy thing to accomplish, to put it mildly. Since his Chessed was based on this appreciation and awareness, it dictated that his manifestation of kindness not be blindly dispensed. He had the greatness and sensitivity of spirit to realize that it is sometimes necessary to balance our display of kindness to one party so that it does not impinge on the honor or respect due someone else.

This contrasts with the dispensation of kindness demonstrated by another "Baal Chessed" elsewhere in this parsha. Lot travels to Sodom, a city noted

for its lack of chessed. Yet, when these same angels come to Sodom, at the risk of his reputation, if not his life, Lot too offers them hospitality. He takes them in and treats them royally. After all, he learned how to dispense Chessed in the house of Avraham Avinu.

What is difficult to understand, however, is how this very same "Baal Chessed" was willing to give over his own daughters for violation when the masses of Sodom came pounding on his door demanding that he throw his guests out to them. Lot's response to the demand of the rabble to "Sodomize his guests" is "take my daughters, instead."

What happened to his Chessed? How does anyone do that?

The answer is that if a person's chessed is based on the Di vine Image of mankind, he would never say such a thing. One would never sacrifice his own family member in order to do a chessed for someone else. However, Chessed that is an ego trip, chessed which is demonstrated to prove "what a nice guy I am" may indeed result in incongruous action. Chessed that is not based on the concept of "Dear is man who was created in His image" [Avos 3:14] could lead a person to do the craziest things in the world."

Wasted Chessed?

The pasuk [verse] in Micha says, "Give Truth (Emes) to Yakov, Kindness (Chessed) to Avraham..." [7:20]. That pasuk teaches us that the fundamental attribute of our first patriarch was his attribute of Chessed. Of the three parshiyos that deal with Avraham Avinu, Lech Lecha, Vayeira, Chayei Sarah, it is in Vayiera that the Torah chooses to highlight examples of this primary characteristic of his.

One example is providing hospitality on a hot day, 3 days after surgery as an old man, to three strangers. Another example is praying for the welfare of the people of Sodom, despite the fact that those people stand at the polar opposite of what he represents. These are the two primary examples from throughout the Torah's narration of Avraham's life where we see his dedication to the attribute of kindness.

Is it not ironic that in both these incidents, the effort exerted by Avraham went virtually for naught? The angels did not need the food Avraham labored to prepare for him. Angels don't need food. They are not physical creatures! Again, all his prayers for Sodom were apparently wasted. Ten righteous people were NOT found in the city and so the city was destroyed. So, is it not strange that the two representative incidents of Chessed from the life of Avraham which the Torah highlights are incidents where the recipient did not really benefit from the kindness? Why then did the Torah choose these acts of chessed as "classic" depictions of Avraham's primary attribute?

The answer is that the Torah is instructing us what Chessed is all about. Chessed is not about what it does for the "other person". Chessed is what it does for the person doing the act of kindness. Chessed is about being self-less. It is not about making someone feel good. Chessed is one of the acts through which a person can emulate the Almighty who "built the world with Chessed" [Tehillim 89:3].

When the Almighty does Chessed for us, it is totally selfless. Therefore, the Torah specifically picked these two incidents, where the act was totally selfless and not at all beneficial to the recipients, to demonstrate Avraham's emulation of this Divine attribute.

A person must realize that "chessed is not for the other guy, it is for me!" That is how we become G-d like. That is how we become self-less, rather than selfish.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Vayeira are provided below: ... Tapes or a complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. To Support Project Genesis- Torah.org Transcribed by David Twersky Seattle, WA; Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman, Baltimore, MD RavFrand, Copyright ©

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Parsha Page by Fred Toczek –

A Service of Anshe Emes Synagogue (Los Angeles)

D. Peninim on the Torah (Rabbi A.L. Scheinbaum)

The Akeidah. The Akeidah also teaches us a lesson about "Kiddush Hashem" (sanctification of Hashem's name). As noted above, we tend to view Kiddush Hashem as one's willingness to abdicate his/her life for Hashem. Yet, we often overlook another form of Kiddush Hashem -- the ability to maintain one's faith in Hashem despite serious hardships. The Jewish people's ability to withstand suffering and deprivation is testimony to the eternity and greatness of their spirit. There is a famous story told of the Bluzover Rebbe, z"l, which took place as he lit the Chanukah candles in concentration camp. Standing amidst death and desperation, he recited the first two blessings over the candles. When he came to the third blessing -- the "Shehechyanu" -- blessing Hashem for keeping us alive and preserving us to reach this joyous occasion, he suddenly stopped, looked around the room into the faces of the other inmates and then recited the blessing. Later, he explained why he hesitated. How could he say this blessing amidst the immense suffering? However, he noticed the throng of Jews who, despite their obvious misery, stood resolute with tears streaming down from their glistening eyes. Their faces expressed faith and concentration as they listened to the blessings. He, therefore, felt it was mandatory to exalt Hashem. A people who continues to serve Hashem despite all of the anguish which its members have undergone truly exemplifies the concept of Kiddush Hashem.

E. Kol Dodi (Rabbi David Feinstein)

Never pass up an opportunity to do a mitzvah. Abraham ran to greet the strangers, offering to serve them food and drink and begging them not to leave without accepting his hospitality. His words "because for this you have passed your servant's way". Why did he use the words "for this"? Abraham believed that the men had been sent by Hashem specifically to give him the opportunity to perform a mitzvah. Thus, he was saying you are coming to me "for this", i.e., for the purpose of allowing me to give you food and drink. This gives us a picture of Abraham's greatness; it never entered his mind to complain that the men were causing him trouble or expense at a time at which he wasn't feeling well. To the contrary, he believed that they were only there for his benefit, to give him the opportunity to perform a mitzvah. For this we learn that we should never pass up the opportunity to perform a mitzvah.

F. Living Each Day (Rabbi Abraham Twerski)

Living with equanimity. "And Abraham arose early in the morning." One of the commentators points out a tiny detail in the story of the Akeidah which is often overlooked. If Abraham "awoke", then obviously he slept during the night. That is what distinguishes Abraham. Knowing that he would have to sacrifice his son didn't disturb his sleep. He faced this challenge with equanimity. The Talmud states that one must praise Hashem for the bad things as well as the good things. It further requires that this praise be with "simchah"; Rashi points out in this case "simchah" doesn't mean joy, but with a "perfect heart" (i.e., with acceptance that whatever G-d does is just, even though it may be very distressing and appear to us to be unjust). Equanimity is not easily achieved. We welcome pleasant things, but are upset when our wishes are denied or frustrated. Personal losses (whether

personal or material) cause us to be depressed. We may think that it is beyond possibility for a person to have the same reaction to adversity that he does when his fondest wishes are fulfilled. For Abraham, there was only one reason for existence -- to do the will of G-d. What does this say to us? Are we expected to achieve a self-effacement as complete as that of Abraham? Hardly. The Talmud states that a person should aspire that his actions reach those of his ancestors, but to "reach" does not mean to "equal". Yet, while we may not be able to achieve their greatness, there should at least be some point of contact between our ancestors and ourselves. To whatever degree we can achieve self-effacement or align our will with the will of Hashem, to that degree we can achieve equanimity, a more serene and tranquil attitude towards life which at once gives us the courage to achieve while allowing us to accept those things we can not change.

G. Living Each Week (Rabbi Abraham Twerski)

1. Loving Your Fellow Man. "G-d appeared unto him [Abraham] in the fields of Mamre, as he sat at the door of the tent in the heat of the day." The Talmud teaches that Abraham was sitting at the door of his tent so that he would look for wayfarers to invite into his home for rest and refreshment. Abraham was the personification of chesed (loving kindness) and was so drawn to acts of kindness that he actively sought opportunities to perform them. The Baal Shem Tov teaches that the way to achieve the love of G-d is to love other people.

2. Denial and Self-Deception. "Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh,' because she was afraid." The S'fas Emes says that Sarah did not lie, but rather she denied -- she was actually unaware - that she had laughed. Her denial was the result of her intense piety, "because she was afraid"-- because her fear of G-d was so profound that she could not conceive it possible for her to have doubted G-d's word. We too are often unable to accept something about ourselves because it seems so alien to our self-perception. While such denial is not willful distortion of the facts, it is no less destructive, because it stands in the way of our realizing the full truth about ourselves and, ultimately, improving ourselves.

3. True Teshuvah (Repentance). "[The angel said to Lot], escape with your life; do not look behind you". This verse is a powerful lesson in combating our yetzer hara (evil inclination), which often detracts from the performance of mitzvot by causing us to reflect on past misdeeds. True teshuvah consists of avoiding doing what is wrong and dedicating ourselves to doing what is right. Ruminating about our past misdeeds is not only unessential to teshuvah, but can actually be antagonistic to it.

H. Pirkei Torah (Rabbi Mordechai Gifter).

1. Transformation into perfection. Lot's daughters violated one of the seven Noahide laws, yet Moshiach will descend from her son Moab. Why will our ultimate redeemer stem from such unseemly background? Our mission is to refine and perfect the world, enabling the Divine presence to reside within it, and this goal will be realized with the advent of Moshiach. Mochiach, who will bring the world to ultimate perfection, will himself be one who has transformed a deficient essence into one of elevation and perfection.

2. Inspiration Into Action. Immediately after the Akeidah (the binding of Isaac), Isaac went to the Yeshivah of Shem for three years. Why was it necessary for Isaac to go directly to the yeshivah and not stop at home first? Akeidah instilled Isaac with holiness and elevated him to great spiritual heights. This holiness required continuity which was possible only through immediately delving into Torah. When inspired spiritually, we too must immediately turn such inspiration into action.

I. Windows To the Soul (Rabbi Michael Bernstein).

The Ram's Horn. Upon hearing the angel call out to him to stay his hand from sacrificing his son, Abraham looked around to see what he could sacrifice on the altar he had prepared for G-d. Abraham saw a ram and offered it in his son's stead. Why a ram? And, why does the Torah go into such detail (noting that the ram was "caught in the bramble by its horns")? To remind us of the Divine providence that guides all our lives. It was no

coincidence that the ram was entangled there. G-d engineered its presence so it should be there, available at the moment Abraham refrained from sacrificing Isaac. Therefore, we are told of its entanglement, so that we will associate the horn with the Divine providence for all generations.

J. Reflections On the Sedra (Rabbi Zalman I. Posner).

A Personal Touch. Abraham exemplified the trait of hospitality. Despite his age and infirmity (and his wealth of servants), he personally served his visitors and saw them on their way. Doing good involves more than arranging to have good done.

K. Something to Say (Rabbi Abraham Goldwasser).

Cry To The Heavens. "And G-d heard the voice of the lad [Ishmael]. The Kotzker Rebbe asked how it is that the Torah tells us that G-d heard Ishmael's voice, when we have no indication that he cried out at all. We are told only of his mother, Hager, who "raised her voice and cried." He explains that sometimes we can cry from the depths of our heart without uttering a single syllable. This cry can pierce the heavens, rising so high that it is heard by G-d alone.

L. Vedibarta Bam (Rabbi Moshe Bogomilsky).

Helping Others. The order to bring Isaac as a burnt offering came directly from G-d. Why did the order to stop come from an angel (and not from G-d)? We should never harm another person without a direct command from G-d. To help another person, however, one needs no command. Therefore, to let Isaac live, the instruction of an angel sufficed.

M. Torah Gems (Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Greenberg)

1. True Modesty. Even though Abraham reached the elevated level of having G-d appear to him, he nevertheless sat at the tent door and believed that he was not worthy of looking at G-d. (S'fas Emes).

2. True Modesty. Abraham considered every person as greater than himself, for as we read "these men "stood by" [or "above"] him. The test of whether a commandment is done properly is whether its fulfillment makes us feel more humble, rather than more conceited. (Mikra Meforash).

3. The Importance of Hospitality. Abraham's model teaches us, as articulated by R'Judah in the Talmud, that "hospitality to guests is greater than greeting the Divine Presence" (Shabbat 127).

4. Reciprocity. The way we behave is the way we are treated. Abraham said, "I will fetch a morsel of bread," and G-d gave manna for forty years. (Mekhila, Beshalah).

5. Opening Our Eyes. "And G-d opened her (Hagar's) eyes, and she saw a well of water." R'Binyamin said, "All are presumed to be blind until G-d opens their eyes." The Hidushei Ha-Ram said, we can deduce from this that whatever we need is available to us, but we must have the fortune to have G-d open our eyes so that we can see what is around us.

N. Soul Of The Torah: Insights of the Chasidic Masters of the Weekly Torah Portions (Victor Cohen).

1. "Hashem Appeared to Him [Abraham]". The S'fas Emes commented that everything in the universe has a Divine aspect within it. All we have to do is peel away the shell, the material part, and the Divine within it will appear.

2. "He was Sitting at the Entrance of the Tent." R'Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye commented that it is the sign of a truly righteous person that he/she is all always "at the entrance." That is, he/she is aware that he/she has much to do and much to accomplish.

3. A Lesson in Hospitality. "He [Abraham] took butter and milk . . . and placed it before them." The Chidushei Harim commented that we should learn from Abraham the meaning of hospitality - despite the fact that he was a prophet, 100 years old and was ill because it was only 3 days after his circumcision, he insisted on serving his guests himself.

O. There Shall Be Light (Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Goodman)

When Man Stands Above Angels. "And [Abraham] took butter and milk and placed [it] before [the angels] and he stood over them and they ate." Initially, the angels stood over him; now that the positions were reversed. For, when Abraham was sitting at the door of his tent, the angels naturally towered over him in spiritual greatness. However, once he was engaged in a

mitzvah (i.e., hospitality), he "stood over the angels," whose greatness is natural and impervious to temptation. In other words, in doing a mitzvah wholeheartedly, we rise above angels. (The Belzer Rebbe)

The Importance of Self-Sacrifice. "And G-d said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham that which I [intend to] do?'" The Chasem Sofer derives an important principle from this verse: Abraham's level of prophecy did not justify his knowing everything that G-d planned. But, he had not reached this level only because he sacrificed so much of his time for others. His constant hospitality and preaching about G-d prevented him from pursuing personal spiritual growth. Dedicated to others, he sacrificed his own spiritual progress. Therefore, G-d says, "shall I deny him prophecy because of his goodness?" Two verses later, G-d explicitly acknowledges Abraham's merit, "he will instruct his children and his household after him and they will observe the way of G-d." Thus, G-d shared the information with him. The Chasem Sofer explains that each of us must share our time and knowledge, even at the expense of our own scholarship, for such was the example of Abraham.

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The "Sabbath Mode" Oven Controversy by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Sivan 5768 saw a pronouncement of leading Poskim in both Israel and North America forbidding pressing buttons on Sabbath mode ovens on Yom Tov. A permissive ruling was previously issued by Rav Moshe Heinemann, the rabbinic administrator of the Star K certification service. We shall present the basis for Rav Heinemann's ruling (as I understand it) based on both Hebrew and English language articles accessed from the Star K website and a reason why so many Poskim strongly object to his approach.

Background Information Regarding Grama Since Sabbath mode ovens allow for raising and lowering the temperature in an oven by means of Grama, indirect action, it is necessary to review the application of Grama in the modern environment. Last week we explored the issue of Grama in the context of refrigerators. We presented the ruling of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach permitting the opening of a refrigerator door even when the motor is not running despite the fact that opening the door will inevitably trigger the motor to go on earlier than it would have had the door not opened. In short, Rav Auerbach ruled that the impact of opening the door on the motor is indirect (Grama), and Grama is not prohibited when one does not intend to cause the resulting direction. Since one who opens the door intends to take food and not to trigger the motor, indirectly causing the motor to go on earlier is not prohibited on Shabbat or Yom Tov. There are cases, however, where Grama is permitted even when one's intention is to cause the resulting act. For instance, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 334:22) permits one to place barrels of water in the path of a fire so that the heat will burst the barrels causing the water to come out and extinguish the fire. Rama (ad. loc.) cautions, however, that the permission to intentionally perform an act of Grama is limited to case of avoiding great loss, such as putting out a fire. Biur Halacha (ad. loc. s.v. DeGram Kibui) clarifies that this rule applies to all of the 39 Melachot (forbidden activities) of Shabbat and not only to Mechabeh (extinguishing). The Torah (Shemot 20:10) states "Lo Ta'aseh Melachah", do not perform Melachah on Shabbat. The Gemara (Shabbat 120b) infers that performing a Melachah is forbidden but indirectly causing Melachah is not forbidden. Rama, in turn, understands that Chazal created a rabbinic prohibition to indirectly cause Melachah on Shabbat in situations other than a case of great need. Danger to life is not required to permit Grama; rather, great need is sufficient cause. In other words, Grama is permitted for essential needs even if they are not life threatening needs. The reason for this clearly seems to stem from concern that if Grama was permitted in all situations on Shabbat, Shabbat

observance would be eviscerated as all work could be accomplished on Shabbat as long as it is done indirectly. Ramban (commentary to VaYikra 23:24) notes that, due to this concern, Chazal forbade a host of activities, such as engaging in business deals and asking a non-Jew to perform Melachah on one's behalf. Chazal wished to avoid one who on the one hand does not technically violate Shabbat but on the other has not observed a meaningful Shabbat.

Contemporary Applications of the Grama Principle The Gemara (Sanhedrin 77a) presents a situation of Grama referred to as "Sof Chamah Lavo," which twentieth century authorities have applied in a variety of situations. The Gemara describes a case where one ties up another individual in the desert during the night and the sun rises the subsequent day and kills the victim with its heat. The Gemara classifies this as an act of Gram Retzichah (indirect killing), explains Rashi (ad. loc. s.v. Kofto and s.v. Oh ShePara), since the killing agent was not present at the time of the perpetrator's action. The Chazon Ish (O.C. 38:4) applies the Sof Chamah Lavo principle to solve the need to milk cows on Shabbat (see the discussion in my Gray Matter One pp. 200-214). He permits attaching the milking machine pipes to the cow's udder before the electric flow begins. The machine can subsequently be turned on by a timer and the one who attached the pipes to the udder is considered to have milked indirectly. Since the electricity is not flowing when the pipes are attached, it is analogous to the sun not being present when the individual tied up another person in the desert. The Chazon Ish permits this due to the great need for milking cows on Shabbat both in terms of relieving suffering of the cows and severe financial strain on dairy farmers. Another application is the Shemirat Shabbat KeHilchatah's (13:25) permission to adjust certain timers to turn on a light earlier than scheduled, in case of great need. Once again, since the electricity is not flowing when he adjusts the timer, it is comparable to the sun not being present at the time when the deed is done.

The Zomet Institute, an establishment in Alon Shevut, Israel that seeks to find engineering solutions for many contemporary Halachic challenges, produces many items that operate using the Sof Chamah Lavo principle for use in highly essential but not life threatening situations. These gadgets include wheelchairs, hospital equipment and vehicles for patrolling areas in Israel that are not exceptionally dangerous. (For an explanation as to why Grama is preferable to Amirah LeNochri, instructing a non-Jew to perform Melachah, see Rav Yaakov Ariel's Techumin {19:343-348} and Rav Shmuel David's Teshuvot MeiRosh Tzurim {number 36}.) A popular Zomet product is their "Grama phone," which operates as follows. When one raises the receiver an electric circuit is not completed as happens in a conventional phone. Instead, an electric pulse is sent out by the phone every ten seconds or so to detect if the receiver has been lifted. When it detects that the receiver has been lifted the circuit is completed. Yet again, the absence of the pulse when one lifts the telephone parallels the sun which is not at hand when the act is completed. Rav Ovadiah Yosef endorses the use of the Grama phone for essential needs in a brief responsum printed in Techumin (1:518) The Grama phone is used in many venues in Israel, especially in the Israel Defense Forces which has purchased hundreds of these phones for use in essential but not critical situations on Shabbat. Grama phones have greatly enhanced Shabbat observance in the IDF, as a Grama phone is used instead of a regular phone, except in case of a full-fledged emergency. We should note that Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (cited by Rav Hershel Schachter in his Belkvei HaTzon number 7) does not subscribe to the Chazon Ish's application of the Sof Chamah Lavo principle. Rav Soloveitchik argues that since the electricity is operational when one performs his actions it is not analogous to the classic cases of indirectly extinguishing a fire or Sof Chamah Lavo where the "active item" is not present when one acts. One may respond (see my essay printed in Yeshiva University's Beit Yitzchak 35:382-383) that in the classic cases the natural forces moving the fire and the sun (from a common sense perspective) are extant when the action is performed, just as the electricity moving the timer is present at the time when one acts. Accordingly, it would be accurate to

say that the timer itself parallels the classic fire and sun rather the electricity driving the timer. The electricity parallels the natural forces that drive the sun and fire.

Rav Heinemann's Application to Yom Tov and Sabbath Mode Ovens Rav Heinemann argues that Grama is permitted in all situations on Yom Tov. He bases this on a ruling of Rama (O.C. 514:3) permitting one to place a candle in a location where the wind is not currently blowing and a strong wind will later come and extinguish the fire. The Magen Avraham (ad. loc. number 5) questions why Rama does not limit this ruling to a case of great need as he did in the aforementioned context of extinguishing a fire on Shabbat. The Sha'ar HaTziyun (514:31) cites the Ma'amar Mordechai who writes that "perhaps" Yom Tov differs from Shabbat in that only on Shabbat does Rama limit Grama to a case of great need but it is permissible in all situations on Yom Tov. Rav Heinemann understands the Sha'ar HaTziyun as a full endorsement of this distinction. Rav Heinemann applies this to an oven that is modified with a "Sabbath mode" adjustment with a random delay feature. He permits pressing keys on a keypad since nothing happens when doing so. Instead, the oven will randomly look to the setting and adjust the temperature. There is an interval of between fifteen and twenty five seconds before the heating element is activated in such specially modified ovens. Rav Heinemann permits pressing the keys in all circumstances on Yom Tov since he believes that Grama is permitted in all circumstances on Yom Tov.

Criticism of Rav Heinemann's Ruling This past spring saw a flurry of rulings from many top level Poskim in Israel and North America forbidding the pressing of buttons on Yom Tov. These Poskim include Rav Yosef Shalom Eliashiv, Rav Shmuel Wosner, Rav Nissim Karelitz and Rav Moshe Shternbuch in Israel as well as Rav Yisrael Belsky, Rav Feivel Cohen, Rav Shmuel Fuerst, and Rav Mordechai Willig in the United States. In addition, those rabbis who follow Rav Soloveitchik's definition of Grama certainly do not subscribe to Rav Heinemann's approach. Rav Shternbuch in particular seemed very concerned about the use of Grama on Yom Tov especially since there are so many electronic items that can be operated using the Grama principle. For example, if one were to follow Rav Heinemann's to its logical conclusion one could routinely use a Zomet Grama phone on Yom Tov, an obviously intolerable situation according to all opinions. Moreover, the idea that Halachah grants unfettered license to perform Melachah using Grama on Yom Tov does not seem to be supported by Poskim. The Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (98:25) does not permit Grama on Yom Tov and the Aruch HaShulchan (O.C. 514:11) does not articulate a distinction between Grama on Shabbat and Yom Tov. The Shemirat Shabbat KeHilchatah (13:27 and 33) does not grant blanket permission to Grama activities on Yom Tov and the Zomet Institute does not sanction use of its Grama products on Yom Tov for non-essential activities. Even the Sha'ar Hatziyun presents the Ma'amar Mordechai's approach as merely "possible." Hence, intentionally performing Grama is permissible on Yom Tov only for highly essential needs and not simply to raise and lower the temperature in one's oven.

Conclusion Rav Heinemann and the Star-K certification agency are highly respected and are held in the highest regard. However, for the reason articulated above as well as reasons presented by the aforementioned Poskim, Rav Heinemann's ruling appears difficult and should not be relied upon in this specific instance.

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**Sodom and Gomorrah - Biblical Archeology
by Rabbi Leibel Reznick Does archeological data support the
Biblical story?**

The Torah tells us the story of the rise and downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah. To the non-believer, the Biblical story seems so incredible that it must be relegated to the realm of myth and fantasy. The 20th-century German Bible critic, Theodor Noldeke asserted that "The whole story of Sodom and Gomorrah is unhistorical and comparatively late in origin." J. Maxwell Miller of Emory University boldly claims, "These narratives of Sodom and Gomorrah are purely products of the storyteller's art, which of course raises serious questions about their usefulness for historical reconstruction." John H. Hayes, a colleague of the aforementioned J. Maxwell Miller, confirms Professor Miller's belief. [1] Are the assertions of these skeptics based on facts or are they merely the distorted opinions of non-believers? Let us examine the facts of the case and see for ourselves.

There are two places in the desert area near the Dead Sea that could not be more radically different from each other. One area is a dry, harsh wilderness. All that is found there are craggy hills, land strewn with crumbled rock, coarse sand, and intense heat: daytime temperatures rise to 130 degrees Fahrenheit. Rivers are few and meager. The waters of the nearby great lake are not potable: No fish live in its inhospitable waters. There are no trees to offer shade. Wayfarers are few. Snakes and scorpions are the only creatures that find comfort in this forsaken place. Desolation echoes forth from the dry river beds.

The second area is a great and thriving metropolis. Grain grows in abundance and precious raw materials are easily accessed. Its lush tree-shaded groves graciously bestow their blessings of fine fruits. The green canopy of its orchards stretch as far as the eye can see. There are no predatory animals to threaten passersby. The great metropolis and its citizenry are self sufficient; every need can be met locally. A veritable Garden of Eden, it is described in the Torah when Abraham and Lot decide to part ways: And Lot lifted up his eyes, and saw the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, like the Garden of the Lord (Genesis 13:10).

In fact, as incredible as it may seem, the two places are one and the same. We call the area Sodom-Gomorrah. The very names of these two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, are associated with sin and debauchery. Sodom has become a synonym for perversion. The first description of the desolate territory is the area once inhabited by the wealthy, aristocratic Sodomites as it appears today. The second description is the way it appeared earlier, at its Patriarchal Era zenith as depicted in the Talmud and the Midrash (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 109a, Midrash Rabah Leviticus 5:2, Midrash Rabah Numbers 9:24.)

Sodom and Gomorrah were part of a metropolis assumed to have been located on the eastern bank of the Dead Sea consisting of five cities, each with its own king. There was (1) Bera, king of Sodom, (2) Birsha, king of Gomorrah, (3) Shinab, king of Admad, (4) Shember, king of Zeboim, and (5) the king of Bela, which is also called Zoar (Genesis 14:8). This thriving group of city-states is referred to in the Bible (Genesis 13:12) as the Cities of the Plain. The five kings were under the dominion of a coalition of eastern Mesopotamian overlords. According to the Torah, with the help of the patriarch Abraham, the cities gained their independence, though their independence was only short-lived. A few years later, G-d destroyed the cities in a hail of fire and brimstone.

In the early part of the 20th century, the entire Biblical account of Sodom and Gomorrah was doubted by many academicians. Not merely the part of the story of the supernatural destruction, but also any possible rule over the area by the Mesopotamians to the east. There was no route connecting the Dead Sea area with Mesopotamia. How could the Mesopotamians have possibly conquered the area? These factors caused even those normally sympathetic to the Biblical narrative, such as William Foxwell Albright, to doubt the story.

In the early 1920s, Dr. Nelson Glueck discovered evidence of an ancient route between Mesopotamia and the Dead Sea area.

However, in the early 1920s, Dr. Nelson Glueck discovered evidence of an ancient route between Mesopotamia and the Dead Sea area. Traces of the actual route, which had been covered by the desert storms, were uncovered. Mention of the route was subsequently found in cuneiform tablets in Mari and in Ebla.

By 1924, the previously doubtful Albright became convinced of the possibility of some ancient inhabited area near the barren eastern bank of the Dead Sea. His expedition had found some meager remains of an early Bronze Age structure assumed to have been a fortress or temple. It was located on a mound, known as Bab edh-Dhra, overlooking the desert floor some 550 feet below. Albright assumed that the structure was in some way to be identified with the Sodom-Gomorrah story, but was uncertain what that connection might be.

The Five Cities of the Plain

No serious excavations were undertaken in the area until about 40 years later. In the 1960s, a large cemetery was discovered near Bab edh-Dhra. Archeologist Paul Lapp spent three seasons excavating the area where he unearthed a great number of shaft-tombs -- possibly as many as 20,000. (A shaft-tomb is a vertical hole, about 3 feet in diameter, dug into the rocky ground to a depth of approximately 6 feet.) At the bottom of each shaft were 1-5 horizontal shallow shafts, each containing between 1-6 bodies. In addition, there were a number of mud-brick buildings, charnel houses that are repositories for bones or bodies of the dead. Each charnel house contained the remains of several hundred people.

Current estimates of the number of bodies occupying that cemetery is about a half million! Pottery shards found with the skeletal remains indicate that approximately 3,000,000 pottery vessels were used in conjunction with the burials. Other funerary items include clay figurines of goddesses, wooden staffs, sandals and reed baskets, some still containing food remains. [2] The great number of corpses in a single burial ground is evidence of a major population. But this is only the beginning.

Significantly, some forms of the pottery, jewelry, and cylinder seal impressions show a distinct Mesopotamian influence. [3] This bolsters the Biblical connection between the Dead Sea area and Mesopotamia.

A rather obscure branch of archaeology is known as paleoethnobotany. This study examines traces of food items used by ancient cultures in order to get a perspective of the culture's agriculture and diet.

Paleoethnobotanists found in Bab edh-Dhra traces of wheat, barley, dates, plums, peaches, grapes, figs, pistachio nuts, almonds, olives, pine nuts, lentils, chick peas, pumpkin, flax seed, and watermelon. [4] It was a gourmand's delight. The healthy diet manifested itself in the physique of the inhabitants: skeletal remains indicate that a height of 5'9"-6'4" was quite normal. [5] This is a rather tall figure for such an ancient culture.

Only these five cities have been found.

Between 1973 and 1979, four more "cities" to the south of Bab edh-Dhra were found. Their Arabic names are Numeira, Safi, Feifa, and Khanazir. The surrounding area has been thoroughly explored and no other cities have been found, only these five. The five cities, a few miles apart from each other, are almost in a straight line going from north to south.

Numeira was excavated for two seasons and the foundations of a few homes were uncovered. Perhaps the most interesting find was the remains of a winery with 4000-year-old whole grapes were still there, preserved by the arid desert climate. In latter years Moses referred to the vineyards of

Sodom, For their vine is of the vine of Sodom and of the fields of Gomorrah; their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter. (Deut. 32:32) The other three "cities" of the area have yet to be excavated. Surrounding the archeological ruins of Safi is an Early Bronze cemetery which rivals the size of Bab edh-Dhra. About nine miles south of Safi is the next of the five cities, Feifa. A cemetery has been found there too. The burial grounds of Feifa are similar in size to that of Bab edh-Dhra and Safi. [6] As noted above, the cemetery of Bab edh-Dhra is reported to contain the remains of 500,000 individuals. The cemetery in Safi seems to hold the same number of corpses, another 500,000. The grounds of Feifa hold another 500,000. The cemeteries of Numeria and Khanazir have yet to be located; however, the known number of burials in this relatively small area of the Dead Sea Desert -- 1,500,000 bodies -- indicates that this was once a thriving, heavily populated area. Indeed, it does seem to be incredible, yet the evidence is there. Based on this dating of the pottery of the grave goods in Bab edh-Dhra, it seems that this city existed for about 1,000 years. Numeira, on the other hand, existed for a very short span of time, certainly less than 100 years. The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud Shabbos 11a) says that Sodom existed for a mere 52 years. This would make Numeira a likely candidate for Sodom.

Fire and Brimstone

Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven. (Genesis 19:24)

"Fire and brimstone" is a common expression used to describe the sermon of an overzealous preacher, but exactly what is brimstone? The Hebrew word for brimstone in the Biblical verse is *gafrit* and is usually understood to mean sulfur. The Targum Yonathan ben Uziel translates the word into Aramaic as *kivraitah*. The term *kivraitah* appears in the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud Shabbos 89b, 90a; Nidah 62a) and is used in the context of a cleaning agent. It is likely that the Biblical *gafrit* is the hydrocarbon bitumen, which is the essential ingredient of asphalt. Bitumen can also be distilled into a cleaning agent. Bitumen/asphalt is a naturally occurring, highly flammable substance found in the Dead Sea area. In fact, Josephus refers to the Dead Sea as Lake Asphaltites. [7] It is of interest to note that Josephus writes that the Lake Asphaltites was formed as a result of the devastation that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

The entire areas of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira are covered with a spongy ash.

The entire areas of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira are covered with a spongy ash. These two cities show clear signs of utter destruction. The layer of ash ranges from 4-20 inches in depth. [8] Parallel to these five cities is fault line where two large plates of earth are exerting great pressure on each other. This tectonic feature has caused a number of earthquakes in the region. The pressure can also force subterranean matter, such as magma, or, in this case, bitumen into the air. Geologists suggest that, (when the time came for the destruction of Sodom -- my insertion), the earth spewed forth flammable hydrocarbons high into the atmosphere. These were ignited by lightning or some other natural source and the flaming debris fell back to earth. [9]

According to the Biblical narrative, Sodom and Gomorrah were under attack by the Mesopotamian coalition. After winning their independence from the Mesopotamians, Sodom and Gomorrah enjoyed a brief period of peace until it was destroyed in the hailstorm of fire and brimstone. The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud Shabbos 10b) states that it was only a 26 year gap between the two events.

The city of Numeira, as we conjectured, possibly Sodom, is the better preserved of the two excavated sites. Numeira shows signs of two devastations. The latter was the catastrophic fiery event that utterly destroyed the city. An earlier event shows less sign of such a catastrophe, but rather more like the result of a war. Dr. Bryant G. Wood, an expert in Syrio-Palestine archaeology, formerly of the University of Toronto, has examined the two layers of destruction. He concluded that the two events

probably occurred a little more than 20 years apart. [10] His estimation is in line with the Talmud's time frame of 26 years.

Dating

There is one point that prevents this evidence of the Biblical story from being 100% conclusive. The date of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah according to Biblical chronology was about one year before the birth of Isaac, which was in 1712 B.C.E. The archaeological dating of the destruction of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira is about 2300 B.C.E. [11] This discrepancy of 600 years is significant.

The dating of metal and ceramic artifacts in the Holy Land is dependant on comparisons to similar findings in Egypt. Dating Egyptian finds is far easier to estimate due to the existence of contemporary hieroglyphic writings. Archaeologists generally assume that similar type finds in the Holy Land, which are not accompanied by any written evidence, probably date to the same era as their Egyptian counterparts.

But recent evidence found by Manfred Bietak in Tel el-Daba indicates that Middle Bronze Age Canaanite artifacts lagged about 100 years behind their Egyptian counterparts. When it comes to Sodom and Gomorrah, the lag could be much more substantial because, according to the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 109a), intentional isolationism prevailed in the Cities of the Plain.

The (inhabitants of the cities of the Plain) said: "Since there cometh forth bread out of land and it hath the dust of gold, why should we suffer wayfarers, who come to us only to deplete our wealth? Come, let us abolish the practice of traveling into our land."

If, as the Talmud records, traveling into the area of Sodom and Gomorrah was sharply curtailed -- forbidden, or at least discouraged -- the introduction of outside styles of pottery and metal working would seriously fall behind the style and techniques of the more advanced Egyptians. How far the Cities of the Plain would have straggled is unknown. We must be patient and await further evidence to emerge.

Preponderance of Evidence

To summarize, the archaeology evidence as to the destruction of the five Cities of the Plain is inconclusive. However the preponderance of other evidence with regards to the Torah's story of Sodom and Gomorrah is overwhelming.

1. The Bible refers to a metropolis of five cities in the Dead Sea area. Five, and only five cities, have been found in the Dead Sea area.
2. The Bible refers to a conquest by the Mesopotamians. The artifacts found in the Dead Sea area show a Mesopotamian influence.
3. The Midrash describes the metropolis as a thriving population. The enormous number of burials in the large cemeteries attests to a great population.
4. The Talmud and the Midrash describe the area as an agricultural wonderland. The great diversity of agricultural products found in the ruins verify the lush produce enjoyed by the area's inhabitants.
5. According to the Talmud, there was a span of only 26 years between a war in the area and the ultimate destruction. Devastation levels found in Numeira (Sodom) are consistent with the Talmud's assertion.
6. The Talmud states that Sodom, unlike other cities in the area, only existed for 52 years. The ruins in Numeira (Sodom) indicate that the city lasted less than 100 years.
7. The Bible attributes the destruction of the cities to a fiery storm that rained down from above. Thick layers of burnt material covering the remains of the cities in the area bear this out.

After reviewing all of the archaeological data, it is quite clear that the story related in the Torah and Midrash is completely accurate in spite of what the non-believers may boldly claim.

Footnotes [1] J.M. Miller & J.H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1986) 60. [2] "Have Sodom and Gomorrah Been Found?" BAR, Sept/Oct 1980, H. Shanks ed. [3] R.T. Shaub, "Bab edh-Dhra" in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. E. Stern (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) 135. [4] D.W. McCreery, *Paleobotany in Preliminary Report of the 1979 Expedition to the Dead Sea Plain, Jordan*, (Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, 240, 1980) 52. [5] *Ibid.* BAR, Sept/Oct 1980. [6] <http://www.abu.nb.ca/ecm/topics/arch5.htm> [7] *Antiquities*, Book I, chapter 9. [8] M.D. Coogan, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR)*, 1984, 255, p. 80. [9] D. Neev & K.O. Emery, *The Destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, and Jericho: Geological, Climatological, and Archaeological*

Background (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 13-14, 33,37; G.M. Harris & A.P. Beardow, The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: A Geological Perspective, Quarterly Journal of Engineering Geology, Vol. 28, 360. [10] http://www.johnankerberg.org/Articles/_PDFArchives/science/SC3W0903.pdf [11] http://www.johnankerberg.org/Articles/_PDFArchives/science/SC3W1003

From **Rabbi Dovid Horwitz** <yutorah@yutorah.org> reply-toyutorah@yutorah.org to internetparshasheet@gmail.com dateThu, Nov 13, 2008 at 4:35 PM subject Parashat Va-Yera: The 'Aqedah

Parashat Va-Yera: The Aqedah
By Rabbi Dovid Horwitz

When one studies a Talmudic sugya, one must differentiate between the hava amina (the hypothetical assumption advanced but ultimately rejected by the Gemara) and the masqanah (the normative conclusion of the sugya). To be sure, a lamdan will attempt to formulate and conceptualize the hava amina as well as the masqanah, and to recognize which elements of the supposed hava amina are retained in the masqanah. But a talmid hakham, having mastered the masa u-matan (back and forth) of the Gemara, must never forget that it is davka the masqanah, the conclusion of the Gemara, which is normative.

I believe that we should not forget these guidelines when we study the biblical narrative of the 'Aqedah. The hava amina of the 'Aqedah is clear: one must always submit to the will of the Almighty, even if the will of the Almighty is to commit, G-d forbid, a murder. The 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard tried to imagine what Abraham had to go through to accomplish this submission; in his book Fear and Trembling he presents numerous imaginary hypotheses. But the conclusion of all of them is the same: the 'Aqedah constituted a "teleological suspension of the ethical." Abraham had to realize that being truly religious means not doing what he thinks is correct but doing what G-d thinks is correct. And if that meant sacrificing the only son of his old age, so be it.

But what is the masqanah of the 'Aqedah? Are we to understand that when "an angel of the L-Rd called to him from heaven" and said "Abraham! Abraham....!" and said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored son, from Me... (Genesis 22:11-12)" the masqanah left the hava amina totally untouched? Or is there a different conceptual substructure to the masqanah? True, one must always submit to the will of the Almighty. But, indeed, what is the Will of the Almighty?"

One Jewish thinker who stressed the masqanah of the 'Aqedah was Joseph ibn Kaspi. He was a medieval Provençal Maimonidean and interpreted numerous biblical narratives in the spirit of Maimonidean rationalism. He was born in 1279/80 in Argentiere, in the province of Languedoc in southern France, and is presumed to have died shortly before 1345. In his work Gevia' Kesef, he devoted an entire chapter (XIV) to an analysis of the of 'Aqedah. In the manner of the biblical commentary of his contemporary and compatriot, the 14th century Provençal R. Levi ben Gershon (also known as Ralbag or Gersonides), ibn Kaspi cites a series of benefit (to'alot) that the reader of the biblical passage of the 'Aqedah derives from studying the text. What follows is part of his lengthy comment. (I have used the translation and notes of Basil Herring, Joseph ibn Kaspi's Gevia' Kesef: A Study in Medieval Jewish Philosophic Bible Commentary [New York, 1982], pp. 219-24.)

The third benefit...one that is most precious, is the greatest principle for which the (chapter) was recorded. It was the fact that (Abraham) was prevented from carrying it out at the point when he was approaching the act (of sacrifice of Isaac). For this reason, the verse is careful to say that when He, may He be blessed, commanded this act, it was only by way of a test. Heaven forbid that He would command in such a manner as to intend its fulfillment. The purpose (of the command) was to uproot, undermine, and weaken the established belief that was in the heart of the people that those who are punctiliously careful take of their children to make sacrifices to their gods. Furthermore, while it is true that He who gave the Torah

permitted them to take other forms of life (i.e., animals) as sacrifice to the L-RD our God, as an expression of guilt, Heaven forbid that the human species would be used for this purpose. This even includes the prohibition against passing (a human being) through the fire (even without sacrificing him), as is seen from the careful omission of any mention of kindling of fire, even though the high priest would act in that manner (Cf. Leviticus 16:27, regarding the High Priest's service on the Day of Atonement). While it does say earlier that "he took in his hand the fire," (Genesis 22:13) this is avoided in the verse "and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar on the wood (Genesis 22:9). Had this (verse) stated "And he placed the fire under the wood," or "...on the altar," it would have been understood by foolish people as indicating that Abraham was at least (able) to pass Isaac through the fire. (But even this act of "passing through the fire" without burning to death is prohibited.)

The significance (of the custom of sacrificing children) is known from the Torah and Prophets, in that the ultimate sacrifice in those generations was to offer their children as a sacrifice to their gods, whether that would be by passing them through the fire, or to burn them completely, or to slaughter them and cast their blood as a food offering to their gods. This is all evident to one who does not "sit at street-corners (yoshevei keranot)." One can find a specific instance of this in the Book of Kings (II Kings 3:27), where the king of Moab sacrificed his eldest son, which was certainly a burnt offering to his god. It is known that one of our sins was that our people were unable to overcome such beliefs, in spite of all the prophylactic measures used by the Torah to make us understand the matter.

Even Jephthah, who was not one of those considered wicked but only vain, in that he was not wise, actually meant to fulfill the will of the L-RD when he swore, saying, "Whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return from the Ammonites shall be the L-RD's and shall be offered by me as a burnt offering (Judges 11:31). The meaning of "shall be the L-RD's" is not as Ibn Ezra explained. Jephthah did not consider the sacrifice of a human being an abomination to the L-RD, so that when he said this later, he was not specific, for it never occurred to him that it might be his daughter, as did in fact happen. His fate proves his lack of wisdom. For in spite of everything, had he been wise, he would have withdrawn his vow. Instead, he imagined that it (the consummation of his vow) was an act of great piety. While he (undoubtedly) read this episode (in Genesis) in particular, having read it he was not aware of this final cause, for he considered the L-RD's prevention of Abraham (from sacrificing his son) to be only an act of mercy on account of (Isaac's being) an only son in (Abraham's) old age. (So Jephthah thought that) whoever would carry this out would be more praiseworthy and pious, especially (for someone like) Jephthah, a young man in his prime. It is possible that Jephthah expected an angel to call out to him, "Do not raise your hand against the child," and continued to wait for it.

So this foolish enthusiast (Jephthah) sacrificed his only daughter in fire unto the L-RD, in a similar manner to what the wise Abraham began to do with his only son, and similar to the act of the king of Moab in sacrificing his eldest son to his G-d Chemosh, as well as similar to the acts of some of our people, who in their sin sacrificed to idols. Because Jephthah was one of our lesser leaders, the sages said (Rosh Ha-Shanah 25b), "Jephthah was in his generation like Samuel in his generation...."

In general, the Torah attempted to cure this serious disease that occurred in our people in those times, similar to the manner in which it is presented here...For this reason, he who gave the Torah spoke at length in describing the offensive nature of this (child-sacrifice), when He said, "also their sons and daughters do they burn in the fire to their gods (Deuteronomy 12:31), an act that was particularly associated with Molech (Leviticus 18:21; 20:3). For this reason too, the punishment for this sin is greater than all (other) sins, if sacrifice is made to others- quite the opposite of the thoughts of those who considered this child-sacrifice most appropriate for all people. It was enough-more than enough- that in one respect He permitted them to

kill an animal, that which is our brother (species), the offspring of our father (genus that is known as) "living," [hai] which is the category that most immediately encompasses us humans and the animals. But while this (sacrifice of animals) was permitted with conditions, it was not so with relation to the human species, for man was created in the image of God. Consequently, such worship entails the sin of murder and the sin of committing an abomination before the L-RD, as I have explained.

According to Joseph ibn Kaspi, the maskanah of the 'Aqedah is life affirming. G-d wants us to serve Him in life, not by sacrificing other human beings. This dovetails with the biblical imperative ve-hai bahem- "and you shall live by them (i.e., through the observance of the biblical commandments). It also corresponds beautifully with Psalm 115:16-18:

The heavens belong to the L-RD
But the earth He gave over to man.
The dead cannot praise the L-RD
Nor any who go down into silence.
But we will bless the L-RD
Now and forever.

Hallelujah. To subscribe to this email list, please click [here](#) To view more shiurim on Parshat VaYera, please click [here](#) Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future 500 W 185th St. New York, New York 10033

From: Jewish Media Resources <jmrlist@jewishmediaresources.org>
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Mishpacha "Keep it Simple"

Keep it Simple

by Jonathan Rosenblum

Mishpacha November 12, 2008 The World-to-Come is an upside down world (Bava Basra 10b): Those who were on top in this world on account of their wealth (Rashi ad loc.) are on the bottom, and those who were on the bottom in this world are elevated there.

Sometimes we can catch a glimpse of that upside down world in the here and now. Those of us who have made aliyah have witnessed something of the sort. Many who were in high prestige professions, like law, in America cannot work at anything near their previous level because of language barriers. On the other hand, many who were not in the sort of professions that were the traditional dream of every Jewish mother – e.g., plumbers, electricians, those who have worked in construction – find themselves with plenty of well-paying work. I know at least one PhD. nuclear physicist who found he could do much better in Israel repairing washing machines and dryers.

And we are witnessing something of the same thing today. Many people who were pulling down large salaries in the financial industry now find themselves without a job, and possessing very specialized skills for which there is no current market. In the meantime, the plumbers and electricians still have plenty of work.

In short, we have no way of guaranteeing for ourselves, and certainly not for our children, any particular level of lifestyle. If we have learned one thing in recent months, it is that Hashem can take away all a person's wealth in a flash.

But there is one thing that we can do help prepare our children for the vagaries of life: Teach them to live simply without feeling deprived. That is easier said than done in today's consumer society, and after decades of constantly raising our children's expectations.

The hard part is not so much the cutting back, but doing so without creating feelings of deprivation. Success depends on raising our level of ruchnios so that our children really feel that happiness does not come from possessions. Just because it is true doesn't mean that it will be easy convincing our children. (One young mother recently described to me her children's horrified look when they found that their supper meat balls were

now filled with turkey.) And if we do not believe it ourselves, our chances of success are nil.

Once even secular Israelis understood that possessions do not bring happiness. Eli Livni, older brother of our Foreign Minister, told me last week: "In those days, we had one-tenth of what we have today, and we were ten times as happy." In his autobiography, former Chief of Staff Gen. Moshe "Boogie" Ya'alon, describes his childhood in Kiryat Chaim. "We bought black bread, not white, because white cost a pruta more. At one point, we ate squash salad, "liver" made from squash, and jelly from squash because squash was the cheapest vegetable. Shoes were expected to last several years; we started wearing them when they were too big and wore them until we had long outgrown them. Nothing was wasted. My mother sewed clothes out of the sacks in which the sugar came." Yet, he writes, "I didn't know we were lacking anything."

Today, even some chareidi families have forgotten this lesson. Our children assume that whatever is the "norm" will be theirs. A father bemoaned to me recently that his son expected, as a matter of course, that he would provide two buses for bochurim coming to his wedding. As far as the son was concerned, the discussion was closed with the observation "everybody does it," regardless of his father's financial capacity.

In a recent discussion with the directors of Mesilla, an organization devoted to helping thousands of Torah families learn to live within their budget, HaGaon Rav Aharon Leib Steinman stressed the necessity of getting away from this "everybody does it," mentality. Just because everyone does it, Rav Steinman said, is no reason that we have to do it, and certainly no excuse to go into debt.

He pointed out, for example, that there is no halachic requirement to make shevah berachos every night in the week following a wedding, and certainly not fancy ones requiring large outlays on the hosts' part. Ditto large aufrufs to which both extended families are invited and that just add another level of pressure on already overstressed families.

Does anyone who has seen the utter simplicity in which Rav Elyashiv, or Rav Steinman, or Rav Chaim Kanievsky lives imagine that their children were less happy as a consequence? If we look around our own neighborhoods, we will see that the happiest families are those of bnei Torah who live simply.

Many years ago, I remember hearing Rabbi Yechiel Jacobson describe a family that lives with the barest minimum of furniture in the house. One day the father, a big talmid chacham, comes home and announces a celebration, for which he has bought a special treat – a fresh baked loaf of bread. What was the cause of the celebration? The father found a teretz (solution) to a difficult Rambam. The family washes to eat the bread, the father says over his solution to the Rambam, and then he and all his sons start dancing with joy around the table.

That story brings out one of the crucial reasons why we must teach our children to be content with less, especially if they choose a life of long-term Torah learning. Without the ability to live within a limited budget, few will be able to learn Torah for a long time. The seven years of plenty appear to be over – at least for the time being. Those whose plans of learning indefinitely also go along with expectations of an apartment and a worry-free existence may be in for a big surprise.

In Israel, only those who are capable of making do with little and living away from the center of the country, where apartments are still affordable, can be confident of being able to learn long-term. That is one reason why maintaining kollelim on the periphery for those willing to give up creature comforts for learning is a high priority.

Enjoying learning – even being a top learner – will not be enough. Only those who cannot conceive of doing anything else and who are prepared to sacrifice in order to do so will succeed. And the ability to be able to make those sacrifices does not magically appear at 22 or 23. It has to be developed. The sooner we start the better.

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The Lessons of the Akeidah for Our Times

Rabbi Avraham Shulman

The penultimate test of Avraham Avinu's service to Hashem is of course the Akedas Yitzchok, where Avraham is asked to: "Please take your son, your only one, whom you love" and offer him as an "olah" to Hashem. Avraham Avinu not only heeds Hashem's request but does so with alacrity.

What lessons can we learn in our daily lives from this incredible display of devotion to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. How can Avraham Avinu's subjugation of human nature to the will of G-d stand as a model to contemporary Jewish Life where our tests are of a vastly different nature?

Several Rishonim led by the Ramban, understand the purpose of the Akeidah as a vehicle for the spiritual growth of the one being tested. Every human being has within them a latent potential for greatness. In order for that potential to become a tangible reality a person must face a challenge, some kind of crisis that impels them to ascend to greater heights of faith and service both to G-d and our fellow man. From this perspective the Akeidah teaches us to view any challenge in life, even ordinary ones, as opportunities for personal growth. Additionally, we understand that while we pray everyday that Hashem should not give us a nisayon, a test, nevertheless it is exactly the difficulties and hardships in life that provide us with the impetus to get closer to Hakadosh Baruch Hu and reach the potential within ourselves.

The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim (3:24), delineates the Akeidah's meaning as an expression for all of humanity to learn fundamental principles of faith. According to this approach a primary purpose of the Akeidah was not only for Avraham himself but for its' lesson to future generations. One of the primary messages writes the Rambam is that of Yiras Hashem: Fear of Heaven. For Avraham Avinu, who had waited all his life for a son to carry on his legacy, the test of the Akeidah must have been nearly impossible. He was asked to do something so difficult it belied the essence of human nature itself. However by overcoming these challenges and dedicating every ounce of his being towards God, Avraham became the timeless paradigm of a Yarei Shamayim. In our own lives when we face a conflict, and struggle often to perform a mitzvah properly because of the self sacrifice involved. Let us turn to the example of our forefather Avraham for inspiration and guidance.

Through our study of this amazing Parshah, hopefully we can all gain perspective and inspiration for our contemporary obligations in Avodas Hashem.

Avraham's Avodah

Moshe Shulman

The end of Parshas Vayeira deals with Akeidas Yitzchak. In the famous story, Hashem tells Avraham to bring his son Yitzchak as a korban. Avraham tries as he can to fulfill Hashem's word, but as he is about to bring the knife down upon Yitzchak, an angel informs him that he has passed the test and there is no need to bring Yitzchak as a korban. What was the unique greatness of this story? Weren't there many gedolim throughout history who were moser nefesh to sanctify Hashem's name? When we beseech Hashem during the Yamim Nora'im, why do we emphasize the sacrifice that Avraham was prepared to bear rather than the myriad other sacrifices that various of our other leaders have made?

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz answers in his Sichos Mussar that Avraham could have easily rationalized that performing the Akeidah is actually forbidden because his contemporaries will think he is a hypocrite. They will think that Avraham, who is trying to spread the fallacies of Avodah Zara, is now sacrificing his own son to an Avodah Zara. Therefore, Avraham perhaps could have created Cheshbonos as to why he should not sacrifice Yitzchak (For example, he could have said that it is better to violate a Shev V'al Taaseh than to perform an action that would lead to a Chilul Hashem; Or he could have reasoned that Hashem's word was not to be taken literally in situations where doing so would lead to a Chilul Hashem). Because Avraham did not use any of these seemingly plausible Cheshbonos and instead performed Hashem's word without question, his sacrifice was greater than all others' sacrifices.

Rav Shmulevitz proves his point from the angel's statement to Avraham "Atah Yadati Ki Yirei Elokim Atah" – "Now I know that you fear Hashem." Didn't Hashem already know that Avraham was G-d fearing? The angel was really saying that Avraham had shown a greater level of Yiras Shamayim by performing God's command despite the tempting excuses that were available.

Perhaps it is possible to suggest another answer to the original question based on a Rav Chaim Volozhin on Pirkei Avos. Rav Chaim explains that whenever Avraham passed a Nisayon and showed that he possessed a certain Midah, that Midah was passed down to his children. This explains why Akeidas Yitzchak was so unique. Avraham was, historically, the first person to be moser nefesh for Hashem. He was the origin of this Jewish midah, and he passed it on to the rest of klal yisrael. Therefore, each subsequent sacrifice was a direct result of the Akeidah, which is why we mention specifically the Akeidah in our T'fillos.

According to this last answer, we can gain new insight into the significance of the stories of the Avos. Not only does sefer bereishis teach us about the midos of the avos, but it also informs us about the midos that are within ourselves. Each and every action of the Avos impacted our own inherited midos, so we have great potential within us. Our goal is to be motzi min hakoach el hapoal, to act on our potential.

from Chezkie Glatt <Editor@atereshashavua.com> to date Thu, Nov 13, 2008 at 11:51 PM subject Ateres Hashavua mailed-by gmail.com

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Weekly Insights from Moreinu HaRav Yaakov Kamenetzky zt"l

"And there was a famine in the land. And Avram descended to Egypt..."

Rav Yaakov cites the Even Ezra pertaining to the Akeidah. Chazal say "Yitzchak was thirty seven years old when he was brought up to the Akeidah." Logically, says the Even Ezra, this is difficult to understand. If this was the case (that Yitzchak was 37 years old at the time of the Akeidah) his reward should have been double or many times more than that of Avraham. However, there is very little mention of Yitzchak's greatness for his part in the Akeidah. Therefore, says the Even Ezra, it is more appropriate to conclude that Yitzchak was close to 13 years old and that his father forced him to be bound. Rav Yaakov explains (according to this Even Ezra) we can explain the bracha at the end of zichronos by musaf on Rosh Hashanah. The brocha says "Akeidas Yitzchak shall be remembered by the children of Yaakov." Why should Yaakov's children remember the Akeidah? The Akeidah was an occurrence with Yitzchak. The reason is that the children of Yitzchak have nothing to glorify him with, because he was going to be sacrificed on the Mizbayach against his will. Therefore, we mention Yaakov.

Rav Yaakov further embellishes this chazal. Why is there no mention at all of Yitzchak in the pasuk, and furthermore, why is all the credit given to

Avraham for the Akeidah? The Torah barely mentions the test that involved Avraham when he gave himself over to be thrown into the fiery furnace in Ur Kasdim. In any instance that we mention the merit/zechus of the Akeidah we mention Avraham to teach us the magnitude of the test for a father to give up his son. Moreover, this is why we mention Avraham's righteousness by the Akeidah and not Yitzchak's. The reason is that it is tremendously heartbreaking for a father to give over a son to be killed, even though the reason may be to accomplish the will of Hashem.

Joyous Torah Treasures
A Collection of Rabbinic Insights and Practical Advice
by Sam Friedman, M.D.

Joyous Torah Treasures
The Heights of the Universe

Most of the book of *Bereishis* (*Genesis*) relates the major events in the lives of our forefathers and the descent of Yaakov and his family to Egypt. In his commentary on the first sentence of the Torah, Rashi asks why the Torah starts with the story of creation, and not with the first commandment that was given to the Jewish nation. Since the purpose of the Torah is to teach the 613 commandments, Rashi wonders why the Torah doesn't begin with a commandment. Similarly, one can question why most of *Bereishis* relates the major events in the lives of our forefathers, instead of proceeding directly to teach the commandments. What is the purpose of the first book of the Torah which is devoted mostly to stories about the lives of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs? The Ramban was one of the greatest Biblical and Talmudic commentators, as well as a poet, philosopher, Kabbalist, and physician. He was born in Spain in 1194 and died in Israel in 1270. In 1263, he successfully defended Judaism in a public disputation for which King James I of Aragon presented the Ramban with a monetary award. After Pope Clement IV requested that the King penalize him, the Ramban escaped from Spain and immigrated to Israel. In his commentary on the beginning of the Torah portion (*Parsha*) entitled *Lech Lecha*, the Ramban teaches a principle to help us understand the remainder of the book of *Bereishis*:

I will tell you a principle by which you will understand all the upcoming portions of the Torah concerning Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. It is indeed a great matter which our Rabbis mentioned briefly, saying: "Whatever has happened to the Patriarchs is a sign to the children." It is for this reason that the verses narrate at great length the account of the journeys of the Patriarchs, the digging of the wells, and other events. Now someone may consider them unnecessary and of no useful purpose, but in truth they all serve as a lesson for the future: when an event happens to any one of the three Patriarchs, that which is decreed to happen to his children can be understood...It is for this reason that the Holy One, Blessed is He, caused Avraham to take possession of the Land [of Israel] and symbolically did to him all that was destined to happen in the future to his children. *Understand this principle.* (Based on the translation by Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel, זצ"ל. Italics are my emphasis.)

This principle is usually described in Hebrew as "מַעֲשֵׂי אֲבוֹת סִימָן לְבָנִים" "The happenings of the forefathers are a sign for the children," and is based on the *Midrash Tanchuma (Lech Lecha 9)*. The Ramban writes that the Torah relates "at great length the account of the journeys of the Patriarchs" because they are a "sign for the children," and that we should "*understand this principle.*" As the Ramban suggests, let us now try to understand this principle, which can be understood on several levels. *The simplest approach is that whatever happened to our forefathers predicts the future of the Jewish nation.* For instance, Avraham left his birthplace to live in Israel, and eventually God will give the Land of Israel to the Jewish nation. Just as Avraham traveled to Egypt because of a famine in Israel, so too the Jewish nation will descend to Egypt because of a famine in Israel. Just as Yaakov fought with Eisav, so too will the Jewish nation fight with Eisav's descendants. On a

somewhat more complex level, "מַעֲשֵׂי אֲבוֹת סִימָן לְבָנִים" "The happenings of the forefathers are a sign for the children" may be teaching us that *whatever happened to our forefathers is an instructional guide for our future actions.* According to this approach, the actions of our forefathers not only predict the future, but they also serve as a guide for the current and future activities of all Jews. Just as Avraham was known for kindness, so too we should try to be known for kindness. Just as Avraham left his birthplace to go to Israel, so too all of Avraham's descendants should do the same. The Ramban writes in his commentary on the beginning of *Parshas Vayishlach* that just as Yaakov utilized prayer, gifts, and military preparations in his confrontation with Eisav, so too the Jewish nation should use this multifaceted approach in its future confrontations.

Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, זצ"ל (1892-1953), was one of the most profound Jewish thinkers of the last century. He was the *Rosh Yeshiva* (Director) of the *Kollel* in Gateshead, England, and later *Mashgiach* (spiritual guide) of the *Ponevezh Yeshiva* in Israel. Rabbi Dessler's writings were published posthumously in a multi-volume edition entitled *Michtav MiEliyahu*. The first volume of *Michtav MiEliyahu* has been translated into English by Rabbi Aryeh Carmell.

Rabbi Dessler was thrilled that he had acquired some insight into understanding "מַעֲשֵׂי אֲבוֹת סִימָן לְבָנִים" "The happenings of the forefathers are a sign for the children" from the commentary that Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, זצ"ל (1749-1821, the most prominent student of the Vilna *Gaon* and founder of the *Yeshiva* of Volozhin), wrote on *Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers)*, Chapter 5, *Mishna 3*. Rabbi Dessler writes in *Michtav MiEliyahu*, Volume 1, in an essay on *The Attribute of Mercy*, "In this particular instance I am happy to say that Hashem has given me the merit to discover an important key which will help to elucidate the questions we referred to above...." Rabbi Dessler quotes Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, "For there are many attributes which the *tsaddik* (the righteous man) labors hard and long to attain, while to his children they come *naturally* and they can achieve them with little effort...." Rabbi Dessler writes regarding this brief comment by Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin that "One might see nothing special in these few words and pass them by hastily without realizing their true significance. *But no, my dear friends; these words stand at the very heights of the universe.*" Rabbi Dessler returns to the words of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin: We have seen with our own eyes on many occasions how ignorant Jews who know nothing of Torah nevertheless readily give up their lives for the sanctification of the Divine Name [that is, they allow themselves to be killed rather than submit to conversion]. This is *ingrained in us* from Avraham, our father, who was ready to give up his life in the furnace of Ur Kasdim, for the sake of his faith (commentary of Rashi on *Bereishis 11:28*, quoting the *Midrash*). And so the purpose of all the ten tests [that God gave to Avraham] was to straighten the road for us [that is, to make it easier for us to arrive at certain spiritual levels]. Why do we find that a Jew is suddenly seized with a desire to immigrate to the Holy Land? This is derived from [Avraham's successful completion of] the test: "Go away from your land, your family and your father's house, to the land I will show you" (*Bereishis 12:1*).

Regarding this explanation by Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, Rabbi Dessler teaches: It is indeed amazing, when we come to think of it, that we Jews should have retained our deep love for the Land of Israel after having been exiled from it for two thousand years. The reason is that this attachment is, with us, not a matter of mere nationalism. If it had been only this, we should have forgotten about the Land of Israel many centuries ago. After all, other national groups, uprooted from their countries of origin, have adapted themselves completely to their new environment after two or three generations at the most...*It is a spiritual inheritance from Avraham, our father, derived from the test of Lech Lecha.* (This test, which required him to leave his birthplace and his old father for an unknown destination, called for much faith and self-sacrifice on his part.)

Thus, Rabbi Dessler explains, based on the comments of Rabbi

Chaim of Volozhin, "מעשי אבות סימן לבנים" *"The happenings of the forefathers are a sign for the children"* because the attributes and spiritual greatness of the forefathers are ingrained in the nature of the Jewish nation. The natural instincts of the Jewish nation are based on the "מעשי אבות" "happenings of the forefathers." Because Avraham was willing to give up his life to sanctify God and leave his birthplace to move to Israel, the personality of the Jew was modified so that it was less difficult for Jews over the centuries to do the same. The Gemora in Yevamos 79a

teaches, והבלישני, הרחמני, זה באומה זו, "שלושה סימנים יש באומה זו, הרחמני, הבלישני, והבלישני" "There are three signs [of the nature of the Jewish personality] in this nation: they are merciful, bashful, and they do acts of kindness." It's fascinating that this Gemora uses the word סימן, and not the word מדות, which is the usual word for personality traits. The use of the word סימן in the Gemora in Yevamos 79a is reminiscent of the word סימן in "מעשי אבות סימן לבנים" "The happenings of the forefathers are a sign (סימן) for the children." This is easier to understand according to the theory of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin discussed above, that the traits of the forefathers are ingrained in the nature of the Jewish nation. According to Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, it's possible that the "מעשי אבות" *"happenings of the forefathers"* changed the סימנים (signs or personality traits) of their בנים (children) so that it is easier for them to be "merciful, bashful, and people who do acts of kindness." Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin teaches that the "מעשי אבות" "happenings of the forefathers" changed the very essence of the Jewish people, so that certain difficult things, like moving to Israel or being prepared to give up everything to sanctify the name of God, will be less difficult for them in the future, because it is part of their nature.

The Ramban, quoted at the beginning of this essay, suggested that "מעשי אבות סימן לבנים" "The happenings of the forefathers are a sign for the children," is an important principle that explains the purpose of most of the book of Bereishis and that we should try to "understand this principle." Hopefully this essay, at least to some small degree, fulfills the suggestion of the Ramban, as it explains that this principle can be understood on at least three levels: 1) The most simplistic level is that the "happenings of the forefathers are a sign for the children" because they predict future events that will occur to their descendants, the Jewish nation. 2) On a somewhat more complex level, the "happenings of the forefathers are a sign for the children" because they are an instructional guide for the current and future activities of all Jews. 3) A third approach is suggested by Rabbi Dessler, based on the writings of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, who teaches that the "happenings of the forefathers are a sign for the children" because they changed the essence of the Jewish nation, so that following God's mitzvos (commandments) will be easier because it is part of their nature. As the Ramban, quoted above, writes, this is "a principle by which you will understand all the..." stories in the book of Bereishis. As Rabbi Dessler teaches regarding Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin's explanation, "...these words stand at the very heights of the universe." (If desired, see related essay on Parshas Vayechi, entitled "A Principle by Which You Will Understand the Book of Bereishis.") @@@Joyous Torah Treasures A Collection of Rabbinic Insights and Practical Advice 2 Volume Set by Sam Friedman, M.D.

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