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Covenant & Conversation

**Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha from
Lord Jonathan Sacks**

Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British
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<http://www.chiefrabbi.org/>

Vayera 5770 It is one of the most famous scenes in the Bible.

Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day when three strangers pass by. He urges them to rest and take some food. The text calls them men. They are in fact angels, coming to tell Sarah that she will have a child. The chapter seems simple. It is, however, complex and ambiguous. It consists of three sections:

Verses 1: G-d appears to Abraham.

Verses 2-16: Abraham and the men/angels.

Verses 17-33: The dialogue between G-d and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You cannot worship impersonal forces and remain a person: compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving. Precisely because we believe that G-d is personal, someone to whom we can say 'You', we honour human dignity as sacrosanct. Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace

of G-d in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the Divine presence when G-d appears as G-d. What is difficult is to sense the Divine presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving G-d and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

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

Kindness and Shelter

BBC Radio 4 – Thought for the Day 14 June 1999

Tomorrow morning I'll be taking part in what I guess is going to be one of the great emotional experiences of my life. More than a thousand people will be coming together to remember the day, sixty years ago, when their lives were saved by an act of kindness on the part of Britain and its citizens. They are some of the people, rescued as children in the operation known as Kindertransport.

Already by November 1938 most people knew that under the Nazis, Jews were doomed. On a single night, Kristallnacht, 191 synagogues were set on fire and another 76 completely demolished. Thirty thousand Jews were rounded up and sent to concentration camps. It was the beginning of the end.

Out of that darkness came one small beacon of light. The British government announced that it was willing to admit ten thousand children from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. It was an act of humanity unmatched anywhere else in the world, and it literally saved their lives. Most of those who stayed were murdered. Many of those who came never saw their families again. And none has ever forgotten that journey, as they waved goodbye to their parents and travelled to the one place that would let them in.

Many of them, including several friends of ours, have devoted their adult lives to the service of others, giving back some of the kindness that was shown to them. Tomorrow they'll be coming to give thanks to the many people in this country who opened their doors, their homes, and their hearts.

And that same British compassion still lives. The head of the Refugee Council told me of something he'd witnessed a week or two ago. He was up in the midlands, meeting a group of Kosovan refugees, when someone came to tell him that there was a demonstration outside. His heart sank, until he went out and saw what was written on the placards. Just one word. "Welcome!" And when those refugees return home, they'll carry with them the memory of that moment - the knowledge that there is another way of treating strangers, not with hostility but hospitality. And who knows if that isn't the best way of healing a fractured world. Acts of kindness never die. They linger in the memory, giving life to other acts in return. And as the Jewish children of sixty years ago join their thanks with those of the Kosovar Albanians of today, I know that while courage on the field of battle wins wars, it's another kind of courage - the gift of refuge in times of danger - that gives human hope a home.

PARSHAT VAYERA

It is very comfortable to think of Sedom as a city of thugs and pervers. After all, is that not the reason why God decided to destroy it? However, if one takes a closer look at the Torah's presentation of these events, one could reach almost the opposite conclusion - that Sedom was a city with culture, boasting a society not very different from our own. In the following shiur we'll examine this possibility, as we analyze the contrast between Sedom and Avraham Avinu, while considering the very purpose for why God chose a special nation.

INTRODUCTION Our series on Sefer Bereishit has been following the theme of 'bechira', i.e. God's choice of Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of His special nation. In last week's shiur, we discussed why God chose Avraham Avinu - i.e. to create a nation that will bring the Name of God and His message to all mankind. However, we did not discuss the Torah's plan for how this nation can ultimately achieve that goal? In this week's shiur, we attempt to answer this question as we study of the story of God's consultation with Avraham Avinu before He destroys Sedom. To better appreciate how the Torah presents its message through these events; we begin our shiur by paying attention to the lack of any 'parshia' divisions in this entire narrative.

AN EXTRA LONG 'PARSHIYA' Using a Tanach Koren, follow the segment from the beginning of Parshat Vayera (18:1) until the conclusion of the story of Sedom at the end of chapter 19. Note how this unit contains two unrelated topics: 1) The news that Sarah will give birth to Yitzchak; 2) The story of God's destruction of Sedom (& Lot's rescue).

Nonetheless, this entire narrative is recorded uninterrupted by any 'parshia' break. By including both of these events in the same 'parshia', the Torah is already alluding to a thematic connection between these two events. One could suggest that these events are recorded together for the simple reason that the same "mal'achim" [angels or messengers] are involved in both stories. However, this itself raises the same question from a different angle, i.e. why are the same mal'achim who are sent to destroy Sedom - first instructed to inform Avraham about the forthcoming birth of Yitzchak? [If we adopt Rashi's position (see 18:2) that each angel was assigned only one mission, then we would re-phrase our question: Why must all three travel together, or why doesn't each angel travel directly to fulfill his own mission?]

THE DEEPER 'CONNECTION' The answer to this question can be found (right where we would expect) at the transition point between these two stories. Simply take a look the Torah's 'parenthetical' comment, inserted as Avraham escorts his guests on their way to Sedom. As you study these psukim, note how they explain why God must first consult Avraham before destroying Sedom: "And God said: Shall I hide from Avraham what I am about to do? For Avraham is to become a great nation [goy gadol], and through him, all other nations will be blessed [ve-nivrechu bo...] For I have singled him out in order that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of God by doing what is just and right... in order that I shall bring upon Avraham all that I have spoken about him." (See Breishit 18:17-19)

Note how God's decision to consult with Avraham re: Sedom relates directly to the destiny that he has been charged to pass on to his son - Yitzchak. But the thematic connection between these two topics goes much deeper. Let's explain how and why. Review these three psukim once again, noting their textual and thematic parallels to the first three psukim of Parshat Lech Lecha (see 12:1-3), where the Torah details God's original choice of Avraham Avinu: "... ve-e'escha le-goy gadol - and I will make you a great nation - and bless you and you will be a blessing [to others] -"ve-nivrechu becha kol mishpechot ha-adama / - and through you all the nations will be blessed" (see 12:13).

There can be no doubt that the Torah wishes to link these two passages! Then, note how after explaining (in verse 18) why He has chosen Avraham Avinu, God explains how this will happen - for Avraham will teach his children (and those children their children, etc.) to do tzedaka u-mishpat! (see 18:18-19)

In other words, Avraham is expected to initiate a family tradition - that will create a society characterized by acts of tzedaka & mishpat. In this manner, they will truly serve as God's model nation. [See also Devarim 4:5-8 for a very similar explanation. See also Yeshayahu 42:5-6.]

PREVENTING FUTURE CITIES LIKE SDOM This 'prelude' explains why the Torah records both stories in the same parshia, for the reason why God has promised a son to Avraham was in order to begin a nation that will hopefully one day be able to save societies such as Sedom, for they will serve as a 'model nation' from whom they can learn. This can explain why the Torah records Avraham's petition that God spare the doomed city. Avraham does not ask that God simply save the tzaddikim in Sedom; he begs instead that the entire city be saved - for the sake of those tzaddikim! [See 18:26.] - Why? Because - hopefully - those tzaddikim may one day influence the people in Sedom towards

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proper 'teshuva', just as the nation of Avraham is destined to lead all mankind in the direction of God.

This also explains when Avraham's petition ends. After God agrees to save the city for the sake of 50 righteous men, Avraham continues to 'bargain' for the sake of 45, 40, 30, etc. - until he reaches ten (see 18:23-32). He stops at ten, for there is little chance that such a small number would ever be able to exert a serious influence upon an entire community. [This may relate to the concept of a 'minyan' - a minimum amount of people capable of making God's Name known. Note as well the influence the ten 'spies' have on the entire nation in the incident of the 'meraglim', and how Chazal learn the number ten for a minyan from that incident!]

It is God's hope that, in the future, Avraham's nation would prevent the emergence of 'future Sedoms' - by creating a model society established on acts of tzedaka u-mishpat. As Yitzchak is the son through whom this tradition will be transmitted, it is meaningful that the same angels assigned to destroy Sedom must first 'plant the seeds' for the prevention of future Sedoms. Avraham makes this gallant effort to save Sedom, as this reflects the very purpose for which he has been chosen. Despite his failure at this time, it will be this tradition that he must pass on to his son Yitzchak, and later to all future generations.

AVRAHAM VS. SDOM Even though at this point in the narrative, we are not yet aware of the precise sin of Sedom, this 'prelude' certainly suggests that it must relate in some manner to a lack of "tzedek u-mishpat". Now, we will attempt to determine more precisely what their sin was, and how it represents the antithesis of everything for which Avraham stands. Chapter 18 is not the first time in Sefer Breishit when Sedom is mentioned. As we explained in our shiur on Parshat Lech Lecha, Lot's decision to leave Avraham and move to Sedom (13:1-18) reflects his preference not to be dependent on God and to dissociate himself from his uncle. It is in that context that we are told: "The men of Sedom were very wicked to God" (see 13:13). Furthermore, after rescuing Lot from the 'four kings' (see chapter 14), Avraham refuses to keep any property belonging to Sedom which was recovered in that victory. Although he rightfully deserves his 'fair share' of the spoils from the battle which he himself fought and won, Avraham Avinu, expressing his opposition to anything associated with Sedom, prefers to completely divorce himself from any resources originating from that city: "Avram said to the King of Sedom: I swear to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth: I will not take so much as a thread or a shoe strap of what is yours, so you can not say: It is I who made Avram rich" (14:22-23).

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

A GOOD HOST Review the first three psukim of chapter 19, noting how the Torah goes out of its way to describe how insistent Lot is to provide these two 'unknown travelers' with a place to stay: "And the two mal'achim came to Sedom towards evening, and Lot was sitting by the gate of the city, as he saw them he approached them... And he said - 'Please come stay at your servant's house, for lodging and washing up, then you can continue on your way in the morning'; but they declined. But Lot very much insisted, so they came to his house; he gave them to drink and baked for them matzot [wafers] to eat." (see 19:1-3).

Clearly, the Torah is emphasizing Lot's very own 'hachnasat orchim' [hospitality] as the opening theme of this narrative. One could suggest that this same theme continues in the Torah's description of the city's reaction to Lot's harboring of his two guests: "...They [his two guests] had not lain down yet when the townspeople, the men of Sedom, gathered outside his house - from young to old - all the people until the edge [of the city]. And they protested [outside his house] and shouted: 'Where are those men who came to visit you this evening? Take them out of your house so we can know them [ve-nei'da'em]" (see 19:4-5).

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

NO GUESTS ALLOWED Ramban (and Rasag) advance a different interpretation, explaining that the entire town did indeed join in this protest (as the simple reading of this pasuk implies), for they had all gathered outside Lot's house, demanding to 'know' who these guests were. Why are they protesting? As Ramban explains so beautifully (see his commentary on 19:5), the people of Sedom are protesting against Lot's hospitality to these strangers - as they would call for a mass protest anytime there was a fear that someone in their town was 'harboring' guests! There appears to have been a strict law in Sedom: No

guests allowed! As Ramban explains, the Sdomites didn't want to ruin their exclusive [suburban] neighborhood. Should Lot accommodate guests this evening, tomorrow night more guests may come, and by the end of the month, the city streets could be flooded with transients and beggars. Should the 'word get out' that there is 'free lodging' in Sedom, their perfect 'country club' would be ruined. [One could even find a warped ideology in this type of city policy. For example, one could reason in a similar manner that no one should help the needy, for if everyone agreed not to take care of them, then they would ultimately learn to take care of themselves.] Hence, should any citizen of Sedom bring home a guest ['chas ve-shalom'], the city's 'steering committee' would immediately call for a public protest. [See also Sanhedrin 109a.] There may have been mishpat, in Sedom - a standardized system of laws - but it was terribly warped. Not to mention the fact that tzedaka had no place whatsoever in this bastion of amorality. [Chazal remark in Pirkei Avot that the social norm of 'sheli sheli, shelcha shelcha' - what is mine is mine, what is yours is yours - is a 'custom of Sedom'. The attribution of this social philosophy to Sedom reflects this same understanding (see Pirkei Avot 5:10 - 'arba midot ba-adam...').]

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

As we will show, in every instance where Sedom is mentioned by the prophets, it is always in reference to a society lacking social justice, and never in reference to illicit behavior such as sodomy. Let's start with a quote from Yechezkel in which he states explicitly that this was indeed the sin of Sedom (i.e. the very same point discussed above concerning "hachnasat orchim"): "...Your younger sister was Sedom... Did you not walk in her ways and practice her abominations? Why, you are more corrupt than they in all your ways... This was the sin of your sister Sedom - she had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquillity, yet she did not support the poor and the needy. In her haughtiness, they sinned before Me, so I removed them, as you saw..." (see Yechezkel 16:46-50).

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

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

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

In chapter five - Yeshayahu's famous 'mashal ha-kerem' [the parable of the vineyard] - the prophet reiterates God's initial hope and plan that Am Yisrael would perform tzedaka u-mishpat, and the punishment they deserve for doing exactly the opposite: "va-yikav le-mishpat - ve-hiney mispach" [God had hoped to find justice, and found instead injustice], "li-tzedaka - ve-hiney tze'aka." (Yeshayahu 5:7) [to find "tzedaka," and instead found iniquity]

[note amazing parallel with Breishit 18:19-21!] (See Isaiah 5:1-10, as well as 11:1-6.)

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

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

Later, when Yirmiyahu contrasts the corrupt king Yehoyakim with his righteous father Yoshiyahu, he admonishes: "... Your father (Yoshiyahu)... performed tzedaka u-mishpat, and that made him content. He upheld the rights of the poor and needy - is this not what it means to know Me [la-da'at ot], God has said! But you (Yehoyakim) - on your mind is only your ill-gotten gains..." (see 22:13-17)

Note that Yirmiyahu considers doing tzedaka & mishpat as the means by which we come to 'know God' ['la-da'at et Hashem' - (compare with Breishit 18:19, see also Yirmiyahu 9:23)! Finally, when Yirmiyahu speaks of the ideal king who will bring the redemption, he emphasizes this very same theme: "A

time is coming - Hashem declares - when I will raise up a true branch of David's line. He shall reign as king and prosper, and he will perform mishpat and tzedaka in the land. In his days, Yehuda shall be delivered and Israel shall dwell secure..." (23:5-6). [See also Zecharya 7:9; 8:8, 16-17, II Shmuel 8:15]

This reason for the choice of the Kingdom of David corresponds with the underlying purpose behind God's choosing of Avraham Avinu. As we have explained numerous times, God's designation of Avraham came not in reward for his exemplary behavior, but rather for a specific purpose: to establish a model nation - characterized by tzedek u-mishpat - that will bring all mankind closer to God. For this very same reason, God chooses a royal family to rule this nation - the House of David. They too are chosen in order to teach the nation the ways of tzedaka u-mishpat. But even without proper leadership, this charge remains our eternal goal, the responsibility of every individual. To prove this point, and to summarize this theme, we need only quote one last pasuk from Yirmiyahu (not by chance, the concluding pasuk of the Haftara for Tisha Be-av): "Thus says the Lord: Let not the chacham [wise man] glory in his wisdom; Let not the gibor [strong man] glory in his strength; Let not the ashir [rich man] glory in his riches. - But only in this should one glory: Let him be wise to know Me [haskel v-yado'a oti] -For I the Lord act in the land with chesed [kindness], mishpat, and tzedaka - for it is this that I desire, says the Lord." (see Yirmiyahu 9:22-23). [See also the Rambam's concluding remarks to the last chapter of Moreh Nevuchim!]

Once again we find that knowing God means emulating His ways, acting in accordance with the values of tzedek u-mishpat. Should the entire nation act in this manner, our goal can be accomplished. Thus, what appears at first to be simply a parenthetical statement by God (concerning Avraham) before destroying Sedom (in Breishit 18:19) unfolds as a primary theme throughout Tanach!

LA-DA'AT - THE KEY WORD It is not by chance that Yirmiyahu (in the above examples) uses the Hebrew word 'la-da'at' in the context of following a lifestyle of tzedek u-mishpat. As we have already seen, the shoresh 'daled.ayin.heh' has been a key word throughout the narrative concerning Sedom. First and foremost in a positive context: "ki yeda'tiv lema'asher... la'asot tzedaka u-mishpat..." (18:19), but also in a negative context: 've-im lo eida'a' (see 18:21!). However, this same word also surfaces in a rather ambiguous manner later on in the story. As noted briefly earlier, Rashi and Ramban dispute the meaning of 've-neida otam' (see 19:5 - when the protesters demand that Lot surrender his guests). From this pasuk alone, it is not at all clear what this phrase implies.

Rashi explains that the men of Sedom wanted to 'know them' in the Biblical sense (to 'sleep' with them 'mishkav zachar' - see 4:1 & Chizkuni on 19:5). Ramban contends that they wanted to 'know' their identity in order to 'kick them out of town,' in accordance with their city ordinance prohibiting visitors. Clearly, Ramban takes into consideration the psukim from Yechezkel (which he cites explicitly, and most probably also took into account Yeshayahu chapter 1) that clearly identify Sdom's [primary] sin as their unwillingness to help the poor and needy. In light of the direct contrast drawn between Avraham's devotion to tzedek u-mishpat and the character of Sedom (as in 18:17-19), we can readily understand why Ramban sought to interpret 've-neida otam' as relation to 'kicking out' unwanted guests.

Rashi (and many other commentators) argue that ve-neida otam implies mishkav zachar (sodomy - and hence its name!). This opinion is based primarily on Lot's reaction to the protesters' request of offering his two daughters instead of his guests, and his comment, 'asher lo yad'u ish' (see 19:8 / note again the use of the same 'shoresh'). Had it not been for the psukim in Yechezkel 16:48-50, and the prelude in Breishit 18:19, then Rashi's explanation seems to be the most logical. However, when we examine the story a little more carefully, the story itself can support Ramban's approach as well. The most obvious problem with Rashi's explanation (that the protesters are interested in sodomy) stems from their sheer number. From 19:4 it appears that the group that gathers outside Lot's house includes the entire city, most likely hundreds of individuals, young and old! If they are simply interested in sodomy, pardon the expression, how could two guests 'suffice'? [Rashi, in light of this problem, offers a somewhat novel explanation for 19:4, that only the 'thugs of Sedom' ('anshei Sedom' implying a specific group and not the entire city) banged on Lot's door. The Torah mentions the rest of the population - 'from young to old' - only in regard to the fact that they did not protest the gang's depraved behavior. Rasag (on 19:4) disagrees, proving from 19:11 that both young and old had gathered outside Lot's house.]

Ramban combines both explanations, criticizing Lot's own character for foolishly offering his two daughters in exchange for the protection of his guests. However, this explanation of 19:8 is also quite difficult, for how (and why) should

this offer appease this mass crowd who claim (according to Ramban) to be interested only in expelling unwanted guests! One could suggest an explanation for Lot's remarks that solves all of the above questions, leaving Lot's character untainted, while keeping the focus of these events entirely on the lack of tzedek u-mishpat in Sedom.

GIVING MUSSAR Lot's statement must be understood in light of the crowd's reaction. Note how the crowd responds to Lot's 'offer': "And they said to him: Go away [gesh hal'ah - move a far distance, you have just (recently) come to dwell (in our city) and now you judge us! Now we will deal with you worse than with them..." (see 19:9).

What did Lot say that prompted such a severe reaction? If he simply had offered his daughters, why couldn't they just say: No, we prefer the men? Instead, they threaten to be more evil with Lot than with his guests. Does this mean that they want to 'sleep' with Lot as well? One could suggest that when Lot pleads: "My brothers, don't do such evil [to my guests], here are my two daughters..." (see 19:6); he is not seriously offering his daughters at all. Rather, he makes mention of them as part of a vehement condemnation of the people. In a sarcastic manner, Lot is telling the crowd that he'd rather give over his daughters than his guests! He has no intention whatsoever of giving them over to a mass mob. [Note how Reuven's statement to Yaakov that he would kill his own two sons... etc. (see Breishit 42:37) could be understood in a similar manner; i.e. not that he would do that, but to emphasize his seriousness to his father.]

Furthermore, as we mentioned above, how could two women 'appease' such a large crowd! Instead, it would make more sense to explain that Lot is making this harsh statement as a form of rebuke, emphasizing how important it is that they allow him to keep guests. It's as if he said, "I'd sooner give you my daughters than my two guests." [Note as well that Lot does not bring his daughters with him when he makes this so-called 'offer.' In fact, he actually closes the door behind him (see 19:6) afterward, he leaves to negotiate with the rioters. Had Lot really wanted to 'appease' them with his daughters, he should have taken them outside with him! Also, from the conclusion of the story, it seems that his two daughters were married (but their husbands didn't come along)]- v'akmal.]

This explains why the crowd becomes so angered by Lot's remarks. They are taken aback by his harsh rebuke of their 'no guest' policy. Based on this interpretation [that Lot is 'giving them mussar' and not 'making a deal'], we can better understand the mob's response to Lot's offer (19:6-8). They neither accept nor reject Lot's proposal. Instead, they express their anger with Lot's rebuke: "One has just come to live by us - va-yishpot shafot - and now he is judging us; now we will deal more harshly with you than [we planned to deal] with them!" (see 19:8). [In other words: they seem to be saying: 'HEY, you're just a newcomer here in our town, and you already think you can tell us what to do! No way - we're gonna kick you out of town now, together with your lousy guests!'] [This would also explain what they mean by - "Now we will do more evil to you than to them" (see 19:9). In other words, before we only wanted to expel you guests from town, now we are going to expel you and your family as well!]

What do people mean by "you are judging us"? Apparently, there is something in Lot's response that suggests a type of character judgment - but is it only his request that they 'not be so mean' (see 19:7)? One could suggest that they consider Lot's sarcastic offer of his daughters instead of his guests as a moral judgment of their 'no-guest' policy; a reprehension of their unethical social system. If so, then this is exactly to what 'va-yishpot shafot' refers to. They are angered for Lot has 'judged' their character. No one likes being told what to do, especially by 'newcomers'; hence their angry and threatening reaction to Lot's remarks.

This interpretation of 'shafot' in relation to rebuke is found many other times in Tanach. See for example I Shmuel 7:6, where Shmuel (at Mitzpa) rebukes the entire nation for their behavior. We find a similar use of the verb 'lishpot' in I Shmuel 12:7, when Shmuel rebukes the nation for not appreciating God's salvation when asking for a king to lead them instead! [See also Yirmiyahu 1:16, and its context.] If this interpretation is correct, then it may be that Sedom's sin involved only social justice (as Yechezkel 16:48-49 implies), and had nothing to do with 'sodomy' at all! And for this reason alone, God found it necessary to destroy that city. Difficult as it may be to understand, this conclusion should be seriously considered as we set our own values and determine our lifestyle and community priorities.

shabbat shalom, menachem

Thanks to hamelaket@gmail.com for collecting the following items:

From Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein
<info@jewishdestiny.com>
Subject Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Jerusalem Post:: Friday, November 11, 2011
WEDDINGS :: Rabbi Berel Wein

Having just recently been blessed to attend and officiate at a wedding ceremony for one of my grandchildren, I spent some time thinking about the origins and customs of Jewish weddings as they are celebrated in the Jewish world today. The basic structure of the wedding is outlined in the Talmud in the tractates of Ketubot and Kiddushin.

There is a formal, legalistic requirement of the husband "acquiring" his wife by placing a ring on her finger and stating that she is now sanctified unto him according to the faith and ritual of Moshe and Israel. In reality any item of monetary value can be used for this "acquisition" though a ring has been the preferred choice for the ceremony and its use dates back millennia.

The Talmud does discuss ceremonies where other items of monetary value were used and accepted. This ring part of the ceremony is from ancient times and has been the standard for thousands of years. This part of the ceremony creates a relationship called eirusin - a status that binds the couple together but does not yet allow for intimacy.

The full solemnization of the marriage itself is the physical chupah - when the bride joins the groom under his private domain, so to speak, and the seven blessings of joy are recited. This final legal ceremony is called nisuin and is the official culmination of the bonding of the couple to each other, physically and emotionally.

In Second Temple times and even later there was a hiatus of one year between the two ceremonies of eirusin and nisuin. Now, as has been for more than the last millennia, both ceremonies take place almost simultaneously, as one complete wedding. Over the centuries, many customs and nuances have been developed which in turn have added drama, color and tradition to the ceremony.

There is a custom that the parents or close relatives of the groom and the bride accompany them and stand together with the couple under the chupah.. This was traditional in Eastern European society and is pretty much the norm in all Ashkenazic wedding ceremonies. In today's Israel, in many circles, the groom is danced to the chupah by a multitude of his friends and the bride likewise receives such accompaniment by her friends.

In many of the countries of the Diaspora - particularly America and England - there is a wedding procession of undetermined length consisting of chosen family members and friends. Whether this type of procession is a product of acculturation from the general non-Jewish society or of Jewish origin is a matter of debate.

In Ashkenazic circles there is also a custom of the bride accompanied by her mother and the groom's mother circling the groom seven times as he stands under the chupah. This custom is thought to be of kabbalistic origin and is only a few centuries old. In Ashkenazic society there also is a custom that before the ceremony actually begins the groom lowers the veil over the face of the bride. This is in keeping with the Talmudic dictum that one is not allowed to marry a woman unless one first sees her and can recognize her.

Jewish weddings were quite simple in past times due to economic realities and social strictures. Over the past decades they have become more ornate, elaborate and expensive, certainly in America but even in Israel as well. This is certainly due to the greater affluence of the Jewish communities world-wide and of heightened social pressures and expectations. Because of the cost involved many people now invite the

young couple's friends to dessert and dancing after the main meal is over.

Again, the rabbis of the Talmud warned us that a certain amount of aggravation and contentiousness arises with all wedding plans and negotiations. Nevertheless a wedding is a joyous milestone of achievement in Jewish family life and the ceremony and its accompanying customs reflect all the happiness of the occasion. Shabat shalom.

From Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein
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Subject Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Weekly Parsha :: VAYERA :: Rabbi Berel Wein

The Lord appears to Avraham at a very strange time. He is convalescing from his surgical circumcision; the day is very hot and it is high noon; and he is apparently looking for human company as he sits at the entrance to his tent. And even though he does spy three strangers and invites them in, the Lord, so to speak, interrupts this happening by appearing just then to Avraham. He is left conflicted as to which of his meetings he should give precedence to.

The rabbis deduce from Avraham's behavior that greeting and hosting human guests even takes precedence over communicating with the Divine Spirit! But the fact that such a juxtaposition of events occurs at the same time is itself a great lesson in life and faith.

The Lord appears to people at strange and unpredictable times. To some it is in sickness and despair. To others it is at moments of joy and seeming success. Some glimpse the Divine in the beauty and complexity of nature while others find their solace and epiphany in the halls of study and in challenges to the intellect. Since we are all different in nature and outlook, the Lord customizes His appearance to each one of us to fit our unique circumstances.

Thus people experience their own sense of spirituality and connection to their inner essence and to their Creator differently and at different moments in their lives. Some are frightened into such an experience while others enter into it with serenity and confidence. But we can certainly agree that there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to dealing with our souls and the eternal One.

The Lord appears to Avraham at the moment of his hospitality and tolerance towards strangers. In the tent of Avraham and Sarah, creatures can enter as Bedouin Arabs covered with desert dust and leave refreshed as radiant angels. It is in the service of others and in the care for the needs of others that the Lord appears in the tent of Avraham and Sarah. It is in the goodness of their hearts that the Lord manifests His presence, so to speak, to Avraham and Sarah.

Every one of us has traits and a nature that defines us. Just as chesed - goodness, kindness, and care for others - defined Avraham and Sarah, so too are we defined by our concerns, habits and behavior. And it is within that background that the Lord appears to each of us individually, if we are wise enough to recognize His presence, so to speak.

The prophet Yirmiyahu teaches us that in times of trouble and sickness the Lord appears to us "from afar." But, nevertheless, He appears to us. The great Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk was asked: "Where can one find God?" He answered in his usual direct fashion: "Wherever one is willing to allow Him to enter." The performance of the acts of Torah and goodness, the bending of our traits and will towards service and concern for others, are the means by which we will glimpse the Divine presence within ourselves and in our homes - in health and contentment. Shabat shalom.

From Ohr Somayach <ohr@ohr.edu>
To weekly@ohr.edu
Subject Torah Weekly

TORAH WEEKLY :: Parshat Vayera
For the week ending 12 November 2011 / 14 Heshvan 5772
from Ohr Somayach | www.ohr.edu
by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com
INSIGHTS

Make Yourself at Home!

“And behold - three men were standing over him!” (18:2)

There are some people who look like they are giving but they're really taking. And there are some people who look like they are taking when they're really giving.

Anyone who buys a ,000-a-plate charity dinner is giving a lot of charity, but he's also getting a lot of status mixed in with his sushi. On the other hand, there are people who look like they're takers but they are really giving.

Once there was a Jewish traveling salesman who found himself in a largely non-Jewish town on Friday afternoon. His business had delayed him way beyond his expectations and there was now no way he could get home for Shabbat. He had heard that there was just one Orthodox family in town where he could spend Shabbat, and as the sun was starting to set he made his way there.

The owner of the house opened the door to him and showed him into the living room. “May I stay here for Shabbat?” asked the traveling salesman. “If you like,” replied the host. “The price is 0.” “0!” exclaimed the traveling salesman. “That’s more than a first-class hotel!” “Suit yourself,” replied the host.

Realizing that he had no option, the salesman reluctantly agreed. In the short time left before Shabbat the host showed the salesman his room, the kitchen and the other facilities for his Shabbat stay.

As soon as the host left the room the salesman sat down and thought to himself. “Well, if this is going to cost me 0, I’m going to get my money’s worth.” During the entire Shabbat he availed himself unstintingly of the house’s considerable facilities. He helped himself to the delicious food in the fridge. He had a long luxurious shower before and after Shabbat. He really made himself “at home.”

When he had showered and packed, he made his way downstairs and plunked two crisp 0 bills down on the table in front of his host.

“What’s this?” inquired the host. “That’s the money I owe you,” replied the salesman. “You don’t owe me anything. Do you really think I would take money from a fellow Jew for the mitzvah of hospitality?” “But you told me that Shabbat here costs 0.”

“I only told you that to be sure that you would make yourself at home.”

When a guest comes to your home, his natural feeling is one of embarrassment. No one likes being a taker. When a guest brings a present the worst thing you can say is “You shouldn’t have done that!” Rather take the bottle of wine (or whatever it is), open it up, put it in the middle of the table and say “Thank you so much.” By allowing him to contribute to the meal, you will mitigate his feeling of being a taker and you will have done the mitzvah of hospitality to a higher degree.

The mitzvah of hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence. We learn this from the beginning of this week’s Torah portion. G-d had come to visit Avraham on the third day after his brit mila — the most painful day. G-d made the day extremely hot so that Avraham should not be bothered by guests. When G-d saw that Avraham was experiencing more pain from his inability to do the mitzvah of hospitality than the pain of the brit mila, He sent three angels who appeared as men so that Avraham could do the mitzvah of hospitality. When these “men”

appeared Avraham got up from in front of the Divine Presence to greet his guests.

Hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence.

Sources: Rashi, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler

Written and compiled by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

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From Shema Yisrael Torah Network <shemalist@shemayisrael.com>
To Peninim <peninim@shemayisrael.com>
Subject Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum
Parshas Vayera

And Sarah laughed at herself. (18:12)

What if the fifty righteous people should lack five? Would You destroy the entire city because of the five? And He said, "I will not destroy if I find there forty-five. (18:28)

Simchah, joy, plays a significant-- almost critical role-- in our avodas Hashem, service to the Almighty. Without simchah, we are unable to sustain a meaningful and enduring relationship. The ultimate goal of a Jew is to bond with Hashem. Without joy, this is impossible, since the Shechina cannot rest in a place of atzvus-- loosely translated as sadness-- but as the Baal HaTanya defines it, a total absence of feeling. A sad person has feelings. A person in atzvus is mute, without emotion. This is why simchah and sadness can coexist, such as on Tishah B'Av. They are both emotions which are realized at different stages. While we might view simchah as an added quality in avodas Hashem, it is actually much more. Avodas Hashem without simchah is integrally lacking. It is diminished. It becomes a drag - something one must do - rather than something he wants to do and enjoys doing.

Two unrelated exegeses underscore the conclusive benefits of simchah.

It is related that the daughter of Horav Shmuel, zl, m'Kominka, was childless for many years. She had prayed fervently to Hashem to be blessed with a child - to no avail. Once, when her father was out of town, Horav Rafael, zl, m'Barshad, visited the town of Kominka. The young woman asked to see the tzaddik, righteous person. After pouring out her heart to him, she petitioned his blessing for a child. Rav Rafael listened to the woman and replied, "A segulah, special remedy, for having children is simchah." When Rav Shmuel returned home, his daughter related to him what Rav Rafael had said. He immediately replied that this idea may be derived from three areas in Tanach - Torah, Neviim and Kesuvim.

The Torah tells us Va'yitzchak Sarah, "And Sarah laughed." This may be interpreted as the catalyst for her blessing of a child. Since she expressed herself joyfully, it served as a segulah for her. In the Navi Yeshaya 54:1, the Navi says, Rani akarah lo yaladah, "Sing out, O' barren one." If the woman is barren, a solution to her problem would be rani, "sing out" with joy, and Hashem will listen. Last, we find in Kesuvim, Tehillim 113, Moshivi akeres ha'bayis - eim ha'banim s'meichah, "He transforms the barren wife into a glad mother of children." How is the barren woman transformed? By being glad, she will become a mother of children.

Rav Shmuel's daughter was herself a very erudite woman, quite well-versed in Torah. She asked her father, "If this is the case, why did Hashem question Sarah's laughter? Why was He bothered by her reaction? She was only expressing joy as a form of segulah for her predicament." Her father replied, "A segulah is applicable under such circumstances as when a tzaddik issues a blessing. The segulah will support his blessing. When Hashem Himself renders the blessing, one does not need any other assurances. His blessing needs no support." The second exegesis focuses on Avraham Avinu's advocacy on behalf of the "righteous" of Sodom. He asked Hashem if there were to be only fifty

minus five, or forty-five righteous individuals in Sodom, whether Hashem would annul His decree. Hashem replied in the affirmative. The Imrei Chaim, zl, m'Vishnitz, renders this pasuk homiletically. The word chamishah, five, has the same Hebrew letters as simchah. Avraham asked Hashem, "If there are fifty righteous people in Sodom, but they are lacking in simchah/chamishah, will You still destroy the city?" Hashem replied, "I am not mevater, yielding, concerning the attribute of simchah. Even if there are (only) forty tzaddikim (not fifty), but they are b'simchah; if joy is a part of their outlook and demeanor, I will repeal the decree."

And Avraham will surely become a great and mighty nation... for I have loved him, because he commands his children and his household after him. (18:18,19)

The pasuk seems to imply that Avraham Avinu's z'chus was primarily due to the impact he was to make on future generations-- his adherence to the Mesorah, transmission of our heritage, throughout the generations. This is enigmatic. Is Avraham not worthy of his own accord? He was: the first one to recognize Hashem; the individual who was willing to die in a fiery furnace for his convictions; the one who stood up against an entire pagan society to preach monotheism. I think that it is quite a r'sum? to consider. Is Avraham's only merit the fact that he would pass it all onto the next generation? **Horav Yosef Chaim, zl, m'Bagdad**, the Baal Od Yosef Chai, explains this matter. He begins by citing Chazal who compare tzaddikim, righteous people, to trees, quoting David HaMelech in Sefer Tehillim 92, "A righteous man will flourish like a date palm, like a cedar in the Lebanon he will grow tall." In contrast, reshaim, wicked people, are likened to grass, once again quoting David Hamelech (Ibid) "When the wicked bloom like grass."

The difference between trees and grass is that a tree has deep roots. What appears above the ground is only part of the entire tree. Concerning grass, however, what you see is what you get. It does not have such penetrating roots. A rasha is very much like grass. What you see is all that exists. In other words, the rasha lives, then dies, and is forgotten about. He does not have roots. There is nothing enduring about him. His life having been lived is over - and so is he. Nothing remains, but a wasted life of evil.

The tzaddik is compared to a tree, because his life does not end with the grave. There is much more to a tzaddik's life than what we see before us. It has deep roots that penetrate far beneath the soil in every direction. His children carry on his legacy, reflecting his lofty character traits and teachings long after he is gone. Likewise, his students and their students are all a positive reflection of their mentor's impact. Yes, the tzaddik is very much alive, even after his soul has gone on to the World of Truth. Chazal (Bava Basra 116a) distinguish between David Hamelech's passing, which is described in the Navi as shechivah, resting; and Yoav ben Tzruyah's passing, which is referred to as missah, death. David left a successor for his position, a son who would follow in his noble ways. Therefore, David's passing is only considered "resting." He may not be physically active, but his legacy lives on. Yoav did not leave progeny to carry on after him. Thus, the Navi considers him dead in the full sense of the word.

We now understand why Avraham's ability to transmit to the next generation is what merited him to be the progenitor of a large nation. The Torah is not addressing the present. Clearly, Avraham was a great individual whose character and conviction were without equal. The Torah is addressing the future generations: V'Avraham hayo yiheyeh l'goi gadol. "And Avraham will surely become a great and mighty nation." The double wording hayo yiheyeh is used to underscore two havayos, presences, of Avraham: now, during his lifetime; and later, in the future when he will be gone. There is a revealed aspect to Avraham, which, like a tree, is seen by everyone who comes in contact with him. There are also the roots, the concealed impact on his progeny and myriad students, something which is seen even after the Patriarch takes leave of

his mortal remains. On the contrary, this is the way to truly describe a tzaddik: by his enduring impact on future generations.

Because the outcry of Sodom and Amorah has become great, and because their sin has been very grave. (18:20)

The outcry of the victims of Sodom's physical and mental abuse was too much. The tears of the oppressed seeking liberation from their misery had reached the Heavenly sphere. The Talmud Sanhedrin 109b cites a number of cases depicting the perverted sense of justice which characterized Sodom. One of the more infamous decrees was the Sodom approach to hospitality. In fact, the "Sodom bed" has become a catchword for describing a situation where something is made to fit - regardless of its size. The custom was that, when a visitor came to Sodom, they would lay him down on a bed to be measured. If he was too long, he was surgically shortened. If he was too short, he was stretched. In any event, visiting Sodom was not encouraged. In another case, a young girl who had given alms to a poor man was sentenced to death via an extremely cruel method. After all is said and done, Sodom was a depraved place, inhabited by individuals who were clearly out of their minds. Can a significant lesson be derived from this parsha?

Horav Arye Leib Bakst, zl, explains that the Sodomites were far from insane. Indeed, they were very normal - but very wicked people. They maintained a depraved philosophy on life which served as the cornerstone of interrelationships with people. They felt that every person should be made to stand on his own two feet - by himself - without assistance of any kind. Seeking communal assistance was a terrible failing which bespoke a person plagued by weakness. They eschewed the concept of charity, with taking from charity considered to be an unpardonable anathema. Such a person was censured and held in contempt.

Having a philosophy, maintaining it, and seeing to it that it is accepted become the prevalent lifestyle of Sodomite society. By finding extreme ways for compelling people to do things on their own, the people of Sodom established, maintained and assured the acceptance of their desired lifestyle. Refusing all acts of chesed, lovingkindness; rejecting any opportunity for doing good and helping others, were the primary methods used by Sodom's board of governors to train its citizens from early youth to be self-sufficient and to avoid any manner of living off anyone's assistance. By taking matters to the extreme, they felt they would inculcate the citizenry with a disdain for anything but self-sufficiency. The Rosh Yeshivah feels that the Sodomite extreme has wormed its way into the Torah society. How often do we hear well-meaning parents and communal leaders decrying the fact that the Yeshivos and Kollelim are not providing educational opportunities for their young men to earn a living? "Should he be relegated to live off the assistance of others? Should my son grow up to be a beggar? I refuse to have my son support his family on charity." They feel that everyone should do his part to provide for his family and that living "on the dole" is demeaning and counterproductive. Is this any different than the Sodomist perspective on life?

Rav Bakst cites Rabbeinu Yonah in his Shaarei Teshuvah 3:15, where he writes: "We find that the people of Sodom were very evil, with a number of wicked practices being attributed to them... Yet, at the end, they were destroyed because of their nullification of the mitzvah of tzedakah." Their refusal to assist others was their death sentence. One who does not involve himself in acts of chesed is acting contrary to the raison d'etre of the Creation of the world. Olam chesed yibaneh, "Forever your kindness will be built," or, loosely translated, "The world will be built on kindness." The world can only continue to exist upon a foundation established through the principle of kindness. When people live only for themselves the world cannot endure, because, at one time or another, people do need each other.

Avraham Avinu built his mission on the attribute of chesed. He then transmitted it to his descendants, so that a love of chesed would be part

of their DNA. Chesed was the vehicle by which he engendered spirituality within the Jewish people. When we realize that it is not all "about us," it comes to our attention that we have responsibilities in life, to one another - and to Hashem.

I think there is another aspect to chesed that is important. Without chesed, one cannot grow. With acts of chesed, the individual grows exponentially, commensurate with the acts of chesed. In Divrei HaYamim (1:4:10) we find a prayer articulated by an individual whose name was Yaavetz. He asks the Almighty for blessing, using the following prayer, "If You will bless me and extend my borders." He basically is petitioning Hashem for two blessings: to be blessed and to be extended. Why? Horav Tzadok HaKohen, zl, m'Lublin, explains that we often notice people who have been blessed with incredible blessing and unbelievable bounty, but, regrettably, have no idea how to deal with their gifts. Their concept of tzedakah remains on the same level as when they were poor. Their concept of sharing and helping others has not been altered from the time that they lived as hermits. They are ill-equipped for the blessing. They are literally small, simple people with large bank accounts who have no clue that ,with blessing, life must change radically.

We see it all the time, when small people, simple people win a lottery and spend the money on themselves, on items that have very little lasting value. They are soon back where they had been before winning the lottery. Sports figures who are venerated by a generation of fools, who have no concept of the meaning of true success, provide models of small people who do not qualify for blessing. Their large pay checks are soon spent on frivolous matter, leaving them with no enduring livelihood. This was Yaavetz's prayer. He asked that he, too, be expanded with the blessing. To receive great blessing, but remain a small person, defeats the purpose of blessing. He asked to be equipped to appreciate and make proper use of the blessing. In the Talmud Temurah 16a, Chazal expound on Yaavetz's prayer. "If you bless me with Torah; if I will become a great Torah scholar, then bless me also with students to teach, who will imbibe my Torah teachings. By giving to others, I will myself become bigger." This is how one grows: by sharing what he has with others. Without sharing, one continues to remain the same as before - no change, no growth.

Anyone with a modicum of intelligence realizes the truth of this idea. One who retains everything for himself will not grow. He will continue to be diminutive. Those of us who have had opportunity to expand our horizons by reaching out to others-- by being involved in acts of chesed, by teaching, by parenting-- understand the incredible metamorphosis which has taken place in our lives, in our psyche.

Who does not have a friend, classmate, or neighbor who years ago was mediocre at best? Suddenly, upon meeting him or her some thirty-years later, we wonder what happened. How did he or she become so successful? How did he or she blossom so much? We never knew that he or she had that in them. Wow!

Their horizons expanded and, with the added perspective, they accepted greater responsibility. It all came with the territory. Yosef HaTzaddik was not recognized by his brothers. Did his facial appearance change that much? Was his countenance altered by time to the point that these astute Shivtei Kah, future Tribes of Hashem, could not discern that it was Yosef that was standing before them?

They remembered another Yosef: a seventeen-year-old who went around tattling and worrying about his appearance. He would spend time combing his hair, something an individual who was a monarch, a world leader, who held the keys to the world food bank, would never do. It could not be Yosef. This individual who stood before them was as far removed from the Yosef that they remembered as a distinguished, well-bred diplomat was from an illiterate, uncouth village ruffian. No way could this be that Yosef.

But it was. The Shevatim were unaware of Yosef's travails, his many challenges and adversities. His tribulations demanded growth, maturity and acumen, all latent qualities possessed by Yosef, which had been dormant. There had never been a demand for them to surface. When Yosef became a world leader with the responsibility of feeding the world community, his horizons expanded. The imposition of the middah of chesed upon him catalyzed his growth. He became a different person. Olam chesed yibaneh. The world grows on chesed. The more we do for others, the greater we become. Avraham taught us: If you want to grow, to be great, you must expand your horizons by doing for others. As you share with them, Hashem will provide you with more. The greater the expenditure of tzedakah v'chesed, the greater will be the income. Try it and see for yourself.

The child grew and was weaned. Avraham made a great feast on the day Yitzchak was weaned. (21:8)

Rabbeinu Bachya writes that, while the world custom is to celebrate the day of child's birth with a seudah, festive meal, or do the same on the day of his son's Bris Milah, Avraham Avinu waited until Yitzchak was weaned and ready to study Torah. Why? He suggests that it was at this point that the Patriarch initiated Yitzchak in Talmud Torah. After Yitzchak was weaned, Avraham felt that the time had come for his son to commence his Torah studies. This was the day of true joy. Pikudei Hashem yesharim mesamchei lev, "The orders of Hashem are upright, gladdening the heart." Avraham waited to celebrate his son's birth and his entrance into the Covenant of Milah simultaneously, at the point of his most joyous and momentous occasion: when he began to study Torah.

A father's greatest moment is when his son begins to study Torah. It is the moment of dreams: the anticipation, the yearning, all coupled together with the notion that this is the moment of true fatherhood. The torch is being passed on. The legacy continues. While there is undoubtedly much joy felt and exuded during all of life's milestones, they do not compare to the inner joy a parent feels to see the purpose of his life achieving fruition. The spiritual joy emanating from such a sublime moment captivates the parent as nothing else does. Indeed, this is the primary and enduring sense of joy that a parent experiences with regard to his son.

G-d tested Avraham. (22:1)

Chazal tell us that Avraham Avinu was tested ten times by Hashem. It seems strange that the Patriarch had to prove himself so many times. One test should have sufficed. If he passed, it indicated that he believed, that he was committed. What more is necessary? Indeed, Chazal teach us that the Akeidas Yitzchak, Binding of Yitzchak, was the most difficult test, and it was through this test that Avraham successfully completed his trial period. He was "in." If the Akeidah was the turning point, if it was the final indication, why did Hashem not just simply test Avraham with the Akeidah?

Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl, derives an important lesson from here. A man may exist who, for all intents and purposes, is a great man, but this does not detract from the fact that he could have one area in which he is deficient. On the one hand, he is a great man - a giant; on the other hand, in only one area, he is puny, deficient, small. Is it a contradiction? The Mashgiach says, "No." It is not necessary to qualify the paradoxes of human nature, because this is the composition of man. He is filled with contradiction. The good does not compensate for the bad. They are part and parcel of the same individual. In fact, Chazal teach us this lesson when (Sanhedrin 74a) they apply this idea to the seminal pasuk, "Love Hashem with all your heart, all of your soul and all of your money." Why is it necessary to mention all three? Chazal explain that there are people for whom money takes precedence over their lives, and vice versa. There may be an individual who is very pleasant, never loses his temper. He is, however, quite frugal when it comes to sharing his wealth with the poor. He must work on his chesed/tzedakah issues. The list goes on. We all

know someone who lives a contradiction. He is normal. Human beings are filled with contradiction. Hashem has provided each and every one of us with the opportunity for growth, the opportunity to change something about ourselves, because we are not perfect.

And it happened after these things that G-d tested Avraham. (22:1)

The nisayon, trial, of Akeidas Yitzchak, the Binding of Yitzchak, was the greatest of the ten trials which our Patriarch, Avraham Avinu, underwent. His triumph over the various challenges to his faith and his emotions, both as a father and as the first Jew, serves as a paradigm for-- and major intercessor on behalf of -- his descendants. The Akeidah epitomizes the Jew's determination to serve Hashem, despite his difficult circumstances. Pesikta Rabbasi teaches that the Akeidah took place on Rosh Hashanah. For this reason, it serves as the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashanah. That, together with the various tefillos, prayers, which refer to the Akeidah, all serve as interveners, recalling Avraham's superhuman act of devotion. In his merit, we ask we be pardoned and Hashem to continue to sustain us.

I have always been bothered that on the day that we ask for life, we recall an act of devotion that was about to end life. Is this not a bit ironic, almost self-defeating? Furthermore, the Akeidah is considered the ultimate test of the "ten." Why? What about Avraham's being flung into a fiery furnace? That surely was not a trial to ignore. Yet, it lags far behind the Akeidah. According to Rashi, it is number two on a scale of ten. Should not Avraham's willingness to risk his life for Hashem not receive greater acclaim? It is almost as if Avraham had simply been doing that which was expected of him. I recently came across a powerful analysis by **Horav Elazar M. Shach, zl**, concerning the episode in the Talmud Menachos 29b which relates Moshe Rabbeinu's dialogue with Hashem concerning the proper s'char, reward, to be accorded to the Tanna Rabbi Akiva. Chazal relate that Moshe was overwhelmed by Rabbi Akiva's knowledge and his ability to derive novella from the crowns affixed to the letters of the Torah. He asked Hashem, "Show me his reward." Whereby Hashem showed Moshe how Rabbi Akiva was tortured to death by having his flesh torn off his body with metal combs. His corpse was then cut up and sold in the marketplace. When Moshe saw this, he was appalled. Zu Torah, v'zu s'charah? "This is Torah, and this is its reward?" Hashem's response was, Shsok, kach alah b'machashavti, "Be silent! This is what has been My line of thinking." Basically, Hashem told Moshe that the reason behind what appeared to be this gruesome and humiliating form of punishment was beyond Moshe's ken. It is notable that, when Moshe saw Rabbi Akiva's torture, he did not ask any questions. It was only after he saw his flesh being weighed in the marketplace that he became disconcerted. Was Rabbi Akiva's death not sufficiently disturbing that it would engender questioning? Rav Shach explains that Moshe understood that there is no greater reward than meriting to leave this world Al Kiddush Hashem, sanctifying Hashem's Name. This is the ultimate service to Hashem. Indeed, Rabbi Akiva himself declared to his students, "All my days I was troubled about when I would have the opportunity to fulfill the mandate of loving Hashem with all my heart and soul." He had reached the pinnacle of a life devoted to Hashem.

When his flesh was sold in the marketplace, however, it was too much. It was a chillul Hashem, desecration of Hashem's Name. The denigration of such an illustrious Torah leader was too much to bear. Moshe cried out, "Is this Torah? Is this its reward?"

What a powerful lesson the Rosh Yeshivah is teaching us concerning the manner in which a Jew should live. Avraham Avinu walking into the fiery furnace was the ultimate Jewish experience. It was the zenith of service to Hashem He was doing that which was expected of him. This is the meaning of living as a Jew. Only a Jew who is prepared to die as a Jew really lives as a Jew!

On Rosh Hashanah, we recall the Akeidas Yitzchak, which is Yitzchak's mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice. We are telling Hashem, "Yes - we are

prepared to die as Jews." Thus, we are deserving of living as Jews. In the merit of our Patriarchs, who understood the depth of love that one should manifest for the Almighty, we ask that He grant us a year blessed with life, so that we may be able to sanctify our lives for Him. To live for Hashem is to be prepared to die for Him.

Va'ani Tefillah

HaMeir laaretz v'ladarim aleha b'rachamim.

He Who gives light to the earth and all its inhabitants, with mercy.

Horav Avigdor Miller, zl, notes that even in the area of beneficence the benefactor has the option to do what he wants, how he wants, and when he wants, with complete disregard for the needs and feelings of the beneficiary. Hashem provides the world with light. It is the earth's great blessing. He gives it in such a manner, however, that all of its inhabitants derive its benefit. This is executed with utmost mercy, with consideration for the feelings of its beneficiaries. A landlord may decide to fix his apartment's roof at a time convenient for him, but inconvenient for the tenant. Thus, we add, "its inhabitants," for they are the purpose for which the earth was created. In addition, this service is carried out "with mercy." The sun does not rise suddenly in the midst of darkness. The earth's movement causes a gradual change from darkness to light, that neither are one's eyes damaged, nor is anyone startled by the sudden change. Water does not pour from the clouds in heavy torrents, but in small drops, so that the rain can be tolerated. Everything that Hashem does is for us.

Dedicated in loving memory of our dear father and grandfather Arthur I. Genshaft Yitchok ben Yisroel z"l niftar 18 Cheshvan 5739 Neil and Marie Genshaft Isaac and Naomi

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Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

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Person in the Parsha Parshat Vayera

Rabbi Weinreb's Torah Column, Parshat

Sponsored in memory of Nathan and Louise Schwartz a"h

Guests for the Night

I was several minutes late for the class, and all three students, Richard, Simon, and Leon, were present and already involved in what seemed to be quite a heated discussion. Simon, usually the most reticent of the three, was the one who was talking the most.

As soon as he saw me enter the room, he directed his words to me. "We have been using the book of Genesis as a text to teach us some basic concepts of Judaism," he said. "But I learned a basic concept earlier this week, and it wasn't from any book at all."

You will remember that I introduced you, dear reader, to this little project several weeks ago. As for the previous three sessions, I had assigned this small class the weekly Torah portion to read and to identify therein some of the basic teachings of the Jewish faith. This week, the class was to have read the Torah portion of Vayera (Genesis 18:1-22:24). My experience as a teacher had long ago taught me that when a student comes in to class enthusiastic about some personal experience, it is advisable to put the assigned readings aside, at least momentarily, and hear what he or she has to say.

This is what Simon had to say: "This past Sunday morning, I had decided that all this talk about Jewish philosophy was well and good, but it was time for me to actually attend a synagogue. The experience that blew me away, however, did not take place in the actual sanctuary and had nothing to do with the morning prayer service that I had attended. Rather, it was a scene I witnessed in the courtyard outside the shul. A homeless woman was sitting there, looking dirty and unkempt. She had a little charity box in her hands and was begging for alms.

"Most of the people entering the synagogue gave her some coins, but paid her no real attention. They barely looked at her. But one woman came along and approached her directly. She stopped in front of her, called her by name, and embraced her. She proceeded to ask her how her weekend had been, gave her a little package of food, embraced her again even more lovingly, and left.

"To me," continued Simon, "this was an eloquent lesson about a basic Jewish concept. I don't know what kind of food was in that little package. But I do know that the glowing smile on the woman's face was not a response to the charitable gift. It was in response to the warm and heartfelt love that she experienced in those two moments of embrace. "I guess that the Jewish concept I learned that morning was how the manner in which a gift is given exceeds the gift itself by far." I was emotionally moved and intellectually excited by Simon's contribution to our learning process. But I was not so moved or excited by the fact that I was unable to direct the attention of the class to the week's Torah portion. "Can any of you see a connection between Simon's wonderful experience and this week's assignment readings," I asked. Leon, and even Richard, were about to chime in. But Simon, shyly but firmly, said that he would like to point out some connections. To my surprise, he recited several verses from the very beginning of our parsha by heart: "Abraham saw three men standing... as soon as he saw them, he ran... let me fetch a morsel of bread... Abraham hastened... then Abraham ran... and he waited on them under the tree as they ate."

Simon went on to explain: "I remember learning the story of Abraham and his unusual hospitality in Sunday school. Yet reading the passages this time, I was impressed that he not only fed his guests, but he fed them with alacrity and sensitivity and personal attention. Like the woman I observed in the courtyard of the synagogue this past Sunday morning; it was not what he did, but the way he did it, that was so impressive." It was easy for me to expound upon Simon's very cogent observation. Our Sages teach us that the smile on our face is much more important to the person to whom we give charity than the money that we give him. They further teach that even if we give generously, but do so with a frown on our faces, we have failed in the mitzvah of tzedakah. In this class, as in all of my teaching, I tried to introduce the Hebrew version of some of the concepts that we study. In this session too, I told the class that the Hebrew term for "hospitality" is "hachnossat orchim", and that the friendly and smiling face that is the essence of the charitable act is called "sever panim yafot."

There were several other teachings that I felt were appropriate to add to Simon's story and the biblical phrases that he adduced to drive home his point. One was the story I heard many times in my childhood about Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshyscha, a 19th century Chassidic sage. We are told that when he welcomed a stranger to his home, he first showed that stranger where his sleeping accommodations would be for that night. Only then did he serve him his meal.

Simcha Bunim explained that the poor man could not possibly enjoy his meal if he was anxious about where he would be sleeping that night, or indeed wondering whether he would have a place to sleep at all.

One of my revered teachers long ago would tell us about the time that he, as a very young man, was a guest of the saintly, then already aged Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Mayer HaKohen. He described in detail how the old Rabbi personally made the bed of his young visitor. When the young man insisted that he wished to make his own bed, the Chofetz Chaim refused to yield. He said, "If I was putting on my tefillin, would I allow you to do it for me? Hospitality is no less of a mitzvah than tefillin. I want to do it myself."

Whenever I teach and preach on the topic of hachnossat orchim, of the mitzvah of treating guests properly, I find myself pondering upon a teaching of Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, who lived hundreds of years ago, and who is known by the name of the deeply spiritual book that he wrote, the Shaloh HaKadosh. This was his teaching:

"For one to fully appreciate the importance of the mitzvah of hachnossat orchim, one must realize that we are all but guests in God's world. He is the hospitable One who performs the mitzvah. We are just His guests for the night."

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Subject [Rav Kook List]

Rav Kook List

Rav Kook on the Torah Portion

VaYeira: The Salt of Sodom

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

Washing after Meals

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

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

The Selfishness of the Sodomites

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

Purifying the Soul When Feeding the Body

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

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

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

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Yoshev Rosh - Vaad HaRabanim of Detroit

Weekly Halacha

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Mechitzah in Shul: Why and How?

Separate seating for men and women during davening is an ancient practice whose origins hark back to the procedure followed in the Beis ha-Mikdash. During the Festival of Succos, when joyous throngs filled the Beis ha-Mikdash to witness the festivities of Simchas Beis ha-Shoeivah, it was not possible to keep the women totally separate from the men. The rabbis were concerned lest the unavoidable mingling of men and women lead to kalus rosh (excessive frivolity) and thereby mar the sanctity of the holy service. To prevent this from happening, a balcony was erected upon which the women could stand totally apart from the men but still witness the festivities. The Talmud attests that the need for this balcony was considered to be so pressing that its construction was approved even though it is basically forbidden to expand or modify the original structure of the Beis ha-Mikdash. 1

Following the example set by our Sages in the Beis ha-Mikdash, shuls the world over were built with separate sections for men and women. Some shuls had a raised women's gallery like the balcony in the Beis ha-Mikdash, while others had men's and women's sections on the same floor but with a thick wall between the two. This concept of mechitzah (separation) was so taken for granted, so undisputed, that it was not even mentioned in the Shulchan Aruch as a requirement for a Beis ha-Knesses.2

With the advent of the *haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) in Western Europe just over 200 years ago, and its wholesale attack on religious observance (including Shabbos, kashrus, milah, etc.), mechitzos in shuls were also compromised or done away with over the vigorous protest of Rabbonim3 who decried this desecration and forbade davening in any place of worship that lowered or removed the traditional mechitzah.

With the immigration of Jews to the United States in the late 1800's, these transplanted modern 'temples' continued their practice of mixed pews and/or halachically unacceptable mechitzos. In the free and easy atmosphere of America, even the more traditional synagogues began to question the necessity of a mechitzah. And so, eventually, the following questions—unthinkable a century earlier—were posed to the venerable poskim in the U.S.: Is a mechitzah halachically required? How high does a mechitzah have to be?

Reason for the balcony in the Beis ha-Mikdash

In order to answer these questions correctly, we must first examine what purpose the balcony in the Beis ha-Mikdash served. We explained earlier that a balcony was constructed to prevent kalus rosh, excessive frivolity. The Talmud does not, however, elaborate on how, exactly, the balcony prevented kalus rosh. There are two possible ways to understand this:

* Kalus rosh prevails when men can freely gaze at women. It interferes with the men's concentration and profanes the sanctity of the Beis ha-Mikdash. By seating the women on a balcony over the men's section, the men could no longer view the women.4 The balcony was constructed in one of two ways in order to block the men's view: 1) Either the men's section was directly beneath the balcony, hidden from the women's line of vision. The women were nevertheless able to see a small clearing in the middle of the men's section where the few dancers would perform.5 (The majority of the men did not actively participate in the festivities; they were merely spectators.6) 2) Or the balcony was built above the sides of the men's section, but it was enclosed with a curtain or a one-way mirror. This permitted the women to watch the men from above but completely blocked the men's view of the women.7

* Kalus rosh prevails when men and women freely intermingle. By relegating the women to a balcony and physically separating them from "mixing" with the men, the proper decorum and sanctity of the Beis ha-Mikdash is duly preserved.8 According to this understanding, then, the

balcony did not block the men's view entirely. Rather, it separated the two sections and prevented the men and women from communicating or interacting with each other in any way.

The question, then, as it applies to present day mechitzos, is as follows: Do we follow the first interpretation and require a mechitzah that completely blocks the men's view, or is it sufficient to have a mechitzah that divides the two sections in a way that prevents frivolity? The two views of the poskim

There are two schools of thought among contemporary authorities as to the practical halachah. Many poskim9 hold that the purpose of the mechitzah is to block the men's view of the women. Accordingly:

* The mechitzah must be high enough to completely block the entire women's section.

* The entire mechitzah must be made of an opaque material. Glass, flowers and decorative wood slats are not acceptable for any part of the mechitzah.

* Even a balcony must be completely encircled by a curtain, etc.

As stated previously, a mechitzah was a universal, standard feature of every Jewish place of worship. The women's section, whether in the balcony or at the back or side of the shul, was totally separated from the men's. Such a separation was fundamental to shul architecture, as basic as positioning the amud at the front of the shul and a bimah in the middle. It was and still is part of the standard model for a Jewish place of worship.

Rav M. Feinstein,10 however, after establishing that the requirement for separating men and women during prayer services is a Biblical obligation, holds that the essential halachah follows the second approach that we mentioned earlier. Although he agrees that it is commendable and praiseworthy to maintain the age-old traditional mechitzah, he nevertheless rules that the widespread practice of many shuls to lower the mechitzah somewhat is permitted according to the basic halachah. As long as the mechitzah is high enough to effectively block out any communication or interaction between the men's and women's sections, it is a halachically valid mechitzah. Accordingly:

* The minimum height for a mechitzah is shoulder-high, which the Talmud calculates to be 17 to 18 tefachim high.11 Allowing for a difference of opinion concerning the exact size of a tefach, Rav Feinstein rules that a 66-inch mechitzah is permitted,12 while in extenuating circumstances, 60 inches will suffice.13 Any mechitzah lower than that, however, is not considered a mechitzah at all.

* A balcony does not need to be enclosed by a curtain. It is preferable and recommended, however, to do so if possible.14

* Although, technically, the upper part of the mechitzah may be made out of glass since it serves as a physical barrier between the men and women's sections, it is inadequate, even self-defeating to use glass, as many women, unfortunately, come to shul improperly dressed and /or with their hair not covered properly.15

* A mechitzah which has sizable gaps towards the top is not acceptable since it does not effectively guard against kalus rosh.16 A mechitzah which has tiny openings in the lattice work is permitted.17

* The mechitzah must reach the minimum required height (60 inches) in both the men's and women's sections. Raising the floor of the women's section—which in effect lowers the height of the mechitzah—defeats the purpose of the mechitzah.18

1. Succah 51a. The Biblical source for the separation of men and women, says the Talmud, is found in the verse in Zecharyah in which the prophet foretells the eulogy of Mashiach ben Yosef, where men and women will be seated separately. If separate seating is required even at so solemn an affair as a eulogy, how much more so must separate seating be required on a joyous occasion! 2. Tzitz Eliezer 7:8. 3. Led by Rav Shelomo Ganzfried, author of *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, and Maharam Ash, disciple of Chasam Sofer, and countersigned by the *Divrei Chayim*. The proclamation is published in *Lev ha-Ivri*. See also Maharam Shick, O.C. 77 and *Zichron Yehudah* 1:62 who also voiced strong objections to any tampering

with the traditional mechitzah. 4. Rambam (commentary to the Mishnah Succah 5:2) 5. Tosfos Yom Tov (commentary to the Mishnah Succah 5:2). 6. Rambam Hilchos Lulav 8:14. 7. Piskei Rid Succah 51; Meiri Midos 2:5; Korban Eidah (Yerushalmi Succah 5:2) as explained in Divrei Yoel 1:10. 8. Rambam, Hilchos Lulav 8:12 and Hilchos Beis ha-Bechirah 5:9; Meiri Succah 51a; Tiferes Yisrael Succah 5:6; Aruch ha-Shulchan ha-Asid 11. 9. Maharam Shick 77; Rav E. M. Bloch (Taharas Yom Tov, vol. 6); Divrei Yoel, O.C. 10; Shevet ha-Levi 1:29. 10. Igros Moshe, O.C. 1:39 and in various other responsa; Seridei Eish 2:14. See also ruling of Rav Y. E. Henkin (quoted in Teshuvos Bnei Banim, pg. 12). 11. Shabbos 92a. 12. Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:31. 13. Igros Moshe, O.C. 3:23; 3:24; 4:30; 4:31. 14. Igros Moshe, O.C. 1:42. 15. Igros Moshe, O.C. 1:43; 3:23. 16. Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:29. 17. Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:32. 18. Igros Moshe, O.C. 3:23; 3:24; 4:31.

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By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Praying for a Rainy Day when Traveling to or from Eretz Yisroel in November By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Whereas in chutz la'aretz ve'sein tal umatar (the prayer for rain added to the beracha of Boreich Aleinu in the weekday shmoneh esrei) is not recited until the evening of December Fifth (this year -- the exact date varies), people in Eretz Yisroel began reciting this prayer on the Seventh of MarCheshvan, last Thursday night. This difference in practice leads to many interesting shaylos. Here are some examples:

Question #1:

Yankel, who lives in New York, is in aveilos l'ra for his father and tries to lead services at every opportunity. He will be visiting Eretz Yisroel during the month of November. Does he recite the prayer according to the Eretz Yisroel practice while there? Which version does he recite in his quiet shmoneh esrei? Perhaps he should not even lead services while he is there?

Question #2:

Does someone from chutz la'aretz who is currently attending Yeshiva or seminary in Eretz Yisroel recite ve'sein tal umatar according to the custom of Eretz Yisroel or according to the chutz la'aretz practice?

Question #3:

Reuven lives in Eretz Yisroel but is in chutz la'aretz on the Seventh of MarCheshvan. Does he begin reciting ve'sein tal umatar while in chutz la'aretz, does he begin reciting it upon returning to Eretz Yisroel or does he wait until those in chutz la'aretz begin reciting it?

In order to explain the halachic issues involved in answering these shaylos, we must first explain why we begin requesting rain on different dates in Eretz Yisroel than we do in chutz la'aretz.

The Gemara (Taanis 10a) concludes that in Eretz Yisroel one begins reciting ve'sein tal umatar on the Seventh of MarCheshvan, whereas in Bavel one begins reciting it on the sixtieth day after the autumnal equinox. (The Gemara's method for calculating the autumnal equinox is not based on the solar year but on a different calculation. The reason for this is beyond the scope of this article.) Someone who recites ve'sein tal umatar during the summer months in Eretz Yisroel must repeat the Shmoneh Esrei, since this request in the summer is inappropriate (Gemara Taanis 3b; Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 117:3).

WHY ARE THERE TWO DIFFERENT "RAIN DATES"?

Since Eretz Yisroel requires rain earlier than Bavel, Chazal instituted that the Jews in Eretz Yisroel begin requesting rain shortly after Sukkos. In Bavel, where it was better if it began raining later, reciting ve'sein tal umatar was delayed until later. This practice is followed in all of chutz la'aretz, even in places where rain is not seasonal, or where rain is needed earlier -- although the precise reason why all of chutz la'aretz follows the practice of Bavel is uncertain (see Rashi and Rosh to Taanis 10a; Shu"t Rosh 4:10; Tur and Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 117).

LOCAL CONDITIONS

If a certain city needs rain at a different time in the year, can they, or should they recite ve'sein tal umatar then? The Gemara (Taanis 14b) raises this question and cites the following story:

"The people of the city of Nineveh (in contemporary Iraq) sent the following shaylah to Rebbe: In our city we need rain even in the middle of the summer. Should we be treated like individuals, and request rain in the beracha of Shma Koleinu, or like a community and recite ve'sein tal umatar during the beracha of Boreich Aleinu? Rebbe responded that they are considered individuals and should request rain during the beracha of Shma Koleinu."
This means that an individual or a city that needs rain during a different part of the year should recite ve'sein tal umatar during the beracha of Shma Koleinu, but not as part of Boreich Aleinu.

NATIONAL CONDITIONS

Is a country different from a city? In other words, if an entire country or a large region requires rain at a different time of the year, should its residents recite ve'sein tal umatar during the beracha of Boreich Aleinu? The Rosh raises this question and contends, at least in theory, that a country should recite ve'sein tal umatar in Boreich Aleinu. In his opinion, most of North America and Europe should recite ve'sein tal umatar during the summer months. Although we do not follow this approach, someone who recites ve'sein tal umatar at a time when his country requires rain should not repeat the Shmoneh Esrei, but should rely retroactively on the opinion of the Rosh (Shulchan Aruch and Rama 117:2). Similarly, someone who recited ve'sein tal umatar as part of Boreich Aleinu in error after the Seventh of MarCheshvan should not repeat Shmoneh Esrei afterwards, unless he lives in a country where rain is not necessary at this time (Birkei Yosef 117:3; cf. Shu"t Ohalei Yaakov #87 of Maharikash who disagrees.).

With this introduction, we can now begin to discuss the questions at hand. What should someone do if he lives in Eretz Yisroel, but is in chutz la'aretz, or vice versa, during the weeks when there is a difference in practice between the two places? As one can imagine, much halachic literature discusses this shaylah, although I am surprised to report that I found no discussion concerning this question dating back to the Rishonim. I found three early opinions, which I quote in chronological order:

Opinion #1.

The earliest opinion I found, that of the Maharikash (Shu"t Ohalei Yaakov #87) and the Radbaz (Shu"t #2055), discusses specifically an Eretz Yisroel resident who left his wife and children behind while traveling to chutz la'aretz. (In earlier generations, it was common that emissaries from the Eretz Yisroel communities traveled to chutz la'aretz for long periods of time to solicit funds. These poskim ruled that if the traveler left his family in Eretz Yisroel, he should begin reciting ve'sein tal umatar on the Seventh of MarCheshvan, following the practice of Eretz Yisroel, regardless of whether he himself was then in Eretz Yisroel or in chutz la'aretz. However, if he is single, or alternatively, if he is traveling with his family, then when he begins reciting ve'sein tal umatar depends on whether he will be gone for the entire rainy season. If he leaves Eretz Yisroel before the Seventh of MarCheshvan and intends to be gone until Pesach or later, then he recites ve'sein tal umatar according to the practice of chutz la'aretz. If he intends to return before Pesach, then he recites ve'sein tal umatar beginning on the Seventh of MarCheshvan even though he is in chutz la'aretz.

The key question here is, what is the criterion for determining when someone recites ve'sein tal umatar? These poskim contend that it depends on his personal need. If his immediate family is in Eretz Yisroel and therefore requires rain already on the Seventh of MarCheshvan, he begins reciting ve'sein tal umatar then, even though he himself is in chutz la'aretz. This is considered that he has a personal need for rain (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 2:102).

Opinion #2.

The Pri Chodosh (Orach Chayim 117) quotes the previous opinion (of the Maharikash and the Radbaz) and disputes with them, contending that only one factor determines when the traveler begins reciting ve'sein tal umatar -- how long he plans to stay abroad. If he left Eretz Yisroel intending to be away for at least a year, he should consider himself a resident of chutz la'aretz (for this purpose) and begin reciting ve'sein tal umatar in December. If he intends to stay less than a year, he should begin reciting ve'sein tal umatar on the Seventh of MarCheshvan. Furthermore, the Pri Chodosh states that whether one leaves one's immediate family behind or not does not affect this halacha.

These two approaches disagree what determines when an individual recites ve'sein tal umatar. According to Opinion #1 (the Maharikash and the Radbaz), the main

criterion is whether one has a personal need for rain as early as the Seventh of MarCheshvan. According to Opinion #2 (the Pri Chodosh), the issue is whether one is considered a resident of Eretz Yisroel or of chutz la'aretz. According to this analysis of Opinion #2, a resident of chutz la'aretz who intends to spend a year in Eretz Yisroel begins reciting ve'sein tal umatar on the Seventh of MarCheshvan, whereas, if he intends to stay less than a year, he follows the practice of chutz la'aretz (Pri Megadim; Mishnah Berurah; cf. however Halichos Shelomoh Volume 1 8:28 pg. 107). However according to Opinion #1, he would be reciting ve'sein tal umatar on the Seventh of MarCheshvan if he or his family intend to spend any time during the rainy season in Eretz Yisroel. Thus, we already know some background to Question #2 above, concerning a yeshiva bachur or seminary student in Eretz Yisroel. According to Opinion #1, they should follow the Eretz Yisroel practice, whereas according to Opinion #2, they should follow the chutz la'aretz practice if they intend to stay for less than a year.

Opinion #3.

The Birkei Yosef quotes the two above-mentioned opinions and also other early poskim who follow a third approach, that the determining factor is where you are on the Seventh of MarCheshvan. (See also Shu"t Dvar Shmuel #323.) This approach implies that someone who is in Eretz Yisroel on the Seventh of MarCheshvan should begin praying for rain even though he intends to return to chutz la'aretz shortly, and that someone who is in chutz la'aretz on that date should not, even though he left his family in Eretz Yisroel.

Dvar Shmuel and Birkei Yosef explain that someone needs rain where he is, and it is not dependent on his residence. Birkei Yosef points out that if there is a severe drought where he is located, it does not make any difference whether he lives elsewhere; he will be a casualty of the lack of water. This was certainly true in earlier generations, when water supply was dependent on local wells. Even today, when water is supplied via piping from large reservoirs, this opinion would still rule that the halacha is determined by one's current location, and not one's permanent residence.

Opinion #3 (the Birkei Yosef's approach) is fairly similar to that of Opinion #1 (the Maharikash and the Radbaz) in that both approaches see the determining factor to be temporary need and not permanent residency. However, these two opinions dispute several details, including what is the ruling of someone in chutz la'aretz whose family remains in Eretz Yisroel. According to Opinion #1, this person begins ve'sein tal umatar on the Seventh of MarCheshvan, whereas Opinion #3 contends that he begins only when the other bnei chutz la'aretz do.

Why does Opinion #3 disregard his family being in Eretz Yisroel as a factor, whereas Opinion #1 is concerned with this fact? Birkei Yosef explains that praying for rain for one's family when one is in chutz la'aretz is praying for an individual need, which one does in Shma Koleinu, not in Boreich Aleinu, since the rest of the community there has no need for rain. Opinion #1 presumably holds that praying for Eretz Yisroel when I am in chutz la'aretz is not considered praying for an individual, even though my reason to pray for rain in Eretz Yisroel is personal. After analyzing these three conflicting opinions, how do we rule? Although the later poskim, such as the Mishnah Berurah, refer to these earlier sources, it is unclear how they conclude halachically. (See Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer 6:38, which contains a careful analysis of the words of the Mishnah Berurah on this subject.) Thus, an individual should ask his Rav what to do in each case.

TRAVELING AND RETURNING

What does one do if he travels and returns within these days? Assuming that he began to recite ve'sein tal umatar on the Seventh of MarCheshvan because he was in Eretz Yisroel (and he followed those opinions that rule this way, or he changed his plans), does he now stop reciting it upon his return to chutz la'aretz?

This question is raised by the Birkei Yosef (117:6), who rules that he continues reciting ve'sein tal umatar when he returns to chutz la'aretz.

What does one do if he is reciting ve'sein tal umatar, and the community is not, or vice versa -- and he would like to lead the services? Birkei Yosef rules that he should not lead the communal services; however, if he forgot and did so, he should follow his own version in the quiet Shmoneh Esrei and the community's version in the repetition (Birkei Yosef 117:8). However, Rav Shlomoh Zalman Auerbach permitted him to lead the services, ruling that he follows the community's practice in his public prayer, and his own in his private one (Halichos Shelomoh 5:21; note that according to Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 2:23, 29; 4:33 he should not lead the services.).

Let us now examine some of the shaylos we raised above:

Question #1:

Yankel, who lives in New York, would like to lead services when visiting Eretz Yisroel during the month of November.

According to all of the opinions involved, when davening privately Yankel should not recite ve'sein tal umatar until it is recited in chutz la'aretz, since he does not live in Eretz Yisroel, does not have immediate family living there, and was not there on the Seventh of MarCheshvan. As explained above, according to most opinions, he should not lead the services, since he is not reciting ve'sein tal umatar and the congregation is, whereas according to Rav Shlomoh Zalman Auerbach, he may lead the services. According to Birkei Yosef, if he is in Eretz Yisroel on the Seventh of MarCheshvan, he should begin to recite ve'sein tal umatar then, since he now has a need for rain; he should continue to recite this prayer even when he returns to chutz la'aretz. However, in this case, when returning to chutz la'aretz, he should not lead services, according to most opinions, since he is reciting ve'sein tal umatar and they are not. If he forgot and led the services, he should recite ve'sein tal umatar in the quiet Shmoneh Esrei but not in the repetition. According to the Pri Chodosh (Opinion #2 above), if he is in Eretz Yisroel on the Seventh of MarCheshvan, he should not recite ve'sein tal umatar, since he lives in chutz la'aretz. Following this approach, he should not lead services when in Eretz Yisroel, but he may resume when he returns to chutz la'aretz.

Question #2:

Does someone attending Yeshiva or seminary in Eretz Yisroel, recite ve'sein tal umatar according to the custom of Eretz Yisroel or according to the chutz la'aretz practice?

The answer to this question will depend upon which of the above-quoted authorities one follows. According to Opinion #1 (the Maharikash, the Radbaz) and Opinion #3 (the Birkei Yosef), they should follow the practice of Eretz Yisroel, since they need the rain, while in Eretz Yisroel, even though they are not permanent Israeli residents. According to Opinion #2 (the Pri Chodosh), if they are staying for less than a year, they follow the practice of chutz la'aretz, whereas if they are staying longer they should begin reciting it from the Seventh of MarCheshvan. Several people have told me that Rav Elyashiv, shlit"n, rules that they should recite ve'sein tal umatar while they are in Eretz Yisroel, unless they intend to return before the end of the rainy season.

Question #3:

Reuven lives in Eretz Yisroel but is in chutz la'aretz on the Seventh of MarCheshvan (the day that in Eretz Yisroel they begin praying for rain). Does he begin reciting ve'sein tal umatar while in chutz la'aretz, does he wait until he returns to Eretz Yisroel, or does he follow the practice of those who live in chutz la'aretz?

According to Opinions # 1 and #2, he should follow the practice of those living in Eretz Yisroel, but for different reasons. According to Opinion #1, the reason is because he knows that he will return to Eretz Yisroel during the rainy season and therefore follows this approach. According to Opinion #2, since he left Eretz Yisroel for less than a year he is considered an Eretz Yisroel resident. Although it would seem that the Birkei Yosef would hold that he should not recite ve'sein tal umatar until the bnei chutz la'aretz do, it is not absolutely clear that he would disagree with the other poskim in this case. One could explain that he only ruled that one follows the bnei chutz la'aretz if he is there for an extended trip, but not if he is there for only a few weeks that happen to coincide with the Seventh of MarCheshvan. For this reason, when someone recently asked me this shaylah, I ruled that he should follow the practice of those dwelling in Eretz Yisroel. Subsequently, I found this exact shaylah in Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer, (6:38) and was very happy to find that he ruled the same way I had. (However, Halichos Shelomoh 8:19 rules that he should recite ve'sein tal umatar in Shma Koleinu and not in Boreich Aleinu.)

CONCLUSION

Rashi (Breishis 2:5) points out that until Adam HaRishon appeared, there was no rain in the world. Rain fell and grasses sprouted only after Adam was created, understood that rain was necessary for the world, and prayed to Hashem for rain. Whenever we pray for rain, we must always remember that the essence of prayer is drawing ourselves closer to Hashem.