

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parsha Insights
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Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair -
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Parshat Vayera

Is Life Worthless Or Priceless?

"But the son of the slave-woman (Yishmael), as well, I will make into a nation, for he is your offspring." (21:13)

Judaism says there is a G-d who controls everything; that nothing happens without Him wanting it to happen. Whether we like it or not, the massacre of Simchat Torah was part of His plan. How we can understand that? The beginning and the end of understanding is that Divine reasons are beyond the understanding of humans. That's the difference between faith and trust, between emuna and bitachon.

You can believe Hashem exists, but how much do you trust Him? Sure, you trust Him when you pray and you get what you want, but real trust is when things don't go the way you want them to, and you still say, "Hashem I trust You. I don't understand why You are doing this, but I know and believe that it is for my good and the ultimate good of the world."

The Jewish People have been subjected to the most savage, cold-blooded and murderous assault since the Second World War. This has shaken us from our complacency. We think that anti-Semitism is under control, that we are living in golden age, the army is invincible. That Saudi Arabia will tame the Arab world. If you look at the history of Jewish People, you will see that much of our exile has been one of being victims, fear and running for our lives. Why were so many Jews jewelers? Because you pack up your wealth in a small packet and run for your life. Why are so many Jews artisans? Because your livelihood doesn't depend on anything outside yourself, or being an entrepreneur for that matter.

In the Shema, the basic credo of the Jew and our declaration of faith before we leave this world, the second time we say the name of Hashem, one of our thoughts should be that I am prepared to put up with any pain or suffering, or to give my life to sanctify the Name of Hashem. That's what we are committing to. Perhaps, the most important thing in our lives is the way we leave this life.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Parshat Vayeira: It's what you do that counts

It's what you do that counts.

At the beginning of Parshat Vayeira, Hashem appears to Avraham immediately after he had had his brit milah and

Avraham subsequently saw some visitors on the horizon and the Gemara Masechet Sotah teaches us, 'Mikan shemidat Hashem levaker cholim.' From here we see that it is the way of the Almighty to visit the sick.

Hashem is setting us an example and similarly, towards the end of the Torah when Moshe sadly died, the Torah says 'Vayikbor otoh bagai', 'he buried him in the valley'.

Who buried Moshe?

And there can be only one explanation, because nobody knows the burial place of Moshe to this day. So, it had to be Hashem, who served in the capacity of the Chevra Kadisha. Once again, Hashem was leading through example, teaching us the lesson. That what matters most of all is not what you say, but rather what you do.

It is in this spirit that during the current tragic war in Israel, I have been so inspired by the actions, by the practical elements of what so many people are doing.

Firstly, and foremostly, Chayalei Tzva Haganah LeYisrael, who are fighting for the future of the state.

Together with their partners right around the world, people who are giving Tzedakah, people are engaging in acts of Chesed, of loving kindness and people who are praying, reciting Tehillim.

I've been so moved to hear about so many wonderful initiatives.

Yes, this is a time for action.

In Anim Zemirot, we sing 'Dimu otcha v'lo k'fi yeshcha vayeshavucha l'fi ma'asecha.' 'God's greatness is not in what he thinks, but rather 'l'fe ma'asecha', in what he does'.

And that is the greatness of the Jewish people right now.

We are doing so much, and I want to thank all of you for all your efforts at a practical level, to help Am Yisrael, and may Hashem bless us all, with full peace as speedily as possible.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

A small, lonely and eternal people

Even the cursory reader senses that Avraham and Sarah are up to something great – that this is no ordinary tale of pioneering and struggle.

Rabbi Berel Wein

The first book of the Torah we are reading now proceeds from the general and universal story of humankind to concentrate on the particular and individual story of the founding of the Jewish people. The story of Avraham and Sarah, their difficulties and challenges, their loneliness and spiritual quest, form the essence of this parsha and the next one as well. In this life story they create the prototype for all later Jewish and familial society.

The Torah, unlike many more pious modern books of today, avoids painting for us a blissful picture of righteous people being blessed with serenity and perfection of character and behavior. Instead, it shows us the ever present challenges to faith in the Almighty, the difficulties of maintaining domestic harmony and of creating a positive worldview while surrounded by enemies, jealousy and an immoral general culture.

Tradition and the Mishna crown Avraham with the laurel of having withstood and overcome ten major challenges in his lifetime. It is interesting that the great Jewish commentators to the Torah differ as to which ten challenges the Mishna is referring to. Thus, if we combine all of their opinions, there are a significantly greater number of challenges in the life of Avraham than just ten.

The Torah's portrayal of these events – the wandering and rootlessness of coming to the promised land of Israel, the disloyalty of Lot, the difficulties with Sarah and Hagar, the behavior of Pharaoh and his courtiers, to mention some of them – all portray for us a life of struggle, of pain, of striving and of hurdles to overcome.

In spite of all of these very troubling details and incidents as recorded for us in the Torah, there is a tenor and tone of optimism and fulfilled purpose that permeates the entire Torah. Even the cursory reader senses that Avraham and Sarah are up to something great – that this is no ordinary tale of pioneering and struggle. There are Godly covenants and blessings, commitments made that surely will be met and a vision presented of a great and influential people and of a holy land.

God's relationship with humankind generally will be centered in His relationship to the family and progeny of Avraham and Sarah. Nations and beliefs will vie for the honor of being the descendants and followers of Avraham. Millions will adopt his name and follow his monotheistic creed. He and Sarah will be some of the most influential personages in world history. They will not avoid trouble and travail in their personal and family lives but great will be their reward in spiritual and historical achievement.

As such, they truly are the forerunners of the story of the Jewish people – a small and lonely people, wanderers and beset by inner disloyalty and external persecution – which nevertheless is optimistic and vastly influential in a manner that belies its physical numbers and temporal power.

Generally, Avraham is the father of many nations and of all monotheistic believers. But particularly he is the founder and father of the Jewish people whose march through human history parallels the life of Avraham itself. And, the Godly covenant and blessings will assuredly be fulfilled through the accomplishments of the Jewish people, its nationhood and land.

Rabbi Berel Wein

If we give in, terrorists will not worry about being caught, trusting that if in Israeli prisons, they will be freed in a prisoner exchange

Rabbi Eliezer Melaned

Redeeming Captives

Over the generations, especially in the exile, on many occasions, Jews were kidnapped or taken captive, and large sums of ransom money were demanded for their release. The Sages of Israel were called upon to decide the proper response to this painful situation, and they formulated basic cardinal rules concerning the redeeming of prisoners, and the amount of money that could be paid toward their redemption.

Our Sages have taught that the redemption of captives is a great mitzvah for which a person should donate charity, placing it at the top of the list of worthwhile causes because the captive suffers greatly from hunger, medical problems, psychological trauma, and often subhuman conditions whereby his life is often in danger (Baba Batra 8B). Therefore, it is not proper to spare means in rescuing captives (Rambam, and Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 252:1).

Nonetheless, Chazal postulated the halakhah that it is forbidden to pay an over exorbitant amount for pidyon shivuiim (redeeming hostages), as is stated in the Mishna: "They must not ransom captives for more than their value, for the good of society" (Gittin 45A). The main reason given for this enactment, in both the Gemara and the Rambam, is to not create an incentive for highwaymen and kidnappers to seize more and more Jewish prisoners, since they know that we are willing to pay any price to set them free. There is another way of explaining this enactment – not to pressure the public to donate funds beyond their capability. However, most of the Rishonim, including the Rif, Rosh, Rambam, and the Tur, say the principle reason is not to encourage our enemies to kidnap more Jews, and this is the ruling in the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 252:4).

An example is told about Rabbi Meir from Rottenberg, one of the great Torah scholars of his time, who was taken hostage in Alsace about eight-hundred years ago. The evil emperor, Rudolph, requested a staggering amount of money for his release. The Rabbi's many students wanted to raise the funds in order to secure his release, since according to the halachah, in a case where a Gedol HaDor (leader of the generation) is taken captive, there is no limit to the amount that must be paid to set him free. Nevertheless, Rabbi Meir (known as the Maharam M'Rottenberg) instructed them not to agree to the emperor's demand, believing that if they handed over an enormous amount for his release, the enemies of the Jews would kidnap more rabbis and demand extravagant sums for their freedom. Thus, the Maharam M'Rottenberg sat in prison for seven years until the day of his death. Because of his greatness of soul and self-sacrifice for the welfare of

Clal Yisrael, he prevented the capture of other leading rabbis, and the economic collapse which could have shattered many congregations.

However, the rule prohibiting an overly excessive payment of money to redeem hostages applies when it is the public who must supply the funds. In contrast, if a very rich person is captured, and he wants to redeem himself with his wealth, he is free to pay whatever price is asked. This is because his case does not represent a danger to the general community, but only to the rich person himself, since the kidnappers may think to kidnap him again since they now know that he is willing to pay handsomely for his freedom. This decision is the personal matter of the rich person (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 252:4) However, in a case where a member of a wealthy person's family is kidnapped, the rich man is not allowed to pay ransom more than the person's worth. Regarding his wife, if she is kidnapped, the authorities are divided in their opinions whether he is permitted to redeem her by paying an excessively inflated ransom.

Redeeming Hostages Whose Lives are at Risk

What is the law in a case where kidnappers threaten to kill the hostage if their monetary demands are not met?

There are poskim who say that the prohibition against paying exorbitant sums applies in normal situations when the life of the hostage is not immediately at stake. However, in a case of *pekuach nefesh* when life is threatened, since all of the commandments in the Torah are broken to save a life, the enactment of the Rabbis not to pay overly excessive sums of money in order to free a hostage is certainly not heeded, and everything must be done to redeem him.

In opposition, many poskim, including the Ramban, state that even in a case where the kidnappers threaten to kill the hostage, we don't give in, and it is forbidden to pay an exorbitant amount. The reason is, once again, that conceding to the kidnappers will only increase their incentive to kidnap other Jews and threaten their lives. Thus, out of concern for the overall welfare of the public, and because of the life-threatening danger to future captives, it is forbidden to surrender to the kidnapper's threats and demands.

In practice, this question was not definitely decided, and the leading halakhic authorities amongst the Achronim were also divided on the issue (Pitchei T'shuva, Yoreh Deah 252:4).

Whether or not to Surrender to the Demands of Terrorists

Since the founding of the State of Israel, on several occasions terrorists have kidnapped civilians or soldiers and threatened to kill them if we don't free large numbers of Arab terrorists in Israeli jails. In cases like these, are we to accept the demands of the kidnappers and free their imprisoned comrades in order to save Jewish life, or should we refuse?

We previously saw that in a case where a hostage's life is in immediate danger, the authorities were divided on whether or not to give in to their demands. Some say it is proper to redeem him, even at a price greater than his worth because his life is threatened, while others say it is forbidden, out of general concern for the wellbeing of the public.

These opinions are applicable when the kidnappers are normal criminals seeking monetary gain. But in a case of ongoing war between Israel and terrorist enemies, it is forbidden to give in to any coercion on their part, for it is clear that if we were to concede, our enemies would view this as a sign of weakness, raising their morale and increasing their incentive to strike at us further. And we have learned that every time terrorists have succeeded in getting their way, this has motivated others to join them in their war against Israel.

Additionally, if we give in, terrorists will not worry about getting caught, trusting that if they are apprehended and put in Israeli prisons, they will be soon freed in the next prisoner exchange. Also, it is a proven fact that a percentage of the freed terrorists will return to carrying out attacks against Jews. Therefore, despite the pain of the matter, we are not to give in to coercion and pay an excessive price for the hostage, above and beyond the customary payment demanded in kidnappings, meaning a one-man-for-one-man exchange.

The rule is that during a war we do not give in to any demand from the enemy, and if they take even one Jew hostage, we go to war to free him. It is written in the Torah: "And when the Kenaanite, the king of Arad, who dwelt in the Negev, heard that Israel came by the way of Atarim, then he fought against Israel and took some of them prisoners" (Bamidbar, 21:1). Rashi cites Chazal who explain that only one handmaid was captured from Israel. The Jews didn't enter into negotiations to rescue her – they went to war. This is also what King David did when Amalek invaded Zeklag and took the women captive – he went to war to rescue the captives without bothering to negotiate first (Shmuel 1, 30.)

Even if the enemy came to only steal straw and hay, we wage war against them, because if we give in to them on a small thing, they will continue to fight against us with even greater resolve (Eruvin 45A).

All of this concerns terrorists and enemies who are perpetually at war against us. However, if the war has ended, it is permissible to exchange all the enemy prisoners in our hands for the Jews whom they have taken captive, even if the prisoners we set free substantially outnumber the Jews who are released. This is because exchanges of this sort are customary when ceasefires are formulated and all prisoners are set free. This is not considered paying more than the captives are worth on a prisoner-for-prisoner basis, and therefore we are not concerned lest the return of prisoners will encourage the enemy to continue to war their

against us. If the enemy does return to its former belligerency, it is most likely for other reasons (see Tachumin Vol.4, pg.108).2

2. However, see “Aseya,” Vol.7, pg.8; and “Chavot Benyamin,” Vol.1:16, by Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli who writes that it is permissible to exchange many enemy prisoners for our captives, according to the rule that a man can pay an excessive sum of his own money to redeem himself. He reasons that any soldier who enlisted in Tzahal did so under the assumption that if he were captured, the army would redeem him at any price. Thus, it is the army who acts on his behalf in deciding the terms of his release.

However, we have seen in the past that it is not always possible to depend on the decisions of Tzahal commanders, since some of them are likely to change their opinions for political expediency. It is clear that the mass exchanges of terrorists that we have agreed to in the past have increased the morale of the enemy, and many of the released prisoners returned to perpetrate further acts of terror, until the Jews they went on to kill numbered more than the Jews who were released in the exchange. Therefore, the opinion of the Rabbis today is that any exchange of prisoners at an exaggerated price is forbidden.

In this light, Rabbi Ortner in “Tchumin,” Vol.13, pg.262, writes that the claim that released terrorists are not certain to continue terrorist activity has been shown to be false. Therefore, as long as terrorism is waged against us, there is no permission to free terrorists at an exorbitant price. Rabbi Goren, in “Torat HaMedinah,” pgs.424-436, agrees that it is forbidden to surrender to the coercion of terrorists. However, regarding soldiers who were taken captive while carrying out their military duties, he wrote that it stood to reason that the State of Israel had an absolute obligation to redeem the captives at any price, without considering the damage it might cause to the security and welfare of the country.

He further stated that the State was obligated to impose the death penalty against terrorists, for without this deterrence, terrorists would continue to murder, since they will be confident that if they are captured, they will be freed in a future prisoner exchange.

The Binding of Isaac: A New Interpretation

VAYERA

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

It is the hardest passage of all, one that seems to defy understanding. Abraham and Sarah have waited years for a child. God has promised them repeatedly that they would have many descendants, as many as the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, the grains of sand on the seashore. They wait. No child comes.

Sarah, in deep despair, suggests that Abraham should have a child by her handmaid Hagar. He does. Ishmael is born. Yet God tells Abraham: This is not the one. By now Sarah

is old, post-menopausal, unable by natural means to have a child.

Angels come and again promise a child. Sarah laughs. But a year later Isaac is born. Sarah’s joy is almost heart-breaking:

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter; all those who hear will laugh with me.” Then she said, “Who would have told Abraham, ‘Sarah will nurse children’? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

Gen. 21:6-7

Then come the fateful words:

“Take your son, your only one, the one whom you love – Isaac – and go to the land of Moriah. There, offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, the one that I will show you.”

Gen. 22:2

The rest of the story is familiar. Abraham takes Isaac. Together they journey for three days to the mountain. Abraham builds an altar, gathers wood, binds his son and lifts the knife. At that moment:

The angel of the Lord called out to him from the heavens, “Abraham! Abraham!”

He said, “Here I am.”

“Do not lift your hand against the boy; do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear God: for you have not withheld from Me your son, your only one.”

Gen. 22:11-12

The trial is over. It is the climax of Abraham’s life, the supreme test of faith, a key moment in Jewish memory and self-definition.

But it is deeply troubling. Why did God so nearly take away what He had given? Why did He put these two aged parents – Abraham and Sarah – through so appalling a test? Why did Abraham, who had earlier challenged God on the fate of Sodom, saying, “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?” not protest this cruel act against an innocent child?

The standard interpretation, given by all the commentators – classical and modern – is that Abraham demonstrates his total love of God by being willing to sacrifice the most precious thing in his life, the son for whom he has been waiting for so many years.

The Christian theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote a powerful book about it, *Fear and Trembling*, in which he coined such ideas as the “teleological suspension of the ethical”[1] – the love of God may lead us to do things that would otherwise be considered morally wrong – and “faith in the absurd” – Abraham trusted God to make the impossible possible. He believed he would lose Isaac but still keep him. For Kierkegaard, faith transcends reason.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik saw the Binding as demonstrating that we must not expect always to be victorious. Sometimes we must experience defeat. “God tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most.”[2]

All these interpretations are surely correct. They are part of our tradition. I want, however, to offer a quite different reading, for one reason. Throughout Tanach, the gravest sin is child sacrifice. The Torah and the prophets consistently regard it with horror. It is what pagans do. This is Jeremiah on the subject:

“They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal – something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind.”

Jer. 19:5

And this is Micah:

“Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

Micah 6:7

It is what Mesha, King of Moab, does to get the gods to grant him victory over the Israelites:

When the King of Moab saw that the battle had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the King of Edom, but they failed. Then he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall. The fury against Israel was great; they withdrew and returned to their own land.”

2 Kings 3:26-27

How can the Torah regard as Abraham’s supreme achievement that he was willing to do what the worst of idolaters do? The fact that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son would seem to make him – in terms of Tanach considered as a whole – no better than Baal or Molech worshippers or the pagan king of Moab. This cannot be the only possible interpretation.

There is an alternative way of looking at the trial. To do so we must consider an overriding theme of the Torah as a whole. Let us assemble the evidence.

First principle: God owns the land of Israel. That is why He can command the return of property to its original owners in the Jubilee year:

“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine. You are merely migrants and tenants to Me.”

Lev. 25:23

Second principle: God owns the Children of Israel, since He redeemed them from slavery. That is what the Israelites mean when they sang, at the Red Sea:

“Until Your people crossed, Lord, until the people You acquired [am zu kanita] crossed over.”

Ex. 15:16

Therefore they cannot be turned into permanent slaves:

“For the Israelites are My servants, whom I brought out from Egypt: they cannot be sold as slaves.”

Lev. 25:42

Third principle: God is the ultimate owner of all that exists. That is why we must make a blessing over anything we enjoy:

Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel: To enjoy anything of this world without first reciting a blessing is like making

personal use of things consecrated to heaven, since it says, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” R. Levi contrasted two texts. It is written, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof,” and it is also written, “The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth hath He given to the children of men!” There is no contradiction: in the one case it is before a blessing has been said, in the other, after a blessing has been said.

Brachot 35a

All things belong to God, and we must acknowledge this before we make use of anything. That is what a blessing is: acknowledging that all we enjoy is from God.

This is the jurisprudential basis of the whole of Jewish law. God rules by right, not by might. God created the universe; therefore God is the ultimate owner of the universe. The legal term for this is “*eminent domain*.” Therefore, God has the right to prescribe the conditions under which we may benefit from the universe. It is to establish this legal fact – not to tell us about the physics and cosmology of the Big Bang – that the Torah begins with the story of Creation.

This carries a special depth and resonance for the Jewish people since in their case God is not just – as He is for all humankind – Creator and Sustainer of the universe. He is also, for Jews, the God of history, who redeemed them from slavery and gave them a land that originally belonged to someone else, the “seven nations.” God is Sovereign of the universe, but in a special sense He is Israel’s only ultimate King, and the sole source of their laws. That is the significance of the book of Exodus. The key narratives of the Torah are there to teach us that God is the ultimate Owner of all.

In the ancient world, up to and including the Roman Empire, children were considered the legal property of their parents. They had no rights. They were not legal personalities in themselves. Under the Roman principle of *patria potestas* a father could do whatever he wished with his child, including putting him to death. Infanticide was well known in antiquity (and in fact it has even been defended in our time by the Harvard philosopher Peter Singer, in the case of severely handicapped children). That, for example is how the story of Oedipus begins, with his father Laius leaving him to die.

It is this principle that underlies the entire practice of child sacrifice, which was widespread throughout the pagan world. The Torah is horrified by child sacrifice, which it sees as the worst of all sins. It therefore seeks to establish, in the case of children, what it establishes in the case of the universe as a whole, the land of Israel, and the people of Israel. We do not own our children. God does. We are merely their guardians on God’s behalf.

Only the most dramatic event could establish an idea so revolutionary and unprecedented – even unintelligible – in the ancient world. That is what the story of the Binding of Isaac is about. Isaac belongs to neither Abraham nor Sarah. Isaac belongs to God. All children belong to God. Parents

do not own their children. The relationship of parent to child is one of guardianship only. God does not want Abraham to sacrifice his child. God wants him to renounce ownership in his child. That is what the angel means when it calls to Abraham, telling him to stop, “You have not withheld from Me your son, your only one.”

The Binding of Isaac is a polemic against, and a rejection of, the principle of patria potestas, the idea universal to all pagan cultures that children are the property of their parents.

Seen in this light, the Binding of Isaac is now consistent with the other foundational narratives of the Torah, namely the creation of the universe and the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The rest of the narrative also makes sense. God had to show Abraham and Sarah that their child was not naturally theirs, because his birth was not natural at all. It took place after Sarah could no longer conceive.

The story of the first Jewish child establishes a principle that applies to all Jewish children. God creates legal space between parent and child, because only when that space exists do children have the room to grow as independent individuals.

The Torah ultimately seeks to abolish all relationships of dominance and submission. That is why it dislikes slavery and makes it, within Israel, a temporary condition rather than a permanent fate. That is why it seeks to protect children from parents who are overbearing or worse.

Abraham, we argued in last week’s study, was chosen to be the role model for all time of what it is to be a parent. We now see that the Binding of Isaac is the consummation of that story. A parent is one who knows that they do not own their child.

Home Weekly Parsha VAYERA **Rabbi Wein’s Weekly Blog**

The story of the miraculous birth of Yitzchak to his ninety-year-old mother Sarah is not only one of the highlights of the parsha but it is one of the foundation narratives of all of Jewish history. Without Yitzchak there simply isn’t a Jewish people. The birth of Yitzchak is one of the triumphal moments of Jewish life, a reflection of God’s mercy and guidance in creating His special people.

It is therefore all the more surprising – indeed shocking – that the story of Avraham sacrificing Yitzchak appears in this very same parsha. In effect, this story of the binding of Yitzchak on the altar of Mount Moriah completely negates the miraculous birth of Yitzchak. Of what necessity or purpose is the miracle of Sarah’s giving birth to Yitzchak if the entire matter will be undone by the succeeding story of Avraham sacrificing Yitzchak? What is the point that the Torah wishes to teach us by unfolding this seemingly cruel sequence of events? Is not God, so to speak, mocking His

own Divine Will and plans by this sequence of events, recorded for us in this most seminal parsha in the Torah?

Much ink has been used in dealing with this most difficult issue. It has been the subject of much commentary in Midrash and Jewish thought throughout the ages. Amongst the many mysterious and inscrutable issues that God raises for our analysis in His Torah, this contradiction between the miraculous birth of Yitzchak and the challenge of his being bound on the altar ranks high on that long list of Heaven’s behavior that requires Jews to have faith and acceptance.

But is this not the nature of things in today’s Jewish world as well? After the most negative of extraordinary events of sadistic cruelty that we call the Holocaust, miraculous positive events have occurred to the Jewish people. The old woman of Israel, beaten and worn, was revived and gave birth to a state, to a vibrant language, to myriad institutions of Torah learning and good deeds, to the miraculously successful ingathering of the exile communities to their homeland, to a scale of Jewish affluence unmatched in Jewish history. In short, the story of the Jewish people in its resilient glory over the last seventy-five years defies rational and easily explained historical logic. And yet the danger and tension of open hostility to the State of Israel, the threats to its very existence, the attempts to delegitimize it and boycott its bounty, all are evident in our current world.

In the story of Yitzchak, the Torah teaches that we have to live in a world of almost absurd contradictions. Logic plays a very small role in the events of history that occur to the people of Yitzchak. Yitzchak is a product of miracles and his very maturation and survival is also a product of supernatural stuff. So too is this the story of the Jewish people in our age. Just as Yitzchak survived and proved successful, so too shall we, his progeny, survive and be successful and triumphant.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

Strengthening in the Merit of Israel and the Covenant of Our Forefathers

Revivim Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

The merit of our forefathers (zechut avot) is based on the education of our forefathers * In a dangerous situation, one should not mention zechut avot, or our own merit * The mitzvah of Brit Milah is meant to reveal the inner spiritual reality of a Jew * The mitzvot of Yishuv Ha’Aretz (settling the Land of Israel) and Brit Milah are equivalent to all the mitzvot * The brit milah of the Ishmaelites is empty, lacking perfection * We are commanded to strive for hostile non-Jews to leave our Land, including Gaza

Our teacher and mentor, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda HaKohen Kook ztz”l would often teach the divine virtue of Segulat Yisrael (Israel’s unique virtue), which is the foundation for

all the virtues and deeds of Israel. In times of distress, we must return to this great foundation, and rely upon it.

He would explain the short prayer our Sages composed to say in dangerous places, as the Mishnah states:

“Rabbi Yehoshua says: One who cannot recite a complete prayer because he is walking in a place of danger, recites a brief prayer and says: Redeem, Hashem, Your people, the remnant of Israel, at every transition [parashat ha'ibur]. May their needs be before You. Blessed are You Hashem, Who hears prayer” (Berachot 4:4).

Our Sages explained: “Even at a time when they transgress matters of Torah – may all their needs come before You” (Berachot 29b).

Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda asked: A Jew is in danger, afraid, wanting to appeal to God in prayer. What should he mention – Israel’s transgressions, praying that even when Israel ‘transgresses matters of Torah, may their needs come before You’? As if God helps satisfy the needs of one who transgresses – like eating pork?! This is shocking! In a dangerous situation, does he have nothing else to request besides God helping transgressors?! This is truly ‘Do not place a stumbling block before the blind’, ‘assisting a transgressor’. Awesome, and terrifying!”

Merit of Our Forefathers vs. Covenant of Our Forefathers

He continued, explaining that when a person is in regular danger, he mentions “the merit of Torah, mitzvot, and good deeds, that it help him against the accusation of Satan”. But if the accusation is greater, a greater merit is needed, mentioning the merit of one’s grandfather, etc. When the accusation is even greater, zechut avot (the merit of our forefathers), Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is mentioned. But who knows, perhaps the accusation is even far greater, and there are halachic opinions that “the merit of the forefathers has exhausted” (Shabbat 55a). However, as Tosafot wrote: “The zechut avot is exhausted, but the brit avot (covenant of the forefathers) is not exhausted” (ibid.). For indeed, the covenant is “forever, and everlasting”. Therefore, the prayer stems from the covenant.

The merit of the forefathers relies on the education of the forefathers. “But this is a human matter, unable to eternally endure, for the merit’s foundation is the human holiness of our holy forefathers. Everything originating from man, can possibly cease. In contrast, the covenant of the forefathers is not human. A covenant, is a covenant of the Creator of the World.” The covenant God made with Abraham at the ‘Brit Ha’Betarim’ (Covenant of the Parts), and with all Israel at Mount Sinai, is eternal. “A covenant is not a partnership. It is a heavenly, divine concept, unable to change. God’s covenant exists internally, in the soul of Creation, it is eternal, continuing hitherto.”

“Therefore, in a dangerous situation, one should not mention the merit of the forefathers, or one’s own merit. Perhaps there is a Satan, so awesome and terrifying, that the merit of the forefathers is exhausted. One needs a segulah (unique virtue), which is an amulet for all

situations,” that “even in times of spiritual decline...even when the nation is laden with sins, nonetheless, You Hashem, have chosen us.” Therefore, we pray in the plural, for even in difficult times of spiritual decline, a person should not panic. Rather, he should recall belonging to the People of Israel, and pray for Clal Yisrael (the entirety of Israel) “Redeem, Hashem, Your people, the remnant of Israel, at every transition [parashat ha'ibur]. May their needs be before You”. (Based on the Introduction to ‘Orot Yisrael’ in the lectures of HaRav Tzvi Yehuda on the book ‘Orot’, recently published).

The Mitzvah of Brit Milah

The mitzvah of brit milah (circumcision) that we learn in this week’s Torah portion, Lech Lecha, expresses the brit (covenant) between Hashem and Israel. It is so important, it precedes the Torah (Berachot 48b). For the covenant expresses the essential holiness with which Hashem sanctified His nation Israel, a holiness not dependent on our choice, and it is the foundation for receiving the Torah, that demands we choose good. Therefore, the Shulchan Aruch rules: “This mitzvah is greater than other positive mitzvot” (Yoreh Deah 260:1). For the brit expresses the deep connection to Judaism, and the great destiny of the Jewish people, to reveal holiness within reality, and add blessing and goodness to the world.

However, halachically, even a Jew not circumcised is fully considered Jewish. Moreover, an uncircumcised Jew is called circumcised, even though practically, he did not undergo brit milah (Nedarim 31b). In other words, the mitzvah of brit milah is meant to reveal the internal, spiritual reality of a Jew. One not fulfilling the mitzvah, does not reveal or express his holy, Jewish soul, but the intrinsic segulah, by virtue of which Hashem made a covenant with him, endures eternally.

Settling the Land and the Covenant

The mitzvah of yishuv ha’aretz (settling the Land of Israel) is connected to brit milah, as these two mitzvot express the special vision of the Jewish people – revealing holiness within earthly, physical reality. And regarding these two mitzvot, it is said they are equivalent to all the mitzvot (see Peninei Halakha 1:4).

Thus, we find that when Hashem elevated Abraham from the level of a tzadik prati (private righteous person), to the level of a tzadik clali (communal righteous person), and made a covenant with him that an entire nation would emerge from him, revealing God’s word for all generations – He promised him the Land, and commanded him regarding brit milah, as it states in this week’s portion:

“And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you for their generations as an everlasting covenant, to be God for you and your offspring after you. And I will give you and your offspring after you the land of your sojourns, the entire land of Canaan for an eternal possession, and I will be a God for them...As for you, you shall keep My covenant...This is My covenant

that you shall observe...circumcise all males...And it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you” (Genesis 17:7-11).

This is what our Sages said: “If your children keep the mitzvah of circumcision – they will enter the Land, if not – they will not enter the Land” (Bereishit Rabbah 46:9). Therefore, Joshua was commanded to circumcise Israel before beginning conquering the Land (Joshua 5:2).

The Struggle with Ishmaelite’s

Our Sages said: All circumcised, can inherit the Land (Zohar 2:23a). They also said: The children of Ishmael are destined to rule the Holy Land for a long time, when it is empty and desolate. This is because Ishmael was circumcised, and they will hinder Israel’s return to their place. But since their circumcision is empty, without perfection (not circumcising on the eighth day, and not removing the fine membrane), therefore, the Land under them will also be empty and desolate. Ultimately, Israel, whose circumcision is complete, will merit it (see, Zohar 2:32a). The implication that their circumcision is empty without perfection means it contains only subjugation, stifling human creativity, whereas a complete brit with Hashem, enables revealing the Divine Presence, to the full extent of human creativity, in the Land.

Residence of Non-Jews in the Land of Israel

The great vision of the Jewish People in their Land, is for the Land to be settled by the People of Israel, with all aspects of national life conducted according to the Torah’s directives, morally, and holily. And the Jewish people will be a light and blessing, for all the world’s nations. To realize this vision, the entire Land must be settled by Jews, and only non-Jews interested in participating in the great vision of the Jewish people, could join in the status of ger toshav [resident alien]. But hostile non-Jews should not be allowed to reside in the Land, as the Torah says:

“They shall not settle in your land, lest they cause you to sin towards Me, that you will worship their gods, for it will be a snare to you” (Exodus 23:33).

And there is an additional, individual prohibition relating to each individual, not to sell land to a non-Jew, so as not to provide a foothold in the Land, as it states:

“Grant them no terms, and give them no quarter” (Deuteronomy 7:2).

There are differing halachic opinions regarding decent non-Jews, not as gerim toshavim. However, regarding non-Jews supporting our enemies seeking to destroy the State of Israel, all poskim agree it is a mitzvah for them not to reside in our Land (see Peninei Halakha: Ha’Am ve’ Ha’Aretz 5:1, 3). The Torah further warned that if we allow them to remain in the land, we will greatly suffer from them, as it states:

“If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land before you, those you leave will be like thorns in your eyes, and stingers in your sides, and they will harass you on the land you settle” (Numbers 33:55).

Reasons Preventing Fulfilling the Mitzvah

Two main reasons prevent us from expelling the hostile non-Jews from the State of Israel:

1) The mitzvah of yishuv ha’aretz (settling the Land) and all it entails, obligates us to act according to the power we possess. When the non-Jews overpower us, or the international price will be too heavy, we are forced not to fulfill it (see Rambam, Laws of Avodah Zarah 10:6).

2) In recent generations, due to the moral influence of the Torah of Israel, the nations of the world have adopted laws protecting minority rights. And when Bnei Noach enact laws prohibiting expelling a hostile minority population, the Jewish people must also respect these laws, for they have the status of the Seven Noahide commandments, and there is a general halachic principle that something cannot be forbidden to Bnei Noach, yet permitted for Israel (Sanhedrin 59a).

Remembering the Mitzvah

Nonetheless, within the parameters of the law and power constraints, we are commanded to strive for hostile non-Jews to leave our Land, including Gaza. Sometimes, during war, an opportunity arises to organize comprehensive migration, or at least, create a situation encouraging migration, without clashing with the nations or international law, and we must not miss these opportunities. The state and military leadership, and shapers of public opinion, are obligated to remember this mitzvah, not miss opportunities arising on our path, and thereby, promote peace in Israel, and the world.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Vayera Feeling a Need to Do Chessed

In spite of the fact that Avraham Avinu is known for his attribute of “Chessed” (Kindness), the only actual story in the Torah in which we see Avraham engaged in an act of chessed is his welcoming the three “guests” at the beginning of Parshas Vayera. Chazal elaborate with many stories illustrating the propensity of the first Patriarch to engage in acts of kindness, but in terms of recorded Biblical evidence of this attribute of chessed, the story of Avraham’s hosting the Malachim (Angels) is the only example.

This is rather ironic because in fact, the “chedded” done by Avraham at the beginning of Parshas Vayera was an “unnecessary chessed”. In fact, his “guests” were really “Malachim” who do not get hungry and who do not eat. They really did not need all of his hospitality and graciousness. They came on a mission and could have carried out their mission without the welcome mat! This was almost like a “chedded in error”.

Why, then, out of all the various examples of Avraham Avinu’s chessed is this superfluous and unnecessary act of kindness the one that the Torah cites as the prototype of the chessed of Avraham?

On top of that, the Gemara (Bava Metzia 86b) says that it was a very hot day. The Ribono shel Olam did not want to burden Avraham Avinu with having to take care of guests, so he ensured that the weather that day would inhibit wayfarers from travelling on the road. The Gemara says that Avraham sent his servant Eliezer outdoors to see if he could find anyone to invite into Avraham's tent. Eliezer went out to seek visitors, but returned and reported that he could not find any visitors. Avraham told Eliezer, "Eliezer, I don't believe you."

We will learn in Parshas Chayei Sarah that Avraham Avinu had full trust in his loyal servant. He allowed Eliezer full control over his entire household (Hamoshel b'chol asher lo). Not only that, but when Avraham was looking to find a shidduch for Yitzchak, which was certainly the most important of matters, who does he send? He sends Eliezer. He trusts him to take care of his portfolio. He trusts him to find a shidduch for his beloved son. But to go out and find orchim – suddenly, "I don't trust you!" What is going on here?

I saw in the name of Rav Yitzchok Feigelstock, Zt"l, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Long Beach Yeshiva, that there are two types of chessed. There is a type of chessed where someone is in need and you take care of that person. You are motivated by the sense of compassion that Hashem put in most humans. When we see a disheveled person on the street in great need of help, most of us feel a natural sense of rachmanus, such that we are inclined to offer help, whenever possible. That is one type of chessed – the chessed you do to fill somebody else's needs.

There is also another type of chessed. This is a chessed that I do not do because "You need it", but rather because I need to do it! Hashem instructed us that this is why He created the world. Olam Chessed Yibaneh! (The world was created with kindness.) (Tehillim 89:3). Before this world was created, there was nothing lacking, but the Ribono shel Olam created the universe in order to do chessed. Hashem's Chessed is not a function of compassion. He does not do it because He can't stand to see a person suffering or anything like that. It is chessed for the sake of chessed – not because the recipient needs it, but because I need to do it!

In the final bracha of Shmoneh Esrei, when we say "for with the light of Your countenance You gave us, Hashem Elokeinu, the Torah of life and a love of kindness..." we are saying that the Ribono shel Olam gifted Klal Yisrael with something that no other nation has: Ahavas Chessed (love of doing kindness). We don't do chessed because of the crying shame of the situation or because this unfortunate individual's plight pulls at our heartstrings. We do chessed because we need to emulate the Ribono shel Olam, who did chessed in creating the world and we need to do it to make ourselves better people. This is a particularly Jewish quality.

Now we can understand the Gemara in Bava Metzia. Avraham tells his servant "Go out and see if there are any guests." Eliezer comes back and reports, "Nope. No one needs anything. There are no guests out there." Avraham says "I don't trust you." This was not because he suspected that Eliezer was lying to him. He really did trust Eliezer. Avraham is saying, "Eliezer, you do not understand! As wonderful as you are, you are not a Jew and you don't have the same sensitivity that I have. You don't understand that I don't look for guests just because someone needs water or food. I do chessed because I feel a need to do chessed.

That is why the Torah specifically highlights Parshas Vayera, where Avraham feeds Malachim who don't even need food – in order to illustrate the nature of Avraham's urge to do chessed: Avraham's chessed was not merely addressing the needs of the recipients of his chessed. Rather, Avraham's chessed was addressing his own need to perform acts of chessed. This is what is called Ahavas Chessed – the ultimate paradigm of Avraham's attribute of kindness.

Exploring the Depth of Heavenly Mercy

The other observation I would like to point out is from the sefer Be'er Mayim Chayim. The Be'er Mayim Chayim is a Chassidishe sefer, which is usually not my forte, but he has a beautiful insight here, which I would like to share.

The Ribono shel Olam informs Avraham that He was about to destroy Sodom. Avraham starts pleading with Hashem: Will you destroy Sodom even if there are 50 righteous people there? "No!" What about 45? "No!" Do I hear 40? Do I hear 30?

The Be'er Mayim Chayim says this is beginning to sound like the shuk (where haggling over purchase prices in the Arab market is an everyday occurrence.) What is all this bargaining about? Avraham Avinu is not in the shuk. He is talking with the Ribono shel Olam! Why does it seem like an auction here – actually a 'reverse auction' where the numbers are going down rather than up?

The Be'er Mayim Chayim says that Avraham Avinu looked at this not only as an opportunity to save the people of Sodom. He viewed it as an opportunity to explore the extent of the rachamei shamayim (Divine Mercy). He knew "I need to emulate the Ribono shel Olam. I need to be a rachaman." Avraham wanted to see how deep and how profound the Ribono shel Olam's rachmanus went.

Avraham gets into this "bidding" with the Ribono shel Olam not to "cut a better deal" or whatever. He does this to learn the depth of Heavenly Mercy. For that, Avraham Avinu says, "What about 45? What about 40? What about 30 and 20 and 10?"

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Perceptions

By Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Parshas Vayera

Why Yishmael?

Friday Night

IT IS AMAZING how quickly three parshios can pass by. This Shabbos will be a month since the Simchas Torah Arab invasion and atrocities. Unlike other Simchah Torahs from the past, this one will stay with us as we move forward in time because of the terrible bad that happened on it.

Last week we learned about the origin of Yishmael, the source of all of our Arab problems today. He might not have existed as he does now had Sarah not insisted that Avraham have a child through Hagar, her Egyptian handmaid. Yishmael would not have existed as he does had the angel not met up with Hagar in the desert and told her to return to Sarah. What a different world it might have been for the Jewish people.

Maybe the birth was not the problem, nor that Yishmael had to receive Bris Milah at 13 years of age. Maybe it was being expelled from his home with his mother and few provisions. Maybe almost dying in the desert from illness and thirst pushed him to become the pere adam—wild man—he was prophesied to be. That had to create some resentment in them, though we see at the end of next week's parsha, Hagar, a.k.a. Keturah, bore no hard feelings to either Avraham or Yitzchak.

And even had all that been necessary for some crazy historical reason that we cannot comprehend, did God have to go and make Yishmael the father of a massive nation, one that seems to keep growing? Hitler, ysv"z, rose up against the Jewish people for a period, did terrible damage, and then was gone. Haman, for all of his virulent anti-Semitic behavior lasted only 70 days, was killed, and caused a new very celebratory Jewish holiday. After thousands of years, the Arabs still hate Jews and try to annihilate them.

The Arabs have caused the Jewish people so much misery for millennia and just won't go away. They have had a very limited negative impact on the Jewish population, thank God, in proportion to the Crusades and the Holocaust. But as happiness researchers have proven, a one-time broken leg can be much easier to cope with than an ongoing trick knee. One large boom can be handled better than an ongoing squeaky door that just wears you down over time.

According to the Gemora, the angels had been perfectly happy to let Yishmael die in the desert, knowing how bad he would later be to the Jewish people on their way into Babylonian exile. But God told them, "I judge a person by what they are like at the moment, and at this time he is righteous." Well, righteous enough to be miraculously saved now to do evil another day.

But wait a second. Is that even true? What about the Ben Sorer u'Moreh, the rebellious son, mentioned in Parashas Ki Seitzei. We are told to kill him today while he is still "innocent" to avoid having to kill him later when he becomes guilty. Shouldn't the same ruling have been applied to Yishmael, saving him from all his future guilt and us from all our future grief?

Shabbos Day

THERE IS A difference. The Ben Sorer U'Moreh is Jewish and is born with a portion in the World to Come. The concern is that he will lose it based upon his current path in life. What about the fact that he could also later do teshuvah, as many have done in the past? Not worth the risk, the Torah warns us, not for the Ben Sorer U'Moreh or society, if he is already exhibiting certain signs of spiritual carelessness.

Not Yishmael though. He was not born with a portion in the World to Come that we need to save him from destroying in the future. On the contrary, we'd rather not see him there at all. We'd rather let him use up any merit he might have in this world and be "one and done."

That still leaves a very big question. What about the Jewish people to whom Yishmael will do so much of his evil? Doesn't their sanity and security come into play at all? Surely there must have been a time in the last 3,300 years when Yishmael's righteous status wore off and, the Arabs became worthy of a stricter Divine judgment, no?

Yes. But to understand why that doesn't make a difference here, we have to first understand why God arranged for Yishmael's birth at all. After all, it was God Who made Sarah barren, God Who compelled Hagar to leave Egypt with Avraham and Sarah after God had made them go down to Egypt in the first place...after seemingly promising Avraham the opposite! And it was God, in this week's parsha, Who told Avraham to listen to Sarah to send Hagar and Yishmael away. Why?

Because of this:

But God has taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people to Him, an inheritance k'yom—as at this day. (Devarim 4:20)

The Kli Yakar explains:

"Someone who purifies silver from all impurity until it is clean and pure makes it 'clear like the sun.' Similarly were you purified through the suffering in Egypt until you became 'clear like the sun.' Regarding this it says, 'to be a people to Him, an inheritance, as at this day,' like the 'daily cycle' (i.e., the sun). It is similar to what is written, 'they that love Him (should be) as the sun when he goes forth in its might' (Shoftim 5:31), and likewise, 'Sell me k'yom—as of this day your birthright' (Bereishis 25:31). K'yom is explained [by Onkeles] to mean: just as they are clear without waste, likewise sell to me [the birthright] as clear as the sun." (Kli Yakar)

The point is, as the Leshem explains, everything since the sin of eating from the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Ra, the Tree of

Knowledge of Good and Evil, is a combination of good and evil, including, and sometimes especially, the Jewish people. But that is only a temporarily reality for which the events of history are designed to bring about a permanent fix. Moshiach comes when all of the bad has been separated from the good, resulting in the complete elimination of the bad and salvation of all the good (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Introduction 20). As it says in Sefer Yetzirah, "the bad separates out the good" (Ch. 6, Mishnah 5).

That's why Avraham had to father Yishmael from Hagar. Impurities within Avraham had to go before Yitzchak could be born pure of all of them, and Yishmael was the product of those impurities. Once Yishmael was born, only Bris Milah remained to finish off Avraham's purification process so that Yitzchak could finally be born spiritually perfect.

Seudas Shlishis

THAT DOESN'T EXPLAIN though why they are still here causing us as much trouble, even more than ever before. Perhaps not, but the answer is implied.

The process of separating precious metals is a slow and methodical one. If too much heat is used, the metal will liquify and evaporate. If too little heat is used, some metal may not separate from the waste. This is why it is often done in stages, each one carefully refining the precious metal a bit more. To make ten Menorahs for the Temple, Shlomo HaMelech put 1,000 kikaros of gold for each one in the smelting pot 1,000 times to finally end up with only one kikar of pure gold (Menachos 29a).

That has been the history of the Jewish people, which is why the punishment has often seemed to not fit the crime, at least from our perspective. It's because it was more refinement than punishment to end up, at the end of history, with one "kikar" of pure Jewish people. That is the generation that will greet Moshiach and live into the next era.

When it comes to gold and silver, a kikar is a fixed amount (about 96 pounds). When it comes to humans, it can be quality over quantity, meaning that the final "kikar" of the Jewish people may be a lot of people after they have been refined. This doesn't mean that some people won't go; we have been losing so many over the last few decades alone (perhaps because they have been rectified enough to go to the next level of existence, not just of history). But it does mean that those who will be remaining will have become purified in preparation for the Messianic Era.

Every nation the Jewish people have had to cope with over history has been the means for this process, just as Egypt was in its time. Now, with history closing out, the last nation to be part of that process seems to be the Arab world. At least, that is, until the War of Gog and Magog puts the finishing touches on a long history of tziruf v'libun—refinement and whitening.

Ain Od Milvado, Part 71

I WAS RECENTLY asked what you tell a mother who says that she can't believe in a God Who took her two sons. The answer, of course, is, nothing. All you can do is support her and do whatever you can do to comfort her, for as long as she needs and as long as you can. If by some miracle, she later finds it in her painfully sore heart to accept both, the early loss of her sons and a God Who can allow it to happen, amazing. If not, she will join the millions of Jews who, over the ages, gave up on God because they believed God had given up on them.

So much of the time when we talk about ain od Milvado, it is the context of recalling that nothing in the world has any power but God. God directs everything, arranges everything, and makes everything either succeed or fail. Free-will may be ours to use, but the results of our decisions are God's alone (Brochos 33b).

But ain od Milvado also applies to the most tragic of losses. Not many may have said it, but some certainly thought it. How could God allow the Hamas butchers to capture and torture Jews, especially on Shemini Atzeres, the day that celebrates the unique relationship between God and the Jewish people? Why would He allow their simchah of Torah to be turned into a day of dreadful fear and torture, perhaps for years to come?

The only answer we have at present is, ain od Milvado. It means, we can't answer the questions specifically because we just don't know the answers. We just know that He did, and that He had His reasons. Beyond that, we're going to have to wait to find out more of the truth, perhaps after Moshiach has already come and fixed the world. Having ain od Milvado, not just in your mind but in your heart as well, is the only way for our belief in Him and all He does to remain intact until we reach that time, may it be quickly and in our time, b"H.

TORAH SHORTS: Weekly Biblical Thoughts by Rabbi Ben-Tzion Spitz

A Fertility Strategy (Vayera)

Every charitable act is a stepping stone toward heaven. - Henry Ward Beecher

Three travelers, who turn out to be angels, stop by Abraham who is just recovering from having circumcised himself at the age of 99 years old. Abraham rushes to greet them and give them water and food, as well as shade from the hot Canaanite sun. One of the travelers prophetically declares:

'I will certainly return unto thee when the season cometh round; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son.' Genesis 18:10

Abraham and Sarah are the classic biblical example of an infertile couple. After years of trying, after tearful prayers, after attempting every conceivable and even some unusual strategies, they frankly give up. When they reach advanced

ages, it is naturally impossible for Sarah to conceive and unlikely for Abraham.

There are various rabbinic explanations given as to why they were tested in this fashion and why it took so long. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the Kli Yakar (1550-1619) on Genesis 18:6 explains why they finally had a child.

He compares the case to another hauntingly parallel story in the Bible. The prophet Elisha is given extravagant (for those days) hospitality by an older woman of Shunam who recognizes Elisha as a man of God (see II Kings 4:8-17 for the story). Though past child-bearing age, she is blessed with a son, in almost the same language and words as the prophetic announcement of Sarah's birth to Isaac:

'At this season, when the time cometh round, thou shall embrace a son.' II Kings 4:16

The Kli Yakar explains that a possible reason for their blessing and miraculous births was simply because of their great hospitality.

May our acts of hospitality give birth to many blessings.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

On the marriage of Atara Razin and Baruch Katz. Mazal Tov!

Parsha Insights

By Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

Parshas Vayera

She Just Laughed...

This week we read the parsha of Vayera. "Vayera ailav Hashem {Hashem appeared to him (to Avrohom)}[18:1]." The passuk {verse} doesn't state the purpose of this visit nor does it state what Hashem said to Avrohom. Rashi therefore understands that this passuk is a continuation from the last passuk of the previous parsha which dealt with Avrohom's bris milah {circumcision}. Rashi teaches that the purpose of Hashem's appearance to Avrohom was 'bikur cholim' {visiting the sick}.

Avrohom lifted his eyes and saw three 'men' approaching. He, in spite of his pain, rushed to greet them and to invite them for a meal. They were in fact three angels, each with an individualized mission. One informed Avrohom that in one year's time, Sarah would give birth to a son.

Sarah was standing in a doorway behind the angel when she heard him make this pronouncement. She was a mere eighty nine years old at the time and Avrohom was ninety nine. "Sarah laughed wondering: After I've aged will I regain my youth?[18:12]"

"Hashem spoke to Avrohom saying: Why did Sarah laugh... Is there anything that is beyond Me?[18:13-14]"

"And Sarah denied it saying 'I didn't laugh.' And he (Avrohom) said: 'No, you laughed.'[18:15]"

This entire episode with Sarah's laughter and subsequent denial is very hard to understand.

The Ramban explains that, although Hashem had already told Avrohom that he was going to have a son, Avrohom had not relayed that prophecy to Sarah, thinking that Hashem would inform her Himself. Furthermore, in Sarah's eyes, these visitors were nothing more than idolatrous merchants who had perchanced past their tent. Therefore, there was really no reason that she should have attached any credibility to their seemingly ridiculous declaration.

If so, what was the complaint against Sarah that Hashem voiced to Avrohom?

The Ramban explains that the thought of having a child should not have been so astounding in Sarah's eyes. Instead of scornful laughter her reaction should have been along the lines of a heartfelt: 'From your lips to G-d's ears.'

The Ramban explains further that when Avrohom spoke to Sarah about her attitude, she thought that he was basing his censure on her not having shown happiness when she heard their declaration. She denied it. Once Avrohom stated in a definitive manner: "No, you laughed," she realized that he was basing it on what Hashem had revealed to him. She therefore remained quiet.

The Noam Elimelech explains in a different way which I think has some applications to us.

He writes that a person must aspire to reach such a heightened state of 'Hashem-awareness' that even an 'amazing' event won't be a cause for surprise. Hashem runs the world and can do anything He wants. On the contrary, the fact that Hashem conceals Himself behind the cloak of nature is very out of the ordinary and quite 'amazing'. Hashem breaking nature and doing His will regardless of what's considered normal is in fact a natural state of His existence and will.

He explains that Sarah laughed with gleeful surprise. What a miracle! Amazing!

Hashem complained to Avrohom: "Is there anything that is beyond Me?" Why was she so shocked? Was she being tricked by and falling into the clutches of nature's illusion? Sarah was concerned that Avrohom shouldn't mistakenly think that she had scoffed at the thought of having a child. "And Sarah denied it saying 'I didn't laugh.'" "And he (Avrohom) said: 'No, you laughed.'" On your level, the surprised happiness that you exhibited was tantamount to a scoffing laugh...

We certainly are not on a level where we're expected to accept supernatural events as commonplace, yet there are things which we shouldn't find so surprising. We too are misled by the natural world and are 'surprised' and gleeful when scientific advances lead us right back to the knowledge we already had through the Torah. Of course, there should be no contradictions between science and Torah. One is the probing and revealing of the world's

secrets through painstaking experimentation and observation. The other is the knowledge of those very same secrets through the Creator's revelations.

Maimonides, through his knowledge of the Oral Transmission of Torah, writes that the lunar month is exactly twenty nine and a half days, plus 793/1080 of an hour. This comes out to .732459 of an hour or .03059 of a day. The month is therefore 29.53059 days.

NASA, based on information gathered through the most sophisticated telescope they had, concluded that the length of the lunar month is 29.530588. Rounded up to the nearest one hundred thousandth this comes out to the identical number always known to us. When the scientist was told that the Jews already had that number, his response was: Good guess...

That's where we run into difficulties with science. When a monopoly of knowledge has been proclaimed...

However, we should accept these findings as commonplace.

The Talmud [Sotah] teaches that one should only pray for a specific gender during the first forty days of pregnancy. After that point, it's too late as the gender has already been set.

Newsweek reported that researchers at the Institute for Biomedical Research in Cambridge, Mass. 'discovered' that in the seventh week of pregnancy, the gene which determines the gender of an embryo launches a process that leads to sexual development.

Surprised?

Good Shabbos,

Yisroel Ciner

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Vayera

The Return of Abraham

This week we read of Avraham's experiencing both a humbling failure and stunning accomplishment. After he was informed of the wonderful news that a child will be born to him and Sora, Avraham is told bad news. Though it would not affect Avraham personally, Avraham took it personally.

Hashem informed Avraham that he was about to destroy the city of S'dom. That city's customs were diametrically opposed to every one of Avraham's principles and teachings. Where he espoused kindness, they preached selfishness. Where Avraham spoke of Hashem, S'domites promulgated heresy. Avraham should have reveled in their demise, but he did not. He pleaded with Hashem to spare them.

"Will You stamp out the righteous together with the wicked? "Perhaps," he cried "there are 50 righteous men in the city. Shall You not spare the city in the merit of the 50?" (cf. Genesis 18:23-24). But there were not 50, There

were not 40. In fact, there were not even 10 and Avraham had no more bargaining chips. Hashem did not spare S'dom. Avraham lost his case. The Torah tells us that, "Hashem departed after he finished speaking to Avraham and Avraham returned to his place." (Genesis 18:33). What does the Torah mean, "Avraham returned to his place"? Where else should he go? To watch the fireworks that once was S'dom?

This is not the only time that Avraham returns. At the end of the portion, we read of Avraham's great faith and fortitude. He is told by Hashem to sacrifice his only son, Yitzchak up on a mountain the Akeida. Unquestioning and determined, Avraham embarks to fulfill Hashem's wishes. Before the knife reaches his son's neck, an angel stops Avraham AND tells him that he has passed the test of commitment. Hashem promises to increase Avraham's offspring like the stars, and declares that all the nations of the world will bless themselves by Avraham's offspring. After the remarkable incident the Torah tells us that "Avraham returned to his young men."

What does the Torah mean? Of course he returned. Should he stay on the mountain forever? Of course he returned!

Rabbi Dovid Koppleman tells the story of Rabbi Abish, the Rav of Frankfurt who was known for his extraordinary humility. In addition, he would often raise funds for the needy families of his city. Once he heard that a wealthy man was on business in town and went to the man's hotel suite to ask him for a donation. The tycoon was arrogant and assumed that the Rav was a poor shnorrer, and after a few moments drove him out of his room. A few minutes later the man went to leave his suite and looked for his silver cane. Noticing it was gone, he immediately suspected that Reb Abish took it during his brief visit.

Quickly, the man bolted toward the lobby of the hotel where he accosted Reb Abish. "Thief," the man shouted while pushing the Rav, "give me back my cane!" Reb Abish calmly pleaded. "I did not steal your cane. Please do not accuse me! Please believe me. I did not steal your cane!"

The man was adamant in his arrogance and began to beat the Rav while onlookers recoiled in horror. Reb Abish, despite the pain, remained steadfast in his humble demeanor. "Please believe me. I did not steal your cane!" Finally, the man realized he was getting nowhere and left Reb Abish in disgust.

That Saturday was Shabbos Shuva. The entire community, including the wealthy visitor, packed Frankfurt's main synagogue for the traditional Shabbos Shuva Speech. Horror gripped the visitor as a familiar looking figure rose to the podium and mesmerized the vast audience with an eloquent oration. It was the very shnorrer he had accosted in the hotel!

As soon as the speech ended, the man pushed his way toward the podium and in a tearful voice tried to attract the

Rabbi's attention. He was about to plead forgiveness for his terrible behavior when Reb Abish noticed the man. In all sincerity Reb Abish began to softly plead with him. "I beg of you please do not hit me. I truly did not steal your cane."

Avraham's greatness engendered his humility in every circumstance, in victory and defeat. After losing the case of Sodom, he returns. After his amazing accomplishment of the Akeida, he returns. Avraham returns home, never showing the haughty spoils of victory or the despondent embarrassment of defeat. He remained constant in his service to Hashem and in his attitude to his family and peers. Avraham does not revel in victory nor despair in defeat. He returns the same way as he leaves. Steadfast in faith and constant in character.

Good Shabbos

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Dedicated in memory of Milton Gluck by the Gluck Family

Parshat Vayera: Abraham's Silence

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

And it came to pass...that God did test Abraham and said to him, Abraham, and he said, Here I am! And He said, Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I shall show you. (Genesis 22:1-2)

When God presents Abraham with the most difficult and tragic command to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, Abraham rises early the next morning, loads his donkey, calls his servants and immediately starts the journey – without a word of protest. We find no indication that Abraham considered the possibility of remonstrating with the divine, asking for a reconsideration of the injunction, a reasonable reaction given that the Almighty had just guaranteed him: 'Through Isaac shall your seed be called.' Could God have changed His mind?

What makes this question even more poignant is that Abraham does stand up to God when he wants to. In one of the most memorable exchanges in the Torah, the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah brings out all of Abraham's oratorical skills as he pleads for the lives of the wicked inhabitants. 'Will the judge of the world not act justly, will the Almighty destroy the innocent together with the wicked?' he provocatively asks. And if there are at least ten innocent residents, ought the country not be spared? If Abraham was willing to defend the wicked Sodomites from a mass death, couldn't he have done at least as much for his righteous, beloved and divinely promised son?

There are a number of directions to take in explaining Abraham's silence, and I'd like to suggest three.

First of all, there is a commentary suggested by Rabbi Joseph Ibn Kaspi reminding us of the historical context of

the world in which Abraham lived. True, the Torah was given for all time, but it was also given within a certain contextual and historical frame. Abraham lived at a time when the pagan world demonstrated allegiance to the idol Molokh by ritually sacrificing children. Therefore, embedded within the mind of the patriarch was the terrible possibility that such a command may well reach him from his God. In a world of idolatry where children were often sacrificed to Molokh, Abraham may well have understood and even expected that he too could be commanded to do the same – and so he does not even attempt to argue. From this perspective, the command of the Akeida, and its subsequent cancellation, irrevocably makes child sacrifice unacceptable to the Jewish religion. From this perspective, the real test of Abraham comes with the second divine command emanating from the mouth of the angel, 'Abraham, Abraham...Do not send forth your hand against the lad and don't do anything against him...' [Gen. 22:12]. When the patriarch agreed not to sacrifice his son to his God, he demonstrated his break from the world of bloodthirsty idols and his true acceptance of the God of justice and compassion.

This interpretation has special poignancy when modern Israelis witness the chairman of the Palestinian Authority using young children to sacrifice themselves in the front lines of battle – urging them and paying them to throw stones at Israeli citizens while shielding gun-toting Palestinians behind them to become suicidal homicide bombers. The imams promise them eternal bliss in Paradise. Clearly, such cynical use, or rather misuse, of precious children is absolutely biblically forbidden, as the final word of God at the conclusion of the Akeida story demonstrates.

Yet another offshoot of this interpretation is the all too common syndrome of overly ambitious, hyper-successful parents – worst case scenario in pursuit of fame and fortune, best case scenario hoping to save the world (this includes committed rabbis) – who sacrifice their children for God. In the case of a rabbi or educator, the student or congregation often come first, even at the Shabbat table. The Almighty is ultimately teaching Abraham that he dare not sacrifice his son, not even for Him!

Secondly, I've written in the past of two types of prayer – national prayer on behalf of the world and personal prayer on behalf of oneself or one's family – based on two distinct ways in which Moses beseeches the Almighty. When it comes to a prayer on behalf of the entire nation of Israel – a prayer for forgiveness following the sin of the Golden Calf – Moses pleads for forty days and forty nights, beseeching, remonstrating and even demanding that the Almighty not forsake His covenantal people. However, when his own sister Miriam is sick, he utters only five words: 'O God please heal her.' After all, God's promise guaranteed the nation's eternity, but not necessarily the health of Miriam, Moses' own sister.

What's true for Moses applies equally to Abraham. When it comes to the destruction of an entire society, a possibility that innocents will die along with the masses, Abraham pleads with all his rhetorical gifts to alter the horror of the edict. But when it comes to Isaac, his own son, he can allow himself only the minimum of words and gestures. For a people he will plead, but for himself – and Isaac is really an extension of himself – he must remain silent.

And finally, perhaps, Abraham does not argue because he is in a different relationship with God than he was when he remonstrated on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, a more distant relationship which does not permit the camaraderie of questioning a divine order.

Fear of God (*yirat haShem*) and love of God (*ahavat haShem*) are the two fundamental attitudes one takes toward the Almighty. The first emanates from a sense of distance from God and the second from a sense of closeness to God. Maimonides looks upon the fear of God as emanating from the existential realization of one's own smallness in the face of the Infinite, inspired by the magnificent wonders of the cosmic universe. The one who fears God is overwhelmed by the *mysterium tremendum* of divine powers, and is filled with feelings of profound reverence and awe before the majesty of divine creation (*yirat ha-romemut*). In contrast, love of God, teaches Maimonides, emanates from the desire to cleave to God as a lover, who yearns to remove any separation from himself and his beloved, whose thoughts are totally involved with her at every moment and in every situation. In commenting on the verse, 'Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy,' Nahmanides insists that the individual who serves God from love is on a higher spiritual level than the one who serves Him from fear, which is why our Sages have ruled that a positive commandment (love of God) pushes aside and overrides a negative commandment (fear of God). Nevertheless, both relationships are necessary and complement each other.

Fear of God is critical in the fabric of human existence. Those who love – either God or another human being – may sometimes rationalize away their own lapses and indiscretions with the sense that the beloved will understand, that those in love 'need not say they are sorry.' The very closeness of the relationship can breed a 'taking for granted' attitude. Fear of God brooks no exceptions, doesn't allow anyone to take any advantage. Fear of God keeps us on our toes. It keeps us brutally honest, constantly spurring us on to remain steady and steadfast despite the narrowness – the abyss on either side – of life's very narrow bridge. Abraham was the great example of worshipping God from love.

He left the comfort of his homeland, birthplace and family and entered unknown territory in order to be with God – much as a lover following his beloved. The Talmudic sages suggest that he arrived at the God idea as a result of his own intellectual understanding – and for the great

philosopher Maimonides, knowledge and love are synonymous. Abraham establishes altar after altar in the name of his beloved God, of whose ethical teachings and powers of creativity he never ceases to speak – and attempt to persuade others to accept. He is close to God and he understands God – even to the extent of his realization that the Judge of all the world will never perpetrate an injustice, will consider it an anathema to destroy the righteous with the wicked. Hence, he argues with the divine on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah.

He then sojourns to the land of Gerar where Avimelekh is king. Afraid that Sarah's beauty will endanger his life, Abraham instructs Sarah to say she is his sister. The king takes her into his harem, but then in a dream Avimelekh learns that he has overstepped his bounds, that Sarah is actually Abraham's wife. Explanations follow, and when Abraham is asked why he lied he explains, 'Surely the fear of God is not in this place....' Abraham believed that since the 'Gerareans' had no fear of God, they would be likely to murder him if he were indeed the husband of the beautiful Sarah. After all, the very first question they asked him – a stranger in town – was not whether he needed hospitality, but was about his wife!

In the end, Avimelekh makes Abraham a wealthy man. 'Behold my land is before you, dwell where it pleases you.' Abraham receives sheep, cattle, male and female slaves, even a gift of a thousand pieces of silver. Sarah is restored to Abraham. But the last words we read before the account of the Akeda is that Abraham lives in the land of the Philistines for many days. Indeed, the very introduction to the Akeda story begins: 'After these things...' – the last thing being Abraham in Gerar.

What was he doing there? Hadn't he just declared that 'surely the fear of God is not in this place...?' And nevertheless, he remained behind! What happened to his own fear of God? Was it affected? Could it possibly not have been affected? Each of us is affected by his/her environment. Should the first patriarch have lived for many days in a place absent of the fear of God? Abraham will have to be tested to determine if indeed he is still worthy of becoming the father of the Jewish people. As the events of the Akeda unfold, and Abraham lifts the slaughtering knife, what are the words of the angel of God? 'Do not harm the boy...For now I know that you fear God....'

A circle has just been completed, an event that began with Gerar and ends with Moriah. Abraham has proved that he still fears God despite his residence in Gerar. The entire incident of the Akeda bespeaks Abraham's fear of God, his unquestioning acceptance of a divine command he could not possibly understand. His experience in Gerar had apparently caused him to work overtime on his 'fear of God' – and perhaps neglect a bit of his 'love of God.'

From this perspective, entirely new light is shed on the manner in which the Sefat Emet interprets the verse that describes Abraham's approach to Moriah: 'And he saw the

place [makom] from a distance.’ We must understand this to mean that Abraham saw God (makom is after all also taken by the Midrash as a synonym for God, who is every place) from a distance, an expression of fear of God, yirat ha-shem. Had Abraham perceived God from up close, he would have realized – argues the Sefat Emet – that the God of ethical monotheism could never possibly have wished for a human sacrifice!

Perhaps the basis for this fascinating insight of the Sefat Emet is the Talmudic interpretation of the prophet Jeremiah’s denunciation of child sacrifice, ‘which I (God) did not command, which I did not speak, and which did not approach my heart’ [Jer. 19:5]:

‘Which I did not command’ refers to the son of Mesha the King of Moab...; ‘Which I did not speak’ refers to Jephthah; ‘Which did not approach my heart’ refers to Isaac, the son of Abraham...’ (Ta’anit 4a)

And this is very much in line with Rashi, who suggests that Abraham actually misunderstood the meaning of the command of the Almighty: ‘I God, never said for you to slaughter [Isaac] but only for you to lift him up’ – to dedicate him to Me in life and not in death! In other words, an Abraham steeped in the emotion of fear of God, as important as such an emotion may be, is too far away to have perceived the real intention of the divine. And certainly one who feels far removed from God is hardly going to be brazen enough to conduct intimate conversations with God, to dare to argue against a divine command!

And if the first commandment to go to Israel, with which Abraham initiates his election, expresses the first patriarch’s love of God, this final commandment of the Akeda expresses his fear of God. Only an individual who combines both religious dynamics can be the father of the children of Israel.

Especially in light of this last interpretation, there remains yet one agonizing question: why was the divine command ambiguous, leaving room for Abraham’s seemingly ‘misguided’ interpretation? I believe that our Torah understands only too well that the future history of our people will be fraught with tragedies of exile and persecution, a holocaust war against the Jews and liberation wars to acquire the Jewish State. All of these required and requires parents to see their children burnt on the stake, to accompany their children to the idf base...There is profound historic necessity for the fact that this last trial of Abraham pictures him as willing to silently take his only beloved son to be sacrificed on the altar of God, if he understood that such was the divine command. Given the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of the tear-drenched history of our people, Abraham and Isaac also had to serve as supreme models of those ready to give up life and future for the sanctification of the divine name.

Shabbat Shalom

Parshas Vayeira

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week’s Insights is dedicated in honor of Yitzy Zweig. A wonderful person and a great friend.

Selfish Giving

The two angels came to Sdom in the evening and Lot was sitting at the gates of Sdom; and Lot saw and stood up to meet them and bowed, face to the ground (19:1).

This week’s parsha contains a remarkable contrast of the chessed of Avraham with that of his brother-in-law Lot. Just as Avraham had been sitting in his tent gazing towards the highway looking for visitors, so too the Torah tells us regarding Lot; “and Lot was sitting at the gate of Sdom (ibid).” Rashi (ad loc) explains that Lot had learned from living in the house of Avraham to seek out guests.

Avraham is known as the patriarch of chessed. Yet by Lot we see a level of chessed that seems to transcend that of even Avraham, the quintessential paradigm of kindness.

Lot invites the angels who came to Sdom to stay at his home and, even after they politely demure, he insists that they take him up on his offer. Bear in mind, showing kindness to strangers was a serious crime in the city of Sdom; merely feeding the poor of the city was a capital offense (See Sanhedrin 109b and Midrash Tanchuma on Vayeira).

By offering to host the angels, Lot was literally putting himself and his family at grave risk. In fact, Lot was well aware of these potential consequences; once the angels agreed to take him up on his offer, he told them to take a roundabout route so that the inhabitants of Sdom wouldn’t take notice that they were staying in his home (see Rashi 19:2). This seems to be a very high level chessed.

Moreover, when the people of Sdom do find out and surround his home to attack them, Lot makes an extraordinary offer: “I have two daughters that have never been with a man, I shall bring them out to you and you may do as you please with them. Just do not harm these men because they have come under the shelter of my roof” (19:8). Clearly, Lot goes above and beyond to protect these visitors. How is it possible that he isn’t the quintessential “bal chessed”?

While it’s true that doing kindness is an admirable trait, there are often different motivations for being a bal chessed. Helping others is a very fulfilling experience, one feels that he has done the right thing and this is very satisfying. However, another aspect of a being a bal chessed is the feeling that one has now become a greater person for becoming a bal chessed. One who is known as a magnanimous person is admired and held in high esteem.

True chessed requires one to diminish oneself. We see this from Hashem Himself: The world was created as an act of chessed (see Derech Hashem, Part One) and in order to effect a real act of creation Hashem constricted Himself

(the tzimtzum), as it were, to give mankind a feeling of an independent existence. Thus, Hashem limiting Himself effected the original act of chessed and now defines how true chessed is accomplished: through a diminishment of the benefactor.

Avraham Avinu did chessed in exactly the same way; “Avraham ran to the cattle [...] he took cream, milk, and the calf which he prepared, and placed it before them; and he stood over them [...]” (18:7-8).

Even though Avraham was very wealthy he didn’t just snap his fingers and have servants prepare everything and serve his guests. On the contrary, he ran himself to prepare all the foods and then acted as a waiter to serve the food himself — even hovering nearby to see what else they might require.

On the other hand, the Torah tells us exactly Lot’s motivation: “for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” He didn’t want the people of Sdom harming anyone who was under his protection because that would be a violation of his power to shelter someone. For Lot, his magnanimity was about his power and his reputation; it was really all about him. This is reflected in his outrageous offering of his daughters to the people of Sdom to protect his reputation.

An Amazing Sacrifice

And it happened after these words that Hashem tested Avraham [...] (22:1).

At the end of this week’s parsha we find the famous story of the akeida, where Hashem asks Avraham to bring his beloved son Yitzchak as a sacrifice. This is the last and hardest of Avraham’s tests from Hashem.

Just as Avraham passed the first nine tests, he perseveres in this test as well. Thus, he is accorded great righteousness and devotion for being willing to sacrifice his son at God’s request. Obviously, Avraham’s achievement is enormous.

Yet, we must delve deeper. Unfortunately, Jewish history is replete with tragic stories of losing family members. In fact, we find by the tribe of Levi that when Moshe called them to action after the episode of the Golden Calf, they had no qualms about murdering their families (their brothers, parents, grandchildren, and grandparents, see Rashi Shemos 32:27 and Devarim 33:9), all of whom had taken part in the sin of the Golden Calf. They too sacrificed beloved relatives for the sake of Hashem!

We also find the story of Chana and her seven sons (Gittin 57b): The Caesar demanded that her children be brought to him and bow down to worship an idol. One by one they refused and were put to death. When the Caesar saw that his threats had no impact on their resolve, he approached the last child and told him, “I will merely throw down my signet ring and you will bend down to pick it up, so that people will say you have accepted the king’s authority.” The child refused, saying; “If you have such concern for your honor, how much more so do I have to be concerned for the honor of the Almighty!”

When he was taken out to be killed, Chana begged to give him a final kiss. She told him, “Go tell your patriarch Avraham that he did one akeida altar while I did seven akeida altars.” In truth, Chana’s sacrifice seems to be even greater than that of Avraham Avinu’s, what was it about Avraham’s act that made him so unique?

People deal with horrific situations in various ways, but the most common way is to disconnect themselves from either their body, their emotions, or both. We see this almost daily in the news, people explaining that they endured the most horrific acts by physically and emotionally disconnecting. This is how most people cope and, unfortunately, it wreaks havoc on a person’s state of mind.

This is how the members of the tribe of Levi were able to kill so many of their relatives: they emotionally disconnected themselves from what they had to do. This is also how Chana coped with the loss of her seven sons. However, this tragedy took an incredible toll on her; the story ends with her committing suicide by throwing herself from the roof.

Avraham Avinu was different. When Hashem asked him to bring his beloved son as a sacrifice he didn’t disconnect himself. On the contrary, Avraham was fully engaged emotionally: he was filled with love for Hashem (see Rashi on 22:3) and joy in fulfilling God’s command (see Rashi 22:6). Avraham wasn’t a cold and distant person, on the contrary, he is known as the “patriarch of kindness.” Nevertheless, his absolute faith and connection to Hashem allowed him to go forth with the terrible act of sacrificing his son with true love, joy, and devotion. He didn’t have to disconnect himself. This is what made Avraham’s fulfillment of the test of the akeida so unique.

לע"נ

שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל ע"ה