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INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON VAYEIRA - 5774

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From: ravfrand-owner@torah.org on behalf of Rabbi Yissocher Frand [ryfrand@torah.org] Sent: Friday, November 18, 2005 1:26 AM To: ravfrand@torah.org Subject: Rabbi Frand on Parshas Vayeira "RavFrاند" List - **Rabbi Frand on Parshas Vayeira**
These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of **Rabbi Yissocher Frand's** Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 479, Mitzvah of Inviting Guests.

Why Did Avraham Consult With Mamrei Concerning The Mitzvah of Milah?

The pasuk [verse] at the beginning of the parsha describes Avraham as sitting in Elonei Mamrei (the plains of Mamrei) when Hashem [G-d] appeared to him [Bereshis 18:1]. Rashi explains the significance of the Torah pinpointing his location on this occasion: It was Mamrei who advised him concerning the Milah (telling him that circumcision was a good idea). Therefore, G-d appeared to Avraham in Mamrei's territory. Apparently, Avraham's other allies -- Aner and Eshkol -- advised him against circumcision at this advanced age. Only Mamrei advised him to follow G-d's command and encouraged him to go ahead with the operation. By Hashem appearing to Avraham in Elonei Mamrei, Mamrei was eternally memorialized for his "participation" in Avraham's milah.

The commentaries are bothered by the idea that Mamrei advised Avraham to go ahead and listen to G-d's command to circumcise himself. It is impossible to contemplate that Avraham was in doubt as to whether to listen to the Divine command? If we take this teaching at face value, it would appear that Avraham was seeking out a "second opinion" as to whether to undergo this operation, despite the fact that G-d had commanded him to do it. This cannot be.

The Daas Zekeinim suggests that Avraham never had any doubt that he would fulfill G-d's command. His only doubt was whether he should circumcise himself publicly or privately. In other words, he consulted with Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei in order to gauge the surrounding

neighbor's reaction to such an action. Mamrei advised Avraham to do it publicly.

The Imrei Shammai quotes from the work Toras Aharon al HaTorah, which provides a very interesting insight and alternate answer to this question. Avraham Avinu had no doubt in his mind that he was going to perform the mitzvah of milah. So why did he need to go to the non-Jewish world to solicit advice? The answer is that Avraham wanted to place on the record the fact that even the non-Jew believes milah is a good idea. This would impress the "sinners of Israel" in every generation who always seek out the opinion of the non-Jews on all matters and respect their opinions (more than those of the rabbis).

Today, even Jews who have very little relationship with Judaism, who are extremely secular, do circumcise their sons. They call other mitzvos "old-fashioned", "archaic", or "anachronistic". Among many circles of our Jewish brethren, the concern over "what will they say?" is an excuse for the non-performance of so many of our mitzvos. However, milah is nevertheless widely observed even in "non-observant" circles.

Why is this so? The Toras Aharon suggests that Avraham Avinu achieved this lasting impact by consulting with Mamrei. Even the non-Jew believes milah is a good idea! As a result, the argument "what will the umos ha'olam say?" has never applied to this mitzvah.

Respect Begins At Home

Toward the beginning of the parsha, the visiting Angel delivered the message from G-d to Avraham: "I will surely return to you at this time next year, and behold Sarah your wife will have a son. Avraham and Sarah were elderly and that the manner of women had ceased to be with Sarah." [Bereshis 18:10-11] Then in the next pasuk, Sarah asks: "After I have withered I shall again have delicate skin? And my husband is an old man."

In other words, Sarah wonders how is it possible for her to conceive, when she is already past her years of childbearing. In addition, her husband was an old man as well.

However, when Hashem went back to Avraham and chastised him for the laughing disbelief of his wife, Hashem only mentioned her argument that she was old to Avraham. The Almighty does not reveal to Avraham that Sarah had also doubted the news because "her husband was an old man." Rashi infers from this discrepancy -- based on Chazal -- that there is justification for changing (the truth) to preserve peace (between husband and wife).

Rav Pam asks the following question: Avraham Avinu was in fact 99 years old. Everyone knew that he was an old man. Everyone, no doubt, treated him like an old man. It was obvious to him that he was an old man. It would have not at all been news to Avraham that Sarah was surprised that she would conceive, because -- among other reasons -- her husband was old. Would Avraham really have been upset if he had heard the "full truth" from the Almighty?

Rav Pam explains that we see from here, that the whole world can recognize and tell a person that he is old, but he cannot hear that piece of news from his wife! The reverse is true as well. A woman can have gray hair. She can be a grandmother and even a great grandmother many times over. But G-d forbid, if her husband should tell her, "You know, you are getting up there in years."

A person may be able to hear that "news" from everybody, but one cannot hear it from his or her spouse. In spite of the intimacy between husband and wife, there is a certain degree of respect and manners that each must maintain with the other for the good of their marriage. Husbands cannot insult wives and wives cannot insult husbands even if the "insult" is nothing more than revealing a true and obvious fact.

A person must feel and see a certain amount of respect from their spouse. Other people may take liberties in certain comments that a spouse cannot take.

I recently heard a tape from Rabbi Mordechai Finkleman who lectures widely on the lack of Derech Eretz (proper, respectful conduct) we unfortunately find in many of our schools today. Of course this is a problem in the public schools and in non-Jewish circles. But it has become a problem even in our circles (anshei shlomeinu) as well. Derech Eretz is not what it used to be.

One observation that Rabbi Finkleman makes is that the children learn from what they see in their own houses -- how their parents treat each other. If they observe husband and wife manifesting Derech Eretz toward each other, the children will intuitively learn how they must treat their elders and their teachers. If the parents themselves are disrespectful and rude toward each other, what can be expected from the children?

He cited a historical rabbinical "kinus" (meeting) that took place in Europe 70 or 80 years ago to address the issue of lack of Derech Eretz in the European cheder of that day. Different Rabbis spoke about the problem of lack of respect and what should be done about it. The final speaker on the agenda was the Telzer Rav. After a whole series of proposals and ideas were presented by all the earlier speakers, the Telzer Rav's presentation consisted of one sentence: "If a person acts respectfully, he will be respected." In other words a dignified person commands respect. If we do not properly respect people, it is sometimes because they are not worthy of respect, based on the way they act.

If we want our children to show respect to their spouses, to their parents, and to their teachers, the first way to accomplish that is for we ourselves to demonstrate proper respect to our own spouses, our own parents, and our own teachers and rabbis.

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Back to this week's parsha

The Weekly Internet P A R A S H A - P A G E

by **Rabbi Mordecai Kornfeld** of Har Nof, Jerusalem
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This week's mailing has been dedicated by Rabbi Shlomo Shapiro of Kew Gardens Hills, N.Y. in honor of the Bat-Mitzvah of Rivka Becker.
PARASHAT VAYERA 5758 THE PRAYERS OF OUR FOREFATHERS The daily prayers were instituted by our forefathers... Avraham instituted the morning prayer, as the verse says, "Avraham arose early to stand at the place in which he had earlier stood [in prayer] before Hashem" (Bereishit 19:27)... Yitzchak instituted the afternoon prayer... and Yakov instituted the evening prayer. (Berachos 26b)

Our Sages tell us that the three prayers of the day were established by our three forefathers. Although the exact wording of our prayers is clearly a later institution, it is reasonable to assume that it was composed with this point in mind. We may expect the life history and accomplishments of each forefather to be reflected in "his" prayer.

Although the keynote of our services, the Shemoneh Esreh, is nearly identical in all three of the daily prayers, nevertheless the introductory prayers which precede the Shemoneh Esreh vary greatly from one prayer to the other. It is in these that we would expect to find an allusion to the patron of that particular prayer. Let us search the daily prayers for such allusions.

II The first prayer of the day is Shacharit, or the morning prayers. The poem "Adon Olam" plays a prominent part among the opening words of Shacharit. It has been suggested that this is associated to the teaching of the Gemara in Berachot (7b), "From the day Hashem created the world no-one ever called Him 'Master' (Adon), until Avraham came and called Him 'Master' (Bereishit 15:8)." Avraham was the one who taught the people of the world that they are not free to do as they please; there is a Master up above to Whom we must hearken. Since Avraham instituted the morning prayer, we mention his most important teaching at the very beginning of this prayer. (Tikun Tefilah in Otzar ha'Tefilos citing the Vilna Gaon; introduction to Koheles Yitzchak on the Torah, citing a student of the Vilna Gaon; see also Sidur Sha'ar ha'Rachamim, written by Rav Pinchas of Polotzk, student of the Vilna Gaon, for a similar approach.)

We end the introductory Psalms of the morning services with the prayer "Yishtabach." In at least some versions (Sephardi; Kabbalistic/Nusach Sefard), Yishtabach ends with five consecutive phrases, the acrostic of which spells out "Avraham!" This was undoubtedly instituted for the same reason.

III Twice a day, in the morning and the evening, we precede the Shemoneh Esreh prayer with the recital of the verses of the Shema. This is a particularly appropriate introduction for the prayers of Avraham and Yakov.

As we have explained elsewhere (Parasha-Page, Vaetchanan 5756), the Shema has to motifs: (1) accepting upon ourselves Hashem's sovereignty (Mishnah, Berachot 13a), and (2) accepting upon ourselves to learn Hashem's Torah (Gemara, Berachot 14b). These two themes correspond exactly to the primary teachings of Avraham and Yakov. Avraham taught the world that Hashem is the Master of all Creation and that it is He Whom we must serve (Rashi Bereishit 12:5; 21:33; see also above, II). The morning Shema ushers in Avraham's prayer by emphasizing this theme. Yakov's life was dominated by the study of Torah (Rashi Bereishit 25:27; 28:9,11). We therefore introduce his prayer with Shema as well, this time because of the other theme of Shema.

It is also interesting to note that in Shema we call on "Yisrael" to hear our proclamation that Hashem is One -- "Hear O Israel [Yisrael]!" The name "Yisrael," besides referring to the collective Jewish population, is used to refer to both Yakov (Bereishit 35:10) and Avraham (the first Israelite; compare Tehilim 105:7 with Divrei Hayamim I 16:13).

The blessings which surround the Shema in both the morning and evening prayers may also be interpreted as specific to Avraham and Yakov. In the morning, we precede the Shema with two blessings: one an ode to the Divine force driving what we call "nature," and another blessing Hashem for lovingly choosing Israel from among the other nations. The first is easily associated with Avraham, for it was through Avraham's contemplation of nature that he came to recognize the Hand of Hashem in this world (Midrash Raba, beginning of Lech Lecha). The second certainly applies to Avraham, for it was he that Hashem lovingly chose from all the nations of the world (as worded in Nechemya 9:7, "Asher *Bacharta*..."). After Shema we bless Hashem for redeeming Israel -- which, specific to Avraham, may be alluding to Avraham's miraculous salvation from imminent death first at the hands of Nimrod and later at the hands of the warring kings (Rashi Bereishit 18:27).

In the evening, we introduce the Shema with two blessings, the first over the day/night cycle and the second over the study of the Torah and Hashem's love for His people. The first is appropriate for Yakov, since Hashem altered the daily cycle for him, letting the sun set early at one point, and having it set late for him at another point (Rashi Bereishit 28:11; 32:32). In this manner Hashem demonstrated specifically to Yakov His dominion over the cycle of day and night, and it is thus appropriate during the prayer of Yakov to offer recognition to Hashem for his control over this cycle. The second blessing certainly is specific

for Yakov, for he exemplified the study of Torah (as mentioned above) and Hashem singled Yakov out to express to him His love (Malachi 1:2). After Shema, we first bless Hashem for redeeming Yisrael. Since we find that Hashem "redeemed" Yakov (Yeshayah 44:23), and that Yakov's second name was Yisrael, the blessing clearly may be referring to the experiences our forefather Yakov. Next, we bless Hashem for protecting us and spreading His protective tent over Yisrael. This may be alluding to the incident in which Hashem prevented the hostile Canaanite nations from chasing or harming Yakov (Bereishit 35:5).

IV Finally, the afternoon prayer was instituted by Yitzchak. Before beginning the afternoon Shemoneh Esreh, we first recite a chapter from Psalms (Tehilim 145). According to the Talmud (Berachot 4b), what makes this particular chapter unique is the fact that it thanks Hashem for providing sustenance to all creatures. Yitzchak, even more than the other forefathers, saw that material wealth does not stem from one's physical efforts but rather the Hand of Hashem directly provides us with all of our needs. Hashem granted Yitzchak wealth well beyond the physical efforts he put into earning it (Bereishit 26:12,13 and Rashi). When Yitzchak went to pray his afternoon prayer (Bereishit 24:63), Avraham had sent his slave Eliezer to find Yitzchak an appropriate mate. As some commentaries explain, Yitzchak was apparently going to pray for the success of the slave's mission. No sooner did he begin to pray, then he lifted his eyes and saw that they were answered! Eliezer was returning successfully with Yitzchak's wife-to-be, Rivkah (ibid.). In a similar manner, we are told that one should take careful care to concentrate during the afternoon prayers (even though they are prayed when one is weary, immediately after a day of work), since they are sure to be answered (Berachot 6b). On Shabbat, we refer to the afternoon prayers as "prayers in a time of Hashem's goodwill." Perhaps the power of Yitzchak's original afternoon prayer imbued these prayers with their unique potency.

May Hashem answer all of our prayers, in the merit of our saintly forefathers!

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

from: Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein <info@jewishdestiny.com>
reply-to: info@jewishdestiny.com
subject: Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

In My Opinion :: Rabbi Berel Wein

Background Noise

In the highly charged urban setting in which most of us currently live, there always is background noise in our lives. Traffic, honking horns, noisy pedestrians, exuberant children, strange and mostly unintelligible public announcements blared from automobiles with public address systems... are all omnipresent.

There was a period of time here in Israel when we were a much smaller country and population, and when Jerusalem rolled up its streets at about 9:30 PM and quiet reigned supreme until dawn. Not so anymore. Though we are not quite the city that never sleeps, as is the dubious (in my opinion) description of other larger major cities throughout the world – Jerusalem is anything but a quiet place for most of the night and certainly for all of the daylight hours.

Since the rarified air of Jerusalem somehow conducts sound ably and distantly, the noise of far distant weddings being boisterously celebrated often finds its way into my bedroom as I am attempting to fall asleep. In truth, I have become adjusted to living with constant background noise in my life. This was one of the adjustments that I had to make in moving to the urban environment of Jerusalem from the pastoral and semi-rural environment of Monsey, New York.

But even in quiet Monsey, I always operated with background noise,

mostly of my own volition and choice. I always listened to classical music while writing my articles and books. I still do so today. In fact, as I am writing this article I am listening to a flute concerto composed by Georges Telemann as background music. Background sound has become such an integral part of my life that I find it difficult to function well in complete silence. We humans are strange creatures.

During my years of Talmud study at the yeshiva in Chicago, the major part of the learning day was spent in the study hall where over a hundred young men at a time studied, debated and argued with each other at high volume and loud frequency. On the other hand the library room of the yeshiva was an island of tranquility and absolute silence enforced by a most capable but periodically stern librarian,

Yet try as I did on many occasions, I was unable to study well in the quiet library room while I acclimated myself quite well in the noisy quarrelsome study hall. I think that it was this experience that influenced my penchant for background noise even today whenever I write or prepare for a public presentation.

As far as I am concerned, a reasonable volume of background noise sharpens the senses and helps focus one's mind and thoughts. At least it does so for me, hence the background flute concerto music wafting through the confines of my room as I write this article. The concerto is probably much more timeless than is this article but no matter. I think that background noise is very important in everyone's life whether we truly notice or realize it.

The Talmud also refers to the presence of constant sounds in our lives as Jews. Every day there are recurrent echoes from Mount Sinai that goad and provoke us to improve and honor Torah and Jewish tradition. The customs and simple acts that constitute the Jewish way of life – thrice-daily prayer, charitable acts of kindness and consideration towards others, regular Torah study, etc. – are all the factors that compose the sounds of our lives.

In one of the films produced by Destiny Foundation I pointed out the importance of background music in a film. Without the background themes the film is dull and uninspiring. Even at the beginning of the last century, in the days of silent films, all of the movie houses engaged a pianist to provide a musical backdrop for the film.

The Torah also requires a background to make it meaningful and memorable in our individual lives. The Torah calls itself a song, a melody, and not only a set of laws and disciplines. Without hearing this background music, the Torah also becomes dull and lacks its natural verve and vibrancy. That is why the rabbis insisted that Jews feel the freshness and renewal of excitement and novelty regarding Torah every new day of their lives.

The Torah must be today and not merely yesterday. As such, it requires a strong and insistent background melody to carry it into the hearts, minds and actions of Jews at all times and in all places. And that makes background sounds a matter of holiness and eternity and not just noise. Shabat shalom

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

Vayera

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. Shabat shalom

from: Ohr Somayach <ohr@ohr.edu>
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Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Vayera
For the week ending 19 October 2013 / 15 Heshvan 5774
by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com
Insights

Please do not adjust your set, reality is at fault.

"And he (Avraham) was sitting at the entrance of the tent..." (18:1)

The elderly lady was sitting in the parking lot. She was obviously very distressed. "Mrs. Cohen," I said, "What's the matter?" She replied trembling, "I don't know where it is! I don't know where it is!" "You don't know where what is?" I asked. "I don't know where my car is! I'm sure I left it here, and it's not here now. Maybe I'm going senile. Maybe I don't know where things are anymore. Maybe I shouldn't drive anymore!"

I thought for a moment.

"Maybe your car has been stolen, Mrs. Cohen."

Her eyes widened. "Do you think so? Oh, I do hope so!"

We called the police, and sure enough her car had been found, stripped to the chassis, in a town on the West Bank.

Sometimes things aren't the way they seem.

"...and he (Avraham) was sitting at the entrance of the tent..."

The Midrash reveals to us that Avraham wanted to stand up when G-d appeared to him. G-d said to him, "You sit, and I will stand..."

When you go see your bank manager to try to get a loan, you stand and he sits. The one who stands is dependent on the one sits.

When Avraham wanted to stand, G-d told him to sit. In other words, G-d was

telling Avraham, "I depend on you; everything depends on you, not the other way around."

How can this be? How can G-d depend on any creation?

If you look at this world it seems that above us is only the sky. You would be hard pushed to see the existence of many, many worlds above this one. And yet they exist. Millions of worlds, and of all of them, ours is the lowest. And yet, G-d decided that the whole of creation would be governed by what we do in this lowest of the worlds, down here at the bottom of the pile.

When we perform an act of kindness it reverberates all the way up to the highest of the highest worlds, and that causes G-d to radiate an influx of blessing back down to this world.

In other words, a kind word may stop an earthquake, or a train collision, or a war. This is the how we can understand the verse in Psalms, "Give strength to G-d."

Man has been given the role of strengthening the creation through his actions, or, G-d forbid, the reverse.

You'd never believe it to be so, but sometimes things are not the way they seem.

Sources: based on Da'at Torah and a story heard from Rabbi Mordechai Moshe Epstein

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

And Sarah laughed at herself, saying, "After I have withered shall I again have delicate skin? And my husband is old!" (18:12)

Is it possible that Sarah Imeinu questioned Hashem's ability to produce a miracle? Certainly not! She simply did not believe that this was a Divine message. It was the courteous wish of a guest who was just being nice. Sarah had long passed her childbearing age. It would take nothing less than a miracle for her to give birth to a child. Had she known the true identity of these travelers, she would not have been so quick to laugh. Horav Mordechai Eliyahu, zl, has a different approach to the entire parsha, which I feel portrays Sarah in a positive light and teaches us an added dimension concerning her character.

Sarah was the epitome of integrity. This is indicated by the Torah's emphasis, Va'techacheish Sarah, "And Sarah denied" (that she had laughed). They had never before heard any form of prevarication from Sarah. Obviously, this was an isolated incident which is underscored. There must be more to it. The Rishon L'Tzion explains that, just as today there are support groups for many ailments and situations, women at that time must have similarly supported one another. Childless women must have provided solace for one another. A support group allows a group of people who are grappling with the same issues to come together, to talk, encourage one another. The group allows them a "release" from the general unintentional lack of sensitivity to those who have special needs, who have a family member in a special needs situation, or who have undergone a trauma which distinguishes them from others. People are not mean; some are insensitive or just plain thoughtless. The support group avails a person an escape from a society that is thoughtless. A woman who is barren has a greater sense of compassion for another woman who is living through a similar situation. Sarah Imeinu was the rallying point for other women in her situation. Now, let us picture what must have taken place when Avraham Avinu shared with his wife the wonderful news of a child imminently joining their family. Sarah was ecstatic, but very demanding. She could not perceive herself as a mother with a child walking down the street, while all of her friends to whom she had been a tower of support continued to endure a life of pain and loneliness. She demanded that Avraham pray for all of the other women who were childless. If she was to be a mother - so, too, should they become mothers. Our Matriarch stood crying bitter tears before her

husband: "Please, you must intervene on behalf of the others. My motherhood will only increase their pain." Avraham prayed, and when Sarah conceived, so did all of the other women who had until that time been barren.

When Sarah gave birth to Yitzchak, the air was filled with the sounds of infants crying, because when Sarah gave birth, so, too, did all of the other women. The joy was palpable. The entire region was awash with the joyful sounds of mazel tov! There was a problem, however. The litzanei ha'dor, skeptics of the generation, sick individuals who simply could not tolerate the good fortune of those who adhere to Hashem's command, did not believe in miracles. How could they? They did not believe in G-d! If there is no G-d, there can be no miracles. They conjectured that all of these women - including Sarah - had been ill with some undisclosed disease that had attacked the reproductive ability of certain women, thereby rendering them barren. It was no miracle. It was a medical breakthrough.

Such foolish talk, albeit nonsensical, can damage the minds of simple people, influencing them to believe the utter nonsense they were hearing. Hashem performed a miracle. In those days, there was no such "invention" as a baby bottle. An infant nursed from its mother. If this was not feasible, the mother would hire a wetnurse to nurse her child. Since so many women had babies all at once, certainly there was a shortage of wetnurses. To make matters more obvious, Hashem prevented the flow of mother's milk from all of the women other than Sarah, thus compelling all of the new mothers to turn to our Matriarch to sustain their babies. They said, "It is only in your merit that we have given birth, but now, we have no milk to nourish our children. Can you help?" Sarah nursed all of the children. This is what is meant by the pasuk (Bereishis 21:1), Heinikah banim Sarah, "Sarah would nurse children," - all of the children.

This could not go on forever. The women begged Sarah to pray for them - which she certainly did. A whole generation of barren women was now acutely aware of the miraculous births of their children. It was no medical breakthrough. It was the work of Hashem. Avraham and Sarah had intervened for them. Thus, a generation of pagans turned to Hashem with conviction when they were exposed to the truth.

Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzchak. (22:2) In the preface to his commentary to Meseches Shabbos, Minchas Asher, Horav Asher Weiss, Shlita, writes that in the above pasuk, Hashem is spelling out to Avraham Avinu the principals upon - and manner in which - the Akeidas Yitzchak should be executed. He focuses on what many of us conceive as being the state of mind that permeated the two giants who took part in the Akeidah. Avraham and Yitzchak must have been on such an incredibly lofty spiritual plane, completely divested of any physical, mundane emotions which would have run contrary to Hashem's command to them.

Throughout the generations, the greatest, finest and most righteous have served Hashem under the most difficult and challenging conditions, both physically and emotionally, yet did so with unbelievable conviction and calm. They elevated themselves to the land of angels, whereby they were despoiled of their physicality. Should Avraham and Yitzchak be any different? Certainly not! After all, it had to start somewhere. The joy that must have been inherent in the holy Patriarch was unbelievable. This is what seems to have been, or, at least, we perceive that this must have been the case. Veritably, Chazal teach us that this was not the case. Rather, as they describe the scenario, we see an elderly Jew, broken-hearted, tears falling freely down his cheeks, a tormented man about to slaughter his only child, his future.

Indeed, the Midrash presents the following picture. Avraham reached out to take the slaughtering knife in his hand. As he positioned the knife over Yitzchak's throat, Avraham began to cry uncontrollably, and his tears, the tears of compassion for his child, fell on Yitzchak's eyes.

Nonetheless, despite the outward display of sad emotion, Avraham's heart was filled with unbridled joy. Reading this Midrash, we wonder why Avraham was weeping so bitterly? He was carrying out Hashem's command. How could he be sad? Avraham approached serving Hashem much differently than we do. If his heart was filled with joy, it should have been manifest on his face.

Rav Weiss explains that, if Hashem had given Avraham permission to divest himself of all physicality, to elevate himself to the level of Malach Elokim, an angel of G-d, the Akeidah would not have been much of a nisayon, test. It would have been very easy for him to achieve and triumph over the test - because it would not have been a test! An angel has no emotions, therefore the filial, fatherly emotions that prevail in a "normal" situation would be no match for an angel. Hashem did not permit this. Avraham was to take this test as a man - not an angel. Hashem said, "Please take your son, your only one, whom you love... Yitzchak... and bring him up there as an offering." Do not act like an angel. Act like a father whose only son, whom he loves with unparalleled devotion, is to be sacrificed. The Akeidah was to be a father's sacrifice - not an angel's sacrifice. Avraham was commanded to transcend the fatherly emotions and offer his son to Hashem amid tears and emotion, as would a father.

We have no conception of this form of nisayon. Essentially, it is impossible for two opposing emotions, joy and mourning, happiness and grief, to work in tandem within the same person in executing the same activity. Avraham led the way. He could do it. Although his eyes poured forth their tears, his heart reached the epitome of joy in serving his Master.

This, explains Rav Weiss, is the underlying meaning of Yitzchak's question of his father, "And Yitzchak said to Avraham, to his father, 'Father,' and he said, 'Here I am, my son.'" At first glance, Yitzchak's question makes no sense, nor does Avraham's reply. We now understand that Yitzchak was wondering, if in the course of carrying out the mitzvah, Avraham had ceased to be his father. Was he now an angel? Yitzchak asked, Avi, "My father? Are you still my father?" Avraham replied, Hineni beni, "(Of course) behold, my son!" I am still your father; I have not changed.

Horav Eliyahu Meir Bloch, zl, explains this attitude as intrinsic in the exhortation, V'ahavta es Hashem Elokecha b'chol levavcha, "Love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart." Rashi notes the word levavcha is actually written in the plural, rather than as b'chol libecha. From here we derive that one must serve Hashem b'shnei yitzrecha, with both inclinations - good and bad. Harnessing the evil inclination to serve Hashem is not easy, but whoever said that serving Hashem would be easy? It is demanding - as is anything which is important. The Rosh Yeshivah adds that b'shnei yitzrecha refers to one's emotions: sadness and joy. Just as one is to serve Hashem during periods of joy, so, too, must he serve his Creator during moments of pain and anguish. This is indicated by the halachah that if one's father passes away, the son recites the blessing, Baruch Dayan HaEmes, "Blessed is the Truthful Judge," as a way of proclaiming his acceptance of the Divine decree. He also recites, Baruch HaTov v'Hameitiv, "Blessed is the One Who is good and does good," since now he will inherit his father's material possessions. One must serve Hashem with all of his emotions - even if they contradict one another.

In the Toldos Admorei Bobov, an inspiring episode enables us to see this idea in action. The Bobover Rebbe, zl, Horav Shlomo, together with his son and successor, Horav Naftali, were in an underground bunker beneath a hospital in Grosswardein, Hungary. They were hiding in a room in which there was so little oxygen that the candles which they lit kept going out. The air was stale, and food was at a premium. When they were fortunate to obtain a piece of moldy bread, they quickly gulped it down. The men passed their time underground studying and teaching Torah and telling stories about righteous Jews of old. This made it easier

for them to bear the ceaseless hunger.

The Rebbe originally had an old pair of Tefillin, which he continued repairing until the strap finally tore for the last time. He immediately burst into tears, "Now, I have lost yet another mitzvah when I have so few left." His misery was not long-lasting, as a gentile farmer who heard of his plight shared a secret with him. Apparently, earlier in the war, a Jew escaping the Nazis had left his brand new Tefillin with the gentile, telling him that one day he would be able to fetch a large sum of money for them. The Rebbe promised to pay him as soon as he made it across the Romanian border.

Two months later, however, the Rebbe was in Grosswardein, hiding from the Germans. He did have his precious Tefillin with him. He realized that, during the last few months, his young son, Naftali, had reached the age of bar mitzvah. It would be celebrated joyfully in the bunker in Grosswardein. He would wind the Tefillin on the arm of his son - the only survivor of his entire family.

Prior to the celebration, the Rebbe and his son endangered themselves by sneaking out of the bunker and heading for the hospital's showers. No mikveh was available to purify their bodies before putting on Tefillin.

The showers would do. The Rebbe looked at his young son and, with fierce pride, he said, "You know, we are in danger of losing our lives. If they catch us, we will be immediately terminated, and there is no chevra kaddisha, Jewish burial society, to tend to our bodies. So, it is a good thing that we have cleansed our bodies."

He added, as if thinking out loud, "Who would have thought we would come to such a time when a bar mitzvah boy washes up equally for Tefillin and for his departure from this world?"

This is another example of b'chol levavcha - b'shnei yitzrecha.

For I know that you are a G-d-fearing man. (22:12)

This was the tenth test, following after nine tests which all had successful outcomes. Yet, only now, after the Akeidah Yitzchak, did Hashem ratify Avraham Avinu's commitment as a yarei Shomayim, G-d-fearing. If this is the case, what is the meaning of yerei Elokim, G-d-fearing? Does committing to the Akeidah manifest a greater sense of fearing G-d than walking into a fiery cauldron?

Horav Nachum Breslover, zl, teaches that one who does not possess an azus d'kedushah, a sense of resolute holiness, who is undaunted by those who stand in the way of his observance, who can transcend the taunts that they hurl at him and the obstacles they place before him, will slowly defer to the taunts and begin to relax his commitment to Hashem. Thus, one who lacks azus d'kedusha will not learn the way he is supposed to respond. Without learning, he will not possess chochmah, wisdom, and a man without wisdom has no yiraas Elokim, as Dovid HaMelech writes: Reishis chochmah yiraas Hashem, "The beginning of wisdom is fear of G-d" (Tehillim 111:10).

In his gloss to the first halachah of Shulchan Aruch, the Rema writes: "He should not be ashamed of those who seek to degrade him." Azus d'kedusha is the key to avodas Hashem, serving the Almighty. One who fears what people will say, who trembles when others poke fun at him, who takes to heart those who would do everything to prevent him from achieving success in his avodas ha'kodesh, actually does not have a chance for success; he has already capitulated. The Akeidah was an incredibly difficult trial, but what made it stand out more than the previous nine was the fact that after the deed was done, Avraham would have to return home and "face the music." The people would complain about the inconsistency of his teachings. He rejected human sacrifice; yet, he was prepared to slaughter his only son because G-d had commanded him to do so. He promoted marital harmony and respect; yet, he ignored his wife's pain and was prepared to slaughter his son. He declared that G-d was compassionate and loving; yet, this same loving, compassionate G-d had instructed Avraham to commit a brutal act. These are but some of the questions that would be posed to him by the people.

Avraham, however, did not care. His decision was based upon one factor: Hashem. Whatever the Almighty commanded him to do, he was prepared to carry out, regardless of what the critics would say. Some people live for the purpose of maligning others. They seek every opportunity to attack and revile what others do. Avraham Avinu was on a holy mission. What people said did not matter to him.

Va'ani Tefillah

*b'shivtecha b'veisecha u'v'lechtecha va'derech u'b' shachbecha u'b'kumecha.
When you sit in your house, and when you walk on the road; when you lie*

down, and when you arise.

The necessity to make Torah an essential part of our everyday endeavor is herein underscored. Horav Avigdor Miller, zl, explains the above four circumstances from a practical point of view. When one sits in his home, comfortably surrounded by all of its conveniences, recreational and relaxational appliances, he is apt to place Hashem on the "back burner." The Almighty will not be his priority. Thus, he is reminded that the home is also a place for speaking Torah. The other extreme is the road trip which exerts and raises one's anxiety level. Inconvenienced by the presence of strangers, sleeping in strange beds, living out of a suitcase, one might be prone to relax or even forget about Hashem. The Torah reminds him that a Jew may never forget, may never let his guard down.

The second set of circumstances involves the spirit - or emotional aspect - of a person. When one lies down, weary and spirited, he has no desire to do anything but rest and forget about his responsibilities. This idea applies equally to the twilight of one's years, when in our senior years we tend to say, "Who cares?" We are hereby admonished that one who truly loves Hashem never rests from repeating His words. Likewise, when one arises in the morning full of pep and vigor, he is occupied with goals and aspirations for taking on the world and tackling all of its problems, as well as his own. He is so busy with his personal ambitions that he might forget Hashem. This applies also to the morning of one's life, in his youth, when he is so filled with life and material pursuits that the spirit is placed as a far second to everything else. He is hereby reminded that one must always repeat Hashem's words.

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

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Orthodox Union / www.ou.org

Britain's Former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Answering the Call

The early history of humanity as told in the Torah is a series of disappointments. God gives human beings freedom, which they then misuse. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. Cain murders Abel. Within a relatively short time the world before the Flood has become dominated by violence. All flesh had perverted its way on the earth. God creates order. Man creates chaos. Even after the Flood humanity, in the form of the builders of Babel, is guilty of hubris, thinking they can build a tower whose top "reaches heaven."

Humans fail to respond to God, which is where Abraham enters the picture. We are not quite sure, at the beginning, what it is that Abraham is summoned to. We know he is commanded to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and travel "to the land I will show you," but what he is to do there, we do not know. On this the Torah is silent. What is Abraham's mission? What makes him special? What makes him, not simply a good man in a bad age, as was Noah, but a leader and the father of a nation of leaders?

To decode the mystery we have to recall what the Torah has been signalling prior to this point. I suggested in previous essays that a, perhaps the, key theme is a failure of responsibility. Adam and Eve lack personal responsibility. Adam says, "It wasn't me; it was the woman." Eve says, "It wasn't me, it was the serpent." It is as if they deny being the author of their own acts - as if they do not understand either freedom or the responsibility it entails.

Cain does not deny personal responsibility. He does not say, "It wasn't me. It was Abel's fault for provoking me." Instead he denies moral responsibility: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Noah fails the test of collective responsibility. He is a man of virtue in an age of vice, but he makes no impact on his contemporaries. He saves his family (and the animals) but no one else. According to the plain reading of the text, he does not even try.

Understand this and we understand Abraham. He exercises personal

responsibility. A quarrel breaks out between his herdsmen and those of his nephew Lot. Seeing that this was no random occurrence but the result of their having too many cattle to be able to graze together, Abraham immediately proposes a solution:

Abram said to Lot, "Let there not be a quarrel between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." (Gen. 13: 8-9)

Note that Abraham passes no judgment. He does not ask whose fault the argument was. He does not ask who will gain from any particular outcome. He gives Lot the choice. He sees the problem and acts.

In the next chapter we are told about a local war, as a result of which Lot is among the people taken captive. Immediately Abraham gathers a force, pursues the invaders, rescues Lot and with him all the other captives, whom he returns safely to their homes, refusing to take any of the spoils of victory that he is offered by the grateful king of Sodom.

This is a strange passage – not the image of Abraham the nomadic shepherd we see elsewhere. Its presence is best understood in the context of the story of Cain. Abraham shows he is his brother's (or brother's son's) keeper. He immediately understands the nature of moral responsibility. Despite the fact that Lot had chosen to live where he did with its attendant risks, Abraham did not say, "His safety is his responsibility not mine."

Then, in this week's parsha, comes the great moment at which for the first time a human being challenges God himself. God is about to pass judgment on Sodom. Abraham, fearing that this will mean that the city will be destroyed, says:

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?"

This is a remarkable speech. By what right does a mere mortal challenge God himself?

The short answer is that God himself signalled that he should. Listen carefully to the text:

Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him" ... Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

Those words, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" are a clear hint that God wants Abraham to respond, otherwise why would He have said them?

The story of Abraham can only be understood against the backdrop of the story of Noah. There too, God told Noah in advance that he is about to bring punishment to the world.

So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth."

Noah did not protest. To the contrary, we are told three times that Noah "did as God commanded him." Noah accepted the verdict. Abraham challenged it. Abraham understood the third principle: collective responsibility.

The people of Sodom were not his brothers and sisters, so he was going beyond what he did in rescuing Lot. He prayed on their behalf because he understood the idea of human solidarity, immortally expressed by John Donne (in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, 1623):

No man is an island,
Entire of itself ...
Any man's death diminishes me,

For I am involved in mankind.

But a question remains. Why did God call on Abraham to challenge Him? Was there anything Abraham knew that God didn't know? The idea is absurd. The answer is surely this: Abraham was to become the role model and initiator of a new faith, one that would not defend the human status quo but challenge it.

Abraham had to have the courage to challenge God if his descendants were to challenge human rulers, as Moses and the prophets did. Jews do not accept the world that is. They challenge it in the name of the world that ought to be. This is a critical turning point in human history: the birth of the world's first religion of protest – a faith that challenges the world instead of accepting it.

Abraham was not a conventional leader. He did not rule a nation. There was as yet no nation for him to lead. But he was the role model of leadership as Judaism understands it. He took responsibility. He acted; he didn't wait for others to act. Of Noah, the Torah says, "he walked with God." But to Abraham, God himself said, "Walk before me," (Gen. 17: 1), meaning: be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility.

Judaism is God's call to responsibility.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is a global religious leader, philosopher, the author of more than 25 books, and moral voice for our time. Until 1st September 2013 he served as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, having held the position for 22 years. To read more from Rabbi Sacks or to subscribe to his mailing list, please visit www.rabbisacks.org.

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Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

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By Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parshat Vayera: Personality 'exercise'

October 17, 2013 Thursday 13 Heshvan 5774

After Avraham succeeded in this test, his emotional powers are strengthened and he becomes a better person.

Toward the end of this week's Torah portion, we read the dramatic story of Akeidat Yitzhak (the Binding of Isaac). It is a story with a message that became one of the central stories accompanying the Jewish nation throughout its thousands of years of existence. It is a story of ultra-human bravery.

G-d commands Avraham Avinu to slaughter his son Yitzhak. No less! The story may sound enraging. For a father to slaughter his son is the greatest cruelty imaginable; especially when it is a son born to Avraham and Sarah in their old age, after decades of waiting.

But we must read the story to its end and discover that indeed G-d did not want Avraham to slaughter Yitzhak. And at the last moment, after the knife was already brandished in the air, G-d instructed Avraham to stop and avoid this appalling deed. G-d, as opposed to other gods that people believed in in the past, is not interested in any way in human sacrifices. G-d, who is the source of endless good, perfection and grace, expresses clear-cut objection to the heinous and cruel act of killing people.

Why, if so, does G-d initially instruct Avraham to slaughter Yitzhak? The Torah provides us with the answer to this in the verse which opens the story: "And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham." (Genesis 22, 1) It was a test and nothing more.

But now another question perturbs us: Why did G-d test Avraham? Does G-d not know ahead of time what Avraham's reaction will be to His instruction? Is there anything which G-d does not know in advance? This question is not only asked about the story of Akeidat Yitzhak. G-d tests us as well in different ways. We are occasionally confronted with various unforeseen and undesired events and we ask ourselves: Why is G-d doing this to us? And the answer is: It is a test. G-d is testing us to see if we will react correctly; if we will maintain calm even when things do not turn out as we would like; if we will stand on our moral principles even when reality makes this difficult for us.

And again we ask: Why does G-d test us? He undoubtedly knows ahead of time how we are going to react.

Many of our sages dealt with this question, and we will look at the answer of the Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, of the great Spanish sages of the 13th century) who wrote: The Tester, blessed be He, will command to take the thing from potential to the actual, so he will have a reward for a good deed, not only a good-heart reward... and so all the tests in the Torah are for the good of the one being tested. (Ramban on the Torah, Genesis 22, 1) What good comes to man when he takes his deeds from "potential" to "actual"? Nowadays, it is very common for people to exercise for enjoyment – working out, lifting weights, running great distances, etc... If we look at this, we discover something which makes us wonder. The harder the man works, the greater his abilities become. It would be reasonable to think that the greater the effort, the weaker the man would, become since he is "wasting" his strengths. The explanation for this phenomenon is that man's muscles are made in such a way that if man exercises and uses them, they become stronger and able to deal with greater effort.

And just like his body, so are man's emotional strengths. Man sometimes feels like there are things he cannot do. Someone makes us angry and we think to ourselves, "I cannot be silent about something like this." But the truth is that if we succeed in this test and overcome our natural tendency to react, the next time something like this happens, it will be easier for us to restrain ourselves.

The more a man acts in a desirable way, the easier it is for him to do so. Now we understand why G-d tested Avraham and why He tests people. After Avraham succeeded in this test, his emotional powers are strengthened and he becomes a better person.

When we succeed in a test we encounter, our personality is strengthened and the better parts of us overcome our negative tendencies. Because of the test, we take our abilities from the potential to the actual and strengthen them. Thus, G-d "exercises" our personalities, our inner emotional strengths, and we become better people who can make the world a better place for all those who live in it. The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

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Rav Kook on the Torah Portion

Vayeira: Combating Evil

A careful reading of the Torah's account clearly indicates that Lot did not deserve to be saved on his own merits alone:

"When God destroyed the cities of the plain, God remembered Abraham; and He sent out Lot from the upheaval when He overturned the cities in which Lot lived." (Gen. 19:29)

Why was Lot not rescued on the basis of his own merits? He certainly did not participate in the infamous Sodomite cruelty towards visitors. Why was he allowed to escape only because "God remembered Abraham"?

Challenging Sodom

The need for God to destroy Sodom shows the importance of chesed (kindness) in our world. It demonstrated the extent of ruin that results from a society lacking this critical trait.

In any ideological conflict, opposition to a particular position can take one of two forms. Some people may reject a position on the basis of its expected consequences. But if they only denounce and point out its negative aspects, they are only partially confronting the objectionable position. True opposition is only achieved when we can present a positive alternative that promises to govern society in a better and more just fashion.

The problem with Sodom was not just that the people of Sodom were cruel. Rather, the very fabric of the Sodomite society was corrupt, based on their abhorrence of kindness. They based their municipal regulations on an ideology of selfishness and self-interest.

Lot and Abraham

To combat Sodom, it was not enough to merely reject their philosophy. It was necessary to present a comprehensive blueprint for a society guided by the traits of kindness and generosity.

Lot rejected the cruel ways of Sodom. By virtue of his association with Abraham, Lot recognized the importance of chesed. On a private level, he invited strangers and tried to protect them. But Lot was unable to present an alternative vision of society based on kindness.

Abraham, on the other hand, was a different story. His whole life was centered on developing and promoting the ideal of chesed. Abraham established chesed as a fixed and organized trait for both the individual and the community. As God

Himself testified,

"For I have known [Abraham], that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep God's ways, doing righteousness and justice." (Gen. 18:19)

For this reason, Lot did not deserve to be saved from Sodom on his own merits. Unlike his uncle Abraham, he presented no alternative vision, and did not properly contest the Sodomite ideology of cruelty.

How to Fight Evil

This is an important lesson for us. Our rejection of ideologies that contradict the Torah's ethical ideals should not be limited to negative criticism. It is insufficient to merely point out the harmful or false aspects of an ill-conceived plan. Rather, we need to open an offensive front by presenting a positive outlook based on true values - just as Abraham and his vision of chesed stood in direct opposition to the Sodomites' philosophy of egocentric cruelty.

(Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 46-48. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. II, p. 250)

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Rav Lazer Shach – the Transmitter of Mesorah

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Since Rav Shach's yahrzeit is this coming Sunday, I am sending this article this week rather than our usual halachah article.

The yahrzeit of Rav Elazer Menachem Man Shach falls on the 16th of MarCheshvan. Rav Shach was the last surviving member of his generation of gedolei Yisrael, and as such was the link to gedolei Yisrael of over 100 years ago, whom he knew well and whose approach to Yiddishkeit he taught.

Rav Shach's birth date is usually reported as Erev Rosh Chodesh Shvat, 5655/1895, although the exact year of his birth is uncertain. He was born in the village of Vaboilnick, Lithuania, at a time when all of Lithuania and Eastern Poland was under the rule of the Russian Czar. His family was wealthy in yiras shamayim, but destitute in worldly possessions.

Rav Shach would often point out that the gedolim of his generation developed because of the tremendous sacrifice they had for Torah and their lack of material wealth. Indeed, his early years are reflective of the tremendous difference between his generation and ours.

HIS FIRST YESHIVA – Ponevitz

Rav Shach developed a deep attachment to Torah at a very young age. When he was eleven years old, Rav Shach left his home and his hometown to go to the Yeshivah Ketanah in Ponevitz. At this period in history, it was very common for eleven-year olds to be apprenticed for work. Poverty among Jews in Czarist Russia was rampant. Government anti-Semitism made it almost impossible for Jews to earn a living. They were banned from most professions and trades, and generally tried to eke out a living from manual labor, small trade or farming, although a fortunate few had small businesses.

Out of necessity, children as young as eleven and twelve were often apprenticed to skilled and semi-skilled craftsmen. There was often not enough food at home to feed them, anyway. If they were apprenticed, they were at least fed and clothed, albeit poorly. A lucky, young apprentice might even earn enough money to buy a pair of shoes to help him through the harsh Russian winter.

Some dedicated youngsters ignored the financial security of apprenticeship and left home for yeshiva at a very young age. This usually meant going to the nearest large town or city where a prominent talmid chacham headed a yeshivah.

The conditions that Rav Shach and the other young talmidim endured in no way approximated current yeshivah conditions. Those old time yeshivos had no kitchens, dining rooms, or dormitories. The student body was comprised of bochurim learning in a local shul or beis medrash, guided and taught by a local rav, when he was not occupied with his Rabbinic responsibilities.

Many yeshivah bochurim came from very poor families that could not afford to send them any money. With no funds, they usually slept in the beis medrash, where they learnt day and night, or took work as night watchmen in unheated factories or warehouses. This at least provided a roof over their heads during the bitterly cold Russian or Polish winters and a little money to buy some food.

Bochurim with no money to buy food usually ate "teg." Every day (tog) of the week they were assigned to eat with a family, who often did not have sufficient food for themselves. As a result, many bachurim went days on end without a proper meal. Rav Shach used to describe the embarrassment and deprivation he suffered during

his yeshivah days.

STORIES FROM PONEVITZ

Rav Shach often told stories from his years in Ponevitz, thus preserving for our generation the mesorah of Ponevitz Yeshivah and the gedolim who lived and visited there. (The Ponevitz Yeshivah in Bnei Braq was founded by Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, who was the last rav of Ponevitz before it was destroyed by the Nazis.)

At the time Rav Shach arrived in Ponevitz Yeshivah Ketanah as an eleven-year old, Rav Itzele Rabinovitch, who was known as Rav Itzele Ponevitzer, was the rosh yeshivah and the rav of the town. Rav Itzele was famous as the genius of his generation, a rather impressive title, considering that it included such Torah luminaries as Rav Chayim Brisker, Rav Dovid Karliner, the Ohr Somayach, the Rogatchover Gaon, Rav Chayim Ozer, the Chofetz Chayim, and the Aruch Hashulchan.

Indeed, Rav Itzele and Rav Chayim Brisker were chavrusos (study partners) for many years shortly after their marriages (in the 1870's). Rav Itzele was a disciple of Rav Chaim's father, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveichik, the Beis HaLevi.

The youngest who became Rav Shach was very close to Rav Itzele and learned much from him. Rav Itzele's hasmadah (diligence in Torah study) was legendary. He would learn until his last ounce of energy was exhausted and invariably fell asleep with his boots on, even when they were covered with mud. (In this era, the streets of Ponevitz were unpaved.) As Rav Shach expressed, if Rav Itzele had enough energy to take off his boots before falling asleep, he would not have used the strength to remove his boots, but to learn more Torah!!

Rav Shach illustrated Rav Itzele's tremendous fear of sin with the following story. When a Jew opened his business on Shabbos in Ponevitz, Rav Itzele resigned from his position as rav, explaining that he was petrified to go to the Beis Din shel Maalah (the heavenly tribunal) as the rav of a community where Shabbos was publicly desecrated. Eventually, the chevrah kadisha forced the storeowner to close on Shabbos by refusing to bury his father!

Rav Shach quoted this story to point out the awe of Hashem of earlier generations. How many modern day rabbonim would resign their position because someone in the city desecrates Shabbos?

Another aspect of Rav Itzele's righteousness that affected Rav Shach was his tefilah. Rav Itzele would daven with a burning passion. This made a tremendous impression on the young, budding scholar.

Rav Shach pointed out that Rav Itzele's innovative style of learning was praised by some and criticized by others. He quoted Rav Chayim Brisker criticizing Rav Itzele as being expert in three Talmuds, the Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Talmud Rav Itzele. In other words, Rav Chayim considered Rav Itzele's approach to learning as more conjectural than analytic. Others disagreed with Rav Chayim, contending that Rav Itzele's shiurim were total brilliance.

Unfortunately, very few of Rav Itzele's brilliant chiddushei Torah were saved for posterity, other than a small sefer titled Zecher Yitzchak. Rav Itzele's talmidim included Rav Naftoli Trop, who later became the rosh yeshivah of the Chofetz Chayim's yeshivah in Raden, and Rav Boruch Horowitz, who later became a magid shiur (Talmud Lecturer) in Slabodka.

SLABODKA

After several years, Rav Shach left the Ponevitz Yeshivah Ketanah for the Yeshivah Gedolah in Slabodka, which was the "mother of yeshivos" in those days. Most of the gedolei Yisrael of Rav Shach's generation were educated in Slabodka. Slabodka was a suburb of Kovno and stood on the opposite bank of the Vilaya River. Although Kovno was politically and economically far more important (between the two world wars, it was the capital and largest city of Lithuania), Slabodka was clearly the Torah capital of Eastern Europe. It was the home of not one, but two major yeshivos, at a time when there were very few large yeshivos. Surprisingly, both these yeshivos were created by the same gadol, Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, always referred to as the "Alter from Slabodka."

The older of the two yeshivos, Yeshivas Knesses Beis Yitzchok, (named after Rav Yitzchok Elchanan Spektor, the rav of Kovno and the posek hador when Rav Shach was born) was a non-mussar yeshivah. The yeshivah schedule was devoted exclusively to learning, and no official time was set aside for mussar and personality development. The yeshivah's hashkafah (philosophy) was that a student immersed in Torah did not require structured mussar, and that, on the contrary, it might even stunt his growth in Torah learning.

When Rav Shach arrived in Slabodka, the rosh yeshivah of Knesses Beis Yitzchok was Rav Boruch Ber Levovitz. In addition to being a tremendous gaon in learning, Rav Boruch Ber was also a tzaddik who never looked up when walking in the street and was completely unconcerned with the mundane world.

The other yeshiva in Slabodka was the mussar Yeshiva, Knesses Yisrael, which was named after Rav Yisrael Salanter. Its rosh yeshivah was Rav Moshe Mordechai

Epstein. (It is interesting to note that both Rav Boruch Ber and Rav Moshe Mordechai had studied under Rav Chayim Brisker, when he was a magid shiur [a lecturer] in the yeshivah of Volozhin. Thus, Rav Shach absorbed Rav Chayim's methodology through them.)

The two yeshivos of Slabodka were in excellent rapport with one another, as one would expect when the yeshivos are run by great tzaddikim. Students of one yeshivah attended shiurim at the other and sought out its magidei shiur and roshei yeshivah to "talk in learning." Thus, although Rav Aharon Kotler officially studied in Knesses Yisrael, he and others regularly attended Rav Boruch Ber's shiur at Knesses Beis Yitzchok. The attitude of the great luminaries running these yeshivos was that the more Torah institutions there were, the more Torah would be learned. This attitude influenced many of Rav Shach's later decisions about opening new yeshivos.

Rav Shach attended Knesses Yisrael, the mussar yeshivah, whose guiding spirit was its mashgiach, Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the famed "Alter of Slabodka." (His title, the "alter" [the older mashgiach], distinguished him from the other mashgiach, Rav Ber Hirsch Heller, who was his junior by a few years. Rav Heller later became the father-in-law of Rav Yaakov Kaminetski, one of the yeshivah's many talented students. Many decades later, Rav Yaakov and Rav Shach, who knew one another from their Slabodka days, renewed their acquaintance as gedolei and manhigei klal Yisrael when they met in Yerushalayim to discuss community concerns.)

The Alter held that a rosh yeshivah or mashgiach must devote all his energy to his talmidim. A wealthy man once brought his only son to study in Slabodka. As he presented his son to the Alter, he begged him, "Please take good care of this boy. He is my 'ben yochid' (only son)." The Alter replied, "Every talmid of the yeshivah is my ben yochid." This was not rhetoric but the Alter's way of life. For example, Rav Shach related that the Alter fasted when a bochur failed to learn or grow in his Yiddishkeit. This approach to chinuch influenced Rav Shach's leadership not only of his talmidim but also his relationship to people who came to seek his advice.

To appreciate what Rav Shach absorbed in Slabodka, we need to understand the Alter, who was an indirect disciple of Rav Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar Movement. The Alter developed the teachings of Rav Yisrael and his early disciples to meet the challenges of his time. Furthermore, he was brilliant at understanding talmidim and nurturing them to their greatest potential.

The Alter's original contribution to the Mussar Movement was his emphasis on "Gadlus Ha'Adam" -- that a person should develop with his own unique abilities in order to serve Hashem to the maximum.

The Alter nurtured an impressive list of gedolei Torah including Rav Shach, Rav Aharon Kotler of Lakewood, Rav Yaakov Kaminetski of Torah Vada'as, Rav Reuvain Grozovski of Beis Medrash Elyon, Rav Yaakov Ruderman of Ner Yisrael, Rav Yitzchok Hutner of Chayim Berlin, Rav Moshe Chevroni of Yeshivas Chevron. As Rav Shach used to say, an entire generation of gedolei Yisrael, both in America and in Eretz Yisrael, was trained by one man: the Alter from Slabodka.

Each of these gedolim was a tremendous talmid chacham and a gadol in learning, leadership, and mussar. The Alter developed each one of them in his own unique way. Thus, Rav Hutner was a brilliant leader of men whose talmidim also excel in hashkafah, Torah machshavah (Jewish thought), and the writings of the Maharal. Rav Yaakov Kaminetski's greatness as a gadol manifested itself in his unusual expertise and perception in giving advice. Furthermore, he was unusually gifted in poskim, Tanach, and dikduk. Rav Ruderman was a person who could quote verbatim virtually every early sefer ever published -- and at the same time train a young talmid to think for himself. In addition to his lightning-fast mind and brilliance in learning, Rav Aharon Kotler became the community leader who motivated people to work for the kahal (community) in areas where no one else was successful. He has been described as "fire on earth."

A common thread of the talmidim of Slabodka was that although they were totally committed to learning, when the need arose, they involved themselves in community responsibilities. Rav Shach, too, would have happily spent all his time learning and teaching Torah, but he unhesitatingly assumed community responsibility when it became necessary.

Following the Alter's teachings, Rav Shach developed into the proactive leader of klal Yisrael, both collectively and individually. When the time came, he was totally willing to render decisions on any issue -- political, religious, educational, kashrus, organizational. Although he always emphasized and demonstrated that nothing is more valuable than learning Torah intensely to the best of one's abilities, he assumed the mantle of Torah leadership and made crucial decisions when it was necessary.

Slabodka had a tremendous effect on Rav Shach although he was only able to remain there for two years, until the outbreak of World War I. At the eastern front, between Russia and Germany, the war raged through the areas of heavy Jewish

settlement in western Russia. All the yeshivos fled, mostly deeper inside Russia.
RAV ISSER ZALMAN AND RAV AARON

Details of Rav Shach's travels during the war are unclear, but we know that he found his way to Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer's yeshiva in Slutzk. Rav Isser Zalman had also studied under Rav Chayim Brisker in the yeshiva of Volozhin and then proceeded to develop his own style of learning. Rav Shach used to quote Rav Chayim as saying, "Had Rav Isser Zalman followed completely in my footsteps, he would have become the master of my style of learning. Instead, he became the master of his own style of learning." Rav Shach approved highly of this approach and never insisted that talmidim should absorb his style of understanding Gemara. It was far more important to him that they develop their own derech in learning.

In Slutzk, Rav Shach became the chavrusah of Rav Aharon Kotler, who had married Rav Isser Zalman's daughter, Perel. Eventually, Rav Aharon became a magid shiur in the yeshiva and later the rosh yeshiva.

In 5684/1923, Rav Shach married Gittel Gilmovski, Rav Isser Zalman's niece. For the next five years, he continued toiling in Torah day and night. In the meantime, the Communists seized power in Russia and Rav Aharon moved the yeshiva to Kletzk, Poland, which was free of Communist rule.

In 5689/1929, Rav Shach became a magid shiur in Kletzk and began his lifelong career as a Torah teacher. He was a magid shiur or rosh yeshiva of several yeshivos until the Second World War broke out ten years later, first in Kletzk, next in Nowardek, and afterward for four years as rosh yeshiva of the Chassidische Yeshivas Karlin in Lunenitz. Subsequently, he returned to Kletzk.

Rav Shach related that shortly after the Second World War broke out, the invading Soviet army was approaching Kletzk from the east. It was obvious that the yeshiva needed to relocate quickly, and Rav Shach went looking for potential sites. In one town, he met an old Jew who was a grandson of Rav Yisrael Salanter. Rav Shach asked him whether the town had an appropriate beis medrash or shul large enough for the yeshiva, whether the local people would help support the yeshiva, and whether they could provide lodging for the talmidim.

Turning to Rav Shach, the old man retorted, "Why are you delaying? First come, bring the talmidim here, and set up the yeshiva. Do you think that the people will allow the talmidim to sleep in the street? You don't need extensive planning, but you do need quick action!"

"From that yid," said Rav Shach, "I learned a tremendous lesson. In times of emergency, don't raise questions. Just do something!"

It was characteristic of a baal mussar like Rav Shach to tell a story in which he himself was the target of the message. \

THE CHOFETZ CHAYIM

After Rav Isser Zalman moved to Eretz Yisrael in 5685/1925, he often sent inquiries to Rav Shach to bring to the Chofetz Chayim. Rav Shach used these opportunities to become well acquainted with the Chofetz Chayim's world outlook. Years later, when important communal matters came up, Rav Shach often said, "I don't know anything about this subject, but I received a tradition from the Chofetz Chayim that this is what should be done," or "I have not heard anything about this matter, but I have no doubt that the Chofetz Chayim would decide such-and-such. Since he is no longer alive, I must make that decision." Thus, by sending Rav Shach to the Chofetz Chayim with his questions, Rav Isser Zalman was grooming a future gadol hador.

ERETZ YISRAEL

In 5701/1941, with the kindness of Hashem, Rav Shach escaped the inferno of Europe for Eretz Yisrael. Before he found his place in the Ponevitz Yeshiva, he was a magid shiur in several yeshivos in different cities, including Petach Tikvah, Rechovot, and Yerushalayim. During this time he lived in Yerushalayim and became very close to the Brisker Rav, Rav Yitzchok Ze'ev Soloveichik (the son of Rav Chayim Brisker), who transferred the mesorah of Brisk from Europe to Yerushalayim. (The current rosh yeshiva of Brisk Yeshiva in Yerushalayim, Rav Avrohom Yehoshua Soloveichik, is the Brisker Rav's grandson, while Rav Meshulam Dovid Soloveichik, also rosh yeshiva of a very prominent Brisk yeshiva, is his uncle, a son of the Brisker Rav. The "Brisk"-type yeshivos are headed by descendants of Rav Chayim Brisker or by their talmidim.)

The Brisker Rav was known for his meticulous observance of mitzvos. Rav Shach mentioned that while most people purchase new suits in honor of Pesach, the Brisker Rav would buy a new jacket to use at the table, in order to be absolutely certain that his clothes were chometz-free!

In 5711/1951, Rav Shach was invited by the Ponevitzer Rav, Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, to become rosh yeshiva of Ponevitz Yeshiva in Bnei Braq, and he held this position until his passing fifty years later. During this time, he gradually became acknowledged as the gadol hador. Thousands of people sought his guidance, dozens of yeshivos asked him for direction, and he was the active leader of the chareidi world, directing thousands of issues that affect Torah life in a

modern world. He charted the Torah path in dealing with a secular modern state. Never hesitant to issue decisions and opinions on public matters, whether popular or not, Rav Shach ruled according to the mesorah he had received from gedolei Yisrael. Torah is not a public relations tool but the seal of truth.

AVI EZRI

In 5708/1948, Rav Shach published the first volume of his sefer, Avi Ezri. This sefer is organized according to the order of the Rambam, although in many places it contains his chiddushei Torah (original ideas) on the Gemara. His approach is to answer difficult questions on the rishonim in a clear, deceptively simple way. Although the sefer is relatively easy to read, it should be used only by someone who has studied the subject matter in depth. Otherwise, he will fail to see the sefer's greatness.

Unlike many other authors, Rav Shach did not collect numerous haskamos (approbations) for his sefarim. His first volume carried only one haskamah — from his wife's uncle, Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer. His second volume, published in 5716/1956, also, has only one haskamah — from the Brisker Rav (Rav Isser Zalman had passed away by then).

The sefer is built on intellectual honesty. Sometimes, in a later volume, Rav Shach will contend that what he wrote in an earlier volume is wrong. In his hakdamah (introduction) to the sefer he describes the extreme honesty that one must apply to learning — a manifestation of the training he received in Slabodka and from Rav Itzele.

In his hakdamah, Rav Shach questions whether one has the right to publish sefarim if he is not convinced that he has researched the subject thoroughly. How can one claim that he has studied the subject to its greatest depth? Furthermore, if one republishes a sefer (the first volume of Avi Ezri was published four times in Rav Shach's lifetime), one should ostensibly relearn each sugya to see if one still agrees with what one wrote before - just as a rav may not paskin a shaylah that he has ruled on previously without reviewing the question once again.

Rav Shach closes his hakdamah with a realistic conclusion. If we published only those sefarim written totally lishmah, exclusively for the sake of Torah, we would never produce any sefarim at all, and Torah learning would be severely hampered. We are permitted to produce sefarim that increase Torah learning, which is our goal. Hesitating to publish a sefer would minimize Torah learning and leave more opportunity for the intrusion of non-Torah hashkafos.

A FEW VIGNETTES

Everyone finds much to identify with in Rav Shach's stories and mussar. I will share with you some of the stories that I find particularly touching.

A well known talmid chacham was offered the position of magid shiur in a yeshiva where the previous holder of the position had been unsuccessful. Before taking the position, he came to ask Rav Shach for advice and a beracha. Much to his surprise, Rav Shach recommended that he turn down the position. Rav Shach explained that although it was permitted to accept the position, it was inadvisable to accept a position that will cause a talmid chacham to feel bad because someone else replaced him.

Rav Shach was annoyed at the common practice of yeshiva students setting aside time for a daily nap. "When you get tired," he said, "put your head down for a few minutes. But, there is no reason to devote specific time in the day for this purpose." He was once asked to be the sandek for one baby of a set of twins, while the grandfather was to be sandek for the other twin. Rav Shach insisted that he either be sandek for both twins or for neither. He pointed out that later in their lives, the two twins might compare themselves, and one would point out that Rav Shach had been his sandek and not his brother's. He did not want to be party to something that could lead to ill feeling between two brothers.

Often, Rav Shach pointed out that the pace of learning in the European yeshivos that produced gedolim was much quicker than is common today. He noted that in Slabodka, they regularly studied ten blatt of Gemara a week. Rav Shach remarked, "Even if we did not understand the sugya properly at first, we would understand it better the next time around."

Through Rav Shach, a generation of yeshiva students was connected to the mesorah of the Chofetz Chayim, the Alter of Slabodka, Rav Chayim Brisker, Rav Itzele Ponevitzer, Rav Yisrael Salanter and the Mussar Movement. Ye'hi Zichro Baruch.