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The Perplexing Pillar
by Rabbi Ezra Wiener

Although the Midrash describes the miserliness and inhospitable conduct of Eishet Lot, which was certainly in consonance with the behavior of the citizens of Sedom, the Pesukim tell us almost nothing about her. After Hashem destroys Sedom and Amorah, "VaTabeit Ishto MeiAcharav, VaTehi Netziv Melach," "And his wife looked behind him and she became a pillar of salt" (BeReishit 19:26). The Pesukim relate to us that Hashem rains sulphur and fire upon Sedom and Amorah to destroy them (19:24). Presumably, it was this scene that caught her eye, and therefore God meted out punishment in accordance with His warning – "Al Tabit Acharecha," "Do not look back" (19:17). What precisely happened to Eishet Lot, and what was the reason behind this warning of not looking back? It is certainly reasonable to assume that if we understand Hashem's motive behind issuing such a warning, we will better understand the punishment inflicted upon Eishet Lot.

According to a famous Midrash (BeReishit Rabbah 51:7), on the evening the angels arrived in Sedom and received Lot's welcoming and gracious invitation, Lot's wife was busy searching throughout the city for salt. Her objective was to expose the whereabouts of her guests to the people of the city by asking around, "do you possibly have any salt for guests that have arrived at our house?" Rashi (19:26 s.v. VaTabeit Ishto MeiAcharav) refers to this Midrash but presents an alternate exchange about the salt. According to Rashi, it was Lot who asked his wife to give salt to their guests (it appears they already had salt according to this version), and his wife responded, "you even want to practice this evil custom in this place?"

From Rashi's explication, we can postulate that Eishet Lot received a unique, precise, and irregular punishment. Her punishment was in accordance with her wrongdoing – Middah KeNeged Middah – and was meted out due to her inhospitable behavior. What is strange about this

approach, however, is why she was saved at all from the destruction of Sedom. If she identified with the despicable behavior of the people of Sedom to the extent that she couldn't accept one instance of Hachnasat Orechim in support of her husband, then she too should have suffered the same fate as the people of Sedom. It would not be enough to claim that the type of punishment (that she became a pillar of salt) was sufficient. She should have been punished while still in the city, without the opportunity to escape. In addition, according to this Midrash, why did she receive this punishment for looking back? The logic of our Middah KeNeged Middah is flawed. Does the punishment really fit the crime? She should have received a punishment that was commensurate with the violation of the warning to not look back. How is being turned into a pillar of salt the appropriate punishment for looking back?

Chizkuni (19:26 s.v. VaTehi Netziv Melach) is not bothered by any of these questions in his second interpretation of the Pasuk. According to his second approach on the Pasuk, "VaTehi Netziv Melach" does not refer to Eishet Lot, but rather to the city of Sedom. The Torah reports in Parashat Nitzavim (Devarim 29:22) that not only did sulfur and fire descend upon the city, but salt also descended upon the city. When Hashem admonishes the Jews and warns them about what will occur to the land of Israel if there are Jews who will follow their heart's desires and neglect Shemirat HaMitzvot, He says, "Gofrit VaMelach Sereifah Chol Artzah... KeMahpeichat Sedom VaAmorah." This Pasuk demonstrates that the "Netziv Melach" refers to Sedom, not Eishet Lot.

Considering that the Gemara (Berachot 54b) and the Shulchan Aruch have instituted that a Berachah be recited upon seeing the pillar of salt of Eishet Lot, it is essential that we find a working interpretation of these Pesukim. Rashbam claims that Lot, his wife, and his daughters were forewarned not to gaze at the city's destruction in order that they not see the suffering of the sons-in-law who scorned the angels and remained in the city due to their skepticism about the impending destruction of Sedom. Alternatively, Rashbam posits that it was inappropriate for anyone to gaze at the angels as they destroyed the city – there is always a concern that a person will lose his life when exposed to the heightened presence of the Divine which is manifest through the angels.

According to Rashbam, undoubtedly, Lot's wife was punished for looking back. She received her punishment either because she gazed at the city and the destruction of others or because she exposed herself to the sublime Kedushah of the angels. However, we are still left puzzled as to the significance of turning into a pillar of salt, assuming we reject the Chizkuni's approach and accept "Netziv Melach" as a reality. Radak (19:26 s.v. VaTehi Netziv Melach) proposes that the simple reading of the Pesukim is that Lot's wife was punished for looking behind her. However, she was punished either because she had little faith in Hashem's ability to destroy the city, or because she had little faith that Hashem would carry out His word. The measure for measure allotted to Eishet Lot was that she received the identical punishment as the citizens of the city received. Just as the citizens of Sedom and Amorah all essentially became pillars of salt due to the heavy volume of salt and sulfur that rained down upon them, so too, Eishet Lot was turned into a pillar of salt.

Eishet Lot suffered the same fate as the people of Sedom suffered according to the Midrash because she displayed an aversion to acts of loving kindness and a reluctance to break free from the corrupt conformity imposed by societal pressures. On the other hand, perhaps following Radak, she suffered their fate not because she necessarily embraced such a lifestyle and expressed loyalty to corruption and injustice, but because she didn't perceive the pervasive depravity. She may not have been an active participant or exponent of the degeneracy of Sedom, but her failure to recognize the degree of ideological erosion and consequently the justification for complete ruin through Divine intervention was sufficient grounds for her to be taken along with the rest of the city. She questioned the need and appropriateness of such

harsh Divine intervention. She doubted that God would really wipe out the entire city. She believed God was compassionate and slow to anger. We don't claim to understand Hashem's system of justice, but the inability to explain it does not give us the right to dull our minds and our hearts to what is right and wrong. Our inability to explain why Hashem sometimes exercises restraint and chooses not to punish an individual, a community, a nation, or a terror organization should not dull our barometer of measuring good and evil. Occasionally, Hashem does take out His wrath. And Sedom was well-deserving of its punishment. Eishet Lot's flaw, of which many are guilty, was her erroneous evaluation that God's failure to destroy the city up until this point was an indication of His acceptance of this loathsome behavior as culturally sound and unworthy of punishment. God leaves the determination of good and evil to our moral consciousness, and it is not to be inferred from God's choice of deliberation or immediacy in inflicting punishment.

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Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky

Lifting One's Eyes

The theme of "lifting one's eyes and seeing" appears in several places in Parshas VaYera. Avraham is described as one who saw in this manner, whereas others in the parsha failed to observe things properly. Sitting outside his tent in the heat of the day, Avraham chooses to lift up his eyes to view potential guests (Breishis 18:2). Furthermore, years later, as Avraham is traveling to the Akeida, he once again lifts up his eyes and observes Har Hamoriya from a distance (Breishis 22:4). What is the significance of not merely seeing, but also lifting up one's eyes to see?

We can appreciate the manner in which Avraham observed things by contrasting this to others in the parsha who failed to see. Chazal note that after seeing Har Hamoriya from afar, Avraham turns to Eliezer and Yishmael and instructs them to remain behind as he and Yitzchak proceed to the Akeida. Avraham saw a cloud of glory hovering over the mountain whereas Eliezer and Yishmael saw nothing. Something special can be present, but if one fails to "lift one's eyes" and search for it, he may never notice it. Avraham actively sought out spirituality and thereby merited to see the Divine Presence.

Looking for opportunities to "lift our eyes" is not just important in searching for Hashem, but it is critical for developing our relationships with our fellow man as well. In this area, Avraham also excels and actively seeks out opportunities to perform acts of chessed. Notwithstanding recovering from his bris at the age of ninety-nine, he eagerly searches for guests despite the intense heat of the day. In contrast to when Avraham "lifts up his eyes" and sees the potential guests, Hagar also finds herself in a situation in which she can perform a great chessed. Her son, Yishmael is ill and in great need of her care. Rather than comforting her suffering child she deliberately distances herself by saying, "I do not want to watch him die." Hagar had not learned from Avraham regarding how to search for opportunities to perform chessed. Rather, she chose to close her eyes and ignore the dire situation that presented itself.

It is not coincidental that Yishmael did not see the Divine Presence as he stood before Har Hamoriya. He had not learned from his father to cease the opportunity and search for it. Rather, he followed the path of his mother, Hagar's example of turning away.

As the descendants of Avraham Avinu, we must follow his legacy of always "lifting our eyes" and finding ways to connect to Hashem and our fellow man. By actively searching for spiritual growth we will merit that Hashem will look to us as well. At the culmination of the Akeida Avraham names the very place that would later house the Beis Hamikdash, "Hashem will see." May we soon merit the fulfillment of the prophecy of Yeshayahu (60:4), "Lift your eyes and see that your children have gathered to come to you." We

yearn to see the day that the place in which Hashem sees will once again serve as our vehicle to see His presence and inspire us to follow in His ways by bestowing chessed upon one another.

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ki yedativ lma'an asher yetzaveh es banav v'es beto acharav (18:19)
Avrohom merited Hashem's love as a result of his dedication to commanding his children and his household to follow in his ways of Divine service. However, Rav Yitzchok Zilberstein notes that given Avrohom's reputation as an educator par excellence, it is curious that the Torah relates precious little of his actual conversations with his son and spiritual inheritor, Yitzchok. In fact, the only recorded interactions between them are on the way to the Akeidah, in which the Torah mentions (22:7-8) a total of two lines - a mere eight seemingly trivial words - that Avrohom spoke to Yitzchok, and those were only in response to a discussion initiated by Yitzchok. If we are to learn from Avrohom's techniques in giving over our values and priorities to the next generation, shouldn't we be given more examples?

Rav Zilberstein answers that in intentionally limiting the recorded words of Avrohom to his son, the Torah is teaching us a tremendous lesson regarding the education of our children. Many Americans mistakenly believe that raising children is as simple as constantly lecturing and instructing them what they should and shouldn't do. The fact that the parents themselves may not follow this advice is believed to be irrelevant, as "Do as I say, not as I do" seems to resolve the apparent contradiction.

In reality, of course, nothing could be farther from the truth. Our children are much smarter than we give them credit for, and they see right through our double standards, recognizing that our actions reflect our true beliefs, which they in turn absorb. The Torah tells us precious little of Avrohom's words to Yitzchok to teach us that this wasn't Avrohom's primary form of conveying his beliefs. Rather, the most effective form of education came through serving as a personal example of all that he valued and wished to transmit to his son. A son who sees that his father treasures his daily learning seder and prayer with a minyan, and a daughter who observes that her mother cherishes her commitment to chesed and tznius, will learn these values by osmosis, as this form of instruction is stronger than any words, but it could not be explicitly expressed by the Torah.

Rav Nissan Kaplan of Yeshivas Mir in Yerushalayim adds that of Avrohom's eight words to Yitzchok that are recorded in the Torah, two of the words are *âdê* - my son - which is an expression of love and endearment. He explains that this teaches us that in addition to the paramount importance of educating one's children through personal example, it is also essential that each child understands and feels that his parents' messages and teachings are motivated by their caring and love for him.

vatabet ishto meacharov v'tehi netziv melach (19:26)

Parshas Vayeira details the destruction of the wicked city of Sodom and its environs as punishment for their evildoing, in particular for their staunch opposition to doing acts of kindness for others. The angels that were tasked with destroying Sodom told Lot to flee with his wife and two daughters in order to be spared, but they were cautioned not to look behind them to witness what was transpiring in Sodom. Lot's wife did not heed their warning, and when she turned to gaze at the destruction, she was transformed into a pillar of salt.

The Medrash (Bereishis Rabbah 51:5) explains that because Lot's wife had sinned with salt, this punishment was particularly fitting for her. In what way did she sin with salt? When Lot brought the angels to his home as guests, his wife circulated to all of her neighbors to ask if any of them had salt that she

could borrow in order to serve her guests. Although her behavior seemed innocent, in reality, her secret objective was to publicize to the townspeople of Sodom that she had guests, so that they would converge on her house and demand that the guests be handed over to them, which is indeed what occurred. Because she claimed to be out of salt in order to backhandedly announce the presence of her guests, she was punished by being turned into a pillar of salt. This story is difficult to understand for two reasons. First, how is it possible that a self-respecting housewife ran her kitchen without such an essential spice as salt? Second, why is the fact that Lot's wife didn't have salt a reason that she was transformed into a pillar of salt? Had she been lacking potatoes, would she instead have become a potato? What is the deeper connection between her sin and her punishment?

Rabbi Chaim Zvi Senter explains that salt is a food which, if eaten by itself, lacks good taste and nutritional value. Paradoxically, it is also an essential ingredient in countless recipes, and if omitted, its absence is clearly detectable. Even though salt seems to lack value when viewed in a vacuum, it is in reality an extremely versatile spice with the ability to enhance the flavor of other ingredients. In this sense, salt can be described as a food whose entire purpose is to serve other foods.

In light of this insight, it is completely understandable that Lot's wife was so steeped in the self-centered and stingy mindset that permeated Sodom that she viewed salt, a food whose very essence is dedicated to benefiting others, as an alien product which had no place being stored in her home. Similarly, her punishment of turning into a pillar of salt was particularly appropriate for her sin. Because she spent her life focused solely on her own selfish needs with an utter lack of concern for the less fortunate, she was transformed into an eternal monument to chesed by being forced to exist in the form of a food which serves no function other than assisting others

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Peninim on the Torah

by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Parshas Vayera

And Hashem said, "Shall I conceal from Avraham what I do, now that Avraham is surely to become a great and mighty nation?" (18:17, 18) Hashem informed Avraham Avinu, that He was about to destroy the city of Sodom. Its community of sinners had gone too far, elevating sin to the level of cultural acceptance. It had become a way of life. The Torah teaches that Hashem's intention in notifying Avraham of His plans was to inform Avraham about his future as Patriarch of a large nation. Is this the reason that Hashem informed Avraham of His plans? True, Hashem wanted Avraham to pray for the people of Sodom, to teach the Patriarch the significance of prayer and its ability to rescind a decree - even when it appears to be too late. In this situation, however, Hashem knew that Sodom lacked the minimum number of righteous persons to ward off the decree. So why bother to pray? Hashem could have taught Avraham the significance of prayer in any other of a number of instances - ones in which prayer seemed to have greater efficacy than it would have for Sodom.

The Maggid, zl, m'Dubno explains this with his inimitable mashal, analogy. Each of two men asked the salesman to give him a suit to fit his son. The salesman was quick to respond by asking for the boys' sizes. The first father was clueless as to what size the boy wore. He began to describe his height and weight and body build. Being a professional, the salesman instructed the father to go home, pick up his son and return to the store for a fitting. He was not taking chances by selling him a suit for a boy, sight unseen.

The second father also sought a suit for his son. While he did not know his son's size either, he claimed it would not present a problem. Apparently, he had a number of sons of different sizes. He would take a few suits. Whatever did not fit one son would fit another.

Likewise, Hashem sought Avraham Avinu's prayer. He wanted to hear numerous supplications from the Patriarch. True, they might not "fit" the needs of Sodom, but Avraham would be the progenitor of a large nation. Somewhere, someone would need his prayer.

Horav Shlomo HaLevy Levinstein, Shlita, quotes Horav Shimshon Pincus, zl, who reiterated the idea that no prayer is wasted, when he eulogized his mother-in-law, Rebbetzin Mann. When she became ill and required emergency brain surgery, she survived the surgery, but never woke up, lying in a comatose state for a week before her holy neshamah, soul, ascended to its rightful place in Heaven. During her illness, prayers were recited throughout the Holy Land. Yeshivos, Bais Yaakovs, and chadorim recited tehillim in her behalf, entreating the Almighty for her recovery. Hashem listened; regrettably, the answer was, "No."

Rav Pincus explained that, chas v'shalom, Heaven forbid, should anyone think for a moment that the tefillos were wasted. No prayer goes for naught! Hashem saves and stores them until they are needed for another Jew who is missing the necessary prayers on his behalf. When a person harvests his crops, he certainly gathers much more than he needs at the moment. He stores the remainder in a reinforced silo to maintain the grain for a later date. Our tefillos are stored, put away until that time in which they can save another Jew in need.

What if there should be fifty righteous persons in the midst of the city? (18:24)

The pasuk seems to be emphasizing tzadikim b'soch ha'ir, "righteous persons in the midst of the city". Simply, this means that these virtuous men do not play out their righteousness only in the private sphere, but also in the midst of the city. It might not be convenient for some to express their religious beliefs in public - such as when it means adhering to the standard uniform of an observant Jew, i.e. tzitzis, yamulka- yet, they do so out of religious conviction. Hashem was setting the standard: a righteous person at home and in the street. (We have also been plagued with the disease of those who publicly flaunt their religious affiliation, but, in private, they have no qualms about acting in a most reprehensible manner, unbecoming a Jew.)

Harav Zalmen Sorotzkin, zl, suggests that the term tzadik, righteous person, is a relative one. He relates that once while traveling by train, he overheard a group of assimilated young men bragging about their negative religious conquests. On Yom Kippur, they ate and drank to their hearts' content as they played cards. One of their friends who was listening intently asked, "Did all of your friends join in the reveling?" "Yes, they all attended" was the quick response. "What about so and so (one of their peers who rarely attended public functions)?" "No," they replied, "he did not join us. He is a big tzadik. He fasts on Yom Kippur."

Rav Zalmen writes that he derived an important lesson from their response. The term tzadik is relative. An individual can desecrate Shabbos, eat non-kosher food, gamble with the worst of them, but, if he fasts on Yom Kippur, he is considered a tzadik! In contrast to the above story, Rav Zalmen relates that he once had to vet a student of a prominent yeshivah. Upon speaking to his rebbeim, he was informed that they had questions concerning his level of yiraas Shomayim. Apparently, upon occasion, he was guilty of perusing secular periodicals.

When the Lutzker Rav heard this, he deduced that there exists a wide gap between the rasha, wicked/evil person, measured according to yeshivah standards, and the interpretation of tzadik, righteous person, as contrasted with a secular, assimilated environment. The yeshivah rasha was light years above the tzadik of the train set.

We now understand that when Avraham presented his defense of Sodom and asked Hashem that the people of Sodom be spared in the merit of fifty tzadikim, he was certain that there were not fifty righteous individuals in Sodom. Yet, there were "Sodom tzadikim," who, relative to the miscreancy that was rampant in the city, were considered righteous. Avraham asked for fifty tzadikim in the "midst" of the city - in comparison to the rest of the city.

These people were certainly not righteous, but they did not act as nefariously as the others.

The men stretched out their hand and brought Lot into the house with them, and closed the door. And the men who were at the entrance of the house, they were struck with blindness...and they tried vainly to find the entrance. (19:10, 11)

The angels pulled Lot into the house making sure to close the door behind them. Immediately afterward, the angels struck the men at the door, blinding them. They no longer could locate the doorway to Lot's house. One can only find what he can see. We wonder why the door had to be closed once the men had been blinded. They could no longer find the entrance. Lot was essentially protected. He could sit right in front of them, and they would not be aware of it.

Horav Shalom Schwadron, zl, explains that the door was not closed in order to save Lot. The door was closed so that Lot not observe the Sodomites being punished. Lot merited being spared from death. He did not merit to watch the deaths of the evil citizens of Sodom. Lot was far from a saint. He was saved because he had remained silent when Avraham Avinu told the Plishtim that Sarah Imeinu was his sister. Lot could easily have refuted Avraham, but he kept his peace, thereby earning incredible reward for himself. While the reward was worth his life, it did not mitigate his evil streak. He was as wicked as the rest. Thus, he was allowed to live, but he could not watch the others die. The door was closed so that he could not watch his compatriots receiving their due.

Hashem's punishment is exacting, as is His reward. Lot was not allowed to watch; thus, the Sodomites died without having to experience the indignity of seeing one of their own spared. Lot's reward was life - nothing more, nothing less.

And Avraham circumcised his son, Yitzchak, when he was eight days old, as Hashem had commanded him. (21:4)

For the Jew, Bris Milah, circumcision, is much more than a rite of passage; it defines him. This applies to a halachic bris, performed by a bona fide mohel. It does not apply to the surgical procedure performed by one who is not of the Jewish faith - either by birth or by practice. The Jewish child that has been ritually circumcised shares an inextricable bond with the Almighty that transcends any form of physical ligature. In his commentary to Chumash, Horav Aryeh Leib Heyman, zl, very beautifully explains this relationship. He notes that the Torah does not mention Avraham Avinu's exemplary commitment to performing acts of chesed, kindness, until after he had his bris milah. Clearly, Avraham had acted kindly to people even before he was circumcised. Apparently, it was not of the same level of significance. The Avraham of pre-bris mode was not the same person who became the Patriarch of our People.

Second, the Torah sees fit to connect the destruction of Sodom with Avraham's bris milah. We see this in two instances. First, the recuperation from the bris milah, Avraham's act of chesed with the angels that visited him, and the destruction of Sodom are all juxtaposed upon one another-almost as if they were a single story. Second, the three angels who together visited Avraham indicate that their three-part mission was all inter-connected. Indeed, Chazal teach that the reason two angels traveled on to Sodom was that one of the three completed his mission once he delivered the wonderful news concerning the upcoming birth of Yitzchak Avinu to Sarah Imeinu. This explains why he did not go to Sodom, but the angel whose mission it was to destroy Sodom first visited Avraham. Apparently, the mission to destroy Sodom had its roots and point of commencement with the visit to the ailing Avraham.

In order to explain the relationship between milah, the destruction of Sodom and Avraham's commitment to chesed, Rav Heyman cites the place in which the Torah commands Avraham's descendants to carry out acts of chesed. In Devarim 28:9, the Torah enjoins us: V'halachta b'Derachav, "You shall walk

in His ways." This is explained by Chazal as the mitzvah to perform acts of kindness. The Jew is adjured to be G-d-like by performing chesed, just as Hashem performs chesed.

When Hashem commanded Avraham concerning the mitzvah of bris milah, He said, "Walk before Me and be perfect...I will set My covenant between Me and you" (Bereishis 17:1,2). The bond of perfection which Avraham achieves through the bris milah obligates him to "walk in Hashem's ways" by carrying out acts of loving kindness, as does Hashem. Avraham Avinu is linked with Hashem in an eternal bond which transforms his every mundane act of kindness. It is no longer mundane kindness; it is walking in Hashem's footsteps! This idea is reiterated a number of times in Sefer Devarim, as Hashem is referred to as HaKeil Ha'Neeman, shomer ha'bris v'hachesed. Bris and chesed are equated, indicating that they are inextricably bound with one another.

Thus, the Torah underscores Avraham's exerting himself on the third (and most painful) day after his bris milah, to perform the mitzvah of hachnosas orchim, welcoming wayfarers and reaching out to them. It is as if especially at this point - following his entrance into the holy covenant with Hashem, that the mitzvah of chesed becomes significant.

Second, now that Avraham was enjoined in the mitzvah of doing chesed with others, the world (as a result) was introduced to the lofty goals of chesed. Kindness became no longer an abstract idea; it became a mitzvah, a compelling obligation for every human being to be sensitive to the needs of his fellow. The sins of Sodom became blatantly magnified against the backdrop of this mitzvah. They were a people whose entire focus on life was antagonistic to the concept of chesed. Olam chesed yibaneh, the world is built upon the foundation of chesed. To challenge this in the manner that had become the culture of Sodom was to undermine the very underpinnings of Creation. Sodom had to be destroyed!

Furthermore, it would be an egregious error to compare chesed as performed by Lot to the chesed that his uncle, Avraham, carried out. A person who does not have a bris, whose acts of kindness are not carried out as part of the covenantal relationship with Hashem, are just that: kindnesses. They are not chesed, as in bris v'chesed. What Lot did was out of the kindness of his heart; he was not responding to Hashem's command. Thus, he was prepared to allow the violation of his daughters, even their deaths, as long as he could save his guests. This is subjective kindness, which one performs to satisfy his own needs. Therefore, generations later, Lot produced descendants such as Ammon and Moav, who were prepared to allow the deaths of the Jewish People, when their throats were parched from traveling in the wilderness. Therefore, we find benevolent countries who help refugees, because it is good publicity, yet they turn a blind eye to the plight of those who are not politically attuned with them.

In his commentary to the Chumash, Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, as quoted by his son, Rav Meir, offers a novel interpretation of our opening pasuk. He cites the Midrash Tanchuma to Parashas Tetzaveh which asks: "When is a newborn circumcised?" Chazal reply, "A newborn is circumcised when he is eight days old, just as our forefather Yitzchak was circumcised at this age." Why do Chazal ask the question, when, in fact, the Torah explicitly says (Bereishis 17:12), "At the age of eight days, every male among you shall be circumcised." Furthermore, why do Chazal answer this question by citing the fact that Yitzchak was circumcised at the age of eight days? Why not simply quote the pasuk?

Rav Schwab explains that the students were not questioning when a father is obligated to circumcise his son. This is evident from the Torah. Their query, however, focuses on the infant/son: When does the "newborn" become circumcised? When does the "person" within the body of the child, when does his Jewish soul become circumcised, become inducted into the ranks of the Jewish People?

The bris milah accomplishes two "removals": the physical orlah, and the spiritual orlah, the orlas ha'lev, foreskin which encloses the heart. Until the physical foreskin is removed, the spiritual foreskin has not yet been

perfected. The students asked Chazal, "At what point in life does the bris milah (which occurs on the eighth day) have an effect on the child's spiritual dimension?" They were under the impression that, until the child has progressed to a certain level of intelligence, he is incapable of achieving spiritual perfection. Therefore, they thought that the bris, which is performed on the eight day-old infant, has no immediate spiritual effect on the child. The Sages explained that this was untrue. They cited the pasuk which states that Yitzchak Avinu underwent the bris milah at the age of eight days. The Torah stresses that Avraham circumcised "his son, Yitzchak," when it could have simply written, "his son," with no specific reference to Yitzchak. The Torah is teaching us that Yitzchak was the holy Patriarch, even at the age of eight days old! The very day of his circumcision, Yitzchak achieved perfection. His neshamah had reached a sublime level of sanctity as a result of the bris milah. He was now a ben bris, a bona fide son of the covenant. We may not disregard the obvious implications of this dvar Torah. Those who delay and even go so far as preventing the bris from occurring, or who have it performed not in accordance with halachah, Jewish law, are delaying their child's spiritual perfection. You might say, "Who cares?" Do these parents want to sever their child's connection with the source of holiness which permeates Klal Yisrael? If the answer to that is still, "Who cares?," I ask: What right do they have to deprive their children of their rightful legacy?

<http://www.torahmusings.com/2015/10/who-really-built-the-beit-hamikdash/>
Who Really Built the Beit HaMikdash?

By Aharon Ziegler on Oct 23, 15 2:00 am in Halakhic Positions / no responses

**Halakhic Positions of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik
by R. Aharon Ziegler**

It is a well known fact that Shlomo HaMelech built the Beit HaMikdash. Yet, every morning we begin Pesukei Dezimra with Tehilim 30, "Mizmor Shir Chanukat HaBayit LeDavid [A psalm of David. A song for the dedication of the Temple]. Since Shlomo built the first Bet HaMikdash, and David neither dedicated it nor constructed it, the attribution to him in this psalm seems inappropriate.

Rav Soloveitchik explained, that the answer emerges from another passage in Tehilim [132:1-5]-" Shir HaMaalot, HaShem, remember David and all the hardship he endured. He swore an oath to HaShem , and made a vow to the Mighty One of Ya'akov: I will not enter my house, nor go to bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes nor slumber to my eyelids until I find a place for my G-d, a dwelling for Mighty One of Ya'akov."

David HaMelech asked HaShem's consent to build the Bet HaMikdash, but HaShem did not respond immediately to the request. He let David wait for what seemed an interminable period of time. As expressed in these pesukim, David experienced sleepless nights in anticipation of G-d's response. Finally, just as David was about to proceed with his plans, the Navi Natan informed him: "You shall not build a House for My name, because you have shed much blood." [Divrei HaYamim Alef, 22:8], "You shall not build the House; but your son , who shall come forth from you, he shall build the House for My name" [Divrei HaYamim Bet, 6:9]. Why did HaShem make David wait so long when He could have refused David's request immediately?

To this question the Rav found the answer in Gemara Zevachim [24a]. It is written there that "David was Mekadesh the upper floor... and the Kedusha extended from the earth to the heavens". It is true that Shlomo constructed the Temple with G-d's authorization and blessing, and with limitless resources. Nothing stood in his way. But, although Shlomo HaMelech built the physical structure of the Temple, it was David HaMelech that imbued it with Kedusha. Because Shlomo built it in a state of prosperity and tranquility, he could not be the one to be Mekadesh it. It was Shlomo's father who was Mekadesh it with tza'ar, pain, anguish, and uncertainty. The person responsible for the physical structure played a secondary role; for the

very essence of the Bet HaMikdash, its Kedusha, was previously established by David. Our passuk therefore correctly gives credit to David in connection with the dedication of the "Bayit".

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Weekly Parsha Blog:: Rabbi Berel Wein

Vayera

At first glance it may appear that the commitment between God and Avraham described in the opening words of this week's Torah reading is in the nature of a singular and one-off event. There are various interpretations amongst scholars of Israel and the commentators to the Torah as to the level of prophecy that our father Avraham attained. The appearance of angels in the form of human wanderers and their message to Avraham and Sarah is itself the subject of very different interpretations by the generations of scholars of Israel.

However we understand the matter and whatever interpretation we will adopt, it is clear that for Avraham, the presence of God in Avraham's daily existence and even mundane behavior was a constant reality. It is not that God appears to him suddenly and unexpectedly on this hot desert day but rather Avraham sensed the Divine Presence in his life on a constant and permanent basis.

In the house of our founding ancestors the presence of God was always an overriding factor that influenced their behavior and their worldview. Thus the opening words of this week's Torah reading described for us a permanent feature of the house of Avraham and Sarah. In their hearts and minds, in their behavior and attitudes, they were always dealing with the presence and appearance of God. The Torah is describing for us not a one-time singular event but rather the single most vital attribute that made Avraham the father of all nations and with Sarah, the parents of the Jewish people.

When dealing with the construction of the mishkan/tabernacle, the Torah is careful to point out to us that the Lord, so to speak, intends to dwell not in a building but rather within the hearts and souls of the people of Israel. The goal of Judaism has always been to foster and cement a permanent relationship, one that is deeply felt and viscerally experienced, between the Creator and the created.

One of the most characteristic features of Jewish life and society during the long centuries of exile and persecution was the fact that even the simplest Jew, relatively unlearned and certainly not a talmudic scholar, nevertheless experienced this deep connection with God. Tevye, the poor and harried dairyman, needs no intermediaries or appointments to speak to God. For him, as for millions of other Jews throughout history, God was a member of the family, so to speak.

He was to be found in their homes and shops, their barns and fields. He was a permanent presence in their lives. In our more sophisticated milieu, God has become a much more distant and less intimate figure to us. We have relegated Him to the synagogue and the study hall and even then only for certain hours of the day or for certain circumstances in our lives.

The rabbis taught us that there is a demand made upon us to emulate Avraham and Sarah in our own lives. That demand is not restricted only to behavior and actions but rather to the recognition that the relationship we

have with God is constant and omnipresent -wherever we are and whatever tasks in life occupy us.

The Same Old Script

For about the last century, the Arabs have played out the same script over and over again in their attempt to destroy Jewish control over the Land of Israel. And that script is basically to inspire their religiously fanatical followers to riot and kill Jews randomly with no strategic or tactical benefit to their cause. The rallying cry has always been that somehow the Jews intend to physically raze the al-Aksa Mosque built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem centuries after the Temple that stood there was destroyed by the Romans.

This was the cause advanced by the cursed Grand Mufti of Jerusalem in mounting the pogroms of the 1920's against defenseless Jewish civilians throughout the Land of Israel. It was the call to Arab arms and pogroms throughout the 1930's. The Bosnian SS Division that fought together with the Nazis in World War II, did so on the basis of somehow saving al-Aksa from destruction at the hands of the Jews.

This is what justified Auschwitz in the hearts and minds of millions of Moslems the world over during and after World War II. And in all of the painful Arab-Israeli conflicts that have taken place over the past nearly seventy years, the big lie about the Jewish intent to destroy the al-Aksa Mosque has been featured prominently.

So it should come as no surprise that the current wave of violence and murder against Jews – with no purpose except to kill Jews – that the calumny of al-Aksa should again be circulated to a new generation of ignorant, poor and indoctrinated Arabs.

The Palestinians have been very poorly served by Arafat and Abbas. Instead of pursuing the interests and benefits of their people and truly delivering them a state, an economy and a chance at a peaceful and productive existence, the Palestinian Authority has been emulated exactly by the Israeli-Arab politicians, who see their role not as ever truly serving their constituency but rather as an attempt to destroy the very country of whose parliament they are members.

This is almost a fifth column group that Israel bewilderedly seems to accept as a given part of its democratic country. Every attempt to somehow address this issue has never been enforced by the judiciary or legal powers that exist in our country. Why don't our leaders address the Israeli-Arabs directly, regularly and honestly?

Instead, they allow these barely hidden supporters of violence and hatred to control the debate and to gain the attention of the Arab citizens of Israel. This is beyond my realm of comprehension. The way it is now, any Arab leader, religious or secular, who will condemn the direction of the Palestinian Authority and of the Israeli-Arab politicians will be viewed as being treacherous to Islam.

This script of meaningless but murderous violence is a natural reaction to the indoctrination, habits and history of the Arab society in the Middle East and especially in the Land of Israel. And tragically, it reappears periodically out of the frustration of failure that so dominates the Moslem society of the Middle East.

Israel has suffered greatly over its existence from this Arab fixation to destroy it, no matter the cost or the numbers of previously disastrous failures. The current spate of violence will also eventually abate but the underlying issues and causes will fester unless there is a basic change in the mindset of the Arab street and its political leaders.

Once and for all, there must be a realization and acceptance of the reality of the existence of the Jewish state in the Land of Israel. Being the eternal optimist, which is a natural by-product of Judaism and Jewish tradition, I sincerely hope that such a change in the Arab mindset is possible, even if it is not currently foreseeable.

Until that changed mindset arrives, Israel has no choice but to protect itself from random violence by whatever means it possesses. And the cluck-clucking do-gooders of the media, the EU, the UN will blame Israel no matter what Israel does to protect its citizens from uncontrolled terrorism. We have become accustomed from the time of Abraham to being unpopular.

We would like to be perceived as a noble and lovable people. But that is not going to happen and, in fact, it never happened in history. That is the reality of the situation and there is no use pretending otherwise. So expect the same old script to be in vogue for the foreseeable future.

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Rabbi Weinreb's Parsha Column

Vayera - "Dystopia"

I never thought that I would begin a discussion of the weekly Torah portion by referring to a person who was canonized as a saint by the Catholic

Church. Never, that is, until I sat down to write this week's Person in the Parsha column.

The person in question is Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), the great jurist and counselor to the notorious King Henry VIII, who was beheaded because of his insistence that the Catholic Church was his supreme religious authority, and not King Henry.

I have long admired Sir Thomas because of his courage and also because of his wisdom. One example of the latter is the following quotation, which remains one of my all-time favorites: "The ordinary arts we practice every day at home are of more importance to the soul than their simplicity might suggest."

Although those words of wisdom could themselves serve as the basis for an essay, it is another one of More's contributions to the world's culture that prompts me to begin this column by mentioning him. More earned a prominent place in the history of world literature because of his classic work, *Utopia*. In this work, More imagines the ideal society, one that is perfectly just and fair. Indeed, More coined the word "utopia," which has become part of our everyday parlance.

Centuries after More's martyrdom, at least two of his countrymen found it necessary to seek a word which would signify a perfectly evil society. They searched for an antonym to "utopia." In the early 19th century, Jeremy Bentham introduced the word "cacotopia," defining it as a nightmare society in which morals mean nothing. Bentham's follower, the philosopher John Stuart Mill, preferred the term "dystopia." It is Mills' term that has prevailed as the antonym of choice for "utopia." Subsequent philosophers have found it ironic that this nightmare world often results from attempts to create an ideal society.

This week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayera (Genesis 18:1-22:24) tells the story of what was the world's first "dystopia," Sodom. We first encounter this "nightmare society" in last week's parsha, Parshat Lech Lecha. There, we read of Lot's decision to leave his Uncle Abram's company and "pitch his tents near Sodom." Immediately, the Torah interjects: "Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked and sinful against the Lord." (Genesis 13:13) The careful reader of this phrase wonders, "What exactly did they do to deserve such a malignant biblical review? What behaviors were so wicked and sinful?"

The rabbinic commentators, from the Talmud and Midrash down to our very own times, expand upon this description of Sodom and fill in some of the details for us. Rashi briefly summarizes some of the Talmud's views: "They were wicked with their bodies, sinful with their material possessions, and were intentionally rebellious against God." They violated sexual mores, were unethical in their business dealings, and based their behavior upon a corrupt theology.

The great medieval commentator, Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher, elaborates even further by referring to a passage in the Book of Ezekiel that provides us with some further background as to the nature of Sodom. The passage reads: "Behold, this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. In their haughtiness, they committed abominations before Me; and so I removed them, as you saw." (Ezekiel 16:49-50) The prophet informs us that Sodom was an affluent society which could easily have been charitable to others; yet they enacted laws against charity. They were untroubled, at peace because of their military power, yet they isolated themselves from less fortunate neighboring societies. They committed moral abominations.

Rabbenu Bachya continues, "Although the Torah had not yet been revealed, simple human reason demands charitable deeds and moral behavior. It is despicable that one human would stand idly by as another human suffers from hunger. How can one who has been blessed with bountiful wealth not alleviate another person's poverty? How much more despicable is he who ignores one of his own people, one who dwells within his own community."

Our Sages assert that Sodom and the three cities that were her cohorts were denied a place in the World to Come. It was not because they were a lawless society that they deserved this extreme punishment. Quite the contrary—they had an elaborate legal and judicial system. But their laws were based upon intolerance, selfishness, and cruelty. Our Sages tell us that their laws were enforced by means of the most sadistic tortures imaginable.

Abraham's weltanschauung was the polar opposite of Sodom's. Is it not astounding, then, that he pleaded with the Almighty for Sodom's salvation? After all, if the antonym for utopia is dystopia, then Abrahamism is the antonym for Sodomism. Yet Abraham prayed for Sodom!

Commentators throughout the ages have sought to understand why Abraham supposed that there might be fifty, or even ten, righteous men in such a thoroughly corrupt society. One approach to this problem is attributed to Rabbi Isaiah Jungreis, author of the work Chazon Yeschayah, a profound and original thinker whose life was snuffed out by the Nazis in 1944. He argues that, paradoxically, the comprehensiveness and totality of Sodom's evil was precisely what Abraham used in its defense. He puts these words into Abraham's mouth: "Almighty Lord! Is it not conceivable that there are indeed fifty individuals in Sodom who recognize the cruel and evil nature of their society but who cannot protest, because their own lives would then be in danger? Surely these well-intentioned but impotent individuals deserve to be considered righteous individuals in whose merit all of Sodom should be saved!"

Rabbi Jungreis suggests that the Almighty's responded as follows: "Yes, dear Abraham. He who opposes evil but does not protest because he fears for his own life is a righteous person. But there were not fifty, nor even ten, individuals in all of Sodom with troubled consciences. It was not the coercive nature of their environment that prevented them from speaking out. It was their evil and sinful behavior."

I am not qualified to debate Rabbi Jungreis, a keen student of biblical texts and a kadosh, a martyr, of the Holocaust. I concur with his hypothesis regarding Abraham's argument. Abraham may very well have argued that those who fail to protest in order to protect their own lives should be considered righteous men.

But I take issue with his conjecture regarding the Almighty's response. I find the following Divine response more likely: "Abraham, dear Abraham! A person who finds himself in an evil society must voice protest, whatever the cost, if he is to be considered righteous. There may very well have been ten, or fifty, or perhaps even more, residents of Sodom who were aware that theirs was a morally corrupt environment. Arguably, those men should not be considered evil. But there is no way that they can be considered righteous. A righteous person speaks out courageously against the evil that surrounds him. Trust me, Abraham, had anyone in Sodom broken the conspiracy of silence which allowed evil to persist, I, the Lord Almighty would have hastened to assist him in his cause."

It was not only Sodom's evil that God could not tolerate. It was also the silence in the face of that evil. And that silence ultimately excluded all of Sodom from the World to Come.

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Britain's Former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

To Bless the Space Between Us

There is a mystery at the heart of the biblical story of Abraham, and it has immense implications for our understanding of Judaism.

Who was Abraham and why was he chosen? The answer is far from obvious.

Nowhere is he described, as was Noah, as "a righteous man, perfect in his generations." We have no portrait of him, like the young Moses, physically intervening in conflicts as a protest against injustice. He was not a soldier

like David or a visionary like Isaiah. In only one place, near the beginning of our parsha, does the Torah say why God singled him out:

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. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

Abraham was chosen in order to be a father. Indeed Abraham's original name, Av ram, means "mighty father", and his enlarged name, Avraham, means "father of many nations".

No sooner do we notice this than we recall that the first person in history to be given a proper name was Chavah, Eve, because, said Adam, "she is the mother of all life." Note that motherhood is drawn attention to in the Torah long before fatherhood (twenty generations to be precise, ten from Adam to Noah, and ten from Noah to Abraham). The reason is that motherhood is a biological phenomenon. It is common to almost all forms of advanced life. Fatherhood is a cultural phenomenon. There is little in biology that supports pair-bonding, monogamy and faithfulness in marriage, and less still that connects males with their offspring. That is why fatherhood always needs reinforcement from the moral code operative in a society. Absent that, and families fragment very fast indeed, with the burden being overwhelmingly borne by the abandoned mother.

This emphasis on parenthood – motherhood in the case of Eve, fatherhood in that of Abraham – is absolutely central to Jewish spirituality, because what Abrahamic monotheism brought into the world was not just a mathematical reduction of the number of gods from many to one. The God of Israel is not primarily the God of the scientists who set the universe into motion with the Big Bang. It is not the God of the philosophers, whose necessary being undergirds our contingency. Nor is it even the God of the mystics, the Ein Sof, the Infinity that frames our finitude. The God of Israel is the God who loves us and cares for us as a parent loves for and cares for a child.

Sometimes God is described as our father: "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?" (Malachi 2:10). Sometimes, especially in the late chapters of the book of Isaiah, God is described as a mother: "Like one whom his mother comforts, so shall I comfort you" (Is. 66:13). "Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you" (Is. 49:15). The primary attribute of God, especially whenever the four-letter name Hashem is used, is compassion, the Hebrew word for which, rachamim, comes from the word rechem, meaning "a womb".

Thus our relationship with God is deeply connected with our relationship with our parents, and our understanding of God is deepened if we have had the blessing of children (I love the remark of a young American Jewish mother: "Now that I've become a parent I find that I can relate to God much better: Now I know what it's like creating something you can't control"). All of which makes the story of Abraham very hard to understand for two reasons. The first is that Abraham was the son told by God to leave his father: "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house." The second is that Abraham was the father told by God to sacrifice his son: "Then God said: Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah, and there sacrifice him as a burnt offering on the mountain I will show you." How can this make sense? It is hard enough to understand God commanding these things of anyone. How much more so given that God chose Abraham specifically to become a role model of the parent-child, father-son relationship.

The Torah is teaching us something fundamental and counter-intuitive.

There has to be separation before there can be connection. We have to have the space to be ourselves if we are to be good children to our parents, and we have to allow our children the space to be themselves if we are to be good parents.

I argued last week that Abraham was in fact continuing a journey his father Terach had already begun. However, it takes a certain maturity on our part before we realise this, since our first reading of the narrative seems to suggest that Abraham was about to set out on a journey that was completely new. Abraham, in the famous midrashic tradition, was the iconoclast who took a hammer to his father's idols. Only later in life do we fully appreciate that, despite our adolescent rebellions, there is more of our parents in us than we thought when we were young. But before we can appreciate this there has to be an act of separation.

Likewise in the case of the binding of Isaac. I have long argued that the point of the story is not that Abraham loved God enough to sacrifice his son, but rather that God was teaching Abraham that we do not own our children, however much we love them. The first human child was called Cain because his mother Eve said, "With the help of God I have acquired [kaniti] a man" (Gen. 4:1). When parents think they own their child, the result is often tragic. First separate, then join. First individuate, then relate. That is one of the fundamentals of Jewish spirituality. We are not God. God is not us. It is the clarity of the boundaries between heaven and earth that allow us to have a healthy relationship with God. It is true that Jewish mysticism speaks about *bittul ha-yesh*, the complete nullification of the self in the all-embracing infinite light of God, but that is not the normative mainstream of Jewish spirituality. What is so striking about the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Bible is that when they speak to God, they remain themselves. God does not overwhelm us. That is the principle the kabbalists called *tzimtzum*, God's self-limitation. God makes space for us to be ourselves.

Abraham had to separate himself from his father before he, and we, could understand how much he owed his father. He had to separate from his son so that Isaac could be Isaac and not simply a clone of Abraham. Rabbi Menahem Mendel, the Rebbe of Kotzk, put this inimitably when he said, "If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you!"

God loves us as a parent loves a child – but a parent who truly loves their child makes space for the child to develop his or her own identity. It is the space we create for one another that allows love to be like sunlight to a flower, not like a tree to the plants that grow beneath. The role of love, human and Divine, is, in the lovely phrase of Irish poet John O'Donohue, "to bless the space between us".

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Rabbi Ari Kahn on Parsha

The Chief Rabbi Of Sodom

When Terach began his trek from his hometown, his destination was the Land of Canaan. The Torah never explains this migration, never gives us any insight into Terach's motivation. The only information we are offered is the make-up of the traveling party: Terach uproots his son Avraham, his daughter-in-law Sarah, and his orphaned grandson Lot, only to stop short of his stated destination and remain in Charan.

At some later juncture, Avraham heeds the Divine call and heads for an unknown destination – which turns out, ironically, to be the land of Canaan. Although Terach remains in Charan, Lot tags along with Avraham and Sarah. Once again, we have no information regarding Lot's reasons for this second relocation: Was he merely an adventurer, always eager to explore

new lands and new cultures? Perhaps Avraham's personal charisma or the holiness and spirituality of Avraham's household attracted Lot, or perhaps Lot simply choose to maintain his ties with his closest living relative, his sister Sarah.[1]

Whatever his motivation may have been, as they continue their travels it becomes clear that Avraham and Lot are incompatible, and that they must part ways. Avraham suggests that Lot establish his own homestead, offering him the length and breadth of the Promised Land. Instead, Lot chooses neither the north nor the south, as Avraham had suggested, opting instead to travel east and settle in Sodom, a place that reminds him of Egypt. [2] What is the nature of this similarity? The Torah describes the terrain and the abundance of water, but was there something more about Sodom that attracted Lot? Could he perhaps have been nostalgic for the things they had recently experienced in the kingdom of the pharaohs? Although their visit there had made Lot and Avraham rich men, they had just barely escaped intact from the corruption and immorality, from the system of power and cruelty that had nearly cost Avraham his life and Sarah her freedom and honor: Shortly after their arrival in Egypt, their hosts took an unhealthy interest in their female guest, and snatched her away from her family.[3] It seems this sort of behavior was a deep-seated Egyptian characteristic; years later, Yosef was subjected to very similar treatment.[4] Could this have been what attracted Lot to Sodom?

It should come as no surprise that the consequences of Lot's choice are tragic: By choosing Sodom, Lot turned his back – literally, in a geographical sense, as well as figuratively, in the moral and spiritual sense – on the greatest man alive. He distanced himself from Avraham and Sarah, and instead sought out a place that represented the very antithesis of Avraham and Sarah's tent. At one time, Lot might have been considered Avraham's heir-apparent, but from the moment Lot departs for Sodom, that is no longer an option: When Avraham pours out his heart to God and laments his infertility, he mentions his chief steward Eliezer as his only potential heir;[5] Lot, his ne'er-do-well nephew/brother-in-law, is no longer part of the equation.

Eventually, Lot's poor choices rebound on him, with a vengeance: Even when he tries to imitate the hospitality he learned from Avraham and Sarah, the results are a grotesque caricature of true hesed: Rather than a wholehearted invitation, Lot's heavenly guests are shown the door out before they even step in.

Please, my lords, turn aside to my house. Spend the night, bathe your feet, and then continue on your way early in the morning. (Bereishit 19:2)

Lot invites the guests to stay, yet strongly hints that it would be best for them to leave early in the morning. His invitation seems perfunctory, half-hearted, lacking warmth and conviction. Once the guests acquiesce, Lot's neighbors demand to "get to know" them (in the biblical sense).[6]

I have two daughters who have never known a man. I will bring them out to you; do as you please with them, but don't do anything to these men. After all, they have come under my roof!" (Bereishit 19:8)

Lot's pathetic attempt to mimic Avraham's hospitality is nothing short of bizarre: He readily sacrifices his daughters to the marauding crowd, perhaps seeing himself as the hero of an alternative Akeida.

The crowd responds with an interesting and unexpected accusation:

This man came here as an immigrant, and now all of a sudden, he has set himself up as a judge! (Bereishit 19:9)

Here, then, is the crux of the matter: Lot came to Sodom to be a judge.[7]

When measuring up his options, he decided that it would be preferable to be "chief rabbi of Sodom" rather than play "second fiddle" and live in Avraham's shadow. Sharing such close quarters with a spiritual giant can make a certain type of person feel small and inadequate; Lot preferred to strike out on his own, to settle in a place where expectations would be lowest, a place devoid of spirituality, a place that would make him look good in comparison to those around him. In Sodom, Lot could shine.

Unfortunately, Lot's plan backfired. By choosing to live in a corrupt and immoral environment, Lot became estranged from both his immediate and extended family, and eventually became the victim of his children's failed education and the warped morality they had internalized in their hometown. Lot's daughters, who clearly had no feelings of tenderness or loyalty toward the father who was willing to throw them to the wolves, displayed their own version of Sodomite morality: When their father was most vulnerable, they used him for their own purposes, plying him with drink and raping him. The image of Lot with which the Torah leaves us is of a drunk, humiliated and violated man – but one who, we might well imagine, still took pride in the highlight of his resume – his position as judge or “chief rabbi” of Sodom. For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2015/10/parshat-vayera-essays-and-lectures.html>

[1] See Rashi, Bereishit 11:29.[2] Bereishit 13:10. [3] Bereishit 12:15. [4] Bereishit 39:7-13. [5] Bereishit 15:2. [6] Bereishit 19:5. [7] Lot is described as sitting “in the gate of Sodom,” which connotes a judicial position, or, at the very least, a position of civic importance. See Rashi, Bereishit 19:1, and commentaries on Rashi.

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Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Vayera

A Segulah Hinted At In Tefilas Geshem

Parshas Vayera is the parsha of the mitzvah of hospitality (Hachnasas Orchim) in the Torah. Avram Avinu sees Angels who he thought were Arabs and prepares a deluxe meal for them.

Last year, I happened to be at a dinner in New York for the Mir Yeshiva. Someone came over to me and said, "I want to tell you an interesting story." He told me the following story:

There was a fellow in Toronto who saw a Mesulach [charity collector] in shul one morning. He invited the Mesulach home for breakfast. He asked the Mesulach where he was going to spend the evening and the Meshulach told him he had plans to leave town and move on to another city that evening. The fellow said, "Please stay with me tonight." The Mesulach hesitated, telling the host that he really could not afford to stay another night – he had to move on to the next city. The host said, "Trust me, stay tonight and when you leave tomorrow I will give you a bigger check than anything you will get in the next city."

The charity collector stayed with his host that night. The host gave him a big check in the morning, took the Meshullach's phone and address, and then sent him on his way. A year later, the host called the Meshullach, told him that he would like to send him a ticket to fly to Toronto to be by him the following week, when he was making a bris. The host told him, "I want you to be Sandek at the bris of my newborn son."

The Meshulach was speechless. "Sandek? At your son's bris! I barely know you. Why are you giving me all this honor?" The host was persistent and the Meshulach agreed to fly to Toronto on the ticket he was provided. He came to the airport, checked in, and saw that he had a first-class ticket. He came to Toronto and was the Sandek at the Bris.

The host then explained to the Meshulach what happened. He and his wife tried for many years to have children and were unsuccessful. He went to Rav Pam, z"l, and asked for advice. Rav Pam told him an amazing thing: The segulah [fortuitous opportunity] to conceive children on the night the woman goes to the mikveh is fulfilling the mitzvah of Hachnosas Orchim. That very night, his wife was supposed to go to the mikveh. Therefore, he badly wanted to be offering hospitality to someone at that time. That is why he prevailed upon this fellow to stay over that night. And so it was. His wife became pregnant and that is why he wanted this person to be Sandek at his son's bris and flew him in first class!

Where did Rav Pam get this idea from?

There is a line in Tefillas Geshem [the Prayer for Rain recited on Shmini Atzeres] – "Remember the one who was born from the announcement 'Please

take some water'" (referring to Yitzchak whose birth was announced by the Angels after Avraham provided them hospitality and offered them a bit of water to drink). Why is this line thrown into this prayer? The answer is that this line is teaching us something. This, I believe, is the source of the Segulah which was suggested to this childless father by Rav Pam. Avraham and Sarah also had trouble conceiving and then they invited guests.

At that time, the Angel told them "At this time next year, Sarah will have a son." Yitzchak was born with the announcement of "Yukach, nah me'at mayim" [please take a bit of water]. This little line is the source, perhaps, that providing hospitality to others is a Segulah to have children of one's own.

Two Thoughts About The Town of Tzoar

The Angels come to Lot and tell him they are going to destroy Sodom. They take him to the outskirts of the city and instruct him to run for his life. They advise him to not look back, not to remain anywhere in the plain, and to "flee to the mountain lest you be swept away" [Bereshit 19:17]. Lot is not prepared to fully implement the Angel's instructions. "Please no! My L-rd – See, now, Your servant has found grace in Your eyes and Your kindness was great which You did with me to save my life; but I cannot escape to the mountain lest the evil attach itself to me and I die. Behold, please, this city is near enough to escape there and it is small; I shall flee there. Is it not small? – and I will live." [Bereshit 19: 18-20]

For whatever reason, Lot pleaded that he was not able to make it up the mountain. He begged to be allowed to remain in one of the nearby towns, instead of having to flee up the mountain.

Lot's request was granted. "Behold I have granted you consideration even regarding this, that I not overturn the city about which you have spoken. Hurry! Flee there, for I cannot do a thing until you arrive there. He therefore called the name of the city Tzoar." [Bereshit 19:21-22]

Rashi interprets — and he brings textual proof — that when Lot said about the city to which he wanted to escape was "krova" [closer], it does not necessarily mean that it was geographically close to Sodom. The intent is that the city of Tzoar was founded and inhabited one year after Sodom. Consequently, they had one year less of wickedness in their Heavenly account. Lot, therefore, pleaded with the Angels "save this city". It's founding is closer to us in time and therefore it has not yet committed the full measure of sins which would justify its immediate destruction. "Let me, therefore, go there", Lot pleaded. And the Angels agreed: "Okay, we won't destroy Tzoar, because it is not as old as the rest of the cities around Sodom."

Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer spoke to the students at the Yeshiva Eitz Chaim in Yerushalayim (where he was Rosh Yeshiva) on an Erev Rosh HaShannah. He told the students "I want to tell you over a schmooze [ethical discourse] I heard when I was in Slabodka from Rav Yitzchak Blazer (Rav Itzele Peterburger):

Every year, we do not seem so worried when we enter Rosh HaShannah. Even though it is the Day of Judgment, we rationalize "We made it thus far, we made it last year, why shouldn't we make it another year?" But look at the city of Tzoar. The city of Tzoar was saved because it was one year less corrupt than Sodom. This means that in one year, Sodom got so bad that it had to be destroyed. We see, thus, what can happen in a single year. The difference between the death sentence of Sodom and the leniency granted to Tzoar was that of only a single year of less sinning...but one year can tip the scale in the other direction.

Thus, we cannot delude ourselves and say, "Look, we made it last year; we will be alright this year!" Tzoar shows us that this logic is faulty. This was Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer's schmooze before Rosh HaShannah.

Although perhaps this insight has more currency in the days and weeks before Rosh HaShannah, if we are true Baalei Teshuvah, we can still gain inspiration and conviction from it even a few weeks after Rosh HaShannah. The other thought I want to share about Tzoar is the following:

The Orach Chaim asks a question: How are we to understand the status of Tzoar? If part of the original decree was that Tzoar needed to be destroyed, how can Lot say, "Do me a favor and don't destroy it – it is too hard for me to run up the mountain"? On the other hand, if it is not supposed to be destroyed, then even without Lot's petitioning for it, why didn't the Angels advise him to escape to Tzoar in the first place?

The Orach Chaim answers (based on the above cited Rashi) that Tzoar was not as bad as Sodom. It was not fundamentally part of the decree of destruction. But there is a principle that once permission is granted to an Angel to destroy, he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked. Tzoar would have been destroyed because once destructive forces are unleashed in the world, sometimes "innocent" (or at least not completely deserving of punishment) people are killed as well. The Angels were prepared to destroy Tzoar because it was at least on the brink, and once they had license to destroy Sodom and Amora, they would have destroyed Tzoar as well.

Why then, did it not happen? It is because Lot said "Do me a favor. I can't make the trip up the mountain. Save Tzoar!"

Rav Chatzkel Levenstein asks a question. Avraham Avinu – the Tzadik, the Foundation of the World, the Master of Kindness -- prays for all these cities and petitions the Ribono shel Olam and is turned down. Lot comes and tells the Angel he is too old to climb the mountain, and a city is saved for him.

How do we understand this – Avraham's prayers to G-d do not help, yet Lot's request for a favor from the Angels does help?

Rav Chatzkel responds that this worked because the Angels had an obligation of Hakaras HaTov [repaying a favor] to Lot. He took them in; he risked his life for them; he was kind to them. The obligation of Hakaras HaTov to a Lot can even trump the prayers of an Avraham Avinu. This is a tremendous Chiddush and a tremendous lesson to us all about the importance of proper Hakaras HaTov.

Transcribed by David Twersky Seattle, WA; Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman, Baltimore, MD RavFrاند, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Yissocher Frand and Torah.org.

<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/vayera-the-paradox-of-happiness/>

The Blogs :: Ben-Tzion Spitz

Vayera: The Paradox of Happiness

October 28, 2015

Many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose. -Joseph Addison

Based on the biblical accounts, it is easy to imagine the patriarch Isaac as a somber man. This is a great irony, given that his name in Hebrew, Yitzchak, translates as "will laugh." Isaac's life is filled with trials: his father is prepared to sacrifice him; he struggles against the farmers of Gerar for possession of wells he dug; his wife and son deceive him, taking advantage of his blindness to steal a blessing; he is disappointed by the wives of one son and sends the other son into exile to search for better wives. The Sfat Emet in his comments during the year 5643 (1883) digs deeper into the subject of laughter and happiness. He explains that there are two types of laughter and happiness. There is frivolous laughter that is the side-effect of what is at best a superficial happiness or pleasure. Then there is the laughter and happiness of the man who fears God, as Isaac did. When a man fears God exclusively and follows His commands, he fears no man or mortal agency. His laughter is pure and his happiness complete.

May we achieve improved and more meaningful levels of laughter and happiness.

Shabbat Shalom

Dedication - To my mom, Tamara and Tiferet – the birthday girls.

Ben-Tzion Spitz is the Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of two books of Biblical Fiction and over 400 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes

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Rav Kook List

Rav Kook on the Torah Portion

Faith in Troubled Times

The following story took place during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. As told by a student of Mercaz HaRav at that time, it illustrates Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook's guidance how we should conduct ourselves during troubled and difficult times.

That Yom Kippur I prayed in Beit HaRav, the original location of the Mercaz HaRav yeshiva in Jerusalem. Rav Tzvi Yehudah Kook also prayed there. During the chazan's repetition of the Musaf prayer, we were startled to hear the civil defense alarms wailing throughout Jerusalem.

After Yom Kippur ended, I was called up to my unit. For over a month I was stationed in the Sinai Desert.

When I finally received a short leave from the army, I made my way to Jerusalem. First I went to the Kotel, where I poured out my heart over the terrible sights I had witnessed during the war. Then I visited my fiancée. Our wedding date had already arrived, but due to the war it had been postponed indefinitely.

My fiancée asked me, "What will be with our wedding?"

I told her that now, during this terrible war, with so many killed, wounded and missing, I didn't think it was the right time to get married. The situation was still very tense. We were afraid the fighting would start up again. It was impossible to know when and in what condition we would return from the war. Therefore, I explained, we must postpone the wedding until the situation stabilizes.

Without a choice, my fiancée accepted my decision.

I returned to Sinai. We dug into our lines and kept a constant lookout for enemy forces. Tensions were high. Henry Kissinger, the American secretary of defense, had arrived in Israel, with his shuttle diplomacy between Jerusalem and the Arab capitals. But our worries and fears grew.

After a few weeks, I got a second leave. My fiancée asked me again - what will be with our wedding?

I told her that the situation was still difficult. We have no choice, we must wait.

"You have a rabbi," she suggested. "Ask him. Listen to da'at Torah - consult with a Torah scholar."

I was pleased with her suggestion and immediately made my way to Mercaz HaRav.

The yeshiva was almost empty, as many of the students had been called up to fight.

I met with Rav Tzvi Yehudah Kook and explained my dilemma. I spoke about the terrible war, about the unfathomable number of casualties and soldiers missing in action, about the palpable dangers which we faced against the enemy armies. I concluded saying that I felt that, in this difficult time, it is not right to organize a wedding.

The rabbi listened to me with complete attention. He reflected on the matter. After a minute of silence, he said, "We act according to the rules of Halacha. In Halacha, one decides according to the principles of rov (the majority of cases) and chazakah (that pre-existing states will continue). Most of the soldiers who are injured heal. Most of those who go out to battle return."

Usually, the rabbi would finish with a word of advice, but leave the final decision up to the one asking. This time, however, he finished his words with an unequivocal declaration.

Smiling, he shook my hand warmly and announced, "Mazal tov! Congratulations!"

I went back to my fiancée and related the rabbi's verdict. We set a new date for the wedding. I returned to the army, and the news that I was about to get married lifted the spirits of the entire battalion. They all rejoiced. Soldiers volunteered days of their army leave - it was called a 'Day Bank' - and proudly presented me with a gift of 13 vacation days.

The day before the wedding, I took a flight to the Lod airport. I prayed at the Kotel, immersed in a mikveh, and stood under the chupah. Rav Tzvi Yehudah Kook attended the wedding, as did a few fellow students from yeshiva and some soldiers on leave.

The wedding joy raised everyone's spirits, giving them new strength. So it was that, during the very days of that blood-soaked war, when our enemies sought to destroy us, we built our home ke-dat Moshe veYisrael, 'according to the laws of Moses and Israel.'

In another incident from the war, involving the burial of one of the rabbi's beloved students, Rabbi Hanan Porat noted:

"It was clear that our rabbi, in his special way, wanted to teach us that the Yom Kippur War - despite the many sacrifices, despite the deep crisis that it created - will not break us. On the contrary, our job is to increase light and engage in matters of the 'land of the living.'"

(Translated from Mashmia Yeshuah by Simcha Raz and Hilah Volbershtin, pp. 359-360, 363)

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