

Weekly Parsha VAYERA

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The Mishnah in Avot specifically, and Jewish tradition generally, instructs us that our father Abraham was constantly challenged with great tests in life and was able to survive and surmount all of them. There is an underlying difficulty to this narrative regarding the testing of Abraham. God after all is omniscient and knows well in advance what the reaction of Abraham will be to all the challenges that are placed before him. This being the case, then one can easily ask why bother presenting those challenges in the first place.

This fits in to the general question that Maimonides deals with when he attempts to reconcile God's omniscience with the presence of human free will and free choice. His answer is that both exist and coexist and that is part of the secret of the fact that human beings and human logic can never truly understand the Infinite and the Eternal. So that is undoubtedly true in the case of Abraham and his challenges.

Even though ultimately we will be unable to arrive at a definitive answer to this question – almost all questions that begin with the word 'why' are never completely satisfactorily answered – nevertheless I believe that we can attempt to arrive at some sort of understanding as to the purpose of the tests that Abraham endured and overcame. The Torah would not have devoted so much space and such detailed descriptions to these events in the life of Abraham if there wouldn't be eternal moral teachings present in the narrative that are relevant and true to all humans in all generations.

I think the obvious answer that jumps forth from the pages is that the tests are not meant to prove anything to Heaven as much as they are meant to prove the potential of greatness of Abraham to Abraham himself. It is our nature not to realize how great our potential is, how strong we really are, morally and emotionally, and to our surprise what we are capable of accomplishing.

It is one thing to profess that one has faith and is willing to make sacrifices on behalf of the preservation of that faith, whether personal or national. However, it is another thing completely to make those sacrifices, and to experience the emotional difficulties and even tragedies that life often visits upon us. A person never really knows what one's true makeup is unless tested over a lifetime, with the Talmud's graphic phrase that we are ultimately tested regarding our final resting place.

Abraham becomes great and stands erect after having successfully dealt with the challenges to his faith and to his vision that life and the environment in which he lived set before him. That is perhaps what the Torah indicates to us when it says that Abraham's faith was of such power in nature that the Lord deemed it to be the paragon of righteousness. Righteousness is achieved only when challenges are overcome.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

Negative Capability (Vayera 5780)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

I have written about the binding of Isaac many times in these studies, each time proposing an interpretation somewhat different from the ones given by the classic commentators. I do so for a simple reason.

The Torah, and Tanach generally, regard child sacrifice as one of the worst of evils. Child sacrifice was widely practised in the ancient world. In 2 Kings 3:26-27, we read of how the Moabite king Mesha, in the course of war against Israel, Judah and Edom, sacrificed his eldest son to the god Chemosh. Had the point of the trial been Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, then in terms of the value system of Tanach itself he would have proven himself no better than a pagan king.

Besides this, the name Abram means "mighty father." The change of name to Abraham was meant to signify "father of many nations." God

said that He chose Abram "so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to go in the way of the Lord," meaning that Abraham was chosen to be a role model of fatherhood. A model father does not sacrifice his child.

The classic interpretation given by most of the commentators is beautiful and moving. Abraham showed that he loved God more than he loved his own son. But for the reasons above, I prefer to continue to search for different interpretations. Unquestionably, there was a trial. It involved Isaac. It tested Abraham's faith to the limit. But it was about something else.

One of the most perplexing features of the Abraham story is the disconnect between God's promises and the reality. Seven times, God promised Abraham the land. Yet when Sarah died, he owned not even a burial plot and had to buy one at an exorbitant price.

At the very opening of the story (see parshat Lech Lecha), God called on him to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house, and promised him, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you." Without demur or hesitation, Abraham left, began the journey, and arrived in the land of Canaan. He came to Shechem and built an altar there. He moved on to Bet-El and built an altar there as well. Then almost immediately we read that "There was a famine in the land."

Abraham and his household were forced to go to Egypt. There, he found that his life was at risk. He asked Sarah to pretend to be his sister rather than his wife, thus putting her in a false position, (conduct which Ramban intensely criticised). Where, at that moment, was the Divine blessing? How was it that, leaving his land and following God's call, Abraham found himself in a morally dangerous situation where he was forced to choose between asking his wife to live a lie, and exposing himself to the probability, perhaps certainty, of his own death?

A pattern is beginning to emerge. Abraham was learning that there is a long and winding road between promise and fulfilment. Not because God does not keep His word, but because Abraham and his descendants were charged with bringing something new into the world. A sacred society. A nation formed by covenant. An abandonment of idolatry. An austere code of conduct. A more intimate relationship with God than any people has ever known. It would become a nation of pioneers. And God was teaching Abraham from the very beginning that this demands extraordinary strengths of character, because nothing great and transformative happens overnight in the human world. You have to keep going, even if you are tired and lost, exhausted and despondent.

God will bring about everything He promised. But not immediately. And not directly. God seeks change in the real world of everyday lives. And He seeks those who have the tenacity of faith to keep going despite all the setbacks. That is what the life of Abraham was about.

Nowhere was this clearer than in relation to God's promise of children. Four times, God spoke about this to Abraham:

[1] "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you." (Gen. 12:2)

[2] "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted." (Gen. 13:16)

[3] "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then He said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Gen. 15:5)

[4] "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you." (Gen. 17:5-6)

Four ascending promises: a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth, as the stars of the sky; not one nation but many nations. Abraham heard these promises and had faith in them: "Abram believed the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

Then God gave Abraham some painful news. His son by Hagar, Ishmael, would not be his spiritual heir. God would bless him and make him a great nation, "But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." (Gen. 17:21).

It is against this background of four promises of countless children, and a further promise that Abraham's covenant would be continued by Isaac, that we must set the chilling words that open the trial: "Take your son, your only son, the son that you love – Isaac – and offer him up." The trial was not to see whether Abraham had the courage to sacrifice his son. As we saw above, even pagans like Mesha king of Moab had that courage. It was widespread in the ancient world, and completely abhorrent to Judaism.

The trial was not to see whether Abraham had the strength to give up something he loved. He had shown this time and time again. At the very beginning of his story he gave up his land, his birthplace and his father's house, everything that was familiar to him, everything that spoke of home. In the previous chapter, he gave up his firstborn son Ishmael whom, it is clear, he also loved. Was there even the slightest doubt that he would give up Isaac, who was so clearly God's miraculous gift, arriving when Sarah was already postmenopausal?

The trial was to see whether Abraham could live with what seemed to be a clear contradiction between God's word now, and God's word on five previous occasions, promising him children and a covenant that would be continued by Isaac.

The Rabbis knew that there were instances where two verses contradicted one another until a third verse came to resolve the contradiction. That was Abraham's situation. He was faced with a contradiction, and there was as yet no further verse to resolve it. That was the test. Could Abraham live with uncertainty?

He did just that. He prepared himself for the sacrifice. But he told no one else. When he and Isaac set off on the third day on their own, he told the two servants who had accompanied them, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." When Isaac asked, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham replied, "God Himself will provide the lamb."

These statements are usually taken as diplomatic evasions. I believe, however, that Abraham meant exactly what he said. He was living the contradiction. He knew God had told him to sacrifice his son, but he also knew that God had told him that He would establish an everlasting covenant with his son.

The trial of the binding of Isaac was not about sacrifice but about uncertainty. Until it was over, Abraham did not know what to believe, or how it would end. He believed that the God who promised him a son would not allow him to sacrifice that son. But he did not know how the contradiction between God's promise and His command would resolve itself.

The poet John Keats, in a letter to his brothers George and Thomas in 1817, sought to define what made Shakespeare so great compared to other writers. He possessed, he said, "Negative Capability – that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Shakespeare, in other words, was open to life in all its multiplicity and complexity, its conflicts and contradictions, while other, lesser writers sought to reduce it to a single philosophical frame. What Shakespeare was to literature, Abraham was to faith.

I believe that Abraham taught us that faith is not certainty; it is the courage to live with uncertainty. He had negative capability. He knew the promises would come true; he could live with the uncertainty of not knowing how or when.

Shabbat Shalom

Shabbat Shalom: Vayera (Genesis 18:1-22:24)

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – One of the most difficult stories of the Bible – and certainly the complex highlight of Vayera – is the "binding" (and near slaughter) of Isaac, but the tale preceding it may legitimately be called the "binding" (near death) of Ishmael. This occurred when Abram (Abraham), acting on the commandment of God, banishes his eldest son, but without providing him and his mother with enough supplies to survive a desert journey. And perhaps, when the Bible introduces the

story of the binding of Isaac with the words, "And it happened after these things..." the "things" which preceded and even caused the akeda ("near sacrifice") of Isaac refers to Abraham's harsh treatment of Ishmael. God is saying, in effect, that if Abraham could send Hagar and Ishmael into the desert with only bread and a jug of water, then God will now make Abraham take Isaac to Mount Moriah ostensibly to watch him die.

There seem to be many biblical parallels between the two stories that give credence to this "measure-for-measure" interpretation. In both stories it is God who commands the near sacrifice; in both stories it is an "angel of God" who saves the young men, both of whom are referred to as "na'ar" (youth) rather than "son" in the context of the *deus ex machina* (Gen. 21:17; 22:11, 12); and in both instances the son in question does not return to live with his father.

However, upon further reflection it seems to me that the akeda story – clearly an important test for Abraham in its own right – cannot be taken as a mere reaction to Abraham's "niggardly" treatment of Hagar and Ishmael; moreover, Abraham sends his son and mistress away only in acquiescence to God's command that he listen to Sarah, with the Bible expressly stating that "the matter [of the banishment] was very grievous" in his eyes (21:10-12). Abraham only agrees after hearing God's promise that "I shall also make the son of this maidservant a nation, because he [too] is of your seed" (21:13).

Hence I believe that Abraham did give them sufficient supplies, but Hagar got lost in the desert. The point of the biblical narratives – and the parallels between them – is not "measure-for-measure punishment," but to stress the fact that Ishmael is also a son of Abraham, that he too will become a great nation, and that the destinies of both will always be intertwined. Indeed, because Ishmael has been so significantly blessed by God, Isaac seems to be almost obsessed with him – or at least with the place where God promised greatness to Hagar's son – and this obsession haunts him for life.

You will remember that when Hagar first becomes pregnant and Sarai (Sarah) is still barren, Hagar behaves superciliously toward her. In response, Sarai treats Hagar as a handmaiden again (rather than as an equal wife, as the Code of Hammurabi ordains), and she flees. An angel of the Lord finds her, exhorts her to return to Sarai as a handmaiden, and then grants the following blessing: "I shall increase, yes, increase your seed, and they shall not be able to be counted because they are so numerous... and behold you are pregnant and shall bear a son. Call his name Ishmael, for the Lord has heard your affliction [at the hands of Sarai].

He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand over everything and everyone's hand against him; and in the face of all his brethren shall he dwell" (16:9-11).

This blessing of Hagar's seed parallels the blessing that God had just given to Abraham's seed: "Look now heavenwards and count the stars; you cannot count them; so shall be your seed" (15:5). And when, in the next chapter, God changes Abram's name to Abraham, reflecting his destiny to be the father of a multitude of nations, Isaac will wonder whether the main heir to the Abrahamic patrimony is Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn! The place where God bestows this Abrahamic blessing on Hagar's seed is a well between Kadesh and Bered which Hagar names "the well for the Living God who looked after me," Beer-lahai-roi (16:13, 14). And even though later on, when Abraham is told by God to banish Hagar and Ishmael because Ishmael is "mocking" around Isaac, God promises Abraham that "through Isaac shall be called your [covenantal] seed" (21:12).

Yet God still saves Ishmael's life and guarantees that He will make from him "a great nation" (21:18).

Hence Isaac spends his life both attracted to the more aggressive firstborn Ishmael, who will also father a great nation, and jealous of the brother who may well have been his father's favorite – after all, when God informs the 99-year-old Abraham that his 89-year-old wife would become pregnant, the patriarch responds: "Would that Ishmael may live before thee!" (17:18). Isaac is, after all, rather meek – witness how reluctant he is to get into any kind of battle with Abimelech, even

though the king of Gerar has reneged on a contract – and he may well fear that Abraham favors the more aggressive Ishmael. He may even have suspected that his father wanted to see him dead at the akeda to clear the way for Ishmael, and therefore doesn't return with his father to Beer-sheba afterward; we only find Isaac with Abraham at the end of Abraham's life. Isaac is jealous, but is also guilt-ridden.

Ishmael is after all the firstborn, who is banished and whose mother is banished because of him. And Isaac is also filled with feelings of unworthiness because of his lack of self-assertiveness.

And so Isaac, due to his conflicted relationship with Ishmael, is described as going back and forth from Beer-lahai-roi ("bo mibo" – literally coming from coming, Gen. 24:62, 63), which is where Eliezer finds him when he presents Rebecca. And Rashi even suggests that Isaac returns to Beer-lahai-roi to bring Hagar as a new wife for Abraham after Sarah's death; Isaac serves as shadchan ("matchmaker"), since he feels guilty about Ishmael and Hagar's banishment. And Abraham is buried by "Isaac and Ishmael his sons" – the Midrash says that Ishmael returned and repented – after which "Isaac dwelt in Beer-lahai-roi" (25:8-11).

The chapter concludes with the 12 "princes of nations" born to Ishmael, paralleling Isaac's 12 grandsons and tribes. Ishmael and Isaac are involved in a kind of perpetual approach-avoidance dance wherein they see each other as rivals but come to recognize that they must learn to live together in the same part of the world, where each will develop into a great nation.

Abraham is indeed the father of a multitude of nations.
Shabbat Shalom!

Insights Parshas Vayeira Cheshvan 5780

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is sponsored in memory of Mina Bas Yitzchak Isaac.

"May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

That Healing Feeling

To him Hashem appeared, in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw three men standing before him... (18:1-2)

This week's parsha begins with Hashem coming to visit Avraham. Rashi (ad loc) explains the reason for the visit: "It was the third day since the circumcision, and Hakodosh Baruch Hu inquired as to his welfare." Chazal (see Sotah 14a) clearly state that Hashem came to visit Avraham for the mitzvah of bikur cholim, and we are thus instructed to visit the sick just as Hashem visited Avraham.

Hashem noticed that Avraham was pained by the fact that he couldn't fulfill the mitzvah of hachnasass orchim (inviting guests into one's home), so He summoned three "men" to come and visit with Avraham. Rashi (18:2) informs us that these "men" were actually angels sent to Avraham, each with a specific task to accomplish. According to the Talmud (Bava Metzia 86b), the angel Michael came to inform Sarah that she would give birth; Gavriel came to overturn Sdom; Rephael came to heal Avraham from his circumcision.

This seems a little odd. After all, Hashem Himself came to visit Avraham to do bikur cholim. Ostensibly, this would seem to be the highest level of "medical care" that one could hope to achieve. What possible reason would there have been to also send the angel Rephael to heal him?

One of the most under appreciated aspects of recovering from a trauma is considering the emotional state of the patient. There have been countless studies that show that recovery is aided greatly by a person's attitude. Science has tried to explain how the emotional state directly effects the healing process (perhaps the brain releases healing endorphins, etc.) but the link is undeniable.

In other words, there are two aspects to healing: 1) recovering from the actual physical trauma to the body and managing the pain and 2) restoring the patient's proper emotional state, which has been negatively affected by a diminished sense of self. The latter is obviously very much

exacerbated by the medical environment where most patients are treated like an object, or worse, a science project. The significant indignities (hospital gowns - need we say more?) suffered in that environment have a strong and deleterious effect on a patient's emotional state because it causes a terrible impact to one's sense of self.

Hashem visited Avraham not to heal his physical body or to help manage his pain. This is, after all, the domain in which Hashem placed Rephael to administer. Rather, Hashem came to visit Avraham in order to restore Avraham's sense of self. After all, if the Almighty comes to visit you, you're a pretty "big deal," and an important part of His plan. This too is a form of medical treatment as understanding that you matter is the basis for wanting to recover, which therefore speeds up the healing process.

This is the point of bikur cholim (and unfortunately, often overlooked). All too often, bikur cholim is performed perfunctorily; that is, the person visiting makes some "small talk" for a few moments and promptly begins to ignore the patient; either watching television, talking to other visitors or answering phone calls and emails.

We are instructed to follow Hashem's lead in bikur cholim by making sure the person understands that our visit is all about them, conveying that we care about them, and ensuring that they know they are important. In other words, your job in bikur cholim is to restore the patient's sense of self. In this way, you are following Hashem's example and actually participating in the healing process.

People in Glass Houses...

Let a little water be fetched, please, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread, that you may nourish your hearts. After that you shall pass on; seeing that you have already come to your servant. And they said, So do, as you have said (18:3-5).

Rashi (ad loc) quoting the Gemara (Bava Metzia 86b) explains that Avraham was under the impression that these "visitors" were Arabs, whom were known to worship the dust that was on their feet. This was a type of idol worship; as they were a nomadic people who traveled frequently - thus they worshipped the "god" of the roads. They viewed the dust of the road as something sacred; something that should be bowed down to (Maharal).

The Gemara goes on to say that the angels didn't appreciate Avraham suspecting them of such a thing and actually criticized Avraham in their response: "Did you actually suspect us to be Arabs that bow to the dust of their feet? First look at your very own son Yishmael (who regularly does that)?"

In other words, the angels are telling Avraham - before accusing others of misdeeds get your own house in order. How does the Talmud know that this is what the angels replied to Avraham? Our sages don't invent conversations out of thin air. Where in the verses can our sages deduce that this is what actually took place?

If one examines the verses carefully, it can readily be seen what caused the sages to come to this conclusion. Consider, for a moment, three people who are traveling in the blistering heat on a parched and dusty road; desperate for some sort of shelter. They come across a welcoming tent with a benevolent host offering them not only respite from the sun, but plenty of water and food as well. The host only has one stipulation; "please wash your feet, I will then fetch you water and food while you're comfortably resting in the shade of my tree."

What should be the appropriate response to this kind and generous offer? One would imagine that you don't have to have the manners and etiquette of Emily Post to respond; "thank you kind sir! Of course we will do as you wish!" Yet the angels respond in a very odd manner; they basically command him, "so shall you do, just as you have said." Clearly Chazal are bothered that this is an inappropriate response to a kindness that is offered with a generous heart.

Chazal therefore conclude that the angels aren't responding to his generous offer, they are responding to his accusation or assumption that they are idol worshippers. Now their comments begins to resonate - before trying to fix other people's shortcomings, first take care of the very same issues that you have in your own home.

Perhaps most remarkable is how Avraham responds to their chastising of the manner in which he runs his household. After all, it's never easy to open oneself to honest criticism. One would imagine that accepting severe criticism from someone you are going out of your way to be kind and generous toward would give one serious pause. Yet Avraham takes their criticism in stride and literally "runs" to make preparations for them and otherwise oversees that all their needs aren't just minimally met; they are offered expensive delicacies and attentive service.

Undoubtedly, this is why Avraham is the paragon of the attribute of chessed. True kindness shouldn't be delivered based on your feelings toward the recipient; true kindness is based on the needs of the recipient and doing whatever you can to show them how much you appreciate the opportunity to be of service.

Did You Know...

In this week's parsha the Torah describes the destruction of Sedom and the story of Lot and the melachim. The story ends as they are fleeing Sedom; Lot's wife, ignoring the angels' explicit orders, turns around to gaze at Sedom getting destroyed. She immediately turns into a pillar of salt, because, as Rashi (19:26) recounts, she sinned with salt by refusing to serve it to guests in her home in Sedom. What has become of this pillar of salt?

Josephus states that he saw the pillar himself (Antiquities 1:11:4). Additionally, the Gemara (Berachos 54b) tells us of the bracha (Baruch Dayan HaEmes) that one should say upon seeing that pillar.

Clearly the Gemara wouldn't be giving us a bracha to say if there was no chance of ever seeing this pillar of salt - so we know that it existed in the time of the Gemara and there's a chance that it still exists today. So, where might it be?

Fascinatingly, there's actually a mountain along the southwestern part of the dead sea in Israel, part of the Judean Desert Nature Reserve, that's called Mount Sedom. Mount Sedom, or Jabel Usdum in Arabic, is, according to The Living Torah (by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan), the most likely location as to where Lot's wife died, based upon the contention that Lot was heading south to escape. Furthermore, even nowadays, there's a pillar on that mountain called Lot's Wife, which seems to resemble a human form. See picture. Interestingly, while the Torah doesn't mention her name, we learn in Sefer HaYashar 19:52 that her name is Ado.

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VaYeira: Hidden and Revealed Holiness

Rav Kook Torah

A Paradoxical Blessing

After Abraham passed the test of the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, an angel informed him:

"This is what God says: I have sworn by My Essence, since you performed this act and did not withhold your only son, I will bless you greatly and increase your descendants like the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will possess their enemies' gate. And all the nations of the world will be blessed through your descendants." (Gen. 22:16-18)

This blessing appears to contradict itself. On the one hand, Abraham is promised that his descendants will be victorious over their enemies: "Your offspring will possess their enemies' gate." On the other hand, his descendants will be prized and cherished by other peoples: "All the nations of the world will be blessed through your descendants."

What will be the lot of Abraham's descendants: hostility and strife from the nations, or love and respect?

Also: why did God compare the Jewish people to both the stars and the sand?

Two Realms: Internal and External

In fact, an angel appeared to Abraham not once but twice. The first time, an angel appeared just as Abraham was about to offer up his son, commanding him:

"Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God." (Gen. 22:12)

Why were there two messages from God?

We all live in two realms. There is our external world of action and deed; and there is our hidden inner life, our thoughts and desires. Often there lies a wide discrepancy between our outward actions and our inner thoughts and intentions.

The Akeidah occurred differently in these two realms. In the realm of actual deed, Abraham offered a ram on Mount Moriah. But in his inner thoughts and emotions, in his extraordinary dedication and love for God, Abraham offered up his own son. The Midrash writes:

"As he performed each stage of offering [the ram], Abraham prayed: 'May it be Your will that this act should be considered as if it was done to my son: as if my son was slaughtered, as if his blood was sprinkled, as if my son was flayed, as if he was burnt and reduced to ashes.'" (Rashi, based on Tanchuma Shelach 14)

The two calls from heaven, as well as the dual blessing, correspond to the two aspects of the Akeidah: in deed and in thought; the actual and the potential; the revealed and the hidden.

The first call from heaven stopped Abraham from physically carrying out the Akeidah. "Do not lay your hand on the boy." This summons related to Abraham's inner state of holiness, fully revealed only to God. "For now I know that you fear God." Only God truly knew the nobility of Abraham's soul. This level of hidden holiness could not be expressed in action. "Do not do anything."

After Abraham offered the ram in place of his son, a second angel appeared. Abraham's inner devotion had been expressed also in the realm of action. Now, the angel informed Abraham, his blessing was no longer limited to himself, to his own inner spiritual world, but extended to all future generations of his descendants. Abraham had succeeded in revealing his inner holiness in the physical realm. The angel emphasized that Abraham had realized his love for God in deed and action, "since you performed this act."

What is the meaning of this unusual oath, *בְּיָסוּדִי*, "I have sworn by My Essence"? This short phrase refers to both the inner and revealed dimensions. God's Essence is, of course, the deepest, most profound secret. An oath, on the other hand, is a promise to take action, to act upon an inner decision.1

Dual Blessing

This dichotomy of the hidden and the revealed explains Abraham's dual blessing. Why were his children likened to both the stars and the sand? They will reach for the stars as they strive to realize their inner aspirations. At the same time, they will be like the sand, with a down-to-earth holiness, expressed with practical mitzvot.

The story of Abraham's descendants among the nations also reflects this dual nature. In the beginning, the Jewish people made their appearance as yet another nation in the world, struggling against enemies and foes. Their inner sanctity was hidden and unrecognized. At this stage in their history, the Jewish people require the Divine blessing of "possessing their enemies' gate."

But in the future, God's hidden light on the Jewish people will be revealed to all. The nations will recognize that this is no ordinary nation; Israel is the revelation of God's will in humanity and the entire universe. They will acknowledge Israel's inner sanctity: "All the nations of the world will be blessed through your descendants."

(Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. I, pp. 94-96)

1 The word "oath" (shevu'ah) has the same Hebrew root as the word "seven," thus corresponding to the seven days of creation and the physical world.

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Vayera

For the week ending 16 November 2019 / 18 Heshvan 5780

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Insights

Here Today

"...For I have loved him (Avraham) because he commands his children and his household after him that they may keep the way of Hashem, doing charity and justice..." (18:19)

Walking through Ohr Somayach last week, I had a couple of moments of reflection. There's a major building project which, please G-d, will give us a beautiful new Beit Midrash and classrooms. The whole front of what used to be the staircase leading up to the Beit Midrash from Shimon HaTzadik Street is no longer there and in its place is a vast hole. The door that used to lead to that staircase is securely locked, but locked doors can be unlocked and so that door is also barred by two serious cross beams, but there's still a small crack under the door that you can peak through and see a vast chasm of nothing where there used to be a place.

That place exists now in the minds of those who remember it. I went to daven in the Conference Room. It's been a long time since I was in there and as I walked in I looked at the long table and its two ends and remembered two Torah giants who used to sit there, at different times, at its two ends. At the end further from the window, Rav Dov Schwartzman, zatzal, used to give shiur. I was in his shiur when he was teaching his 'favorite' Masechta — Bava Kama. I found it very difficult. One day, he asked me who my chavrusa was, and I said that I didn't have a chavrusa. He said to me, "I will be your chavrusa!" From then on, after every shiur he would painstakingly go over one of the points of the shiur. I looked at his place and thought, "He's not here anymore and only the people who were in his shiur can still see him sitting there." My eye turned to the other end of the table and I remembered how Rav Moshe Shapira, zatzal, would open our eyes and take us soaring into to the heights and beauty of Jewish thought — l'fi erkeinu — according to our ability. He is no longer here among us and only those who were in that shiur can still see him sitting there.

Someone once said, "We live our lives as though we were immortal," but the only certain thing in life is death. I remember Rav Mendel Weinbach, zatzal, saying to me once at a funeral that every time he went to a funeral he knew fewer and fewer people. Now he no longer goes to funerals, and I myself recognize fewer and fewer people at funerals.

However long your life is — it's still very short. This can fill you with despair or galvanize you into action.

At the beginning of the Torah portion of Lech Lecha, where Avraham makes his entrance into the history of the world, the Torah writes nothing about the reason why Hashem chose Avraham to proclaim His Unity in the world. It doesn't say that Avraham was a tzadik, as it does with regard to Noach. In fact it says nothing about him at all. The Torah just says "Lech Lecha." Hashem's choice of Avraham seems almost arbitrary. The Maharal says that had the Torah enumerated Avraham's virtues, it would imply that he was chosen for those virtues, and, were his offspring to veer from his path, then Hashem might renege on his choice of Avraham's progeny as His agents in the world. Thus the Torah says nothing of Avraham's virtues, to teach us that G-d's love of Avraham was absolute and unqualified. His covenant with Avraham and his descendants was eternal and did not depend on future generations emulating him.

However, it seems from this verse in this week's portion that Hashem had reasons why he loved Avraham: "Because he commands his children and his household after him that they may keep the way of Hashem, doing charity and justice..."

My father, of blessing memory, used to say that saying "Don't do as I do. Do as I tell you" is ineffective parenting. Hashem loved Avraham not because of what he did, but because what he did revealed who he was.

Those of us who remember the great ones of Ohr Somayach who are no longer with us, remember them not so much for what they did but because what they did revealed who they were.

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Parshas Vayera
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb
Hospitality Before Heaven

He was an old man, frail, tired, and bereaved. News of Hitler's advancing army preoccupied him, and he was overwhelmed, if not broken, by the requests for advice he was receiving from hundreds of troubled Jews. Indeed, he may have already sensed that he had only months to live.

His name was Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, and he was universally acknowledged to be the world's leading Talmudic scholar. He lived in the city of Vilna, and the time was late 1939.

The person who told me the story was then a young man, barely twenty years old. He was himself a refugee, along with his fellow yeshiva students. He found himself in the neighborhood of Rabbi Grodzinski's residence during the Sukkot holiday. He decided he would attempt to visit the Rabbi, although he knew that he might not be granted an audience.

How surprised he was to find the Rabbi alone, studying and writing. The rabbi welcomed him, inquired about his welfare, and invited the visitor to join him in a light lunch. The Rabbi told him that because of his age and physical weakness he deemed himself to be exempt from the requirement to eat in the sukkah. He considered himself a mitzta'er, one whose physical discomfort freed him from the sukkah requirement.

"But you," the Rabbi continued, "are a young man and reasonably healthy. Therefore, take this plate of food down to the sukkah in the courtyard, and excuse me for not being able to join you."

The young man did so, but soon, sitting in the sukkah by himself, was surprised to hear the old Rabbi slowly making his way down the many steps from his apartment to join him in the sukkah.

"You may wonder why I am joining you," exclaimed the old Rabbi. "It is because although a mitzta'er, one who is in great discomfort, is exempt from the mitzvah of sukkah, he is not exempt from the mitzvah of hospitality, of hachnasat orchim."

This anecdote underscores the importance of the mitzvah of hospitality and illustrates the fact that even great physical discomfort does not excuse a person from properly receiving and entertaining his guests.

Of course, the biblical basis for Rabbi Grodzinski teaching is to be found in this week's Torah portion, Vayera. In the opening verses, we find that Abraham, despite the fact that he was recovering from his recent circumcision, exerts himself to welcome a small group of wayfarers and tends to their needs with exquisite care.

Abraham is our model for the important mitzvah of welcoming strangers and seeing to it that they are greeted hospitably.

The 17th century sage, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, known as the Shelah HaKadosh, points out that performance of this mitzvah helps us realize that we are all wanderers and merely transient guests in the Almighty's world. We pray that He treats us hospitably during our sojourn in His world, and to earn such treatment, we are sensitive to the physical and emotional requirements of our own guests.

Our sages discovered an even deeper dimension to Abraham's hospitality. The third verse in our Torah portion reads, "And he said, 'My lord, if I have found favor in your eyes, pass not away from your servant.'" The simple reading of this verse is that Abraham is speaking to one of his guests whom he refers to as "my lord."

Another reading, a startlingly provocative one, suggests that Abraham is addressing the Almighty Himself, and that the word "lord" should be spelled with an uppercase "L". According to this interpretation, Abraham is asking that the Lord Himself excuse him and wait for him while he tends to his guests. "Welcoming one's guests is a bigger mitzvah than welcoming the Shechinah, the Divine Presence." That is the lesson which the Talmud derives from the story which opens our parsha this week.

Commentaries throughout the ages have questioned whether it is indeed legitimate for one to abandon his rendezvous with God in order to attend to the needs of mere human beings. Is it right for one to interrupt his dialogue with the Almighty just to perform the mitzvah of hospitality? There is a rich literature of responses to this question. One approach is to understand that it is not so much that hospitality trumps the experience of communication with the Shechinah. Rather, it is that the way to earn such an exalted spiritual experience is by practicing hospitality.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Vayera
Why Ask Mamre Whether to Fulfill G-d's Command?

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

The pasuk at the beginning of the Parsha says, “Hashem appeared to him (Avraham) in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day.” [Bereshis 18:1] Rashi explains why Mamre receives honorable mention in this pasuk recording the Almighty’s appearance to Avraham Avinu: Mamre was the person who gave Avraham advice regarding circumcision. Mamre had a covenant with the patriarch Avraham and when Avraham consulted with him regarding G-d’s command to circumcise himself at age 99, Mamre advised him to go ahead with the operation. To recognize this role of Mamre, the Torah records here that G-d appeared to Avraham in the plains of Mamre.

Many of Rashi’s super-commentaries—including Rav Eliyahu Mizrahi—ask the obvious question: How are we to understand the implication that Avraham consulted with Mamre regarding G-d’s mitzvah of Milah? It seems inconceivable that the pious patriarch who was willing to do anything for the Master of the Universe would feel a need to check with his friends before carrying out an unambiguous command from Hashem.

The Maharal, in his Gur Aryeh, gives two answers to this question. First, he says the patriarch did it to preempt criticism from his contemporaries that “Avraham acted without counsel.” Certainly, there was no doubt that he would go ahead with the circumcision regardless of what his friends advised him. However, he wanted to fend off societal reaction that he “rushed into a rash action.” Therefore, Avraham publicly sought out a prestigious person with whom he consulted so that no one could accuse him of taking this significant action without first going through a thought-out rational process. The Maharal says that this is the same reason that it took Avraham Avinu three days to get to Har Hamoriah. Had he responded to Hashem’s command to slaughter his son by immediately slaughtering his son in his back yard, people would have said, “he was making a rash decision in a perturbed frame of mind without thinking through its implications and long-term consequences.” Since Avraham undertook a 3-day journey prior to carrying out the Divine command, it was clear to everyone that he had engaged in a thought-out, rational process.

Second, the Maharal says that Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre had an alliance with Avraham (they were Ba’alei Bris with each other) and it is inappropriate for any member of an alliance to initiate a major action or activity independently without first consulting with the other members of the alliance. When friends do something crucial in their lives, they share it first with one another. Again, this is not because Avraham considered for a moment doing anything other than what the Almighty commanded him, but it is just proper protocol for a ba’al bris—which is much more than just a friend—to provide the others with a “heads up” before initiating independent action of a momentous nature.

Let us say you decide to move to Eretz Yisrael. Here you are, you are established in the community. You decide you are going to pick up yourself and your family and make Aliyah. Tavo alecha bracha [May blessing come upon you.] However, it is only right that before this becomes public knowledge, you go to your closest friends and associates and tell them, “Listen, I have made a big decision. We are moving to Eretz Yisrael.” It is not that you are asking for their permission or even their opinion. But it is a natural and appropriate rule of social etiquette to not let your closest friends hear such momentous news about you from others, or after the fact. That is the way friends treat each other. They share with one another their secrets and their plans. G-d willing, when your daughter becomes a bride and it becomes public knowledge, your best friends should not hear about it in shul—they should hear it from you!

In Parshas Lech Lecha, Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky put a different spin on this answer. He cites a Gemara [Nedarim 32a]: When Avraham Avinu received the command “Walk before me and be perfect” [Bereshis 17:1], he began to tremble. He was frightened. Rav Yaakov explains – what

was he frightened about? Rav Yaakov brings a Gemara in Sanhedrin [89b] that when Avraham Avinu was on the way to the Akeida, the Satan appeared to him and tried to deter him. The Satan knew it would be futile to tell Avraham “Don’t do it!” Instead he told him, “Avraham, have you lost your mind? You—the person who has been the promoter of monotheism and Chessed [kindness] in the world—you are going to slaughter your son? Do you know what is going to happen, Avraham? You will lose every single baal teshuva that you ever made! They will all say, ‘The man is cruel. He is a sadist! He is barbaric!’ Avraham, how can you engage in human sacrifice? What will everyone say about you?” This is the type of argument that could appeal to most people. “You are going to destroy your life’s work. You are going to make a chilul Hashem.”

The Gemara says that Avraham responded to the Satan, “I will walk in my innocence” (Ani b’tumi eilech). In other words, Avraham told him, “You have a good question, but I am listening to the Ribono shel Olam. When G-d tells me something, I do not ask any questions.”

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky says that the same attitude prevailed by the circumcision. Avraham Avinu had no doubt that he was going to do the milah. His doubt, however, was, “What kind of impression will this make on people? It may look like my G-d is a barbaric G-d. He asks me to circumcise myself at age 100.” Therefore, the whole query that Avraham placed before his ba’ale bris was: Should I do this act publicly or privately? He could have put out the word that he was going to Eilat for a few days, then go ahead and circumcise himself far away from any acquaintances, and come back a week or two later to Beer Sheva. No one would have had to know about G-d’s command or his following through on it.

This is why he ran the idea by Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre. He openly told them that G-d commanded him to enter into a Covenant with Him via circumcision. Avraham wanted to hear their opinion as to the expected reaction of society, if word got out about this command and his intention to fulfill it. Mamre told him “If Hashem told you to do it, it must be good for you. People know how G-d loves you. They will understand, and if they don’t, don’t worry about what people say. Do it publicly!” Avraham took Mamre’s advice. Not about the Milah itself. About that he had no doubts. But he took Mamre’s advice to do it publicly, and for that reason the Torah records that G-d appeared to Avraham in the plains of Mamre.

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Vayera: The Cost of Missed Opportunities

Ben-Tzion Spitz

Nothing is more expensive than a missed opportunity. - H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

God decides he’s going to destroy the evil city of Sodom and its four other sister cities. However, He feels he needs to inform Abraham about it before He does so. What ensues is one of the most bizarre biblical bargaining sessions that were ever conducted. Abraham questions God and then suggests God should spare the cities if He finds 50 righteous people there (ten per city). God agrees. Immediately, Abraham, perhaps sensing that God knows there aren’t 50 righteous people, asks God to spare the cities if he finds just 45 people (nine per city). God agrees. Abraham pushes again and asks for 40 people to be the measure. God agrees. Abraham, on a roll, asks for 30 people. God agrees again. Abraham asks for 20 and God agrees. Finally, Abraham asks for ten, God agrees, but perhaps sensing that he can’t push his luck any further, Abraham stops.

In the end, there are less than ten righteous people in the entire Sodomite metropolis. God sends angels to extricate Abraham’s nephew Lot and his family from Sodom and proceeds to rain fire and brimstone upon Sodom in one of the more dramatic and apocalyptic scenes of the Torah. The Meshech Chochma points out an interesting inconsistency in the progression of the bargaining. When God agrees to spare Sodom if there

are 45 righteous, He says “I won’t destroy.” When he refers to the 40 and 30, He says “I won’t do.” When he refers to the 20 and 10, He reverts back to saying “I won’t destroy.”

The Meshech Chochma understands that when God says He “won’t destroy,” it means he won’t destroy, but He will punish. That makes sense for a city or a metropolis which lays claims to only 10 or 20 righteous people. When God says He “won’t do,” it means he won’t even punish, if the cities have a more substantive cadre of 30 or 40 righteous. But why does God opt for the harsher option of “won’t destroy,” meaning He will punish if there’s a more substantial 45 righteous?

The Meshech Chochma explains that the harsher punishment is because they were so close to salvation, they just needed one person for each of the five cities to complete the count of ten righteous people per city. Just one person. If one person would have decided to do the right thing, they all would have been saved. Because one person missed the opportunity, God punishes not only for the general evil and sin they’re guilty of but also for the missed opportunity.

The Meshech Chochma teaches that God doesn’t only punish for our sins. He also punishes for missing out on the positive things we could have done, spoken or even thought instead of the sin.

May we always grab and create opportunities to think, speak and do well.

Shabbat Shalom,

Dedication - To the people of Israel under fire. May this pass quickly and may we finally end these attacks.

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah: Vayeira

What’s the difference between sand and the stars?

Immediately after the Akeida, Hashem gave Avraham a wonderful blessing: ‘Veharbah arbeh et zaracha k’chochvei hashamyim v’chachol asher al tsfat hayam’ I shall significantly increase the number of your offspring so they will be like the stars in the heavens above and like the sand which by the seashore.

Why this repetition?

Surely we don’t need both examples? Both the stars in the heavens above and the sand by the seashore, indicate a number so high that nobody could count them. The Midrash helps us, by saying that when Hashem says that the Jewish people will be like the stars above, that refers to a time when we are loyal to the words of Hashem. And that we’ll be like the grains of sand on the seashore below – that’s when we rebel against the words of Hashem. The Midrash explains that one cannot touch the stars – they are safe, they are secure and that represents the people of Israel in good times, whereas sand is trampled underfoot and that represents the people of Israel in challenging times.

I’m troubled by this peirush because the context here is one of pure blessing. It’s in the immediate aftermath of the greatest statement of faith in God – the akeidah. Hashem wants to reassure Avraham that thanks to the loyalty that we the Jewish people place in God above, He will forever bless us. So therefore both the stars and the sands must indicate blessing and therefore I’d like to suggest the following...

Like the stars in the heavens above – that means innumerable. Like the sand on the seashore is different. It’s not just ‘Chol – sand’. It’s ‘chol asher al-tsfat hayam’ – sand by the seashore, which is wet, like mud. It appears as one single entity. Though it is made up of separate grains, they are clasped together as one.

This is a further blessing! In addition to being like the stars above, Hashem is saying that the Jewish people will be blessed with unity. Each individual will retain his or her own unique identity but we will stand together as one great nation.

Through the ages, God has indeed blessed us to survive together as a nation, against the odds. And true to his word we have been like the stars of the heavens above.

Let us help Hashem to bless us just as the sand which is by the seashore and guarantee that we will always have unity within our midst.

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

Vayera 5780 - An Ideology of Evil

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Two weeks ago, we read in Parashat Noah about G-d’s promise not to bring another flood upon the world. “I will no longer smite all living things as I have done... and there will never again be a flood to destroy the earth.” This week, we read the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the severe punishment inflicted upon them – the erasure of these cities from the map. In light of the promise given after the flood, we understand that the actions of the people of Sodom were so terrible and evil that they warranted a punishment like the flood – but in a localized and limited manner.

What was so terrible about the behavior of the people of Sodom? Actually, it is not explicitly stated in the parasha. But we do read about two guests who arrived in Sodom toward evening and were hosted by Lot, Abraham’s nephew. When news of their arrival spread around town, all the inhabitants – emphasis on all: “both young and old, the entire populace from every end [of the city]” – surrounded Lot’s house. They demanded that he send the guests out of the house because they wanted to abuse them.

What motivated them? Why were they so opposed to hosting passers-by? The prophet Ezekiel answers these questions when he admonishes the people of Judea in the 5th century BCE for their sins, comparing them to the people of Sodom:

Behold this was the iniquity of Sodom your sister: pride, abundance of bread, and careless ease were hers and her daughters’, and she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they became haughty and did abomination before Me...” (Ezekiel 16, 49-50)

Pride was at the root of all the Sodomites’ evil deeds. This pride was expressed by their immoral lifestyle. The people of Sodom did not only refrain from helping the poor or passers-by, but they viewed such selfishness as an ideology. They enacted laws that forbade helping the poor, and they severely punished those whose conscience led them to have compassion for others, thus violating their evil decrees.

If we want an example of this Sodomite ideology, we do not have to go far. We still have living among us those who lived under the Nazi regime, one that made evil and arrogance into an ideology that manifested itself in both legislation and horrific acts. If Jew-hatred and the “final solution” stemmed from classic anti-Semitism, what led to the evil that brought about the chilling executions of disabled people? It is hard to fathom, but the story of Sodom makes us confront this phenomenon and reminds us of the depths to which man can sink if he nurtures his pride and arrogance, his evil inclinations and indifference.

In the Chapters of Fathers, we find a disagreement among the Tannaim: “One who says: ‘Mine is mine, and yours is yours’ – this is a commonplace type, and some say this is a Sodom-type of character.” (Mishna, Chapters of the Fathers, ch. 5)

How can this disagreement be so extreme? In one opinion, the attitude that “mine is mine and yours is yours” is commonplace, even classic; but in the opposing opinion, this attitude represents the utter evil of Sodom? Truthfully, both these opinions are accurate. When the attitude stems from human weakness, it is commonplace. So, though it is not an admirable one, it is not so terrible. But when this attitude becomes an ideology to live by, then it is considered an evil of Sodom that should not exist.

The darkest abyss into which humanity can fall is not when man capitulates to his inclinations, or when someone acts corruptly without conscience. Situations like those are repairable. The worst is when a

society proudly adopts evil as an ideology. Situations like those are irreparable.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Vaeira

פרשת וירא תשפ

וירא אליו ד' באלני ממרא והוא ישב פתח האהל כהם היום

Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre, while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. (18:1)

It was three days after Avraham *Avinu's* *bris milah*, circumcision. The third day is the most painful. Yet, our Patriarch was sitting at the entrance of his tent during an unusually warm time of the day. *Chazal* teach that Hashem removed the sun from its protective casing in order to make it more powerful (and hotter), so that wayfarers would not travel. Thus, they would not inconvenience Avraham (by not creating an opportunity for him to serve them). When Hashem saw that Avraham was actually pained by not having the opportunity to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *hachmosas orchim*, welcoming guests, to his home, He sent three angels in the guise of men to visit him.

It is understandable that Avraham, the *amud ha'chesed*, pillar of lovingkindness, would want to reach out to people and offer his brand of material/spiritual kindness. Why, however, was he so anxious, so desperate, to perform the *mitzvah* that Hashem was compelled to send angels in the form of men in order to satisfy Avraham's need to perform *chesed*? It is not as if Avraham had nothing to do. He was in pain. He could have rested until his strength returned. There is also the *mitzvah* of *limud haTorah*, Torah study, that is available at all times, under all conditions, in all places, which takes precedence over all other *mitzvos*. Why did he not put *chesed* on hold for a few days?

We observe from the above that *chesed* meant the world to Avraham. He even interrupted Hashem's visit with him to tend to the wayfarers that came by his tent, individuals who were miraculously present only to assuage the *chesed*/guilt feelings of Avraham. *Horav Levi Dicker, zl*, explains this based upon the well-known axiom that the actions of our forefathers were not isolated activities performed in a vacuum. These actions were not performed for the personal spiritual benefit of the Patriarchs; rather, they were to set the tone and establish the spiritual, moral and ethical DNA of the Jewish people.

Indeed, when Bilaam sought to curse the Jews, with his words ending in blessing rather than curse, he said, *Ki meirosh tzurim areenu*; "For from its origins, I see rock-like" (*Bamidbar* 23:9). *Rashi* explains, "I gaze at their leaders and the beginning of their (*Klal Yisrael's*) roots, and I see that they are fortified and strong like rocks and hills through their Patriarchs and Matriarchs." Bilaam found it impossible to undermine – or locate a weakness in – the Jewish people's spiritual mettle. He had no choice but to praise them. The spiritual strength that we had/have is our inheritance bequeathed to us from our Patriarchs and Matriarchs. The actions of our forefathers did not merely set an example for us to emulate; rather, their actions became forever imprinted on the Jewish soul, embedded deeply within the Jewish psyche, endowing the Jewish DNA with these traits for generations to come.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that Avraham *Avinu*, who achieved the epitome of *middas chesed*, understood that it was his responsibility to implant this *middah*, attribute, into his future descendants. When he performed *chesed*, he was not performing only for himself – he was in the process of imbuing generations of Jews with the *middah* of *chesed*. Since this was his specific *middah*, he dedicated his life to bequeathing the Jewish nation with the attribute of *chesed*. He succeeded. Indeed, *Chazal* (*Yevamos* 79a) teach that when one does not manifest a predilection for performing acts of lovingkindness, his Jewish pedigree is suspect. The *Talmud* (*Beitzah* 12:B) goes as far as to posit that one who does not perform acts of *chesed* is not from the progeny of Avraham.

We now understand why Avraham yearned to perform *chesed* on that third day following his *bris*. Veritably, Avraham could have

opened his "*Gemorah*" and learned Torah all day in the safety and comfort of his tent. Instead, he sought opportunities for *chesed*. Why? Because the future of *Klal Yisrael*, its internal character and mission in life, was at stake. He wanted to insure that his descendants would be imbued with an innate proclivity towards acts of *chesed*.

As Jews, we may not waste the opportunities for *chesed* that emerge at various intervals in our lives. Although *chesed* in and of itself certainly does not take center stage in place of Torah learning, it is an inherent component of our DNA. We are *chesed*. Hashem is *chesed*. Acting as His children is our mission in this world.

וישא עיניו וירא והנה שלשה אנשים נצבים עליו

He lifted his eyes and saw: And behold! Three men were standing over him. (18:2)

Rashi explains that it was necessary to send three angels in the image of men because an angel performs only one mission. Thus, one angel came to heal Avraham *Avinu*; the second came to inform Sarah *Imeinu* of the impending birth of her son; the third came to destroy Sodom. Raphael, the angel who healed Avraham, went on to Sodom to save Lot from the conflagration that would destroy the city. The question is obvious: If an angel performs only one mission (at a time), and Raphael had gone on to destroy Sodom to save Lot, would it not have been more appropriate just to send another angel (rather than have Raphael undertake two missions)?

I think that an important principle may be derived from here. Avraham was the pillar of *chesed*, kindness. For him to be healed from his *bris milah*, while simultaneously knowing that his nephew, Lot, would soon be history, would undermine his healing process. Avraham could not recuperate knowing that his nephew was going to die a miserable death together with the inhabitants of Sodom. Thus, saving Lot was an intrinsic part of healing Avraham.

We must keep this idea in mind when we reach out to help those in need. We must take into consideration all of their needs, because inviting someone for a meal when he does not have any clothes to wear, or helping a child with issues at school when the problems at home are overwhelming, undermines the *chesed*. When performing acts of kindness we must think broadly, and ask ourselves: What does this person really need? A quick fix is just that: a quick fix, not a lasting solution.

כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך ד'

For I have loved him, because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of Hashem. (18:19)

The literal translation of *yedaativ* (reference to knowledge) is, "I know him." Understandably, when one loves and cares for someone, he seeks to bring him close and know him better. Hashem loved Avraham because he did not keep His teachings to himself. When one believes in something, he wants to shout it from the rooftops, to reach out to whomever he can, so that he can share these verities with him. Interestingly, Avraham *Avinu* performed many *mitzvos* for which he achieved singular distinction. In addition, he kept the entire Torah even prior to its being given to *Klal Yisrael*. Yet, the only time that we find the *lashon* of *chibah*, term of love (Hashem loved Avraham), is with regard to *chinuch ha'banim*, educating his descendants. Avraham was the first outreach expert; he wrote the book on *chesed*, but none of these wonderful *mitzvos* earned him the appellation of *yedaativ*, loved him. Each of the *Asarah Nisyonos*, Ten Trials, which Avraham successfully passed did not earn him the description, "loved by Hashem." Only one *mitzvah*, *l'maan asher yetzaveh es banav*, "because he commands his children," did. Why?

Acharav, "after him," is a powerful word which connotes Avraham's teaching method. He taught by example. He did not make demands; he showed the people that he, too, answered to a Higher Authority and that everything he was doing was in accordance with the *tzivui*, command, of Hashem. Avraham taught; he did not compel. He demonstrated his commitment by his actions which he welcomed and encouraged others to follow.

Perhaps we might take this idea a bit further. *L'maan asher yetzaveh es banav* is the criterion which serves as the barometer for our

mitzvah observance. How stable/solid are our actions? Will they be sustained through the vicissitudes of time, ideologies, culture and societal changes? Can we say that our children observing our *mitzvah* performance today will be inspired and remain connected to these *mitzvos* a generation later? Will they transmit that which they saw to their own children? *Mitzvah* observance, if it is to be taught to our children, must be able to withstand the test of time.

Furthermore, *l'maan asher yetzaveh es banav*, should be the criterion by which we measure the value and authenticity of our religious observance – and everything that we do. How much of what we do, the way we act, where we go, etc. do we want our children to emulate? Perhaps we might think twice before acting. After all, our children are watching.

The *Sefer Tiferes Banim* writes that a person does not earn the title *yarei Hashem*, G-d-fearing, or *tzaddik*, righteous man, unless he carefully watches over his children. (This does not mean that something will not go wrong even in those homes where parents maintain a watchful eye over their children's activities.) One can be a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, devoted and committed in every way, but if he does not educate/see to his children's education, he should not be called a *yarei Hashem*. We see that despite all of Avraham's attributes and *mitzvos*, the only time that Hashem expressed His love for him was with regard to Avraham's commitment to inculcating his family with his values. Any commitment that one does not sufficiently value enough to transmit to his children is not much of a commitment.

A father's traditions, the customs that were bequeathed to him by his own father, are (should be) sacrosanct. He must realize that his children derive incredible benefit from his adherence to these customs. In some situations, these customs are what keeps them attached to *Yiddishkeit*. *Horav Gamliel Rabinowitz, Shlita*, relates that he heard from a Holocaust survivor that throughout his years in the various Nazi concentration/labor camps, and despite being a teenager at the time, he never once ate non-kosher food. It was difficult for him, and, as a result, he endured much suffering, but he was unyielding in his tenacious commitment to keeping kosher. Indeed, he served as an inspiration to others, not only with regard to kosher food, but to *Yiddishkeit* as a whole.

The survivor explained that he was able to withstand all of the pain and suffering only because he was raised in a home in which commitment to *kashrus* was sacrosanct. He remembered that once his father was quite ill, and the family fed him food that was of questionable origin (the *kashrus* had not been confirmed). As a result, when his father's health returned, his father accepted upon himself (as penance) to fast on Mondays and Thursdays. It was such devotion that inspired his young son to keep kosher during the entire Holocaust.

A father should make sure never to belittle a *mitzvah*, custom, tradition, any Torah practice in general, especially when his children are watching. Children have a habit of outdoing their parents, by completely rejecting what their parents had only belittled.

A father and mother, both of *Chassidic* persuasion, came to *Rav Gamliel* to seek his counsel concerning their son who wanted to shave his beard. They were pained by his decision, which would bring tremendous shame and ridicule to their family. (In the *Chassidic* community, shaving one's beard is frowned upon. There is an element of holiness to the beard, as expressed by the *Zohar HaKadosh*. Therefore, when a boy of *Chassidic* upbringing shaves off his beard, it is cause for concern.)

Rav Gamliel met with the boy and expressed to him the pain that his decision was causing his parents. The boy responded that he was only changing *minhagim*, customs. He would not shave with a razor (which is prohibited), but with a shaver. From a *halachic* standpoint, he was doing nothing wrong. "Regarding my family customs," the boy reiterated, "I have seen members of my own family veer many times from their customs. Why should I be held to a higher standard than they hold themselves? I am acting no different than they are acting!"

Sadly, this boy's claim was valid. By their own actions, parents set the standard for their children to emulate. If the standard is of

a positive nature, we may hope that the child will follow. If it is of a negative nature, all we can do is hope that for once the child will "rebel."

Rav Gamliel believes the challenges which seem to appear in our generation may be attributed to a weakened and diminished relationship between children and their grandparents. Such children have not been raised to respect the past, to respect the world of their grandparents. To them, their grandparents are mere relics of a lost generation. If we link ourselves firmly to our parents and grandparents, we may hope to see a continued relationship with our children, grandchildren and beyond.

Horav Yaakov Galinsky, zl, relates the story of a young boy who hailed from an unobservant home, who sought desperately to alter his life's trajectory by becoming *frum*, observant. He became close to *Rav Galinsky* and slowly began performing *mitzvos*, until he became completely observant. His parents did not take kindly to their son's religious transformation. Indeed, they were so furious over their son's gravitation to an archaic lifestyle that they actually sued *Rav Galinsky* in court. They contended that by convincing their son to become observant, he had damaged him irreparably.

Rav Galinsky was summoned to court. When the judge explained the charges against him, *Rav Galinsky* vehemently denied them. He insisted that he was instructing and encouraging the boy to emulate his father, to actually follow in his footsteps. The judge was puzzled. "How could this be?" he asked. Anyone could see that the father was *chiloni*, totally secular, while his son dressed and acted like a true *ben Torah*.

Rav Galinsky explained, "This boy's grandfather was devoutly observant. He was meticulous in his *mitzvah* observance and diligently studied Torah daily. His recalcitrant son, the boy's father, rebelled against his father's principles and lifestyle. Thus, I told the boy to act exactly as his father had acted. Just as he rebelled against his father's values and lifestyle, so should he." The court was impressed with *Rav Galinsky's* argument and found him innocent of any coercion.

ותאמר לאברהם גרש האמה הזאת ואת בנה כי לא יירש בן האמה הזאת עם בני עם יצחק

So she said to Avraham, "Drive out this slavewoman with her son, for the son of that slavewoman shall not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak!" (21:10)

The *Chazon Ish, zl*, teaches that distancing a boy from *yeshivah*, sending him away, is a *dinei nefashos*, life and death, issue. A *yeshivah* that sends a student away due to its inability to deal with him is similar to a hospital who refuses to treat a patient whose illness is advanced. A *maggid shiur* in Yeshivas Porat Yosef approached *Horav Yehudah Tzadaka, zl, Rosh Yeshivah*, with a request that a certain student be asked to leave the *yeshivah*. *Rav Tzadaka* asked the *rebbe*, "Did you pray for him? Did you fast for him? First pray and fast for him and, then, if he does not change, return to me, and I will address your request."

In a similar incident, a *maggid shiur* asked his friend, who was also a *rebbe* in the same *yeshivah*, "How do I rid myself of this student? He is impossible. A day does not go by that he does not in some way ruin my *shiur*." His friend countered, "If this boy would have been your son, would you act likewise?" "Absolutely not," he replied. "I would do all that I could to turn him around. This does not mean that this boy does not deserve to be ejected from the *yeshivah*. It is just that, concerning my own son, I am prejudiced (and I will go the extra mile to save him). His friend suggested, "Come, let us ask a *Rav* concerning what is the correct and proper way of dealing with this situation." The *Rav's* response was to be expected (at least by anyone who understands the essence of the *rebbe-student* relationship): "Anything that you would do for your own son, you must for this boy as well."

At times, in extreme situations, the *rebbe* might not be innocent with regard to the student's challenging behavior and attentiveness to learning. A particular boy quite possibly needs a little extra attention from his *rebbe*. Love goes a long way in reaching a student. If, for some reason, the *rebbe* holds back in establishing a

positive, caring relationship with his student, it is his fault that the student is failing, and, thus, it is his responsibility to right the wrong that he is allowing to occur. No student should become a victim of a *rebbe* who has too much on his mind, and the *rebbe* is certainly obligated to correct his mistake and repair the damage he has initiated.

Horav Levi HaKohen Rabinowitz, zl, was a *rebbe* for thirty-two years. He achieved distinction in the field of Torah *chinuch*, education, not only because of his expertise, but because of his abiding love of and devotion to each and every student. He became a resource for *rebbeim*, schools and parents throughout *Eretz Yisrael*. Many wondered: What was his secret? Discipline was never an issue in his class. His relationship with his students endured a lifetime. How did he do it?

Rather than focus on his unusual positive character traits and fear of Heaven, I cite from his son's (*Rav Gamliel*) tribute to him as a *mechanech*, educator: "My father spent many hours *davening* for the success of his students, crying copious tears to Hashem, pleading that He enable this child to succeed in becoming a Torah scholar with fear of Heaven!

"This was obvious during recess, when most *rebbeim* would tend to various errands and school work or just rest a bit. He would sit in his classroom, take out his *Tehillim*, and pray to Hashem for the success of his students. This was his secret!"

וידי אהר הדברים האלה והאלקים נסה את אברהם

And it happened after these things that Hashem tested Avraham. (22:1)

Our Patriarch, Avraham *Avinu*, had been tested ten times by Hashem as a means of confirming his commitment and as a vehicle for proclaiming to the world his abiding devotion to Hashem. Hashem was now asking him to sacrifice his only son, whom he loved with a love that went beyond words. Actually, Avraham had already proven his commitment to Hashem, when he relinquished his life as he was prepared to die in the fiery cauldron of *Uhr Kasdim*. How often did Avraham have to prove his willingness to sacrifice on behalf of Hashem? *Mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, is a spiritual staple which is the barometer of Jewish commitment. It appears that our Patriarch could not prove his commitment in one trial. He required ten trials. Why is this?

Horav Yaakov Yitzchak HaLevi Ruderman, zl, explains that the test of the *Akeidah*, Binding of Yitzchak, did not only concern *mesiras nefesh*. It was a greater test than even relinquishing one's life. The test of the *Akeidah* determined how far Avraham would go to give up his love (son). He waited for one hundred years to hold his Yitzchak, his son, heir, successor. Finally, he was blessed with a child, not just any child, but Yitzchak. One can only imagine the overreaching love that Avraham had for Yitzchak. There could be no love stronger, deeper, more powerful and all-encompassing than Avraham manifested for Yitzchak. Hashem tested Avraham to see if the love he had for Hashem superseded the love he had for Yitzchak. Hashem was teaching Avraham that there can be no love in the world that competes with the love one must have for Hashem. The *Akeidas Yitzchak* demanded of Avraham to demonstrate to the world that the love he had for Hashem transcended even the love he had for Yitzchak. *Ahavas Hashem*, love of the Almighty, must be the paradigm of unsurpassed love.

Dedicated in loving memory of our dear father and grandfather

Arthur I. Genshaft

יצחק בן מרדכי ישראל ז"ל

נפטר חי' חשוון תשל"ט

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Weekly Halacha :: Parshas Vayera

Davening with a Minyan: How Important?

Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

The following is a discussion of Halachic topics related to the Parsha of the week. For final rulings, consult your Rav.

I will not destroy [Sodom] on account of ten (18:32)

The mitzvah of davening with a minyan (a religious quorum: ten males over bar mitzvah), though Rabbinic in nature, has a Biblical source: When Abraham importuned G-d to save Sodom in the merit of the *tzaddikim* who dwelled there, he ceased pleading when he realized that there were fewer than ten righteous individuals. This, says the *Ibn Ezra*(1), is because the fewest number of people that can constitute a *tzibur* – the basic unit for communal prayer – is ten. It follows that *tefillah*, the daily prayer service, should be conducted within a *tzibur* so that its manifold benefits will be realized. Indeed, the *Rambam*(2) and the *Shulchan Aruch*(3) rule that all men should make every effort to daven all *tefillot* with a minyan, for *tefillah b'tzibur* is much more than a preferred course of action – it is a Rabbinic obligation(4).

Despite the paramount importance of *tefillah b'tzibur*, however, there are several cases when it becomes secondary to other *halachos* or situations that take precedence. For example:

It is forbidden to eat before davening *Shacharis*. A weak person who must eat before davening should daven at home early in the morning, eat, and then go to shul to answer to *Kaddish* and *Kedushah*(5), etc.

If *tefillah b'tzibur* would cause a monetary loss, one may daven alone. But if it merely causes one to earn less profit, he is not allowed to skip *tefillah b'tzibur*(6). A deduction from a paycheck due to lateness caused by *tefillah b'tzibur* is considered a monetary loss(7).

It is forbidden for a scholar to learn till late at night if it will cause him to miss *tefillah b'tzibur* the next morning(8).

Even if one can concentrate better at home, he is still required to daven with a minyan as long as he can concentrate sufficiently to understand the simple translation of the words he is saying(9).

Wearing *tefillin* during *Shema* and *Shemoneh Esrei* takes precedence over *tefillah b'tzibur*(10).

One who is particular to daven *k'vasikin*(11) on a steady basis may daven by himself when he cannot find a minyan(12). Even if he does not daven *k'vasikin* daily, but is particular to daven *k'vasikin* at specific times, e.g., on *erev Rosh Chodesh*, he may daven *k'vasikin* without a minyan on those specific days(13).

One who must leave for work at a certain time and is faced with a choice of davening in a slow minyan (such as a *yeshiva* or *kollel*) and leaving before the end of davening, or davening in a quicker minyan where it is difficult for him to daven properly, should rather daven in the slower minyan – even if it means that he will miss *kerias ha-Torah* on Mondays and Thursdays(14).

Kerias ha-Torah takes precedence over *tefillah b'tzibur*(15) and *tefillah k'vasikin*(16).

QUESTION: How far must one travel from his home in order to daven *tefillah b'tzibur*?

DISCUSSION: If the closest minyan is an eighteen-minute walk or more [each way] from one's home, he is exempt from davening *b'tzibur*(17). If he owns a car and uses it routinely, he must travel by car for up to eighteen minutes [each way](18). If he uses his car only for emergencies, then he is not obligated to use his car for *tefillah b'tzibur* either(19).

QUESTION: How many people should be finished with *Shemoneh Esrei* before the *chazan* may begin his repetition of the *Shemoneh Esrei*(20)?

DISCUSSION: The *poskim* debate this issue. Some maintain that the *chazan* may not repeat *Shemoneh Esrei* until there are nine other people listening to him. Those who are still davening *Shemoneh Esrei* are not included(21). Other *poskim* are more lenient. They allow the *chazan* to begin the repetition as long as there are six people listening to him(22).

The *Mishnah Berurah* does not directly rule on this issue. On a related matter, he quotes both views and suggests that in a situation when the *chazan* suspects that there may not be nine people answering "amen" to his repetition, he should make a condition (*tenai*) before starting that his *Shemoneh Esrei* is a *tefillah nedavah*, a voluntary prayer, should nine people not answer "amen" to his blessings(23).

L'chatchilah, therefore, since some *poskim* rule strictly on this issue, the *chazan* should wait for nine people to finish their *Shemoneh Esrei*. If,

however, people are rushing to go to work, etc., we may rely(24) on the more lenient view and begin Shemoneh Esrei before all nine people have finished(25). The chazan should do so with the aforementioned precondition.

FOOTNOTES

1 Makkos 24a.

2 Bereishis 18:28. See also Targum Yonasan 18:24 for a similar idea.

3 Hilchos Tefillah 8:1.

4 O.C. 90:9.

5 Igros Moshe O.C. 2:27. See, however, ha-Tefillah B'tzibur (pg. 34) quoting the Eimek Brachah's view that the Rambam holds that tefillah b'tzibur is not an absolute obligation.

6 Beir Halachah 89:3.

7 Mishnah Berurah 90:29.

8 Harav S.Y. Elyashiv (quoted in Avnei Yashfei on Tefillah, 2nd edition, pg. 74).

9 Igros Moshe O.C. 2:27.

10 Igros Moshe O.C. 3:7.

11 Mishnah Berurah 66:40.

12 As explained in the Discussion on Parashas Vayigash.

13 Beir Halachah 58:1. According to the understanding of Harav S.Y. Elyashiv (quoted in Avnei Yashfei on Tefillah, 2nd edition, pg. 62) even one who does not daven regularly k'vasikin, but would like to daven k'vasikin on a certain day just for the sake of davening k'vasikin, may daven without a minyan.

14 Harav S.Z. Auerbach (quoted in ha-Tefillah B'tzibur, pg. 116).

15 Written responsum from Harav S.Z. Auerbach (published in ha-Tefillah B'tzibur, pg. 250) who adds that he should make sure that the other congregants – who see him leaving early – are aware of the reason for his early departure. Harav Auerbach adds that even if he is the tenth man who completes the slower minyan, and his early departure will break up the minyan before the last Kaddish, he should still do so.

16 Minchas Yitzchak 7:6; Harav S.Z. Auerbach and Harav S.Y. Elyashiv (quoted in Avnei Yashfei on Tefillah, 2nd edition, pg. 140)

17 Harav S.Y. Elyashiv (quoted in Tefillah K'hilchasah pg. 73).

18 Mishnah Berurah 90:52; Igros Moshe O.C. 2:27.

19 Based on Beir Halachah 163:1; Aruch ha-Shulchan Y.D. 375:17. See Hebrew Notes to Parashas Ha'azinu for elaboration.

20 Rulings of Harav S.Y. Elyashiv (quoted in Avnei Yashfei on Tefillah, 2nd edition, pg. 75 and in Tefillah K'hilchasah pg. 138).

21 Our discussion covers Chazaras ha-Shatz only. The halachos of Kaddish are more lenient.

22 Shulchan Aruch Harav 55:7; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 20:2; Kaf ha-Chayim 55:48. This ruling is based on the view of the Taz 55:4.

23 Aruch ha-Shulchan 55:13; Imrei Yosher 2:9-1; Eimek Berachah, Tefillah 6. This ruling is based on the view of Magen Avraham 55:8. This also seems to be the view of the Pri Megadim (MZ 55:4) and Beir Halachah 55:6. See Tzitz Eliezer 12:9 for an explanation.

24 Mishnah Berurah 124:19.

25 See Salmas Chayim 1:24; Tzitz Eliezer 12:9; Beis Baruch 29:1; Yalkut Yosef 1:287.

26 According to Chayei Adam 29:1 and Eimek Berachah, Tefillah 6, this should not be relied upon unless there are at least eight people who finished Shemoneh Esrei. See also Orchos Rabbeinu 1:51 that this was the view of Harav Y.Y. Kanievsky.

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לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה