

Weekly Parsha VAYEIRA 5781

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

One of the main issues in this week's Torah reading is the relationship between Yishmael and Yitzchak. Yishmael is the son of Abraham and Hagar, while Yitzchak is the son of Abraham and Sarah. It is common knowledge that, as the half-brothers grow up together, the differences between them in character, spirituality, ambition, and behavior become increasingly apparent. Sarah notices that Yishmael is somehow more the son of Hagar than of Abraham. In a bold decision made to preserve the legacy of Abraham and the life and well-being of Yitzchak, Sarah asks Abraham to send Hagar and Yishmael away, and out of the house of Abraham and Sarah.

True to Sarah's intuition Yishmael, left to his own devices, becomes a famous archer and warrior. He is a person to be feared, and his influence and power, not limited to the land of Israel, will spread over the entire geographical area. Sarah senses that no amount of education, training or parental influence would change Yishmael's basic nature of being wild, unpredictable, dangerous and a threat to the lives and ideals that Abraham represents. Yishmael will profit from being the son of Abraham and his descendants have continued to do so, even until today. But descendants are not necessarily heirs—either in the physical sense or even more so in an eternal, spiritual legacy.

The Torah describes Yishmael as being wild and uncontrollable. That is his nature and personality; everything else that occurs throughout human history regarding him and his descendants is colored by this stark description. Sarah senses this almost from the beginning. The Torah records that she saw Yishmael "jesting". Rashi points out that the Hebrew verb which it uses means something far more sinister than merely exhibiting a sense of humor. It indicates a capacity for murder and immorality, for danger and irresponsibility. It is the same verb that the Torah itself will use when describing the mood and the behavior of the Jewish people when they worshipped the Golden Calf in the desert. Rabbis also point out that the same word can mean mockery through humor and sarcasm, as well as sexual immorality.

Humor, like all human traits, can have both a negative aspect as well as a positive one. We live in a generation when what is sacred is mocked at, and what is holy is easily trampled upon. The beginning of murder is to take many things lightly. Those things include human life and any moral restraint. An enemy that we can demonize, mock, laugh at, and constantly insult soon becomes an object not only of derision, but of violence and subjugation too. When Yishmael mocked Yitzchak for his piety, diligence, and an apparent lack of practicality in the world, Sarah sensed that Yishmael was capable of physically harming Yitzchak, even if not murdering him. All of history bears out the fact that persecutions and holocausts begin with insults and jokes, mockery, and degradation of others. This is why the Torah speaks out against such behavior—in all forms and under all conditions.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

Answering the Call (Vayera 5781)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The early history of humanity is set out in the Torah as a series of disappointments. God gave human beings freedom, which they then misused. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Cain murdered Abel. Within a relatively short time, the world before the Flood became dominated by violence. All flesh perverted its way on the earth. God created order, but humans created chaos. Even after the Flood, humanity, in the form of the builders of Babel, were guilty of hubris, thinking that people could build a tower that "reaches heaven" (Gen. 11:4).

Humans failed to respond to God, which is where Abraham enters the picture. We are not quite sure, at the beginning, what it is that Abraham

is summoned to do. We know he is commanded to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and travel "to the land I will show you," (Gen. 12:1) but what he is to do when he gets there, we do not know. On this the Torah is silent. What is Abraham's mission? What makes him special? What makes him more than a good man in a bad age, as was Noah? What makes him a leader and the father of a nation of leaders?

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

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

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

If we understand this, we understand Abraham. He exercises personal responsibility. In parshat Lech Lecha, a quarrel breaks out between Abraham's herdsmen and those of his nephew Lot. Seeing that this was no random occurrence but the result of their having too many cattle to be able to graze together, Abraham immediately proposes a solution:

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

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

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

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

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

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (Gen. 18:23–25)

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

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

Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him" ... Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous

that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached Me.” (Gen. 18:17–21)

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

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

So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth” (Gen. 6:13).

Noah did not protest. To the contrary, we are told three times that Noah “did as God commanded him” (Gen. 6:22; 7:5; 7:9). Noah accepted the verdict. Abraham challenged it. Abraham understood the third principle we have been exploring over the past few weeks: collective responsibility.

The people of Sodom were not Abraham’s brothers and sisters, so he was going beyond even what he did in rescuing Lot. He prayed on their behalf because he understood the idea of human solidarity, immortally expressed by John Donne:

No man is an island,

Entire of itself ...

Any man’s death diminishes me,

For I am involved in mankind.[1]

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

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

Abraham was not a conventional leader. He did not rule a nation. There was as yet no nation for him to lead. But he was the role model of leadership as Judaism understands it. He took responsibility. He acted; he didn’t wait for others to act. Of Noah, the Torah says, “he walked with God” (Gen. 6:9). But to Abraham, God says, “Walk before Me.” (Gen. 17:1), meaning: be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility. Judaism is God’s call to responsibility.

Shabbat Shalom

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

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not withheld your only son from Me.” (Gen. 22:12)

The akeda (“binding” of Isaac) serves as a model for one of the most important questions in contemporary family life: to what extent should a parent continue to influence, direct, or channel their adult child’s life? Can the power of a parent be taken too far? Ultimately, how much control can parents continue to have in their relationships with their adult children? The Torah offers an insight to these questions in describing the immediate aftermath of the akeda.

What happened to Isaac after the harrowing experience with his father on Mount Moriah? The Torah states, “So Abraham returned [singular form] to his young men [the Midrash teaches they were Eliezer and Ishmael, who accompanied them, but did not go to the actual place of the appointed sacrifice] and they [Abraham and the young men] rose up and went together to Be’er Sheva and Abraham dwelt in Be’er Sheva” [Gen. 22:19].

Where was Isaac? Didn’t Isaac also descend from the altar and return to Be’er Sheva?

Yonatan Ben Uziel, in his interpretive Aramaic translation, writes that Isaac is not included as having returned home to Be’er Sheva because he went instead to the yeshiva of Shem and Ever. In other words, prior to the akeda, father and son magnificently joined together—and they walked, the two of them, together” (Gen. 22:6)—but afterwards, they had to part ways.

Abraham returns to his household, while Isaac returns to his books, to an academy of solitude and study. In the vocabulary of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik z”l, Abraham is the outer-directed, extroverted, aggressive Adam I, while Isaac is the more inner-directed, introverted, introspective Adam II.

In the conceptual scheme of the mystical Zohar, Abraham is the outgoing, overflowing symbol of hesed (loving kindness), while Isaac is the disciplined and courageous symbol of gevura (inner fortitude). The akeda is both the point of unity as well as the point of departure between father and son. Isaac enters the akeda as Abraham’s son; he emerges from the akeda as Jacob’s father (Jacob will also study at the yeshiva of Shem and Ever).

Isaac’s commitment to God is equal to that of his father, but his path is very different. Simultaneously, the akeda is the point of unity and separation, between father and son, for each must respect both the similarities as well as the differences within the parent-child relationship.

The commandment to circumcise one’s son is most certainly modeled on the symbol of the akeda. After all, the basic law prescribes that it is the father who must remove his son’s foreskin (even though most fathers feel more comfortable appointing the more-experienced mohel as their agent).

From a symbolic perspective, it is the parent’s responsibility to transmit to the children the boundaries of what is permissible and what is not. Nevertheless, despite the fact that every child is a product of the nature and nurture provided by his/her parents—and the Torah teaches that a child must respect and even revere his/her parents—the existential decisions of how to live one’s life, which profession to enter and which spouse to marry are decisions which can only be made by the adult child himself/herself. [See Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah, Chap. 240:25, Laws of Respecting Parents, the last comment of Rema, citing Maharik.]

We see the importance of parental restraint in the continuation of Gen. 22:12: “For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not withheld [hasakhta] your only son from Me.”

However, we can also understand the verse to mean, “For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not done away with [the Hebrew h-s-kh can also mean to remove, or cause to be absent] your only son because of [My command].”

In the first reading, the angel praises Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac; in the alternative reading, Abraham is praised for his willingness not to sacrifice Isaac. [See Ish Shalom, ‘Akeda,’ Akdamot, August 1996.]

The critical lesson of the akeda, then, is not how close Abraham came to sacrificing his own son, but rather, the limits of paternal power.

Paradoxically, when a parent enables a child to psychologically separate, the child will ultimately move forward. Isaac returns from the yeshiva to continue his father’s monotheistic beliefs and Israel-centered life. Our paramount parental responsibility is to allow our children to fulfill their own potential, and our challenge is to learn to respect their individual choices.

Shabbat Shalom!

Insights Parshas Vayeira - Cheshvan 5781

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

This week’s Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Mina bas Yitzchak Isaac. "May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

Selfish Giving

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

True chessed requires one to diminish oneself. We see this from Hashem Himself: The world was created as an act of chessed (see Derech Hashem, Part One) and in order to effect a real act of creation Hashem constricted Himself (the tzimtzum), as it were, to give mankind a feeling of an independent existence. Thus, Hashem limiting Himself effected the original act of chessed and now defines how true chessed is accomplished: through a diminishment of the benefactor.

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

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

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

An Amazing Sacrifice

And it happened after these words that Hashem tested Avraham... (22:1) At the end of this week's parsha we find the famous story of the akeida, where Hashem asks Avraham to bring his beloved son Yitzchak as a sacrifice. This is the last and hardest of Avraham's tests from Hashem. Just as Avraham passed the first nine tests, he perseveres in this test as well. Thus, he is accorded great righteousness and devotion for being

willing to sacrifice his son at God's request. Obviously, Avraham's achievement is enormous.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Question of the Week

In this week's parsha we have the destruction of the city of Sdom. Sdom has become the archetype model of a city that is both evil and morally bankrupt. Interestingly, the mishna in Pirkei Avos (5:10) describes different types of outlooks on life: One who says, "What is mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" is a boor. One who says, "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours" is representing the outlook of an average person (meaning neither righteous nor wicked); yet others say that this is the character of a Sdomite.

In other words, there are some who feel that the Sdom philosophy is acceptable outlook on life. How is this possible?

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Rav Kook Torah

VaYeira: Sanctity in Space

"Abraham rose early in the morning, to the place where he had [previously] stood before God." (Gen. 19:27)

What does it mean that Abraham "stood before God"? The Talmud interpreted this phrase to refer to prayer. (The central prayer is called the Amidah, meaning "standing," since it is recited while standing.)

A Set Place for Prayer

From the fact that Abraham returned to the place where he had prayed in the past, the Sages deduced that Abraham had designated a particular spot for prayer.

“Rabbi Helbo said: Anyone who has a set location for his prayers will be assisted by the God of Abraham. And when he dies, they will say about him, ‘What a pious individual! What a humble person! He was a disciple of our forefather Abraham.’” (Berachot 6b)

In what way is a person who sets aside a place for prayer a humble individual? What makes him a disciple of Abraham? Why is it so praiseworthy to always pray in the same location?

Spatial Holiness

We are accustomed to the idea that holiness is a function of space. Different places have different degrees of sanctity. The synagogue is holier than the Beit Midrash (the house of study), the Beit Midrash is holier than an ordinary home, and an ordinary home is holier than the bathhouse. Levels of sanctity are also a geographic reality. The Land of Israel is holier than outside of Israel, Jerusalem is holier than other parts of Israel, the Temple Mount is holier than the rest of Jerusalem, and so on.

When examined by cold logic, however, our sense of holiness in space raises questions. Does not God’s glory fill the entire universe? Are not the limitations of space and location irrelevant to God? Why should it matter if I pray to him in the synagogue - or in the bathhouse? What difference is there to God between the inner sanctum of the holy Temple and a Los Vegas casino?

Elevating the Imagination

Rav Kook explained that a fundamental truth is at work here: whatever contributes to our ethical and spiritual improvement merits divine providence. Our moral perfection is dependent not only on the intellect, but on the refinement of all of our faculties, including our powers of imagination. Anything that elevates our emotions and imagination, directing them towards good deeds and refined character traits, merits divine providence.

A set location for prayer is a powerful mechanism for uplifting the imagination. Sanctity of place greatly enhances our sense of holiness. Because of its importance in developing this aspect of human nature, there is divine providence to help us succeed in this area.

Intellectual Humility

What makes this conduct humble?

The essence of religious humility is preventing the intellect from belittling matters of spiritual value, even though logically they appear to be baseless. We live not by the intellect alone. Good deeds are the ultimate measure of true living, and our actions are greatly influenced by our imagination and feelings.

Abraham exemplified this form of intellectual modesty. He arrived at belief in the Creator through his powers of logic and reasoning.¹ But when he was tested in the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, Abraham relied solely on his faith in God. He chose to disregard all arguments of reason and logic.

Anyone who follows in Abraham’s footsteps, and sets aside a special location for prayer, is elevating his imaginative and emotive powers. He is a disciple of Abraham, emulating his traits of humility and piety.

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parsha Insights

For the week ending 7 November 2020 / 20 Heshvan 5781

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parashat Vayera

Last in Line

Something that always amazes me when I travel by plane is how competitive people are to get to the front of the line, whether it’s for the security check, check-in, passport control or boarding. Human nature wants to be “the first.” And even in these days of limited air travel and much shorter lines, people still want to be first in those short lines. When flying out of Tel Aviv the other day, I pointed this out to my wife and asked, “We’re all going to get on the same metal tube and leave at

the same time, so what does it matter who goes first?” “Well,” she said, “they’ll have more time for shopping.” I said, “But the shops are all closed in the airport.” So she said, “Even so, people want to just get through and sit down.”

During the prayers of the Yamim Noraim — the Days of Awe — we pray to Hashem to put an end to competitiveness. Were it not for competitiveness, a person would be happy to live modestly, dress modestly and behave modestly. But, because we cannot bear the thought of someone being more than us, our lives become dedicated to out-doing our neighbors.

The difference between Capitalism and Communism is the kind of competitiveness their systems produce. The Communist says, “Your car is bigger than mine. I’m going to make sure you don’t have a car at all!” The Capitalist says, “Your car is bigger than mine. I’m going to make sure that I have a car so big that I can put your car in my trunk and give you a ride!”

Arguably, the beginning of the Communist approach to competitiveness was in Sodom. The evil of Sodom and Amora was that they usurped a trait of Hashem. The deeper sources teach that their society was based totally on the characteristic of din — strict justice. The trait of din says, “You get what you deserve, no less, and certainly no more.” In such a society there is no room for chessed, kindness, because we often receive chessed even when we do not necessarily deserve it. Chessed is “for those who are good and for those who are evil.” When Hashem judges us with din, it is always to fulfill the purpose that His chessed should be of the best kind.

But, if competitiveness is part of human nature, it must have a positive application. The Mesillas Yesharim describes three levels of spiritual motivation. The second level is that we cannot bear the thought of getting to the next world and seeing our friend in a “better seat.” The third level is that we cannot bear the thought that when we get to the next world we will see someone in a “better seat” and think to ourselves, “That could have been my seat!” It is not that we are jealous, that we want our fellow not to have that seat. It is just that we know that had we tried harder and been more competitive in the things that really matter, we could have the front row in the stalls of the World to Come. And that’s significantly more painful than having to join the line at the back of the line at the airport.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

The Chief Rabbi’s D’var Torah for Vayeira - The greatest leaders

The greatest leaders, just like great parents and teachers are all defined by one thing.

Parents only teach their children one lesson. What is it?

Parshat Vayeira commences,

“Vayeira elav Hashem,” – “Hashem appeared to Avraham,” immediately after his circumcision and it was in this vision that Avraham saw three strangers coming towards him.

Chazal, our sages, in the Gemara, Masechet Sotah, teach:

“Mikan shemidat Hashem levaker cholim.” – “From here we learn that one of the ways of the Almighty is to visit the sick.”

Hashem is obviously the ultimate leader. He’s the Melech Malchei haMelachim, the Supreme King of Kings and He wants us to know that a crucial ingredient of outstanding leadership is setting an example to others. Policies are important, instructions are crucial, but there’s nothing more important than doing the right thing and leading the way. It’s not only what you say that counts. It’s also what you do.

Similarly in Parshat Vezot Habracha after we read about the sad passing of Moshe Rabbeinu, the Torah tells us,

Vayikbor otoh bagai.” – “And He buried him in the valley,”

and nobody has ever discovered the burial place of Moshe.

“Vayikbor,” – “He buried him,” – Who served as the chevra kadisha?

According to tradition, it was none other than the Almighty himself setting an example to us for all time of how important it is for us to

relate with respect to the remains of the deceased. So from Hashem we learn how important it is for leaders to do the right thing.

And we have a fine example of this in Parshat Vayeira. The Parsha immortalises Avraham Avinu and it does so through revealing to us details of the Akeida, when Avraham took his precious son Yitzchak, listened to the word of Hashem and nearly sacrificed him on an altar.

Of course Avraham changed the world, transforming lives from that time onwards through teaching people a new way of morality, ethics and spirituality, and his legacy lasts to this day. But ultimately Avraham is remembered because of what he did – the Akeida. Together with the nine other trials, this proved that he was the real thing.

He was a sincere leader. He didn't only say what was right – he always did what was right, setting that prime example for others.

So from Avraham Avinu, indeed from HaKadosh Baruch Hu, we learn the crucially important lesson of inspiring and leading others. Teachers only teach one class, Rabbis only deliver one sermon and parents only teach one lesson to their children and that is: the lives that they live.

Shabbat shalom.

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

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Rav Yissocher Frand - Parshas Vayera

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

Things Do Not Occur at Random

Parshas VaYera contains the pasuk, "I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may sustain yourselves, then go on, inasmuch as you have passed your servant's way. They said, 'Do so, just as you have said.'" [Bereshis 18:5] One of the amazing things about Chumash is that you can learn the Parshas haShavua for sixty, seventy, or eighty years, or you can read the same pasuk over and over again hundreds of times, and then you read it once more and you say to yourself: "I never thought of this question!" Chumash study is as deep as the ocean.

In this pasuk Avraham tells the Angels, "Okay, eat something, for that is why you have passed your servant's way." Rashi comments: "I make this request of you after you have passed my way." It seems like Avraham is saying, "Since you came, I am asking you to do this" (eat something). What does this mean? Why not just offer them food? And what do the Malachim say? "Do as you have said." – You know what? – Give us food!

Have you ever invited someone for Shabbos lunch—or any meal for that matter—and received such a reaction? You tell them – "Why don't you stop by my house and have a meal?" And they respond, "You are right. I should have a meal by you!" That is in effect what the Angels are saying here. What is this dialog all about?

The truth of the matter is that Avraham is telling the Malachim something much deeper than it appears on the surface. He is saying: Listen here, there is no such thing as pure 'chance' (mikreh) in this world. We do not experience random events in our lives. That which happens in this world happens because the Ribono shel Olam deems it to happen. Life is full of Hashgocha Pratis (personal Divine Providence). People should seek out those Divine Messages and act upon them.

Avraham thinks to himself: "Here I am – it is hot as blazes outside! Nobody is walking around. Suddenly, you happen to come to my house? This is not an accident! This is not something that 'just happened.' It happened because the Ribono shel Olam wanted it to happen. And He wants me to serve you, and therefore you must eat by me. That is G-d's Will." This is what Avraham is telling the Malachim.

The Angels answer: "You are right! If we are here now and you happened to see us, and you are inviting us because you understand that this is G-d's Will, because it is not an accident that all this happened, then we indeed must eat by you! We too are bound to carry out G-d's Will as expressed by His Hashgocha."

Things don't happen for no reason at all and if something lands in your lap, it is because G-d wants it to be in your lap, and you must take that as a sign from Heaven!

This theme is one of the central ideas of Megillas Esther. (I know this is not the time of year to focus on Purim, but this idea happens to be a key theme of that entire story.) What does Mordechai tell Esther? "Listen, Esther, you need to do this. You need to go into King Achashverosh, even though you have not been invited, even though that violates his policy and risks your life."

I saw a Medrash this week that Esther had to pass through six or seven chambers to get to the throne room of Achashverosh. When she reached the third chamber, the king saw her coming and yelled out, "Vashti never did this! What a chutzpah! She is coming uninvited?" Esther knew she was taking her life in her hands by approaching the king uninvited, but Mordechai told her, "Esther, you need to do this! Do you know how I know that you need to do this? Because why on earth, out of all the women in the kingdom, were you chosen to be the queen? Obviously, it is because the Ribono shel Olam wants you in the palace in that role!" That is the Hashgocha, and a person cannot hide from the Hashgocha. A person cannot hide from G-d's calling!

Avraham was faced with the same situation: He recognized, "If I have these Malachim standing here now, it is because G-d wants me to invite them in.

I read about the following incident many years ago, and I read about it again recently: In Poland, before the war, there was a custom among Ger Chassidim that if someone could not pay his rent and was about to be evicted, the entire Ger community would come to the fellow's aid and pay the rent so that he should not be evicted. The community made a collection to pay the landlord for the Chassid's rent so he should not wind up on the street.

An incident once happened in Lodz, Poland. One Gerer Chassid rented his apartment from another Gerer Chassid. The renter could not pay his rent. The landlord wanted to evict his tenant and went to the Gerer Rebbe, the Imrei Emes and explained the situation to him. "Listen, this fellow is not paying me his rent. I need to make a living. I have my own expenses. If he does not pay, I want to evict him."

The Rebbe told him – "Heaven forbid! You cannot throw another Gerer Chassid on the street." The landlord then said to the Rebbe, "Okay, then let's have everyone chip in and pay the fellow's rent, as is the custom among Ger Chassidim." The Rebbe said, "No! You need to sustain the whole thing yourself." The landlord asked, "Why me? It is not fair! When a non Ger Chassid is the landlord, everyone chips in and pays the landlord the rent of the Ger tenant. Just because I am a Ger Chassid, I need to sustain the whole cost of a bankrupt renter myself? I do not get it!"

The Rebbe reaffirmed his original ruling: "That is indeed the case. If the Ribono shel Olam puts you in the situation that you are the landlord and this bankrupt Chassid is the tenant, the Ribono shel Olam is giving you this mitzvah of Tzedaka, and you cannot run away from it. That is why you are there. You are there because He wants you there. This is your challenge. This is your nisayon, your mitzvah, and therefore you are expected to fulfill it yourself."

This is the message Avraham Avinu gave to the Malachim: "For this reason you passed by your servant. Therefore, you need to eat here." And it was to this logic that they Angels concurred: "Yes. We must do as you said."

Three Interpretations of a Most Difficult Medrash

I would like to share a difficult Medrash which I came across recently, but I am not going to be able to give a definitive interpretation of it. I am going to offer three interpretations.

The pasuk by the Akeida says: "Then Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father and said, 'Father...'" [Bereshis 22:7] This seems a bit redundant. The word 'father' appears two times in the same pasuk! The Medrash states that Samael (same as the Angel of Death and the same as the Satan) did not want to let the Akeida happen. He understood that this would become a seminal event in Jewish history which would always cause the Almighty to remember His children with Mercy. To sabotage the incident, Samael went to Avraham Avinu and told him "Are you out of your mind, Avraham? You waited a hundred years for this son to be

born, and now you are going to slaughter him?” Avraham replied “I know what I am doing. The Ribono shel Olam asked me to do it. I am going to do it!”

Samael tried another couple of tracks with Avraham Avinu, but nothing worked. When Samael came to the conclusion that Avraham was not budging, he attempted to preempt the Akeidah by speaking with Yitzchak. He came to Yitzchak and said, “Yitzchak, do you know what is going to happen? Your father is going to slaughter you!” Yitzchak repeated his father’s determination: “I know that. I am going to go through with it anyway.” Samael then asked Yitzchak, “What is going to be with your poor mother? She waited all these years to have a child. She will be devastated by this incident.” Yitzchak maintained his steadfastness.

Samael then persisted, “But Yitzchak, all those beautiful clothes that your mother made for you – Yishmael is going to inherit them. You will have nothing.” The Midrash writes that this argument gave Yitzchak pause and he then cried out “Father, father...” so that his father would have mercy upon him. This explains why the pasuk has the term father twice.

This is a wondrous Medrash! The Satan tells Yitzchak “you are going to die” and it does not faze him. He tells him “your mother is going to be devastated” and it does not faze him. But when he tells Yitzchak that Yishmael will inherit his nice clothing – suddenly, he cries out to his father for mercy. What could this Medrash possibly be telling us?

I saw three interpretations:

I have a sefer called Nachalas Eliezer, from the Mashgiach in Gateshead. He says that we see from here the power of midos (character traits). Even a person like Yitzchak, who is G-d fearing and steadfast in his obedience to Him, when you arouse within him a possible kernel of jealousy, that is strong enough to sow doubts in his mind about the proper course of action.

It is hard for me to accept this approach. I find it difficult to accept the idea that Yitzchak Avinu, who was an Olah Temima (a pure burnt offering) should be subject to the moral frailty of Kinah (jealousy).

I was sitting at a Chuppah two hours ago, next to Rabbi Goldberger. I told him over this Medrash and asked him to give me his interpretation of it. He told me that we find in Chazal that sometimes Eisav appears like a wicked thief and sometimes he appears like a Talmid Chochom, meaning that we need to beware of our spiritual enemies no matter in what type of garb they appear. Here too the Medrash is expressing the concern that Yishmael might dress up in Yitzchak’s clothing and look like Yitzchak, giving people the impression that the wicked Yishmael is really righteous. This is dangerous. Yitzchak felt, “I cannot have him wearing my clothes because maybe he will seduce people by disguising himself as if he were me.” This is Rabbi Goldberger’s pshat.

Finally, I was walking to the Yeshiva last night and I ran into Rabbi Steinhart. I told him over this Medrash and asked, “What do you think it means?” He answered basically as follows: Yitzchak and Yishmael are perpetually engaged in an epic battle. It is a battle that began when they were young children, and it is a battle that has lasted until today. This is a battle for the ages: Yishmael versus Yitzchak. Bnei Yishmael versus Klal Yisrael. They are still at it. The Moslems believe that (what we call) Akeidas Yitzchak was actually Akeidas Yishmael. They believe that they are the rightful heirs of Avraham Avinu, and they will not give up. Eventually, there will be a final battle between Yishmael and Klal Yisrael and we will win that final battle, and only then will they concede.

The Maharal of Prague writes that the first nation of the Nations of the World to recognize Moshiach will be Yishmael. So, when the Satan tells Yitzchak “Yishmael is going to get your clothes” he does not look at this as merely clothes and something about which to be jealous. Yitzchak is concerned: Yishmael will win the epic battle? He will be around at the End of Days and I will not? Now we are talking about the future of the Jewish people! Yitzchak says “I am willing to die. I am willing to cause my mother pain. But there is one thing I am not willing to do. I am not giving up on the future of Klal Yisrael.” That far he was unwilling to accept: “Father, father, please have mercy.”

These interpretations and the Medrash itself warrant further thought and discussion. It is something to think about at your Shabbos tables.

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Drasha Parshas :: Parshas Vayera :: Blessing In Disguise Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

In Pashas Vayera, Sora, the 90-year-old wife of Avraham, receives a most surprising piece of information from an even more surprising source. She is told by Arab nomads, who had found obliging accommodation in Avraham’s house, that in one year she will have a child. Instinctively, she reacts in disbelief to this prediction. She laughs.

Immediately, Hashem appears to Avraham He is upset. “Why did Sora laugh? Is there something that is beyond the Almighty? At the appointed time I shall return, and behold Sora will have a son (Genesis 18:12-13). Hashem’s ire must be explained. After all, Sora was not told by Hashem that she will have a baby. She was informed by what appeared to be Arab wanderers. And though the Talmud explains that the three nomads were indeed angels sent by the Almighty, they did not identify themselves as such. So what does G-d want from Sora?

A man once entered the small study of the revered the Steipler Gaon, Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievski with a plea. “I’d like a blessing from the Rav. My daughter has been looking to get married for several years. All her friends are married and she would like to get married too, but nothing is working. Can the Rosh Yeshiva bless her to find her bashert? (appropriate one),” he asked.

The Steipler turned to the man and asked, “Is this your first daughter?”

“No,” replied the distraught parent, “Why do you ask?”

“When she was born did you celebrate with a kiddush?” (a celebratory party in a religious setting)

The man was perplexed. “No. But, that was 27 years ago,” he stammered, “and she was my third girl. I may have made a l’chayim while the minyan was leaving shul, but I never made a proper kiddush. But what does a missed kiddush 27 years ago have to do with my daughter’s shidduch (match) today?”

“When one makes a kiddush at a festive occasions,” explained Rav Kanievski, “each l’chayim he receives is accompanied by myriad blessings. Some are from friends, others from relatives, and those blessings given by total strangers.

Among those blessings are definitely the perfunctory wishes for an easy time in getting married. By not making a kiddush for your daughter, how many blessings did you deprive her of? I suggest you make your daughter the kiddush that she never had.”

The man followed the advice, and sure enough within weeks after the kiddush the girl had met her mate.

At the bris (circumcision) of his first son (after ten girls), my uncle, Rabbi Dovid Speigel, the Ostrove-Kalushin Rebbe of Cedarhurst, Long Island, quoted the Ramban (Nachmanides) in this week’s portion.

The reason that Hashem was upset at Sora was that even if an Arab nomad gives the blessing, one must be duly vigilant to respond, “Amen.” One never knows the true vehicle of blessing and salvation. Hashem has many conduits and messengers. Some of those messengers’ divinity is inversely proportional to their appearance.

We have to do is wait, listen, and pray that our prospective exalter is the carrier of the true blessing. And then, we have to believe.

Quite often, we have ample opportunities to be blessed. Whether it is from the aunt who offers her graces at a family gathering or the simple beggar standing outside a doorway on a freezing winter day, blessings always come our way. Sometimes they come from the co-worker who cheers you on at the end of a long day or the mail carrier who greets you with the perfunctory “have a nice day” as he brings today’s tidings. Each blessing is an opportunity that knocks. And each acknowledgment and look to heaven may open the door to great salvation. The only thing left for us to do is let those blessings in.

*Dedicated to our Beloved Mother Shirley Eskowitz – Sarah bas Reb Moshe by Marilyn & Jules Beck
Good Shabbos!
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Vayera: Sacrifice

Ben-Tzion Spitz

For anything worth having one must pay the price; and the price is always work, patience, love, self-sacrifice — no paper currency, no promises to pay, but the gold of real service. - John Burroughs

In the middle of the synagogue service, a man quietly walks up to his rabbi who is sitting at the front of the synagogue and admits to having committed a horrible, highly embarrassing sin, and that he is now seeking to repent. The rabbi looks at him, thinks, and then tells him to go to the middle of the synagogue, bang on the table, and publicly declare to the entire congregation his sin.

“Here? Now?” the man asks, his face ashen.

“Yes,” the rabbi declares firmly. “It’s the only way to repent.”

The man looks incredulous, but he trusts his rabbi and he deeply needs to repent. He walks to the middle of the synagogue as if it were a death sentence. He is about to bang on the table when a hand grabs his shoulder. It’s the rabbi.

“That’s far enough,” the rabbi tells the man. “That’s all you need to do. You needed to demonstrate that you were willing. That’s your repentance.”

For me, one of the more theologically challenging narratives in the Bible is God’s apparent command to Abraham to bring his son Isaac as a sacrifice. The Sages throughout history have praised Abraham’s complete devotion to God and willingness to sacrifice his long-sought and beloved son.

Nonetheless, there remain troubling aspects. Did God truly desire Abraham to kill Isaac? It doesn’t seem likely. Did Abraham misunderstand such a significant divine communication from God? Also, hard to imagine. Did God never intend for Abraham to carry through with the sacrifice but purposely mislead Abraham? It’s not clear from the plain text.

The Bechor Shor on Genesis 22:12 suggests that there was some level of purposeful misdirection on God’s part. He explains that God knows the heart of every person and He knew very well that Abraham was so completely devoted to God, that he would even sacrifice his son, the very son God had promised him, if that was God’s command. But it seems that not only did God want Abraham, Isaac, and us, their descendants to see that he was willing to make such a sacrifice to God, but He also wanted the nations of the world to realize Abraham’s commitment to God.

The misdirection comes in the Hebrew word that God used here for “sacrifice” – Olah. In the common language of sacrifices, an Olah, translated as an Elevation Sacrifice, is an animal sacrifice which is completely consumed by the fire of the Altar. However, in its simplest meaning, Olah means to elevate. The Bechor Shor suggests that God never intended Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but He did want him to think that He wanted him to sacrifice Isaac. It was a test that Abraham passed with flying colors. God wanted Abraham to elevate Isaac, to bring him up to the altar he built on Mount Moriah without harming him, but He also wanted Abraham to demonstrate his willingness to follow God’s directive, as excruciating, as incomprehensible, and as sacrificial as it might seem.

Dedication - On the engagement of our son, Elchanan, to Zavi Lava. Mazal Tov! Shabbat Shalom

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.

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parasha Vayera 5781 - Divine Revelation Versus the Needs of Others

This week’s parasha, Vayera, begins with a double story: The Divine Revelation that Abraham experiences and his “hachnasat orchim,” his hospitality. The sages of the midrash teach us that the reason Abraham sat at the entrance to his tent on that hot day was because he was looking for guests. Abraham’s life was founded on giving. He felt an obligation to give to others. Therefore, he sat at the entrance of the tent and looked out onto the horizon hoping that maybe someone would pass by who might be happy to stop in Abraham’s tent for some refreshments and rest.

While sitting at the entrance of his tent, Abraham experienced a Divine Revelation. The great commentator, Rashi, explained that G-d came to visit Abraham who was recovering from the brit mila, the circumcision he had undergone at an advanced age. At that same moment when Abraham experienced this spiritual transcendence, he noticed three people approaching the tent. It could be there was a moment of hesitation. Did Abraham ignore those people and continue to immerse himself in the spiritual revelation, or did he stop and approach the guests?

Whether or not there was any hesitation, Abraham’s decision was unequivocal:

“...and he saw and he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and he prostrated himself to the ground. And he said, ‘My lords, if only I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass on from beside your servant.’” (Genesis 18, 2-3)

Who was Abraham speaking to? The Hebrew is in the singular so some of the commentators understood that Abraham was speaking to one of the three approaching people. But if so, why would Abraham speak to only one of them? Indeed, Rashi suggested an additional explanation, that Abraham was speaking to G-d “and he was telling the Holy One, blessed be He, to wait for him until he would run and bring in the wayfarers.” Abraham gave up on the spiritual transcendence in order to welcome the guests, feed them, and bring them something to drink. The Babylonian Talmud learns the following principle from this:

“Welcoming guests is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shechinah (G-d)” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 127)

To understand how profound a decision it was to surrender the Divine Revelation for the sake of strangers, we have to try to examine Abraham’s understanding of “chessed” – acts of loving-kindness. We saw that Abraham sat at the entrance of his tent on a hot day to search for guests. This is slightly odd. We are used to understanding the term “chessed” as one in which we fulfill the needs of others. We see someone who is lacking something and as a result we do “chessed” and give him what he was lacking. But we are not accustomed to thinking of “chessed” as an essential need of the giver’s, as seems to be reflected in the story about Abraham.

One of the greatest people in the Hassidic movement from the beginning of the 20th century, the Admor Rabbi Shmuel Bornstein of Sochatchov, Poland, wrote about this in his book “Shem Mishmuel.” There he states that a person who is exposed to another’s despair and does “chessed”, even if it is obviously a positive act, there is something egotistical about it. It is hard to witness despair and suffering. Our desire to solve someone else’s problems stems also from our own difficulties with seeing someone else suffer. But there is another form of “chessed” that is altruistic, when someone wants only what is best for another.

That’s who Abraham was. He did not do acts of loving-kindness only when he saw someone who needed them. He waited at the entrance of the tent for an opportunity to do “chessed.” Therefore, he even gave up on a Divine Revelation. The Revelation includes an aspect of spiritual pleasure, but Abraham postponed this spiritual pleasure until he finished seeing to the needs of his guests.

How suitable are the words of Yisrael Salanter (Lithuania 1810 – Prussia 1883), the founder of the “Mussar Movement” in Lithuanian yeshivas, who said, “The material needs of others are my spiritual needs.” When a person internalizes this, he is capable of even giving up on a Divine Revelation in order to see to the material needs of another.

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וישא עיניו וירא והנה שלשה אנשים נצבים עליו

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

If Lot had learned one thing from his uncle, Avraham *Avinu*, it was to adhere meticulously to the *mitzvah* of *hachnosas orchim*, hospitality to wayfarers – and anyone in need of a bed or a meal. *Hachnosas orchim* is just one of the many activities that fall under the rubric of *chesed*. Avraham was the *amud ha'chesed*, pillar of loving-kindness. Avraham devoted himself to it to the point of self-sacrifice. *Chesed* also gave him the opportunity to reach out to the pagan world spiritually and to teach the pagans about Hashem. *Chazal* laud Avraham for his extraordinary dedication to serving the three travelers that presented themselves at the door of his tent. This occurred while Avraham was recuperating from his *Bris Milah*, circumcision. While one cannot argue that Avraham deserves recognition for his actions, we cannot ignore the fact that Lot did the same thing when the angels visited his home in Sodom. Indeed, Lot risked his life to protect them. What distinguishes Lot's act of *chesed* from that of Avraham?

The *Kedushas Levi* (also attributed to *Horav Leib Sorah's*) explains that Avraham did not have a selective policy concerning his *hachnosas orchim*. He was hospitable to anyone and everyone who came to his door – rich, poor, pagan; his door was always open and welcoming. Lot, however, knew his guests were Heavenly angels. It is no wonder that he bent over backwards to serve them. Angels did not visit him every day. Lot's *chesed* was discriminating. Avraham's *chesed* was open and indiscriminate. He acted in order to do a *mitzvah*. Lot acted in order to promote himself. He felt good when he reached out, but he was not prepared to reach out to just anyone.

The story is told concerning a *tzaddik nistar*, covert righteous person, who, although a holy man, was careful not to reveal his righteousness. He wandered from place to place, serving Hashem wherever he was. He stopped in a community and approached a well-known philanthropist and asked if he could spend the night in his home. [The man had no shortage of rooms, no lack of food.] The wealthy man took one look at the *tzaddik's* shabby clothes and altogether unbecoming appearance and bid him a good day. He had no room for him. Two years later, the *tzaddik* revealed himself to the world, and now lines of visitors petitioned his blessings. As a distinguished *Rebbe*, he no longer traveled by foot; rather, he had a coach that was pulled by four horses and a driver who chauffeured him. This time, when he had occasion to visit the community where two years earlier he had been shunned, the wealthy man who had ignored him earlier approached him and begged him to stay in his house: "It would be a great honor for me if the holy *Rebbe* would spend the night in my 'simple abode.'" [When one wants to glorify himself with the presence of a *tzaddik*, his palatial home suddenly becomes a simple abode.] The *Rebbe* replied in the affirmative. How surprised the wealthy man was to see the *Rebbe's* driver and horses waiting by the entrance to his large barn. The *Rebbe*, apparently, was residing at the home of a poor, but learned, Jew.

"*Rebbe*, why was my home not blessed with his honor's presence?" the wealthy man asked. The *Rebbe* smiled and explained, "When I was here two years ago and needed a place to sleep you demurred. I was not sufficiently worthy of your attention. This time, suddenly you want me to stay at your home. What changed? I realize that the only real difference between who I was two years ago and who I am today is my horses. When I last came, I was a poor, itinerant beggar. Today, I am a famous *Rebbe*. Truthfully, the only change that transpired is that now I travel in style. Obviously, what impressed you were my horses. So, I brought you my horses. Let them sleep in your barn!"

The man was more impressed with the outer trappings of the *tzaddik* than with his inner essence. He was not performing *chesed* for the poor person. He was offering to perform *chesed* for himself.

The *Mararil Diskin, zl*, was a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, whose encyclopedic knowledge of Torah was peerless. He spent every waking moment deeply engrossed in Torah study. He was a saintly Jew whose self-abrogation of materialism and physicality paralleled his devotion to Torah and *mitzvos*. He was also a *gaon* in *chesed*. He did not just "give"; he thought before he gave. He empathized with those who came to him and sought the most beneficial avenue to help them. When he left Brisk (where he was *Rav*) and emigrated to Yerushalayim, it was not long before he realized the plight of its many orphans. He then established the Diskin Orphanage, where he and his *rebbeztin* became surrogate parents to those helpless children.

The *Rav's* home was open to anyone. At any time, one could find individuals who had been struck by life's adversities, sitting in his home, being served by the *rebbeztin*, while he continued with his learning. One time, the *Rav* noticed that an elderly, impoverished Jew was having great difficulty chewing his bread. The man no longer had teeth, and the bread was too hard for his gums. The *Rav* arose from his chair, sat down next to the man, took a slice of bread, removed its hard crust, and gave the bread back to the man. The man's face lit up, realizing that he could now eat the bread. This went on for an hour, as the *Rav* peeled the crust and spoon-fed the elderly Jew. Furthermore, how in the midst of his learning was he able to notice that the man was unable to chew because the crust was too hard? One of the *Rav's* students questioned his *Rebbe's* taking an hour off from his precious learning to feed an elderly Jew. The *Rav* replied, "Good question! This question, however, should have been posed to Avraham *Avinu*, who, while being visited by Hashem Himself, interrupted the conversation to attend to three angels disguised as Arabs. When Avraham was speaking with the *Shechinah*, Divine Presence, he became devoid of all physicality. How was he even able to perceive the guests that stood at the doorway to his tent?

"The answer to both question (the *Rav's* noticing the poor man's chewing problem and how to alleviate it, and Avraham's perceiving the angels while he was so engrossed in his meeting with Hashem) is: when one must perform *chesed* – he sees! If you want to do *chesed* and your heart empathizes with the plight of your brethren, then, even when you are in the midst of your *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty – you will sense the needs of another Jew!" Sensitivity for another Jew should permeate a person to the point that it breaches through anything in which he is involved – even *avodas Hashem*!

כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו

For I have loved him because he commands his children and his household after him. (18:19)

Chinuch ha'banim, educating our children, inculcating them with the moral/ethical values of our Torah expounded by *Chazal*, is the primary role with which parents are charged. Hashem says that He loves Avraham *Avinu* because he places education uppermost in his mind. Everything that Avraham did contained an educational aspect. He lived to serve Hashem. We can perform no greater service to the Almighty than one which imbues others and brings them closer to serving Hashem. We can derive a number of lessons from this *pasuk*. First, one is not included under the rubric of a *yarei Hashem*, G-d-fearing Jew, unless he maintains a strong eye over his children's education. Avraham *Avinu* reached the apex of spiritual devotion to Hashem, yet he did not warrant the love of the Almighty until he demonstrated his affinity for transmitting the Torah to his children and household.

Second, we wonder about the meaning of *acharav*, after him. Simply, it means that they follow his example. What he does and how he acts comprise one element of his pedagogical dynamic. They follow after him, doing what he demonstrated for them. I think, however, that we may suggest a deeper message in the word *acharav*, after him: after he is gone. The litmus test of a parent's educational success is: whether

his child continues along the path that the father delineated and practiced.

All too often, we (sadly) visit homes whose affiliation with Torah is tenuous or, at best, the people are complacent. These are young men and women who grew up in observant homes, and, for some reason, the parents' observance did not transfer over to the next generation. Something happened in the "shipping" (or in the "packaging"). Acting in a certain manner does not always send a strong enough message. Children must be educated; they must receive a clearly-defined image of what is acceptable – and what is not. This brings me to the third lesson.

L'maan asher yetzaveh es banav v'es beiso – acharav, "Because he commands his children and his household – after him." Writing this circa 2020 amid a society where everything goes, and Heaven help the parent who comes on too strong with his/her child, I wonder how we define *yetzaveh*, command. The Torah is conveying to us, in no uncertain terms, that the most effective manner by which to teach a child is command. This is definitely not politically correct in 2020. On the other hand, the Torah is intimating that if a parent wants to be assured that *acharav*, after him – after he is "gone" (after his "120"), his child, hopefully now grown up, will adhere to his father's image of a Torah Jew, then the father must teach by command. Let me qualify this: How we issue the command (i.e., what motivations, inspirations, prizes, sweet-talking we employ) is dependent on parent and child. One principle is unwaiverable: the child must have a "command" – a clear, defined message that this is the behavior that the parent expects. Otherwise, the *acharav* will probably not occur.

Yosef *HaTzaddik* was on the verge of falling into the abyss of sin. What saved him was *d'mus d'yukno shel aviv*, "the image of his saintly father." This means that his father's image was deeply engraved in his psyche. This can only be achieved through command, whereby a child knows that there is only one way. Each father and mother must endeavor to find the most appropriate, loving manner to convey this command, but it must be a command. Parents who maintain such an unequivocal approach to raising and educating their children will live on and on in their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, because it becomes part and parcel of the essence of the child.

Horav Yosef Sholom Elyashiv, zl, was asked who is considered a child's primary educator. His reply: the parents. He/she knows his/her child, understands his/her personality; thus, he/she knows how to educate the child. (Obviously, this is a general statement and open to individual situational exceptions.) The parent's suggestions, based upon his or her individual perception and discernment, should never be ignored, because a parent usually know what is best for his or her child (although parents might lack objectivity – which must be factored in). The mother, as the *Tolner Rebbe, zl*, explains, sets the tone and tenor in the home. While the father might (and should) focus on developing a child's knowledge of Torah, his desire and love of Torah will come from his mother. This, says the *Rebbe*, is the meaning of *Toras imecha*, "The Torah of your mother (*Shema beni mussar avicha v'al titosh Toras imecha*, "Hear, my child, the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the teaching of your mother" [*Mishlei* 1:8]).

Having said this, we reiterate the importance of parents being firm, but loving, demanding, but understanding. A "one-size-fits-all" approach to child-rearing is not realistic, because children are different. The "oldest," pride and joy, might not be the smartest. The youngest might give the parents a run for their money that overshadows anything they experienced with their other children. That is life. No one said that it was going to be easy, but the rewards are remarkable.

A Bnei Brak family was going through a serious challenge with one of the sons who had gravitated to a group of friends that was not conducive to the spiritual goals that they sought for their children. His parents were firm with him, stating unequivocally that his friends and behavior were unacceptable. *Erev Pesach*, he ran away from home. He claimed that no one seemed to care about him, so he was leaving and going where he would feel respected. The parents were heartbroken and did not know what to do. Since it was *Erev Pesach*, they were busy with *Yom Tov* preparations. The whole time they were hoping that after a few

hours of "stewing," their errant son could come to his senses and return home.

The father returned from *shul*, and the family sat down at the table; one seat was glaringly empty. The father asked the *gabbai* at the *Lederman Shul* (where he attended services) to ask the *Steipler Gaon, zl*, what they should do. The answer came back, *L'hantin*; "To wait." Two hours passed, while everyone sat around the table talking. The time for eating the *afikoman* was rapidly approaching. Once again, the father appealed to the *gabbai* to ask the *Steipler* what they should do. The response came back: "Wait." Another half hour passed, and suddenly the door opened. Their son had returned. He looked at the table and then at his parents, and he asked, "You waited for me?" "Of course; you are our son." All of his anger melted away once he saw that he was valued by his parents. Sometimes, all the child needs is to be told: "You count; You are special."

The Hermans, *Horav Yaakov Yosef Herman* and his wife, were unusual *baalei chesed*; their kindness knew no bounds. *Rav Yaakov Yosef* was a demanding person – of himself, and of those whom he educated. The family took in an orphaned boy, *Avreml*, whom they raised as their own. Indeed, he required the firm, demanding discipline manifest by *Rav Yaakov Yosef*, coupled with the extraordinary love showed to him by Mrs. Herman. One day, *Rav Herman* made what *Avreml* felt was too strong of a demand on him, and *Avreml* refused to carry out his surrogate's instructions. *Avreml* went so far as to complain, "Do you know that I am an orphan? Why are you so demanding? It is not right!"

Mrs. Herman attempted to sooth *Avreml's* feelings – to no avail. He knew that his surrogate father was upset. Finally, *Avreml* announced, "I have decided to move out! I am leaving your house." He collected his few belongings, placed them into a duffle bag and went to the door – all the while turning his head back to see if *Rav Herman* would "beg" him to stay. He did not.

Reluctantly, he went down the stairs. When he reached street level, he heard *Rav Herman* calling after him as he ran down the stairs, "Avreml! Wait a moment!" *Avreml* waited, hoping deep down that now *Rav Herman* would ask him to stay, perhaps even apologize for his demands on him. He was wrong. *Rav Herman*, the educator par excellence, caught up with *Avreml*, and, in his hand, he had a little bag, "Mother and I would like you to have these cookies in case you get hungry." Then, *Rav Herman* took out a few dollars from his pocket and said, "Here, in case you need some money." No apology; no lessening of his demands; just love and more love. *Avreml* came back, realizing that, indeed, he was being treated just like their child: demands coupled with love.

ויזכר אלקים את אברהם וישלח את לוט מתוך ההפיכה

Hashem remembered Avraham; so He sent Lot from amidst the upheaval. (19:29)

Avraham Avinu was a *baal chesed*, master of kindness. Indeed, the Torah goes to great lengths in describing his devotion to the wayfarer, and how he exerted himself to make sure that whoever came into his home had a pleasurable and satisfying experience. *Lot*, *Avraham's* nephew, also acted with *chesed*. He moved to Sodom and became a distinguished member of this ignominious community. He moved there because he was into money and everything one can achieve with material bounty. He did, however, retain some of the good qualities that he learned under the influence of his uncle. When the Angels visited Sodom, *Lot* risked his life on their behalf. One would think that it was due to *Lot's middah*, attribute, of *chesed*, that he was spared from the destruction of Sodom.

In commenting on the above *pasuk*, *Rashi* gives a different reason for *Lot's* rescue from the annihilation of Sodom. "Hashem remembered." What did He remember (about *Avraham* concerning *Lot*)? Hashem remembered that *Lot* was aware that *Sarah Imeinu* was *Avraham's* wife (and not his sister, as he had asserted to the Egyptians), but *Lot* did not reveal the truth about *Sarah*, out of pity for *Avraham*. Therefore, Hashem took pity on him. Measure for measure. *Lot* "ignored" his

memory regarding Sarah; Hashem remembered this and spared Lot. The question is obvious: Why was Lot not spared as a result of his devotion to the *middah* of *chesed*? Surely, positive action trumps his remaining silent and not negatively revealing a secret that would have cost Avraham his life. Furthermore, the sin that catalyzed Sodom's destruction was the people's opposition to *chesed*. To them, kindness to others was an anathema. Thus, Lot, who fought against them, whose actions were the antithesis of what Sodom stood for, specifically deserved to be saved.

Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, quotes the *Alter, zl, m'Slabodka*, who says that Lot emulated Avraham's actions. Everything Lot did was imitation. Lot's *middas ha'chesed* was not part of his essence. It was an extrinsic activity performed to copy Avraham. After a while, he became accustomed to acting with *chesed*, but it was not part of his character – it did not define Lot. One can perform acts of kindness, but it does not mean that he is a kind person. Lot performed *chesed*, but he was not a *baal*, master, of *chesed*.

We may add that this concept applies to all *middos*. Just because a person acts humbly does not mean that he is a humble person. Some individuals present themselves as refined and humble until they are ignored or slighted. Then, their true selves comes to the fore. Perhaps the best way to describe this is as *Rebbetzin Shulamit Ezrachi* describes her father, *Chevroner Mashgiach, Horav Meir Chodosh, zl*. "His life was an open book, exposed to all eyes, day by day, and hour by hour. It served as an example and model for anyone who wished to learn from it. The students saw before them, day after day, the image of a man whose every action, speech, behavior and smallest gesture were all thought out."

Horav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, zl, was a *gadol* in Torah as well as *chesed*. His *rebbetzin*, the daughter of *Rav Yaakov Yosef Herman, zl*, was witness to *chesed* at its apex. Her home was the address for anyone who was in need of kindness. When the Hermans moved to *Eretz Yisrael*, their *Shabbos* table was the place where one could find any person who just needed a "place." To them, everyone was family. As I was perusing through a biography of *Rav Scheinberg*, I came across many stories of his extraordinary empathy for others. His acts of *chesed* were directed to anyone in need, be it: a *yeshiva* student; *kollel* fellow and his wife; members of the Jewish community; or the drunk and the homeless who were laying in the gutter on a cold winter night. (He would bring them hot soup which his *rebbetzin* prepared.)

One story particularly inspires me. I preface this with the notion that *chesed* does not only involve material benevolence. Emotional support is equally (and, in some situations, more) important. We can find *chesed* in Torah, helping someone who is in need of a boost in his Torah learning. The greatest *chesed* (in my opinion) is reaching out to someone who is floundering in his *Yiddishkeit*, whose religious observance is becoming more and more borderline. It is critical that one assesses the situation, find out the cause, and offer spiritual and emotional support. Now for the story:

One *Erev Shabbos* when *Rav Scheinberg* lived in the Lower East Side, a young married man asked him a *halachic* query (*shailah*) concerning a family purity issue. Although *Rav Scheinberg* felt that he had reason to *pasken muttar*, render a decision of permissible, to the man, he wanted to buttress his decision with a little research. He needed a certain *sefer*, volume of *halachic* responsa, which he did not own and would have to borrow. He told the young man that since it was almost *shkiah*, sunset, he would not be able to answer his *shailah* before the beginning of *Shabbos*. He did not bother telling the young man that the *sefer* was located in Williamsburg. Soon after *Shabbos* began, *Rav*

Scheinberg walked one hour across the Williamsburg Bridge and looked up the *sefer*. He confirmed that it was *muttar*.

He then returned to the Lower East Side, went up to the young man's apartment, knocked on the door and, when the man answered, *Rav Scheinberg* said, "*Muttar*." He did an about face and went home to make *Kiddush*. Two hours of walking, keeping his family waiting for him, all to answer a *shailah*. He knew that a young couple needed the answer. This is *chesed* at its zenith.

Having digressed, I return to *Rav Aharon's* question: Why was Lot not spared as a result of his *chesed* activities? *Horav Yerachmiel Chasid, Shlita*, distinguishes between two *middos* which on the surface appear similar, but actually are quite different from one another. They are: *chesed* – kindness; and *rachamim* – mercy. *Rachamim's* focus is to fulfill a need, a vacuum, something that a person is missing. Therefore, the benefactor is addressing the *chisaron*, deficiency/fault. When travelers appear at one's tent on a hot day, after trudging through the desert's grueling heat, what they need is shade, something to drink. Once these basic necessities have been addressed, they no longer need mercy. The immediate need has been filled. It is time to move on.

Avraham *Avinu*, however, was not satisfied with *rachamim* alone. He was a *baal chesed* who brought three fresh tongues. He himself waited on the travelers, attempting to give them anything that would make life better for them. This is *chesed*: going beyond filling the need; doing more, acting with generosity of spirit, a smile, as if this is the only activity that one has to do that entire day. There is no limit to *chesed*. *Rachamim*, however, fills the gap. *Chesed* is non-judgmental. *Chesed* is inclusive – making a point to involve others. *Rachamim* can be selective: one must be sensitive to the person, the issue and feel pity for him/her. A *baal chesed* lives where he can perform acts of kindness. He does not make his home in Sodom, a city which featured the opposite extreme of *chesed*. Avraham *Avinu* manifest *chesed*. Lot was merciful. *Chesed* was beyond him. Therein lay the difference between the two.

Va'ani Tefillah

כלה וכל החיים יודוך סלה – *V'chol ha'chaim Yoducha Selah. Everything alive will gratefully acknowledge You, Selah!*

It is all about life. Without life, one cannot thank Hashem. With life – everything is possible. *Eitz Yosef* quotes two great leaders: David *Hamelech (Tehillim 146:2)*, "I will praise Hashem while I live; I will sing to my G-d while I exist"; and *Chizkiyah Hamelech*, who, when he recovered from his near-fatal illness, declared (*Yeshayah 38:18,19*), "The grave cannot thank You." We echo their praises when we say: "Everyone alive will gratefully acknowledge You." *Siach Yitzchak* adds: Even if our other requests have not been answered to our satisfaction, the mere fact that we continue to live is, in and of itself, the greatest gift and a compelling reason for expressing our gratitude.

The *Chiddushei HaRim* views this prayer as a clarion call to others to wake up and acknowledge Hashem's constant Presence and Providence. The fact that we know that He looks down on us, observes our every move and sustains us, should catalyze for an expression of gratitude. It is not enough for us to know it; we must arouse the world around us to acknowledge this verity.

Dedicated in loving memory of our dear father and grandfater Arthur I. Genshaft
נפטר חי' חשוון תשל"ט - יצחק בן נחום ישראל ז"ל -

Neil and Marie Genshaft

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לע"נ

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