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INTERNET PARSHA SHEET
ON VAYEIRA - 5766

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Brisk on Chumash

Insights on the Parashah from Brisk to Jerusalem

By Rabbi Asher Bergman

Parashas Vayeira

And he said, "Let not my Lord be angry, and I will speak" (Genesis 18:30).

On the surface, it appears that Avraham was pleading with G-d not to become angry at him for his bold request. This interpretation seems difficult, however. Avraham was offering his prayers on behalf of the people of Sodom. Why should G-d become angry at him for that?

When Avraham first started to plead for the sparing of the Sodomites, he said (following the translation of Onkelos), "Will You, in Your anger, eliminate righteous people along with the wicked?" (18:23). This should be understood in light of the Talmud's dictum (Bava Kamma 60a) that "Once permission has been given to the Destroyer to destroy, he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked." This is why there are often cases of mass tragedies, when a righteous minority suffers along with the wicked majority. Avraham thus pleaded with god that He should not act upon His anger, for in that case the result would be the elimination of "the righteous people along with the wicked."

In our verse as well, then, we can understand Avraham's request "Let not my Lord be angry, and I will speak," - to mean "Let not my Lord act with anger - against the people of Sodom - so that I can pray on behalf of the few righteous individuals who may live there."

-- **Brisker Rav**



From: Rabbi Goldwicht [rgoldwicht@yutorah.org] Sent: Thursday, November 17, 2005 8:04 PM Subject: Parashat VaYeira 5766

WEEKLY INSIGHTS BY RAV MEIR GOLDWICHT

At the end of this week's parasha, the Torah tells us that Avraham built a mizbeach (altar) upon which to sacrifice his son, Yitzchak. This is the fourth mizbeach built by Avraham.

In Parashat Lech Lecha, he builds one at his first stop in Eretz Yisrael, Shchem, where HaKadosh Baruch Hu informs him that his descendants would inherit the land. He builds a second one between Beit El and Ay. He builds his third mizbeach in Chevron, after returning from Mitzrayim, when Hashem tells him, "Kum hithalech ba'aretz...ki l'cha etmenah, Go walk in the land...for to you I shall give it" (Bereishit 13:18).

The second mizbeach, built between Beit El and Ay, is significant in that it is the only mizbeach to which Avraham Avinu returns. After he returns from Mitzrayim, the Torah says that Avraham traveled from the South to the place of the mizbeach he had made between Beit El and Ay (13:4). Rashi, based on the gemara in Sanhedrin, teaches that Avraham saw through ruach hakodesh that his descendants, B'nei Yisrael, would lose a battle against Ay after conquering Yericho, and Avraham Avinu wished to daven for them. If this mizbeach is so significant, though, in that it is the only one to which Avraham returns, why does the Torah not tell us its exact location? Why is it referred to as the mizbeach "between Beit El and Ay"?

In Yehoshua (perek 7), the navi tells us that before going into battle against Ay, Yehoshua sent scouts, who determined that it would be sufficient to send a small contingent of the army to conquer Ay. However, when B'nei Yisrael actually go out to battle Ay, the soldiers of Ay defeat them. B'nei Yisrael becomes despondent, their hearts melting like water. The question here is what exactly happened. Surely B'nei Yisrael didn't succeed in battle, but why was this such a significant defeat that their "hearts melted"?

After this loss, HaKadosh Baruch Hu explains to Yehoshua that "Israel has sinned, transgressed My covenant...taken from the cheirem, stolen and denied" (Yehoshua 7:11). Why does HaKadosh Baruch Hu speak in the plural, as if all B'nei Yisrael has sinned, when the truth is that only one man, Achan, took from the spoils of Yericho that had been designated for Hashem?

In taking Yericho, B'nei Yisrael were commanded to circle the city once every day. On the seventh day, B'nei Yisrael were commanded to circle the city seven times, and on the seventh time, the kohanim sounded shofars and the entire nation shouted in unison. So great was the noise that it was heard across Eretz Yisrael. At this point, HaKadosh Baruch Hu took down the walls of Yericho miraculously and everyone witnessed His greatness and salvation. But Achan believed that B'nei Yisrael had played a part in bringing down the walls of Yericho as well. Although Hashem certainly had performed great miracles, even 99% of the work, B'nei Yisrael's shouting helped bring the walls down. In other words, Achan felt that he was a partner in victory, deserving a portion of the spoils, and he therefore took from the cherem.

Achan was certainly not the only person to feel this way. His actions represented a mentality among B'nei Yisrael. HaKadosh Baruch Hu therefore felt it necessary to make it clear to all before entering Eretz Yisrael that UeverythingU comes from Him and only Him. Once He has provided, UthenU does our partnership begin. Only to protect that which He has bestowed upon us. He is the ba'al milchamot, the matzmiach yeshuot, and He works alone. This is what Hashem wanted to clarify, and this is why He spoke in the plural, to address all those who agreed with Achan but had not acted on their belief.

When Avraham Avinu returned from Mitzrayim with great wealth, he was concerned that he might arrive at a "kochi v'otzem yadi, my strength and ability" mentality. He therefore returned to the mizbeach between Beit El and Ay, because Ay represents the kochi v'otzem yadi mentality (and it is for this reason we lost in battle), while Beit El represents the mentality of "kol asher titen li aser a'asrenu lach, everything You give me I will tithe for You," that everything comes from Hashem. The location of the mizbeach cannot be pinpointed because it resides somewhere along the continuum of kochi v'otzem yadi and kol asher titen li. If we forget that HaKadosh Baruch Hu gives us the strength, the capabilities, the siyata dishmaya, we lean towards Ay. If we remember that everything comes from Him and Him alone, we approach Beit El, and the closer we come to Beit El, the closer we come to Yerushalayim as well.

Living today, in the era of technology and scientific advance, it is very easy to forget Hashem and fall prey to the kochi v'otzem yadi mentality. It is very easy to think we have created, we have invented, we have discovered. These feelings bring us towards Ay, a city that is in ruins to this day. If we remember that Hashem gives us the tools and the siyata dishmaya to create, invent, discover, we come closer to Beit El and Yerushalayim.

May Hashem grant us the strength to follow in the footsteps of Avraham Avinu, rising along the path towards Beit El and that greatest of mountains, Yerushalayim.

Shabbat Shalom!

Meir Goldwicht

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For those interested, the following are the times and locations of R' Goldwicht's weekly shiurim on the parasha (the live shiurim differ in content from the e-mail shiur): Sunday, 8pm: Young Israel of Avenue J, Flatbush Monday, 8pm: Congregation Sha'arei Tefillah, Lawrence Tuesday, 7:30pm: Congregation Bnay Yeshurun, Teaneck, NJ Wednesday, 8:30pm: Congregation Ohab Tzedek, 95th St. and Amsterdam Avenue, Manhattan Thursday, 8pm: Young Israel of Hillcrest, Queens

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From: ZeitlinShelley@aol.com Sent: Thursday, November 17, 2005 7:18 PM To: ZeitlinShelley@aol.com Subject: Chinuch and Tzedaka by Rabbi Moshe Meir Weiss

Chinuch and Tzedaka

By Rabbi Moshe Meir Weiss

The father of the Jewish people was Avraham Avinu. One might wonder why Hashem bypassed some other great tzadikim who preceded Avraham. For example, consider the lofty accomplishments of Noach. Although Avraham was known as Avraham HaIvri, the man who stood up against the entire world, Noach did the same thing. It was he against the entire corrupt society that he lived in. And what about Mesushalach, the great tzadik for whom the very flood was postponed so that seven days of mourning for him could be properly observed? Or what about Shem, the pious son of Noach known as Malkitzedek Melech Shalem?

Still, the Torah answers why Avraham Avinu earned the privilege to be our first ancestor. The posuk reveals about Avraham, "Ki yidativ lemaan asher yitaveh es banav v'es beiso acharov v'shomru derech Hashem, laasos tzedakah u'mishpat." Hashem said, "I have a special love for him for I know that he will instruct his children and his household to heed the way of Hashem and to do righteousness and justice." Herein lies the secret of Avraham's uniqueness. He was dedicated and talented to pass on the ways of Hashem to his family. This is the trademark of the Jewish people. No matter what, we devotedly and single-mindedly forge our children into another link in the chain of Torah Yiddishkeit.

Thus, parents in the Warsaw ghetto awaiting transport to the gas chambers still taught their children how to clean for Pesach and prepare for a Seder. This is the reason why the holiday of Pesach corresponds to Avraham Avinu. For Pesach is the special time of v'higadeta l'vinecha, when we instruct our children and transmit to them the fundamentals of our beautiful heritage.

Rav Moshe Feinstein, Zt'l Zy"va asks, "Why did not any students - other than the family of Yaakov - remain from the great academy of Sheim v'Ever? We know that they were all lost since it says categorically that only Yaakov Avinu with seventy souls went down into Egypt - and no others. What happened to the many disciples of that ancient Yeshiva? Rav Moshe answers that while Sheim and Ever were great sages and pious people, they did not have the art of transmitting what they embraced to their students. It was only Avraham Avinu who had this prowess and it was he who inculcated it into the Jewish bloodstream.

In this critical verse that defines a primary aim of the Jewish people, it states that Avraham would show his progeny "Laasos tzedakah u'mishpat - To do charity and justice." As the verse says first tzedaka and only then the other laws, we see from here - comments the Rambam - how one should give over the mitzvah of tzedaka with an emphasis that supercedes any other positive commandment. This is a strong reminder to parents to take every opportunity to inject into their children a desire to give tzedaka. Many people get numerous charity solicitations in the mail, throwing them out before even opening them. But what an opportunity it would be to sit down with the children at the table and say, "We have our own tzedakahs. We can't give too much but let's not turn anyone down empty handed. Come, help me fill out the envelope, we'll give everyone two dollars." It becomes a family activity of tzedakah and you can be sure that it creates a legacy. When your child grows up, he will also give something in every envelope. When you're in shul with your young children and poor people come around, give them nickels and tell them to give it to each person with a smile.

Train them young in the mitzvah of charity raising them with the gift that breeds life wealth and peace. This triple cord of reward for giving tzedaka is taught to us in the following three Talmudic dicta. Tzedakah tatzil mi'maves - Charity saves from death. Aser t'aser, asher bishvil shetisasher - You shall surely tithe," which is interpreted to mean, "Tithe in order to become wealthy." Finally, "Marbeh tzedakah, marbeh shalom - One who increases his charity increases his peace."

When many people, one after another, come ringing your doorbell requesting a handout, don't make the mistake of saying in frustration, "Don't answer the door, it's enough already." This is another urgent chinuch opportunity. The Kitzur Shulchan Orech relates from the Medrash, "Tireh de'lo tiftach l'anya tiftach l'asya - A door that doesn't open to the poor will have to open for the doctor." Rather, say to your children, "It's already the fifth poor person. You can open the door and say gently but firmly 'I can only give a small amount for I have already given my quota, but I can also give you a drink and wish you a good day.'" These are sparkling opportunities to educate our children in the right way to behave.

In the zechus of educating our children may we merit to see many generations with much Torah nachas.

From: Rabbi Kalman Packouz [mailto:newsletterserver@aish.com] Sent: Sunday, November 13, 2005 10:59 AM Subject: Shabbat Shalom - Vayeira Dvar Torah

based on Growth Through Torah

by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin

Avraham invites three visitors to stay for a meal with the words:

"I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may sustain yourselves, then go on."

Yet, Avraham does not give them a crust of bread, he dines them in a lavish style with a multi-course banquet. Why does Avraham use such a parsimonious invitation? Wouldn't a sumptuous description have been more enticing?

In the Talmud (Bava Metzia 87a) the Sages derive from here the principle that the righteous say little and do much. The wicked, however, say much and do little as we see next week with Efron's false assurances to Avraham when Avraham wants to bury his wife, Sarah.

Rabbi Yeruchem Levovitz, of the Mir Yeshiva, commented on this that talking about what you plan to do is negative. It is superfluous and often counterproductive. Talking is easier than doing. It creates expectations. And then, even with the greatest of intent, things happen which prevent doing. There is pleasure in talking about the good you intend to do, but it is a cheap way of getting honor and approval. Talking changes the focus from doing good for its own sake to doing good for the sake of approval. And there are those who make grandiose promises and then they forget causing great heartache and pain.



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Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha from

SIR JONATHAN SACKS

Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth [From 2 years ago 5764]

<http://www.chiefrabbi.org/tt-index.html>

Vayera

THE TORAH DOES NOT HAVE A WORD FOR AMBIVALENCE (the nearest is Elijah's question to the Baal-worshipping Israelites: "How long will you waver between two opinions?"). It does, however, have a tune for it. This is the rare note known as the shalshet. It appears three times in Bereishith, each time at a moment of crisis for the individual concerned. (It appears a fourth time in Vayikra 8: 23, where its significance is less apparent). In each case it signifies an existential crisis. The agent is called on to make a choice, one on which his whole future will depend, but he finds that he cannot. He is torn between two alternatives, both of which exercise a powerful sway on him. He must resolve the dilemma one way or another, but either way will involve letting go of deeply felt temptations or deeply held aspirations. It is a moment of high psychological drama.

The shalshet is an unusual note. It goes up and down, up and down, as if unable to move forward to the next note. It was the 16th century commentator Rabbi Joseph Ibn Caspi (in his commentary to Bereishith 19:16) who best understood what it was meant to convey, namely a psychological state of uncertainty and indecision. The graphic notation of the shalshet itself looks like a streak of lightning, a "zigzag movement" (tenuah me'uvetet), a mark that goes repeatedly backwards and forwards. It conveys frozen motion - what Hamlet called "the native hue of resolution sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought" - in which the agent is torn by inner conflict. The shalshet is the music of ambivalence.

One instance occurs in Genesis 24:12. Abraham has sent his servant (not identified in the text, but taken by the commentators to be Eliezer) to find a wife for his son Isaac. He goes to the city of Haran where Abraham's family remained while he went on to the land of Canaan. Arriving at the town's well, he proposes a test: the woman who comes to draw water, offers some to the traveller, and in addition gives water to his camels will be the one chosen by G-d for his master's son. Over the "and he said" introducing his request of G-d that this test should succeed, the masoretic tradition has placed a shalshet.

The commentators identify multiple sources of ambivalence at this point. First, was the test permitted? Jewish law forbids relying on "omens" (Deut. 18: 10, Hullin 95b), and Eliezer may have felt that his test was dangerously close to pagan practice (Ran to Hullin 95b, however, states that Eliezer's conduct was legitimate; he sought not an omen but a sign of the woman's character).

Ibn Caspi himself suggests that Eliezer was unsure as to whether a single test like this was sufficient grounds on which to base so fateful a decision as the choice of a marriage partner for Isaac.



The midrash (Bereishith Rabbah 59: 9), however offers the most insightful explanation. Eliezer had mixed feelings not about the test but about the whole mission itself. Until that point, says the Midrash, he had been "sitting and weighing whether his own daughter was suitable for Isaac." He had hoped, in other words, that one way or another, Abraham's estate would pass to him.

There are two cues that led the midrash to this hypothesis. The first is that when Abraham first spoke to G-d about his childlessness, he said: "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus" (Ber. 15: 2). Eliezer, at that time, had reason to hope that he would be Abraham's heir.

The second is that when Abraham charges him with the mission to find a wife for his son, he replies, "What if [ulai] the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land?" As Ibn Ezra notes (Commentary to Psalm 116: 16), the word ulai is not always neutral. Sometimes it signifies an eventuality one does not want to happen, but at others it indicates an event one does wish for. Eliezer's "what if" may have been an unconscious expression of the fact that, with half his mind, he wanted the mission to fail. That would once again place him or his daughter in a position to be Abraham's heir.

It was therefore with profoundly mixed feelings that he prayed for a woman to appear who would be G-d's choice of Isaac's wife.

More dramatic still is the case of Joseph. Child of a shepherd (Jacob), an almost youngest son, hated by his brothers and sold by them into slavery, he finds himself in Egypt as head of household to one of its prominent citizens, Potiphar. Left alone with his master's wife, he finds himself propositioned by her: "Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, 'Come to bed with me.'" The text continues: "But he refused . . ." (39: 8). Over this verb, tradition has placed a shalshet.

We can imagine the conflict in Joseph's mind at that moment. On the one hand, his entire moral sense said No. It would be a betrayal of everything his family stood for: their ethic of sexual propriety and their strong sense of identity as children of the covenant. It would also be, as Joseph himself says, a betrayal of Potiphar himself: "With me in charge, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against G-d?"

And yet, the temptation must have intense. He was in an urban civilisation of a kind he had not seen before. It was his first experience of "bright lights, big city." He was far from home. No one could see him. After all the hostility he had suffered in his childhood, being propositioned by Potiphar's wife must have been flattering as well as seductive. It was a decisive moment. A slave, with no realistic hope of rescue, was he to become an Egyptian, with all the sexual laissez faire that implied? Or would he remain faithful to his past, his conscience, his identity?

The Talmud gives a graphic description of his inner torment:

The image of his father appeared to him in the window and said, "Joseph, your brother's names are destined to be inscribed on the stones of the [high priest's] ephod, and you will be among them. Do you want your name to be erased? Do you want to be called an adulterer?"

The shalshet is an elegant commentary to Joseph's crise de conscience. In the end, Joseph refuses, but not without deep inner struggle.

Which brings us to the third case chronologically the first, in today's sedra. Here the conflict is explicit. Two of the angels who had visited Abraham now come to Lot in Sodom. They tell him the city and its inhabitants are about to be destroyed. He and his family must leave immediately. But Lot delays:

12 The two men said to Lot, "Do you have anyone else here-sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, 13 because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the Lord against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it." 14 So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, "Hurry and get out of this place, because the Lord is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought he was joking. 15 With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished." 16 When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them.

Over "he hesitated" is a shalshet.

Lot's hesitation goes to the core of his identity. We recall that earlier, when he and Abraham agreed to separate to end the quarrel between their herdsman, "Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar . . . So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east" (13: 10-11) He chose to

make his home in Sodom, despite the fact that, as the Torah already states at that point, its inhabitants "were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord."

When we see Lot in chapter 19, he and his family have already become profoundly assimilated. His daughters have married local men. On the phrase at the beginning of the chapter, "Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city" the sages said that "he had just been appointed as a judge" - the gate of the city being the place where, in Abrahamic times, the judges and elders sat to resolve disputes. Lot does not see himself, as did Abraham, as "a stranger and temporary resident." He has decided to put down roots in the Jordan valley and the cities of the plain. This is henceforth where he belongs - so much so that the visitors have physically to drag him away.

Lot's sense of belonging, however, is either naiveté or self-deception. The text makes this clear at three points. The first is the attempted sexual assault on Lot's visitors (19: 4-5). Evidently the people of Sodom do not take kindly to strangers. This is the first hint that perhaps Lot too is, in their eyes, a stranger. In fact, he is. The Torah, in its second indication, is brutally explicit:

"Get out of our way," they replied [to Lot, when he begged them to respect his visitors]. Then they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them."

The third comes when he tells his daughters' husbands that they must escape because the city is about to be destroyed, "But his sons-in-law thought he was joking." Lot's elaborate new identity is about to come crashing down about him - not only because of the impending destruction but because he has discovered in successive blows that he has not been accepted in this place. Sodom hates strangers, they still consider Lot "an alien", and his sons-in-law regard him as a fool.

Yet despite this, he hesitates. He has invested too much of himself in the project of making his home among the people of the plain. He is a prime example of what Leon Festinger called "cognitive dissonance." According to Festinger, the need to avoid dissonance is fundamental to human beings; otherwise it creates unbearable tension. It is this tension that Lot cannot resolve - and which is signaled by the shalshet over "he hesitated." It was the ultimate existential question, "Who am I?" Having tried so hard to become one-of-them, he finds it almost impossible to tear himself away. (There were, tragically, many Jews in Germany and Austria in the 1930s who refused to leave because they would not or could not believe the evidence around them, that Hitler was serious in his threats to destroy Jews).

Incidentally, Festinger's theory also explains the behaviour of Lot's wife who "looked back [against the explicit instruction of the angels] and was turned into a pillar of salt." Festinger called this syndrome "post-decision dissonance." He predicted that the more important the issue, the longer the person delays a decision and the harder it is to reverse, the more he or she will agonize over whether they have made the right choice. They have second thoughts; they need reassurance; they "look back".

The Shalshet over Lot's hesitation is no mere detail of the biblical text. It is, in a real sense, the story of the modern Jew. Entering mainstream society for the first time, and yet encountering overt or covert anti-semitism, many nineteenth century European Jews became ambivalent about their identity. They tried to hide it and to assimilate. They became secular marranos. It did not work. The more they strove to be like everyone else, the more conspicuous they were, and the stronger anti-semitism grew. They themselves lost much in the process - not only their Jewish heritage itself, but also the simple capacity to know and take pride in who they were.

The lives of Lot and Abraham exemplify for all time the contrast between ambivalence and the security that comes from knowing who one is and why. Lot, who tried to become someone else, found himself regarded by his neighbours as an alien, an arriviste, an interloper, a parvenu. To his own sons-in-law he was a "joker." Abraham lived a different kind of life. He fought a war on behalf of his neighbours. He prayed for them. But he lived apart, true to his faith, his mission and his covenant with G-d. What did they think of him? Early in next week's sedra the Hittites call him "a prince of G-d in our midst." That equation has not changed. Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. They are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism. Never be ambivalent about who and what you are.



Subj: VaYera Torah Essay Date: Nov/17/2005
From: "Michael Hoenig" <MHoening@herzfeld-rubin.com>
An (Open) "Secret" to Understanding the Akeidah
Michael Hoenig

The "Akeidah." A word that connotes concrete facts yet profound mystery. It is a story about real people yet is imbued with symbolism. It speaks to ancient concepts yet teaches very modern lessons. To the faithful the word resonates deeply and

evocatively. For some it literally sends shivers up the spine. Others recognize it as describing a significant episode but not fully comprehensible. Clearly, an extraordinary scenario unfolded in the Holy Land in which our Patriarchs Avraham and Yitzchak, though mortals, nevertheless achieved some level of devotional supremacy and sublime interface with Hashem. We mark the Torah's recital as a special watershed event in Klal Yisrael's history and to inform future generations. Thus, Chazal ordained that the Akeidah chapter be included in our daily prayers. It is again made a special Torah reading on Rosh Hashannah. No ordinary story about ancient greats in a far away land, this is pure "Chiyus," living Torah, meant to inspire and be studied and comprehended. The daily prayer is not meant to be robotic or tiresome. Presumably, we are to continually learn, to discern fresh insights.

Complexities Abound

The faithless seem to have it easier. They can deny the story is true or say it is a quaint, ancient tale, the stuff of folklore and legend, shrouded in mists of antiquity, a narrative relic from a time when human sacrifices to pagan deities were deemed fashionable. The faithless can walk away from the Akeidah. The faithful cannot. The faithful do not have the luxury of denial, of burying one's head in the sand. For many of us, however, the Akeidah is a tough, daunting episode to understand. The intellectual, faith-based struggle is very real. Many readily believe the Torah's report of events but find the scenario problematic, partially elusive. The mind must work to catch up with the heart. Is the lesson, as many commentators have suggested, Avraham's utter and total fealty to Hashem's command? Is full obedience the price of perfect faith? Is it Yitzchak's resolute acceptance of the Divine injunction that is the lesson for today?

While oceans of ink have been used up by Chazal explaining what we can learn from the "Akeidah," often, quivering questions or nagging uncertainties creep in. There seem to be traps for the faithful, complexities that distract.

For example, the Nisayon of Avraham, the "test" or "trial" or "ordeal" (or as the Midrash says, the "Nes," as in "symbol" or "emblem" or "flag" of the Akeidah) focuses on Hashem's order to sacrifice Yitzchak. Clearly, this is a horrendous command. Avraham's obedience is thus said to be a behavioral model for Klal Yisrael. We are to see in this an emulative goal. But is sacrifice of one's sons for perceived just causes unique to Avraham? Have not many societies seemingly been "tested" to send their sons into battle for what they believed were righteous reasons? Doesn't Israel today knowingly send its soldiers, its precious sons, into harm's way? Aren't American parents courting ultimate sacrifices when their sons (and daughters) combat deadly terrorists in Iraq? And haven't innumerable Kedoshim perished over the centuries in sacrifices Al Kiddush Hashem?

Another distracting thought. We are supposed to learn salient lessons for today and tomorrow from yesteryear's Akeidah. But, truth be told, what would happen today if a renowned Gadol Hador, one of our current Torah leaders, announced that Hashem commanded him to go to Har Moriah and sacrifice his son. Clearly, such plans and actions in furtherance of their would call for restraint, by strait-jacket, if need be. Other Gedolim likely would agree. Replicating Avraham's behavior, even by a Gadol Hador's discernment of a Divine command, likely would be deemed lunacy. So how is the modern, "lonely man of faith" (as the Rav might have referred to him) to identify with Avraham's obedience model of long ago? How is the Akeidah to be rationally relevant today?

"Secret" Clue?

This writer's thesis here is that the Akeidah text provides strong, "secret" clues, in effect, code words, that help the informed, faithful reader comprehend many of the complexities. They are an open secret. The code words stare the reader in the face.

The key clue is open because it is easily seen. The code words are only a "secret" because they seem to be glossed over by many readers. We may have lost sensitivity as to their meaning and import. Lamentably, time and experience seem to have obscured the clue. Nevertheless, the code word reverberates repeatedly; it beckons the reader. Vistas of fresh understanding can be unmasked.

The pivotal clue is the word "Olah." It is variously translated in English as an "offering" (i.e., a kind of Avodah or sacrifice), a "burnt offering," or an "elevation offering." The root word "Olah" or its derivatives (in subject and predicate form) are mentioned no less than 8 times in the Akeidah reading. This, in itself, is remarkable because of the usual economy of Torah verse. Such repetition suggests an emphatic message. The textual references to language of "Olah" are as follows: VaYera, 22:2 VeHaalehu Shom LeOlah (note the double language); 22:3 VaYevaka Atzai Olah; 22:6 VaYikach Avraham Es Atzai HaOlah; 22:7 VeAyeH HaSeh LeOlah; 22:8 Hashem Yireh Lo HaSeh LeOlah; 22:13 VaYaaleho LeOlah Tachas Beno (note the double language).

Further, the reader readily observes that these direct references to "Olah" are amplified further by the contextual frame of reference. Clearly it is geared to the "Olah mission" Avraham must perform. Thus, for example, he must go to Eretz

Moriah, a place of Avodah and Tefilah; he splits wood for the Olah; he places the wood for the Olah upon Yitzchak; he takes in his hand the fire and the knife; Yitzchak asks his famous question ("where is the lamb for the Olah?"); Avraham responds re the "lamb for the Olah"; Avraham built the altar there; and arranged the wood; he bound Yitzchak (VaYakod) and placed him on the altar atop the wood; he took the knife to slaughter his son, and so on, repeatedly. Note that the Olah mission is intensely critical to the ordeal, sensationally so. Most of the descriptive references involve implementing the command to bring Yitzchak as an Olah. The Olah offering is not only part and parcel of the unfolding events, it is the crucial focal point of the episode. The entire story is Olah-oriented.

The Olah edict is a forceful engine that drives Avraham to do the Divine bidding. He arises early, a paradigm of faith-based devotion. Olah is the code word rousing Avraham to perfect his obedience. It is also a well-understood code word to Yitzchak to exhibit perfect faith and confidence. But what is so important about the Olah command that galvanizes Avraham into unquestioning action? We see Avraham protesting for the salvation of evil Sodom, yet here – for his own precious son – he is acquiescent and compliant. Something about that Olah command compelled Avraham to aim for spiritual heights. We need to understand why this Olah message was the focus of Hashem's Nisayon. Why did this message resonate so forcefully with Avraham?

The Code Word Resonates We can hypothesize some answers. Perhaps those better informed will add genuine Torah expertise and authoritative insights. Topically, the Korban Olah is described at the outset of Vayikra ("Im Olah Korbano," etc. 1:3). Artscroll translates it there as an "elevation-offering." (Artscroll Chumash, Stone ed. 1994, at p. 545). Its commentary reports that Rashi and Radak interpret "Olah" to refer to a Korban, an offering, that is completely burned (apparently because it goes up in flames to G-d). Ramban, Ibn Ezra and R'Bachya tie the name Olah to the sin for which one generally brings the offering – an atonement for sinful ideas or thoughts which come up in a person's mind. R'Hirsch is said to connect the name of the Korban to its purpose: to raise its owner from the status of sinner to one in a state of spiritual elevation. (Id.). Each of these rationales has in common the notion that a sinner, or a person who perceives himself as one, brings the offering to atone for some transgression. Artscroll's commentary informs further. The Olah "may be brought by someone who has intentionally committed a sin for which the Torah does not prescribe a punishment or who failed to perform a positive commandment." The Olah can also be brought "by someone who had sinful thoughts that have not been carried out in deed." The Olah could be brought by everyone ascending to Yerushalayim for the Shalosh Regalim. And it may be offered "by anyone who wishes to raise his spiritual level." (Id.). Despite Vayikra's structured approach, Korbanos generally and the Korban Olah in particular seem to have been a known practice from earliest times. Kayin and Hevel each brought an offering the Torah labels a "Mincha" (Bereishis 4:3-5). But Noah, upon exiting the Ark, built an altar and brought Olos, burnt-offerings, of every clean animal and every clean bird. (Bereishis, 8:20, VaYiven Noah Mizbeach LaShem VaYikach MiKol HaBehema HaTehora UMikol HaOf HaTahor VaYaal Olos BaMizbeach). Indeed, Hashem is said to have smelled the pleasing aroma (Bereishis 8:21, VaYerach Hashem Es Rayach HaNichoach). This early Noahide use of the Olah, a burnt-offering, assures us that in Avraham's time the Olah was an established ritual familiar to the Patriarch. Rambam comments on the tradition that the altars of Dovid and Shlomo, of Avraham where he bound Yitzchak, of Noah, Kayin, Hevel and Adam were all at the same place, Har HaMoriah, site of the Temple in Jerusalem (Artscroll Commentary to Noah 8:20 [citing Rambam's Hil. Beis HaBechirah 2:2]). Torah also tells us Avraham built altars. Assuredly, these were not artwork to dot the landscape. Clearly, by the time Hashem commands Avraham to offer his son as an Olah, that Korban and its devotional purposes were well-known to the Patriarch. A Divine edict for Avraham to bring his son as an Olah must have been a signal message of great import. Olah is a word of art. Those who interface with Hashem on a high spiritual level see deep meaning in Hashem's use of the word. Avraham was not told to kill his son outright. He was told to go to the land of Moriah, a holy place, and offer Yitzchak as a Korban. The Olah message compelled Avraham's obedience. Why?

Was Atonement Needed? We can hypothesize that a command to bring an Olah suggested to Avraham that perhaps he had sinned, grievously enough to raise the stakes of atonement from typical Olos to the extraordinary demand that his son be the Olah offering. Could the saintly Avraham have considered himself a "sinner" calling for such a severe atonement sacrifice? For many of us the notion of Avraham as a sinner seems unacceptable. Yet Chazal clearly suggest as much.

For example, Chazal harshly fault Avraham for his entry into a treaty of friendship with the pagan King Avimelech (VaYera 21:22-32). Remember that the Akeidah chapter begins, "VaYehi Achar HaDevarim HaEleh" (22:1, "And it happened after these things ..."). What things? The immediately preceding episode deals with

Avraham's concordat with the Philistine Avimelech. (See the Commentary of R' Eli Munk in Kol HaTorah, The Call of the Torah, Bereishis, 22:1, at pp. 280-283 (Artscroll 1994)). Rabbi Munk quotes Tanna D'Bei Eliyahu 7 that the ministering angels protested Avraham's alliance with pagans. Hashem is said to have replied, "He has but one son, born to him when he was 100 years old. I shall order him to sacrifice this son to Me as an offering. If he accepts – good; if not, you are right." Rashbam comments adversely: "Divine anger was kindled against Avraham. For G-d had given the land of the Philistines (along with the rest of the Promised Land) to the patriarch, but he made a pact of friendship with Avimelech for three generations (whereas its inhabitants were to have been completely exterminated). Accordingly, G-d commanded Avraham to offer up his son as a sacrifice in order to show him just what could happen from making an alliance on his own, an alliance which put a commitment on the future destiny of the Promised Land." (Quoted in R' Munk, Kol HaTorah, Id. at p. 282). Because of this treaty, we know that Dovid HaMelech had to defer conquest of Yerushalayim for seven years, waiting in Chevron for the pact's expiration. Ramban too, in various places, criticizes Avraham for what he calls major "sins." Notable among these is the "Achosi He" episode (Lech Lecha 12:11) in which Avraham requests Sarah to tell the Egyptians that she is his sister. Ramban (at 12:10) says that Avraham "unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that G-d would save him and his wife and all his belongings for G-d surely has the power to help and to save." Similarly, Avraham's leaving the Holy Land because of the famine was a sin. Because of this deed, says Ramban, the exile in the Land of Egypt was decreed for Avraham's children. Ramban also faults both Avraham and Sarah for dealing harshly with Hagar (Lech Lecha 16:6): "Our mother did transgress by this affliction, and Avraham also by permitting her to do so. And so G-d heard her affliction and gave her a son who would be a Perekh Adam, to afflict the seed of Avraham and Sarah with all kinds of affliction." (Ramban, R' Chavel Translation, at p. 213). Rav Yochanan, in Nedarim 32b, faults Avraham for giving over to the King of Sodom the prisoners he had rescued from the battle with the Four Kings. (See Lech Lecha 14:23-24). Says R' Yochanan: "Because Avraham missed a chance to bring some people to G-d he was punished and his children were enslaved in Egypt." R' Yochanan condemns the Patriarch's decision when choosing against a Kiddush Hashem. In similar fashion, Avraham is reproached for repulsing the pagan princess Timna when she came to convert. Consequently, she became the concubine of Eliphaz, Eisav's son, and bore him Amelek, the unrelenting future enemy of Yisrael. (R' Munk Commentary, Kol HaTorah, Bereishis, at p. 184). Some sages fault Avraham for saying, "BaMoh Eda" during the episode of the Bris Ben HaBesorim (Lech Lecha 15:8). The Amora Shmuel, in Nedarim 32a, says that Avraham was punished and his children enslaved in Egypt for 210 years because he went too far in asking about the Divine promises. The Ramchal, speaking of the need for careful speech, says Avraham did not escape punishment for a few words spoken negligently. (See Commentary of R' Munk, Kol HaTorah, Bereishis, at 191). We see, therefore, Chazal's identification of chinks in Avraham's armor of saintly behavior. Some sages call them outright sins. To an Avraham striving for perfection, a supreme Navi in unique communications with Hashem, the Divine admonition that he must bring a Korban Olah at the Moriah site, one of historical and future devotional significance, could have signaled a mandatory need for atonement. The fact that Hashem's command made Yitzchak the Olah offering only exacerbated the gravity of the message. It emphasized a requirement to atone at the most sacrificial level. Avraham's obedience was compelled. What else could he do? Where could he go? The edict, in effect, may have said "you have sinned; now go to Moriah and atone in the manner known to you, offering the Olah." Yitzchak, the Korban Temimah, understood this code word too. Tzaddikim Gemurim know what they must do. Teshuvah and Kapparah apply to Tzaddikim as well. Indeed, they are judged more acutely, Kechut HaSaarah. The Nisayon of Avraham (and Yitzchak) is better understood when the Patriarchs are viewed as real men of giant spiritual stature. They are constantly challenged. Occasionally, they stumble. The ways of Teshuvah (repentance) and Kapparah (atonement) are as much fashioned for them as for ordinary man, for today's man. The Akeidah is best understood when its central focus – the Korban Olah – is duly recognized. It is this word that made the message to Avraham thunderously and irreversibly compelling. Avraham's obedience is now fully comprehensible when viewed in the light of a mortal's perception of sin, guilt, Charata (regret) and atonement. Hashem's Olah message and the contextual details of the chapter make perfect sense as a penultimate Nisayon, a trial, an ordeal. Avraham passes the severe test because his need for atonement seemingly was Divinely ordained. This explains why the ram suddenly appears and why the Korban Olah, now a quite traditional one, is offered instead. Lamentably, the erosion of time and knowledge has made us insensitive to the

importance of the Olah in devotional practice. By giving due deference to the key code words, however, the modern reader can find refreshed insights in the Akeidah chapter. This Olah-oriented episode becomes more comprehensible as Torah text, as a daily prayer and as a lesson for the faithful of all times.



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MOREINU HORAV YAAKOV KAMENETZKY zt'l
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 "And behold three men were standing in front of him"

Rashi on this pasuk based on a Midrash in Bereishis Rabbah, writes that the malach Refael was the malach that healed Avraham from the pain of the milah, and afterwards he continued on to Sodom, where he also saved Lot from the destruction of his city.

HaRav Yaakov Kamenetzky, zt'l asks a question on this Midrash. The Gemara in Masseches Bava Metzia (86b) states that it was the malach Michoel, the malach that told Sarah that she would have a child, and not the malach Refael who saved Lot. How do we reconcile the Midrash and the Gemara?

Rav Yaakov explains that the seeming contradiction hinges on the explanation of a pasuk later on in the parsha. When the malachim informed Lot that they were on a mission to destroy Sodom, they advised him to gather his extended family, and prepare to flee the region. Lot immediately ran to inform his two married daughters that they had to leave. His sons-in-law scorned him, and dismissed him as a lunatic. Influenced by their husband's skepticism, Lot's daughters refused to believe their father, and refused to leave Sodom. The malach then told Lot, (19:15) "Get up and take your wife, and two remaining daughters." The Gemara in Masseches Yevamos (77a) says that the word "Hanimtza'os" refers to Dovid HaMelech. Dovid descended from Rus, the Moavi princess who descended from the son that was born to Lot and his daughter. As such, when the malach saved Lot and his daughters, he was really saving the future of Klal Yisroel, as Moshiach descends from the family of Dovid. Based on this Gemara, we must conclude that the malach that saved Lot must have been the malach Michoel, who is the malach that protects Klal Yisroel, and defends them against the Satan. Since the malach in question acted for Klal Yisroel's protection, the Gemara in Bava Metzia identified the malach as Michoel. However, this is based on a drasha, and is not the simplest way to understand the pasuk. Rashi in his peirush was learning the pasuk according to the simple understanding, and as such he used the explanation of the Midrash; that the malach in question was the malach Refael.

May we be zocheh to once again see the salvation of Klal Yisroel, with the coming of Moshiach Ben Dovid, and the rebuilding of the third Bais HaMikdash, bi'mihayra bi'yameinu, amen.

From: Peninim-bounces@shemayisrael.com on behalf of Shema Yisrael Torah Network [shemalist@shemayisrael.com] Sent: Thursday, November 17, 2005 6:49 AM To: Peninim Parsha

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

Hashem appeared to him in Elonei Mamre: And it happened after these things that G-d tested Avraham. (18:1;22:1)

There is something intriguing about the beginning of the Parsha, which commences with Hashem visiting Avraham Avinu as he recuperates from his Bris Milah, and the conclusion of the Parsha, which describes Yitzchak's preparedness to be sacrificed for Hashem. In both of these circumstances, the names of the major "player", Avraham and Yitzchak, are not mentioned. Indeed, Avraham's name is not mentioned until later, when he slaughters a calf and prepares the meat for his guests. Otherwise, we have no clue who Hashem is visiting and who saw the three angels dressed as Arabs. The story of Akeidas Yitzchak, which is one of the most seminal events in Jewish history, talks only about Avraham taking Yitzchak, preparing Yitzchak and almost slaughtering Yitzchak. But, it does not mention Yitzchak as playing a starring role in this episode of mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice. Why?

We find a similar anomaly in Parshas Tetzaveh, in which Moshe Rabbeinu's name is not mentioned. Indeed, this is the only Parsha in the Torah, from the time of

Moshe's birth, in which his name is not mentioned. The Baal HaTurim explains that when Moshe interceded on behalf of Klal Yisrael, following the sin of the Golden Calf, he said to Hashem that if He would not forgive the Jews, then "erase my name from Your Book." Because of this, Moshe's name is erased from one Parsha - interestingly, the one that corresponds with the anniversary of his death. Now, is it fair that the "reward" for his readiness to be moser nefesh for Klal Yisrael should be to have his name erased from the Torah?

Horav Eliyahu Schlesinger, Shlita, distinguishes between the acts of mesiras nefesh that individual Jews have carried out throughout the millennia, and the acts of mesiras nefesh that were performed by our Avos, Patriarchs. Yitzchak stood primed to sacrifice his life to fulfill Hashem's command. Throughout the millennia, millions of Jews have done this. Chazal record the story of Channah and her seven sons who died Al Kiddush Hashem, sanctifying Hashem's Name. When her youngest son was led to be executed, she cried out to him, "My son! Tell Avraham, your forefather, 'You bound one altar; I bound seven altars!'" While these acts of self-sacrifice certainly do not detract from Yitzchak's stellar sacrifice, they do, however, elicit us to question its primacy.

Obviously, there is a difference in the manner they withstood the nisayon, test, and the way individual Jews have triumphed. The Maharal in his Sefer Gevuros Hashem, explains that Avraham Avinu did not act throughout his trials as an individual person. He acted as the father of Klal Yisrael, as the root of a large tree, with the Jewish People, throughout the ages, as its branches. The Chasam Sofer in a homily on Rosh Hashanah adds that Hashem did not test the Patriarchs as individuals. In order to test the nation that would eventually descend from them, it was first necessary to test the Patriarchs - to have to wander from country to country, to trek the wilderness, to undergo sacrifice and hardship, so that they would serve as the shoresh, root, for their progeny.

Thus, Avraham's test concerning the Bris Milah, was Klal Yisrael's test. Yitzchak's sacrifice was Klal Yisrael's test. Moshe Rabbeinu's sacrifice was Klal Yisrael's sacrifice. When they triumphed - we triumphed. When they withstood the test - we withstood the test. Therefore, their names are not mentioned with regard to these seminal events, because it was really our tests which they passed and, subsequently, imbued us with the courage and fortitude to continue passing the tests.

Then G-d opened her eyes and she perceived a well of water; she went and filled the skin with water and gave the youth to drink. (21:19)

There are two significant lessons to be derived from here. First, as the Midrash notes, it does not state here that a well was created for her. It says that she "opened her eyes" and saw a well. This teaches us that the yeshuah, salvation, provided by Hashem is always there waiting for us. We have only to open our eyes and look. Second, the Midrash notes from the phrase "she went and filled the skin with water," that she filled the skin with more than enough for that day. This prompts Chazal to declare that Hagar was deficient in her belief in Hashem. Otherwise, why should she be concerned about tomorrow? She should have taken enough water to address her present needs. Where was her trust that Hashem would continue providing for her?

Chazal's inference begs explanation. We have an anxious mother with a sick son wandering in the wilderness. Is there something wrong with taking along a little bit more water, "just in case"? Does this action manifest a lack of faith? Horav Yehudah Leib Chasman, zl, explains that if one is traveling on a train as a guest of the king, he does not worry about food for tomorrow. If the king says he will provide him with his meals, he has no reason to be concerned any further. On the contrary, one who takes along extra food "just in case" is insulting the king.

This is exactly the way Heaven views the individual who worries about tomorrow. We are guests on Hashem's train. If he says that it is "all on Him" we no longer have any reason to be concerned. Hagar clearly saw that Hashem miraculously caused her to see a well before her eyes. In effect, He was saying to her, "I will take care of your needs." Why did she not trust Him? Why did she fill up water for tomorrow? Was she doubting Hashem?

The Chafetz Chaim, zl, was wont to say that the students of today's yeshivos eat from the king's table. Just as a soldier in the army is sustained by the commander-in-chief, so, too, are the soldiers in Hashem's army sustained by Hashem. Thus, the ben Torah who devotes himself to Torah study and serving Hashem, will be provided for by Hashem. He has only to open up his eyes and see.

... On the third day, Avraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place from afar. (22:4)

The Midrash draws a parallel between the three days that Avraham Avinu traveled with Yitzchak and their assistants, and the three days Esther prepared before going to Achashveirosh. Chazal say that Esther succeeded in her dialogue with King

Achashveirosh in the merit of what her ancestor Avraham did on the "third day." His preparedness to sacrifice his son sent a message of strength and fortitude many generations later.

Horav Mordechai Rogov, zl, explains that Esther needed incredible strength to remain committed and observant in the palace of the king. She succeeded in rising to the challenges with which she was confronted. If we think about it, Esther was, in effect, trapped in the palace, isolated from her world of religion. How was she able to carry out her commitment? We are taught that she arranged to have seven maids, naming each one for another day of the week, in order to identify the day when Shabbos would occur. Everything Esther did to identify with and fulfill mitzvos took an enormous amount of strength and strategic planning. What motivated her? From where did she get the emotional drive and resolve to be able to rule over one hundred and twenty seven provinces and still remain uncompromising and unwavering in her religious beliefs? Chazal trace the source of her strength to her ancestor, Avraham. His heroic and courageous acts at the Akeidah infused these qualities in his future descendants. Esther survived because of Avraham. She maintained her valor and dignity, her commitment and courage, because she inherited these qualities from Avraham. She represented her heritage with pride, exercising self-control and resolve - first, over herself, thereby influencing others to emulate her. Every step that she took reflected Avraham Avinu's imbued lessons. Avraham's "three days" left an indelible impression and a solid foundation upon which Esther built her "three days."

Parents have that effect upon their children. We, the Jewish People, have been bequeathed a noble heritage of blood, sweat and tears. We have suffered, but we have triumphed. This is the legacy that we bequeath to the next generation. We must make sure that we transmit the correct values to our children. What we bequeath them will endure long after we are gone. I recently read an article by a rabbi who contrasted two funerals that he had attended in one week. One funeral was a very public one, in which a large gathering had assembled to pay tribute to a family patriarch. The deceased grandson spoke lovingly of his grandfather's character, his love of life and sensitivity to people. True, it was a funeral, but the assemblage departed with a sort of "good" feeling about a man who lived his life well.

The other funeral was a graveside service where, regrettably, they could not even put together a minyan, quorum, of ten men. In this case, a daughter was burying her father next to her mother, who had preceded him in death some ten years earlier. As the casket was being lowered into the ground, the woman got down on her knees and screamed, "Daddy, don't hurt Mommy! Don't hurt Mommy! Leave her alone!" Unfortunately, this woman had grim memories from her youth.

I have stated this fact numerous times: Our children are watching, and what they see becomes a part of them that they will one day transmit to their children. We must see to it that their memories are always of a positive nature.

There is a deeper aspect to our heritage that should be noted. Throughout history we have been witness to an incredible phenomenon. Jews who were clearly distant from religious commitment, who had strayed far from any form of observance, suddenly, under pressure from tormentors and oppressors, have refused to renounce their faith. They have been willing to forfeit their lives for Jewish ideals. Indeed, Rav Yaakov Emden, zl, writes that during the Spanish Inquisition, many sophisticated Jews abdicated their beliefs and renounced Judaism, while the simple, unpretentious Jew went to the burning stake, undeterred, with Shema Yisrael on his lips.

Horav Yaakov Twerski, zl, the Milwaukee Rebbe, explains that this is represented by Moshe Rabbeinu's vision of the Burning Bush. The thorn bush represents the Jew who seems to be unproductive: dry, empty, providing no shade, devoid of any signs of Jewishness. Yet, when he is put to the test, he comes out alive, with a fiery passion, a burning fervor which gives a glow that extends beyond time and space. Moshe Rabbeinu asked the Almighty, "From where comes so intense a rapture in someone who otherwise shows no sign of Jewishness?"

Hashem's response was, "This is the legacy of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. They bequeathed every Jew with a spark of their own neshamos, a nucleus of Jewishness that is the heritage of each Jew. At any moment that hidden spark can erupt into an intense and absolute devotion. Thus, no Jew may ever be written off as lost to his People."

Mitzvah performance can spur this spark to burst into flame. Rav Twerski would relate the story of an assimilated Jew in Kiev, Russia, who, due to concealing his Jewishness, had been accepted by the gentile community. Once, while on vacation at a seashore, this man chanced upon a scene where a body had washed ashore. The deceased man had no identifying papers on him, but the mere fact that he was wearing Tzitzis identified him as a Jew. As a result, he was given a Jewish burial.

Our assimilated Jew received a rude awakening: While his newly-acquired status gave him access to the higher echelons of gentile society, what good would it do

him after his death? He realized that when it really mattered, he wanted to be buried as a Jew. One cannot die as a Jew if he does not live as one. So, he began to wear Tzitzis. One mitzvah led to another, and a complete metamorphosis took place. Shortly thereafter, the man assumed his rightful position in the Jewish community. One should never despair of a Jewish soul. It has a noble heritage.

Dedicated in loving memory of our dear father and grandfather Arthur I. Genshaft Yitzchok ben Yisroel z"l niftar 18 Cheshvan 5739 by his family Neil and Marie Genshaft Isaac and Naomi Peninim mailing list Peninim@shemayisrael.com http://www.shemayisrael.com/mailman/listinfo/peninim_shemayisrael.com

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Hamaayan / The Torah Spring

Edited by Shlomo Katz

Vayera: Religious Coercion

Sponsored by Rabbi and Mrs. Sam Vogel and family in memory of father and grandfather Aharon Yehuda ben Yisroel a"h (Leon Vogel)

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David and Sarah Maslow and family in memory of his father Archie Maslow a"h (18 Cheshvan) and her father Samuel Holstein a"h (25 Cheshvan)

The Midrash relates that after Avraham would feed the guests who passed his way, he would say, "Now thank G-d whose food you have eaten." If the guest refused, Avraham would say, "Then pay me! The wine costs such-and-such, the meat costs such-and-such, the bread costs such-and-such. Who would give you wine in the desert? Who would give you meat in the desert? Who would give you bread in the desert?" At that point, Avraham's guests would agree to thank G-d.

The commentaries ask: Why did Avraham do this? Of what value is a blessing which is extracted under financial duress? R' Yitzchak Or Zarua z"l (13th century) answers that Avraham did not actually ask his guests for money. Rather he argued, "Think how much you would be willing to pay for food and drink in the desert. Behold! G-d has prepared that food and drink for you by causing me to be here in your time of need. Moreover, it's all free. You would have been willing to pay a small fortune had I requested it, but I ask you for nothing for myself."

Upon realizing that G-d indeed looks out for each person's needs, Avraham's guests would willingly thank G-d for their food, the Or Zarua explains.

R' Moshe Zuriel shlita (former mashgiach of Yeshivat Shaalvim) adds: At first glance, the above Midrash appears to say that Avraham practiced "kefiyah datit" / forcing others to observe halachah against their will. However, the Or Zarua's explanation reveals that the opposite is true. Avraham caused people to serve Hashem by showing them how Hashem cares for every human and by demonstrating the beauty of serving the One G-d. (Otzrot Hatorah Vol. I. p.54)

"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." (18:1)

The Midrash explains that Hashem appeared to Avraham to visit the sick, for it was the third day after Avraham's circumcision and he was in pain.

The Gemara says that Avraham had a gem that hung at his throat, and anyone who looked at it was healed from any injuries he had suffered. When Avraham passed away, Hashem hung that gem from the sun. If so, asks R' Bezalel Darshan z"l (Poland; 16th century), why was Avraham still in pain three days after his circumcision? Why didn't he just look at the stone that hung around his neck?

R' Bezalel explains: Avraham did not literally have a gem hanging on a necklace. Rather, the Gemara means that Avraham's throat, i.e., his voice, spoke "gems" of truth about G-d that cured idolaters of their spiritual ills. After Avraham died, that gem was hung from the sun, meaning that a person who wished to find G-d could do so through an intensive study of nature, represented by the sun in the Gemara's statement.

In this light, says R' Bezalel, we can understand another Midrash which emphasizes that Avraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent in order to "open a door" through which travelers and converts could enter the service of the One G-d. The Midrash means to answer the same question we asked above, i.e., why didn't Avraham look at his gem and heal himself? The answer is that Avraham did not have a real gem. Rather, the gem referred to was his voice, which he used to "open

doors" for converts, and the healing referred to was spiritual healing. (Amudehah Shivah)

"Hashem said, 'Because the outcry of Sdom and Amorrhah has become great, and because their sin has been very grave. I will descend and see . . ." (18:20-21)

"Avraham came forward and said, 'Will You also stamp out the righteous along with the wicked?'" (18:23)

Why did Avraham think he had the right to speak to Hashem this way? R' Shimon Schwab z"l explains: Very often, we do not understand Hashem's actions or His plan. However, when the Torah uses words such as "I will descend," Hashem is saying that He will descend to man's level, i.e., He will act in a way that mankind can understand. This fact gave Avraham the right to question. (Selected Speeches p.35)

"On the third day, Avraham raised his eyes and perceived the place from afar. Avraham said to his young men, 'Stay here by yourselves with the donkey, while I and the lad will go until there; we will worship and we will return to you.' . . . Then Yitzchak spoke to Avraham, his father, and said, 'Father . . . Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?'" (22:4-7)

Why did Yitzchak wait until the third day to ask where the sheep for an offering was? R' Yechezkel Abramsky z"l (rabbi in Poland and London and rosh yeshiva in Israel; author of Chazon Yechezkel; died 1976) once said, "I learned from here that before one asks a question, he should look around to see if there are people there whose presence might discourage candor. Yitzchak did not ask his question before the third day because he suspected that Avraham might not speak freely in the presence of Yishmael and Eliezer who accompanied them. (Quoted in Peninei Rabbeinu Yechezkel)

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (chapter 5) teaches: "Avraham Avinu was tested ten times, and he withstood them all." Many commentaries ask: Why is Avraham referred to as "Avinu" / "our father" in this mishnah, whereas he is not given that title in the previous mishnah which also mentions his name?

R' Moshe Zaturensky z"l (19th century Lithuania) explains: The last of Avraham's tests (according to most commentaries) was the Akeidah / Binding of Yitzchak. Our Sages highlight the fact that Avraham reasonably could have asked Hashem, "Previously You told me (21:12), 'For through Yitzchak will offspring be considered yours! Now, You are telling me to offer him as a sacrifice?'" In other words, it was precisely the fact that Avraham was destined to be "Avinu" / "our father," whereas sacrificing Yitzchak would have eliminated that possibility, that made the Akeidah was such a difficult test.

On a simpler level, the Akeidah was a difficult test because it asked Avraham to do something that was contrary to his paternal instincts. For both of these reasons, he is given the title "Avinu" / "our father" in this context. (Darkei Moshe Al Pirkei Avot)

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[From several years ago]

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

Not Only Shabbos, but Erev Shabbos

Rabbi Chaim Volozoner in his work on Pirkei Avos comments that in contrast to the mishna (Avos 5:3) which states, "there were ten generations between Noah and Avraham", which merely states a historical fact, the subsequent mishna ("Avraham Avinu our father was tested with 10 test, and he passed them all"

(Avos 5:4)) informs us of the strength of character that Avraham bequeathed to later generations. The ability of Jews to die Al kidush hashem, to give up their lives when necessary in order to sanctify G-d's name, stems from our father Avraham's sacrifice of his son Yitschok. This is stated explicitly in the Talmud (Gittin 57) when Channah, whose seven sons allowed themselves to be killed rather than commit idolatrous acts, said, "you Avraham made an akeida of one sacrifice, and I made an akeida of seven sacrifices".

The Talmud in Chulin (142) teaches that one does not receive reward for mitzvos in this world. The reason, as explained by the Chofetz Chaim, is that mitzvos are spiritual in nature, and one can not properly receive a reward for a spiritual act through a physical medium. In light of the aforementioned statement of the Talmud, the Gaon of Vilna comments (in Kol Eliyahu) that it would seem that we should not be able to derive benefit from the mitzvos of our fore-fathers, including the akeida. And yet, we see that much of our efforts to return in repentance and secure forgiveness from G-d on Rosh Hashana is based on the akeida! In our prayers, we ask G-d to forgive us in the merit of the akeida; we blow a ram's horn to remember the akeida; among the reasons that we go to a body of water to recite Tashlich is to remember Avraham's determination to fulfill the word of G-d, and go to the akeida despite obstacles put in his way by the Satan including a body of water. The Gaon explains, that the benefit we derive is not from the mitzvo itself that Avraham performed, but rather from his actions of the two days leading up to the akeida. We benefit from Avraham's zrius (enthusiasm and zeal) and personal involvement that goes beyond the actual fulfillment of the commandment of G-d. We receive reward for Avraham's waking up early in the morning to begin the journey to the akeida, for saddling his donkey himself, and for personally cutting the wood for the akeida.

This understanding of what benefit we derive from the akeida also explains the Medrash on the verse (Vayera (22:4)) "On the third day, Avraham raised his eyes and perceived the place from afar". The Medrash Braishis Rabbah (56:1) quotes a verse from Hoshea (6:2), "He will sustain us after two days, on the third day he will raise up and we will live before Him". What relevance does this verse have to the akeida? The Medrash is saying that the verse in Hoshea tells us that we are sustained in this world by Avraham's actions on the two days preceding the akeida ("He will sustain us after two days"), and ultimately in the future we will receive the complete reward for the actual akeida, which occurred on the third day ("on the third day he will raise up").

There are two important lessons to be learned from the comment of the Gaon of Vilna. First, we see how important our personal attitude and motivation in the performance of mitzvos is. Are we motivated by joy, love, and a true sense of privilege to perform a mitzvo? The Imrei Emes writes that it is because of the importance of attitude that the special ceremony which took place on Sukkot in the Beis Hamikdosh was called the "Simchas Bais Ha-shoiva" ("joy of the place of the drawing of the water"). The mitsva on Sukkot was to pour the water on the alter, not draw the water, so why is the drawing of the water emphasized in the name given to the occasion? The Imrei Emes explains that the drawing is emphasized because it was done with happiness and joy (see the fifth chapter in Tractate Sukkah for details), and for that joy we are rewarded in this world.

Secondly, we see how significant our actions are not only for ourselves, but also for subsequent generations. Our enthusiasm not only teaches by example in this generation, but also provides subsequent generations with merits they can draw upon in their times of need. Avraham teaches us the significance and worth of each person's preparations.

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From: rabbiwein-owner@torah.org on behalf of **Rabbi Berel Wein**
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rabbiwein@torah.org Subject: **Rabbi Wein** - Parshas Vayera
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Jerusalem Post November 18, 2005
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DEBATES AND ARGUMENTS <http://rabbiwein.com/column-1011.html>

The Talmud and in fact the Tanach itself is full of debates and disputes. In fact, the given and accepted method of Talmudic study is to debate and discuss each point thoroughly and logically. Throughout Jewish history, great issues have been debated and argued. These issues, moral, spiritual, national and practical were all brought into sharp focus and relevance by the presence of these ongoing debates. The debates were meant to shape a clearer image of the Jewish future and through discussion and debate, no matter how heated and virulent as it sometimes became, to hammer out a greater unity of purpose and amity within the Jewish people. In terms of basic beliefs in G-d and the divinity of Torah, there was little debate for centuries. However, in terms of the relationship of the Jewish people to the outside non-Jewish world and its values and mores there was almost always intensive

debate in the Jewish world. And if there was general agreement on what the goals of Jewish life were to be, there were sharp differences regarding the tactics to be employed to achieve those goals. Even though the process was one of friction and sometimes even heartache, the end result was usually one of clarifying the issues and eventually dampening the fires of the disagreements.

This was true in the strong and contentious debate of Rabenu Saadia Gaon and Ben Meir regarding the proper calculation of the Hebrew calendar in the ninth century. It also occurred in the strong and even violent controversy regarding the philosophical writings of Rambam in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In later times, the open debate between Chasidut and its opponents eventually led to a change in the position of both sides and a begrudging but permanent reconciliation between the two schools of thought and philosophy. When the Mussar movement in Lithuania began to conquer the yeshiva world of the late nineteenth century there was a heated debate as to whether it should be included in the curriculum of those study halls of Torah. An entire literature of that debate has been published and studied. The Mussar movement was able to successfully explain itself to its opponents and remained dominant in the Lithuanian yeshivot for almost a century. The Haskala/Enlightenment was also the subject of debate within the religious world and the newly arising secularists debating their views of the Jewish future often on the pages of the very same publication. The same was true regarding the rise of Zionism in the early twentieth century. The varying forms of Zionism hotly debated their programs and viewpoints with each other with the debate again, in spite of its heat, often generating light on the problems and difficulties that the movement faced. Those who opposed Zionism also debated it and many of their arguments had to be taken into account even if Zionism appeared to emerge the victor in those twentieth century debates.

With the creation of the State of Israel and especially over the last few decades, the place of debating ideas, programs and a viewpoint of our future has gradually disappeared. It has been replaced by arguments over budgets, jobs, power and personalities. There is really no debate over our future, our goals. Most of our major decisions and actions are taken on an ad hoc basis. The country has a history of political leaders who are strong men (and one woman) who brook little debate and are loath ever to really explain their decisions to the public let alone debate the wisdom of those decisions. The Supreme Court rules as a completely independent fiefdom, self-serving and self-righteous. The religious and secular sections of our society do not deign to debate each other. They either ignore or simply denounce each other without really ever listening, explaining and debating their different visions of what the Jewish people and future should look like. Within the religious Jewish world there is also very little room for debate. Either we cover our differences with slogans and a false sense of conformity of mind and appearance or we engage in the sterile conflicts of political parties, patronage and unnecessary disputes. Disputes exist but there are very few moments of serious and revealing debate. Without debate we will never be able to formulate a true, practical and correctly Jewish vision of our future as a people and as a nation. We should not shrink from nor fear a debate of ideas and visions. It will clear the air and provide, eventually, a sense of unity for our country.

Weekly Parsha

November 18, 2005

<http://www.rabbiwein.com/parsha-index.html>

VAYERA <http://rabbiwein.com/column-1012.html>

Our father Avraham pleads for the forgiveness and survival of Sodom. He strikes the best bargain he apparently can with G-d, so to speak. If there are ten righteous people in Sodom then the city will be spared. There is a sizable population living in Sodom so Avraham is somehow confident that he has saved the city once the number of necessary righteous inhabitants has been reduced to ten. This is perhaps the reason that Avraham does not bargain for a number lower than ten. But Avraham is sadly disappointed. Sodom does not contain even ten righteous people and the avenging angels do their work of retribution and destruction.

My teachers often pointed out to my colleagues and me during our yeshiva years that Sodom was not destroyed because of its tens of thousands of evildoers. It was destroyed because it lacked ten good people. Once again, here in the story of Sodom, the Torah reiterates to us the value of an individual, of a good person, of a good deed performed for its own sake, how in the eyes of Heaven goodness always trumps evil. Therefore Judaism places great responsibility upon the individual and his or her personal behavior. Rambam makes this point when he states that before doing an act in life one should always consider that the whole world is evenly balanced at that moment between good and evil, salvation and destruction. The act about to be performed if it is one of goodness can save the entire world. And if it is wrong and evil, selfish and uncaring, it can doom all of humankind.

A second lesson inherent in the story of Sodom is that even the most righteous person in the world our father Avraham cannot save other people simply with his blessings and entreaties. People, communities, nations, have to save themselves. Avraham can guide and teach, serve as an example and role model, influence and lead, but in the last analysis only Sodom can save Sodom, only Lot can save Lot. There is a great reliance in the religious and general world upon others to somehow pull us through. People are willing to invest a great deal of time, effort and money to obtain the blessings of a righteous person to solve their problems. The same effort invested in their own personal attempts to improve themselves in their daily behavior would perhaps produce greater and more beneficial results than blessings from others, no matter how great those others are. The rabbis of the Talmud when asked for blessings often asked the supplicant: What good deed have you done in your lifetime? A blessing can have no good effect if the person receiving it has no personal merit. The Talmud stated the great rule in life: Your behavior will bring you closer [to G-d and humans] and in the alternative your behavior will distance you from them. Avraham is powerless to save Sodom without the cooperation of the inhabitants of Sodom. This is truly the bitter and telling lesson of this week's parsha. It is one that should be studied and internalized by us all.

Shabat shalom. Rabbi Berel Wein

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From: debra@etzion.org.il Sent: Thursday, October 28, 2004 8:02 AM To: yhe-parsha@etzion.org.il Subject: PARSHA65 -04: Parashat Vayera [From last year] YESHIVAT HAR ETZION ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM) PARASHAT HASHAVUA

This parasha series is dedicated in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

This shiur is dedicated in memory of Howard (Haim) Greenspan z"l.

It is with heavy heart that we dedicate this shiur in memory of Rabbi Selim Dweck z"l, brother of our alumnus Yaacob Dweck, and brother-in-law of our alumnus David Schorr. May his wife Rochelle, his mother, his children, and the entire Dweck family be comforted among the mourners of Tzion veYerushalayim.

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/parasha65/04-65vayera.htm>

PARASHAT VAYERA

The Way of G-d and the Way of Righteousness and Justice

By Rav Yaakov Medan

A very warm mazal tov to Rabbi Josh and Shira Schreier upon the engagement of their daughter Rachel to Yair Moses. May they be zocheh to build a bayit ne'eman be-Yisrael!

INTRODUCTION

"He placed, eastwards of the Garden of Eden, the keruvim... and the revolving flaming sword to guard the way' – this refers to the 'way of the world' (derekh erez). The tree of life' – this teaches that derekh erez precedes the tree of life. And the tree of life is none other than Torah, as it is written, 'It is a tree of life for those who grasp it.'" (Tana Devei Eliyahu Rabba, 1) In this statement, as in many others, Chazal clarify their attitude towards these two foundations of man's obligation in the world. The two sides of the scale that represent man's labor are "derekh erez," good character traits, good deeds and interpersonal relationships – on the one hand, and faith, Torah, fear of Heaven and man's relationship with G-d – on the other hand. What is the ratio between these two? Which is more important? Can there be a contradiction between them? And if so, how can it be bridged?

We shall examine this question from the perspective of the path chosen by the founder of our nation. On the one hand, Avraham was the first and firmest believer in One G-d, in a world that was immersed in idolatry:

"Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: From the time that G-d created the world, there was no one who called Him 'Master' until Avraham came along, and called Him 'Master.'" (Berakhot 7b) On the other hand, Avraham also established a doctrine of kindness, hospitality, compassion, righteousness and justice:

"For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they should observe the way of G-d, to perform righteousness and justice." (Bereishit 18:19)

What, then, is the proper balance between these two values – faith, on the one hand, and righteousness and justice, on the other – which mold Avraham's world?

I shall address this subject through four acts that Avraham performs: circumcision and the akeida, on the one hand, and his hospitality towards the three guests and his battle on behalf of Sedom, on the other. It should be clarified here that when I speak of "Torah" in general, and of Avraham's tent in particular, I refer not only to Torah study in its narrow sense, but to everything involved in man's cleaving to G-d, including faith in and acceptance of the Shekhina, fear of G-d, and selflessness in performance of mitzvot. The command to sacrifice his son was Avraham's most critical test in the fulfillment of these values, and so I have added – for reasons that will become clear further on – the test of circumcision as well.

PRESENTATION OF THE PROBLEMS

A study of the story of the angels who reveal themselves to Avraham and of the stories that follow it (the news of the impending pregnancy and birth of Yitzchak, the negotiations over the destruction of Sedom) gives rise to questions regarding the contents, interpretation and meaning of the stories. The commentators address all these questions, proposing various understandings. I shall discuss some of these and pave a path in between them, along the way encountering additional stories which, in my view, raise similar issues.

The principal questions that we shall attempt to solve are as follows:

1. "G-d revealed Himself to him at Elonei Mamrei as he sat at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw, and behold – three men..." (18:1-2). The substance of G-d's revelation to Avraham is omitted here: was there no content? And if there was – what was it? This question is all the more striking in view of the obvious parallel between "G-d revealed Himself to him" in our parasha, and "G-d revealed Himself to Avram" in the episode concerning his circumcision (17:1).
2. What connection is there between verse 1 and verse 2, between "G-d revealed Himself to him" and "he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold – three men"? Are the two verses describing the same event, or are they two separate events? And if we understand the text on the literal level, so that they refer to two separate events – we face a real difficulty: how could Avraham "abandon" G-d, in the middle of His revelation, and turn his attention to three men?
3. "He said: My lords, if I have found favor in your eyes, do not pass over your servant." Is this verse meant to be a continuation of verse 2, such that "adonai" (my lords) is the plural of "adon," referring to the three visitors, or is it the continuation of verse 1, describing G-d's revelation, such that "Ado-nai" is a holy Name, referring to G-d?
4. The purpose of the story of the encounter with the three angels is not clear. The narrative opens with a detailed account of Avraham's trait of hospitality, and ends with the news of the imminent birth of a son. Is this a single story with two independent, unrelated purposes?
5. What is the need for the angel's message that a son will be born in a year's time after Avraham has already been told this by G-d Himself, on the occasion of his circumcision: "...whom Sara will bear to you at this season next year" (17:21)? [1] From the continuation of the parasha, describing the argument between Avraham and G-d over the fate of Sedom, further questions arise:
6. G-d testifies, concerning Avraham: "I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they should observe the way of G-d, to perform righteousness and justice." What is the meaning of this testimony? Why does G-d need to "ask permission" from Avraham before annihilating Sedom?
7. "I shall descend, then, and see whether it is as the cry that comes to Me that they have done..." What is the meaning of this "descent" by G-d? What is the difference between "looking out" at man from the heavens (as in, "Look out from Your holy abode" [2]) and "descending" to earth?
8. The order of the verses in this parasha is not clear. Seemingly, the order should be: "The men got up from there and looked out over Sedom, and Avraham went with them, to see them off... The men turned from there and went towards Sedom, while Avraham still stood before G-d. And G-d said: 'Shall I hide from Avraham that which I am going to do? But Avraham will surely

become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed through him...' And G-d said: '(Because) The cry of Sedom and Amora is great, and (because of) their sins, which are very many – I shall descend, then, and see whether it is as the cry that comes to Me that they have done – (in which case) to destroy; and if not, I shall know.' Avraham approached and said: 'Will You then annihilate the righteous together with the wicked?' But the actual order is different: "The men got up from there... and G-d said: 'Shall I hide from Avraham...' And G-d said: '(Because of) the cry of Sedom and Amora, for it is great... I shall descend and see...' And the men turned from there and went to Sedom... And Avraham approached and said: 'Will You then annihilate the righteous together with the wicked?'" Why does the narrative not follow the logical order of the verses? 9. Seemingly, the angels are sent in order to destroy Sedom, as we are told explicitly: "We shall utterly destroy this place, for their cry is great before G-d, and G-d has sent us to destroy it" (19:13). How, then, are we to understand the negotiations between Avraham and G-d concerning the fate of the city, after the angels have already been sent to destroy it? And if G-d knows in advance that there are not fifty righteous people to be found in Sedom – and not even ten – then what makes this "argument" so important that the Torah records it at such length? Surely it is nothing more than an unfounded illusion on Avraham's part? 10. Avraham's argument against G-d's judgment seems to be groundless. His claim is logical – that the Judge of all the world should not put righteous people to death along with the wicked. But how does this lead to the conclusion that G-d should forgive the entire city – including the wicked majority – on account of the few righteous men that he hopes to find there? If the punishment of the righteous on account of the wicked represents a distortion of justice, then surely leaving the wicked alive in the merit of the righteous is no less a travesty. Why, then, does Avraham demand this of G-d? 11. We questioned above the connection between the hospitality that Avraham shows towards the angels, and the news concerning the birth of his son; we have also mentioned the parallel connection between the hospitality shown towards the angels by Lot and the overthrow of Sedom. We may also ask, what is the connection between these two narratives? Why do the same angels descend with four different roles: to visit Avraham, to tell him that he is to have a son, to visit Lot, and to bring destruction to Sedom? What is the connection between the birth of Yitzchak and the destruction of Sedom? 12. Why are three angels required to tell Avraham about the son that he will have, while only two are required to destroy Sedom? 13. Finally, there is a moral problem that gnaws at the very center of the parasha, although it has no connection with the literal text. How can Avraham – who never questions G-d's decree with regard to the akeda, who goes off to slaughter his son with not a word of protest or argument – become so passionately defensive with regard to Sedom, addressing such harsh words to G-d? Is the command to offer his son as a sacrifice more moral than the overturning of Sedom?

As noted above, the commentaries address most of the above questions. I shall discuss their explanations briefly, with a view to clarifying my own understanding of this parasha.

PART I: THE MEANING OF THE REVELATION AT ELONEI MAMREI

A. Rashi: "G-d Appeared to Him" – To Visit the Sick

Concerning our first question – what need there was for G-d to appear to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei – the commentators are divided into three main camps.

Rashi (and Ramban [3]) regards G-d's revelation as bearing relation to the prior revelation informing Avraham of the covenant of circumcision. The latter is narrated in a similar style:

"Avram was ninety-nine years old, AND GOD APPEARED TO HIM, and said to him: I am E-l Sha-dai; walk before Me and be perfect." (17:1) In chapter 17, G-d commands Avraham concerning circumcision. Avraham fulfills the command, and then G-d appears to him a second time at Elonei Mamrei. The advantage of this interpretation is that, as we have noted, it explains why the expression, "G-d appeared," is repeated twice.[4]

Concerning the purpose of the revelation after the circumcision, Rashi and Ramban are divided. Rashi explains that G-d came to visit Avraham:

"To visit the sick... this was the third day following his circumcision, and G-d came to inquire after his welfare." (Rashi on 18:1) This explanation requires some clarification and expansion: if G-d is not coming in order to HEAL Avraham [5], then what is the significance of He Who knows everything coming to inquire after Avraham's health?

Rashi may solve this problem in his interpretation of the words, "in the heat of the day":

"G-d drew the sun from its sheath, in order that he would not be disturbed by visitors." (18:1)

In Rashi's view, perhaps the "drawing of the sun from its sheath" – G-d's creating oppressive heat – is part of the Revelation of the Shekhina to Avraham. If this is true, then there is a parallel between the appearance of the Shekhina at the tent of the hospitable Avraham and its appearance later on in Sedom, where hearts are hardened towards guests:

"The sun came out over the land... and G-d rained down upon Sedom and upon Amora brimstone and fire, from G-d, from the heavens." (19:23-24)

In both places, the Shekhina appears in the blazing sun, but there is an important difference: in Elonei Mamrei the sun comes out in order to help the weak Avraham, to ensure that he will not be troubled by guests [6], while in Sedom the sun emerges to rain fire down on the city's wicked inhabitants. This is reflected in certain respects in the words of the prophet Malakhi:

"For behold, the day is coming that burns like an oven, and all those who act arrogantly and those who perform wickedness will be like straw, and that day that is coming will burn them up... while to you, those who fear My Name, there shall arise a sun of righteousness with healing in its wings." (Malakhi 3:19-20)

Or, in the words of the Gemara:

"...Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: There is no Gehenna in the World to Come; rather, G-d removes the sun from its sheath: the righteous are healed by it while the wicked are judged by it, as it is written: 'While to you, those who fear My Name, there shall arise a sun...'" (Nedarim 8b)

There is another difference between the two phenomena: the sun that shone on Sedom prevailed over the wicked people who locked their houses in the face of guests, and destroyed them. Avraham – who wanted to receive guests – "prevailed," as it were, over the appearance of the Shekhina and the accompanying heat of the day, and G-d sent him guests so that he would not suffer anguish:

"G-d drew the sun from its sheath, so as not to trouble him with guests. But when He saw that [Avraham] was anguished because no guests were coming – he brought him angels in the form of men." (Rashi, 18:1)

Rashi may be hinting at the same idea further on: "He told G-d to wait for him while he ran to welcome the guests" (Rashi on 18:3), or, in the words of Chazal (Shabbat 127a): "Hospitality is greater than receiving the Shekhina."

G-d revealed Himself to Avraham in order to visit and comfort him in his weakness "in the heat of the day" – in other words, in the form of the sun that was removed from its sheath in order to help him, in his weakened state, so that he would not be troubled with guests. But Avraham's hospitality "prevailed," as it were, over G-d's intention in visiting him, and so Avraham took care of his guests.

According to the above explanation, we now understand G-d's purpose in visiting Avraham: to assist him in his illness, so that he would not have to exert effort – and this is the essence of the mitzva of visiting the sick. [7]

B. Contrast Between Circumcision and Hospitality

The problem with Rashi's interpretation is the structuring of the parashot, as well as the words, "He lifted his eyes and saw" (18:2), instead of, "Avraham lifted his eyes." Both of these elements connect the revelation at Elonei Mamrei with the story of the angels that follows it, rather than with the circumcision that precedes it. According to Rashi's explanation, "G-d appeared to him at Elonei Mamrei" should have been written at the end of the story of the circumcision, while the new story should begin with Avraham lifting his eyes and seeing the three men standing at the entrance to his tent.

However, it may be possible to solve this problem. G-d appears to Avraham to visit him because he is weak and ill, on the third day following his circumcision; thus, the revelation at Elonei Mamrei is connected to the preceding parasha – the circumcision. At the same time, the revelation at Elonei Mamrei is also related to the following story – in accordance with the literal text and the structuring of the parashot. The connection here is one of contrast: despite his illness, and despite the heat of the day and G-d's revelation to him so as not to trouble him with guests – Avraham looks for potential guests and takes more trouble over them than he is obligated to do. This is in complete contrast to the people of Sedom: although they are quite healthy and the guests reach the city at evening time, rather than during the hottest part of the day – they make no effort to show hospitality; on the contrary, they even attempt to abuse them.

We may take Rashi's line even further, and regard this contrasting connection in a more fundamental light. By its very nature, circumcision is meant to set Avraham's descendants – holy seed – apart from the other nations.[8] Eliyahu, the

angel who oversees circumcisions – like Pinchas, his predecessor [9] – guards against gentiles intermingling with families of Israel.[10] The Midrash ascribes to Avraham the concern that, following his circumcision, the wayfarers that come by will be different and distinguished from him. G-d confirms his thoughts and makes it clear that the purpose of his circumcision is indeed to set him aside from the nations of the world, dedicating him to a life of holiness:

"He said: 'Up until my circumcision, the wayfarers would come to my home [- now will they refrain from doing so?]' G-d replied: 'Up until your circumcision, uncircumcised mortals would visit you. Now, I and My entourage shall be revealed to you.' As it is written: 'He lifted his eyes and saw, and behold – three men were standing before him.'" (Bereishit Rabba 48:9)

The sun, which had emerged from its sheath while G-d was revealed to Avraham, in order to distance guests from his tent, was therefore not meant only to ease Avraham's discomfort, but to set forth a new path for him in Divine worship. Until then, Avraham had been uncircumcised, with no distinction between him and other people, and therefore he would mingle with them and invite them into his home. Until then, Avraham had been the father of Yishmael and the husband of Hagar. Following his circumcision, distinguishing him from other people, he would no longer have regular guests visiting him; at the entrance to his tent the very Shekhina reveals itself.

Avraham, sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day and in anguish over the lack of guests to invite (whether because of the heat or because he is now distinguished from them, through his circumcision), does not accept G-d's answer – that from now the revelation of the Shekhina will replace the hospitality that he used to practice. And so he creates a new path in serving G-d: a path of "hospitality is greater than receiving the Shekhina" (Shabbat 127b). Even after being distinguished from the nations of the world through his circumcision – he will receive them in his tent. He will not forego the mitzva of hospitality.

According to the approach of the Midrash Rabba, proposing that the issue of hospitality was a fundamental one and not just an incidental practical question that arose because of Avraham's weakness, it is possible that Avraham's request – "My lords, if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass from before your servant" [11] - may also have signified a fundamental request of G-d. This is not just a practical request – that G-d Who has revealed Himself to him should wait until he has taken care of his guests – but rather a more profound one: although Avraham has chosen the path of hospitality, which would seem to contradict the path of circumcision (by being distinguished from the nations of the world), Avraham nevertheless asks to merit having G-d reveal Himself to him. Although immoral idolaters continue to visit him, Avraham asks to continue having the merit of receiving the Shekhina.

Let us summarize briefly what Rashi's approach seems to be teaching us. The essence of the revelation at Elonei Mamrei is related to Avraham's circumcision. G-d, Who commanded him to perform the operation, comes to assist him in his debilitated state. The essence of G-d's assistance is the fact that He draws the sun from its sheath in order that Avraham will not be troubled by guests, and this assistance is presented in contrast to the punishment of the people of Sedom, in the words, "the sun came out over the land." The connection between the revelation and the continuation of the story lies in the fact that Avraham refuses to accept this assistance; he actively takes care of his guests. Midrash Bereishit Rabba deepens the chasm between the two approaches – that of G-d and that of Avraham – by noting that both symbolize paths in Divine service: personal communion with the Shekhina vs. hospitality. The Gemara explicitly values the latter over the former: "Hospitality is greater than receiving the Shekhina," but Avraham asks G-d to allow him to walk both paths. As we shall see further on, his request is granted.

C. Rambam and Rashbam

Another set of commentators – Rambam, Rashbam and others – draw a connection between the ambiguous revelation at Elonei Mamrei and the three angels that Avraham sees. In their view, there is no direct link between the revelation and the preceding episode of the circumcision. The content of the revelation at Elonei Mamrei is the news that the three angels come to tell Sara. The correspondence between "G-d revealed Himself to Avram" in chapter 17 and "G-d revealed Himself to him" in chapter 18 indicates that in both cases there is news of the imminent birth and the laughter that follows.

In their view, the relationship between verse 1 ("G-d revealed Himself to him at Elonei Mamrei") and verse 2 ("He lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing before him") is one of general vs. particular; from verse 2 onwards the Torah describes the revelation noted in verse 1 and reveals its content. According to this explanation, "Ado-nai" is a Holy Name, referring both to the most senior of the three angels and to G-d, Who has revealed Himself to Avraham, since the senior angel carries G-d's Name within him.[12]

D. Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor and His Followers

If we wish to avoid the position into which Rashi's approach forces us – that G-d's revelation at Elonei Mamrei had no defined verbal content – as well as the difficulty that arises from the interpretation of the Rashbam and Rambam, according to which the story is narrated in the form of "general and particulars," with the three angels presenting the specifics of the revelation [13], then we have no choice but to adopt the approach of R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Radak and Abarbanel. According to the latter group, G-d reveals Himself to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei in order to tell him about the sin of Sedom and the imminent punishment, as the Torah goes on to describe.

"The reason for this vision, and its purpose – on the level of the literal text – is to tell Avraham of the wickedness of the people of Sedom and of their sins, and the destruction that is soon to befall them." (Abarbanel)

This approach gives rise to a most serious difficulty: what is the meaning of the break between the revelation and the story of Sedom? How is it possible that G-d reveals Himself to Avraham in order to tell him about Sedom, and Avraham "leaves" G-d and goes to take care of his guests?

We could perhaps counter with the Gemara in Shabbat, quoted above – that hospitality is a greater deed than receiving the Shekhina, and therefore Avraham leaves off his audience with G-d (until He tells him of the plan to destroy Sedom) and goes off to attend to his guests. But this would be problematic. Before, we were talking about a minor revelation, with the Shekhina visiting Avraham's tent in order to assist him in his incapacitated state or to show him honor. In this situation, the relationship between "receiving the Shekhina" and showing hospitality is that of a permanent mitzva vs. a mitzva that will pass, and the passing mitzva takes precedence.[14] The situation may be compared to a person who is engaged in Torah study (a permanent mitzva), who is obligated to stop learning in order to perform a time-specific mitzva even though "Torah study is [of] greater [value] than saving lives" (Megilla 16b), and even though "Torah study is considered equal to all of them" (Peah 1:1).

All of this, as stated, assumes that the revelation was a "routine" one – like a permanent mitzva. But according to the interpretation of Radak and others – that G-d came to speak with Avraham about a specific matter – it is difficult to accept the possibility that Avraham "abandons" G-d, Who has come to talk with him, in order to attend to mortal guests. This situation resembles more closely a person engaged in prayer: he would certainly not stop his prayer in the middle in order to take care of guests, since "Even if the king asks after his welfare, he should not reply" (Mishna Berakhot 2:1). Indeed, the commentators who explain that the purpose of the revelation at Elonei Mamrei is to tell Avraham about Sedom, all grapple with this problem, each explaining the interruption by the story of the three men in a different way.[15]

Let us propose the following hypothesis, essentially similar to what we said above in connection with Rashi's approach: perhaps the connection between our parasha and the story of Sedom is meant to represent a contrast. In explaining Rashi's approach, we discussed the connection between the sun that G-d drew from its sheath in order to help the hospitable Avraham in his illness, and the sun that emerges over the land to rain fire over Sedom, where guests are unwelcome. If we look at Radak, whose explanation contains neither the sun nor Avraham's hospitality (it focuses, rather, on angels in a prophetic vision), we may explain that there is a contrast between the childless Sara and the hope conveyed in the news of her impending pregnancy, on the one hand, and the complacent Sedom sentenced to annihilation, on the other. I shall discuss the nature of this contrast at greater length further on.

Abarbanel proposes a different understanding. In his view, the story of the three men (which took place in reality, not in a prophetic dream, and in which men appeared, not angels) did not interrupt and come between G-d's revelation to Avraham and G-d's words to Avraham concerning Sedom; rather, the two events happened together. G-d's revelation and speech to Avraham happened at the same time that Avraham was taking an ox, bringing milk and butter before his guests, and giving instructions to Sara, his wife, and to his attendant. According to this explanation, this double-story is meant to demonstrate the way in which G-d was revealed to Avraham. Unlike other prophets, who required special preparations in order for G-d's word to be revealed to them, G-d's word was revealed to Avraham while he was engaged in matters of this world. This is a higher level of revelation, and the intention of the text is to express praise for Avraham after his circumcision [16]:

"For previously, while he was yet uncircumcised, the spirit of prophecy would come to him only in a special, prepared place and following a preparatory procedure with a nullification of the senses... but after he was circumcised he was so close to G-d... that he lifted his eyes and saw, and

behold, three men were standing before him, and he ran towards them – without waiting for G-d to depart from him." (Abarbanel ad loc.)

PART II: SEDOM'S VERDICT

A. Why Does G-d Consult Avraham? The Commentators Respond

Let us now discuss what the various commentators have to say about G-d consulting with Avraham with regard to Sedom, and the meaning of the verse explaining this phenomenon:

"For I know him, that he will instruct his children and his household after him, that they should observe the way of G-d, to perform righteousness and justice, in order that G-d may bring upon Avraham that which He spoke to him." (18:19)

Here, again, the commentators fall into three main categories.

a. Rashi and Rashbam connect G-d's consultation with Avraham with the promise of the land. Since G-d is coming to destroy this portion of land, which was promised to Avraham, He tells him the reason for it. As we know, in Sedom it was not only the people who were destroyed, but also the very land itself:

"...That all the land is burned with brimstone and salt; it is not sown nor does it bear, nor will any grass grow on it, like the overthrow of Sedom and Amora, Adma and Tzevoyim, which G-d overthrew in His anger and in His wrath." (Devarim 29:22)

Rashbam goes on to explain that with the words, "In order that G-d may bring upon Avraham that which He spoke to him," the Torah refers to the inheritance of the land. The problem with this explanation is that there is no explicit mention here of the inheritance of the land.

b. Ramban, Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor and other commentators explain that the story of G-d's consultation with Avraham concerning Sedom is meant to express Avraham's great spiritual stature following his circumcision: G-d does nothing in the world without notifying and consulting with him.[17]

c. Most of the later commentators (Abarbanel, Seforno, Malbim, Netziv and others, as well as Radak and Chizkuni on "for I know him") tend towards a third interpretation. G-d tells Avraham about Sedom so that on this basis Avraham will command his household after him to perform righteousness and justice; he will teach them about the punishment of Sedom and will warn them not to follow the path of wickedness. These commentators raise further ideas about what it is exactly that Avraham will teach his children concerning Sedom; we shall not elaborate here.

But these explanations are likewise insufficient. On the one hand, it is difficult to read a warning of punishment to Avraham's descendants into the verses, as Radak and his school would suggest. The verses themselves, explaining why G-d tells Avraham about Sedom, exude love for and closeness to Avraham, rather than rebuke and warning. Indeed, this reflects the opinion of Ramban quoted above. But the commentators who adopt Ramban's approach fail to explain the nature of this special quality that the verses would attribute to Avraham, according to their view – his inclusion in G-d's deliberations and management of the world, and what need there is for it. Further on, I shall attempt to answer this question, arising from Ramban's approach – which I shall adopt on this issue.

The commentators devote little attention to the other questions presented at the outset; only Abarbanel addresses almost all of them, and solves them in accordance with his exegetical approach. But our final question – why Avraham fails to protest against the command to slaughter his son at Har Ha-Moriah as he protested against the verdict of Sedom – finds no response.[18] The rest of our discussion on the parasha will be devoted to this question.

B. Why G-d Consults with Avraham – A New Proposal

In my view, the key to answering all these questions is to be found in a midrash quoted by Rashi:

"As he sat – The text says that he sat. He wanted to stand up, but G-d said to him: You sit; I shall stand. And you will thereby provide a sign for your descendants, that in the future I shall be present among the judges as they sit, as it is written, 'G-d stands amongst the Divine assembly.'" (Rashi 18:1) The accepted interpretation of G-d's "standing amongst the Divine assembly" is in accordance with Rashi and the other commentaries on Tehillim: that G-d is present in the counsel of the judges, to judge together with them, as one of them (or perhaps even as the President of the court).[19] This would appear to be borne out by the continuation of the verse: "in the midst of the judges shall He judge" – that G-d Himself renders judgment among the other judges.

However, this interpretation fails to explain the words of the Midrash Rabba quoted above. The midrash treats the word "standing" literally: in a Jewish court the judges sit, while G-d stands. But the President of the Beit Din sits, like the other members of the court; in fact, he is given the seat of honor. Furthermore, in

the image created by the midrash, Avraham sits while G-d stands before him after He has come to his tent.

It would seem that the midrash in our parasha is interpreting G-d's standing in Avraham's tent in the spirit of, "The two men who have the argument shall stand before G-d, before the kohanim and the judges" (Devarim 19:17). G-d, as it were, is standing before Avraham as a plaintiff standing before the judge.

The parallel that we have noted throughout, between the angels' visit to Avraham's tent and their visit to Lot, supports our thesis. When G-d reveals Himself to Avraham, we are told: "as he sat AT THE ENTRANCE TO HIS TENT" (18:1). When the angels appear before Lot, we read: "Lot sat at THE GATES OF SEDOM" (19:1). This would suggest that Lot sits at the gates of Sedom as a judge, and Rashi indeed comments: "On that day they appointed him a judge over them." [20]

Another parallel, similar to the one between the entrance to Avraham's tent and the gates of Sedom, is to be found in the Torah's discussion of a betrothed girl who has relations with someone else; this, too, appears in a judicial context:

"They shall bring the girl out TO THE ENTRANCE OF HER FATHER'S HOUSE and the men of her city shall stone her with stones, that she may die... You shall bring out both of them TO THE GATES OF THAT CITY, and stone them with stones, that they may die..." (Devarim 22:21-24)

This parallel would seem to suggest that we may view Avraham, sitting at the entrance to his tent, as a judge, and G-d – Who comes before him – as the plaintiff, as it were.

The midrash, in drawing the parallel between Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent and the judges in whose counsel G-d stands, is connecting verse 1 – "G-d appeared to him" – with the story of Sedom. Upon this view, the revelation to Avraham is meant to tell him about the fate of Sedom. The story of the three visiting angels interrupts this matter, and after they leave, the Torah returns to the original subject – as R. Yosef Bekhor Shor explains.

But while Radak and Abarbanel, who adopt this interpretation, explain that the revelation was meant to teach Avraham that he should warn his children and his household after him not to follow the ways of Sedom and Amora in order not to meet the terrible fate that befell these cities – i.e., G-d appears as the Judge and Avraham as one witnessing the judgment – the midrash would seem to present G-d as bringing the judgment of Sedom before Avraham, who sits as a judge at the entrance to his tent. G-d, according to the midrash, appears as a plaintiff against Sedom, suing over the cry of the city; G-d – the plaintiff – stands with the people of Sedom – the defendant – before Avraham, who sits in judgment. Avraham is required to come to a verdict concerning the punishment that G-d – the plaintiff – wants to bring upon Sedom.

Chazal note the difficulty in presenting Avraham as a judge of G-d's actions. They interpret the verse, "Avraham was still standing before G-d," as a correction:

"Avraham was still standing before G-d – it should say, 'G-d was still standing before Avraham;' this is a scribal correction." (Rashi 18:22, based on the midrash) Nevertheless, the idea of G-d standing, as it were, before a mortal judge, before the judges of Israel, is to be found explicitly in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 6b):

"The judges should know Whom they are judging, and before Whom they judge, and Who is destined to hold them culpable..." Likewise, we may note Rashi's comment on Divrei ha-Yamim II 19:6 – "Your hearts should be, in each and every case, as though G-d was standing before you in judgment."

Let us be more precise: G-d appears in Sedom's case not only as the plaintiff, but also as the judge, as Avraham declares: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?!" But at the same time, G-d's case is brought before Avraham, and his role is somewhat like that of an appeals court. Indeed, G-d accepts Avraham's opinion and ultimately declares, at the end of the session: "I shall not destroy for the sake of the ten!" (18:32).

C. When Is the Fate of Sedom Sealed? The Commentaries' Position

Our conclusion from the midrash – that Avraham sat on the seat of judgment concerning Sedom – brings us to understand Avraham's role in the argument differently than most of the commentaries. It also leads us to further conclusions as to the meaning of the entire episode.

According to the commentators quoted above, G-d simply notifies Avraham as to what He is going to do to Sedom. He reveals to him the decree that has already been passed, in order that he will guide his household and teach them about sin and its punishment, because Avraham is the lord of the land, or G-d's close associate. Rashi writes: "Shall I then destroy the children without notifying the father, whom I love?" (18:17), and the other commentators concur with this interpretation. Ramban explains that Avraham could have changed the decree through his prayer (has the people of Sedom been deserving of this), but even he agrees that the decree had already been passed.

The problem here concerns the meaning of the words, "I shall descend, then, and see whether it is as the cry that comes to Me that they have done – (in which case) to destroy; and if not, I shall know" (18:21), which would seem to imply that the fate of Sedom has not yet been sealed.

Radak notes that Sedom's fate had already been sealed by the time G-d spoke to Avraham:

"Even though everything is revealed and known to Him, this is written in order to teach man not to be hasty in judgment." Chizkuni and Ramban likewise grapple with this problem, each solving it in his own way.[21] Both maintain that G-d had already reached His judgment, and His descent to observe Sedom was meant only to bear out the truth of His judgment in the eyes of man.[22] Even Rashi, who maintains that the verdict of Sedom was not yet finalized, posits that its share of wickedness was complete; G-d still gave the city a final opportunity to repent:

"If they persist in their rebellion, 'destruction' is what I shall bring up them. But if they do not persist in their rebellion – 'I shall know.'" (Rashi on 18:21)

Only Abarbanel (and, in a similar vein, Malbim) understands Sedom's judgment as not yet final. G-d descended to Sedom in order to test the people and view their actions. This descent is actualized in the arrival of the two angels in Sedom; they come to see how the people of Sedom treat their guests. Abarbanel writes:

"For this purpose G-d sent His angels there, to perform an experiment and a test, [to see] whether the people of Sedom would actually do what they had planned and agreed to do or not, for the matter was dependent on their actions."

In other words, when G-d spoke to Avraham, the people of Sedom still had the power to steer their verdict in the direction of G-d's mercy, had they received their angelic guests properly. The angels were not originally sent with the mission of destroying Sedom. They were angels of mercy. They came to give Sedom an opportunity to follow the path of Avraham, to perform hospitality. It was only the wicked reception that the people of the city extended to the angels that sealed their verdict. It was this that changed the approach of mercy into strict justice.

"This was the sin of Sedom, your sister: she and her daughters had pride, they were sated with bread and peace and quiet, but they did not strengthen the hand of the needy and destitute." (Yechezkel 16:49) D. The Argument Over the Number of Righteous

Whether we adopt the approach of Abarbanel or that of the other commentators quoted above, the emphasis is on the sin of Sedom and the consequent punishment. According to most of the commentators, the fate of Sedom is sealed because of the sins that preceded G-d's revelation to Avraham; according to Abarbanel, it is sealed once the angels visit there. The possibility that the righteous people of Sedom will save the city from its punishment appears nowhere. This possibility is nothing but an innocent hope that burns in Avraham, who is unfamiliar with the city and unaware of the behavior of its inhabitants. There are not fifty righteous people in Sedom, nor even ten. It is an altogether wicked place, and its punishment is determined accordingly.

The problem here is that this conception pushes to the margins the argument-cum-negotiations between G-d and Avraham concerning the possibility of saving the city. Avraham is not asking that G-d forgive the sin of Sedom. He makes no attempt to judge the people of the city favorably, he does not ask G-d to be tolerant, nor does he try to bring the people of Sedom to repentance. The sole anchor of salvation to which Avraham ties his hopes is that the righteous people of Sedom will protect the city. If this possibility is not a realistic one, then what has Avraham achieved? For what reason does the Torah record, at such painstaking length, the claims that Avraham raises in defense?

These questions, difficult to begin with, become more so in light of the approach that I introduced above, according to which Avraham sits in judgment, and in light of my proposal that the entire revelation at Elonei Mamrei was meant to include Avraham in the judgment of Sedom. If we adopt this approach, it is certainly very difficult to view Avraham's participation here as something marginal, unrealistic, misguided and ultimately ineffective.

I propose, as does Abarbanel, that when G-d spoke to Avraham, the fate of Sedom was not yet sealed. G-d, by informing Avraham, "I shall descend, now, and see," refers to the descent of the angels to Sedom to test its inhabitants' measure of hospitality. Until the people of Sedom come to assault the angels, the city's measure of wickedness is not yet complete.

In my view, this serves to explain the difficulty arising from the order of the verses, as discussed at the outset. The logical order of the verses would seem to be:

"The men got up from there and looked out over Sedom, and Avraham went with them to see them off." (18:16) "The men turned from there and

went to Sedom, while Avraham was still standing before G-d." (18:22) "G-d said: Shall I hide from Avraham that which I am going to do?" (18:17)

But in the text, verse 22 ("The men turned from there and went to Sedom") follows immediately after the statement, "I shall descend, now, and see." In other words, it is the same event: G-d descends to Sedom (in the form of the angels' arrival) in order to test them and evaluate their actions.

The full order of events is therefore as follows: the angels look out over Sedom, then G-d hears the cry of the city and wants to descend to see and test them. Then the men turn to go towards Sedom in order to test the city, and Avraham comes to appeal the verdict.

However, contrary to Abarbanel, I believe that the people of Sedom were not tested through their treatment of guests – or, at least, that this was not what sealed their fate. In my understanding, Avraham was well aware of the nature of Sedom's inhabitants. Chazal expound at length, in the Midrash, on an earlier test performed in Sedom – not by G-d, sending His angels, but rather by Avraham himself, who sent Eliezer to test the people of the city. Although he knew them, Avraham brought his claim before G-d that the entire city should be saved on account of the righteous people in its midst.

Rashi explains the calculation of the number of righteous people on whose behalf Avraham presents his claim. When he pleads for fifty, he refers to the possibility that there are ten righteous people in each city of the Sedom district. When he asks on behalf of forty-five, he has in mind nine people in each city, with G-d joining them to form a "minyan." When he reaches the number forty, he is thinking of saving only four cities, and likewise when he speaks of thirty, twenty, and ten. From this, it would appear that just as he hoped that forty-five righteous people would save five cities, he likewise calculated that thirty-six could save four cities, with the addition of "the Righteous One of the world" – G-d Himself. Likewise, twenty-seven could save three cities, eighteen could save two cities, and (as Rashi notes) nine could save one. In Rashi's view, Avraham did not ask on behalf of eight, because Noah and his family numbered eight, and their merit was not enough to save the world.

In my view, this explains Avraham's claim as to "righteousness and justice." If G-d would destroy righteous people together with the wicked – according to his argument – Divine justice itself would be harmed; hence Avraham says, "Will the Judge of all the world not perform justice?" G-d wants to reveal to Avraham the "path of G-d, to perform RIGHTEOUSNESS and justice." The righteousness is that even when there is less than a minyan of righteous people in each city, G-d – Who is the Righteous One of the world – will join them to form a quorum, saving the wicked Sedom and its environs from annihilation.

As I understand it, the nine righteous people on behalf of whom Avraham asks that Sedom be saved are Lot and his wife, his two married daughters and their husbands, and his three unmarried daughters: the two whom Lot wanted to send into the hands of the mob in order to save his guests, and his other daughter, Plotit, who was killed on that day by the people of Sedom for having given some of her bread to a poor man. It was because of Plotit's cry that G-d descended to judge Sedom.[23] The Midrash recounts:

"Rabbi Yehuda said: It was announced in Sedom that anyone who gave bread to a poor or needy person would be burned with fire. Plotit, Lot's daughter, was married to one of the prominent men of Sedom. She saw a certain poor person on the street in the city, and her heart was anguished. What did she do? Every day, when she went out to draw water, she would bring in her jug some of whatever she had at home, and she would feed this poor man. People asked: What does this destitute person live on? And when the matter became known to them – they brought her out to be burned. She said: Master of the Universe, do justice for me! And her cry came before the Throne of Glory. At that moment G-d said: 'I shall descend now [and see], if the people of Sedom have done as the cry of this girl – I shall overturn its foundations.' The text does not say, 'according to their cry,' but rather 'according to her cry' [in the Hebrew, the reference is ambiguous – it appears to refer to the city, but may in fact have some other feminine singular object]." (Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera 83, and also, in somewhat different form, in Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 25)

Thus, Lot's family numbered nine. With the addition of the "Righteous One of the world," they were a "minyan," such that Sedom could be saved in their merit.[24]

In my view, G-d accepted Avraham's judgment – for He had appointed him a judge by coming to his tent. Moreover, although Plotit had died (without Avraham's knowledge), and although Lot's wife, his married daughters and their husbands were adherents of the way of Sedom, and although they were not worthy of having Sedom saved in their merit – nevertheless, G-d would show favor to Sedom even for the sake of Lot alone [25], and all because of the principle

that Avraham invoked in his judgment. Proof of this may be brought from Tzoar, a city that had been saved in the merit of the righteous man who fled there, even though he had none of his party with him (except for his two unmarried daughters):

"He said to him: I have accepted this thing, too, that I will not overthrow the city concerning which you have spoken. Make haste and flee there..." (19:21-22) E. When Is the Fate of Sedom Sealed? My Position

We may therefore say that Sedom's test with regard to the angelic guests was a success. One Sodomite put his life on the line and invited them into his home. This righteous man, Lot, had the power to save the entire city.

But then comes the story of all the people of the city surrounding the house. Abarbanel, as we mentioned, concludes that the city's measure of wickedness was complete when they demanded, "Bring them out to us, that we may know them" (19:5). In my view, it was not at this point that G-d finally decided to destroy them. Even at this point, the angels did not declare that the destruction was imminent. Rather, the fate of Sedom was sealed over a different sin:

"[The people of Sedom] said: Move away! And they said: This one came to sojourn with us, and has become a judge! Now we will do worse to you than to them." (19:9) It was then, and only then, that the angels act:

"The men put forth their hand and brought Lot into the house to them, and closed the door. And they struck the people at the door of the house with blindness, from young to old, so they could not find the entrance. And the men said to Lot: Who else do you have here? Son-in-law and your sons and daughters and whatever you have in the city – bring it out of this place, for we are going to destroy this place." (19:10-13) The people of Sedom

intended not only to do evil to the guest, but also came to do evil to Lot, the only righteous man among them, for having welcomed guests hospitably. They no longer recognize his citizenship or his status as a judge; they declare, as though he were a stranger, "This one came to sojourn" – in the finest tradition of Sodomite treatment of strangers and wanderers. With their own hands, the people of Sedom sever their connection with Lot. Lot would be forced to leave, to flee the city, even were it not about to be destroyed. The angels, in pulling Lot towards them and closing the door, are merely giving expression to the existing situation – the barrier that has suddenly sprung up between Lot and his townspeople. Lot leaves the city no longer a judge and no longer a citizen with equal rights. It is on this point that Sedom's fate is sealed. Not a single righteous person is left in the city.

I draw a sharp and clear distinction between the filling of the cup of wickedness of this city of blood, and its final verdict. These two – the sin and the judgment – are separated by Avraham's claim concerning the righteous people to be found there. So long as these are in its midst, G-d must not destroy it.

According to my understanding, Sedom's measure of evil was complete already twenty-five years prior to its destruction. The text tells us, "The people of Sedom were exceedingly evil and sinful to G-d" (13:13); immediately thereafter, we read of the war of the kings and the fact that the five cities of the plain fall into the hands of Kedarla'omer and his partners. Sedom and its environs are saved from the fate they deserve in the merit of the "one who sojourns among them" – Lot. Avram, who hears that his nephew has been captured, pursues Kedarla'omer, and in the act of saving Lot he also restores the women, the people and all the property to the king of Sedom. G-d shows favor to Sedom because of Lot, who dwells there. Now that the cry of the city has risen, G-d once again agrees to show favor because of the righteous man in its midst. But the people of Sedom, who twenty-five years earlier [26] had accepted Lot to live with them, now banish him. And when not even the single hospitable person who once lived there is left in the city, it no longer has any protection: "for we are going to destroy this place" (19:13).

F. Verdict for the Individual and Verdict for the Public

What we have said above would seem to solve another problem posed at the beginning of the shiur. We noted that G-d wants to destroy the entire city of Sedom, with no distinction between righteous and wicked, and this indeed is what Avraham argues: "Will you destroy the righteous together with the wicked?" But in Avraham's "judgment" the justice meted out seems no less distorted: "Will you destroy and not show favor to the place for the sake of the righteous people who are in its midst?" (18:24). Seemingly, the proper solution would be to put to death the wicked people and to save the righteous, as indeed we read ultimately at the end of the story: Lot is saved while the city is destroyed. This simple solution is not raised by either G-d or Avraham! G-d and Avraham share the view that there is one verdict for the city as a whole, with no distinctions to be made.

The problem of the relationship between the collective and the individual exists in any ruling pertaining to the public; I shall not elaborate on

this issue here. Suffice it to say that the same judgment applies to the entire collective. So it is in the mitzva to wipe out Amalek: the individuals are judged as part of the collective to which they belong, and so it is in all the prophecies with G-d's decrees on the nations because of their sins. As an example, we may consider the judgment of Ninveh in the Book of Yona. Had the inhabitants of Ninveh not repented, the city would have been overthrown, and "more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who did not know their right hand from their left, as well as much livestock," would have died (Yona 4:11). G-d has mercy on them only after the people of Ninveh engage in repentance. Likewise the judgment of Sedom, except that instead of repenting, they sink even deeper into their corruption. G-d and Avraham agree that a single verdict applies to the entire city, but G-d judges it according to most of its inhabitants, while Avraham argues for the measure of compassion – that G-d should show favor even for a small minority – and his argument is accepted.

The unacceptable solution – to save the righteous man by removing him from the city and separating him from its wicked people sentenced to death – is one that represents neither the measure of justice nor the measure of compassion. It was the solution created by the people of Sedom, who raised a barrier between themselves and the single righteous man among them. It was also the solution created by the visiting angels, who took the line adopted by the people of Sedom a step further: they pulled Lot to their side of the divide, closed the door, and thereby drew an eternal separation between Lot and the people of the city.

I have treated this matter at length in order to clarify the enormous weight that is attached to Avraham's claim that Sedom should be saved for the sake of its righteous inhabitants. This argument was a realistic one, and on the basis of it the city was to be saved. Avraham's judgment is a true one. Concerning Sedom's verdict, Avraham sits in judgment at the entrance to his tent, at the time when G-d is revealed to him at Elonei Mamrei, standing before him like a person standing before a judge.

PART III: CRITICISM VS. FAITH

A. "Far Be It from You" – Really?!

Let us return to the matter of the debate between the two judges – G-d and Avraham. On the one hand, we cannot cast any doubt on the truth of G-d's judgment, for wanting to destroy Sedom despite the possibility that a minority of righteous people may live there. On the other hand, we have seen that G-d accepts Avraham's argument and his demand that the wicked be saved in the merit of the righteous. How is it possible for there to be two different verdicts, each of which is true?

Perhaps the solution to this dilemma is hinted at in G-d's words to Avraham: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they should observe the way of G-d, to perform RIGHTEOUSNESS AND JUDGMENT, in order that G-d may bring upon Avraham that which He spoke concerning him" (18:19).

A true judgment has two elements: righteousness and justice. Justice (mishpat) represents the exact ratio between the sin and the punishment, with no other consideration, in the spirit of the maxims – "Let justice bore through the mountain!" or "We do not have mercy in justice." Righteousness (tzedek) involves the inclusion of another element in the ratio between the sin and the punishment, in the spirit of the maxim "The law is with you – but give to him" (Chullin 134a). Although in monetary matters a doubtful case is usually decided in favor of the owners, we are commanded that when it comes to a question regarding money set aside for charity, the destitute recipient should be favored. The law must contain another element – mercy, compassion, an aspiration to maintain the world despite its shortcomings.

The strict law (mishpat) requires that Sedom be demolished, for the great majority of the inhabitants are sinners. The single and indivisible verdict of the city requires, therefore, that the righteous die together with the wicked. But righteousness (tzedaka) requires a softer verdict. Since there are some righteous people in the city, and they are not deserving of death – even though the wicked are the majority – compassion and mercy come to bend the verdict such that G-d will show favor to the wicked and not destroy the righteous.

Both of these approaches represent truth, and it is they that stand at the foundation of the argument. Ultimately, G-d decides to lean towards mercy, in accordance with Avraham's approach.

If we are correct in assuming that the two approaches that we find concerning the fate of Sedom are related to the two terms that the Torah uses – "righteousness" (tzedaka) and "mishpat" (justice), then it seems that we may take another step and address another of the questions that we posed at the outset. For what reason did G-d see fit to include Avraham in the judgment of Sedom, and what is the meaning of the justification, "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him..."? The commentators, as

quoted above, discuss only why G-d elected to reveal to Avraham His decision concerning Sedom, but the question posed here is a different one: why did G-d include Avraham in the decision itself?

According to what we have said, the "righteousness and justice" that Avraham will command his children and his household after him do not stand in direct opposition to the lack of righteousness and justice practiced by the people of Sedom.[27] They are not even the reason for G-d's love for Avraham, nor for his promised inheritance of the land. They are nothing more than the reason for G-d telling Avraham of the justice and truth of His judgment, and asking for his agreement. If Avraham does not understand the justice of G-d's judgment, he will not be able to command his children and his household after him to "observe the way of G-d, to perform righteousness and justice." He will not understand that G-d's way is the way of righteousness and justice, nor will he understand that the way of righteousness and justice is the way of G-d.

If, heaven forefend, Avraham sees some injustice in G-d's judgment, he will be able to educate his children and disciples in only one of two ways – and either way this education will be flawed. He may educate them to observe G-d's way, even though it is seemingly not the way of righteousness and justice, or he can educate them in the way of righteousness and justice, even though it is seemingly not the way of G-d. In order to be able to command his listeners to observe "the way of G-d to perform righteousness and justice," it is critical that he understand that G-d is indeed a just Judge, and he must agree to G-d's judgment. Only in this way will Avraham's children be able to observe the mitzva, "You shall follow the Lord your G-d" – "just as He is a just Judge, so shall you judge justly." [28] For this purpose, G-d revealed to him the judgment of Sedom, asked for his approval, and from the two of them – G-d and Avraham – emerged the way of righteousness and justice, by which the people of Sedom were judged, and in which Avraham is commanded to educate his children and his household after him.

All of the above gives rise to a principle in G-d's management of the world, and it is worth expanding a little on this matter. The justice of G-d's handling of the world and the truth of Divine retribution, by which G-d judges His creations, must not only be done; they must also be seen and understood, in order to be done by man. This is in order that there not arise, heaven forefend, a contradiction between the "way of G-d" and the "way of righteousness and justice;" in order that we be able to maintain justly the command, "You shall follow the Lord your G-d." The prophets, who would seem to argue against G-d's judgment in the world [29], did not argue against the actual justice of G-d's decisions, but rather argued that it was not apparent, that one could not educate in the light of what mortals were able to see.

On the basis of this view, it is permissible – and in fact desirable – to examine G-d's management of the world. It is permissible and even desirable to ask questions, and to argue about what we see in order to understand it. It is not good for a person to declare himself too small and insignificant to try to understand, to accept G-d's judgment as is and to believe blindly in its justice. After all, it is in light of G-d's judgments that a person must educate himself and his children to observe the way of G-d to perform righteousness and justice, and therefore a person must do everything he can in order to understand it and to identify with it.

B. "Here I am!"

Nevertheless, it would seem that even as we try to explain Avraham's path, judging G-d's verdict regarding Sedom, addressing harsh words to the Holy One concerning the need for righteousness together with justice – and even if we understand the importance and need to educate his children as to that path – it is difficult to rid ourselves of the sense of discomfort at Avraham's audacious words to G-d: "Far be it from You; will the Judge of all the earth not do justice?"

No matter how strongly we emphasize the need to question G-d's handling of the world in order that we will be able to educate accordingly, it is difficult to ignore the danger inherent in this approach. There is only a fine line dividing this from the path of Iyov, who temporarily lost his wholehearted faith in the justice of G-d's judgment, and from the line adopted by Elifaz, one of his close friends: "And you say, What does G-d know? Does He judge through the thick cloud?" (Iyov 22:13).

How can a person be sure that he will be able to distinguish between examining the truth of G-d's judgments for educational purposes, and examining the truth of His judgment out of doubt and with questions as to whether G-d is indeed a Righteous Judge? How can Avraham be certain that the personal example he set for his descendants in addressing G-d so impudently will be a desirable one, and not – heaven forefend – an opening to the way of Iyov in his time of suffering, a path defined by Chazal as "insult and blasphemy" (Bava Batra 16a)? [30]

The akeida came to answer this question. Many commentators and philosophers have addressed the magnitude of the test involved in the akeida. Many of them have not explained it as a test regarding the natural compassion of a father for his son. Perhaps the reason for their doing so was because of the claim brought in the name of the "mother of the sons" during the period of the forced apostasy – the mother who instructed her own children to sacrifice themselves upon the altar of Sanctification of the Name of G-d: "Go and tell Avraham, your forefather: You bound only one son; I sacrificed seven" (Gittin 57b). Perhaps they did so because of similar claims that arose throughout the course of Jewish history, by parents who sacrificed their children for the sanctification of G-d's Name, thereby making the test of sacrificing an only son too "routine" to be perceived as the climax of our forefather Avraham's faith.

Indeed, aside from the test of selfless devotion, Avraham was faced with another test in the akeida, perhaps no less powerful than the first: it was a test of his faith in G-d Who had revealed Himself to Avraham as the G-d of righteousness and justice. A G-d Who sentences Sedom to annihilation because of the cry of a single girl – how will He respond to the cry of an elderly mother, whose only son is taken from her to be slaughtered on Mt. Moriah? Can there be any answer to this question concerning a G-d of righteousness? Is the G-d Who sealed one covenant after the next with Avraham, promising him the land and descendants who would inherit it, and Who now comes and rips all of this to shreds with the terrible command, "Offer him up there as a sacrifice" – is this then the G-d of justice?

G-d allows Avraham three full days to raise and ponder these difficult questions. But Avraham, throughout these days, offers only one word to his Creator: "Hineni" (Here I am) (22:1). In all four hundred and eighty verses of the Book of Iyov, this word appears nowhere. Those three days of silence and acceptance of G-d's judgment, while Avraham walked towards the land of Moriah, remove any shadow of a doubt that the path that he bequeaths to mankind is one of "insult and blasphemy," like that of Iyov. That single word of Avraham as he accepted G-d's command – "hineni" – places a very tall barrier between Iyov, who questioned G-d's way of righteousness and justice out of doubt in its existence, and Avraham, who – with perfect faith and with no possibility of finding any answer to his questions as to the way of his G-d and Educator – accepted his command with love.

C. The Difference between the Two Decrees

Avraham, then, adopts two paths which seem to contradict one another. In the story of Sedom, he uses strong words to express his opinion concerning G-d's judgment: he argues with G-d, refusing to budge until his demand for a righteous judgment is accepted. In contrast, when it comes to the akeida, he accepts G-d's unfathomable and seemingly unjust decree. He accepts it in silence, with no appeal, with perfect faith. The obvious question is: what is the difference between these two instances?

Before answering this question, let us try to understand another aspect of the akeida. What is the meaning of the opening words of that narrative – "It was, AFTER THESE THINGS, that G-d tested Avraham" (22:1)?

To which event is the Torah juxtaposing the akeida, by using the words "after these things"? Rashbam and Radak – each in his own way – connect this parasha to Avraham's covenant with Avimelekh, which is mentioned in the verses immediately preceding the akeida. Rashi goes further back, to the feast that Avraham held in honor of Yitzchak's weaning, and elsewhere he goes even further backwards, to the episode of Avraham's circumcision.[31] Other commentators (Malbim and others) understand this phrase as referring to all the tests that G-d presented to Avraham.

I propose here a different interpretation. The narrative immediately preceding the akeida is, as we have noted, the covenant between Avraham and Avimelekh. This story represents, in my view, an independent unit that is related only indirectly to the order of events, and therefore it has its own introduction: "It was at that time..." (21:22).[32] The story of the akeida therefore follows on the previous event, namely, the story of Yishmael's eviction.

The banishing of Yishmael is counted as one of the ten trials with which G-d tested Avraham. Avraham loved both his sons; he wanted both to inherit the promised land. It was bad, in his eyes, to banish Yishmael, but he upheld his Creator's command, which contained something of a consolation: "Let it not be bad in your eyes concerning the boy and concerning your handmaid... for your descendants will be called after Yitzchak" (21:12).

After these events – after Avraham send Yishmael away, consoled by the fact that he still has Yitzchak – G-d comes and commands him: Go and slaughter Yitzchak, your only son (i.e., the only one remaining to you). In my view, the juxtaposition highlights the common content of the two tests: the banishing of

Yishmael and the proposed slaughter of Yitzchak. Avraham will remain with no children, with no successor.

Let us return to our question: what is the reason for the difference between Avraham's reaction to the decree of Sedom's destruction and his reaction to the decree of the destruction of his household? We emphasized above that Avraham assumes the right to judge G-d's judgments, to demand righteousness of G-d, and he expresses this sharply. On the other hand, G-d presents Himself at Avraham's tent like someone who comes before a judge, and He agrees with him. All of this happens for one reason: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they should observe the way of G-d to perform righteousness and justice" (18:19). All of this happens in order that Avraham will be able to teach the way of G-d - which is the way of righteousness and justice - to his sons, his descendants, to the nation that will arise from him.

In the akeida (and the expulsion of Yishmael, which is recounted prior to it), G-d commands Avraham to upset and bury his entire future as the founder of a nation, as an educator of his descendants, as a leader. Here there is no room for questions concerning G-d's way. For Avraham is left with no one to educate as to the way of G-d - the way of righteousness and justice. Here there is room only for perfect faith, faith that is not accompanied by any explanation or even a thread of logic, for "The Rock - His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice; a G-d of faith with no injustice, righteous and upright is He" (Devarim 32:4).

In both tasks - scrutiny of G-d's ways and perfect faith in Him - Avraham is admirably successful.

In light of the above, we may solve another of our original difficulties: why does the story of the three angels interrupt in between G-d's revelation to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei, as he sits in judgment at the entrance to his tent, and His words to him concerning the judgment of Sedom later on? The three angels come to tell Avraham about the son that will be born to him. This news is critical, and specifically at this point. It is only once Avraham has been told that he will have a son, that he is given a new role in the world: "that he will command his children and his household after him." Only once he knows that he will have a son does G-d come to tell him of His actions in the world, teaching Avraham the Divine way of righteousness and justice.

D. On Hospitality and Visiting the Sick

We have already noted above that the story separating G-d's revelation to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei and the argument concerning the judgment of Sedom is a double story. In addition to the news of Yitzchak's birth, there is also an elaborate description of the hospitality that Avraham shows the three men. We have already explained the significance of the first element; we must now explain the significance of the hospitality within the chain of events, whose climax is the argument over the fate of Sedom.

We could suggest a simple explanation for the location of this description in our story: through the warm welcome that Avraham extends to his guests, he proves that his way is one of kindness, righteousness and justice, thereby proving that he is worthy of being the one who will command his children and his household after him to observe this way. Indeed, immediately after being told that Sara will give birth to Yitzchak - whom Avraham is destined to educate and command in G-d's ways - G-d includes him in the judgment in order that he will educate in light of this path. But in my view, this explanation does not suffice; we shall go back to the beginning.

We explained above the teaching by R. Chama in the Midrash Tanhuma, maintaining that G-d's appearance to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei was an act of visiting the sick. We discussed at length the question of how Avraham could desert G-d in mid-conversation and run off to attend to his guests, and we proposed an explanation of Rashi's comment concerning the sun, based on the Midrash Rabba. We concluded that the text is trying to combine two opposing paths: one of Divine revelation, and the other of tending to ordinary mortal guests. Avraham tries to bridge these contradictory paths, and the final outcome indicates that "hospitality is greater than receiving the Shekhina."

In light of the above, let me propose a different understanding. Receiving the Shekhina and showing hospitality to mortal guests are not necessarily contradictory. On the contrary, they are identical paths. Let me explain: there are two positive traits, both related to the path of righteousness, that we may learn from our parasha: visiting the sick [33], and hospitality. In many places, Chazal mention these traits together:

"These are acts whose fruit a person enjoys in this world, while the principal reserved for him in the World to Come... and hospitality and visiting the sick..." (Tosefta Pe'ah 1:1) Indeed, these traits are similar to one another. Both involve hosting; in both cases, a positive and warm connection is forged between the host and the guest. In the case of visiting the sick, the guest comes to perform a kindness for the host; he comes to assist him in

his weakness. In the case of hospitality, the host performs kindness for his guests, preparing food and a place for him to sleep.

This, then, is the order of events. Avraham is weak because of his circumcision, and G-d performs a kindness to him and comes to assist him. Avraham welcomes the Shekhina that appears at his tent in the very same way that the Shekhina is revealed to him: through the very act of showing hospitality for the three wayfarers arriving from the desert. In short: G-d is revealed to Avraham as visiting the sick, and Avraham welcomes Him by fulfilling the mitzva of hospitality towards the three men who happen to pass by at that moment. Avraham, therefore, simultaneously performs two mitzvot: hospitality as well as "you shall follow the Lord your G-d," since he is acting in precisely the same way as G-d in His appearance to him; he is following the way that is the "twin" of the way in which G-d reveals Himself to him.

It turns out that Avraham is worthy not only of commanding his children and household after him as to the way of righteousness and justice; he is worthy of commanding them to observe THE WAY OF GOD in performing righteousness and justice, and in fulfilling the command, "You shall walk after [the way of] the Lord your G-d" - just as He performs kindness, so shall you perform kindness" (Sota 14b). From now on, G-d includes him in His judgment. G-d proves to Avraham in the judgment of Sedom that His way is one of righteousness and justice, in order that he will be able to teach this way to his children, and establish the future nation that will bear the standard of G-d's way in the world.

I shall return to this subject below, concerning the judgment of Sedom. But let us first turn our attention to the news of the imminent birth of a son that is uttered on this occasion.

E. Two Notices of Yitzchak's Birth - Why?

On two occasions, G-d tells Avraham about Yitzchak's birth: in parashat Lekh-lekha and in parashat Vayera. Both announcements are introduced with the same words: "G-d appeared to Avram" (17:1), and "G-d appeared to him" (18:1). The first occasion is prior to his circumcision; the second is afterwards.

But Avraham's reaction to the two revelations is quite different. In the first instance we are told, "Avram fell upon his face" (17:3), while the second time we read, "He saw and he ran towards them" (18:2). Before his circumcision, his reaction is one of self-nullification before the glory of the Shekhina; he falls upon the ground before G-d. After the circumcision, his reaction is one of activity: not self-nullification and self-effacement, but rather walking in the way of G-d.

There are two levels of receiving the Shekhina. The first is awe, leading to self-effacement and inaction; the second is love, leading to activity and a person's desire to imitate his Creator. The first level represents that of Avraham prior to the circumcision, while the second represents his level afterwards. This difference may explain why Avraham is told twice about Yitzchak's birth: first in a revelation before he is circumcised, and then - three days later, on the third day following his circumcision - by the angels.

In the first revelation, Avraham is told that he will be distinguished from the nations and set aside for Divine service. The news of the birth comes hand in hand with the rejection of Yishmael. Avraham asks of G-d, "If only Yishmael may live before You" (17:18), and G-d replies with reservation:

"But Sara your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Yitzchak, and I shall establish My covenant with him as an eternal covenant for his descendants after him. And concerning Yishmael I have heard you... I shall make him a great nation, but My covenant I shall establish with Yitzchak, whom Sara will bear to you at this time next year." (17:19-21)

The most prominent element of the news about Yitzchak is the contrast between him and Yishmael. Although Yishmael, too, will be blessed, he is rejected from the eternal covenant through which G-d gives Avraham the land of Canaan. Indeed, when Yitzchak is born, Sara demands that Hagar and Yishmael be banished, for the same reason that was stated already prior to Avraham's circumcision: "Banish this maidservant and her son, for the son of this maidservant will not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak" (21:10). Chazal address this point and comment: "G-d said to him: Up until your circumcision, uncircumcised mortals used to visit you; now - I Myself will be revealed to you" (Bereishit Rabba 47).

The second announcement concerning the birth of Yitzchak, uttered three days later at the entrance to the tent in Elonei Mamrei, is completely different. It is conveyed to Avraham not while he falls upon his face, but while he is busy with his guests. Here, the essence of Yitzchak's birth is not meant to sever Avraham from Hagar and Yishmael, but rather to establish the nation that will walk in G-d's path - the path of righteousness and justice - and bear G-d's Name in the world. Already at the very beginning of Avraham's new path as the forefather of G-d's nation, he decides that the way of righteousness will be

directed towards trying to save the wicked people of Sedom, to repair the entire world and bring it closer to G-d. In this scene, Yitzchak is not the inverse of Yishmael, the mocker, but rather the inverse of Lot, who was scorned in the eyes of his sons-in-law. In the previous parasha, Yitzchak – who is destined for a covenant that separates him from the rest of the world – is the opposite of Yishmael, whose "hand is upon all, and the hand of everyone is upon him." In our parasha, Yitzchak – who is destined to teach the way of righteousness – is the opposite of Lot, who is severed from Sedom, having failed to influence even his own daughters and his sons-in-law and convince them to join him. Yitzchak, whose birth is announced in the story of Avraham's hospitality, and in whose virtue Avraham is appointed to sit with G-d in judgment – is the one whose descendants, destined to bear the banner of the way of G-d, the way of performing righteousness and judgment, will rectify the entire world in the Kingship of G-d.

The two announcements as to the birth of Yitzchak are not only contrasting but also complementary, just as the two revelations of G-d to Avram-Avraham – one before the circumcision and the other follow it – complement one another.

F. The Four Missions of the Angels

We listed above the four missions entrusted to the angels: they visit Avraham's home, they tell him about the imminent birth of Yitzchak, they visit Sedom and Lot's home, and they destroy Sedom and the cities of the plain, saving Lot.[34] We asked whether these four missions are connected in any way, or whether their occurrence together is incidental.

We noted above the connection between the first two missions: The Shekhina is revealed at Avraham's tent with a manifestation of the trait of visiting the sick, and Avraham receives the angels with the trait of hospitality. Then Avraham is chosen as the person to establish the nation that will observe "the way of G-d, to perform righteousness and justice," and he is told that a son will be born to him. With this news, Avraham becomes worthy of having G-d tell him of the ways of His righteousness and justice, in order that he will be able to educate his children and his household in those ways. He is then required, therefore, to express his opinion of G-d's justice concerning Sedom, and he adds the element of righteousness. The hospitable Avraham imparts some of his righteousness upon the judgment of Sedom, whose measure of evil is complete because "it did not uphold the hand of the poor and destitute" by not showing hospitality. The angels, who tested Avraham's hospitality and his worthiness for his future appointment, were the same ones sent to test Sedom. One angel – the one within whom G-d's Name resides [35] – stands before Avraham and declares, "I shall descend, then, and see" (18:21). The other two – the two witnesses – go down to test Sedom with the same test that was presented to Avraham. In the test of Sedom, Lot – who welcomes the guests – emerges innocent, while Sedom is judged guilty.

It would seem that the saving of Lot resembles the news of Yitzchak's birth. Lot is permitted to take his family with him, although his sons-in-law and married daughters did not participate in the mitzva of hospitality. In my view, they were shown a kindness that they did not deserve in order that Lot would be able to establish his name and have descendants to survive him. Hence, Lot receives the reward of his hospitality with a kindness that is reminiscent of the kindness shown to Avraham, his uncle: descendants that would be born from him, the right to establish a nation, the continuity of generations. At the point of losing hope, at the moment of his drunkenness – a stupor born of despair [36] – his daughters assume for themselves the right of 'yibum' and establish his seed for his vanished family, just as a woman whose husband has died childless is obliged to establish his seed.[37]

Hence, the four missions of the angels are four links in the same chain: the test and reward for Avraham, and the test and respective retribution for the people of Sedom and for Lot.

PART IV: THE KNOWLEDGE

A. "For I Know Him"

The subject that has occupied us thus far is the role and destiny that G-d entrusts to Avraham: to establish a nation that will bear the sign of G-d's providence in the world, and to educate this nation in light of the understanding that the way of G-d is the way of righteousness and justice. In other words, he and his seed will fulfill the commandments of kindness, righteous and justice not just as independent values, but as an expression of the command, "You shall walk in the way of the Lord your G-d" – just as He performs kindness, so shall you perform kindness." Let us now address this concept of walking in the way of G-d.

The commentators address the significance of G-d's knowing – "For I know him." Most (the Targum Yonatan and Onkelos, Ba'alei ha-Tosfot, Seforno and others) explain this in accordance with its meaning in most places in Tanakh, as referring to intellectual awareness: G-d knows Avraham and knows his ways.

This explanation poses a difficulty because of the following expression, "that" (lema'an), which usually introduces a description of purpose, while in our context it introduces the description of a reason.[38] Most commentators who adopt this interpretation explain that the description of purpose connects to what was said previously: G-d reveals to Avraham what He is going to do to Sedom in order that he will instruct his children and household after him.

But Rashi and others who follow his opinion explain the words, "For I know him," as an expression of love and closeness, as in, "Naomi had a kinsman [lit.: 'one who was known'] of her husband" (Ruth 2:1), "Adam knew Chava his wife" (Bereishit 4:1), etc.[39] According to this understanding, G-d drew Avraham close and loved him in order that he would command his household to walk in the way of G-d. Hence, the revelation of the judgment of Sedom to Avraham is an expression of G-d's love for him.[40]

Furthermore, we may say that according to Rashi's explanation, the love and bond between G-d and Avraham are the motivation for Avraham and his household not only to serve G-d, but to act in accordance with His actions, to fulfill the mitzva of "You shall walk in the ways of the Lord your G-d." In other words, awe – such as the awe of a servant for his master – is the main impetus for observing G-d's mitzvot as divine commandments, and this motivation is particularly suited to the mitzvat between man and G-d. Love – such as the love between a son and a father, or the bond and cleaving to G-d – is the main impetus for the desire to act in accordance with G-d's actions, to develop good character traits – essentially, the commandments between man and his fellow man.

B. "That I May Know You"

A similar "knowing" and "instruction" is to be found in the case of Moshe:

"Moshe said to G-d: See, You say to me, 'Bring up this nation' – yet You have not told me whom You will send with me. But You have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in My sight.' So now, if I have found favor in Your sight, please show me Your way, that I may know You, that I may find favor in Your eyes." (Shemot 33:12-13) Likewise, in G-d's response:

"For you have found favor in My eyes, and I will know you by name." (Shemot 33:17) Moshe is the messenger who leads the nation of Israel in accordance with G-d's word, "for I shall not go up among you" (Shemot 33:3). Moshe assumes upon himself the mission of leading them in the same path that G-d has guided them thus far. In order to walk in G-d's ways, he asks to cleave to Him and to know Him. Moshe, who seeks to lead the nation in the ways of G-d, merits that "G-d spoke to Moshe face to face, as a person talks to his neighbor" (Shemot 33:11), and he asks further: "Please show me Your ways, that I may know You" (ibid. 19). Indeed, G-d grants his request and shows him His ways:

"He said: I shall make all My goodness pass before you... and I shall be gracious to whom I shall be gracious, and I shall have mercy on whom I shall have mercy." (Shemot 33:19) Knowing G-d and knowing His ways means knowing His goodness, His kindness and His mercy, and following His ways: "Just as He shows kindness, so shall you show kindness." Later on, G-d tells Moshe of His ways – the way of the thirteen attributes of mercy.

When G-d shows him this path, He says: "You shall see the back of Me, but My face shall not be seen" (ibid. 23). This may be understood as a "hiding of G-d's face," as opposed to the level of, "G-d spoke with Moshe face to face." According to this understanding, the hiding of G-d's face was caused by Moshe's rejection of G-d's proposal: "My Presence will go (with you) and I shall give you rest" (33:14). But, alternatively, we may understand "You shall see the back of Me" as a positive development, as Chazal teach: "He wrapped Himself before him like a prayer leader" (Rosh HaShana 17b).

The prayer congregation sees only the back of the leader, not his face. The prayer leader leads the congregation after him in prayer. He reads, they respond after him. The same applies to G-d, Who makes His traits known to Moshe and teaches him to follow in His ways – the ways of kindness and compassion.

"G-d performs righteousness, and judgments for all those who are oppressed. He made His ways known to Moshe, and His acts to the Children of Israel. G-d is merciful and gracious, long-suffering and full of kindness." (Tehillim 103:6-7)

G-d's way is the way of righteousness and justice, as we are told concerning Avraham. His way is also the path of kindness and mercy, as we are told concerning Moshe. In both cases, "knowing G-d" – attachment and cleaving to Him, walking in His ways – teaches the Children of Israel the positive traits and the ways of G-d. This is the path of Avraham's children and household, and this is the path of the nation and disciples of Moshe. G-d knows them, and they know Him.

C. "Has She Not Informed Me"

One of the harshest prophecies concerning the destruction of the Temple is Yirmiyahu's lament (Yirmiyahu chapter 9) concerning the speech of his generation, which addresses lying, tale-bearing and evil gossip. However, Yirmiyahu views the root of the sins pertaining to speech as something else:

"They proceed from one evil to the next; they have not known Me, says G-d... through deceit they refuse to know Me, says G-d." (9:2-5) The connection between the sins of speech, the treason and the gossip, and the lack of knowledge of G-d is spelled out at the end of the prophecy:

"So says G-d: Let the wise man not glory in his wisdom, nor the valiant one glory in his v; let the rich man not glory in his wealth. Let he who glories rather glory in this: that he understands and knows Me, for I am G-d Who performs kindness, justice and righteousness in the land, for it is these that I desire, says G-d." (9:22-23) Knowing G-d means cleaving to Him, walking in His ways. The way of G-d is the way of kindness, righteousness and justice. Only one who does not know G-d engages in the opposite of these traits: slander, lies, tale-bearing, etc. Therefore, the prophet Hoshea likewise cries out: "There is no truth, and no kindness, and no knowledge of G-d in the land!" (4:1).

Quite explicitly, Yirmiyahu says before King Yehoyakim, concerning his father King Yoshiyahu:

"Did your father not eat and drink and perform justice and righteousness – then it was good for him? He judged the cause of the poor and destitute – and it was good. Was this not knowledge of Me?" (Yirmiyahu 22:15-16)

The way of Yoshiyahu is the way of Avraham. Because of it, G-d knew Avraham. In fact, G-d taught Avraham His justice and righteousness in Sedom in order that Avraham would know G-d and His way – the way of righteousness and justice – and bequeath it to his children.

NOTES:

This article was originally written (in altered form) in memory of a beloved student, David Cohen, who fell in battle against terrorists in Lebanon. "Land – do not cover his blood; let there not be a resting place for his cry."

[1] Later on in the parasha, we find a parallel story: the description of the hospitality shown to the angels in Lot's house. There, again, the arrival of the angels serves two purposes: the overthrow of Sedom on the one hand, and the saving of Lot on the other. The connection between these two purposes is more apparent than the connection between the two purposes of the angels who visit Avraham, but I shall deal with that below. [2] See also Tehillim 14 and 53. [3] Despite the exegetical resemblances, Ramban's approach is very different from that of Rashi. In his view, G-d appears to Avraham for the purposes of revelation and to honor Avraham following his circumcision; with the same honor in mind, He consults with him concerning the fate of Sedom. [4] Another advantage of this explanation relates to the interpretation of the verse, "G-d appeared TO HIM at Elonei Mamrei." Because the text does not repeat "to Avraham," but says only "to him," we may deduce that this was the continuation of the same story. For further discussion of this point, see Ramban and Rabbeinu Bechaye. Abarbanel rejects this textual analysis in light of another reading; see ad loc. [5] In Rashi's view, healing Avraham was the task of Raphael, one of the three angels who came to Avraham thereafter (see Rashi 18:2), with no connection to G-d's revelation to him. Malbim admittedly connects the appearance of Raphael (as Rashi suggests) with the revelation itself, but the other commentators on Rashi maintain the same position that I have explained. [6] Compare Rashi on 32:32: "The sun shone upon him" – for his benefit; to heal his limp." [7] Compare Melakhim II 8:29 – "Achazyahu... went down to see Yoram ben Achav in Yizre'el, for he was ill." Targum Yonatan translates, "to assist Yoram." Compare also Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabbalah on our parasha, as well as the Gemara in Nedarim. [8] See Malakhi 2:10-12. [9] See Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 771 – "Pinchas is Eliyahu." [10] See Malakhi 3, and compare Pinchas's reaction to the act of Zimri ben Salu with Kozbi bat Tzur to the reaction of Eliyahu to the marriage of Achav and Izevel. [11] According to Rashi's second explanation, the name "Ado-nai" here is a Holy Name. Verse 3 continues verse 1, and Avraham turns to G-d Who has appeared to him. The Gemara (Shabbat 127) interprets accordingly, and I have adopted this approach. [12] Rashbam explains: "G-d said to Avraham, why then does Sara laugh? – this is the angel talking, for there was no revelation other than the arrival of the angels." He also continues this line in explaining, "G-d said: Shall I hide from Avraham that which I am going to do?," as well as "Avraham was still standing before G-d," and that the entire argument concerning Sedom was conducted between Avraham and the angel. He explains in the same way why only two angels came to Sedom: for the third, the senior one, remained with Avraham. [13] It should be remembered that according to the literal text, Avraham saw three men, not three angels, and the food that he serves to them is understood as an act of hospitality, not a sacrifice. If Avraham did not discern that the three men were in fact angels, then it is difficult to claim that their appearance before him constitutes a revelation. [14] The Netziv, in Ha'amek Davar, writes: "For this is the will of G-d – that a practical mitzva should defer this mitzva that has no fixed measure or time." [15] Radak adopts Ramban's approach in this regard, maintaining that the sight of the three men was a prophetic vision. He explains that G-d Himself – before speaking with Avraham about Sedom – told him, prophetically, through an angel, about the birth of Yitzchak. Radak fails to explain why the text interrupts with the news about Yitzchak in the middle of a revelation that is supposed to be about Sedom. [16] Compare Guide of the Perplexed III:21. [17] Likewise in the words of the prophet Amos: "The Lord G-d will not do anything without revealing His counsel to His servants, the prophets" (3:7). [18] See article by Rav Yehuda Shaviv, "Mussar vs. Mitzva – the Akeida," Megadim I, which was devoted to this problem. [19] Another interpretation that arises in the commentaries is that this refers to the Heavenly court. [20] This is the meaning of the word, "gate" in many places in Tanakh. See, for example, Devarim, end of chapter 16, chapter 17, chapter 22, Iyov 29 etc. [21] Chizkuni: "Everything is known before Him, but [He entered this discussion with Avraham] because of the Trait of Mercy, which requested mercy on their behalf." Ramban writes: "According to the literal meaning, [this dialogue] is because He wanted to reveal the matter of Sedom to Avraham, and to inform him that there was not one there who did good." [22] Or to the trait of mercy, and to Avraham, according to Chizkuni and Ramban. [23] Bereishit Rabba 49:13 presents a different calculation. [24] The reader asks: was Lot's wife a righteous woman? Did she not sin with salt? And were his sons-in-law righteous – was Lot not scorned in their eyes? All of this is true. But Noah's son Cham was likewise not a righteous man worthy of having the world saved in his merit, and nevertheless he is counted as one of the eight. It appears, therefore, that not necessarily every person is evaluated individually; if the head of the household is righteous, his household is considered thus. [25] Later on, Moshe walked in Avraham's

footsteps, demanding that G-d forgive the entire nation in the merit of a single righteous man: himself. "Now if You will forgive their sin – and if not, erase me from Your book that You have written" (Shemot 32:32). There, indeed, we find that G-d shows favor to the entire nation in the merit of a single man. [26] See Rashi 19:20. [27] To a certain extent, this contrast must be true. I shall employ it further on. [28] This is based on the Gemara (Sota 14a): "Rabbi Chama said in the name of Rabbi Chanina: That which is written, 'You shall walk in the ways of the Lord your G-d': is it then possible for a person to walk in the way of the Shekhina? Are we not told, 'The Lord your G-d is a consuming fire?' Rather, this means that we must imitate His traits: just as He clothes the naked, so you shall clothe the naked. G-d visits the sick... likewise you shall visit the sick. G-d comforts mourners – so shall you comfort mourners. G-d buries the dead – so shall you bury the dead." [29] See, for example, Yirmiyahu 12:1-3; Chabakuk 1, etc. [30] Chazal address at length the contrast between Avraham and Iyov; I shall not elaborate here. [31] These two interpretations are to be found in Sanhedrin 89b. [32] Similar to this is the story of Yehuda and Tamar, which is likewise introduced with the words, "It was at that time that Yehuda went down..." (38:1). It represents an independent unit in the middle of the story which is devoted to the sale of Yosef. Accordingly, just as "Yosef was taken down to Egypt" (39:1) follows on "the Midianites sold him to Egypt, to Potifar..." (37:36), even though the story of Yehuda and Tamar interrupts in the middle, so in our parasha the akeida follows chronologically after the story that precedes "it was at that time..." [33] See the Gemara in Sota 14b quoted above. [34] Rashi divides the angels' tasks differently, see ad loc. [35] See Rashbam here and Ramban on Shemot 23:21. [36] "Give strong drink to one who is ready to die, and wine to the bitter of spirit; let him drink and forget his poverty, and not remember his toil any more" (Mishlei 31:6-7). [37] I have written about the parallel between the daughters of Lot and the mitzva of yibum in my article, "Amar Naval Be-libbo," Megadim 4. [38] G-d did not know Avraham in order that he would teach his descendants (as the usual meaning of "lema'an" would indicate"), but rather BECAUSE he was going to do this (as the word "ki" would usually indicate). [39] See Tehillim 1:6: "For G-d knows the path of the righteous." There, too, the commentators are divided as to the meaning of "knowing," because of the syntactical difficulty of the verse. It should be noted that there is a connection between these two meanings of the word "knowing." See Guide of the Perplexed I:68. [40] See Rashi, "Shall I hide" and "For I know him."

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