

Weekly Parsha VAYERA 5782
Rabbi Berel Wein's Weekly Blog

Our father Abraham experiences the revelation of the Lord when he is sitting alone at the opening of his tent. Only a few days had passed since his circumcision and the day itself is being described. He appears to us as a solitary figure, wrapped in his own thoughts, searching for attachment to his Creator. We are accustomed to think of this situation as being one of preparation for the visit of the three angels. However, if we but take a broader view of the matter, we readily can see that the Torah is describing for us the permanent and regular state of being of our Father figure.

He constantly experiences the presence of the Lord within and without. All his life, in everything that he does, is measured by the metric that the Lord is looking over his shoulder and recognizing the potential reward for his actions and goodness. King David centuries later said that he always envisions the presence of the Lord before him permanently. This is the highest level of attachment to the Creator that is humanly possible.

This emotional attachment is described for us in detail in many of the holy Psalms of King David. These depictions are based on the formative experiences of our father Abraham in founding the Jewish people. Wherever he goes and whatever he does, our father Abraham feels within himself that the Lord is appearing before him and accompanying him on his new and difficult journey through life.

Even in his moments of sleep and while dreaming, Abraham is constantly aware of, if not in fact interacting, with his Creator. The gift of prophecy is one of the highest forms of communication and attention to God. There were, in ancient times, schools that trained people to become prophets. I have often wondered how that is possible, since the service of prophecy seems to be a one-off moment of revelation bestowed upon certain human beings. So how can one go to school to become a prophet?

Upon deeper reflection, it is obvious that even if the moments of recorded prophecy are rare and few, part of the necessary attribute to become a prophet is that one constantly trains oneself to visualize Heaven and to attempt to maintain a constant attachment to one's eternal soul and Creator. And this required training includes study, effort, sacrifice, and the attainment of a special relationship with impunity and eternity.

So, the description of the Lord that begins this week's Torah reading should be viewed as a description of the constant and permanent state of the relationship between God and Abraham, and not merely as a one-time fortuitous experience of holiness. Perhaps, this is what the rabbis meant when they stated that the all-merciful One desires

our hearts. God desires our permanent attention, goodness, and righteousness, and that we not be distracted by the vagaries of life. We must become a holy nation and a kingdom of priests

Shabbat shalom

Rabb Berel Wein

The Binding of Isaac (Vayera)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

“Take your son, your only son, the one you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” (Gen. 22:2)

Thus begins one of the most famous episodes in the Torah, but also one of the most morally problematic. The conventional reading of this passage is that Abraham was being asked to show that his love for God was supreme. He would show this by being willing to sacrifice the son for whom he had spent a lifetime waiting.

Why did God need to “test” Abraham, given that He knows the human heart better than we know it ourselves? Maimonides answers that God did not need Abraham to prove his love for Him. Rather the test was meant to establish for all time how far the fear and love of God must go.[1]

On this principle there was little argument. The story is about the awe and love of God. Kierkegaard wrote about it[2] and made the point that ethics is universal. It consists of general rules. But the love of God is particular. It is an I-Thou personal relationship. What Abraham underwent during the trial was, says Kierkegaard, a “teleological suspension of the ethical,” that is, a willingness to let the I-Thou love of God overrule the universal principles that bind humans to one another.

Rav Soloveitchik explained the Binding of Isaac episode in terms of his own well-known characterisation of the religious life as a dialectic between victory and defeat, majesty and humility, man-the-creative-master and man-the-obedient-servant.[3] There are times when “God tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most.”[4] We must experience defeat as well as victory. Thus the Binding of Isaac was not a once-only episode but rather a paradigm for the religious life as a whole. Wherever we have passionate desire – eating, drinking, physical relationship – there the Torah places limits on the satisfaction of desire. Precisely because we pride ourselves on the power of reason, the Torah includes *chukim*, statutes, that are impenetrable to reason.

These are the conventional readings and they represent the mainstream of tradition. However, since there are “seventy faces to the Torah,” I want to argue for a different interpretation. The reason I do so is that one test of the

validity of an interpretation is whether it coheres with the rest of the Torah, Tanach, and Judaism as a whole. There are four problems with the conventional reading:

We know from Tanach and independent evidence that the willingness to offer up your child as a sacrifice was not rare in the ancient world. It was commonplace. Tanach mentions that Mesha, King of Moab, did so. So did Yiftah, the least admirable leader in the book of Judges. Two of Tanach's most wicked Kings, Ahaz and Manasse, introduced the practice into Judah, for which they were condemned. There is archeological evidence – the bones of thousands of young children – that child sacrifice was widespread in Carthage and other Phoenician sites. It was a pagan practice.

Child sacrifice is regarded with horror throughout Tanach. Micah asks rhetorically, “Shall I give my firstborn for my sin, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Mic. 6:7), and replies, “He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Mic. 6:8) How could Abraham serve as a role model if what he was prepared to do is what his descendants were commanded not to do?

Specifically, Abraham was chosen to be a role model as a parent. God says of him, “For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just.” How could he serve as a model father if he was willing to sacrifice his child? To the contrary, he should have said to God: “If you want me to prove to You how much I love You, then take me as a sacrifice, not my child.”

As Jews – indeed as humans – we must reject Kierkegaard's principle of the “teleological suspension of the ethical.” This is an idea that gives carte blanche to religious fanatics to commit crimes in the name of God. It is the logic of the Inquisition and the suicide bomber. It is not the logic of Judaism rightly understood.[5] God does not ask us to be unethical. We may not always understand ethics from God's perspective but we believe that “He is the Rock, His works are perfect; all His ways are just” (Deut. 32:4).

To understand the Binding of Isaac we have to realise that much of the Torah, Genesis in particular, is a polemic against worldviews the Torah considers pagan, inhuman and wrong. One institution to which Genesis is opposed is the ancient family as described by Fustel de Coulanges[6] and recently restated by Larry Siedentop in *Inventing the Individual*.[7]

Before the emergence of the first cities and civilisations, the fundamental social and religious unit was the family. As Coulanges puts it, in ancient times there was an intrinsic connection between three things: the domestic religion, the family and the right of property. Each family had its own gods, among them the spirits of dead ancestors, from whom it sought protection and to whom it offered sacrifices. The

authority of the head of the family, the *paterfamilias*, was absolute. He had power of life and death over his wife and children. Authority invariably passed, on the death of the father, to his firstborn son. Meanwhile, as long as the father lived, children had the status of property rather than persons in their own right. This idea persisted even beyond the biblical era in the Roman law principle of *patria potestas*.

The Torah is opposed to every element of this worldview. As anthropologist Mary Douglas notes, one of the most striking features of the Torah is that it includes no sacrifices to dead ancestors.[8] Seeking the spirits of the dead is explicitly forbidden.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that in the early narratives, succession does not pass to the firstborn: not to Ishmael but Isaac, not to Esau but Jacob, not to the tribe of Reuben but to Levi (priesthood) and Judah (kingship), not to Aaron but to Moses.

The principle to which the entire story of Isaac, from birth to binding, is opposed is the idea that a child is the property of the father. First, Isaac's birth is miraculous. Sarah is already post-menopausal when she conceives. In this respect the Isaac story is parallel to that of the birth of Samuel to Hannah who, like Sarah, also is unable naturally to conceive. That is why, when Samuel is born Hannah says, “I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of Him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.” (I Sam. 1:27) This passage is the key to understanding the message from heaven telling Abraham to stop: “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son” (the statement appears twice, in Gen. 22:12 and 16). The test was not whether Abraham would sacrifice his son but whether he would give him over to God.

The same principle recurs in the book of Exodus. First, Moses' survival is semi-miraculous since he was born at a time when Pharaoh had decreed that every male Israelite child should be killed. Secondly, during the tenth plague when every firstborn Egyptian child died, the Israelite firstborn were miraculously saved. “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to Me, whether human or animal.” The firstborns were originally designated to serve God as Priests, but they lost this role after the sin of the Golden Calf. Nonetheless, a memory of this original role still persists in the ceremony of *Pidyon HaBen*, redemption of a firstborn son.

What God was doing when He asked Abraham to offer up his son was not requesting a child sacrifice but something quite different. He wanted Abraham to renounce ownership of his son. He wanted to establish as a non-negotiable principle of Jewish law that children are not the property of their parents.

That is why three of the four matriarchs found themselves unable to conceive other than by a miracle. The Torah wants us to know that the children they bore were the children of God rather than the natural outcome of a biological process. Eventually, the entire nation of Israel would be called the children of God. A related idea is conveyed by the fact that God chose as His spokesperson Moses, who was “not a man of words” (Ex. 4:10) He was a stammerer. Moses became God’s spokesman because people knew that the words he spoke were not his own but those placed in his mouth by God.

The clearest evidence for this interpretation is given at the birth of the very first human child. When she first gives birth, Eve says: “With the help of the Lord I have acquired [kaniti] a man.” That child, whose name comes from the verb “to acquire,” was Cain, who became the first murderer. If you seek to own your children, your children may rebel into violence.

If the analysis of Fustel de Colanges and Larry Siedentop is correct, it follows that something fundamental was at stake. As long as parents believed they owned their children, the concept of the individual could not yet be born. The fundamental unit was the family. The Torah represents the birth of the individual as the central figure in the moral life. Because children – all children – belong to God, parenthood is not ownership but guardianship. As soon as they reach the age of maturity (traditionally, twelve for girls, thirteen for boys) children become independent moral agents with their own dignity and freedom.[9]

Sigmund Freud famously had something to say about this too. He held that a fundamental driver of human identity is the Oedipus Complex, the conflict between fathers and sons as exemplified in Aeschylus’ tragedy.[10] By creating moral space between fathers and sons, Judaism offers a non-tragic resolution to this tension. If Freud had taken his psychology from the Torah rather than from Greek myth, he might have arrived at a more hopeful view of the human condition.

Why then did God say to Abraham about Isaac: “Offer him up as a burnt offering”? So as to make clear to all future generations that the reason Jews condemn child sacrifice is not because they lack the courage to do so. Abraham is the proof that they do not lack the courage. The reason they do not do so is because God is the God of life, not death. In Judaism, as the laws of purity and the rite of the Red Heifer show, death is not sacred. Death defiles.

The Torah is revolutionary not only in relation to society but also in relation to the family. To be sure, the Torah’s revolution was not fully completed in the course of the biblical age. Slavery had not yet been abolished. The rights of women had not yet been fully actualised. But the birth of the individual – the integrity of each of us as a moral agent in our own right – was one of the great moral revolutions in history.

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

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “And it came to pass...that God tested Abraham, saying to him, ‘Abraham,’ to which he responded, ‘Here I am!’ And He said, ‘Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, offering him there as a sacrifice on one of the mountains that I will show you” (Gen. 22:1-2).

Has Abraham lost his moral compass? When God presents Abraham with the most difficult and tragic command, to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, Abraham rises early the next morning, loads his donkey, calls his servants and immediately starts the journey—without a word of protest.

Not long before, though, when God declares the imminent destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham passionately protests the Divine decree, pleading for the lives of their immoral inhabitants: “Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?” [ibid. 18:25].

If Abraham was willing to defend the wicked residents of Sodom and Gomorrah from a mass death, could he not have done at least as much for his righteous, beloved and Divinely-promised son? What has changed within Abraham?

Indeed, Abraham has undergone a change, and it is because of this change that he does not argue with God now. Abraham relates to God differently from how he related to Him before. He now has a more distant relationship with God that does not permit the camaraderie of questioning a Divine order. Why is this? At first glance, this would appear to be a negative development. How could distance from God be positive? Paradoxically, in the case of Abraham, it was a necessary evolution. Permit me to explain why.

Fear of God and love of God are two fundamental principles of Jewish philosophy, forming the framework for our service to the Almighty. The former emanates from a sense of healthy distance from God, while the latter involves a sense of closeness to Him. Both relationships are necessary, and complement each other.

Fear of God is critical to the fabric of human existence. Those who love—either God or another human being—may sometimes rationalize away their own lapses and indiscretions with the sense that the beloved will understand, that those in love ‘need not say they are sorry.’ In contrast, fear of God brooks no exceptions, keeping us honest, constantly spurring us on to remain steady and steadfast despite the narrowness of life’s very narrow bridge.

Abraham is the paradigmatic example of loving God. He leaves the comforts of his homeland, birthplace and family

and enters an unfamiliar land in order to be with God—much as a lover following his beloved.

Abraham establishes altar after altar in the name of his beloved God, about Whose ethical teachings and powers of creativity he never ceases to speak—and attempts to persuade others to accept Him. He is close to God and he understands God. Hence, his argument with the Divine on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah.

This changes when Abraham sojourns to the Land of Gerar, a place about which he comments, “Surely the fear of God is not in this place” [ibid. 20:11]. The final words we read before the account of the Akeda is that Abraham lived in the land of the Philistines for many days. Indeed, the very introduction to the Akeda story begins: “After these things...” [ibid. 22:1], a reference to his stay in Gerar. What was he doing in a place defined by its lack of fear of God?

This, in fact, is the basis for the segue to the incident of the Akeda, which bespeaks Abraham’s fear of God and his unquestioning acceptance of a Divine command he could not possibly understand. His experience in Gerar had apparently caused him to place an emphasis on a fear of God that he had not previously had to employ to such an extent in his service of God. And it had a balancing effect on him.

We can now see the significance of the climactic moment of the Akeda, when, as Abraham lifts the slaughtering knife, the angel of God cries out, “Do not harm the boy! For now I know that you fear God...” [ibid., v. 12]. In other words, ‘You had long shown your love of God. Now your fear of God has been tested, as well, and you have succeeded!’

It is at this crucial moment that a circle has been completed, an event that began in the land of Gerar and ends on the mount of Moriah. It was in Gerar that Abraham honed his fear of God, a necessity in a culture in which it was sorely lacking.

Whereas Abraham’s first commandment to go to the Land of Israel epitomizes the love of God, this final commandment, the Akeda, most accurately embodies the fear of God. In the process of his life experiences, Abraham has found the proper balance of both religious dynamics, perfecting his relationship with the Almighty, and teaching his descendants the proper path for our service of God.

Shabbat Shalom!

From Spouse to Sibling

When Your Relationship Faces Crisis, Tell Them She Is Your Sister

Rabbi YY Jacobson

A Chassid related the following story:

The loyalty of Russian soldiers to the Czar was legendary. I once saw a Russian soldier being whipped. His crime?

While standing watch on a Russian winter night, his feet had frozen to his boots.

"Had you remembered the oath you took to serve the Czar," his commander berated him, "the memory would have kept you warm."

"For 25 years," concluded the Chassid, "this incident inspired my service of G-d[1]."

A Self-Absorbed Husband?

This week's Torah portion, Lech Lecha, relates how a famine breaks out in the Land of Canaan, and Abraham and his wife Sarah head down south to Egypt. As they approach Egypt, Abraham voices his fears to his wife that the Egyptians, notorious for their immorality, might kill him so that they may lay their hands on the most beautiful Sarah.

"Please say that you are my sister," Abraham pleads with his wife, "so that they will give me gifts for your sake and my life will be spared[2]."

This is a difficult story to digest. Abraham, the founder of Judaism, considered one of the most spiritual humans of all times, the person who gave the world the gift of Monotheism and taught humanity the value of kindness, seems to be all-consumed by the fear for his life, and totally unconcerned with the fate of his wife.

What is even more disturbing is Abraham's interest that "they give me gifts for your sake," while his wife would be enduring abuse and humiliation.

No less absurd is the fact that the Torah finds it necessary to begin the biography of the father of the Jewish people with this episode, as though signifying that it contained the fundamentals of Jewish faith and practice...

Two approaches can be found among the commentators. The Ramban (Nachmanides, circa 1194-1270) writes that Abraham performed indeed "a great sin, inadvertently." The Zohar explains (Tazria 52a), that Abraham, who knew Sarah's superior spiritual quality, was certain that no harm would befall her. He was only fearful about his own fate.

Yet, as in every story of the Torah, this narrative contains a psychological and spiritual message[3].

A Tale of Two Loves

What is the difference between the sibling relationship and the spouse relationship? A spouse you choose; siblings you don't choose. Your connection with your brothers and sisters is natural and innate.

The bond between siblings is constant and immutable. Whether you love your brothers or not, he will always remain your brother; you are eternally connected by genes, culture, and soul connection.

Conversely, the bond with a spouse is subject to change and fluctuation; today you are married, but in a year from now you may sadly be divorced.

Yet paradoxically, the love of a sibling – even at its best -- is calm and placid; the love of a spouse, on the other hand, is capable of becoming fiery and passionate. Because the love of a sibling is inborn and natural, it can never die, but

we also don't get too excited about it. It is part of who we are.

The love of a spouse is something created anew as a result of two separate individuals coming together at a later stage in life. The distinctiveness, rather than the sameness, of the two individuals linked in marriage, is what gives the relationship its intensity and drama, feelings that cannot be found even between close siblings. Yet this same quality is also the reason some marriages are short-lived. Passion can flourish, but passion can fade away.

And when the marriage does fail, you fall back on the innate bond that exists among family members, who are, hopefully, always there for you.

Tough Times

The story of Abraham and Sarah is also allegorical.

When one is situated in the holy-land, a term symbolizing a psychological state of serenity and spirituality, he is her husband and she is his wife. They care for each other and look out for each other in a way that only a husband and wife can. Those are the days when you wake up in the morning and say, "Thank you G-d for giving me such a special person in my life."

But then a famine may erupt, starving your heart and dulling your senses, you end up in "Egypt," which in Hebrew means "constraints" and "limitations." You lose your passion for your spouse, barriers between you are constructed, and your love becomes a challenge.

At these moments one must remember that his wife is, in essence, also a sister and that her husband is also a brother. Even if you don't feel the connection, you remain connected innately; even if you don't experience the romance consciously, you remain linked essentially. Because the shared bond between a wife and her husband is not only the result of a created union at a later point in their lives; rather the spouse relationship is innate and intrinsic, in the words of the Zohar, "two halves of the same soul[4]." A marriage, in the Jewish perspective, is not only a union of two distinct people; it is a reunion of two souls that were one and then, prior to birth, separated. In marriage, they are reunited.

The relationship between spouses goes beyond feelings. We crave to always be husbands and wives, but sometimes -- for our marriages to survive and thrive -- we must become brothers and sisters. Whether you feel it or not, your wife is one with you, always[5]. Do not allow the loyalty and trust to wane, on both sides. Even if there are arguments, difficulties, and hardships, maintain the loyalty to each other, like healthy and functional siblings.

Abraham and Sarah taught us, that when the relationship becomes challenging, you cease to be husband and wife; now you become brother and sister. You fall back on the innate, intrinsic oneness which binds you in an eternal link. This, in fact, brings an awesome benefit to a husband. When you are there for your wife even when you're not in the mood for it, an extraordinary energy of love is later

returned to you. That's why Abraham told Sarah that by saying that she was his sister, he would not only survive but would also receive special gifts.

G-d My Sister, G-d My Wife

"A sound! My beloved knocks! Open your heart to Me, My sister, My wife, My dove, My twin (5)." In these stirring words, King Solomon describes the Jew both as G-d's spouse and as G-d's sibling.

There are times when the Jew is situated in the holy-land, inspired and motivated to live a spiritual and G-dly life. Like in a good marriage, the Jew is excited about G-d, yearning to be close to Him and fulfilled by having a relationship with Him.

But then come the days when you enter into a psychological "Egypt," where your inner spirituality is numbed, as you are overtaken by self-centered lusts, beastly cravings, negative impulses, and enslaving addictions. Your marriage with G-d seems all but dead.

The key to survival at those moments is to remember that G-d is not only a spouse but also a sibling. We are sacred and G-dly not just because we feel it and we love it, but because a person is inherently a sacred creature, and G-dliness is intrinsic to the human being's very composition. Whether I'm in the mood for it or not, when I behave in a moral and spiritual way, I am being loyal to my true self.

You are holy not because you feel holy, but because you are essentially holy – this is one of the most fundamental ideas of Judaism, expressed in the first narrative about the first Jew.

When the Russian winter threatens to freeze our souls, it's time to recall the warmth provided by G-d as a member of the family. It's time to remember the intrinsic bond existing between you and your sibling that will never fail[6].

[1] Once Upon A Chassid, p. 217.

[2] Genesis 12:10-13.

[3] Cf. Likkutei Sichos vol. 20 Lech Lecha. Based on the idea of the Baal Shem Tov (Baal Shem Tov Al Hatorah Lech Lecha), that as a result of descending to Egypt Abraham's relationship with Sarah was compromised, for then he began seeing her beauty as autonomous of the Divine beauty, it is possible to suggest that the explanation in the essay is relevant on some level to the literal story as well.

[4] Vayikra p. 7b.

[5] Song of Songs 5:2.

[6] This essay is based on the writings of the Chabad Chassidic Masters (Or Hatorah Emor, pp. 149-151; Safer Hammamarim 5627, pp. 248-251; Likkutei Sichos vol. 20 Lech, and Tanya chapters 18 and 25).

Insights Parshas Vayeira - Cheshvan 5782

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

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

Cutting Them Loose

Avraham made a great feast on the day that Yitzchak was weaned (21:8).

This week's parsha retells the stories surrounding the prophecy to Avraham and Sarah that they will have a child, and the subsequent birth of Yitzchak the following year.

Rashi (ad loc) quotes the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 53:10) and explains that the word ויגמל means "weaned" and this is referring to the end of the twenty-fourth month (i.e. age 2) when a child is weaned of his mother's milk. There is another opinion in the Midrash that it is referring to the age when he is weaned off of the evil inclination, which is the age of thirteen (bar mitzvah) as we see in Chazal (Avos D'rebbe Nosson 16:2). What is the relationship between being weaned off milk and that of being weaned off the yetzer hara that the same word ויגמל – can refer to a bar mitzvah or being weaned off milk?

In order to properly understand this concept, we must delve further into the meaning of the word גומל and its most common iteration – to be gomel chessed or gemillus chessed. Why are acts of kindness called gemillus chessed? The answer is that at its very essence doing chessed for someone can actually be a source of pain for them. Rashi (Vayikra 20:17) explains that the word chessed in Aramaic means shame. As explained in prior editions of INSIGHTS, Aramaic is the language of understanding another's perspective. In other words, as you are doing someone a kindness they feel shame for not being self-sufficient and having to rely on the largesse of others.

The expression gemillus chessed is very precise; it tells us how we have to perform acts of kindness. We have to give the recipient the ability to be weaned off of the chessed. In this way, they can become self-sufficient and restore their sense of self. Just as importantly, we must also wean ourselves from the feeling of being benefactors. We must focus on the ultimate way to perform acts of kindness and realize that they aren't about us. This is why Maimonides rules that the highest level of tzedakah is when neither party is aware of the other's identity.

This is also the connection between bar mitzvah and a weaned child. One might wonder why for a boy we use the word bar mitzvah and for a girl bas mitzvah – it's incongruous: The word bar is of Aramaic origin and bas is of Hebrew origin. Why isn't a thirteen-year-old male called a ben mitzvah, which would be the Hebrew equivalent?

The word bar in Aramaic doesn't just mean "son of" – it originates from another meaning for bar in Aramaic: "outside of." The true meaning of bar mitzvah is that he is now weaned and independent. Essentially, he is now ready to go out and leave his parental family unit and begin his own, thus he is "outside" the family. Conversely, women

are always associated as daughters of the family they grew up in – thus she remains a bas mitzvah.

Rooting Out the Problem

And he settled in the desert of Paran and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt (21:21).

In this week's parsha, the Torah relates the events surrounding the birth of Yitzchak and the subsequent conflict with his older (half) brother Yishmael. At this point, Sarah demands that Avraham expel both Yishmael and his mother Hagar from their home.

The Torah goes on to tell us the details of what happens to Yishmael and Hagar in the desert and how Yishmael was miraculously saved from an illness after his mother despaired for his life. The Torah ends the narrative with the statement that Yishmael settled there in the desert and that his mother Hagar took a wife for him from Egypt.

Rashi (ad loc) comments, "[Hagar obtained a wife] from the place where she grew up [...] This is what people say, 'Throw a stick in the air and it will land on its root.'"

However, the Torah doesn't mention random facts and Rashi isn't given to repeating trite colloquialisms; so what is the Torah trying to teach us about Hagar and Yishmael and how is Rashi defining what Hagar did?

The Talmud (Yoma 38b) on the verse "and the name of the wicked shall rot" (Mishlei 10:7) explains that this means we do not use the names of the wicked. Rashi (ad loc) explains this further to mean that we do not give the names of the wicked to our children. The commentators (Ritva and Tosfos Yeshanim ad loc) ask on this assertion: Seeing as Yishmael is considered such a wicked person, why were righteous Kohanim Gedolim and Tana'im given this name? They answer is that since Hashem said that this name should be given to Yishmael we are not concerned. Alternatively, R' Elazar holds the opinion that Yishmael did teshuvah (Bava Basra 16b). Yet these answers require a deeper understanding. How do these answers address the fact that Yishmael behaved so wickedly for much of his life? In other words, even if someone repents at the end of his life, how do we reconcile the fact that the vast majority of his life was rife with evil acts and that those acts were committed by someone named Yishmael? It seems odd to name someone after him.

It is fascinating to note that the Torah only calls Yishmael by name in a few places: when he is born, when he is circumcised, and when Avraham Avinu dies and Yishmael defers to Yitzchak by the burial (see 25:9 and Rashi ad loc). In this week's parsha – the only place in the Torah that has a story of any length about Yishmael – he is never referred to by his name (Yishmael), rather he is always called "נער — lad." This is very odd, Yishmael had already been introduced a few times, why does the Torah refrain from using his name?

The Torah is telling us something remarkable. The word נער means to shake and be unstable. The reason a youth is called a נער is because a person in his youth does not yet

have an identity and he is in a constant state of flux. The key event in this week's parsha is the prophecy and birth of Yitzchak Avinu to the true wife of Avraham Avinu. This displacement served to destabilize Yishmael and caused his identity to be in a state of flux; that is why he is now called a נָעוּר. These evil acts weren't done under the identity of the name Yishmael. Therefore, the name can be used in the future.

It was the instability in his self-definition that caused him to act out and misbehave. Hagar, in her motherly wisdom, recognized that her son needed to find his identity. She therefore arranged a wife for him from the land of Egypt – a place where he is of royal lineage. Hagar was trying to take him back to his family origins and root him to stabilize him. This is what Rashi means when he says, “throw a stick in the air and it will land on its root.”

Did You Know...

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

Josephus states that he saw the pillar himself (Antiquities 1:11:4). Additionally, the Gemara (Berachos 54b) tells us of the bracha (Baruch Dayan HaEmes) that one should say upon seeing that pillar. Clearly, the Gemara wouldn't be giving us a bracha to say if there was zero chance of ever seeing this pillar of salt – so we know that it existed in the time of the Gemara and there's a chance that it still exists today. So, where might it be?

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

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Parashat Vayera

Make Yourself at Home!

"And behold - three men were standing over him!" (18:2)

There are some people who look like they are giving but they are really taking. And there are some people who look like they are taking when they are really giving.

Anyone who buys a \$5,000-a-plate charity dinner is giving a lot of charity, but he is also getting a lot of status mixed in with his sushi.

On the other hand, there are people who look like they are takers but they are really giving.

Once there was a Jewish traveling salesman who found himself in a largely non-Jewish town on Friday afternoon. His business had delayed him way beyond his expectations and there was now no way he could get home for Shabbat. He had heard that there was just one Orthodox family in town where he could spend Shabbat, and as the sun was starting to set he made his way there.

The owner of the house opened the door to him and showed him into the living room. "May I stay here for Shabbat?" asked the traveling salesman. "If you like," replied the host. "The price is \$200." "\$200!" exclaimed the traveling salesman. "That's more than a first-class hotel!" "Suit yourself," replied the host.

Realizing that he had no option, the salesman reluctantly agreed. In the short time left before Shabbat, the host showed the salesman his room, the kitchen and the other facilities for his Shabbat stay.

As soon as the host left the room, the salesman sat down and thought to himself. "Well, if this is going to cost me \$200, I am going to get my money's worth." During the entire Shabbat he availed himself unstintingly of the house's considerable facilities. He helped himself to the delicious food in the fridge. He had a long luxurious shower, both before and after Shabbat. He really made himself "at home."

When he had showered and packed, he made his way downstairs and plunked two crisp \$100 bills down on the table in front of his host.

"What's this?" inquired the host. "That's the money I owe you," replied the salesman. "You don't owe me anything. Do you really think I would take money from a fellow Jew for the mitzvah of hospitality?" "But you told me that Shabbat here costs \$200."

"I only told you that to be sure that you would make yourself at home."

When a guest comes to your home, his natural feeling is one of embarrassment. No one likes being a taker. When a guest brings a present, the worst thing you can say is, "You shouldn't have done that!" Rather, take the bottle of wine (or whatever it is), open it, place it in the middle of the table, and say, "Thank you so much!" By allowing him to contribute to the meal, you will mitigate his feeling of being a taker and you will have done the mitzvah of hospitality to a higher degree.

The mitzvah of hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence. We learn this from the beginning of this

week's Torah portion. G-d had come to visit Avraham on the third day after his brit mila, the most painful day. G-d made the day extremely hot so that Avraham should not be bothered by guests. When G-d saw that Avraham was experiencing more pain from his inability to do the mitzvah of hospitality than the pain of the brit mila, He sent three angels who appeared as men so that Avraham could do the mitzvah of hospitality. When these "men" appeared, Avraham got up from in front of the Divine Presence to greet his guests.

Hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence.

Sources: Rashi, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler and others

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***Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Vayera
Suspect Subtly, With Honor and Respect***

I would like to say over a brilliant shtickle Torah from the present-day Tolner Rebbe of Yerushalayim, Rav Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg.

In the beginning of our parsha, the Malachim come to Avraham Avinu (who does not realize they are Angels). Avraham Avinu offers them to wash their feet, and rest up a bit. Rashi explains that the reason he asked them to wash their feet was because he thought that they were Arabs who bow down to the dust of their feet.

There were different forms of Avodah Zarah. Some people worshipped the sun. Other people worshipped the moon. There was, apparently, a particular sect that worshipped the dust of their feet. Avraham did not want these visitors to walk into his tent with their Avodah Zarah on their bodies, so he asked them to first wash their feet. Rashi here comments that Lot had no such reservations and offered these same guests, when they came to visit him, lodging first—and only afterwards the opportunity to wash their feet. This is the Rashi at the beginning of Parshas Vayera. [Bereshis 18:4]

However, there is a different Rashi later on in the parsha [Bereshis 19:2], when the Malachim enter Sodom. Rashi asks on the expression "Take lodging and wash your feet": Is it customary to first take lodging and only later to wash up? A person does not go to sleep and then take a shower; he showers and then goes to bed! Rashi there answers that Lot was afraid that the people of Sodom would come and find his guests all washed up from their travels and would suspect that he had already been hosting them for several days. He preferred that they remain dusty to appear like they had just arrived and had not yet had time to wash up. In Sodom, they did not take kindly to people who offered hospitality to wayfarers. If they would see that Lot had strangers in his house with clean feet, the Sodomites might fine him for violating their "zoning rules"!

Thus, there is a contradiction between the two comments of Rashi. In the beginning of the Parsha, Rashi says that Lot offered lodging and then washing because he was not

concerned about the Avodah Zarah of the dust of their feet. Rashi later on in the Parsha says that he did this to trick the Sodomites into thinking the guests just arrived. This is the first question the Tolner Rebbe asked.

The Tolner Rebbe's second question is the following: Why does Rashi even mention Lot at the beginning of the parsha when explaining why Avraham said first wash and then seek lodging? That really has nothing to do with what Avraham told the Malachim. Let Rashi save his comments about Lot for the later chapter in Chumash that deals with Lot's interaction with the Angels! What is the need to raise the issue now?

Third of all (this is an issue that many other Chumash commentaries also deal with) – why did Avraham Avinu say "take a little water and wash your feet" (me'at mayim). Is Avraham Avinu being stingy? Is he worried that he will need to schlep too much water? By food, he gave them each a tongue of a cow, which is huge. But when it comes to water, he only allows them to have a little bit. What is going on here?

These are the three questions that the Tolner Rebbe raises regarding the interaction(s) of Avraham (and Lot) with the Malachim.

The Tolner Rebbe answers beautifully. There is a popular maxim about how a host should treat his guests: Kab'deyhu, v'Chash'deyhu – Honor him, but be suspicious of him. When someone who is a perfect stranger comes to your house, you need to treat him with honor and respect. But at the same time, do not leave the silver unlocked. Treat your guest like a king, but count your silverware at the end of Shabbos because you really don't know what type of person this is.

Actually, there is no such saying in Chazal of Kab'deyhu v'Chash'deyhu. The world says this, but Chazal have a variant expression (found in Maseches Derech Eretz): All people should be in your eyes as if they were robbers, but honor them like Rabban Gamliel (the Nasi of the Jewish people). This is a very difficult thing to do. You must suspect that a person is going to steal you blind, but at the same time treat him like he is the Prince of Israel.

Maseches Derech Eretz then tells a story: There was an incident with Rav Yehoshua. He had a guest who he fed and provided with everything he needed. He then took him up to the roof. He told him "My guest room is in the attic." Fine. Good night. Rabbi Yehoshua then (unbeknownst to his visitor) removed the ladder which served as the stairs between the attic and the main dwelling area.

In the middle of the night, this visitor went around collecting all the valuables he found in the upper story of the dwelling. He went to the place where the ladder was supposed to be. Lo and behold the ladder was not there. The guest falls to the ground and is left lying there until the next morning. The next morning, he complains to his host "You took away the ladder!" Meanwhile, the valuables are

spread out all over the floor. Rabbi Yehoshua tells him “You thief! We know how to deal with your type!”

Rabbi Yehoshua commented: “Any person (who you don’t know) should be in your eyes as if he is a thief, and nevertheless you must honor him as if he were Rabban Gamliel.” So we learn in Maseches Derech Eretz. The succinct way in which the masses express this idea is “Kab’deyhu v’chash’deyhu.”

Similarly, in this parsha, Avraham Avinu is demonstrating how to properly be suspicious of your guest. In practical terms, how do you implement “Kab’deyhu v’chash’deyhu”? Do we need to ask for photo ID whenever someone shows up at our door? Should we ask all guests to leave us a credit card when they “check in” for our home hospitality “just in case we need to cover the incidental charges”? Is that how we are supposed to treat our guests? Or, when the guest is about to leave, do we ask to look through his luggage before he steps out of our house?

We obviously don’t do that, because that is insulting. When you suspect a person, you need to do so in such a subtle manner that he does not even begin to grasp that you are suspicious of him. This is why Avraham says to his guests “Please take a little bit of water.” If he would give each one a barrel of water like he gave each one a tongue, they would ask, “Why is he giving us so much water to wash? Does he think we are that dirty?” Avraham very delicately says, “Please take a little bit of water to wash yourselves” so that they do not have the slightest inclination that this has to do with Avodah Zarah.

Now we understand how subtle Avraham was with this comment. Lot was the disciple par excellence of Avraham Avinu regarding hachnosas orchim (to such an extent that later on in the parsha Lot is willing to give over his daughters to the Sodomite mob rather than to have them mistreat his guests). But even Lot did not recognize what Avraham Avinu was doing when he made these subtle comments to his guests. The reason Lot did not do this was because he did not realize he should do it. Lot learned everything from his uncle. Avraham Avinu gave them a little water, but Lot never sensed the etiquette of Avraham’s mode of expression.

That is why Rashi points out over here at the beginning of the Parsha that this was not the practice of Lot. Rashi is making the point that Lot did not offer a little water because he never grasped the subtlety that this is the way a host should treat his company.

Later on, Lot will in fact have yet another reason why they should wash their feet second rather than first. Rashi there tells us that second reason (because he didn’t want them to look like they had been there for a long time), which was also true. Both reasons are true.

This answers all three questions: There is no contradiction between the Rashis because both of Lot’s reasons are true. Lot really did not offer them to wash first, because he wanted to make them look like they just arrived, as Rashi

says over there. Avraham only offered a little water in order to be subtle about his suspicions that they worshipped the dust on their feet. And the reason why Rashi also contrasts Avraham with Lot over here, is in order to point out that Avraham kept his suspicion of his guests so subtle that Lot did not even realize what was going on.

With this approach, the Tolner Rebbe says an incredible ‘chap’.

On the surface, this maxim that Rav Yehoshua says in Maseches Derech Eretz (that people should suspect every stranger of being a thief and yet honor them like Rabban Gamliel) means that the person should be honored as if he were Rabban Gamliel. However, the Tolner Rebbe says, there is also a hidden message here. Rav Yehoshua and Rabban Gamliel had a history between them. In Maseches Rosh HaShannah [25a], Rav Yehoshua calculated a different day when Yom Kippur should be observed than did Rabban Gamliel. Rabban Gamliel, who was the Nasi, insisted that Rabbi Yehoshua accept the date that Rabban Gamliel calculated as Yom Kippur, and ordered Rabbi Yehoshua to appear before him on the date Rabbi Yehoshua thought was Yom Kippur, carrying his staff and his money bag.

The Gerer Rebbe asks a question on this incident: If Rabban Gamliel wanted Rabbi Yehoshua to admit that he was wrong, why didn’t Rabban Gamliel order him to appear before him and eat a sandwich on the day he thought was Yom Kippur? Taking a money bag and a staff is only a rabbinic prohibition of muktzeh, while breaking one’s fast would be a Biblical offense involving the kares punishment. The answer is that Rabban Gamliel did not want to do that to Rav Yehoshua. Rabban Gamliel had that sensitivity. He did not want to crush Rabbi Yehoshua by asking him to eat on Yom Kippur.

This explanation allows us to view Rabbi Yehoshua’s maxim “...and respect him like Rabban Gamliel” in a new light. He did not mean that a person should respect the suspected thief as if he were Rabban Gamliel. He meant a person should show respect to this person like Rabban Gamliel showed respect to me. Just like Rabban Gamliel did not make me eat on Yom Kippur even though he held I was wrong, but rather he had respect for my self-esteem and personal dignity – that is how you should treat everyone, even if you suspect their character and integrity. There is no mitzvah to crush people or to break them.

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Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parashat Vayera 5782 Seeing the Good

11 Heshvan 5782 October 17, 2021

In Parashat Vayera, we read the story of the city of Sodom. The people of Sodom deteriorated to abominable behavior and their society became morally corrupt, committing acts of burglary, murder, and rape. As a result of this continuous depravity, G-d decided to destroy the city. But first He shared his plan with Abraham, the man who publicized G-d's name in the world by spreading justice and loving-kindness.

We might have expected Abraham to be happy about this news, about evil being punished. But that's not what happened. Abraham begged G-d to look at all the people in Sodom, asking Him to save the city even if there were only fifty righteous people among them. When G-d doesn't find fifty righteous people, Abraham keeps begging, dropping the number gradually until he gets to ten. When it becomes clear that there aren't even ten righteous people in the entire city, Abraham surrenders and stops praying to save Sodom.

What we will examine is why Abraham thought, and G-d agreed, that it was enough to find ten righteous people to warrant saving the entire evil city from punishment. Couldn't those ten righteous people be rescued and the rest of the city be punished?!

To answer this question, we will look at something said by the sages of the Mishna:

...judge all men with the scale weighted in his favor. (Pirkei Avot 1, 6)

Different interpretations have been offered to this Mishna. One of the most fascinating of them is attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Breslev. He said that when we look at others carefully, we should always search for their good points. Even when it is a person who conducts himself badly or immorally, even then, we must look for the good in him since it is impossible that there is a person – even the most corrupt one – who does not occasionally do good deeds. This does not mean that we should ignore others' negative behavior, or see them as positive. The sages of the Mishna ask us to shine a light on the positive things we see around us and to focus on those.

Usually, when we examine ourselves, we are critical and tend to focus on the negative and inappropriate things we've done. The sages of the Mishna ask us to use that same positive outlook when we are introspective, focusing on our positive deeds and traits.

By doing so, not only can we live in peace and joy with our surroundings and with ourselves, but it also leads to real change. When we see someone in a positive light, he himself manages to see that same goodness in himself and manifest it. The same is true when we look inside ourselves. Focusing on our good points is the key to being able to make real change, to make ourselves better people. This is the deeper intent of the saying, "judge all men with the scale weighted in his favor."

Our patriarch Abraham does not ask G-d to ignore the sins of Sodom for a handful of people. He asks G-d to shine a

light on the righteous people who live in Sodom and focus on the good in it, thus allowing the people of the city to undergo a process of real transformation. When it became clear that the city of Sodom isn't capable of containing even a handful of good people, and evil and corruption have consumed even the remnants of good people, it was obvious that they needed to get the full extent of G-d's punishment.

Modern therapists recognize this phenomenon that the sages point to, in light of the interpretation of Rabbi Nachman of Breslev. By tilting the balance toward positive feelings when we examine ourselves, our partners, and our environment – not through a critical prism, and not by ignoring what needs to be repaired, but by focusing on the good points – we can inundate these relationships with joy and create space for personal and moral growth for ourselves and for all those around us.

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

Rav Kook Torah

Vayeira: The Journey to Moriah

Chanan Morrison

"On the third day, Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from afar." (Gen. 22:4)

For three days Abraham traveled, following God's command, towards Mount Moriah. What happened during this long journey, the prelude to the Akeidah? What was Abraham — a loving father, soon to offer up his only son to God — thinking about? What were his feelings and emotions?

In general, the Torah's style is terse. The text focuses on actions, rarely describing inner thoughts and emotions. Still, a careful reading reveals much about how Abraham undertook this trial.

The Greatest Challenge of the Akeidah

God did not initially tell Abraham where to offer his son. The Divine command was deliberately vague. "Bring him there for an offering, on one of the mountains that I will tell you" (Gen. 22:2). Rav Kook wrote that this detail indicates the most challenging and remarkable aspect of the test.

It would not be sufficient for Abraham merely to carry out the technical aspects of the Akeidah. If Abraham had gone through the outward motions — preparing the wood and the knife, bringing the fire and his son — and yet was inwardly troubled by fears and doubts — he would have failed the test.

Abraham needed to be ready to receive an additional prophecy. Only after three days would the exact location of the Akeidah be revealed to him. And that was the catch. Only a person who is at peace with himself, filled with joy and happiness, is a fitting vessel for prophecy. To complete the test, Abraham would require incredible reserves of spiritual fortitude to be able to receive that future prophecy. If Abraham was disturbed by misgivings and doubts, if his

faith and equilibrium were shaken, he would not merit receiving God's instructions where to offer up Isaac.

Without rock-solid faith in his mission, Abraham would never make it to Mount Moriah.

Focused Yet Serene

In fact, the text hints at Abraham's remarkable strength and composure as he readied himself to fulfill God's command.

"Abraham woke up early in the morning." Abraham had been called to sacrifice his beloved son — how could he sleep? A man of lesser faith would have been unable to sleep, disturbed and troubled over what was expected of him. But no feelings of anxiety disturbed the sleep of this remarkable tzaddik. He awoke at his usual hour, eager to perform God's will with the swiftness of a deer and the courage of a lion.

"He saddled his donkey." Abraham's every move was deliberate and precise. His first priority was to arrange the fastest and most assured transportation to fulfill his mission. Only afterward did he attend to other, less essential preparations for the journey.

"He split wood for the offering." Abraham could have waited until later to find wood. Or he could have brought the wood, and only later split it into smaller pieces. But a profound love of God, beyond ordinary human measure, burned so fiercely in his heart that he made sure to prepare every detail.

"And he rose" — not bowed and beaten, but proud and tall, full of strength and energy — "and went to the place that God had told him." All of Abraham's actions were focused on reaching the desired destination and fulfilling God's word. Everything else, whether of a personal or societal nature, became inconsequential compared to his soul's burning desire to carry out the Divine command.

"On the third day..." What happened during those three days? The text does not tell us. The unique experiences of that spiritual journey cannot be expressed in words; they transcend the limits of human language.

"Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from afar." What was to be an oral prophecy — "on one of the mountains that I will tell you" — was in fact a prophetic vision. Abraham's soul experienced a spiritual elevation so great that his senses became united. Speech and sight, together with his faculties of prophetic insight, were combined as one. "Abraham lifted his eyes." His physical eyes became receptors for prophetic vision.

Abraham had passed the most extraordinary aspect of the trial. He had reached Mount Moriah, where the Akeidah would take place.

(Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. I, pp. 86-87)

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Vayeira

פרשת וירא תשפ"ב

ותצחק שרה בקרבה

And Sarah laughed to herself. (18:12)

Sarah *Imeinu*, the *tzadekes*, righteous and pious Matriarch, was a prophetess. Thus, her incredulous laughter begs elucidation. Is anything beyond Hashem's ability? Indeed, it is specifically this question that Hashem presented to Avraham *Avinu*. Furthermore, why did Sarah deny her mirthful reaction to the news that she would have a child? It seems that when Avraham *Avinu* laughed at the same news, it was acceptable. Why did Sarah's reaction draw the Almighty's subtle rebuke? To set the record straight, Sarah *Imeinu's* laughter was no different than that of Avraham; both expressed joy and gratitude. Nonetheless, Hashem saw a nuanced variation, a tinge of impurity in Sarah's laughter, sufficient to warrant His rebuke. Wherein lay the difference between these two laughers?

Horav Yisrael Belsky, zl, explains that the slight tinge of laughter, rooted in ridicule, which stained Sarah's expression of joy was so minute that the Matriarch herself was unaware of it. How did it occur? The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, and *leitzaanus*, ridicule/cynicism, are total opposites. One who ridicules lacks *yiraas Shomayim*. Therefore, Sarah, who was certain that she was filled with *yiraas Shomayim*, understood that ridicule had no place in her personality. The slightest vestige of ridicule would have tainted her *yiraas Shomayim*, and she would have noticed it. This is why she replied, *Lo tzachakti*, "I did not laugh." She intimated that had it been a laugh of ridicule, she would have noticed a drop in her level of *yiraas Shomayim*, which did not occur. She was confident that her laughter was an expression of joy — not ridicule.

Avraham responded that although he did not understand how it was possible, Hashem had spoken, which means that He sensed something improper, even though Avraham and Sarah did not. Sarah accepted the rebuke, acknowledging the fact that it was possible to be (on some remote level) insensitive to the ridicule in one's own mirth. She worked on herself to the point that this failing, which Hashem identified in her, would be expunged. From now on, her manifestation of joy would be one that expressed *simchah shel mitzvah*, the joy of performing a *mitzvah*, in its most pristine form.

It is for this reason that when Sarah observed Yishmael "laughing," she understood that the laughter which Hagar's son expressed was not a laughter of joy, but a malicious form of laughter that bespoke his latent tendency toward murder and idol worship. We derive a powerful lesson herein: Laughter is not innocuous. Laughter can betray the real motivation behind it. Yishmael grew up in Avraham *Avinu's* home. Hence, he was privy to the character refinement and moral cultivation that existed in this home. Furthermore, G-d was an intrinsic part of their lives. Thus, Yishmael's laughter should have been a refined, honorable expression of joy. For all intents and

purposes, quite possibly, as far as Yishmael was concerned – it probably was. However, Sarah, having learned a powerful lesson concerning the depth of expression that laughter can manifest, realized that something was amiss in Yishmael's laughter. When she shared her feelings with Avraham, he was at first not in agreement, until Hashem instructed him to listen to Sarah. She had a deeper understanding of laughter, having herself undergone an educative experience followed by self-imposed sensitivity training.

Rav Belsky makes an insightful observation concerning the *leitz*, scoffer/cynic/ridiculer, and his bag of tricks called *leitzanus*. Hashem created the universe *yeish mei'ayin, ex nihilo*; something from nothing. The *leitz* employs his power of ridicule to create nothing out of something. This is why *yiraas Shomayim* and *leitzanus* can never coalesce. The *leitz* tears down anything in his way, because it means nothing to him. Nothing is sacred if it is in his way. One who fears Hashem recognizes His Creation and its significance. He acknowledges that everything in this world has a purpose; otherwise, Hashem would not have created it.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* concludes with an exhortation to expunge ridicule and cynicism from our lives. As long as we are subject to the effects of these reprehensible character deficiencies, we will never rise above the exile in which we live. Wherever we go, we take it along with us. It is similar to someone who carries a foul-smelling object in his pocket. He thinks the stench is the product of the environment in which he finds himself, so he moves elsewhere. It still smells. He moves again. It still smells. He never thinks that he is transporting the smell from place to place – in his pocket! The *leitz* takes his miserable outlook on life wherever he goes. In the beginning, he is funny. When the people stop laughing and he is rejected for what he is, he just moves on and takes his toxic personality elsewhere – until someone has the courage to tell him: You are not wanted here.

ויהי בשחת אלקים את ערי הככר ויזכר אלקים את אברהם וישלח את ליש מתוך ההפכה

And so it was when Hashem destroyed the cities of the plain that G-d remembered Avraham; so he sent Lot from amidst the upheaval. (19:29)

Rashi asks: What is the remembrance of Avraham concerning Lot? He explains that Hashem remembered that Lot was aware that Sarah was Avraham's wife, and he heard Avraham say (in Egypt) that she was his sister. Lot did not divulge that Sarah *Imeinu* was, indeed, Avraham *Avinu's* wife. Therefore, Hashem took pity on Lot. In other words, Lot was rewarded with his life because he did not inform the Egyptians that Sarah was actually Avraham's wife. If Lot would have spoken up, the Egyptians would have killed Avraham, leaving Sarah a widow. Sarah was really Yiskah, the daughter of Haran, sister of Lot, who was taken in by Terach, her grandfather, upon Haran's

untimely death. What was so laudatory about Lot's silence? Should he be rewarded for not causing the death of his brother-in-law?

Concerning Noach, the Torah writes, "And Noach found favor in the eyes of Hashem" (Ibid. 6:5). *Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 28:9)* teach that actually Noach was not deserving of being spared the fate suffered by the rest of the world. Despite the fact that he was righteous and perfect, when the Destroyer is granted permission to devastate, one needs a special merit in order to be spared. Noach found favor. This is what protected him – not his righteousness! If so, asks *Horav Eliyahu Svei, zl*, how is it that such a minor act of silence – the act of not catalyzing Avraham *Avinu's* death – served to protect Lot from the devastation that wiped out Sodom?

The *Rosh Yeshivah* suggests that *Chazal* are teaching us an important principle concerning the extraordinary positive effect of even the slightest relationship with someone as holy and prestigious as Avraham *Avinu*. Lot did practically nothing. Indeed, he was passive, and his deference saved Avraham's life. This in and of itself is sufficient reason for him to have been saved from Sodom – at a time when everyone else was destroyed.

We find a similar instance concerning Og, King of Bashan. Moshe *Rabbeinu* feared initiating any altercation with Og due to Og's merit, earned when he informed Avraham that Lot had been taken captive. It was a simple act of decency, performed for the wrong reason. Actually, Og hoped that Avraham would rush into battle and lose his life, thus freeing him to marry Sarah. Nonetheless, the slightest relationship which benefitted Avraham was considered meritorious for Og – enough that Moshe feared his worthiness.

In connection with this concept, *Horav Yechezkel Levinstein, zl*, comments, concerning *Chazal's* enjoinder, *Hevei zanav l'arrayos v'al tehi rosh la'shualim*; "Be a tail to lions, rather than a head to foxes" (*Pirkei Avos* 4:15). He explains that Lot was spared from certain death as a result of his connection to Avraham. When a person performs a favor for someone, it is considered as if he has given him a part of himself. Thus, he is bound to him and shares in his merits. Since Lot acted kindly to Avraham – even though it was not much – it was still considered as if he had given Avraham a part of himself. This connection was his source of salvation. The *Mashgiach* cites the *Chasid Yaavetz* who explains the above quoted dictum from *Pirkei Avos*: "A tail of a lion is still a lion; and the head of a fox is still a fox." This means that if one conjoins with a lion, regardless of where and how he is connected, he is a lion. Likewise, if he is joined only to a fox, he is a fox. Whatever the linkage, it creates a bond that makes one a part of the subject to whom he is fused.

We note that following the devastation of Sodom and Lot's having been saved, the Angels wanted to take

Lot and return him to Avraham *Avinu's* proximity. Lot demurred, claiming that he was more comfortable and felt safer not being near Avraham. *Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 50:11)* explain Lot's reasoning, "As long as I was in Sodom, I was compared to the evil Sodomites. Therefore, I appeared meritorious. In comparison to Avraham, however, I will pale." What happened all of a sudden? He had been with Avraham prior to moving to Sodom. It did not seem to have been a problem then. Why would a relationship with Avraham now present itself as an issue?

Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, explains that earlier Lot had been connected with Avraham. As such, he was a part of the Patriarch. Once they separated and Lot moved to Sodom, their relationship was severed. Therefore, despite his present realization of his earlier grievous error, it was too late. The prior connection could not be repaired to its previous state in which Lot was a part of Avraham. He would now have to fend for himself. This proved to be too much of a challenge for him to navigate. As long as one remains steadfastly connected to a pure and sacred source, he is included in it. Once the affiliation has been dissolved, he no longer enjoys the benefits.

והאלקים נסה את אברהם

G-d tested Avraham. (22:1)

The question is obvious: Why is the *Akeidah*, Binding (of Yitzchak), considered a test of Avraham *Avinu's* conviction? One would think that for a thirty-seven-year old man to "stretch out his neck" and prepare to be slaughtered as an offering to Hashem is an extraordinary test of his own faith. Why is it not considered the test of Yitzchak? The commentators, each in his own idiomatic manner, offer an insightful explanation. Yitzchak *Avinu* achieved a level of spirituality which was extraordinary. As the first one willing to allow his father to slaughter him as a sacrifice to Hashem, Yitzchak not only set a standard for our people, but he also engraved in the hearts and minds -- in the psyche of Jews throughout time -- the concept of a willingness to devote ourselves to Hashem, even if it means the ultimate commitment. We tend to overlook one aspect of Yitzchak's commitment: his education; his mentor.

Yitzchak was the primary student of Avraham. As such, he was raised from birth in the most positive, spiritual environment, inculcated by parents who were themselves the exemplars of spiritual dedication. Is it any wonder that Yitzchak acted accordingly? This is what his parents taught him! Is it then any wonder that the *Akeidah* is known as the test of Avraham? He demonstrated the depth of his faith when he showed what his student had achieved.

וישם אותו על המזבח ממעל לעצים

And he placed him on the Altar atop the wood. (22:9)

The *Yalkut Shemoni (Parashas Vayeira 101)* teaches that Avraham *Avinu's* eyes looked into Yitzchak *Avinu's* eyes, while Yitzchak's eyes gazed up at the

Heavens. Tears dropped incessantly from Avraham's eyes. We derive from here that Avraham did not abrogate his human emotions. He was a father whose overwhelming love for his son was evident throughout the *Akeidah*. His love for Hashem was evidently greater. Avraham wanted to carry out Hashem's command with total equanimity and joy. Nonetheless, it pained him greatly that executing the command meant slaughtering his son. The *Alter, zl, m'Slabodka* wonders why Avraham did not subdue his emotions altogether in order to perform the *mitzvah* in total simchah.

He explains that Avraham refused to subdue his emotions totally, because this would involve uprooting his unparalleled love for his son to an extent. Hashem imbues a father with love for his child. It is wrong for a parent to uproot this love, because doing so would make his service to the Almighty almost mechanical in nature. Hashem does not want robots without feeling and sensitivity. He wants us to be normal and to serve Him amid normalcy. On the contrary, Hashem commanded Avraham to sacrifice the son whom he loves. One whose relationship with Hashem causes him to become emotionless, unfeeling, uncaring and robot-like is missing the point. This is not what Hashem asks of us. He wants normal human beings – not angels.

וישב אברהם אל נערייו... וישב אברהם בבאר שבע

Avraham returned to his young men... and Avraham stayed at Be'er Sheva. (22:19)

The Torah informs us that following the *Akeidah*, Avraham *Avinu*, made an about face and returned home with the two lads - assistants (Eliezer and Yishmael) who had accompanied him and Yitzchak *Avinu* on this momentous journey. Four people left – three people returned. Where was Yitzchak? *Targum Yonasan* explains that the future Patriarch, who was prepared to relinquish his life for Hashem, seems missing from the equation. Apparently, Avraham had sent his primary son to Shem ben Noach to study in his *yeshivah*. Yitzchak spent the next three years studying Torah from Shem.

This directive begs elucidation. Why did Yitzchak require a change of venue, indeed, *galus*, exile, to Shem's *yeshivah*. Was Avraham's Torah insufficient for guiding Yitzchak on the correct path? Avraham seems to have appropriately prepared Yitzchak for his mission in life. To achieve *Olah Temimah*, perfect sacrifice, status is not a simple achievement. Certainly, Avraham's educational abilities were as good as those of Shem. The Torah that Avraham taught was the epitome of *Toras chesed*. How did it differ from the Torah taught by Shem?

Horav Moshe Tzvi Neriah, zl, cites *Chazal* and early commentators who identify Avraham's distinctive method of teaching Torah through the medium of outreach to the masses, to the point that he even published manuscripts explaining the fallacies of idol-worship and the existence of one Supreme Creator (*Rambam Hilchos Avodah Zarah 1:5*). Shem, in contrast, maintained his

yeshivah for those unique highly-motivated seekers of truth. Avraham went into the streets and preached to the masses. Shem remained ensconced in his cubicle and worked with those who came to him.

Clearly, during all the years that Yitzchak was home, he was the repository of his father's *derech*, method, of teaching. He would one day assume the position of mentor to the world. As such, his father taught and prepared him for that moment in which he would transition into Patriarchal status, when the baton of leadership would pass on to him. This was the case until the *Akeidah*, when Avraham observed the spiritual plateau to which Yitzchak rose; when he saw him achieve the apex of *yiraah* and *ahavah*, awe and love, of Hashem. When his unequivocal faith to the Almighty burst forth, Avraham realized that Yitzchak was no longer the same Yitzchak that had departed with him three days earlier. Yitzchak was no longer the person to reach out to the masses. His level of *avodas HaKodesh*, service to the Almighty, was not something that could be inculcated into just anyone. It was for *yechidei segulah*, unique individuals, who had achieved a lofty spiritual plateau and sought to grow higher and better. Thus, Avraham decided that his son needed to change *yeshivos*, to transition into the *derech* which Shem promoted. His *yeshivah* was not for "everyone." Indeed, later on (when Yitzchak came to greet his *kallah*, Rivkah *Imeinu*), the future Patriarch could be found secluded in Be'er Lachai Ro'ie. Until now, he had served Hashem through the medium of *ahavah*; it was now time to transition to the lofty plane of *yiraah*.

Kiruv richokim, outreach to the unaffiliated, requires intense commitment, extraordinary love and a heavy dose of common sense. Rarely does a "one size fits all" approach work successfully. The expert outreach professionals who succeed in their field are individuals who innovate and devote themselves caringly and lovingly to their work and to their charges. Clearly, every culture, every environment -- both geographically and societal--presents their individual challenges, but through deft skills and dedication, one can successfully maneuver himself to surmount them.

Horav Yitzchak David Grossman, Shlita, is such an individual, who, through his life's work, has saved thousands of young unaffiliated and alienated men and women from both physical and spiritual disaster. While every person/situation is different, his approach from day one has always been: to attempt to understand the person whom he is trying to win over; neither threaten nor castigate; sympathize, care and show love; and, above all, be sincere. These are the ingredients that often spell the difference between success and failure with regard to outreach.

When *Rav Grossman* arrived in Migdal HaEmek, the city which he almost singlehandedly transformed, he discovered that many of the stores were open on *Shabbos*.

He figured that taking on all the stores at once would be a lesson in futility. He would begin with the popular restaurant that was near his *shul*. He entered the restaurant *Minchah* time on *Erev Shabbos* to see an establishment filled with young men and women playing games, listening to music and engaged in various other acts of *chillul Shabbos*. Most of them adhered to the Sephardic custom of calling out *B'oi Kallah*, "Welcome, Bride," in reference to the *Shabbos* Queen, who was soon to make her appearance. All this was done amidst flagrant *chillul Shabbos*. A lesser person would have cringed or even shouted out at them for their hypocrisy.

Rav Grossman reminded himself of a similar incident which had occurred with *Horav Aryeh Levin, zl*, who fruitlessly attempted to convince a barber to close his shop for *Shabbos*. Finally, with no other recourse, *Rav Aryeh* took a seat near the shop's entrance, hoping that his presence would inspire the customers to return home and observe *Shabbos*. The potential customers demurred from entering the shop out of embarrassment in front of *Rav Aryeh*. He would do the same, hoping that he, too, would succeed in closing the door. Within a few weeks, the barber noticed that his business was suffering due to *Rav Aryeh's* intervention. In due time, other barbers closed their shops prior to *Shabbos*.

Rav Grossman entered the restaurant and was overwhelmed with the cacophony of sound, the clinking of beer bottles and the calling out of *B'oi Kallah*. Alas, welcoming the *Shabbos* bride in such a manner defamed it. Clearly, these young men and women were clueless concerning the meaning of *Shabbos*, its sanctity as an integral aspect of Judaism. *Rav Grossman* was in a quandary. This group was not open to a lecture on *Shabbos*. They would ignore him, laugh at him, or throw him out. Unless he showed that he respected them despite their present alienation from religion, he was wasting his time. He decided on a brilliant ploy. He walked into the center of the room and recited the final verse of *Ashrei* -- *Va'anchnu nevareich Kah mei atah v'ad olam Hallelukah*. Without waiting for anyone to react, he immediately commenced with *Kaddish*, *Yisgadal v'yiskadash Shmei Rabba!* Immediately everyone in the restaurant screamed out, "Amen" at the appropriate place.

As soon as he concluded *Kaddish*, he began *Shemoneh Esrai*, followed by *Chazaras Ha'Shatz*, the repetition of the Prayer. When it was time for *Kedushah*, everyone participated. He finished *Minchah*, and, while he had their attention, he called out, "*Chevrah, Shabbos Kodesh! Shabbos Kodesh! Holy Shabbos!*" He had their attention, and he followed up with an insightful story. Needless to say, *Rav Grossman* had caused a stir, which became a movement that catalyzed the return to religion for these and other young people. He was unable to convince them to come to *shul*, so he brought the *shul* to them -- and others, as he went from restaurant to restaurant to *daven*

with the customers. He understood them; he respected them. They, in turn, realized that he sincerely cared for them. This brought about their “homecoming” to *Yiddishkeit*.

Va’ani Tefillah

וּנְפֹשֵׁי כְעָפָר לְכֹל תְּהִיָּה – *V’Nafshi ke’afar lakol tiheyeh*. And let my soul be like dust to everyone.

Concerning Avraham Avinu, the Torah writes, *V’samti es zaraacha k’afar ha’aretz*, “I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth” (*Bereishis* 13:16). (Various interpretations abound regarding dust as a simile for *Klal Yisrael*.) The *Chidushei HaRim* interprets dust as denoting something which people step on and trample. It is also a reference to Avraham Avinu’s sense of humility in considering himself lowly and unworthy of acclaim and recognition. Hashem told him that He would make his descendants just like him, i.e., they, too, would maintain a sense of humility. Thus, when a Jew acts with arrogance, he not only acts inappropriately, he also goes against the “grain” with which Hashem imbued him.

In 1954, the *Bais Yisrael* attended the *Knessiah Gedolah* which took place in Yerushalayim. It was the first such conference to convene following the cataclysmic destruction of European Jewry. Thus, it was attended by thousands of Jews from all corners of the globe. When the *Rebbe* entered the room, the entire congregation rose up in reverence for the saintly leader of *Gerrer Chassidus*. As he walked to the dais, the *Rebbe* kept “mumbling” to himself. He later explained that he had been reciting the verse, *V’nafshi ke’afar lakol ti’heyeh*, to remind himself not to let the public acclaim go to his head.

Dedicated in loving memory of our dear father and grandfather

Arthur I. Genshaft

יצחק בן נחום ישראל ז"ל נפטר חי' חשוון תשל"ט

Neil and Marie Genshaft

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prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

Ask Rav Aviner: toratravaviner@yahoo.com

Ha-Rav answers hundreds of text message questions a day. Here's a sample:

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov in Tzefat?!

Q: Is it true that Rebbe Nachman of Breslov was reburied in Tzefat and is no longer in Uman?

A: This claim has no strong basis.

Rambam's Medical Advice

Q: Is it permissible today to disagree with the Rambam's medical advice?

A: Yes. The Rambam explains at length in his medical writings that they are not based on Torah but rather on Galen. Baruch Hashem, medicine has greatly advanced since then.

Baal Shem Tov and Halachah

Q: The Baal Shem Tov did things which appear to be contrary to Halachah. How so?

A: They appear to be contrary but are not. They can be explained (The Satmar Rebbe opposed telling stories which seem to contradict Halachah so people will not come to take Halachah lightly. In the book "Abir Ha-Ro'im", p. 31-33).

Sha'ar Ha-Rachamim

Q: Is it true that the Messiah will enter Yerushalayim through Sh'ar Ha-Rachamim?

A: No. The Turkish Sultan heard this, and there closed up the gate.

Birkat Cohanim with Snuggly

Q: Is it permissible for a Cohain to recite Birkat Cohanim while carrying a baby in a snuggly?

A: When there is no other choice and the baby is covered.

Saving Parking Space for Husband

Q: Can I save a parking space for my husband when other cars want the space?

A: Yes. "Ishto Ke-Gufo" – a wife and husband are like one being.

Falling Asleep in Front of Chief Rabbi

Q: If someone falls asleep during the Chief Rabbi's class, should I wake him up?

A: Yes. It is certainly his desire even if he did not say so explicitly. And the same applies to the classes of other Rabbis.

Minhag of Child of Divorced Parents

Q: Whose Minhag should a child of divorced parents follow if he lives with his mother?

A: His mother's. After all, he lives with her there.

Tefillin for Vegan

Q: What should a Vegan do about putting on Tefillin?

A: Display self-sacrifice and put on regular Tefillin

22-Day Fast

Q: There was a news story that someone fasted for 22 days. Is this possible?

A: Refraining from eating is possible – but damages the body. But refraining from drinking for that long is impossible.

The Words of the Prophets

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

At this beginning of parshat Vayeira, the Torah tells us that Hashem appeared to Avraham Avinu --

Question #1: Just This Once

“Obviously, I never met either the Chofeitiz Chayim or Rav Aryeh Levin, but there is a great tzadik in our neighborhood, a big talmid chacham and a mekubal, who is never involved in what is going on. Today, he came to me, quietly, and told me that Hashem appeared to him in a vision and instructed him to tell me that this coming Shabbos, but only this Shabbos, I am supposed to drive him somewhere in my car. Am I supposed to listen to him?”

Question #2: Untruthful Prophets?

The brocha we recite prior to reading the haftarah states ve'rotzeh be'divreihem ha'ne'emarim be'emes, that Hashem "desired the words of the prophets that are said in truth." This brocha requires explanation: Of course, Hashem desires the words of the prophets – He was the One Who sent them the message in the first place! What does this brocha mean?

Answer:

To answer the above questions thoroughly and correctly, we need to study the entire halachic issue of prophets, beginning from the Chumash, through the Gemara, rishonim and poskim. Even if we do not happen to have a neighbor in shul who meets all the requirements of a navi, we should know these laws:

- (1) From a perspective of mitzvas Talmud Torah.
- (2) So that we can observe them properly when we again have the opportunity.
- (3) So that we can understand the verses that are germane.
- (4) A proper understanding of the thirteen ikarei emunah of the Rambam is contingent on comprehending these laws.

How prophetable?

We will start with the Torah's discussion in parshas Shoftim about the topic:

"You shall be wholehearted with Hashem, your G-d... A prophet from among you, from your brothers, like me (Moshe), will Hashem, your G-d, establish for you. You shall listen to him.... Then, Hashem said to me... 'I will establish for you a prophet from among your brothers, like you, and I will put My words in his mouth – everything that I will command him. Whoever will not listen to My words that the prophet will speak in My name – I will exact punishment from him. However, any prophet who will have the audacity to speak in My name that which I did not command him to say, or any prophet who will speak in the name of foreign gods – that prophet shall surely be put to death.' And should you ask in your heart, 'How am I to know which statement was not said by Hashem?' (The answer is): That which the prophet says in the name of Hashem (that it will miraculously happen) and the matter does not transpire, this is, for certain, something that Hashem never said. This prophet has violated the Torah intentionally: Do not be afraid of him." (Devorim 18: 13, 15, 18-22).

We see in these pesukim the following laws:

A. If a prophet demonstrates that he is, indeed, a prophet that Hashem sent, we are required to obey whatever he tells us that Hashem commanded. Based on the pesukim and some relevant passages of Gemara and halachic midrash, the Rambam (Sefer Hamitzvos) explains as follows: "Mitzvah #172 is that we were commanded to listen to every prophet and to obey what he commands, even if it contradicts a mitzvah... as long as it is temporary, not a permanent change either to add or subtract... The words of the Sifrei are 'to him shall you listen'; even if he tells you to violate temporarily one of the mitzvos that are written in the Torah, listen to him."

B. Someone who does not follow the commandment of the prophet – Hashem will exact punishment from him. Chazal tell us that the punishment is quite severe.

C. If the prophet claims to speak in Hashem's Name and he had received no such commandment – such a "prophet" should be executed.

D. Someone who meets all the requirements of a true prophet, but relates a prophetic vision in the name of an idol or other foreign god (anything that qualifies as avodah zarah) -- this "prophet" should also be executed.

In the Rambam's opinion, there is also another place in the Torah where this mitzvah is discussed. At the end of parshas Va'eschanan, the Torah writes, "Lo senasu es Hashem Elokeichem, do not test Hashem your G-d" (Devorim 6:16), which the Rambam explains to mean: Do not test the promises or warnings that Hashem sent to us via His prophets, by casting doubt on the veracity of a prophet after he has proven his authenticity. This mitzvah is similarly quoted by the Sefer Hachinuch, who calls this mitzvah (#424 in his count): "Not to test a true prophet more than necessary."

This leads us to the following question: What are we to do when someone seems to have the right qualifications for a prophet, and he tells us that he received a prophetic vision? The prohibition just described is only after he has demonstrated adequately that he is, indeed, a navi. How does he prove that he is an authentic navi?

Who is prophetable?

First, we need to establish that there are pre-requisite qualifications that must be met by a navi. The Gemara (Nedarim 38a) states: "Hashem places his presence only on someone who is physically powerful, wealthy, wise and humble." The Gemara proceeds to prove that we know these factors from the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu was physically strong enough to assemble the Mishkan on his own, and that he was extremely wealthy from the trimmings of precious stone that he collected when he chiseled out the second luchos.

The Rambam adds a few other qualities that a prophet must always exhibit: "Among the most basic concepts of religion is to know that Hashem communicates with people. Prophecy happens only to a very wise talmid chacham who is in total control of his personality traits, whose yetzeir hora never controls him – rather, he is in control of his yetzeir hora, always. He must also be someone with tremendous and correct understanding. Someone filled with all these qualities, who is physically complete and healthy, when he begins studying the deeper aspects of Torah and is drawn into these great topics, develops great understanding, becomes sanctified and continues to grow spiritually, separates himself from the ways of common people who follow the darkness of the time, and instead, he is constantly growing and spurring himself onward. He teaches himself to control his thoughts so as not to think of things that have no value. Rather, his thoughts should always be engaged with the 'Throne of Hashem', in his attempts to understand holy and pure ideas.... When the spirit of Hashem rests upon him, his soul becomes mixed with that of the angels... and he becomes a new person who understands that he is no longer the same as he was before, but that he has become elevated beyond the level of other talmidei chachamim" (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 7:1).

Net prophets

When the prophet reveals his first prophecy, the posuk that we quoted above teaches: "How am I to know which word was not said by Hashem?" (The answer is): "That which the prophet says in the name of Hashem (that it will miraculously happen) and the matter does not transpire, this is for certain something that Hashem never said."

This posuk teaches that, in addition to having all the requisite personal qualities, a navi must foretell the future in the Name of Hashem in order to qualify as a navi. There is a dispute between Rav Sa'adiyah Gaon and the Rambam what type of "prophecy" must be demonstrated to prove that he is a prophet. According to Rav Sa'adiyah, the prophet must perform something that is

supernatural, such as Moshe did when he turned water into blood, or the stick into a snake. This is because the navi, functioning as a messenger of Hashem, would have been provided by Him with a sign that only Hashem could accomplish, such as preventing water from running downhill, or stopping a heavenly body in its course (Emunos Udei'os 3:4). (This is also the opinion of the Abarbanel in parshas Shoftim.)

On the other hand, the Rambam (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 10:2) disagrees, stating:

“Any prophet who arises and says that Hashem sent him does not need to produce a sign on the level of what Moshe Rabbeinu did, or Eliyahu or Elisha, which was completely supernatural. It is sufficient that he prophesy, saying that something will happen in the future, and his words come true.... Therefore, when a man appropriate to being a navi comes... we do not tell him, 'Let us see you split the sea, or bring the dead back to life, or anything similar, in order that we can believe you'. Rather, we tell him: 'If you are indeed a prophet, foretell something that will happen.' When he foretells, we then wait to see if it happens. If it does not happen, even if something small of his prophecy does not happen, we know for certain that he is a false prophet. If his words are entirely fulfilled, you should consider him to be truthful. We then proceed to check him several times; if each time his words are exactly fulfilled, we consider him a true prophet.”

According to some acharonim (Arba'ah Turei Aven), we test him three times, just as Moshe Rabbeinu was given three signs. If he meets all the requirements of a navi and foretells the future, perfectly and accurately, three times, we are required to follow what he tells us to do, and, when we do so, we accomplish the mitzvah of the Torah.

If he predicts that something will happen and it does not, we know that he is a false prophet. In any of these cases where we are not permitted to obey his words, the Sanhedrin would subject him to capital punishment as a false prophet.

Prophets on prophets

There is another way that a navi can be verified as such, without his producing a miracle or foretelling the future. If someone we already know to be a prophet testifies that an individual who meets the personal requirements of a prophet is indeed a navi, the second individual should be accepted immediately as a prophet (Rambam, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 10:5). The proof for this is that Yehoshua became accepted as a prophet on Moshe Rabbeinu's say-so, without producing any miracles or foretelling the future. (The miracles he performed were done later, after he already had been accepted as a navi.)

Gross prophet

What is the halacha if someone who clearly does not meet the personal requirements that we have described tells us that Hashem spoke to him. Let us even assume that he foretells the future successfully, or that he performs miracles. What is the halacha?

The halacha is that he is considered a false prophet. When the batei din had the ability to carry out capital punishment, he would be executed by them. Since our batei din do not have this ability today, we can excommunicate him or banish him, to mitigate the harm he causes. This was done many times in our past, when we were confronted by false prophets. In other words, it is non-prophetale to have him among the Jewish people.

Highly prophetale

The halacha is that once he proved he is a prophet, we are required to obey him, even if he tells us to do something that is counter to a mitzvah or is usually prohibited. The two exceptions are if he tells us that he is changing something of the Torah permanently, or if he tells us to violate the prohibition of avodah zarah. In either of these two situations, the Torah tells us that he is a false prophet, even if his tests were true.

Is this a prophetale venture?

At this point, we can analyze our opening question: “Obviously, I never met either the Chofeitzy Chayim or Rav Aryeh Levin, but there is a great tzadik in our neighborhood, a big talmid chacham and a mekubal, who is never involved in what is going on. Today, he came to me, quietly, and told me that Hashem appeared to him in a vision and instructed him to tell me that this coming Shabbos, but only this Shabbos, I am supposed to drive him somewhere in my car. Am I supposed to listen to him?”

Let us assume that this talmid chacham/mekubal meets all the requirements that the halacha requires, as quoted above. He now needs to meet the next challenge: According to Rav Sa'adiyah and the Abarbanel, he must perform a miracle that defies nature as we know it. According to the Rambam, he must successfully predict future events several times, without a single detail varying from his description and without any incorrect prediction. If his prophecy is inaccurate even in a slight detail, he is subject to the death penalty, if Sanhedrin can carry out this ruling. Since we have no Sanhedrin today, he would be ruled as a rosho, notwithstanding his other, fine qualities.

Personally, I would think that he is probably suffering from some mental illness, and I would recommend that he have a full psychiatric evaluation. I do not think that he is evil; I think that he is ill.

Prophetale brochos

At this point, let us examine our second opening question: The brocha we recite prior to reading the haftarah states that Hashem “desired the words of the prophets that are said in truth.” This brocha requires explanation: Of course, Hashem desires the words of the prophets – He was the One Who sent them the message in the first place! What does this brocha mean?

We can answer this question by realizing the following: With the exception of Moshe Rabbeinu, Hashem communicated to the prophets in a vision, not in words. The prophet, himself, put the ideas he had seen, heard and understood into his own words. It is for this reason that the Midrash teaches that ein shenei nevi'im misnabe'im besignon echad, it will never happen that two prophets recite the exact same words of prophecy (Pesikta and Midrash Seichel Tov, Parshas Va'eira 9:14). Each prophet still maintains some of his own personality and upbringing that will reflect itself in the way he describes what he saw. Yet, the final words, which are the words of the prophet, “their words,” are still “said in truth” – meaning that notwithstanding the personal imprint of the prophet on what he said, the words all convey Hashem's absolute intent.

Conclusion:

In the Sefer Hachinuch, mitzvah #424 is: “Not to test a true prophet too much.” He explains that, if we test the navi after he has adequately proved his veracity, those jealous of him or pained by his success may use excessive testing as an excuse not to listen to his commandments. In other words, they will deny his authenticity unjustifiably, by claiming that he has as yet not been tested sufficiently. Thus, we see that even something so obvious

as the ability of a great tzadik to foretell the future can be denied
by people, when they don't want to accept the truth!

לע"נ

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