

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

It seems at first glance that Avraham and Sarah both react in the same way when they hear the good news that they will soon have a son. Avraham's reaction appears at the end of last week's Torah portion. "And Avraham fell on his face and laughed, and he said in his heart: Can a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And what about Sarah? Can a woman ninety years old give birth?" [Bereishit 17:17]. Sarah's reaction appears in this week's portion. "And Sarah laughed to herself, saying: Will I be renewed after I have become elderly, and my master is old!" [18:12]. But the Divine response to the two reactions is different. With respect to Avraham, G-d gives a straightforward answer: "In any case, your wife Sarah will indeed give birth to a son for you, and you will call him Yitzchak" [17:19]. Sarah, on the other hand, is reprimanded: "Why is it that Sarah laughed, saying, How can I give birth when I am so old? Is anything impossible for G-d?" [18:13-14]. And what follows is an unpleasant conversation between the Almighty and Sarah. "And Sarah denied it, saying, I did not laugh, for she was afraid. And He said, No, you laughed." [18:15]. Why was G-d's reaction so different when Sarah laughed, as compared to when Avraham did?

Some commentators feel that in fact there was no significant difference between the laughter of Avraham and Sarah. This implies that the reprimand given to Sarah was also meant for Avraham. "Why did the verse protest to Sarah and not to Avraham?... This teaches us that they were both wrong. Since one was greater than the other, the correct practice is to criticize the person at the lower level, and the greater one understands the reprimand by himself." [Midrash Hagadol, Bereishit 18:13]. On the other hand, Rashi (following Onkeles) feels that there is a difference between the laughter of Avraham and that of Sarah. "The point is that when Avraham heard the news he was happy, while Sarah did not believe and mocked.

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Menachem Falik Greenspan
by
Rabbi Harry Greenspan

That is why the Almighty was angry with Sarah and not with Avraham."

Perhaps this differentiation by Rashi is based on the different ways the laughter is described. About Avraham, we are told, "he laughed and he said in his heart." With respect to Sarah, it is written, "Sarah laughed to herself." Thus, Avraham's reaction was legitimate wonder, since human intelligence might indeed find it hard to accept that such old parents could have a child. There are other places in the Torah where thoughts of the heart are not treated in a negative way, even if they seem to question the belief in G-d, as long as they remain questions. For example, here is what Moshe said to Yisrael: "If you will say in your heart, these nations are many more than me, how can I take their possessions?" [Devarim 7:17]. Such thoughts are not bad in themselves, and they are given a response: "Do not fear them, remember what your G-d did to Pharaoh and all of Egypt" [7:18]. (See also Devarim 9:4-6.)

As opposed to this, Sarah's laughter was "within herself." This is the only time that this word is used in relation to human thought. Usually the word "b'kerev" denotes physical presence inside a person or at a specific place, such as "The sons were agitated within her" [Bereishit 25:22], or "the famine has been in the land for two years" [45:6]. Thus, while Avraham's laugh was an indication of an understandable intellectual wonder, Sarah's laughter was an internal sign of a lack of faith. And this is the reason that she was criticized so sharply.

Shall I Hide This from Avraham?

by Rabbi Eliezer Altshuler

Rabbi of Sussia and Respondent in the Puah Institute
Avraham, our ancestor, in praying for the salvation of Sedom, is revealed to have two basic traits: he is a father and also a man of faith. As a father, his heart has pity on the multitude of nations, even including the evil city of Sedom. Even a son who has strayed from the true path remains a son and is never abandoned. As a believer, he knows that the Almighty wants to hear the prayers of righteous people, and that this can override a Divine judgment. In the end, when not even ten righteous people are found in Sedom, Avraham stops praying.

Let us take a deeper look at what happened. Without a doubt, Avraham also felt a responsibility for Lot and his family, since he had originally proposed to

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Lot, "If you go to the left I will go to the right, and if you go right I will go left" [Bereishit 13:9]. This proposal, which had sounded reasonable at the time, might now lead to the complete destruction of Lot and his family. However, Avraham holds back and does not pray for them. Why not? Evidently Avraham understood that in essence Lot was part of Sedom. This was the reason that "the land could not bear to have them both dwelling together" [13:6], and there was no alternative than to have them separate. The conclusion is that Lot and his family would not be judged separately from the rest of the city.

However, why doesn't Avraham pray for less than ten people? Everything in the world exists only because of its relationship and its attachment to the Master of the Universe. The sages have taught us that "wherever there are ten men the Shechina appears," but fewer people who study Torah are also accompanied by the Shechina, and this is true even for one person. It seems that there is an aspect of holiness when ten people gather, and in the face of holiness, even if it is only a small spark, Avraham believes that it can be fanned into a great flame. Lot may have gone to Sedom, but since he has joined the city he no longer represents the Torah, and the appearance of the Shechina therefore depends on finding ten people. But the city did not have ten righteous people.

Was there really no other way to save Sedom? The Or Hachaim suggests an idea that should be taken into account. "As we have been taught by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, 'a righteous man is the foundation of the world' [Mishlei 10:25]... perhaps if Avraham had been in the midst of Sedom the entire city would have been saved." This implies that there is something that is even stronger than prayer. Prayer can bring about a link to the Almighty only if the Shechina has begun to appear in a specific place. Why is this so? It is because one who prays stands aside from a distance. He is worried

and wants to save the people, but he remains on the hill opposite the city.

If Avraham had descended into the city, ready to make a spiritual and educational sacrifice for himself and his people, he might have come to harm but on the other hand he might have saved the entire city!

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The Torah portion of this week is especially marked by the awe inspiring, prophetic and even tragic story of the akedah. It is fascinating however that the conclusion of the akedah—and indeed the conclusion of the Torah portion—seems almost mockingly strange: "It came to pass after these things, that Abraham was told saying: behold, Milcah too has born children to Nahor, your brother: Uz, his first born;

Buz, his brother; Kemuel, the father of Aram; and Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, Bethuel; And Bethuel begot Rebecca. These eight (children) Milcah bore Nahor Abraham's brother. And his concubine whose name was Reumah also bore children: Tebah Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah. (Genesis 22: 20-24)

Now we have just studied ten Biblical chapters which speak of the heartfelt difficulty which Abraham and Sarah experienced in their search for a son. They adopt Lot, they attempt to raise a concubine's son Yishmael, and finally G-d grants them, in their old age, Isaac. And even Isaac puts Abraham through the torture of an akedah, a near slaughter. And then, at the conclusion of the akedah story the Torah tells us that Abraham's brother Nahor has borne eight children with his wife Milcah and an additional four with his concubine Reumah. I do not know whether or not Nahor was wicked, but he certainly couldn't have held a candle to the righteous path breaker and preacher of the Lord, Abraham. What can possibly be the point of contrasting Abraham's painful experience in a search for one son with Nahor's brood of twelve which seems to have come to him effortlessly.

I believe a direction towards understanding emerges from the name of Nahor's first born, Uz. You may remember that the book of Job, the tragic story of a righteous individual who suffers the loss of his family and wealth through no fault of his own, opens as follows: "There was a man in the Land of Uz whose name was Job; that man was wholesome and upright he feared G-d and shunned evil. Seven sons and three daughters were born to him. His possessions consisted of 7,000 sheep and goats, 3,000 camels, 500 pairs of cattle, 500 she—donkeys and very many enterprises. That man was the wealthiest man of all the people in the East." (Job 1-3). And that man loses all of these things because Satan wants to tempt him to blaspheme G-d. Is this fair? It certainly does not appear to be fair. And Job comes from the land of Uz, apparently named for the first son of Nahor. Was it fair that Abraham

should have such travail with one son and Nahor should have such an easy time with 12 children? It too is not fair, Uz is not fair; Job comes from Uz-land, Unfair—land.

In effect, the Torah is telling us that the world is an unfair place, that there are righteous who suffer and wicked who prosper. In the words of the Talmud, "Children, length of years, and material sustenance are not dependent on merit but are rather dependent upon (blind) fortune." (B.T. Moed Katan 28) There is not necessarily reward for the commandments in this world (B.T. Kidushin 39); reward comes in the world to come, in the life-after-life in a world of souls. In this world G-d created light and darkness, good and evil. It is our task to live in it as a momentous challenge, and to do our best—no matter the personal situation in which we find ourselves—to be partners with G-d in attempting to bring light where there is darkness, order where there is chaos, and to ultimately perfect the world in the Kingship of the Divine.

Perhaps this is precisely the Divine response to Job's remonstrance as to the injustice of the world as it is.

"And the Lord responded to Job from out of a whirlwind and He said, Gird now your loins like a man (a ge'ever). I wish to ask you and I want you to tell Me (instead of your challenging Me and insisting that I respond to you). Will you then abrogate My laws (by which I established a world of evil as well as of good)? Will you make Me out to be evil in order for you to remain righteous?! Is it then not true that you have an arm just like G-d's and a voice which can thunder just like His! Adorn yourself now with confidence and pride; dress yourself in glory and respect. Scatter your anger; look upon all of the (wicked who are) in high places and cause them to be brought low. Look upon all of the (wicked who are) in high places and subdue them; crush the wicked underfoot. Bury their faces in the dust, conquer them in places of burial. Then even I (G-d) will praise you because your right hand has brought you deliverance." (Job 40:6-14)

Yes, this world may very well be the world of Uz, the world of unfairness. But we humans who are created in G-d's image must assume responsibility for our legacy and—in partnership with the Almighty—must bring about the ultimate salvation in a world where G-d's goodness and love will become manifest to all. © 2004 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

The Midrash (Tanchuma 8) tells us that G-d informed Avraham of his plans to destroy Sodom because He knew that Avraham would try to defend them, and ask that G-d save them. However, being that despite Avraham's lengthy multi-step prayer (Beraishis 18:23-32) Sodom was still destroyed, it

seems strange that G-d would purposely solicit a request that would not be answered. Why did G-d want Avraham to ask for something if the answer would be "no?"

The wording of Avraham's prayer also deserves a closer look. Rather than asking G-d to forgive them, he seems to accuse G-d of attempting a miscarriage of justice (18:23): "Will your anger wipe out the righteous along with the wicked?" Instead of begging, "please don't," Avraham demands, "how could You?" Is that the appropriate way of asking G-d for something?

Finally, Avraham takes it for granted that a fair and just G-d cannot allow the righteous to suffer the same consequences as the wicked. Yet, we have numerous sources that indicate just the opposite. For example, the Talmud (Bava Kama 60a) says that "once permission is given to destroy, there is no longer any distinction made between the righteous and the wicked." The Rambam (Laws of Repentance 3:2) tells us that a city (such as Sodom) that has more sins than merits gets destroyed in its entirety, implying that even the righteous within it perish. In fact, the Lechem Mishneh there asks how G-d could have told Avraham that He would spare the city if there were 50 righteous people in it, since its bad outweighed its good—mandating that it be destroyed. He answers that even if there were righteous inhabitants, it would have been destroyed— if not for Avraham's prayer. Nevertheless, this only explains how G-d could have theoretically decided not to destroy Sodom. Avraham's assumption, though, was that G-d could not destroy Sodom if some of its populace were righteous; we see from the Rambam that He could have (and would have) even if they were. If the righteous can (and do) suffer as a "side-effect" of the wicked being punished, how could Avraham have been so adamant that it is beneath G-d to allow that to happen?

"Rabbi Levi said, 'why did the Holy One Blessed is He reveal to Avraham [what he was about to do to Sodom]? Because he was bothered by what had happened to those who perished in the flood, saying that it is impossible that there weren't any (other) righteous people (besides Noach). We know that this is so from [Avraham's] response, [asking] if [G-d]'s anger will wipe away the righteous with the wicked.' (Tanchuma Yashan 7)" A similar version of this Midrash includes what happened to those who were dispersed (after the attempt to build the "Tower of Babel"), along with those who perished in the flood. Avraham assumed that there had to be "20, or [at least] 10 righteous people" included in each of the punishments, leaving him to question whether this is really how G-d operates—wiping out the righteous with the wicked.

There were numerous reasons why G-d wanted to inform Avraham about what was about to happen to Sodom. As Rashi points out, G-d had promised the land, including (what was) the metropolitan Sodom area, to Avraham's children. This was prime real estate

("like G-d's garden, like the Land of Egypt"), and G-d wanted to explain to Avraham why such fertile land had to be destroyed. Besides, Avraham had recently put his life on the line (in the war with the kings) defending Sedom and returning its people and property, and would understandably be upset if he awoke one morning to find that it was destroyed. G-d therefore knew that upon being informed of its impending doom, Avraham would ask that it be spared. These Midrashim are telling us that there was another reason why G-d wanted to tell Avraham about his plans for Sedom before it was destroyed. He knew that it would trigger a prayer/conversation that touched upon a topic that had been eating at Avraham for some time; does G-d really allow the righteous to suffer along with the wicked.

The Talmud (Avodah Zarah 4a), asking how Avraham could tell G-d that He can't wipe out the righteous along with the wicked when there is an explicit verse (Yechezkel 21:8) that says that He does, explains that only those who are not completely righteous are included in the suffering; the completely righteous, however, are spared. (The Talmud continues by saying that "completely righteous" in this context refers to those who try to correct the ways of the wicked, while the "righteous, although not completely so," refers to those who don't sin themselves, but don't object to the others sinning either.) The conversation between Avraham and G-d, therefore, was about the "completely righteous" being spared. Avraham either knew that those not "completely righteous" would be included in the decree against Sedom, or realized it at the beginning of this conversation.

Either way, we can now understand why Avraham's prayer was as much an inquiry into how G-d runs the world as it was a request that He save Sedom.

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DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi?

Bereishit is the Book of the Forefathers. There is much that we can learn from them and Abraham is our greatest teacher. The first incident recorded in our parsha shows Abraham's unflinching, unfaltering and indefatigable energies in the service of his fellow man. After circumcising himself at 99 years of age, he runs, hurries and runs again to serve his unexpected guests. Other aspects of Abraham's graciousness and his being our model in his behavior towards his fellow man, are more subtly hidden in the Torah's words. The following is an example.

"And Hashem had remembered Sarah as He had said, and Hashem did for Sarah as He had spoken." (Genesis 21:1)

Rashi explains that this means Sarah conceived and then gave birth. Now let us look at the first Rashi-comment on this verse.

"And Hashem had remembered Sarah"—Rashi: [The Torah] connected this passage here (to verse 17:17 above where it says that Abraham prayed for the ailing Avimelech) to teach us that whoever prays for his fellow man while he himself is in need of the same thing, he will be answered first (before his fellowman). As it places the verse "And Abraham prayed" (he was praying for Avimelech's family to be cured after God had prevented their women from giving birth) next to this verse which says "And Hashem had remembered Sarah." This means that she was remembered (i.e. conceived) even before Avimelech was cured.

This comment is based on several principles of interpretation, which must be explained. One principle is that when two sections of the Torah are placed in juxtaposition, it means that there is some meaningful connection between the two sections. The second principle is one of Biblical grammar. The past tense is used in Biblical Hebrew in two different ways. One is, for example, "vayipakod" which means "And he remembered" It has the vav hahipuch, the converse vav, in front. It is the simple past tense. The other form is what we have in our verse, "V'Hashem pakad." This is past perfect, meaning Hashem had remembered. This implies that He had remembered even before the last recorded incident. So in our verse the Torah tells us that God had remembered (enabled Sarah to conceive) even before the last recorded event—which was Avimelech (and his wife) being cured, meaning conceiving (verse 20:18). This came after Abraham prayed for him (verse 17). So the sequence of events is: (1) Abraham prayed for Avimelech's cure, (2) Sarah conceived and (3) Avimelech's family was cured (their women conceived).

We have explained what questions Rashi was dealing with—both the juxtaposition of the sections and the grammatical nuance of "And Hashem had remembered," and his interpretation based on these points. Perhaps we can gain a deeper understanding of what Rashi has taught us.

There is a basic question regarding the significance of our praying to Hashem for His help when we are in trouble. Why should our prayers asking God to intervene to help us, be of any efficacy? After all, wasn't it God who put us in this predicament to begin with? He withheld pregnancy from Sarah as well as from Avimelech's wife. What good would it be to ask Him to change our situation? We certainly don't know the considerations taken into account by God when He decided to put us in need of help. So how can we ask Him to change His decision?

The answer given is that the act of praying itself raises us to a higher spiritual level than the one we were on before our prayers. So, if we were deserving of a particular punishment or deprivation previously, perhaps now after our praying, being on our new spiritual heights, we would deserve a reprieve.

In light of this explanation for prayer in general, we can better understand Rashi. When Abraham prayed for another person, Avimelech, someone deserving of Divine punishment, his selfless act of prayer would certainly be deserving of recognition by Hashem—even more so than the person on whose behalf he had prayed.

We see another example of Abraham's love and concern for another, even more than for himself. We see this trait in action when Abraham prays to save the city of Sodom, although God had decided to destroy it. Abraham nevertheless rushed in to intervene and save these people.

A model we must strive to emulate in our own lives as descendants of Abraham Avinu. © 2004 aish.org & Dr. A. Bonchek

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Years back, a Hebrew Christian approached me, arguing that his belief in Jesus had something to do with the binding of Isaac story. Jesus, he suggested, was able to do what Yitzhak (Isaac) could not. Jesus gave his life for God, while Isaac did not reach that level. An analysis of the akeidah story, the story of the binding of Isaac, found in this week's parsha, goes a long way in responding to this challenge.

From a certain perspective, the most unusual feature of the akeidah (binding of Isaac) narrative is the absence of dialogue; Avraham (Abraham) and his son Yitzhak hardly speak.

The Midrash fills in the empty spaces. As Avraham walked to Moriah to slaughter his son, the Midrash suggests that an elderly man approached him suggesting that it was improper for a father to sacrifice his son. Furthermore, the elderly gent questioned the ethics of sacrificing life for God. (Bereishit Rabbah, 56:4)

My rebbe in Chumash, Nehama Leibowitz, concluded that the elderly gentleman represented Avraham's inner conscience. As Avraham walked to Moriah, his inner soul stirred and he began to ask himself deep and profound questions about whether it was appropriate both as a father and as the founder of ethical monotheism, to sacrifice the life of his son.

This Midrash may have been motivated by the fact that the only time in the narrative, and for that matter in the whole Bible, that Avraham and Yitzhak speak to one another is when they walk to Moriah. Yitzhak begins his comment with just one word—"avi, my father." (Genesis 22:7) In other words, Yitzhak was saying, "father, how can you do this? How could you offer me, your son, as a sacrifice?" Yitzhak, in the same sentence, continues asking, "where is the animal to be sacrificed", hinting at an ethical concern with respect to human sacrifice.

The upshot: although some conclude that Avraham was prepared to sacrifice his son without question, in fact, he was filled with doubt.

Once arriving, the angel of God steps in and tells Avraham not to sacrifice the child. (Genesis 22:11) Here again the Midrash quotes Avraham as asking, "How can you so quickly change your mind? Yesterday, you told me to sacrifice my child and now you tell me to refrain from doing so?!" According to the Midrash, the angel responds, "I never told you to sacrifice (shehatehu) the child, only to take him up to the mountain (ve-ha'aleihu). You brought him up, now bring him down." (Bereishit Rabbah, 56:8)

In other words, when God told Avraham "ve-ha'aleihu", (to bring him up or to dedicate him) (Genesis 22:2) Avraham assumes that the ultimate dedication is through death. In the end, the angel, who may very well have been Avraham's inner conscience, tells Avraham that the greatest dedication to God is living for God, not dying for Him.

For this reason, Avraham heeds the command of the angel. The angel was not contradicting God's command, but was giving Avraham an understanding of God's will --- to sanctify God by living every moment properly.

Herein lies a tremendous difference between Judaism and many other faiths. In Christianity, for example, ultimate redemption comes by believing that their man-god dies for all people. In Judaism, redemption comes by living and sanctifying every moment of existence.

This is the message of the akeida. What my Hebrew Christian friend did not realize is that the highest commitment comes through life and not death.

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The destruction of Sodom as described in this week's Torah reading teaches us that the fate of a society really lies in its own hands. The rabbis taught us that even though the angels told Lot that they are going to destroy the cities of Sodom and its satellites, the angels "sinned" in so doing. They should not have stated that it was certain that Sodom would be destroyed, since even at the last moment the people of Sodom had the option of repenting and saving themselves and their cities. This was especially true after Avraham had successfully lowered the bar to only ten righteous people. Thus even if a few people would have realized the sinful wrongness of their behavior and repented, all would have been saved. I have often remarked that Sodom was destroyed not necessarily because it contained millions of evil people. It was destroyed because it did not possess ten good people. We see in the Book of Yonah that Ninveh was saved and Yonah's prophecy of its destruction was

reinterpreted to be one of deliverance because of the willingness of the population to rethink their ways, repent from evil and embark on a more positive direction in their lives. Sodom and its inhabitants had the same opportunity but refused to avail themselves of it. Thus Sodom destroyed itself. This holds true for all evil societies. They all eventually self-destruct.

The Torah tells us that when Lot attempted to convince his family, especially his sons-in-law, to flee with him from Sodom, he was greeted with derision and laughter. They thought that Lot was playing some great and hilarious prank on them. It is typical of the mentality of evil people to mock any sense of impending doom or punishment for their deeds. Hitler said that the world would do nothing to stop him. He envisioned a thousand-year-Reich. Stalin and his brutish successors thought that they could maintain the facade of "progressive" Communism forever, while the true totalitarian, inefficient and murderous nature of the state would remain hidden for centuries. Dressing terror and murder in religious clothing does not change its inherent evil nature and consequences. Evil always mocks good. But evil always eventually consumes itself. Lot's sons-in-law had a good laugh at the expense of their old father-in-law, who even in Sodom could not completely shake off his past training in good behavior learned in the house of Avraham. But it certainly was not the last laugh. The story of Sodom and of its destruction thus remains as a paradigm for all of the other Sodoms that unfortunately followed it in human history. In our present world of terror and evil we should not forget this story and its outcome. Evil always eventually destroys itself.

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RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

So HASHEM said, "Because the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah has become great and because their sin has been very grave..." (Breishis 18:20-21)

Why was Sodom destroyed? What was the "great outcry" that sealed their decree? Rashi references the Talmud which tells the sad story of a young lady who met with a terrible fate at the hands of the "justice" system of Sodom. She committed the ultimate crime of feeding bread to the poor, and as a result she was punished with a cruel death. They covered her with honey and left her for the bees and other insects to devour her. (Sanhedrin 109B) The Mishne in Pirke' Avos gives us an insight into the ideology of that doomed city. It outlines four character types with regard to property.

1) One who says what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours is considered average and some say it is characteristic of Sodom.

2) Mine is yours and yours is mine is an unlearned person.

3) Mine is yours and yours is yours is scrupulously pious.

4) Mine is mine and yours is mine is wicked.

Why is the 1st category either average or Sodom-like? We would expect Sodom to be akin to the wicked one. What's so terrible about saying; "What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours"? Why is it possibly average? The answer is: #2 and #4 have no concept or respect for private property. They have little problem feeling deserved of another's stuff. In contrast #1 and #3 seem to understand; "what's yours is yours". However Sodom's commitment to respecting the property rights of others is based upon a sinister ulterior motive. Why would they pronounce in principle "what's yours is yours"? Because they want to insure the more important part; "what's mine is mine". They sinned not from impulsiveness but with a dispassionate intellect. That's worse! Why is that so?

The Maggid of Kelm said many decades before WWII, "Because of Geiger's Reform Code of Jewish Law, another law will emerge from Germany. It will say that every Jew, without exception, must die. May G-d protect us!" How could he say such a thing? Yet, how true it turned out to be! Was he speaking with prophecy? I don't think so! My point in mentioning that startling quote is not to stir the larger than life questions of "why?" with regard to the Holocaust but to look for the basis of the Maggid's logic. Let us say: Shimon comes to school day after day without his homework. Each time his teacher gives him that solemn look and pens a zero in the box marked "homework". Shimon and his parents are looking forward to a brutal PTA meeting. He is still, albeit failing, a member of the class.

Chaim comes to school and for the first time is missing homework. When asked for a reason, he declares, "My parents say that I don't have to do any homework or school-work anymore."

The teacher calls the principal and has the child expelled from school. Why should that be? He only missed one assignment and Shimon so many!

All the time that Shimon is missing his homework he is wrong, and behind all the clever excuses, he knows it. His teacher hopes that someday he'll rebound and become responsive to his duties. Chaim declares his conscience dead. He guarantees that he can feel no pangs of regret. In his mind he is now correct in all he does. Legalizing his laziness locks him in a world of limitations no school can overcome.

Similarly, when Sodom promulgated laws disallowing charitable behavior and then enforced it, they sealed their own fate. They could never hope to be better, to become givers as Avraham had attempted to teach. Where there is no hope there can be no life and

in the end what was theirs was theirs. © 2004 Rabbi L. Lam & www.torah.org

THE SALANT FOUNDATION

Parsha Insights

by Rabbi Zvi Miller

Many people assume that to draw close to HaShem one must detach himself from earthly affairs. In light of this, they assume that a spiritual person is out of touch with human desires, lives a life of deprivation, and humbles himself before everyone. However, such an austere lifestyle is totally incongruent with Torah values—for the Torah is a "Tree of Life." Hence, it imparts life and "all of its ways are pleasant." Indeed, it enlightens one with true happiness.

The true righteous person devotes both his soul and body to Divine Service. For instance, Avraham Avinu reached the spiritual heights and at the same time was the consummate master of loving-kindness. His ability to serve others, provide them with palatable delicacies, and to treat them with royal honor reflected his profound understanding of the world.

Physical discomfort usually breeds a bitter spirit. A sick person, for instance, usually has little interest in entertaining guests. Yet when Avraham was recovering from his circumcision at age ninety-nine—he suffered not from the bodily pain—but from the lack of guests. Even when the Divine Presence came to "visit" him, Avraham asked permission to leave the Divine Presence when he noticed three travelers nearing his tent. With love of his fellow man burning in his heart, he ran across the hot desert sands and bowed down—in full prostration—to the three travelers. Can you imagine the joy that a traveler would have at such royal treatment!

Avraham's emulation of the Divine attribute of kindness was so perfect—that he could not bear, even a brief period, to withhold himself from bestowing love on other people. May we learn from Avraham Avinu to ascend to the heights of spiritual joy, and at the same time may we bring delight to others through our acts of loving-kindness.

Implement: Be sensitive to the needs of others and do as much as you can to help them. [Based on Chochmah U'Mussar of the Saba M'Kelm, volume 2, page 190]

RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar with a quotation from the second paragraph of Medrash Rabba on this parsha. That Medrash Rabba, in turn, cites a pasuk in Iyov (19:26): "Ve'achar ori nikfu zohs; umibari echezeh Eloka." (ArtScroll: "After my skin was stricken, they pierced me; and I see the judgment of God from my flesh.")

The Medrash—which by definition is not the plain/simple/literal interpretation—on this pasuk, feels

that these words might just as well also have been spoken by Avraham Avinu after he had performed bris mila on himself. Viewing the pasuk in that context, the Medrash presents its reading of this pasuk: "After I performed the bris mila, many people circled around me to follow my path; and once I made this change in my flesh, I was able to see HaShem much more clearly."

The reaction of the Sfas Emes to this text signals his whole approach to this parsha. Kedarko bakodesh, the Sfas Emes presents what is, in effect, a Medrash on the Medrash. Thus, he tells us that a nekuda connecting to HaShem is present everywhere in the cosmos. This nekuda gives all creation access to chiyus. emanating from HaShem. All we have to do is to remove the klipa (husk) which covers this contact point and HaShem's Presence is revealed. So too, symbolically, when the outer covering—the foreskin—is removed, our covenant with HaShem is evident.

Continuing with this line of thought, the Sfas Emes points out that the name of this parsha—"Vayeira" ("And He appeared") -- tells the same story. That is, by performing the mitzva of bris mila, Avraham pierced the outer covering that was hiding HaShem's Presence, and then (presto!) "And HaShem appeared." (see footnote below [1]).

The Sfas Emes depends his discussion of this subject in his ma'amar of 5633. A basic question that puzzles many thinking people is: Why did HaShem create the world? Apparently, the Sfas Emes asked himself that question, for he provided an answer to it. He tells us that HaShem created the world so that people would be aware of His Presence and bring testimony (by their manner of living) that HaShem gives life to all creation. (A person may or may not find this answer persuasive. But the mere fact that the Sfas Emes felt that he had to confront the question is noteworthy.)

Proceeding further, the Sfas Emes notes that the letters of the word "Vayeira" ("And He appeared") can be rewritten to form the word "Vayahr" ("And He saw").

Mention of the word "Vayahr," in turn, immediately brings to mind (that is, to the mind of the Sfas Emes, and thence, to our minds) a pasuk which echoes the word "Vayahr". Which pasuk? The pasuk (Bereishis, 1:31): which concludes the Torah's account of Creation. That is: "Vayahr HaShem es kohl asher asah, vehinei tov me'od." (ArtScroll: "And God saw all that He had made; and behold, it was very good.") The Sfas Emes adds that the gaze of HaShem continues forever, giving life and vibrancy to the whole world.

The Sfas Emes now returns to his central theme. That is, we can—indeed, we must—remove the external shell which conceals HaShem's Presence, and thus bring testimony concerning the real world. In fact, the Sfas Emes tells us, Bnei Yisroel can be better witnesses to HaShem's Presence and to His constant sustaining force of all creation (i.e., that He is mechayeh

hakohl) than are the malachim (the agents that HaShem uses to manage the world).

Why so? Because the malachim have ready access to the truth and hence are totally aware of HaShem. By contrast, for Bnei Yisroel, HaShem is hidden—indeed, this world is called "alma deshikra" (the world of falsehood). Nevertheless, Bnei Yisroel fight on to be witnesses of HaShem's reality. And at substantial cost to themselves, Bnai Yisroel accept His Kingship!

Perhaps as a bonus for sticking with him in hard times as well as when things are difficult, the Sfas Emes offers us his comment on another pasuk (Bereishis 18:1). That pasuk says: "vehu yosheiv pesach ha'ohel..." (ArtScroll: "And he (Avraham) was sitting at the entrance of the tent..." Says the Sfas Emes: We give joy to HaShem when we conduct ourselves properly. In fact, the way HaShem structured the world, the entire cosmos gets its direction from our behavior. (For, if we live our lives properly, HaShem's Presence in the world is revealed.)

Nevertheless, we should not exaggerate our importance. Thus, we should be aware that we are only "at the entrance of the tent." Even if we serve HaShem passionately ("... kechom hayom...," "in the heat of the day"), we are enjoined to see ourselves in proper perspective. I suggest that what the Sfas Emes has in mind here is that we conduct ourselves with due humility as well as with gratitude to HaShem for giving us Torah and mitzvos. These gifts help us fulfill our awesome responsibility of revealing HaShem's Presence behind the klipa.

To conclude for today, I cannot resist lifting a thought of the Sfas Emes on this parsha in the next year, 5634. On the phrase (Bereishis, 18:1) "HaShem appeared to him" Rashi—echoing Chazal—tells us that HaShem came "levakeir es hacholeh" ("to visit the sick person."). Who was this sick person? Avraham Avinu, presumably, because Avraham had not yet recovered from surgery—his bris mila. The Sfas Emes reacts negatively to this suggestion—that Avraham was sick because he had yet recovered from the surgery of bris mila. He offers in its stead a mind-stretching non-pshat. Thus he quotes by quoting a pasuk in Shir HaShirim (2:5) : "Ki cholas ahava ahni" ("For I am sick with love."). You might feel that this expression is merely a guzma (hyperbole) and/or chassidisch emotionalism. But look at what is happening here. A person who is 99 years old, without anesthesia, sharp instruments, or germ-free conditions, performs bris mila on himself! Truly, this person is "lovesick"!

[1] A question comes to mind at this point. Women cannot have Bris Mila. Hence, the question: How do women fit into this picture? The Gemara (Avoda Zara, 27,a) provides an answer: namely, that women are considered as already circumcised! Moreover, this view is not rhetorical; it is applied lehalacha. Thus the Gemara gives us the rule that only

a person who is circumcised may perform Bris Mila. And the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Dei'ah, 264) paskins (rules) that a woman may in fact circumcise. © 2004 Rabbi N.C. Leff & www.torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Vayeira contains a theme that isn't apparent to the casual observer. The Parsha starts with Avraham sitting on the third day after being circumcised (which is the most painful day), on the hottest day, and he's looking out for visitors to serve. Three angels appear, and he runs to feed and clean them. Needless to say, Avraham was never expected to have been so kind, especially to angels, who didn't even need the food he gave them. Then, later in the Parsha in a seemingly unrelated story, Avraham tries to save Sedom from being destroyed, claiming that there might be a few righteous people still left in the city. Avraham asks that justice then be used, and that the city be spared. Justice?? A whole city of evil people should be saved because of as few as 10 righteous people is justice?

The answer is that because Avraham did more than he had to in hosting guests and being kind to strangers, it WOULD have been justice for G-d to save Sedom for him! Although his argument wasn't strong enough for Sedom in the end, Avraham's argument was still valid, and was good enough to save Lot and his daughters. The same applies to us! The Torah is full of rules of equality... do unto others what you would have done to you...love your neighbor as you love yourself... the rules of giving charity to those less fortunate.... even the rules of paying back things you stole are based on restoring equality. The same rules apply to our relationship with G-d. We can do what we have to do, and get the reward we deserve. OR, we can look for ways to do MORE, and get reward far beyond that which we merely deserve. In every relationship, finding a way to do more is what shows our love and builds the relationship, and our relationship with G-d deserves no less! © 2003 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

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