

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

In the beginning of this week's Torah portion, we read about Avraham's meeting with "three men" who came to him [Bereishit 18:2]. After he served as their host and heard the news that Sarah would have a child, they left—"And the men turned from there and went towards Sedom" [18:22]. However, when they arrived in Sedom, their title had changed: "And the two angels arrived in Sedom" [19:1]. Where did the third man disappear?

Based on the approach of the sages, Rashi writes that the third man's role was to give the news about Sarah, and after he finished his task he left. But this is hard to reconcile with the simple reading of the verse, since the Torah does not mention at all that one of the men left—in fact, the wording implies that all of the "men" went to Sedom. It is thus simpler to follow the interpretation of the Rashbam. The passage begins with the words "And G-d revealed Himself to him at Elon Moreh" [18:1], without giving any more details about this description. In the next verse, it is written, "And he saw that three men stood over him" [18:2]. This implies that the meeting with the three men is itself the act of revelation of the Almighty. This means that the three men that Avraham saw were G-d and two angels who accompanied Him.

Based on this approach, the entire passage becomes very clear. We can understand why the promise of the birth of Yitzchak is given in the singular: "And he said, I will return to you at this time next year, and behold your wife Sarah will have a son" [18:10], since this promise was given by the man who represented G-d. It also explains how the Almighty appears embedded within the story of the visit: "And G-d said to Avraham, why did Sarah laugh, saying, How can I give birth when I am so old?" [18:13]. Once again, the one who spoke was the specific Divine "man." This also explains the disagreement between the Almighty and Sarah. "And Sarah denied it, saying, I did not laugh because I was afraid, and he said, No, you did indeed laugh." [18:15]. Sarah thought that she was arguing with a normal man.

After the first goal of the meeting was accomplished, the promise of the birth, the second mission begins—the declaration of Sedom's fate. The Almighty, still represented by the third man, tells

Avraham about his intention to destroy Sedom. At this point, the group separates into two: the two angels go on to complete their mission in Sedom, while the third "man"—who represents the Almighty—remains standing with Avraham. As is written (after changing the sequence of the verse, see Rashi), "And the men turned away from there towards Sedom, while Avraham remained standing before G-d" [8:22]. Avraham carries out a long negotiation with the Almighty in an attempt to rescue Sedom, but in the end, "G-d went away when He finished talking to Avraham, and Avraham returned to his place" [18:33]. Thus, there remained only two men who went to Sedom, and the man who represented G-d, who could only be seen by Avraham, did not go with them.

In summary, the passage describes a visit by three men who represent the Almighty and two angels accompanying Him, announcing to Sarah the news of the birth of a son. Years later, Avraham would go with two young men to perform G-d's will and offer the son who was born in the wake of this Divine promise as a sacrifice.

Guests Who Spread Litter

by Rabbi Shlomo Schock

On the beach, I once met a fisherman from Dimona, sitting in glorious solitude with his fishing rod. I did not want to interfere, but since he turned to me with a question, I took the opportunity to ask him some questions of my own.

The man told me about fish, about how to prepare them in the tastiest way, especially when getting ready for Shabbat or for guests. And he added a lesson that his father had bequeathed him: "Never allow your table to be dirty with the remains of food after the guests have finished eating." I liked that, and I told him that every person has something to learn from his father, and from his ancestor Avraham, in that he must open his heart to others and to strangers and put "everything on the table."

We parted as friends, and he left me with an invitation to come to Dimona where he would open up a table where we would leave the remains of our meal. Later, when I returned to the beach, I thought about the "waves" that Avraham had left behind, reaching to this very day with their influence on the proper way to welcome guests, especially if they are strangers.

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The great generosity of Avraham begins with, "I will take a loaf of bread, and you will eat to your heart's content" [Bereishit 18:5], and then continues with "knead it and make cake" [18:6] and then "he took a calf... and he took cream and milk" [18:7-8]. For Avraham knows that the desire for food grows as the amount is increased, and that the important thing is to bring the guests along a process which leads them to be satisfied, without ever asking the silent question, when are you going to leave? When I go someplace as a guest and I am asked whether I want a hot or cold drink, I always as for something hot. This is because a hot drink lasts longer, and until I finish the hot drink I can tell if I am truly welcome or not.

Once, when I was little, my parents used to visit relatives, friends, and neighbors, without giving them any advance warning. We would just turn up for a visit. (Before the era of the telephones, people had more time, and now that cellphones have been invented nobody has any time at all.) Nowadays if we visit without giving any warning, the potential host might well make us remain outside of the steel door and ask in the politeness of a metallic-sounding voice if he can help us in any way. And then, without much choice, we give up on our ideas of spontaneity and invent a need to borrow a book or some sugar, just to cover our embarrassment. In any case, we decide never to get trapped into a similar situation, and we make a binding decision that it is better to remain home, and to tell our family how much better things were at the home of our Patriarch Avraham.

Let us keep in mind that somewhere out there in the city of Dimona, it is still possible to dirty a table with the remains of a good fish, and to believe that there is still hope for a descendent of Avraham.

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 unfailing, 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, 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 G-d 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 conversive 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 G-d 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 G-d to intervene to help us, be of any efficacy? After all, wasn't it G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d 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. © 2006 Dr. A. Bonchek & aish.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

One of the truly tragic figures of the Bible is Lot, nephew and adopted son of Abraham. The first Jew had himself discovered the new - found faith of ethical and compassionate monotheism and had been elected by G-d to propagate this faith to the nations of the world so that they might eventually be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). Understandably such an educational process could only take place in historical time, so that Abraham and Sarah would be expected to found a covenantal nation. Since their marriage had not been blessed with progeny, logic would dictate that the heir apparent was to be Lot, who at least shared in Abraham's blood line and had been a part of Abraham's family and teachings since they all had left Ur Kasdim for Haran on the way to the land of Canaan (Gen. 11:31).

But as we have previously written, Lot became negatively affected by the materialism in Egypt when famine forced the family to sojourn there for a brief period, and he forsook the Abrahamic vision and mission for the more venal and verdant pastures of the wicked Sodom (Gen 13:5-13). We meet up with Lot once again several decades later in this week's Biblical reading, when two of the angel-messengers - who had visited Abraham to inform him that he and Sarah would give birth to a son - arrive now at Sodom to destroy the wicked city and rescue Lot and his family.

Lot is here pictured as the prototype of the Jew who greatly compromises the traditions of his forbears

for the material comforts afforded him by a foreign and corrupt society. He has forsaken his uncle -father the first Jew, and has become an inverted marrano. A marrano was a Jew in fifteenth and sixteenth century Spain during the Inquisition who publicly appeared as a Christian while retaining Jewish commitments in his personal life and in the cellars of his home. An inverted marrano is the Jew who is publicly and outwardly known to be a Hebrew, but who has internalized the gentile and corrupt mores of the society in his individual life-style and outlooks.

Lot, like many inverted marranos, has "made it by" in Sodom. The Biblical text finds him "seated at the gate of the city" (19:1), at the very least as one of the wealthy and respected elders, and possibly even as an esteemed Judge (Rashi, ad loc). He takes note of the arrival of the two strangers, and is caught in a difficult bind: on the one hand, all of his early training in Abraham and Sarah's tent cries out to him to welcome these men with embracing hospitality (as Abraham has so warmly done in the opening segment of our portion) but on the other hand he has become a stingy and ego-centric Sodomite, wherein welcoming strangers is not only frowned upon culturally but it is also legally forbidden "Behold now, my lords, swerve aside (suru, so that you will not be noticed as you enter) into the house of your servant, spend the night and wash your feet (so that your bath not be at all obvious to the other townspeople), and then rise early and go on your way (so that no one will see you leave)." No wonder that to such an invitation they respond, "No, we would rather spend the night on the city thorough-fare" (19:2).

The profound inner perversion of Lot's personality becomes clear in the very next incident. He importunes them, the strangers to "swerve into" his home, the Sodomites discover the transgression, surround the habitation and demand that Lot give over the strangers to the homosexual desires of the townsmen. Lot offers the Sodomites his two unmarried daughters in their stead! He has certainly learned hospitality from Abraham, his intentions may even be praiseworthy, but at the same time giving over his daughters to be raped is at the very least a misguided interpretation of the value of accepting strangers into your home. (Indeed, Lot seems to be penalized for his suggestion which was never accepted by the rowdies who, before they could get at the two "men", were felled with blindness - when his daughters who think the world has come to an end when Sodom and Amora become covered with molten lava, make their father drink, become impregnated by him, and thereby hope to repopulate the world; he is at the same time paid back for his good intentions by the fact that Moab (from father) is the son born to his elder daughter, whose descendant Ruth will later become the grand-mother of King David (Genesis 19: 31-38)).

Moreover, Lot the inverted marrano is still viewed as an alien stranger by the community for which he sacrificed his Hebraism. When he refuses their demands, he is criticized as "one who came as sojourner and is now making himself a judge" (19:5), and is viewed as a "joke" (19:14) by his resident sons in law. And despite all of this, he hesitates to leave the doomed Sodom, causing the angel -messengers to grab him and his family by the hand to enable them to escape the burning sulphur which will be the fate of his "adopted" nationality.

Indeed the Hebrew "and he hesitated" is punctuated by the lengthy zig-zag cantillation shalsholet, which appears only three times in the Book of Genesis (here in Gen 19:16, 24:12 and 39:8), each time expressing doubt and lack of decisiveness; Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, calls the cantillation shalsholet the music of ambivalence. And in our context of Lot's hesitation to leave Sodom and its impending destruction, we see the terrible fate of the inverted marrano, internally and hopelessly divided in half by a confused identity. Rashi (ad loc) suggests that he hesitated to leave because of his concern for his wealth in Sodom. I believe that is only part of his tragedy. Lot has no real place to go. He is neither Sodomite nor Hebrew, he is a man not only without a country but without a real identity. I believe the Jews in the diaspora - and especially in Europe - ought to take heed of Lot's tragedy. © 2006 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI ZVI MILLER

The Salant Foundation

The innate power of human nature inclines a person to be primarily concerned with one's personal benefit and needs. Whereas an enlightened person realizes the vital importance of extending oneself to care and assist one's fellow. What's more, he, himself, will benefit-extraordinarily- through his giving to others.

Avraham was the greatest man of his age, attaining universal prestige and esteem. Notwithstanding, when Avraham welcomed three desert travelers to his home, he personally served them, as the verse says (Bereishis 18:8), "and he stood near them under the tree and they ate." He performed this gracious act of kindness, at the age of ninety-nine, while still recovering from his circumcision.

The Talmud (Kiddushin 32b) recounts an incident wherein the preeminent sage of his generation, Rabban Gamliel, was serving guests in his home. The guests debated whether it was appropriate for them to be served by a man who was deserving of the highest honor. Rabbi Yehoshua cited a proof that it was proper to partake of Rabban Gamliel's hospitality from Abraham who served simple nomads.

Whereas Rabbi Zaddok remarked, "HaShem causes the wind to blow, the rain to fall, the earth to blossom, and 'sets a table' before each person. Surely if HaShem continuously serves the needs of His creations, we shall permit Rabban Gamliel to attend to us."

Moreover, when HaShem took us out of Egypt, He provided 'a pillar of cloud' to lead the way through the desert by day, and 'a pillar of fire' to illuminate the night. He did not consider it below His dignity to show people the way of the road.

We see that HaShem serves His creations-He provides for our every need and desire. Therefore, to follow the ways of HaShem, i.e., to help and serve our fellow, is an extremely rewarding enterprise. Filling our hearts with concern for others and actively performing good deeds for them frees us from our inherent self-centered tendencies.

Even more, when we shift our focus from exclusively looking after ourselves to also caring about others, we enter the holy dimension of the kind ways of HaShem. May we succeed in sensitizing ourselves to care for and serve others. Our dedication to give to others will grant us the opportunity to truly emulate HaShem. (Based on *Ohr RaShaz* of Rav Simcha Zissel)

Implement: Focus on caring for and bringing happiness to others. © 2006 *Rabbi Z. Miller & The Salant Foundation*

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's Haftorah reveals to us an incredible dimension of faith and its astounding result. Out of deep appreciation to a Shunamite lady's hospitality the Prophet Elisha promised that she would bear a son. This startling prediction raised major concern due to her elderly state coupled with her physical inability of bearing children. Indeed, she sensed some reservation in Elisha's words and expressed her strong desire that the child live a full, healthy life. (see Malbim's comment to 4:14,16) Elisha responded by repeating his promise and predicting the date of her son's birth. His promise was fulfilled and she gave birth to a boy on the exact date of prediction. When the boy matured, sudden tragedy befell him and he took seriously ill and died soon after in his mother's arms. The Shunamite lady did not despair and immediately traveled to Elisha. Upon arrival she calmly reminded him of his promise, whereupon Elisha ordered his servant to rush to the scene of her motionless child. Elisha prayed to Hashem and warmed the boy's body and Hashem responded and returned the child to life.

When reading these p'sukim we are overwhelmed by the Shunamite's manner in dealing with her son's sudden passing. Scriptures record her response and state, "She arose, placed the (dead) child

on the prophet's bed, closed the door and left." (4:21) There is no mention here of any emotional outburst, cry of despair or feeling of grief or anguish. Scriptures continue to relate that she calmly requested a donkey and informed her husband that she was rushing to the prophet on a peaceful journey. Even after arriving at Elisha's doorstep she maintained that everything at home was in order. Only after entering his private quarters did she allude to his promise and hint to the seriousness of her situation.

This entire episode reveals the Shunamite's incredible strength of character rooted in her total faith in Hashem and His prophets. She displayed an unparalleled degree of trust and regarded physical impossibilities within the realm of reality. Her conviction in Hashem was so strong that she sincerely anticipated His performance of a miracle of major proportions. She simply refused to accept that her miracle boy's life ended so soon. She reasoned that if Hashem defied His rules of nature to grace her with a son He could likewise defy them and return her son to life. Since Hashem accepted Elisha's first request for a miracle Hashem would conceivably accept Elisha's second request for another miracle. Therefore, with total conviction she calmly awaited a nearly unprecedented experience—the revival of her dead son. Indeed, Hashem rewarded her for this perfect faith and she merited to witness one of Hashem's greatest revelations of all times.

Where did she develop such faith and conviction? Although we know that Hashem's ability is limitless we are also aware of the improbability of His altering His master plan for the world. The revival of the dead is an experience reserved, for the most part, for the end of days and is not meant to happen before then. Prior to the Shunamite's miracle world history saw the revival of two people, our Patriarch Yitzchok during the Akeida and the Tzorfati boy revived by the Prophet Elyahu. (see Pirkei DR' Eliezer 31, M'lochim 1 17:22) How could this Shunamite even dream of such supernatural occurrences, let alone believe that they would happen to her son?

One could suggest that she drew her strength from a lesson in this week's sedra. We read this week about three common travelers who informed our Patriarch Avrohom that his wife, Sora would bear a son. Sora, a ninety year old barren lady whose husband was also quite elderly, didn't place much value on this prediction. In fact, she found the travelers' words somewhat amusing and chuckled at the notion of her bearing a child at her ripe age. Hashem reprimanded her and said, "Why did Sora laugh saying, 'Can I give birth when I am so aged?'" Hashem continued and said, "Is anything out of Hashem's reach?" (Breishis 18:14) We are somewhat puzzled by this dialogue. Sora's response merely reflected the true improbability of child bearing at her ripe age. Why should she,

physically incapable of giving birth and well past that stage, entertain the bizarre phenomena of returning to her youth? Nachmanides places this in perspective and reminds us that this prediction came from three angels disguised as ordinary Arabs. Our Matriarch Sora was totally unaware of their true identity and seemingly responded in a most appropriate way. She certainly appreciated their blessing but had long given up on considering such ridiculous things. Nachmanides questions why then did Hashem fault and reprimand her for a natural and logical response?

He answers that Sora's faith in Hashem should have exceeded such physical restrictions. With her level of knowledge she should have entertained the possibility of the nearly impossible. She should have believed that such miracles could actually happen or respond, at least, by wishing that Hashem willed them to be so. Sora's profound understanding of Hashem's ways should have left room in her mind for even the most remote of suggestions. She certainly realized that Hashem could do anything and should have eagerly entertained the fulfillment of this blessing. (Nachmanides to Breishis 18:15)

This interpretation, apparently, understands that Sora should have valued the blessing of common ordinary travelers. Indeed, the Sages teach us never to take anyone's blessing or curse lightly because of their possible degree of truth. (Mesichta Baba Kamma 93a) In this vein, even the seemingly ridiculous words of ordinary Arabs has merit. Who knows if their words were not a reflection of a miraculous development in the near future. Although it was highly improbable for this to be so, the possibility did exist and should not have been overlooked. Maybe these travelers were angels in disguise delivering a message from Above! Our Matriarch Sora's chuckle reflected that child bearing for her was outside of reality. Hashem reprimanded her and reminded her that nothing is ever outside of reality. If she had considered things from Hashem's perspective she would have concluded that nothing is beyond His capability or difficult to bring about.

Sora should have hearkened to the definitive tone of the travelers' prediction. As remote as it seemed the Arab travelers may have been sending her a message. After all, Sora was privileged to witness Hashem's involvement in every step of her life. Hashem therefore expected her never to limit His degree of involvement and respond favorably to this most remote prediction or blessing and contemplate its possible reality.

One could suggest that the Shunamite lady thoroughly absorbed this lesson and applied it to her own predicament. She, in fact, already merited to witness a miracle of major proportions. She was also incapable of child bearing and well on in her years before she miraculously conceived her son. Once she

experienced this, she thoroughly researched Hashem's guidelines for miracles and concluded that nothing was beyond reality. She totally identified with this principle and continuously viewed her son's existence in this light. When her sudden tragedy occurred she saw in it the perfect opportunity to practice her belief. Drawing on her inner principles of faith she immediately engaged them into action. She fully believed that her son's death was no cause for despair because Hashem could easily restore him if He so willed. Consequently, she immediately traveled to Elisha and elicited him to daven for a miracle. Her unwavering faith served her well and in its merit Hashem responded to Elisha's prayers and restored her son to life.

We consistently daven to Hashem to end our troubles and bring us the long awaited Messianic era. For many people it is difficult to conceptualize or fathom how this phenomena will come about. At present, there are so many obstacles in the way that any stage of redemption will require unprecedented miracles. In the recent tragic American experience Hashem displayed untold levels of compassion. Close to one thousand souls were spared from a horrifying death due to unexpected Divine intervention. For those fortunate people Hashem's perfectly timed miracles will undoubtedly remind them of His constant involvement in their lives. But, even we who are privileged to learn of these miracles can draw inspiration from them. Let us daven to Hashem that as He has begun showing us His open hand He should continue doing so until the entire world recognizes His sovereignty and warm relationship with His devout children. © 2006 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI BARUCH LEFF

Kol Yaakov

How can we put Sarah and disbelief in the same sentence? Sarah-the initial Matriarch of the Jewish People-did not believe or trust in G-d? Yet, the Torah seems quite clear on the subject. It is truly a daunting task to attempt to analyze seeming misdeeds of one of our Matriarchs. But we must if we are to take the study of Torah seriously. Let us read this shocking story of the birth of Isaac:

"The angels said to Abraham: 'Where is Sarah, your wife?' He said, 'Behold, she is in the tent'. The angel said, 'I will surely return to you at this time next year and there will be a life, a son for Sarah, your wife!' Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent which was behind the angel. Sarah and Abraham were old; Sarah had reached menopause. Sarah laughed inside saying, 'After I have withered, will I again have my menstrual cycle?' G-d said to Abraham, 'Why has Sarah laughed saying, "Can it be true that I will give birth; I am old!" Is anything beyond G-d? At this time next year I will return to you, there will be a life and Sarah will have a son!' Sarah refuted saying, 'I did not

laugh', for she was afraid, but Abraham said, 'But you did laugh!'" (Genesis 18: 9-16)

The questions abound: Why did G-d have Sarah overhear the news of Isaac's birth? Why not tell Sarah directly?

Why would Sarah laugh? Did she think the angel was being sarcastic? And if she truly did not believe that G-d could make her body youthful again, why would she lie about it later and say that she did not laugh? Even out of fear, a righteous person would not say outright lies.

We are in a quandary. We know that Sarah was an extremely devout and righteous woman. It is impossible to understand that she did not believe in G-d's omnipotence and power. She knew that G-d can do anything, including making an old woman pregnant. On the other hand, we also must trust G-d's assessment that Sarah's laughter showed disbelief. And to make matters worse, when presented with the evidence of G-d's assessment, Sarah denies it!

It would seem that making a compromise solution is the only way to answer this Biblical puzzle. We must find an explanation for Sarah's reaction to which Sarah would not think is denial of G-d's powers, but G-d, in His profound awareness of a person's nature, would know that indeed it is.

We would suggest, therefore, that Sarah was saying, "Abraham and I are old. We cannot naturally have a child. Sure, G-d is all-powerful and could allow us to have children in our old age, but G-d does not run His world this way. It must not be true what I just heard. G-d will not change nature to such a great extent."

Sarah laughs, but she does not deny G-d's omnipotence. G-d, though, does not see it this way. He sees Sarah's reaction and views it as denial of His control of the world. He understands that Sarah is not limiting His power in theory, but her suggestion that there are rules of nature that G-d does not wish to break even at limited times is a denial of G-d's direct participation in the world. True, G-d made nature and its characteristics, but when G-d wants, He steps in and changes all nature according to His desires. He is not bound by even the natural laws of the world that He Himself arranged.

So Sarah does not really laugh in denial, but in G-d's ultimate assessment, she does. G-d had known that Sarah would have a difficult time with all this because of her mode of thinking, and arranged that she shouldn't be confronted with His criticism directly. She would overhear the fact of Isaac's birth and how G-d will change nature when He chooses. G-d does the same when He has Abraham tell Sarah of His displeasure. He wishes not to encounter her directly, for her benefit.

Have you ever been corrected by a friend for behavior that he/she felt was unbecoming of you? When your friend 'gave it to you', did you 'give it right

back'? It's a natural reaction. It is quite difficult to accept 'mussar'- rebuke when you are directly confronted with it. We should be accepting of it but we often fail this spiritual challenge.

Have you ever overheard someone else being critical of something that you realize applies to you sometimes? In such situations, it is much easier to accept the rebuke and improve because you get a chance to truly and honestly think without too many personal power struggles ("I'm not going to let him tell me that!") getting in the way.

We often have our own critiques of people's ideas or actions. Avoid the direct confrontation. It is then that we will have acted in the *Imatatio Dei* mode that we learn from G-d's treatment of Sarah. © 2006 Rabbi B. Leff & aish.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

After the binding of Yitzchak (Isaac) episode (akedat Yitzchak), the Torah tells us that Nachor, Avraham's (Abraham) brother, was blessed with eight children. (Genesis 22:20-24) The listing of Nachor's progeny seems odd as it comes after an event of such dramatic proportions. Why the need to give us this information here?

The mainstream answer is that since Yitzchak's life has been saved, it is time for him to marry. In the end he weds Rivka (Rebecca) whose lineage is explained in the final sentences of the passage.

From here we learn an important message. Yitzchak is saved from death. But to be fully saved means not only to come out physically unscathed, but emotionally healthy as well. Displaying an ability to marry, establish a family and continue the seed of Avraham would show that Yitzchak truly survived the episode. Thus, the last sentences dealing with Yitzchak's future wife are crucial to the binding story for without marriage, Yitzchak's life would have been only partially saved.

Another thought comes to mind. The Avraham story begins and ends with the words *leich lecha*. (Genesis 12:1, Genesis 22:2) But, in truth, it starts a few sentences before chapter 12 with the listing of Avraham's complete family. This listing includes his brother Nachor who does not accompany Avraham to Canaan. As the Avraham story is introduced with the mentioning of Nachor, so too is it closed with the listing of Nachor's full progeny. The narrative is, therefore, presented with perfect symmetry, beginning and ending with Nachor.

Here too, another important message emerges. Often in families, we think of individuals who are more important and less important. Here the Torah states that Nachor, who at first glance seems less important, begins and ends the Avraham narrative for he plays a crucial role in the development of Avraham's future - he

was, after all, the grandfather of Rivka and the great grandfather of Leah and Rachel.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik offers yet another insight. The birth of Nachor's children is recorded to contrast Avraham's and Nachor's lot in life. Avraham, the pathfinder of a new faith, the absolute believer in G-d, struggled to have a child with Sarah. And even after the long anticipated birth, this miracle child, Yitzchak, almost dies in the binding story. Nachor on the other hand, a man of questionable faith, is blessed with child after child. It all comes so easy to him.

Here too, there is another essential lesson to be learned. Avraham could have challenged G-d and argued, "why should I struggle while Nachor reaps such great reward?". Still, Avraham never doubts G-d, and remains a staunch believer.

I remember receiving a \$500 check to our synagogue in the fall of 1986. The writer of the letter indicated he was sending the donation in the wake of the miraculous game six victory by the N.Y. Mets over the Boston Red Sox (the famous Bill Buckner game). "This check," he wrote, "is the fulfillment of a promise I had made at the bottom of the 10th inning with two outs and two men on. In closing, all I can say is that as a Jew and a Met fan I've learned to believe in miracles."

The young man who sent the check meant well. May he be blessed for giving so generously. But still, I couldn't help but think of the countless synagogues and churches which may have lost out when Boston fans made similar type promises if the Red Sox would win.

The test of faith is to believe in G-d not only when our prayers are answered, but even when they are not. © 2001 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

When Sara heard the visitors inform Avraham that she would give birth to a son (Beraishis 18:10), she laughed (18:12), as had Avraham when G-d informed him (17:17). Yet, G-d seems to only take issue with Sara's reaction (18:13). Why was G-d upset with Sara and not Avraham?

This question becomes even stronger when we consider that Avraham had heard it directly from G-d, while Sara only heard it from the guests she thought were real people. We can understand not believing that such a miraculous birth would occur if it was only predicted by humans, but how could Avraham question whether a couple as old as they were can become parents if G-d Himself said it will happen? There are numerous approaches to answer these questions, some of which are presented below.

Rashi (17:17) tells us that their reaction was not similar at all. Avraham fully believed G-d, and laughed because he was so happy about it, even more so because of the extent of what G-d was doing for them, changing nature by making them parents at such an advanced age.

The Ramban agrees, saying that it is apparent that they were different types of laughter from the context. When "laughter" refers to belittling something far-fetched, it stays inside the person, while real "laughter" comes out of the mouth. Avraham "laughed," i.e. real laughter (because he was happy), while Sarah "laughed inside" (18:12) because she didn't really believe it was true.

The Bechor Shor (one of the Ba'alay Tosfos) adds another way that we can see from the context that Avraham really believed it, as before laughing he "fell on his face," thanking G-d for bending the laws of nature for him.

The Ralbag and the Abarbanel point to Avraham's words after his laughter to show that it came from joy rather than disbelief. The Ralbag says that Avraham wondered why G-d would go so far to give him another son rather than just fulfilling his promise through Avraham's already-born son, Yishmael; which is why he asked that Yishmael "live before G-d" rather than changing nature by giving him a son with Sara. The Abarbanel understands Avraham's query to be internal: If a son could be born naturally, then he and Yishmael could both fulfill G-d's promises about his descendants. If, however, G-d had to change nature in order for the new son to be born, it must be because it would be impossible to fulfill His promises in any other way, meaning either that Yishmael would die or was not worthy. Concluding that the only way for he and Sara to have a son is through a tremendous miracle, Avraham prayed for Yishmael.

The Pa'ane'ach Raza (another of the Ba'alay Tosfos) says that even if Avraham's laughter was not from happiness (but disbelief), we can understand why G-d only rebuked Sara. Avraham had kept his doubts to himself ("in his heart"), while Sara shared her doubts with others (as the Torah adds the word "saying," both when telling us that she laughed and when G-d asks Avraham why she laughed). Although he implies that he agrees with Rashi that Avraham's laughter was the result of being happy, the Chizkuni (also one of the Ba'alay Tosfos) suggests the same answer (18:13) but seems to say that, like Sara, Avraham had a hard time believing that they would become parents (17:17). The Moshav Zekaynim (a compilation of various Ba'alay Tosfos) points out that Rashi had told us (18:8) that Sara had already returned to her youth, so should have believed that she would bear a son, while Avraham experienced no physical changes.

The Chizkuni adds that the rebuke of Sara was intended to be a rebuke of Avraham as well, while the

Midrash Hagadol says that whenever two people are guilty of the same thing, out of respect for the greater of the two the rebuke is directed at the other one. It can be said that giving their son the name Yitzchok, referring to their scoffing (as the Midrash Hagadol says it does), is also a form of rebuke, although it could also be taken as a constant reminder that even from the time of our earliest forefathers our nation was built on the impossible. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

R' David Hakochavi z"l (Southern France; 13-14th centuries) writes: We have previously explained that Hashem, in His great kindness to mankind, created man in His tzellem/image so that he could follow a wholesome path and choose good over bad and truth over falsehood. Moreover, just as He created man following a period when nothing existed and He made man as a wondrous new thing, so He continues this closeness with personal hashgachah/attention to man, and through this hashgachah He does wonders for man. In particular, His wonders can be seen in the persons and the property of those whom He loves.

It is well known that the most important aspect of man's creation is the fact that he was created in G-d's tzellem and demmut/likeness and it was for this that He made the wondrous creation. Similarly, He gives His attention and performs wonders primarily for those who reflect His image. It is such a relationship that G-d was describing when He said regarding Avraham [in our parashah; verse 18:19], "For I have loved him, because he will command his children and his household after him to keep the way of Hashem..." Such a relationship is also alluded to in the verse [Shmot 19:4], "You have seen what I did to Egypt and that I have borne you on the wings of eagles..."

Further, writes R' David, once we believe that He gives His attention and performs wonders for those who reflect His tzellem and for their children and property, we must further believe that He performs wonders in order to perfect our own tzellem. We can understand, for example, that the revelation at Sinai was primarily to perfect the human mind [which is what distinguishes man from animals and therefore is the clearest manifestation of the tzellem of G-d]. Man is created with potential intelligence, and [only] if he understands the intention of Torah and its mitzvot will he understand fear of G-d and find sacred knowledge. (Migdal David: Sefer Ha'emunah: Pillar IV, Ch. 1)

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