

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### Taking a Closer Look

Upon hearing that G-d was judging Sedome (Sodom) and its neighboring cities as a prelude to completely destroying it (Beraishis 18:20-21), Avraham beseeched G-d on their behalf (18:23-32). He began by asking if the righteous will be punished along with the wicked (18:23), but then switches to the opposite extreme, asking if the wicked will be spared with the righteous (18:24), before reverting back to his original request by saying it is beneath G-d to punish the righteous with the wicked (18:25). What was Avraham really asking for? Was he asking that the righteous be spared even though he understood that the wicked had to perish, or did he assume that the righteous would be spared and was trying to save the wicked as well?

Beraishis Rabbah (49:8) understands it to be one long statement; "it's not enough that you aren't sparing the wicked because of the righteous, but [instead] you are going to destroy the righteous with the wicked?" It would seem, then, that Avraham was asking for both. First of all, the righteous should be spared, and, secondly, being that they should be spared, they should protect the wicked - allowing them to be spared as well. As Rashi puts it (18:25), "and if You'll say that the righteous will not save the wicked, why should the righteous die?" The Ramban (18:23) explains this further, saying that Avraham was addressing two of G-d's attributes; appealing to His attribute of justice, Avraham said that even if the wicked deserve to die the righteous should be spared, and appealing to His attribute of mercy, Avraham asked that G-d go beyond strict justice by allowing the wicked to be spared because of the righteous.

Whereas the starting point for this approach seems to be that the righteous should be spared, with Avraham then requesting that it be taken to the next level (so that the wicked are spared too), the Bechor Shor starts from the other end, with Avraham saying that really G-d should show His mercy and spare the wicked with the righteous, but instead the wicked are causing the righteous to be wiped out with them. Either way, these commentators (and many others who follow their approach) understand Avraham to be asking for two things. At the very least, the righteous should not be punished because of the sins of the wicked, and

ideally the wicked would be spared too, because of the righteous. Why the righteous would or should protect the wicked is not discussed, and may be part of a larger, separate, issue. Nevertheless, other approaches that explain Avraham's request may provide possible reasons as to why the righteous would protect the wicked.

The Radak (see also Moshav Zekainim and Paaneach Raza quoting R"Y Chasid) suggests that Avraham wasn't really asking G-d to spare the lives of the wicked; his request was only to spare the righteous. However, since the righteous would survive, there would no longer be a need to "destroy the place," as the righteous would still be able to live there. G-d had indicated that He would completely destroy Sedome and the cities around it, so Avraham asked why, if there were righteous individuals who would (should) be spared, must the cities be destroyed too (with the righteous having to move elsewhere). Instead, G-d should wipe out all of the wicked people but leave the righteous individuals and their homes (and cities) intact. It would seem that according to the Radak Avraham knew that the wicked couldn't be saved, so tried to save as much as he could on behalf of the righteous. The Ran (quoted by the Abarbanel) adds that seeing their home and birthplace destroyed would bring the righteous anguish, so just as they shouldn't be killed, they shouldn't suffer either, and the "place" should be spared along with the righteous. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch takes it one step further, suggesting that seeing their (wicked) friends, neighbors and relatives perish, especially before having repented, would pain the righteous. Avraham was therefore asking that the wicked be spared for the sake of the righteous. It is certainly possible, though, that since any righteous people in Sedome were not completely righteous (see Beraishis Rabbah 49:9), even if they would be spared from death they wouldn't be spared from suffering.

The Malbim quotes the Talmud (Bava Kama 60a) that "once the destroyer is given permission [to destroy] it does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked," and uses it to explain Avraham's request. While even the "destroyer" (messenger of G-d sent to punish the wicked) cannot inflict damage on the completely righteous, he can (and does) destroy those who are not completely righteous even if they were not wicked enough to warrant this punishment being sent (they would need special protection to be spared, and

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they don't have the merits for such protection). Avraham knew that there was no one in Sedome (et al) that was completely righteous, but thought there might be some (50? 45? 40? 10?) that were not (as) wicked either. If G-d were to send His "destroyer" to punish the wicked, the semi-righteous would perish with them. Therefore, in order to save the "righteous," Avraham asked that everyone be spared, i.e. that the "destroyer" not be sent. It was not a two-step process, first asking that the righteous be saved even if the wicked were destroyed and then asking that the wicked be spared too, but a one-step process, as either they would all be destroyed or all be spared.

Based on how Rav Eliyahu Dessler, zt"l, explains having two days of Rosh Hashanah (Michtav Mei'Eliyahu II, pgs. 74-77), another possibility can be suggested as well. Although it is not problematic to call the second day of Yom Tov, which is only of rabbinic origin, a "holy day" (since it has become holy), calling the second day of Rosh Hashanah a "day of judgment" should be. After all, it is G-d judging us, and this judgment already occurred on the first day of Rosh Hashanah! How can we say "today we are being judged" if the actual judgment has already taken place? Rav Dessler explains that our sages understood the inner workings of judgment day, and that there is a second judgment taking place on the second day. On the first day, we are judged on our own merits, and whether the choices we have made warrant giving us another year of life. On the second day, we are judged based on how we are needed by others, specifically, by those that are righteous (really righteous, not just "not-wicked"). If an individual (or individuals) that truly serves G-d benefits from someone (in a way that enhances their serving G-d), that "someone" can be granted another year of life (etc.) even if they didn't deserve it in their own merits. The storekeeper that provides nourishment to the Torah scholar can be spared even if he were found "guilty" on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, and this is true of anybody that provides the framework within which the righteous person lives.

If all of the wicked people in society were destroyed, could that society function? This may have been Avraham's argument to G-d. If there are 50 righteous people in Sedome, and everyone else is

wiped out, could those 50 people survive? If the farmer was no longer there to grow his crops, how would the righteous eat? All the roles that were filled by the wicked would now be unfulfilled, and the righteous would perish anyway. Therefore, in order to save the righteous, Avraham had to ask G-d to save the wicked on their behalf as well.

Although obviously not using Rav Dessler as his starting point, the Abarbanel says something very similar. Boruch she'kivanti. © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

If one had to choose a biblical moment that evokes awe, confusion, inspiration, fear and terror all at the same time, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, the akeda, stands unique. For thousands of years, commentators have grappled with this unsettling, disturbing event which, with one stroke of the knife, threatens to dissolve Abraham's world as well as his world order.

Abraham has been continuously promised that the nation which shall emerge from his own loins will, against all odds, survive and declare the name of one G-d, to the entire world. And Isaac's very birth to aged parents was a miraculous confirmation of G-d's promise. Is Abraham now expected to destroy that very miracle? Moreover, Abraham's message to the world was one of ethical monotheism, of a G-d who created the human being in His own image, who deplored immorality and bloodshed. Hasn't his very ministry been the exact antithesis of Moloch's blood-thirsty parts of child - sacrifice?

Tragedy, however, is halted. The verdict of biblical commentaries is that by subjugating his own will before G-d's will, Abraham proves to be the ever-faithful servant whose immense faith in the face of this 10th, and final, test is rewarded. A ram trapped in a thick grove suddenly appears, and Isaac, as well as Abraham's dream, is saved.

Most commentators approach this difficult story of the akeda from Abraham's point of view. Maimonides, for example, sees it as a fundamental confirmation of the truth of prophecy. Upon hearing G-d's word, Abraham does what he does because he has heard the divine command.

Soren Kierkegaard, in his masterpiece "Fear and Trembling," understands that Abraham is being taught the essential lesson in religious worship, the "teleological suspension of the ethical," and, the more contemporary Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz who extracts from the akeda that the human being is not commanded by the Torah to be ethical; he is rather commanded to serve G-d.

But perhaps we ought view the akeda story from G-d's perspective, from the very complex lesson (or lessons) that G-d was trying to communicate to the first Jews. The command is, after all, an ambiguous

one: "lift him up as a dedication (olah)", literally a lifting-up. As Rashi correctly notes, G-d never said: slaughter him!

Of course, olah certainly means a sacrificial offering in the context of a system of animal sacrifices. And in the light of subsequent Jewish history, tear-stained and blood-drenched, with parents who had to see their children immolated on the pyres of anti-Jewish tyrants from the Nile River of Pharaoh to the gas chambers of Hitler, - Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac provides Biblical precedent for superhuman acts of faith which have paradoxically ensured and enshrined our national eternity.

But what if G-d's ambiguity reveals another message - and a second kind of test. After all, the Biblical punch-line is that Isaac lives, that G-d's angel - a true *deus ex machina* - pushes back Abraham's hand at the very last moment.

Perhaps G-d expected Abraham to have pleaded for Isaac, to have taken a firm stand against child sacrifice, to have resisted, pleaded and begged, on behalf of Isaac just as he resisted on behalf of Sodom. Is that not how Moses reacted in a later generation when, after the Israelites sinned with the golden calf, G-d tells Moses to leave Him alone and He will destroy the entire nation and begin anew with Moses alone. Moses categorically rejects the offer, debating with the Creator effectively and convincingly on behalf of His eternal covenant with Israel, His divine promise to the Patriarchs (Ex 32:11-13). Were not G-d's initial words to Moses a test of the prophet's commitment to and love for his nation, a test to which Moses reacted differently from Abraham?

We find evidence for this reading in the text itself. After the akeda, G-d never speaks to Abraham again. Indeed, it is actually an angel and not G-d Himself, who prevents Abraham from the act of slaughter according to the Biblical narrative.

And the Bible reiterates the necessity of sometimes challenging G-d. Job suffers abject pain and bereavement and is comforted by his friends, who urge him to accept his plight as a just punishment from G-d. Job challenges G-d, insisting to be shown where and how he sinned. And in the end, G-d accepts Job's challenge and rejects the simplistic "piety" and acquiescence of his friends. Indeed, it was Abraham's earlier remonstrations with G-d on behalf of the wicked Sodomites as well as Moses and Job which served as a model for one of the great religious heroes of recent times, the Hasidic leader and saint R. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. He once rose in the midst of the Yom Kippur synagogue service, before Kaddish, and cried out to G-d, "Enough! What have Your people done that You continue to make them suffer? Have we not suffered enough? I refuse to leave this place until you forgive Israel! Yisgadalei Ve Yiskadash Shmei Rabbo."

In effect, after the binding of Isaac, Abraham's career is over. We never see him directly encountering or being encountered by G-d again. And indeed, the Sfat Emet interprets the words in our Biblical akeda narrative "And he (Abraham) saw the place from afar" to read "And he (Abraham) saw G-d from afar," taking the Hebrew *makom* in this context to refer to G-d, as it is used in the blessing we convey to mourners (Gen. 22:4). The Sfat Emet suggests that this was a test of Abraham's fear of G-d; had the patriarch been in the mode of love of G-d, he would have realized that the "Merciful, loving Rahum" could never have requested child sacrifice of him.

And this interpretation is not very different from that of Rashi, who suggests that G-d's initial intent had only been for Abraham to bring Isaac up the mountain, and then to take him down from the mountain. And the probable source for Rashi is Babylonian Talmud Taanit (4a), which cites Jeremiah's (19:5) critique against Israelite idolaters who set up altars for burning their children to Baal, something which "I (G-d) never commanded, never spoke of, never imagined: "I never commanded Mesha to sacrifice his son, I never spoke to Jefta to sacrifice his daughter; I never imagined that Abraham would sacrifice Isaac."

Our Bible is eternal, speaking to its generation as well as to all generations. For all generations wherein Israelites would be called upon to sacrifice their children "al Kiddush haShem," the command to Abraham was a call to faith and Abraham remains a beacon of commitment unto death. At the very same time - and especially for the generation of the Bible with its Moloch idolatry - the entire story comes to teach that our G-d of ethical monotheism would never expect a parent to slaughter his son in His name! © 2007 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**M**ost commentators dwell upon the compassion for sinners demonstrated by our father Avraham in this week's parsha. Though this message is undoubtedly the important one, as relating to the tragedy of Sodom, there is an important peripheral lesson, of perhaps equal importance, involved there as well. And that lesson is that a few good people make all the difference in human society and in the fate of mankind.

Sodom is not destroyed because of the thousands or even millions of evildoers in its midst. It was destroyed simply because it lacked ten good people in its society. And this is G-d's message to Avraham as well. Avraham is a lonely person - he is on one side and everyone else in the world is seemingly on the other side.

Lonely people oftentimes are beset by doubts as to their course in life. "Fifty million Frenchmen can't

be wrong!" But history has shown us time and again that the lonely individual is proven correct and the behavior and opinions of the many are proven to be wrong and even dangerous. Avraham becomes the paradigm for the lonely righteous in a world that envies, imitates and glorifies Sodom. He is the father of the Jewish people especially in this regard.

The Jews are a small and lonely group in our world. Their values and way of life are in opposition to those of the many. Yet even our enemies admit - and in fact object to the prevalence of our contributions, influence and vitality as regards human civilization and history.

The destruction of Sodom leaves a deep imprint on Avraham. It helps shape his attitude towards his son Yitzchak. He eschews the choice of the many - of Yishmael and the children of Keturah - in favor of the lonely good and pious son Yitzchak. That is perhaps the message of G-d to Avraham when He told him: "For through Yitzchak [alone] will you have true descendants."

One Yitzchak eventually is able to counter - in G-d's inscrutable reckoning of merits and salvation millions of evildoers - no matter how well pedigreed those evildoers claim to be. Sodom eventually is destroyed by its own innate lack of goodness and of a dearth of pious citizens. But Avraham and Yitzchak, small in numbers and opposed by most of the world, will continue to flourish and proclaim the values of goodness and righteousness in the general world.

The prophet Yeshayahu characterizes Avraham as "echad" - one, unique, alone, singular. That description is to be interpreted positively and not as a complaint or source of weakness or pessimism. In a world of the many it is the few that really matter. The lord told us long ago in the book of Dvarim that we would be the fewest of all people. Yet in our influence and strength of spirit we are as numerous as are the stars in heaven.

This inner realization of ourselves and our role in G-d's plan for human existence and growth marks us as the true children of Avraham and gives us hope even in a world where Sodom appears all powerful. © 2007 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**T**his week's portion (Va-yera) parallels last week's (Lekh Lekha) with one significant exception. Lekh Lekha is nationalistic, while this week's portion is universalistic.

Both portions deal with Avraham (Abraham) as savior of Sodom. In Lekh Lekha, the focus is on family,

as Avraham saves his nephew Lot who had moved to Sodom. (Genesis, Chapter 14) In Va-yera, Avraham tries to save the entire city filled with non-Jews. (Chapters 18,19)

Both portions deal with Sarah's declaring that she is Avraham's sister. In Lekh Lekha that declaration is followed by their eviction from Egypt. (Ch. 12) In Va-yera the declaration is followed by Avraham understanding that he is part of a larger world. He thus enters into a covenantal agreement with Avimelekh, King of Philistia. (Chapter 20, 21)

Both portions deal with the expulsion of Hagar, Avraham's second wife. In Lekh Lekha Avraham does not object. (Ch. 16) In Va-yera he is reluctant to have Hagar cast out. In the end, Avraham is thereby protective of the forerunners of Islam, Hagar and their son Yishmael.

Both portions deal with G-d's promises to Avraham. In Lekh Lekha, G-d makes a covenant exclusively with Avraham - promising him land and children. (Chs. 12, 15, 17) In Va-yera, G-d eternally connects with Avraham through the binding of Isaac. Still, whereas Avraham is described as walking together (yahdav) with Yitzchak (Isaac) to Moriah (Ch. 22:6), Avraham returns home together (yahdav) with his lads-Yishmael and Eliezer, non-Jews. (Ch. 22:19)

It can be suggested that Avraham in Va-yera had become so universal that he forgot his national roots. The corrective to Avraham's universal leaning is next week's portion of Hayeei Sarah. Note that in Hayeei Sarah, Avraham acquires part of the land of Israel and finds a wife for his son-both minding the home front and echoing the nationalistic themes of Lech Lecha. (Chs. 23, 24)

One of the beauties of our tradition is that Judaism has nationalistic as well as universalistic dimensions. The way that we care for our own informs us how to treat the larger world. Indeed, the test of the way we love the world is how we show love toward our own brother or sister, our fellow Jew.

The flow of the Avraham / Sarah narrative indicates that one should realize that both elements are critical, yet one should make sure that when embracing the importance of universalism, that it not be at the expense of one's inner circle, family or nation. © 2007 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 NAFTALI REICH**

### **Legacy**

**W**hat thoughts passed through Abraham's mind as he walked towards the mountaintop with his son Isaac? Childless until the age of one hundred, Abraham and Sarah had finally been blessed with a son, and now, Hashem had commanded

Abraham to bind his beloved son on the altar and sacrifice him. In this, the supreme test of his loyalty and devotion, Abraham did not hesitate for a moment, and we his descendants still reap the benefits to this very day.

But let us consider for a moment Abraham's state of mind on that fateful day. Was his heart gripped by the icy fingers of dread? Did he cringe at the thought of touching the sharp blade to the tender skin of his son's throat? Did he despair at the thought of a lonely future with no fitting heir to take his place?

Not at all. As Abraham and Isaac set out for the mountain, the Torah tells us, "Vayeilchu shneihem yachdav. The two of them went together." What does this mean? Our Sages see this as a metaphor for the feelings in their hearts, which beat together as one. Abraham fully shared the joyous anticipation experienced by Isaac, who was as yet oblivious to the true purpose of the journey. The enormity of what he was about to do did not becloud Abraham's mind and heart. On the contrary, it exhilarated him.

Abraham had attained the highest levels of faith. He had so completely subordinated his own desires to the divine will that nothing existed for him but Hashem's command. Therefore, in his understanding, how could an action that fulfilled the will of Hashem inspire anything but perfect joy?

And how about Isaac? What was the level of his faith? We need look just a little further in the parashah to find the answer. As they travel towards the mountaintop, Isaac questions his father about the whereabouts of the sacrificial lamb. From Abraham's response, it becomes apparent that Isaac himself is to fill that role. And again the Torah tells us, "Vayeilchu shneihem yachdav. The two of them went together." Their hearts still beat together as one. Isaac not only accepts his divinely ordained fate, he faces it with joy equal to that of his father.

But perhaps the most startling insight into the character of the patriarchs comes at the very end of this astonishing episode. The angel has stopped Abraham's hand even as it already held the slaughtering knife. Hashem has acknowledged Abraham's supreme faith and showered eternal blessings upon him and his offspring. We can well imagine the transcendent ecstasy that gripped Abraham and Isaac in the aftermath of this incredible spiritual experience. And yet, when they return to the young attendants waiting with the donkeys in the distance, the Torah again tells us, "Vayeilchu yachdav. They went together." Together in spirit as in body, the commentators observe.

Abraham and Isaac did not feel themselves suddenly vastly superior because of the miracles they had witnessed and the promises they received. They took no personal credit for their stellar achievements and considered themselves no more or less precious than any of the Hashem's other creatures.

A man once visited a great sage. "I have finished the entire Talmud," he boasted.

"Indeed?" said the sage. "Apparently, it has taught you nothing."

"What do you mean?" the startled man stammered.

"When a man discovers the vast ocean of the Talmud," replied the sage, "when it dawns on him that in an entire lifetime he can expect to do no more than scratch the surface, he is immediately overwhelmed by the extent of his own ignorance. But you seem quite pleased with yourself. Where is your humility? Where is your awe? I don't think you have the faintest idea of what the Talmud is all about!"

The outstanding spiritual achievements of the patriarchs and their extreme humility present no paradox. Quite the contrary. As they became more and more aware of the awesome and infinite Presence of the Almighty, their own sense of self diminished proportionately, and consequently, their humility was a direct result of their spiritual growth.

In our own lives, we can use our own humility as a measure of our spiritual growth. As long we feel smug and self-satisfied by the good deeds we accumulate and the advances in our level of learning, we can be sure that our growth is essentially superficial. But when we begin to feel dazzled and dwarfed by the spiritual vistas that open before us, when our new understanding and experiences make us shrink inside with a sudden sense of inadequacy, then and only then do we know that we are on the path of true spiritual growth. © 2007 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

#### 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 Eliyahu. (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. © 2007 Rabbi D. Siegel & Project Genesis, Inc.

#### **RABBI ARON TENDLER**

### **Parsha Summary**

**N**ote: The Shabbos Torah Reading is divided into 7 sections. Each section is called an Aliya [literally: Go up] since for each Aliya, one person "goes up" to make a bracha [blessing] on the Torah Reading.

1st Aliya: The three angels appear to Avraham and foretell the birth of Yitzchak. Upon hearing the news, Sarah laughs to herself.

2nd Aliya: The angels depart to destroy Sodom, and Hashem [G-d] tells Avraham about His plans for destroying Sodom. Pasuk 18:18-19 proclaims G-d's confidence in Avraham to teach the world the concept of justice. Avraham negotiates, unsuccessfully, on behalf of Sodom.

3rd Aliya: The story of the destruction of Sodom is told. Lot's generosity to the "two visitors" is rewarded and he, his wife, and only two of their children are saved from Sodom.

4th Aliya: Lot's wife looks back upon the destruction of Sedom and dies, and Lot and his two daughters escape into the mountains. Lot's daughters conspire to rebuild humankind, and taking advantage of Lot's drunkenness, they become pregnant from Lot resulting in the birth of Ammon and Moav. Avraham encounters Abimelech after which Sarah gives birth to Yitzchak in the year 2048.

5th Aliya: Yishmael and Hagar are forced out of Avraham's home, and an angel reassures Hagar of Yishmael's destiny.

6th Aliya: Abimelech and his general Phichol resolve their conflict with Avraham over water rights, and they "sign" a covenant of peace.

7th Aliya: In the year 2085, when Avraham was 137 and Yitzchak was 37, Avraham is commanded to sacrifice Yitzchak. This amazing story heralds the end of Avraham and Sarah's era, and the beginning of Yitzchak and Rivkah's era.

#### **Summary of The Haftorah: Haftorah Vayera**

Sometime around the year 3043 -- 705 b.c.e., Elisha took over the mantle of prophecy from Eliyahu. Elisha served the Jewish people as their mentor and protector, and this week's Haftorah relates two of the miraculous incidents that he performed. The first story is of Ovadya's widow and the pitcher of oil that continued to pour until she had enough oil to pay off all her debts and make a decent living.

The second is the Shunamis who was unable to conceive children. After being blessed with a son, the child dies and Elisha performs the miracle of resurrecting the boy's life. In both instances, basic human needs were satisfied through the righteous individuals trust in the Navi and in Hashem's providence. The widow's husband was the great Ovadya who risked his own life and fortune to protect 100 prophets from the murderous purge of Achav and Ezevel. The Shunamis and her husband were wealthy, G-d fearing people who generously provided for all who needed. Both women could have expected that their basic needs for income and family be deservedly provided by G-d.

The theme of Vayera is trusting Hashem beyond the limits of rational and assumed justice. As with Sarah and Avraham, the trust that Ovadya's widow and the Shunamis had in Hashem was unrelated to their limited human expectations. They trusted Hashem to provide as He saw fit, without any strings attached.

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#### **RABBI YEHUDA APPEL**

### **Kol Yaakov**

**T**he Russian Czar Nicholas I, in his efforts to destroy Jewish life, demanded that each Jewish community provide soldiers for his forces. These young men, called "Cantonists," were typically drafted at the age of 12 and served in the Russian army for 25

years. They did not serve in the regular army, however, but in separate units under the most anti-Semitic officers. The Russian hope was that they would eventually convert to the Russian church. Ultimately, many of these young men did lose their Jewish identity. Others were killed, and many took their own lives rather than be baptized.

It so happened during this period, that there was a meeting in St. Petersburg of many of the great rabbis of the time. The meeting took place around the High Holidays and there was some speculation as to which rabbi should be given the honor of leading the Rosh Hashana services. Right before the services were to begin, a group of Cantonists walked into the shul and announced that one of them would lead the prayers. Seeing the quizzical looks on the faces of the rabbis, one of the Cantonists lifted his shirt, exposing his back. The flesh was a mass of scarred tissue, testifying to the many beatings he'd endured to maintain his Jewish faith. With no further discussion, the Cantonist was given the honor of leading the services.

Sacrifice and a willingness to undergo hardships for the right cause has long been a hallmark of Jewish greatness. Loyalty to a just cause is a great source of meaning and fulfillment. As the Sages say: "According to the difficulty, is the (divine) reward."

Nowhere is the importance of sacrifice more evident than in this week's Torah portion, Vayera. In the parsha, Abraham is commanded by the Almighty to offer his only son Isaac on an altar. In perhaps the most moving of all Torah passages, Abraham is told to bring "your son, your only one, the one you love" and bind him on an altar at Mount Moriah.

The Midrash describes how Abraham's life was a series of spiritual tests. At a young age, he risked his life to fight against idolatry. Later on, hearkening to G-d's call, he left everything behind, following G-d's dictates to go to a strange, new land. Now he was being asked to make the greatest of all sacrifices: to offer up his son. This was the son for whom Abraham and his wife Sara-previously childless-had spent decades praying for! All his dreams, all his teachings, the legacy he had hoped to pass down to mankind had been riding on this son. And now he was to slaughter him.

It was the cruelest of ironies that Abraham, who had spent decades preaching against idolatry and human sacrifice, was now being asked to perform this pagan practice. The Bible reports, though, how Abraham, with no sign of hesitation, took Isaac for the 3-day trip to Mount Moriah, then bound him on the altar. Abraham was about to slaughter his son... when an angel intervened- stopping the sacrifice.

The obvious question is: Why did the Almighty put Abraham through this test in the first place? Of course the Omniscient One already knew how Abraham would face this test!

In the view of many commentaries, the purpose of this test was to help Abraham reach a greater level of loyalty to the Almighty. While it is true that Abraham must have had this potential all along, having the potential to do something is not the same as doing it. Through this trial, Abraham actualized his potential and grew tremendously.

The Abarbanel (15th century Spanish rabbi) has a different interpretation. He sees the purpose of the binding not so much as a lesson for Abraham, but more as a message for the whole world. The Abarbanel points out that the Hebrew word for test-"nisa"-has in its root the word "ness" which means "banner." The primary purpose of Abraham's actions were to show successive generations the degree to which sacrifice is possible.

Whether it was the Cantonists or others, this lesson was learned quite well by Abraham's spiritual descendants who made great sacrifices to fulfill the Almighty's will. © 2007 Rabbi Y. Appel & aish.org

#### **RABBI SHLOMO KATZ**

### **Hama'ayan**

**“S**arah laughed inside..." (18:12)

"Sarah denied it, saying, 'I did not laugh'." (18:15)

"Sarah saw the son of Hagar... mocking. So she said to Avraham, 'Drive out this slavewoman with her son...'" (21:9-10)

R' Nosson Teomim z"l (the "Krystonopolyer Rav" in New York; died 1983) asks the obvious question regarding the first two verses quoted above:

Did Sarah lie? He answers as follows:

The Ba'al Shem Tov (the founder of the Chassidic movement; died 1760) taught that one does not witness a sin unless he himself has committed a similar sin. Thus, whenever one sees another person commit any sin, the viewer should search his own deeds for a similar iniquity (albeit, perhaps of lesser severity) and repent for it.

Yitzchak's proper upbringing required that his half-brother Yishmael be expelled from Avraham's home. However, this would not happen unless either Avraham or Sarah saw Yishmael "mocking." Accordingly, Hashem brought about a circumstance that caused Sarah herself to mock; after she had committed this small sin, even inadvertently, it would be possible for her to witness Yishmael's sin and to take the first step toward expelling Yishmael from the household.

Of course, Sarah never meant to mock, and she therefore denied that she had laughed (meaning that she had not laughed inappropriately). This also allows us to understand why Avraham resisted expelling Yishmael; he had never had the opportunity to see Yishmael mock. (Bar Pachtai) © 1999 Rabbi S. Katz & Project Genesis, Inc.