

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG

TorahWeb

“Whoever has the following three traits is among the disciples of Avraham Avinu; and [whoever has] three different traits is among the disciples of the wicked Bilam. Those who have a good eye, a lowly spirit, and a meek soul are among the disciples of Avraham Avinu. Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and an expansive soul are among the disciples of the wicked Bilam” (Avos 5:19).

Rabbeinu Yona notes the redundancy of the mishna. It could have said only, "Whoever has a good eye, a lowly spirit, and a meek soul is a disciple of Avraham Avinu." Why does it state, "Whoever has the following three traits is among the disciples of Avraham Avinu," and repeat, after listing the traits, "is among the disciples of Avraham Avinu"?

The answer is that these three traits contain all the perfection needed to be Avraham Avinu's disciple. The shorter version would imply that these three are necessary, but insufficient, conditions. In fact, these three character traits suffice.

The Rambam explains these three traits as follows: A good eye is "histapkus," managing with one's resources and not pursuing greater wealth with an evil eye. Avraham refused to take anything from the king of Sodom (Bereishis 14:22,23), while Bilam sought compensation for cursing Am Yisrael (Devarim 23:5).

A lowly spirit represents humility. Avraham Avinu said, "I am like dust and ashes" (Bereishis 18:27), whereas Bilam prided himself as one who hears the words of G-d (Bamidbar 24:4), indicating an arrogant spirit.

A meek soul is a person who exercises care and restraint. Avraham Avinu did not ogle his wife's beauty (Bereishis 12:11, B.B. 16a). He did not lust the consort of his concubine Hagar (21:11,18). Bilam's expansive soul was lustful, even for bestiality (Sanhedrin 105a), and led him to advise the daughters of Midian to seduce soldiers of Am Yisrael (Bamidbar 31:16).

In focusing on the stellar character traits of Avraham Avinu, the mishna ignores what is arguably his greatest accomplishment. In a world that had succumbed to paganism, Avraham Avinu discovered Hashem and called out His Name (Bereishis 12:8, Rambam Avodah Zarah 1:3). This omission is

especially perplexing in light of R. Yona's comment that the three traits listed comprise the entirety of the requirements to be a disciple of Avraham Avinu.

Apparently, the perfection of character inevitably leads to belief to Hashem. Avraham Avinu understood that the world, like an illuminated castle, must have a Creator and Director (Bereishis Rabba 39:1). Why was this fundamental truth ignored by all of his contemporaries?

"Bribes blind the eyes of the wise" (Devarim 16:19). Recognizing Hashem as the Creator and Director implies obedience of His law. If one's arrogance, lust, and pursuit of wealth are limited by Hashem and His law, one is blinded and does not recognize the Creator (see Kovetz Ma'marim by R. Elchanan Wasserman, 1963 ed., pp. 12-16).

Thus, Avraham was chosen by Hashem because of his good heart (Nechemiah 9:7,8), his exemplary selflessness, humility, and restraint. These traits are all that one needs to be Avraham Avinu's disciple. Belief in Hashem is but a result of character refinement and perfection.

Am Yisrael, Avraham Avinu's descendants, are known by three simanim. They are merciful, have shame, and perform kindness (Yevamos 79a). One who is humble is not self-centered and is merciful to others. Care and self-restraint in avoiding inappropriate lust are based on shame: "So that awe of Him shall be on your faces so that you shall not sin" (Shemos 20:17) -- this is shame, modesty that protects from sin (Nedarim 20a). A person who is content with his portion, is not greedy, and does not take from others, is a giver who performs kindness.

Modern society is filled with the pursuit of wealth, prominence, and gratification. We must be wary of the greed that is widely blamed for the collapse of the financial markets. We must avoid ostentation, the lethal combination of wealth, real or imagined, and arrogance. And in a shameless world, in which no one blushes anymore (see "Doesn't Anyone Blush Anymore?" by R. Manis Friedman, 1990), extreme care must be exercised to avoid sinful talk, voyeurism, and behavior.

Avraham was known as the Ivri (Bereishis 14:13). He was on one side of the river, and rest of the world was on the other (Bereishis Rabba 42:8). This is commonly understood theologically: Avraham believed in Hashem when the rest of the world believed in idols. However, the unique character perfection of Avraham is

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equally important, and in fact led to Avraham's theological leap.

"They mingled with the nations and learned their deeds" (Tehillim 106:35). Unfortunately, many Jews have assimilated, abandoning Torah practices and even beliefs. However, the believing and practicing community of Orthodox Jews is not immune to outside influence and must be vigilant to avoid learning the negative deeds and traits that prevail in the host society.

As we read the inspiring story of our founding father, we, his descendants, must become and remain his disciples as well. © 2009 Rabbi M. Willig & TorahWeb Foundation

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As Hagar sits a distance from her dying son Yishmael an angel appears and declares "Mah lakh Hagar? What ails you Hagar?" (Genesis 21:17) One may claim that this question is actually rhetorical for G-d's emissary obviously knows what is bothering Hagar.

In truth, rhetorical questions play an important role in the Torah and usually appear in order to present a criticism. For example, when G-d asks Adam, "Ayeka," after he ate from the tree of the Garden of Eden he obviously knew where, physically, Adam was located. (Genesis 3:9) G-d was actually making a clear statement to Adam, criticizing him and asking him, "What have you done? Why did you disobey Me?"

One wonders then why was the angel critical of Hagar in our narrative?

Keep in mind that G-d had previously promised Hagar that she would have a child who would "dwell in the face of all his brethren." (Genesis 16:12) G-d later tells Avraham that Yishmael would become "a great nation," (Genesis 17:20) - a promise Avraham no doubt shared with Hagar. Still, here in the desert Hagar feared for Yishmael's life for she sensed that his death was imminent (Genesis 21:16). Her feeling displayed a loss of faith in the Divine promise. When the angel asks "what ails you Hagar?" he actually is asking Hagar, "What is wrong? Have you lost faith in G-d?!"

Rabbi David Silber notes that whenever the Torah uses the term to'eh it means to wander. Not in the physical sense but in the metaphysical one-to stray

from the right path. Not coincidentally the Torah in the Hagar narrative states she strayed, va-teyta, in the wilderness. (Genesis 21:14) This confirms our belief that in this case, Hagar had lost her spiritual way.

This idea of to'eh is also found when Avraham, for a second time, declares that Sarah is his sister. He tells Avimelech, "and it came to pass when G-d caused me to wander (hit-u)." (Genesis 20:13) Here, Avraham is straying. He misidentifies Sarah as his sister, rather than pointing out that she is his covenantal wife from whom the second patriarch would come.

The term to'eh is found in one other place in Genesis. When Joseph seeks out his brethren, the Torah states, "And behold, he was wondering (to'eh) in the field." (Genesis 37:15) Once again, wander, to'eh, means that Joseph was not only lost physically. He had lost his sense of brotherhood, and he also bore responsibility for breaking up the family unit.

In all these cases the personalities who were to'eh, eventually found their way back. Yishmael is saved; Avraham recognizes that Sarah is his covenantal wife and Yitzchak his covenantal son; Joseph and his brothers unite. This teaches all of us the power to return and to correct our mistakes.

Everyone will be to'eh. Inevitably everyone makes mistakes. The question is not whether one will stray, rather how will we respond when we stray. Will we give in to our leanings and continue to be in a state of to'eh, or will we stand up and rise against the tide and work on our souls and our lives until we get back on the road of holiness and connection and walk the straight path. © 2009 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 BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

G-d appears to Avraham in the opening verse of this week's parsha. How does G-d appear to him?

The rabbis teach us that He appears to him in the form of a visitor there to cheer him in his illness and pain after the rite of circumcision. The Jewish value of visiting and cheering the sick stems from our imitation of this G-dly virtue as first revealed to Avraham. In this instance, G-d reveals Himself to Avraham through three Bedouin Arabs who are apparently searching for a place to rest, eat and drink.

The apparent Arabs are angels and messengers of G-d. It is one of the great attributes of the house of Avraham and Sarah that visitors can enter their home as Arab desert dwellers and leave as angels. It is these wayfarers that deliver to Avraham and Sarah the message of continuity and eternity of Jewish life. Sarah will give birth to Yitzchak after decades of being a barren woman.

Earlier, G-d informed Avraham of this momentous news directly. Yet Sarah, the direct

recipient of this blessing, He somehow chooses to inform in an indirect manner through the unknown strange visitors that arrive at her tent and that she hospitably feeds. There is a great insight in this chosen method of G-d, so to speak, in delivering the message to Sarah through seemingly human auspices. G-d often, if not constantly in our times, talks to us through seemingly human messengers. If we are able to listen carefully to what others say to us, oftentimes we will hear a divine message communicated to us through a human conduit.

I think that this also explains why Sarah was initially bemused by the words of the angel. She evidently thought that it was just a throw-away promise of a wandering Bedouin Arab and reacted accordingly. At the outset she did not hear the voice of G-d in the words of the angel that addressed her. Therefore she did not take those words seriously. G-d reprimands her for this attitude and asks "Why did Sarah not take these words seriously?"

Avraham who heard the tidings from G-d directly realized that the message was true and serious. Sarah had to believe what she thought was a human wish and therefore discounted it. But G-d demanded from her, as He does from each of us, that we pay proper attention to what other humans say to us. Perhaps in their statements and words we can realize that G-d Himself, so to speak, is talking to us.

G-d has many messengers and many ways of reaching us individually but we must be attuned to hear the messages that emanate from Heaven. They should never be allowed to fall on deaf or inattentive ears and minds. To a great extent this ability to listen to the otherwise unheard voice of Heaven is the measure of a Jew and of his ability to accomplish in life. Eventually Sarah hears and believes - and through this Yitzchak is born and Jewish continuity is assured and protected. © 2009 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd an angel of the Lord called out to Hagar.... Arise, lift up your lad for I shall make him a great nation" (Gen 21:17,18)

One of the most perplexing stories of the Bible - and the highlight of this week's portion of Vayera - is the Akedah, the "binding" of Isaac. But when just before the Akeda, Abraham is commanded by G-d to banish his first-born son Ishmael from his household, we could easily describe that story as the "binding" - the near-death of Ishmael!

The Bible introduces the story of the binding of Isaac with the words, "And it happened after these things that the Lord tested Abraham..." What are these

things? It may very well be that the Torah is referring to Abraham's harsh treatment of Ishmael. In effect, G-d is saying that if Abraham could send mother and son into the desert with only bread and a jug of water - supplies so inadequate that Hagar would end up watching her son come close to death - then G-d will now command Abraham to bring Isaac to Mount Moriah where he too will be forced to 'watch' his other beloved son narrowly escape death.

Further parallels between Ishmael in the desert and Isaac on Mount Moriah may give credence to a 'measure-for-measure' interpretation. In both events, it is G-d who commands the 'near' sacrifice, and on both occasions we read, "And Abraham rose up early in the morning." (Gen 21:14, 22:3) In addition, Hagar "...goes and wanders in the desert of Be'er Sheba" just as Abraham walks to an uncertain destination, to "...one of the mountains which He [G-d] will tell him." (Gen 21:14; 22:2,3). In both stories, the moment of deliverance occurs when an "angel of G-d" appears and saves the young men, both of whom are referred to as "na'ar (youth)" rather than "son" (Gen. 21:17; 22:11,12); and in both instances the sons do not return to live with their father.

Although we have seen various parallels between the two 'bindings,' I'd like to suggest that they are quite different and it's wrong to consider the Akedah story as the measure-for-measure result of Abraham's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael. The fact is that Abraham banishes them only in acquiescence to G-d's command that he listen to Sarah; indeed the Torah expressly states that "...the matter [of the banishment] was very grievous in the eyes of Abraham..." (Gen. 21:11) Abraham only agrees to send mother and son into the desert following G-d's promise, "And I shall also make the son of this maid servant a nation [in his own right] because he is of your seed." (21:13)

I'd like to suggest that the weaving of these near fatal moments in the lives of both Isaac and Ishmael is not meant to illustrate a measure-for-measure punishment, rather the Torah wants to emphasize that Ishmael is also a son of Abraham, and the similarities between his life and Isaac's - both brothers are saved from near death, and both will become founders of great nations. But most important, the lives of these brothers will always be intertwined and inter-related.

Earlier in the Bible, when Hagar became pregnant and Sarah was still barren, Hagar behaved superciliously towards her, causing Sarah to treat her as a handmaiden once again. Distraught, Hagar fled from Sarah's home. An angel of the Lord found her, exhorted her to return to Sarah as a hand-maiden, and then blessed Hagar: "I shall increase, yes increase your seed, and they shall not be able to be counted because they are so numerous... and behold you are pregnant and shall bear a son; call his name Ishmael..." (Gen. 16:10-11)

This blessing to Hagar's seed paralleled G-d's initial blessing to Abraham: "Look now heavenwards and count the stars; you cannot count them; so shall be your seed." (Gen 15:5)

The location where G-d bestowed this blessing on Hagar's seed was a well between Kadesh and Bar'ed which Hagar named "...the well for the Living G-d who looked after me, Be'er leHai Ro'i." (Gen 16: 13,14) Indeed, because Ishmael has been significantly blessed by G-d, Isaac seems almost obsessed with Ishmael - or at least with Be'er LaHai Roi - the place where G-d first promised greatness to Hagar's son, and this fixation haunted him throughout his life.

It shouldn't surprise us that since Ishmael is Abraham's first-born, Isaac will always be concerned that his elder brother could become the heir to the Abrahamic patrimony!

Hence the younger Isaac is both attracted to the more dominant, first-born Ishmael but also jealous of the brother destined to father a great nation. Unlike Ishmael, Isaac is rather meek and withdrawn - witness his reluctance to stand up to Avimelekh even though the King of Gerar has reneged on his contract. His lack of assertiveness and relative passivity could easily make Isaac feel unworthy and lead him to wonder whether his father had greater love and respect for his older brother. Maybe he knew that when G-d informed his father that Sarah was pregnant, Abraham responded, "Would that Ishmael may live before you." (Gen. 17:18)

Beyond jealousy there is guilt. After all, Isaac could not forget that it was because of him that Ishmael and his mother were banished when the teenaged Ishmael was found to be "sporting" or "mocking" around him. Indeed, Isaac may have even considered the possibility that his father really wanted him out of the way and that the Akedah was a way to clear the path for Ishmael to inherit his mantle. Certainly, after the trauma of the Akedah, Isaac doesn't return with his father to Be'er Sheva, and father and son are never seen together again until the end of Abraham's life!

And so Isaac, due to his conflicted sensitivities and complex relationship with Ishmael, is seen returning to Be'er LeHai Roi ('bo mibo' - literally coming from coming, Gen 24: 62), which is where Eliezer finds him when he arrives with Isaac's future wife, Rebecca. Rashi even suggests that Isaac returned to Be'er LeHai Roi in order to bring Hagar back into Abraham's life after Sarah's death: still feeling troubled over Ishmael and Hagar's banishment, Isaac serves as his father's shadchan. And we should remember that the Torah underscores the fact that Abraham is buried by "...Isaac and Ishmael his sons," and the text points out that "Isaac dwelt by B'er Le'Hai Roi." (Gen. 25: 9-11)

The chapter concludes with the twelve "princes of nations" who were born to Ishmael, paralleling Isaac's twelve grandsons and tribes born to his son Jacob. (25:12) Ishmael and Isaac are involved in a perpetual approach-avoidance dance wherein they see

each other as rivals but come to recognize that ultimately they must learn to live together in the same part of the world where each will become a great nation.

Abraham is indeed the father of a multitude of nations. © 2009 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

It is a blistering hot day. Abraham, that paragon of hospitality, is sitting by the door anxiously looking for passersby that he can invite into his home. Suddenly, he sees three dust-covered desert nomads trudging down the road. Before he brings them into his house, Abraham asks them to wash their feet, because he suspects they might be pagans who worship the dust of their feet. Then he feeds them lavishly.

Before they leave, the travelers, really angels in disguise, inform Abraham that Sarah would give birth in a year. Sarah overhears and bursts into laughter. After all, Abraham is one hundred years and she herself is a sprightly ninety, not exactly the height of the child-bearing years.

The Almighty, however, does not consider the situation humorous. He asks Abraham why Sarah found this a laughing matter, and Abraham, in turn, rebukes Sarah for laughing.

Let us consider for a moment. What had Sarah done wrong? After all, she did not know that the dusty wayfarers were really angels. Why then should she have thought that their blessings were efficacious? Can she be blamed for finding the fanciful good wishes of these wayfarers laughable?

The commentators explain that Sarah might indeed not have known that the wayfarers blessing her were angels, and this was exactly the reason she deserved to be reprimanded. She saw before her people who dressed differently, spoke differently, thought differently, and therefore, she looked down on them. She did not consider the blessings of such people worthwhile.

But how could she judge who is worthy and who is not? How could she know what lay within the hearts and souls of other people? How could she determine their inner value?

This was the reason Sarah was reprimanded. She took one look at these dusty wayfarers and instantly jumped to the conclusion that they were worthless people whose blessings were equally worthless.

A young man approached the stately house and knocked on the door. There was no response. He knocked again. Still no response.

Suddenly, he heard a hoarse voice speak. "What are you doing here, young fellow?"

He turned and saw an old man dressed in tramp's rags sitting on the ground, his back against the wall. He had not noticed him before.

"I've come to see the great sage, old man," the young man replied. "I want to become his disciple and learn from his knowledge and wisdom."

"Hah!" said the tramp. "He doesn't have so much knowledge, and he has even less wisdom."

"How dare you?" the young man replied in a flash of anger. "What does a person like you know about knowledge and wisdom?" He turned back to the door and resumed knocking. Still no response.

The following day, the young man returned. His knock was answered by a servant who showed him into the presence of the sage. Amazingly, the sage seemed to be the identical twin of the beggar.

"You recognize me, don't you?" said the sage, "I was the man sitting on the ground. I am afraid I can not accept you as my disciple."

"But why?" the young man asked plaintively. "How was I to know it was really you?"

"You saw a man," said the sage, "and based on his outward appearance you decided that he could now nothing about knowledge or wisdom. You can never be a disciple of mine."

In our own lives, we are called upon to make value judgments about other people all the time. Whether it is in a business, social or any other setting, we tend to jump to conclusions about new people. We rely on first impressions. We look at their clothing, their accessories, their bearing, their air of sophistication or lack of it, and we make assumptions about their intelligence, character, talents and social standing. First impressions are certainly important, and we should always try to make a good first impression on others. Nonetheless, it is unfair to pigeonhole and stereotype people on the basis of external appearance. Appearances can be deceiving, and we could be missing out on some very fine blessings. © 2009 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

As Parshat Vayeira clearly demonstrates, one of Avraham's most beautiful qualities was his kindness to others. This is demonstrated when his three guests came to visit: Almost everything was done with excitement, enthusiasm, and in excess, solely for the benefit of his guests. The only exception was that when Avraham offered the men water, he specified getting them "a little" water. Why did Avraham suddenly seem to get stingy?

The Lekach Tov explains that this act shows Avraham's sensitivity to others even MORE because water was the only item that Avraham didn't have time to fetch himself. Avraham's thinking was that if he was going to trouble his servants to get the water, he had no right to ask them to bring more water than is actually needed. That's why Avraham only offered a small quantity of water. Avraham's lesson is simple: Being

kind to others only takes a little effort, so why be stingy about it? © 2009 Rabbi S. Ressler & torah.org

RABBI SIR JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

It is one of the most famous scenes in the Bible. Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day when three strangers pass by. He urges them to rest and take some food. The text calls them men. They are in fact angels, coming to tell Sarah that she will have a child.

The chapter seems simple. It is, however, complex and ambiguous. It consists of three sections:

Verse 1: G-d appears to Abraham.

Verses 2-16: Abraham and the men/angels.

Verses 17-33: The dialogue between G-d and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

How are these sections related to one another? Are they one scene, two or three? The most obvious answer is three. Each of the above sections is a separate event. First, G-d appears to Abraham, as Rashi explains, "to visit the sick" after Abraham's circumcision. Then the visitors arrive with the news about Sarah's child. Then takes place the great dialogue about justice.

Maimonides (Guide for the Perplexed II:42) suggests that there are two scenes (the visit of the angels, and the dialogue with G-d). The first verse does not describe an event at all. It is, rather, a chapter heading.

The third possibility is that we have a single continuous scene. G-d appears to Abraham, but before He can speak, Abraham sees the passers-by and asks G-d to wait while he serves them food. Only when they have departed- in verse 17 -- does he turn to G-d, and the conversation begins.

How we interpret the chapter will affect the way we translate the word Adonai in the third verse. It could mean (1) G-d or (2) 'my lords' or 'sirs'. In the first case, Abraham would be addressing heaven. In the second, he would be speaking to the passers-by.

Several English translations take the second option. Here is one example:

"The Lord appeared to Abraham... He looked up, and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them. Bowing low, he said, 'Sirs, if I have deserved your favour, do not go past your servant without a visit.'"

The same ambiguity appears in the next chapter (19:2), when two of Abraham's visitors (in this chapter they are described as angels) visit Lot in Sodom:

"The two angels came to Sodom in the evening while Lot was sitting by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low he said, 'I pray you, sirs, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night there and bathe your feet.'"

Normally, differences of interpretation of biblical narrative have no halakhic implications. They are matters of legitimate disagreement. This case is unusual, because if we translate Adonai as 'G-d', it is a holy name, and both the writing of the word by a scribe, and the way we treat a parchment or document containing it, have special stringencies in Jewish law. If we translate it as 'my lords' or 'sirs', then it has no special sanctity.

The simplest reading of both texts—the one concerning Abraham, the other, Lot—would be to read the word in both cases as 'sirs'. Jewish law, however, ruled otherwise. In the second case—the scene with Lot—it is read as 'sirs', but in the first it is read as 'G-d'. This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that Abraham interrupted G-d as He was about to speak, and asked Him to wait while he attended to his guests. This is how tradition ruled that the passage should be read:

"The Lord appeared to Abraham... He looked up and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them, and bowed down. [Turning to G-d] he said: 'My G-d, if I have found favour in your eyes, do not leave your servant [i.e. Please wait until I have given hospitality to these men].' [He then turned to the men and said:] 'Let me send for some water so that you may bathe your feet and rest under this tree...'"

This daring interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: "Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine presence." Faced with a choice between listening to G-d, and offering hospitality to [what seemed to be] human beings, Abraham chose the latter. G-d acceded to his request, and waited while Abraham brought the visitors food and drink, before engaging him in dialogue about the fate of Sodom.

How can this be so? Is it not disrespectful at best, heretical at worst, to put the needs of human beings before attending on the presence of G-d?

What the passage is telling us, though, is something of immense profundity. The idolaters of Abraham's time worshipped the sun, the stars, and the forces of nature as G-ds. They worshipped power and the powerful. Abraham knew, however, that G-d is not in nature but beyond nature. There is only one thing in the universe on which He has set His image: the human person, every person, powerful and powerless alike.

The forces of nature are impersonal, which is why those who worship them eventually lose their humanity. As the Psalm puts it:

"Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils but cannot smell... Their makers become like them, and so do all who put their trust in them." (Psalm 115)

You cannot worship impersonal forces and remain a person: compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving. Precisely because we believe that G-d is

personal, someone to whom we can say 'You', we honour human dignity as sacrosanct. Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of G-d in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the Divine presence when G-d appears as G-d. What is difficult is to sense the Divine presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving G-d and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

One of the most beautiful comments on this episode was given by R. Shalom of Belz who noted that in verse 2, the visitors are spoken of as standing above Abraham [nitzavim alav]. In verse 8, Abraham is described as standing above them [omed alehem]. He said: at first, the visitors were higher than Abraham because they were angels and he a mere human being. But when he gave them food and drink and shelter, he stood even higher than the angels. We honour G-d by honouring His image, humankind. © 2009 Rabbi J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Although they were very wicked, Avraham prayed on behalf of the people of Sodom, in an effort to save them from being destroyed (Beraishis 18:23-33). What about Yitzchok? Did Avraham also pray for him when G-d commanded that he brought as a human sacrifice?

On the one hand, it seems strange that Avraham would spend so much time and effort trying to save people who were wicked, that he didn't know personally (his nephew Lot was saved) and not ask G-d to spare his own son, who was extremely righteous. On the other hand, since bringing Yitzchok as a sacrifice was a direct commandment, and one of (if not the biggest of) his ten "tests," how could Avraham have asked that he be saved? "Please G-d, don't make me do what you just asked me to do"? Can you imagine Avraham, after being commanded to "go out from your land to the land that I will show you," turning around and asking G-d to please not make him go?

As with all learning, this topic is still a "work in progress." Nevertheless, I thought I would share my thoughts (so far). As usual, any comments and/or additional sources are welcome (RabbiDMK@yahoo.com), and perhaps if we look into the issue together we can gain a better understanding of it.

In Selichos, when we ask G-d to answer us the same way He answered others, and those "others" are enumerated, the first example is Avraham: "He Who answered our father Avraham on Mt. Moriah, He will answer us." This certainly sounds like Avraham did ask G-d to spare Yitzchok, although it doesn't explain how he did, or how he even could. This part of Selichos is

based on the prayers the Mishna (Taanis 2:4) teaches us are added when public fast days are added. Tosfos (Taanis 16b) says that the reason the first of the seven examples of G-d answering our prayers is Avraham being answered is because he was the first person to be saved, when he was saved from Nimrod (most likely referring to Avraham being tossed into the fiery furnace). Many understand this to mean that it is this incident that the prayer/selicha is referring to, not saving Yitzchok. This is difficult to say for several reasons (as we shall soon see), most obviously because the example states explicitly "who answered Avraham on Mt. Moriah," which is where the "akaida" (lit. "binding," as Yitzchok was tied up before he was placed on the altar to be sacrificed) took place, not where Nimrod tried to kill Avraham. I would suggest that Tosfos is not telling us which prayer/incident is being referred to in the prayer/selicha, but why Avraham was the first example given in this series of prayers. Nevertheless, there are a number of (recent) commentators that say explicitly that Avraham did not offer any prayer on behalf of Yitzchok.

Rav Shimon Schwab, z"l (Ma'ayin Bais Hasho'ayva, Beraishis 22:12) contrasts Avraham praying on behalf of the people of Sedom with his not praying on behalf of his own son, which shows the extremely high level he had reached. He does not, however, explain how this is consistent with the Mishna (or selicha). ArtScroll (in Selichos and the Yom Kippur Machzor) explains this line of the selicha to refer not to a prayer made to save Yitzchok, but to the prayer Chazal (Yerushalmi Taanis 2:4 and elsewhere) tell us Avraham made immediately after Yitzchok was spared, when he asked G-d to always remember how he (Avraham) put aside his love for his son to fulfill G-d's will and to put aside His anger against the Jewish nation. However, putting this prayer after Yitzchok was already saved is problematic. For one thing, even though the Mishna in Taanis does not mention any prayer by Yitzchok, the selicha's second example is "He Who answered his son Yitzchok when he was bound on top of the altar, He will answer us." If Yitzchok's prayer was made while he was still "bound on top of the altar," it came before the prayer Avraham made after Yitzchok was saved. (It could be suggested that the selicha lists Avraham's prayer first anyway, in deference to his being the father, but the simplest reading is that Avraham's prayer came first.) More problematic, though, is that the Yerushalmi (ibid) asks why the blessing after this prayer is "Blessed are You, Hashem, Redeemer of Israel", rather than "Redeemer of Yitzchok," since it was Yitzchok that was saved as a result of this prayer. (The Yerushalmi answers that by saving Yitzchok, it is the same as if all of Israel was saved.) It is rather obvious that if Yitzchok was saved as a result of this prayer, it could not have been a prayer made after he had already been saved.

Machzor Mesores Harav (Yom Kippur, pgs. 177-178), whose commentary is based on the teachings

of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, says that not only is there no indication in the Torah that Avraham asked G-d to save Yitzchok, but doing so would undermine the whole point of the test. Instead, he suggests that despite not letting it show, Avraham was suffering inside (over having to sacrifice his son), and G-d "answered" him, even though an actual prayer was never offered. This is certainly possible, and is consistent with a verse (Yeshaya 65:24) we reference fairly often in our High Holiday prayers: "And it will happen before they call out that I (G-d) will answer." Since G-d knows what we really want/need, He sometimes "answers" our prayers before we even make them. However, numerous Midrashim (e.g. Mechilta Beshalach 5, see Torah Shelaima 22:50) tell us explicitly that Avraham actually offered a prayer, based on the Torah telling us that "Avraham got up early in the morning," an expression that indicates prayer.

A not-as-recent commentator, the Maharsha (Taanis 15a), puts an interesting twist on the issue. He suggests that Avraham's prayer was not that Yitzchok be saved, but that even though no animal was brought to be offered, "Hashem find for Him a sheep" (22:8) to be used as an offering. Not as a replacement for Yitzchok, but to be brought after he sacrifices Yitzchok, to atone for any less-than-perfect thoughts Avraham may have while sacrificing his own son. Aside from not being a straightforward reading of the verse or of what the prayer was, it's difficult to label this prayer as having been answered, since, as it turned out, there was never any need to atone for any less-than-perfect thoughts (as Yitzchok was never sacrificed), and the ram brought as an offering was instead of Yitzchok, not besides Yitzchok. Are we really asking that G-d answer us in a way other than we are actually asking?

What was Avraham thinking when G-d commanded him to sacrifice his son, the son through whom He had promised the nation of Israel would emerge? The lesson we supposedly should learn is how obedient Avraham was, doing as G-d asked without questioning him. Is that really what we strive for? Are we supposed to just throw away our rational thoughts and blindly do as we are told? Or are we supposed to use the brains G-d gave us to figure out what He really wants. We know, with 20/20 hindsight, that G-d never intended on having Yitzchok sacrificed; it was only a "test" to "prove" how righteous Avraham was (to the world and/or to the angels), and/or to bring Avraham's potential righteousness into the realm of reality. A rational, loving, kind G-d does not want human sacrifices, and offering a son would go against everything Avraham believed in, practiced, and preached. Rav Shimon Schwab (22:12) says that the reason Sara was not included in this "test" is because she, who was on a higher prophetic level, would have seen through it, known that G-d never intended on Yitzchok being sacrificed, and told Avraham, thus nullifying the test. Why didn't Avraham at least question

whether or not G-d really wanted him to do such a heinous act?

From the wording of the prayer made after Yitzchok was saved (see Torah Shelaima 22:40 as to how often this prayer is quoted by our sages), it becomes evident that Avraham had all of these questions, and was struggling with it internally. "Master of the worlds, it is revealed and known to you that when you told me to bring up Yitzchok my son, I had what to answer and say to You; yesterday (i.e. previously) You told that that 'through Yitzchok would your (Avraham's) descendants be known,' and now you tell me to bring him up as an offering? But I did not do that." The prayer isn't (just) about Avraham being willing to sacrifice his own son, it is about his not challenging G-d about it despite knowing it doesn't make sense. Throughout the trip to Mt. Moriah we see how Avraham struggled with this. When he told Eliezer and Yishmael (his "lads") that he and Yitzchok would go "until there" (22:5), the word for "there" ("ko") is the same word used by G-d when He informed Avraham how numerous his descendents will be (15:5). Our sages (Beraishis Rabbah 56:2, see Rashi and Targum Yonasan) tell us that this was Avraham's way of saying "now we'll see how G-d will keep that promise if I have to sacrifice Yitzchok." Avraham's greatness was not that he turned his brain off, but that he was willing to do G-d's bidding despite not understanding it.

I would suggest that until the very end, Avraham was unsure that G-d really wanted him to sacrifice Yitzchok. He knew that G-d's words could be understood two ways; either He wants him to sacrifice Yitzchok, or wants him to "bring him up as if he were an offering," but not to follow through. The simplest, most straightforward meaning of the words were to actually sacrifice Yitzchok, so until G-d clarified what He really meant, Avraham had to go under the assumption that this was what He wanted. He couldn't ask G-d not to make him follow through, because if that's what G-d wanted, that's what had to be done. Instead, Avraham tried to find out what G-d wanted by asking in a round about way, such as by asking how he could bring a sacrifice if he wasn't a Kohain (Beraishis Rabbah 55:7). If G-d never meant for Yitzchok to be sacrificed, Avraham not being a Kohain was irrelevant. However, G-d still sidestepped the issue by telling him that he was, in fact a Kohain, and could bring a sacrifice. That didn't mean He definitely wanted Yitzchok sacrificed, but left him still doubting what G-d really wanted.

When Avraham told Yishmael and Eliezer that "we" would return (22:5), it wasn't a slip of the tongue, or just a misdirection so that they wouldn't know what was really happening. It was Avraham being hopeful that G-d didn't really want Yitzchok to be sacrificed, and both would return. Perhaps this was part-prayer as well, saying "please G-d, let us both return." When Yitzchok asked where the sheep to be slaughtered was (22:7), Avraham answered in a way ("G-d will show for Him a

sheep, my son") that could mean that G-d will help them find one, or that "my son" will be in place of a sheep, a double-meaning because Avraham still didn't know which it would be. This may have also been a prayer, asking G-d to make the offering a sheep rather than his son, i.e. asking G-d that this be His will. There are Midrashim (Sha'aray Aharon quotes it from Midrash Hachafetz, while Torah Shelaima 22:97 brings it from other Midrashim) that say explicitly that this was the prayer Avraham made that is referred to in the prayer/selicha, with the answer being G-d sending a ram to be slaughtered instead of Yitzchok.

Avraham was willing to do whatever G-d asked of him, even if he didn't understand it, even if it contradicted what G-d had promised him earlier. Even if he wasn't 100% sure that it was what G-d wanted, he would go full-steam-ahead to fulfill the plain meaning of G-d's commandment until he was told otherwise. Along the way, though, he was hoping that G-d didn't mean it literally, and praying that he would somehow be able to fulfill G-d's will completely without having to lose his son. And G-d answered his prayer by sending the ram and informing Avraham that He really just wanted to prove how faithful he was by not telling him until that last moment that He just meant to bring Yitzchok up on the altar, not to sacrifice him.

[As far as Yitzchok's prayer, it could have also been that G-d's will be fulfilled, but that His will be that his parents shouldn't suffer the loss of their son by his losing his life. There are Midrashim (see Yalkut Shimoni 101) that have Yitzchok's prayer being "I lift my eyes to the mountains; from where will my salvation come" (Tehillim 121:1). Avraham had shared with Yitzchok the two possibilities of what G-d wanted, and Yitzchok was willing to be sacrificed to G-d if that was His will. Nevertheless, he was hoping that G-d would clarify to his father that all He wanted was for Yitzchok to be "brought up," not to be sacrificed. They had traveled for three days without any new instructions. They climbed the mountain; still nothing. Yitzchok was bound and "brought up" on the altar, and still no reprieve. "From where will my help come?" If G-d doesn't say something now, it means He really wanted me sacrificed. Please, G-d, let it be Your will that my father has already fulfilled what You asked without having to use the knife. And G-d answered Yitzchok's prayer too, telling Avraham not to do anything else (22:12). May G-d answer our prayers as well.] © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

