

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Avraham's hospitality to his three visitors included offering them "bread, to sustain [their] heart" (Beraishis 18:5). Rashi, quoting Beraishis Rabbah (48:11), points out that the word "your heart" is written with just one "beis" ("libchem") rather than two ("levavchem"), which informs us that "the evil inclination does not rule over angels." However, if Avraham didn't realize that they were angels, thinking they were idolatrous humans (as indicated by his wanting them to wash the dust they may have worshipped off of their feet, see Rashi on 18:4), how could he have meant that they only have a "single heart" because they were angels?

The wording of Rashi (and the Midrash) is that "the evil inclination does not rule over angels," not that "angels do not have an evil inclination." The implication is that although they have an evil inclination, they don't allow it to affect them. The Talmud (Shabbos 88b-89a) tells us that one of the arguments Moshe used to prove that the Torah should be given to people (not angels) was that the prohibitions contained in it can't apply to angels. Moshe explained to them why prohibitions such as "do not kill," "do not commit adultery" and "do not steal" are not relevant for angels: "Is there jealousy amongst you? Is there an evil inclination amongst you?" As a result of this argument, "immediately they (the angels) agreed" that the Torah was meant for humans. If angels don't even have an evil inclination, shouldn't that be the message behind Avraham's wording, not that it doesn't rule over them?

Among the commentators to address the first issue is Rabbi Aryeh Leib Zuenz (Malay HaOmer), who suggests that Avraham chose this wording not because he knew that they were angels (and therefore had no evil inclination), but because he thought they were idol worshippers, whose inclination for good did not have any influence over them. They had but one "heart," just like angels, but instead of the "one heart" being the "good" side, their "one heart" was on the "other" side. Aside from teaching us an amazing (and important) lesson about how to treat people who seem to have few redeeming qualities (Avraham took care of them despite thinking they were so consumed by evil that they didn't even have a "good" side), Rabbi Zuenz's approach can also explain the wording of the Midrash that Rashi

quoted; Even though angels have no evil inclination, since the "one heart" Avraham was referring to was that of these humans, and they could have had a "good" side (and could still develop one) but it (currently) had no influence over their actions, the parallel lesson, regarding the "one heart" of the angels, had to be worded in a similar way.

Although Rabbi Zuenz's approach addresses the issue of how Avraham could imply they had just "one heart" if he didn't know they were angels, it leaves us with a different problem: If Avraham's wording is based on his thinking that the three people standing in front of him had no "good" side, how does this inform us that angels have no "bad" side? Avraham saying "libchem" instead of "levavchem" to describe what he thought were human guests should have no bearing on how many "hearts" angels have; how do Chazal use Avraham's choice of words to describe "bad people" to teach us that angels are "purely good"?

Sefer Devarim consists primarily of the words Moshe spoke to the nation shortly before he died. Despite these words being Moshe's, not G-d's, they have the status of "Torah" because G-d dictated those same words back to him, quoting him word for word (see Abarbanel's introduction to Sefer Devarim). Similarly, the words spoken in the narratives in the Torah, including those in Sefer Beraishis, attained the status of "Torah" when G-d dictated them to Moshe. It is extremely unlikely that Avraham spoke Hebrew to these travelers from the Galil (see Yerushalmi Shabbos 16:8); most likely they spoke either Sumerian or Akkadian. It would be highly unlikely that the word for "heart" in whichever language Avraham conversed with his guests had similar variants, meaning either "one heart" or "two." Rather, Avraham said the word "heart" in their native language, but when G-d dictated this conversation to Moshe in Hebrew, He used the Hebrew word that implies having just one inclination, not two. The main reason for using this word, as the Midrash and Rashi tell us, is to inform us that angels have no evil inclination. However, if Avraham didn't think these beings had just one inclination, the Torah couldn't have used even the Hebrew version when retelling the narrative (or it would be misrepresenting Avraham's words).

Avraham sees three beings he thinks are idol worshipping humans, treats them like royalty despite thinking they have no spiritual value, and offers them (in Sumerian or Akkadian) "bread to sustain their heart."

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These beings are actually angels, and in order to teach us that angels have no evil inclination, the Torah uses the Hebrew word for heart that indicates this, a word that the Torah can use while still staying absolutely true to the narrative because Avraham really thought they had just one inclination (albeit the other one). Nevertheless, because Avraham thinking they were idol worshippers with no "good inclination" was necessary in order to teach us that angels have no "evil inclination," the Midrash uses words to inform us about the nature of angels that are consistent with what Avraham thought about his guests. Therefore, even though angels have no evil inclination, the most we can learn through Avraham's words are that the evil inclination has no power over them. © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

It is the hardest passage of all, one that seems to defy understanding. Abraham and Sarah have waited years for a child. G-d has promised them repeatedly that they would have many descendants, as many as the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, the grains of sand on the sea shore. They wait. No child comes.

Sarah in despair suggests that Abraham should have a child by her handmaid Hagar. He does. Ishmael is born. Yet G-d tells Abraham, This is not the one. By now Sarah is old, post-menopausal, unable by natural means to have a child. Angels come and again promise a child. Sarah laughs. But a year later Isaac is born. Sarah's joy is almost heartbreaking.

"Sarah said, 'G-d has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.' And she added, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.'" [Gen. 21:6-7]

Then come the fateful words: "Then G-d said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.'" [Gen. 22:2]

The rest of the story is familiar. Abraham takes Isaac. Together they journey for three days to the mountain. Abraham builds an altar, gathers wood, binds his son and lifts the knife. At that moment: "The angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, 'Abraham!

Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied. 'Do not lay a hand on the boy,' he said. 'Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear G-d, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.'" [Gen. 22:11-12]

The trial is over. It is the climax of Abraham's life, the supreme test of faith, a key moment in Jewish memory and self-definition.

But it is deeply troubling. Why did G-d so nearly take away what He had given? Why did he put these two aged parents-Abraham and Sarah-through so appalling a test? Why did Abraham, who had earlier challenged G-d on the fate of Sodom, saying, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?" not protest against this cruel act against an innocent child?

The standard interpretation, given by all the commentators, classical and modern, is that Abraham demonstrates his total love of G-d by being willing to sacrifice the most precious thing in his life, the son for whom he has been waiting for so many years.

The Christian theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote a powerful book about it, *Fear and Trembling*, in which he coined such ideas as the "teleological suspension of the ethical"-the love of G-d may lead us to do things that would otherwise be considered morally wrong-and "faith in the absurd"-Abraham trusted G-d to make the impossible possible. He believed he would lose Isaac but still keep him. For Kierkegaard, faith transcends reason.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik saw the binding as demonstrating that we must not expect always to be victorious. Sometimes we must experience defeat. "G-d tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most."

All these interpretations are surely correct. They are part of our tradition. I want, however, to offer a quite different reading, for one reason. Throughout Tenakh, the gravest sin is child sacrifice. The Torah and the prophets consistently regard it with horror. It is what pagans do. This is Jeremiah on the subject:

"They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal-something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind." [Jeremiah 19:5]

And this is Micah: "Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, / the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" [Micah 6:7]

It is what Mesha, King of Moab, does to get the gods to grant him victory over the Israelites: "When the king of Moab saw that the battle had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the king of Edom, but they failed. Then he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall. The fury against Israel was great; they withdrew and returned to their own land." [2 Kings 3:26-27]

How can the Torah regard as Abraham's supreme achievement that he was willing to do what the worst of idolaters do? The fact that Abraham was willing

to sacrifice his son would seem to make him-in terms of Tenakh considered as a whole-no better than Baal or Molech worshippers or the pagan king of Moab. This cannot be the only possible interpretation.

There is an alternative way of looking at the trial. To do so we must consider an overriding theme of the Torah as a whole. Let us assemble the evidence.

First principle: G-d owns the land of Israel. That is why He can command the return of property to its original owners in the Jubilee year: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants." [Lev 25:23]

Second principle: G-d owns the children of Israel, since He redeemed them from slavery. That is what the Israelites mean when they sing, at the Red Sea: "... until your people pass by, O LORD, until the people you acquired [am zu kanita] pass by."

Therefore they cannot be turned into permanent slaves: "Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves." [Lev 25:42]

Third principle: G-d is the ultimate owner of all that exists. That is why we must make a blessing over anything we enjoy: "Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel: To enjoy anything of this world without first reciting a blessing is like making personal use of things consecrated to heaven, since it says, 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.' R. Levi contrasted two texts. It is written, 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,' and it is also written, 'The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth hath He given to the children of men!'-There is no contradiction: in the one case it is before a blessing has been said, in the other, after a blessing has been said." [Berakhot 35a]

All things belong to G-d, and we must acknowledge this before we make use of anything. That is what a blessing is: acknowledging that all we enjoy is from G-d.

This is the jurisprudential basis of the whole of Jewish law. G-d rules by right, not by might. G-d created the universe. Therefore G-d is the ultimate owner of the universe. The legal term for this is "eminent domain." Therefore G-d has the right to prescribe the conditions under which we may benefit from the universe. It is to establish this legal fact-not to tell us about the physics and cosmology of the Big Bang-that the Torah begins with the story of Creation.

This carries a special depth and resonance for the Jewish people since in their case G-d is not just-as He is for all humankind-Creator and sustainer of the universe. He is also, for Jews, the G-d of history, who redeemed them from slavery and gave them a land that originally belonged to someone else, the "seven nations." G-d is sovereign of the universe, but in a special sense He is Israel's only ultimate king, and the sole source of their laws. That is the significance of the book of Exodus.

The key narratives of the Torah are there to teach us that G-d is the ultimate owner of all.

In the ancient world, up to and including the Roman empire, children were considered the legal property of their parents. They had no rights. They were not legal personalities in themselves. Under the Roman principle of patria potestas, a father could do whatever he wished with his child, including putting him to death. Infanticide was well known in antiquity. (It has even been defended in our time by the Harvard philosopher Peter Singer in the case of severely handicapped children). That, for example is how the story of Oedipus begins, with his father Laius leaving him to die.

It is this principle that underlies the entire practice of child sacrifice, which was widespread throughout the pagan world. The Torah is horrified by child sacrifice, which it sees as the worst of all sins. It therefore seeks to establish, in the case of children, what it establishes in the case of the universe as a whole, the land of Israel, and the people of Israel. We do not own our children. G-d does. We are merely their guardians on G-d's behalf.

Only the most dramatic event could establish an idea so revolutionary and unprecedented-even unintelligible-in the ancient world. That is what the story of the binding of Isaac is about. Isaac belongs to neither Abraham nor Sarah. Isaac belongs to G-d. All children belong to G-d. Parents do not own their children. The relationship of parent to child is one of guardianship only. G-d does not want Abraham to sacrifice his child. G-d wants him to renounce ownership in his child. That is what the angel means when it calls to Abraham, telling him to stop, "You have not withheld from Me your son, your only son."

The binding of Isaac is a polemic against, and a rejection of, the principle of patria potestas, the idea universal to all pagan cultures that children are the property of their parents.

Seen in this light, the binding of Isaac is now consistent with the other foundational narratives of the Torah, namely the creation of the universe and the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The rest of the narrative also makes sense. G-d had to show Abraham and Sarah that their child was not naturally theirs, because his birth was not natural at all. It took place after Sarah could no longer conceive. The story of the first Jewish child establishes a principle that applies to all Jewish children. G-d creates legal space between parent and child, because only when that space exists do children have the room to grow as independent individuals.

The Torah ultimately seeks to abolish all relationships of dominance and submission. That is why it dislikes slavery and makes it, within Israel, a temporary condition rather than a permanent fate. That is why it seeks to protect children from parents who are overbearing or worse.

Abraham, we argued in last week's study, was chosen to be the role model for all time of what it is to be a parent. We now see that the binding of Isaac is the consummation of that story. A parent is one who knows he or she does not own their child. © 2010 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

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 lech 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. © 2010 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

It will come as a surprise to no one that the Torah, and Judaism generally, apparently values human life above all else. Rare are the cases to be found in the Jewish story and in halacha where human life is not the primary value that trumps all other behavior and ideals. The story of the akeida- of Abraham offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice to the Almighty and at the last moment being prevented by Heaven from so doing-is illustrative of this idea of the sanctity of human life.

However as noble as this idea is, it many times wilts in the face of dire practical circumstances. The best and worst example of this problem is the conduct of war. There is no war without killing humans and the Torah in its narrative and value system certainly recognizes war as a reality and sometimes as a necessity.

The current debate in the Western world regarding the funding of stem cell research faces the moral dilemma of the permissibility of killing human fetuses in the process of possibly saving other humans from diseases, genetic and otherwise.

In the Torah itself, the kind, hospitable and righteous Abraham himself goes to war to rescue his kinsman Lot. It is obvious that the value of human life, dominant as it is in Judaism, is never quite absolute. And this therefore poses the moral questions that every generation, nation and even an individual eventually

must face in life and society: When is taking a life justified?

Halacha provides some guidance on the subject, allowing for self defense, preemptive strikes and the execution of criminals who threaten society's existence. Jewish history also provides us with some insight on the matter, approving suicide, for instance, over forced conversions or a life of shame.

Because of this elasticity in what appears at first to be an absolute value, many questions are raised - and almost always in heartbreaking instances. The question of mercy killing and euthanasia remains on the agenda of the rabbinic responsa in our time though it is basically forbidden in Jewish society. Abortion is also opposed in Jewish law but individual respectable rabbinic advisors and decisors in some exceptional instances have allowed it.

The general rules and outlines are clear but in individual cases the matter becomes fuzzy. Maybe that is why Midrash sees Abraham himself as being conflicted over the issue of the akeida even after the angel of G-d instructs him not to sacrifice Isaac. The supreme test lies in the ability of humans to conform their behavior to G-d's will. That is the only truly absolute value in Judaism which allows for no exceptions or deviations.

Abraham is rewarded for his willingness to sacrifice his son and he is rewarded for not actually going through with the sacrifice. The common denominator in Abraham's seemingly contradictory behavior is his constant willingness to accept G-d's will and behave accordingly. This attitude has become the basis for all halachic decisions and Jewish behavior over the ages - the continued attempt to understand and follow through upon G-d's will. That is Abraham's legacy to us. © 2010 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

“I have loved [known] him in order that he will command compassionate righteousness and moral justice” (Genesis 18:19). In last week's portion, Lech Lecha, we read of G-d's covenant with Abraham - that seminal event which made Israel the Chosen People. An important contemporary theologian, Michael Wyschogrod, maintains that our covenant is a result of G-d's preferential love for the descendants of Abraham, through which He continues to "dwell within the continuity of historic or corporate Israel." The Bible itself teaches, "He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their seed after them, and brought you out in His presence with great power from Egypt, to drive out nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in and give you their land for an inheritance. G-d did not

love you and choose you because you were greater in number than any people; rather, you were the fewest of any people; it was because the Lord loved you and because He would keep the oath He swore to your ancestors" (Deut. 4:37-38; 7:7,8).

This is how Wyschogrod formulates his thesis: if G-d continues to love the people of Israel - and it is the faith of Israel that He does - it is because He sees the face of His beloved Abraham in each and every one of his offspring, as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of their union. (See Meir Y. Soloveichik, G-d's First Love, First Things, November 2009). I would maintain, however, that G-d's election of Abraham was not merely an act of love, but rather a morally directed charge in keeping with the fundamental definition of ethical monotheism. This is made clear in this week's portion: "And Abraham shall surely become a great and powerful nations, through whom all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; it is to this end that I have known him, in order that he will command his children and his household after him to guard the way of the Lord, to do compassionate righteousness and moral justice, in order that the Lord may bring you, Abraham, whatever He has said He would" (Genesis 18:18, 19).

The Divine election of Abraham and his descendants is explained by their responsibility for spreading G-d's message of compassionate righteousness and moral justice. This fits with the ancient definition of a covenant - a two-way street of mutual obligation. This covenant between G-d and our ancestors provided an enlightened alternative to the corrupt societal structures which brought about divine punishment through deluge, fire and brimstone. And even though G-d unconditionally guarantees that Abraham's seed - the Jewish people - will never be destroyed, our ability to live in the Land of Israel as a sovereign nation is dependent upon our moral and ethical worthiness. The relationship between our status as a nation and our ethical standing is iterated and reiterated throughout the Bible. Even those Biblical passages which emphasize Divine love as the reason for the election conclude with a warning: "But you shall observe the statutes and commandments which I have commanded you this day, that it may go well with you and with your children so you may lengthen your days on the land which the Lord your G-d has given you" (Deut. 4:40). "And you shall know that the Lord your G-d, He is G-d the faithful G-d who observes the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and observe His commandments. So you shall observe the commandment and the statutes and the laws which I have commanded you this day to do them" (Deut. 7:9-11).

Indeed, the Bible prophecies two destructions and exiles - one foretelling the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE: "If they will not hearken unto Me" (Lev. 26:14), and the second dealing with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the

second exile: "And it will happen if they do not hearken to the voice of the Lord your G-d" (Deut. 28:15). The prophet Isaiah even refers to the divine charge to Abraham when he insists that ultimately "Zion shall be redeemed by means of moral justice [mishpat] and [Israel] shall return [to her land] by means of compassionate righteousness [tzedaka]" (Isaiah 1: 27). No wonder that these are the concluding words of our prophetic reading (haftara) on the Shabbat before Tisha B'Av, the anniversary of both Temples' destruction.

The message that emerges from this study should be clear and frightening. G-d loves and believes in Abraham's progeny, and there will always be a faithful remnant worthy of redemption. But whether our present miraculous return - "the beginning of the sprouting of our redemption" - will truly flower into the long-anticipated salvation of our nation and the world depends upon our penitent hearkening to G-d's voice, and our ability to serve as a sacred model of compassionate righteousness and moral justice. © 2010 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftarah

This week's Haftarah 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. © 2010 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

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

The Medrash-which, by definition, is not the plain/simple/literal interpretation-feels that these words might just as well also have been spoken by Avraham Avinu after he had performed bris mila on himself. Viewing the pasuk in that context, the Medrash presents its reading of this pasuk: "After I performed the bris mila, many people circled around me to follow my path; and once I made this change in my flesh, I was able to see HaShem much more clearly."

The Sfas Emes's reaction to this text signals his whole approach to this parsha. Kedarko bakodesh, the Sfas Emes presents what is, in effect, a Medrash on the Medrash. Thus, he tells us that all Creation is connected with HaShem. How? Via a contact point-a nekuda-through which life-giving chiyus from HaShem can flow to us... This nekuda gives all Creation access to the chiyus emanating from HaShem...

Thus, the entire cosmos has its existence only from its constant contact-via the nekuda-with HaShem,. But note a potential problem... Our awareness that we exist only thanks to the chiyus from HaShem may be blocked by a klipa- a husk-of evil... How can we handle this potential problem? Drawing on the Sfas Emes's conceptualization of Bris Mila, we see a solution to our potential problem. Remove the husk blocking

awareness of our constant contact with HaShem. HaShem's Presence will then be revealed..Note the parallel with Bris Mila. When the outer covering-the foreskin-is removed, our special relationship with HaShem-the covenant-is evident...

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

(A question comes to mind at this point. Women cannot have Bris Mila. Hence, the question: How do women fit into this picture? The Gemara (Avoda Zara, 27,a) provides an answer: namely, that women are considered as already circumcised! Moreover, this view is not rhetorical; it is applied lehalacha. Thus the Gemara gives us the rule that only a person who is circumcised may perform Bris Mila. And the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Dei'ah, 264) paskins (rules) that a woman may in fact circumcise.)

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

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

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

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

Why so? Because the malachim have ready access to the truth and hence are totally aware of

HaShem. By contrast, for Bnei Yisroel, HaShem is hidden-indeed, this world is called "alma deshikra" (the world of falsehood). Nevertheless, Bnei Yisroel fight on to be witnesses of HaShem's reality. And at substantial cost to themselves, Bnai Yisroel accept His Kingship!

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

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

To conclude for today, I cannot resist lifting a thought of the Sfas Emes on this parsha in the next year, 5634. On the phrase (Bereishis, 18:1) "HaShem appeared to him " Rashi-echoing Chazal-tells us that HaShem came "levakeir es hacholeh" ("to visit the sick person.").

Who was the sick person whom HaShem came to visit? Presumably, Avraham Avinu, who had not yet recovered from surgery-his bris mila. The Sfas Emes reacts negatively to this suggestion-that Avraham was sick because he was still recovering from the surgery of bris mila. He offers in its stead a mind-stretching non-pshat. Thus he quotes a pasuk in Shir HaShirim (2:5): "Ki cholas ahava ahni" ("For I am sick with love."). You might feel that this expression is merely a guzma (hyperbole) and/or chassidisch emotionalism. But look at what is happening here. A man who is 99 years old, without anesthesia, sharp instruments, or germ-free conditions, performs bris mila on himself! To undergo this painful and dangerous experience solely because HaShem had asked to do so, the person truly must have been " lovesick"! © 2010 Rabbi N.C. Leff & torah.org

