

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

There is one image that haunts us across the millennia, fraught with emotion. It is the image of a man and his son walking side-by-side across a lonely landscape of shaded valleys and barren hills. The son has no idea where he is going and why. The man, in pointed contrast, is a maelstrom of emotion. He knows exactly where he is going and why, but he can't make sense of it at all.

The G-d who gave him a son is now telling him to sacrifice his son. On the one hand, the man is full of fear: am I really going to lose the one thing that makes my life meaningful, the son for whom I prayed all those years? On the other hand, part of him is saying: just as this child was impossible -- I was old, my wife was too old-yet here he is. So, though it seems impossible, I know that G-d is not going to take him from me. That is not the G-d I know and love. He would never have told me to call this child Isaac, meaning "he will laugh" if He meant to make him and me cry.

The father is in a state of absolute cognitive dissonance, yet-though he can make no sense of it-he trusts in G-d and betrays to his son no sign of emotion. Vayelchu shenehem yachdav. The two of them walked together.

There is just one moment of conversation between them: "Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, 'Father?'

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here,' Isaac said, 'but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'

"Abraham answered, 'G-d himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.'" (Gen. 22: 7-8)

What worlds of unstated thoughts and unexpressed emotions lie behind those simple words. Yet as if to emphasise the trust between father and son, and between both and G-d, the text repeats: Vayelchu shenehem yachdav. The two of them walked together.

As I read those words, I find myself travelling back in time, and in my mind's eye I see my father and me walking back from shul on Shabbat. I was four or five years old at the time, and I think I understood then, even if I couldn't put it into words, that there was something sacred in that moment. During the week I would see the worry in my father's face as he was trying to make a living in difficult times. But on Shabbat all

those worries were somewhere else. Vayelchu shenehem yachdav. We walked together in the peace and beauty of the holy day. My father was no longer a struggling businessman. Today he was a Jew breathing G-d's air, enjoying G-d's blessings, and he walked tall.

Shabbat was my mother making the food that gave the house its special Shabbat smell: the soup, the kugel, the lockshen. As she lit candles, she could have been the bride, the queen, we sang about in Lecha Dodi and Eshet Chayil. I had a sense, even then, that this was a holy moment when we were in the presence of something larger than ourselves, that embraced other Jews in other lands and other times, something I later learned we call the Shekhinah, the Divine presence.

We walked together, my parents, my brothers and me. The two generations were so different. My father came from Poland. My brothers and I were "proper Englishmen." We knew we would go places, learn things and pursue careers they could not. But we walked together, two generations, not having to say that we loved one another. We weren't a demonstrative family but we knew of the sacrifices our parents made for us and the pride we hoped to bring them. We belong to different times, different worlds, had different aspirations, but we walked together.

Then I find my imagination fast-forwarding to August this year, to those unforgettable scenes in Britain-in Tottenham, Manchester, Bristol- of young people rampaging down streets, looting shops, smashing windows, setting fire to cars, robbing, stealing, assaulting people. Everyone asked why. There were no political motives. It was not a racial clash. There were no religious undertones.

Of course, the answer was as clear as day but no one wanted to say so. In the space of no more than two generations, a large part of Britain has quietly abandoned the family, and decided that marriage is just a piece of paper. Britain became the country with the highest rate of teenage mothers, the highest rate of single parent families, and the highest rate -- 46% in 2009 -- of births outside marriage in the world.

Marriage and cohabitation are not the same thing, though it is politically incorrect to say so. The average length of cohabitation is less than two years. The result is that many children are growing up without their biological father, in many cases not even knowing who their father is. They live, at best, with a succession of stepfathers. It is a little-known but frightening fact that the rate of violence between stepfathers and

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stepchildren is 80 times that between natural fathers and their children.

The result is that in 2007, a UNICEF report showed that Britain's children are the unhappiest in the developed world-bottom of a league of 26 countries.

On 13 September 2011, another report by UNICEF, compared British parents unfavourably with their counterparts in Sweden and Spain. It showed that British parents try to buy the love of their children by giving them expensive clothes and electronic gadgets-"compulsive consumerism". They fail to give their children what they most want, and costs nothing at all: their time.

Nowhere do we see more clearly the gap between Jewish and secular values today than here. We live in a secular world that has accumulated more knowledge than all previous generations combined, from the vast cosmos to the structure of DNA, from superstring theory to the neural pathways of the brain, and yet it has forgotten the simple truth that a civilisation is as strong as the love and respect between parent and child-Vayelchu shenehem yachdav, the ability of the generations to walk together.

Jews are a formidably intellectual people. We have our Nobel prize-winning physicists, chemists, medical scientists and games theorists. Yet as long as there is a living connection between Jews and our heritage, we will never forget that there is nothing more important than home, the sacred bond of marriage, and the equally sacred bond between parent and child. Vayelchu shenehem yachdav.

And if we ask ourselves why is it that Jews so often succeed, and succeeding, so often give to others of their money and time, and so often make an impact beyond their numbers: there is no magic, no mystery, no miracle. It is simply that we devote our most precious energies to bringing up our children. Never more so than on Shabbat when we cannot buy our children expensive clothes or electronic gadgets, when we can only give them what they most want and need-our time.

Jews knew and know and will always know what today's chattering classes are in denial about, namely that a civilisation is as strong as the bond between the generations. That is the enduring image of this week's parsha: the first Jewish parent, Abraham, and the first Jewish child, Isaac, walking together toward an unknown future, their fears stilled by their

faith. Lose the family and we will eventually lose all else. Sanctify the family and we will have something more precious than wealth or power or success: the love between the generations that is the greatest gift G-d gives us when we give it to one another. © 2011 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**fter this, Abraham received a message: Milcah has also had children from your brother Nahor: Uz, his first born; Buz, his brother, Kemuel, father of Aram, Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph and Bethuel. Bethuel had a daughter, Rebekah. Milcah bore the above eight sons to Abraham's brother Nahor. [Additionally] Nahor's concubine was named Reumah and she also had children: Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Ma'acah" (Genesis 22:20-24).

I would like to draw your attention to the strange biblical postscript to the akeda, describing the descendants of Abraham's brother Nahor.

What could be the reason for this addendum? Abraham was clearly the most righteous man of his generation. He discovered the ideal of ethical monotheism, and taught compassion and justice to anyone who would listen. In a miraculously successful military maneuver, Abraham freed the five kings of the fertile crescent from four tyrants, and willingly left his ancestral home (his past) and bound his adored son (his future) to the altar because G-d asked him to do so.

Yet Abraham had tremendous difficulty in conceiving a son with his wife Sarah and once he did, he was commanded to sacrifice the young man. In contrast, Abraham's only surviving brother, Nahor, about whose deeds the Bible records not one syllable, is blessed with eight sons by his wife Milcah, and has four more with his concubine, Reumah. The biblical report makes absolutely no mention of any difficulty his brother might have had with conceiving children.

In placing this message immediately after the traumatic events of the akeda, could the Bible be pouring salt on Abraham's wounds? Why would it do that? I believe a clue to understanding this strange passage lies in the name of Nahor's firstborn son, Uz. This can be connected with the first verse in the Book of Job: "There was a man who lived in the land of Uz and Job was his name; this man was wholehearted and righteous, one who feared G-d and kept far from evil."

The book continues by telling us how G-d proclaimed the greatness of Job before Satan, who responded that it was no wonder Job was righteous after all the good fortune he had received. It is this dialogue that leads to G-d's decision to "test" Job with misfortune.

The parallel to Abraham's "test" is clear. Both stories emerge from the land of Uz, which symbolizes the unfair, incomplete and as-yet unredeemed world

where G-d's face remains hidden and the righteous continue to be tested.

It is just these tragic circumstances which cause Rav Ya'acov to cry out, "There is no reward for commandments in this world," (B.T. Kiddushin 39b), and the Talmud to declare "Life, children and sustenance are not dependent on merit but rather upon mazal [the luck of the draw]" (B.T. Moed Katan 28a).

And so perhaps the postscript to the akeda, reminiscent of a kind of synagogue bulletin announcing births within the community, reflects our own life experiences: the righteous Abraham has it hard while the nondescript Nahor has it easy.

There is, however, a totally antithetical way of looking at this conclusion to the akeda. Yes, Nahor received undeserved good fortune and Abraham underwent a traumatic experience. But remember that this world is merely a corridor to the Messianic Age and the spiritual world-to-come.

We live in a training ground wherein the Almighty is our Master Trainer.

From this perspective, G-d had to communicate a crucially important ideal to the first Hebrew, and the founder of ethical monotheism.

He wanted to teach him that our G-d is not Moloch; He will never accept child sacrifice as a legitimate religious ritual.

So any individual who sends out his child as a suicide bomber in the name of G-d is actually serving Satan. Hence, the first divine message asking the patriarch to bring Isaac as an *ola* - which can be taken to mean a "whole burnt offering" - is redefined by the second Divine message, unequivocally forbidding Abraham from committing such a sacrilege. *Ola* is an act of dedication in life (an uplifting), and our G-d sees Moloch as an abomination.

But why did G-d use such an ambiguous term as *ola*, which can also mean "whole burnt offering"? Perhaps because although G-d would never ask for human sacrifice, the gentile world of persecution and pogrom might well ask just that of us, as we have experienced throughout history.

Those who are the most capable leaders, chosen by G-d, must be ready for special tests to learn difficult lessons. And despite the challenges of one life versus the ease of the other, Abraham remains the father of a multitude of nations, while if Nahor is remembered at all, it is merely as Abraham's brother
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RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

What 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 fell 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. © 2011 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

RABBI DANIEL TRAVIS

Integrity

“**T**he people of Sodom were very wicked and sinful against G-d.” (Bereshith 13:13)

This verse refers to the monetary transgressions of the Sodomites. (Rashi on Bereshith 13:13) The people of Sodom, living in a self-sufficient community, legislated that no outsiders be allowed in their country, for they felt that they stood to lose from the presence of outsiders. (Maharsha, Sanhedrin 109a)

Their stinginess festered, to the point that they covered the tops of the trees to prevent the birds from eating their fruit. (Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer 25) Eventually this developed into total disregard for the needs of others, even the needy among their own people. (Tifereth Yisrael, Avoth 5:10)

One day a young woman in Sodom met a friend beside a well and saw that she was suffering from starvation. The government of Sodom had forbidden anyone to give charity, so the woman sent her friend some food secretly. When the authorities discovered what the woman had done they burned her alive. The cries of this woman reached G-d, and it was then that He decreed that Sodom be completely annihilated. (Bereshith Rabbah 49:6)

Our Sages, recognizing the dangers inherent in stinginess, wrote that anyone who says, "What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours," shares this personality trait with the people of Sodom (Midath Sodom). (Avos 5:10) The only proper attitude about anything that G-d is the true Owner of all property, and He has told us to share our belongings with others. Someone whose attitude is "What's mine is mine..." shows that he does not subscribe to this principle, and is moving toward total denial of Divine sovereignty. (Yalkut Shimoni, Bechukothai 573) The halachah, therefore, is that kofe b'midath Sodom- we totally reject the principal trait of the people of Sodom. In certain situations, if one person will not lose anything and another stands to gain, the first person is obligated by halachah to let the other benefit.

One such case is if a person has taken up residence on the property of another without the owner's consent. The "squatter" acted improperly by not asking permission, and the owner has the right to stop him from remaining there. Nevertheless, if the owner had no intention of renting out or otherwise using the property, the squatter is not obligated to pay. The above is true even if the squatter gained financially by utilizing the other person's possessions-in the case cited here, he saved himself from having to pay rent to a different owner. Since the owner had no intention of profiting from the property, he lost nothing from the squatter's use of it. (Bava Kama 20a, according to the Rif and Rambam; Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat 363:6. The above only applies if absolutely no damage was incurred through the use of the property. If the property was damaged by use, the halachah [Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat 363:7] is that the owner may ask for full compensation.) © 2011 Rabbi D. Travis & torah.org

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Lord appears to Avraham at a very strange time. He is convalescing from his surgical circumcision; the day is very hot and it is high noon; and he is apparently looking for human company as he sits at the entrance to his tent. And even though he does spy three strangers and invites them in, the Lord, so to speak, interrupts this happening by appearing just then to Avraham. He is left conflicted as to which of his meetings he should give precedence to.

The rabbis deduce from Avraham's behavior that greeting and hosting human guests even takes precedence over communicating with the Divine Spirit! But the fact that such a juxtaposition of events occurs at the same time is itself a great lesson in life and faith.

The Lord appears to people at strange and unpredictable times. To some it is in sickness and despair. To others it is at moments of joy and seeming success. Some glimpse the Divine in the beauty and complexity of nature while others find their solace and

epiphany in the halls of study and in challenges to the intellect. Since we are all different in nature and outlook, the Lord customizes His appearance to each one of us to fit our unique circumstances.

Thus people experience their own sense of spirituality and connection to their inner essence and to their Creator differently and at different moments in their lives. Some are frightened into such an experience while others enter into it with serenity and confidence. But we can certainly agree that there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to dealing with our souls and the eternal One.

The Lord appears to Avraham at the moment of his hospitality and tolerance towards strangers. In the tent of Avraham and Sarah, creatures can enter as Bedouin Arabs covered with desert dust and leave refreshed as radiant angels. It is in the service of others and in the care for the needs of others that the Lord appears in the tent of Avraham and Sarah. It is in the goodness of their hearts that the Lord manifests His presence, so to speak, to Avraham and Sarah.

Every one of us has traits and a nature that defines us. Just as chesed - goodness, kindness, and care for others - defined Avraham and Sarah, so too are we defined by our concerns, habits and behavior. And it is within that background that the Lord appears to each of us individually, if we are wise enough to recognize His presence, so to speak.

The prophet Yirmiyahu teaches us that in times of trouble and sickness the Lord appears to us "from afar." But, nevertheless, He appears to us. The great Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk was asked: "Where can one find G-d?" He answered in his usual direct fashion: "Wherever one is willing to allow Him to enter." The performance of the acts of Torah and goodness, the bending of our traits and will towards service and concern for others, are the means by which we will glimpse the Divine presence within ourselves and in our homes - in health and contentment. © 2011 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 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. © 2006 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and President of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School - the Modern and Open Orthodox Rabbinical School. He is Senior Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, a Modern and Open Orthodox congregation of 850 families. He is also National President of AMCHA - the Coalition for Jewish Concerns.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd G-d appeared to [Avraham] in the Plains (or Orchards) of Mamray" (B'raishis 18:1). [Mamray] was the one who gave Avraham advice regarding the circumcision, therefore [G-d] appeared to [Avraham] on [Mamray's] property (Rashi). The commentators are puzzled as to why Avraham would consult with Mamray (or anyone else) about whether or not to listen to G-d and become circumcised. Is it really possible that the righteous Avraham would consider disobeying G-d's command?

Although the question is often worded by asking how Avraham, who passed the famous "Ten Tests," would have asked anyone whether he should disregard G-d's command, since having a circumcision is one of the 10 tests, it could not have been a foregone conclusion that Avraham would pass. It should therefore not be surprising if, during the test-while still in the process of trying to pass it, fighting internally to overcome whatever obstacles made it a "test," he consulted with his close comrades (see 14:13). Nevertheless, it is worth exploring what made this a "test" (rather than an automatic "G-d said it, so obviously I'll do it" situation).

The commentators suggest many different approaches to explain how Avraham could have asked Mamray for advice. Most say that the advice was not whether or not to have a circumcision, but how to. Should he publicize the fact that he was commanded to become circumcised (and was doing it), thus setting an example of doing what G-d wants no matter what, or should he do it without any publicity, so others can't make fun of it and in order to avoid giving his enemies (the world powers he defeated in the war with the kings) an opportunity to exact revenge while he was recuperating (Tosfos, Sifsei Chachamim)? Should he do the procedure in front of others because of the Kiddush Hashem it would create, or privately, for modesty reasons (B'er HaTorah, imprecisely quoting Maharai)? Some (Tosfos, see also Mizrahi) suggest that Avraham wasn't sure which part of the body the circumcision should be done on, or which part to remove (Moshav Z'kainim and other Tosafists). Chizkuni suggests that he asked for medical advice regarding the healing process afterwards; B'er BaSadeh suggests that he wanted their thoughts on how to protect himself and his family during their recovery,

while vulnerable to attack. Tosfos suggests that his family/household was resistant to the idea of being circumcised, and Avraham asked how he could convince them to do it. Although each of these suggestions deserves a discussion of their own, the bottom line for our purposes is that if the advice Avraham asked for was not about whether to have a circumcision, but about issues raised by having a circumcision, the original question has been avoided.

As several commentators (e.g. Mizrahi) point out, none of these approaches are consistent with Rashi's Midrashic source (B'raishis Rabbah 42:8), where the conversation is about whether or not to have a circumcision. It is possible that Avraham started the conversation about a consequence of his already-reached decision to have a circumcision, with Aner and Eshkol questioning the decision itself and Mamray therefore having to support it, but the implication in the Midrash is that Mamray "rebelled" against Avraham rather than support his decision. In addition, parallel Midrashim (Tanchuma Vayeira 3, Agadas B'raishis 19) are explicit that Avraham himself was unsure whether he wanted to undergo a circumcision.

Maharzo (a commentary on B'raish Rabbah) and Anaf Yosef (in his commentary on Midrash Tanchuma) are among those (see Chizkuni and other Tosafists, as well as Mizrahi and Sifsei Chachamim) who suggest that Avraham was merely testing his friends/partners to see if they really feared G-d or were just acting as if they did. Similarly, some (see Mizrahi, Sifsei Chachamim) suggest that Avraham expected them to try to talk him out of it, but wanted to make a greater Kiddush Hashem by going through with it regardless. Others (Maharai, Gur Aryeh) suggest that Avraham wanted to make sure no one thought he was being impulsive when he had his circumcision, so "consulted" with Aner, Eshkol and Mamray before following through with the decision he had already reached. If so, the conversation being about the circumcision itself does not negate the possibility that Avraham was going to go through with it no matter what they said.

Chasam Sofer suggests no less than seven possible issues that Mamray could have advised Avraham about (many commentators suggest several possibilities), one of which is that Mamray advised Avraham to wait until he was commanded to become circumcised, as it can only be fulfilled once (unlike other mitzvos), and it's better to do something after it's commanded than to do it before it became obligatory (see also Ikar Sifsei Chachamim and Raza D'Meyer, a commentary on Paanayach Raza). However, the Midrashim are explicit that Avraham asked for advice after G-d had already told him to become circumcised.

R' Chaim Paltiel (a later Tosaist), and R' Yaakov K'nizel and Maysiach Ilmim (two early commentators on Rashi) suggest that Avraham wasn't sure who should be circumcised first, himself or his

family. Another suggestion R' Paltiel-and numerous others-make is that Avraham started circumcising others, but they all died. Mamray told him, based on G-d's wording, that only someone who is already circumcised can circumcise others. This would explain why Shem (Noach's son) was brought in to circumcise Avraham (Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer 29), as Shem was born "already circumcised" (Avos d'Rav Nosson 2:5). Gur Aryeh suggests a concept that is expanded upon by Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, z"l (Oznayim L'Torah) and (I'havdil bain chaym l'chayim) Rabbi Peretz Steinberg, sh'lita (Pri Eitz HaChaim); since Avraham had already entered a covenant with Aner, Eshkol and Mamray (B'raishis 14:13), he had to consult with them first before doing anything as drastic as becoming circumcised. After all, doing so made him, and his entire household (who were obligated by the treaty to come to Aner, Eshkol and Mamray's defense) vulnerable to attack, and created tension between his household and the rest of the (uncircumcised) world. Additionally, how could Avraham enter a new "covenant" with anyone (in this case, G-d) without first consulting with those he had already made a covenant with? Although each of these approaches has its own shortcoming (the Midrashim imply that Avraham was trying to decide if he should get circumcised, not who should get circumcised first; many ask how Mamray could know the "d'rasha" that only someone circumcised can circumcise others if Avraham himself didn't know it; if Avraham was asking permission to become circumcised and make a covenant with G-d, how could he say "too bad" after Aner and Eshkol said "no," what value would Mamray agreeing to it have if his partners outnumbered him, and if he split with them and retained his treaty with Avraham while they didn't, it wouldn't be "advice" that Mamray gave, just an agreement to maintain their previous agreement), they can help paint a slightly different picture.

A "covenant" is an agreement between two or more parties. Although we, as Avraham's descendants, are obligated to maintain the covenant he made with G-d, he could not be "forced" to make this covenant; it could not be a "commandment," only an "invitation" (see Taz). This doesn't remove the original question, as it would still be puzzling why Avraham would have to ask Mamray whether he thinks Avraham should become G-d's "partner," but it does change the question at least a little bit.

If Avraham, who was 99 years old, was afraid that undergoing this procedure put his life at risk, we can understand why it would be a "test," and perhaps why he would consult with his "partners" during his decision-making process. It would also explain why he would want to first circumcise younger, healthier members of his household, as they were not only a smaller risk, but after having performed several circumcisions he would be more experienced and could be more confident that he would be successful with

those who were more fragile (including himself). When his first "patients" died, Avraham's fears grew. Should he really voluntarily agree to undergo this dangerous procedure? A procedure that will alienate him and his household from almost everybody else, and would put them in danger of a retaliatory strike from the world powers? Was it fair, for his own spiritual advancement, to put his partners at risk too? Or to force them to either dissolve their partnership or be stuck with a weaker partner? Avraham therefore consulted with his partners, and although two of them thought it wasn't worth the risk, one of them (Mamray) thought that not only was it worth the risk, but based on G-d's track record of saving Avraham from the fiery furnace, the mighty kings, and the famine (including what happened to Pharaoh and Avimelech), Avraham could be confident that G-d would help him through this as well.

Whether or not to undergo a circumcision was one of Avraham's Ten Tests, one that was difficult to pass. After hearing Mamray's advice, it became easier for Avraham to pass the test. © 2011 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week we read the parsha of Vayera. Avrohom was sitting by the entrance to his tent fervently hoping for some passersby. Seeing how badly Avrohom wanted the opportunity to perform chessed {acts of kindness}, Hashem sent three angels in the guise of men.

The Talmud [Bava Metzia 86B] reveals how every aspect of Avrohom's chessed reverberated through time. It was taught in the yeshiva of Rabi Yishmael:

In the merit of the butter and milk that Avrohom served the angels, Bnei Yisroel {the Children of Israel} merited the manna from heaven. In the merit of Avrohom standing by them to attend to their needs, Bnei Yisroel merited the clouds of glory that accompanied them throughout the Midbar {wilderness}. In the merit of the water that was brought to them, Bnei Yisroel merited the spring of water that flowed from the rock.

The B'er Yosef asks an interesting question. We know that Avrohom's life was replete with chessed. If so, why was this particular encounter with its accompanying acts of chessed singled out as being the cause of Hashem's miraculous providence in the wilderness?

He explains that the other acts of chessed performed by Avrohom were within the parameters of a person's normal ability. However, this time Avrohom went far beyond the bounds of natural behavior.

He was in a debilitated state, a mere three days after his bris milah {circumcision} and yet he was sitting outside during an incredibly hot day hoping for guests. When he saw them he ran all the way to them, humbled

himself by bowing to them, urged them to come to his house and served them a lavish meal. The happiness he felt in sharing what he had with others outweighed all of the pain that he was in.

By his breaking the bounds of normal, natural behavior, his descendants merited Hashem's supernatural supervision.

Avrohom's desire to share became an intrinsic part of the spiritual DNA that was passed down to his descendants. So much so that the Sages taught that a person who is not a gomel chessed {one who acts kindly by looking to help others} is suspected to not be from the descendants of Avrohom Avinu {the Forefather, Avrohom}.

This middah {attribute} must be so deeply ingrained that we must be willing to share even our sharing...

Rav Yehonasan Eibeshitz, zt"l, married the daughter of a wealthy man and received three thousand gold coins as a dowry. After the marriage, he and his chevrusa {study partner} continued with their learning.

The gentiles of that city, in order to antagonize the Jews, built a church right across from the Beis Hamedrash {Torah Study Hall}. All were very upset, but Rav Yehonasan Eibeshitz's chevrusa, who was a very passionate person, decided to take matters into his own hands. At midnight, he climbed up to the roof and broke the cross. On the way down however, he was caught and incarcerated.

None of the Jews were aware of what had transpired and thought the man had simply gone missing. Search parties were organized but they all returned empty-handed. Meanwhile, the guard who worked at the church secretly approached one of the Jewish leaders, told him what had happened and informed him that the priest had decided that he would be burnt to death. This guard knew of a secret passage leading out of the cell and said that for three thousand gold coins he'd help him escape.

People were immediately sent out to try to raise this tremendous sum. When Rav Yehonasan Eibeshitz heard about his chevrusa's plight he didn't waste a second. He immediately went home, took out the three thousand gold coins he'd received as his dowry and delivered it to the guard. The guard helped the man escape and he was quickly sent to another town.

When the collectors approached Rav Yehonasan Eibeshitz for a contribution, he told them that he'd already taken care of it and the man was free. A disagreement ensued with the collectors feeling that Rav Yehonasan should accept the money that had already been collected in order to give those contributors a share in the mitzvah {commandment} of chesed. Rav Yehonasan insisted that he'd already taken care of it and they should return the money that had been collected.

With the news of the escape came suspicion that this guard had been involved. The priest decided

that the fate of the Jew should now befall this guard. The guard caught wind of this decision and decided to escape. Needing a safe place to store his money and remembering the righteousness of Rav Yehonasan, he brought all of his wealth over to Rav Yehonasan's house. Rav Yehonasan wasn't there so the guard told his wife the entire story, not knowing that she had been totally unaware of all that had transpired.

"I'm returning the three thousand gold coins as a gift," he told her, "and I'm entrusting you with the rest of my fortune. I know it's safe by you and your husband and that it will be returned immediately upon my return. If I don't return, I've seen that your husband knows how to use money for worthwhile causes."

As he was running from the town, he was caught and killed and the entire fortune, in addition to the original three thousand gold coins, now belonged to Rav Yehonasan.

When Rav Yehonasan returned, his wife began to tell him how Hashem had paid back his kindness manifold. To her shock, instead of feeling appreciation, Rav Yehonasan began to cry bitter tears. "My reward being given immediately in this world is a clear sign that my mitzvah was rejected. Otherwise, the reward would have waited for the World to Come."

Rav Yehonasan decided to fast for three days and then to make a sha'alos chalome {a kabbalic means of asking in a dream why certain things happened}. He was told that his mitzvah was 'returned' because he wasn't willing to share it with others...

The descendants of Avrohom have to be willing to share even their sharing... © 2011 Rabbi Y. Ciner & 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 milk, he specified getting them "a little" milk. Why did Avraham suddenly seem to get stingy?

The Lekach Tov explains that this act shows Avraham's sensitivity to others even MORE because milk 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 milk, he had no right to ask them to bring more milk than is actually needed. That's why Avraham only offered a small quantity of milk. Avraham's lesson is simple: Being kind to others only takes a little effort, so why be stingy about it? © 2002 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.