

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

There is a mystery at the heart of Jewish existence, engraved into the first syllables of our recorded time. The first words of G-d to Abraham were: "Go out from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house . . . And I will make you a great nation . . ."

In the next chapter there is another promise: "I will make your children like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust of the earth, so shall your offspring be counted."

Two chapters later comes a third: "G-d took him outside and said, 'Look at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.' Then He said to him, 'So shall your children be.'"

Finally, the fourth: "Your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations."

Four escalating promises: Abraham would be the father of a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky. He would be the father not of one nation but of many. What, though, was the reality? Early in the story, we read that Abraham was "very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold." He had everything except one thing – a child. Then G-d appeared to Abraham and said, "Your reward will be very great."

Until now, Abraham has been silent. Now, something within him breaks, and he asks: "O Lord G-d, what will you give me if I remain childless?" The first recorded words of Abraham to G-d are a plea for there to be future generations. The first Jew feared he would be the last. Then a child is born. Sarah gives Abraham her handmaid Hagar, hoping that she will give him a child. She gives birth to a son whose name is Ishmael, meaning "G-d has heard." Abraham's prayer has been answered, or so we think. But in the next chapter, that hope is destroyed. Yes, says G-d, Ishmael will be blessed. He will be the father of twelve princes and a great nation. But he is not the child of Jewish

destiny, and one day Abraham will have to part from him.

This pains Abraham deeply. He pleads: "If only Ishmael might live under Your blessing." Later, when Sarah drives Ishmael away, we read that "This distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son." Nonetheless, the decree remains. G-d insists that Abraham will have a son by Sarah. Both laugh. How can it be? They are old. Sarah is post-menopausal. Yet against possibility, the son is born. His name is Isaac, meaning "laughter": 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."

Finally, the story seems to have a happy ending. After all the promises and prayers, Abraham and Sarah at last have a child. Then come the words which, in all the intervening centuries, have not lost their power to shock: After these things, G-d tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. 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 that I will show you."

Abraham takes his son, travels for three days, climbs the mountain, prepares the wood, ties his son, takes the knife and raises his hand. Then a voice is heard from heaven: "Do not lay a hand on the boy." The trial is over. Isaac lives.

Why all the promises and disappointments? Why the hope so often raised, so often unfulfilled? Why delay? Why Ishmael? Why the binding? Why put Abraham and Sarah through the agony of thinking that the son for whom they have waited for so long is about to die?

There are many answers in our tradition, but one transcends all others. We cherish what we wait for and what we most risk losing. Life is full of wonders. The birth of a child is a miracle. Yet, precisely because these things are natural, we take them for granted,

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated
in memory of our beloved mother
Chana Rosenberg A"H
on her fifth yartzeit
חנה בת יוסף ע"ה
נפטרה כ"ג מר חשוון תשע"ב
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forgetting that nature has an architect, and history an author.

Judaism is a sustained discipline in not taking life for granted. We were the people born in slavery so that we would value freedom. We were the nation always small, so that we would know that strength does not lie in numbers but in the faith that begets courage. Our ancestors walked through the valley of the shadow of death, so that we could never forget the sanctity of life.

Throughout history, Jews were called on to value children. Our entire value system is built on it. Our citadels are schools, our passion, education, and our greatest heroes, teachers. The seder service on Pesach can only begin with questions asked by a child. On the first day of the New Year, we read not about the creation of the universe but about the birth of a child – Isaac to Sarah, Samuel to Hannah. Ours is a supremely child-centred faith.

That is why, at the dawn of Jewish time, G-d put Abraham and Sarah through these trials – the long wait, the unmet hope, the binding itself – so that neither they nor their descendants would ever take children for granted. Every child is a miracle. Being a parent is the closest we get to G-d – bringing life into being through an act of love.

Today, when too many children live in poverty and illiteracy, dying for lack of medical attention because those who rule nations are focused on fighting the battles of the past rather than shaping a safe future, it is a lesson the world has not yet learned. For the sake of humanity it must, for the tragedy is vast and the hour is late. © 2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"For now I know that you are a G-d-fearing man, seeing that you have not withheld your only son from Me." (Gen. 22:12) The Akeda serves as a model for one of the most important questions in contemporary family life: to what extent should a parent continue to influence, direct, or channel their adult child's life? Can the power of a parent be taken too far? Ultimately, how much control can parents continue to

have in their relationships with their adult children? The Torah offers an insight to these questions in describing the immediate aftermath of the Akeda.

What happened to Isaac after the harrowing experience with his father on Mount Moriah? The Torah states, 'So Abraham returned [singular form] to his young men [the Midrash teaches they were Eliezer and Ishmael, who accompanied them, but did not go to the actual place of the appointed sacrifice] and they [Abraham and the young men] rose up and went together to Be'er Sheva and Abraham dwelt in Be'er Sheva' [Gen. 22:19].

Where was Isaac? Didn't Isaac also descend from the altar and return to Be'er Sheva?

Yonatan Ben Uziel, in his interpretive Aramaic translation, writes that Isaac is not included as having returned home to Be'er Sheva because he went instead to the yeshiva of Shem and Ever. In other words, prior to the Akeda, father and son magnificently joined together – 'and they walked, the two of them, together' (Gen. 22:6) – but afterwards, they had to part ways.

Abraham returns to his household, while Isaac returns to his books, to an academy of solitude and study. In the vocabulary of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, z"l, Abraham is the outer-directed, extroverted, aggressive Adam I, while Isaac is the more inner-directed, introverted, introspective Adam II.

In the conceptual scheme of the mystical Zohar, Abraham is the outgoing, overflowing symbol of hesed (loving kindness), while Isaac is the disciplined and courageous symbol of gevura (inner fortitude). The Akeda is both the point of unity as well as the point of departure between father and son. Isaac enters the Akeda as Abraham's son; he emerges from the Akeda as Jacob's father (Jacob will also study at the yeshiva of Shem and Ever).

Isaac's commitment to G-d is equal to that of his father, but his path is very different. Simultaneously, the Akeda is the point of unity and separation, between father and son, for each must respect both the similarities as well as the differences within the parent-child relationship.

The commandment to circumcise one's son is most certainly modeled on the symbol of the Akeda. After all, the basic law prescribes that it is the father who must remove his son's foreskin (even though most fathers feel more comfortable appointing the more-experienced mohel as their agent).

From a symbolic perspective, it is the parent's responsibility to transmit to the children the boundaries of what is permissible and what is not. Nevertheless, despite the fact that every child is a product of the nature and nurture provided by his/her parents – and the Torah teaches that a child must respect and even revere his/her parents – the existential decisions of how to live one's life, which profession to enter and which spouse to marry are decisions which can only be made

by the adult child himself/herself. [See Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah, Chap. 240:25, Laws of Respecting Parents, the last comment of Rema, citing Maharik.]

We see the importance of parental restraint in the continuation of Gen. 22:12: 'For now I know that you are a G-d-fearing man, seeing that you have not withheld [hasakhta] your only son from Me' [ibid].

However, we can also understand the verse to mean, 'For now I know that you are a G-d-fearing man, seeing that you have not done away with [the Hebrew h-s-kh can also mean to remove, or cause to be absent] your only son because of [My command].'

In the first reading, the angel praises Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac; in the alternative reading, Abraham is praised for his willingness not to sacrifice Isaac. [See Ish Shalom, 'Akeda,' Akdamot, August 1996.]

The critical lesson of the Akeda, then, is not how close Abraham came to sacrificing his own son, but rather, the limits of paternal power.

Paradoxically, when a parent enables a child to psychologically separate, the child will ultimately move forward. Isaac returns from the yeshiva to continue his father's monotheistic beliefs and Israel-centered life. Our paramount parental responsibility is to allow our children to fulfill their own potential, and our challenge is to learn to respect their individual choices. ©2016 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah always deals with real life, with current assessments and realities. In fact, much of the current pattern and modern story of the Jewish people is reflected in the Torah reading of Vayera, especially in the story of Avraham and his nephew, Lot. Lot sees Avraham as being old-fashioned, irrelevant and a definite handicap to the establishment of the new and better worldview. Lot sees the realization of this better world in the newly burgeoning society of Sodom. He ignores the intrinsic evil of that society and builds his hopes on the superficial wealth and glitter that Sodom exudes. He is convinced that his uncle Avraham, childless and old, has no future, while he, with his large family, immense wealth, and the seeming respect of the society of Sodom, will live on and become the new Avraham.

In our century a large segment of Jewry convinced itself that the old Avraham was done for, and in their eyes, deservedly so. Orthodoxy and a Torah life-style and value system were doomed to be relegated to the ash-heap of history. The "new Jew" would be cultured, modernized, secularized, reformed, and "free" of the burdens of Torah law and the Jewish past. He would be a Socialist, a Communist, a Humanist, a secular Zionist, but he would be Lot and not Avraham. And if that meant taking upon Jewish

society some of the trappings of Sodom, well, so be it. For after all, it was impossible to remain with the worldview and way of life of the old Avraham.

However, Sodom did not turn out to be the paradise that Lot hoped for. Lot's children, raised and educated in Sodom, ridiculed and despised Lot, much as Lot had himself ridiculed and despised Avraham. They resented Lot's old-fashioned attachment to the outmoded ideas of Avraham, of hospitality and kindness to others, even to strangers. Lot's own family turned against him and informed on him to the authorities and people of Sodom. Lot was the precursor of the Jewish Communists in the Stalin era, who turned in their parents for being "counter-revolutionaries", only to be eliminated a decade later by the "great father Stalin." And, worst of all, Sodom was destroyed! The whole brave new world collapsed in fire and brimstone, poverty and death, disappointment and disillusion.

All of the beliefs of the modern Jew in the better world of European culture and modernity were crushed by the Holocaust, by Stalin and his successors, by the unending trials by fire of the State of Israel. Lot remained alone, unable any longer to return to Avraham, sunk in the incestuous wallowing of his own emptiness of spirit and lack of vision. Meanwhile Avraham somehow miraculously survived and even prospered. He had a son and heir, Yitzchak, and he had a spiritual foundation for his being, and the Lord protected him (albeit barely) from his enemies. Lot is bankrupt and the old, irrelevant Avraham waxed richer and richer. That is a pretty fair description of today's Jewish world. The outstanding feature of today's Jewish world is the contrast between the resiliency and confidence of Orthodoxy and the angst and depression that characterizes the non-Orthodox Jewish world. Avraham grows strong and mighty while Lot destroys himself.

But all is not lost for Lot. Hundreds of years later, long after Sodom has been transformed into salt and sulfur and ashes, a descendant of Lot, Ruth of Moab, seeks out Avraham. She forsakes her home and her family, her opportunity for physical comforts and a seemingly secure existence, and sets out on a difficult road that will bring her to Avraham's people and make her the mother of kings. Somewhere within Lot there was a spark of Avraham that was not extinguished by the experience of Sodom. Ruth discovered that spark within herself and that discovery gave her no rest. She rebuilds her life and her own person under the shadow of Avraham's canopy.

There are thousands of descendants of Lot-Jews throughout the world today who are searching for Avraham. They go against family and society and ignore the cluck-clucking platitudes of the professionals of the Jewish world, all in order to reunite themselves with Avraham, with Torah, and with the Jewish past and destiny. Sodom is destroyed, but Lot "who went with

Avraham" emerges, even after centuries of separation and self-hate, to take his place once again alongside his uncle in the struggle for G-dliness and sanctity. Is this not a description of our world and our times? ©2016 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

Years back, a Hebrew Christian approached me, arguing that his belief in Jesus had something to do with the binding of Isaac story. Jesus, he suggested, was able to do what Yitzhak (Isaac) could not. Jesus gave his life for G-d, while Isaac did not reach that level. An analysis of the akeidah story, the story of the binding of Isaac, found in this week's parsha, goes a long way in responding to this challenge.

From a certain perspective, the most unusual feature of the akeidah (binding of Isaac) narrative is the absence of dialogue; Avraham (Abraham) and his son Yitzhak hardly speak.

The Midrash fills in the empty spaces. As Avraham walked to Moriah to slaughter his son, the Midrash suggests that an elderly man approached him suggesting that it was improper for a father to sacrifice his son. Furthermore, the elderly man questioned the ethics of sacrificing life for G-d. (Bereishit Rabbah, 56:4)

My rebbe in Chumash, Nehama Leibowitz, concluded that the elderly gentleman represented Avraham's inner conscience. As Avraham walked to Moriah, his inner soul stirred and he began to ask himself deep and profound questions about whether it was appropriate both as a father and as the founder of ethical monotheism, to sacrifice the life of his son.

This Midrash may have been motivated by the fact that the only time in the narrative, and for that matter in the whole Bible, that Avraham and Yitzhak speak to one another is when they walk to Moriah. Yitzhak begins his comment with just one word—"avi, my father." (Genesis 22:7) In other words, Yitzhak was saying, "father, how can you do this? How could you offer me, your son, as a sacrifice?" Yitzhak, in the same sentence, continues asking, "where is the animal to be sacrificed," hinting at an ethical concern with respect to human sacrifice.

The upshot: although some conclude that Avraham was prepared to sacrifice his son without question, in fact, he was filled with doubt.

Once arriving, the angel of G-d steps in and tells Avraham not to sacrifice the child. (Genesis 22:11) Here again the Midrash quotes Avraham as asking, "How can you so quickly change your mind?"

Yesterday, you told me to sacrifice my child and now you tell me to refrain from doing so?!" According to the Midrash, the angel responds, "I never told you to sacrifice (shehatehu) the child, only to take him up to the mountain (ve-ha'aleihu). You brought him up, now bring him down." (Bereishit Rabbah, 56:8)

In other words, when G-d told Avraham "ve-ha'aleihu," (to bring him up or to dedicate him) (Genesis 22:2) Avraham assumes that the ultimate dedication is through death. In the end, the angel, who may very well have been Avraham's inner conscience, tells Avraham that the greatest dedication to G-d is living for G-d, not dying for Him.

For this reason, Avraham heeds the command of the angel. The angel was not contradicting G-d's command, but was giving Avraham an understanding of G-d's will – to sanctify G-d by living every moment properly.

Herein lies a tremendous difference between Judaism and many other faiths. In Christianity, for example, ultimate redemption comes by believing that their man-god dies for all people. In Judaism, redemption comes by living and sanctifying every moment of existence.

This is the message of the akeida. What my Hebrew Christian friend did not realize is that the highest commitment comes through life and not death. ©2016 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 YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week we read the parsha of Vayera. "Vayera ailav Hashem {And Hashem appeared to him (to Avrohom)}[18:1]." Rashi explains that on the third day after his circumcision, Hashem paid Avrohom a sick call. Three angels in the guise of travelers then pass by Avrohom's tent. Filled with zeal to perform the mitzvah of hachnosos orchim {bringing guests into one's home}even in his debilitated state, Avrohom runs out to greet them and invites them to a his tent for a meal.

Last week we discussed a person showing pride in who he is and what he stands for. The effect that this has on others is obviously very profound. This week I'd like to discuss the very profound effect and sometimes disastrous results of not realizing the far-reaching influence we have on others.

This week's parsha completes the ten nisyonos {tests} of Avrohom, culminating with the akeida -- Avrohom's willingness to sacrifice his son Yitzchak to Hashem. Avrohom passed and grew from all of those nisyonos, yet that is not why Hashem had such a special love for him. The Rambam writes that he would travel from city to city, ultimately spreading the then

revolutionary monotheistic belief in Hashem to tens of thousands of people. Yet, that is not why Hashem had such a special love for him.

What was the cause of this special love that Hashem had for Avrohom? The passuk states very simply: "Ki y'dativ l'maan asher y'tzaveh es banav v'es baiso acharav v'shomru derech Hashem {I (Hashem) have loved him (Avrohom) because he will command his children and household after him to keep the ways of Hashem}[18:19]."

Avrohom will pass it on to others. There will be a continuity throughout the generations. A chain will be formed from him until the end of time. That's why Hashem had that special love for him.

It follows very simply that if we are a link in that chain and we too contribute to the continuity then, to whatever degree we are involved, we will also be deserving recipients of that love from Hashem.

Very often in life, there are people we know who, at that time, seem to us to be incredibly religious. We therefore attach a lot more importance to their words than they themselves realize. They might not be aware of the responsibility that they carry.

When I was about nine or ten years old, one of the men in shul that I considered to be 'real religious' mentioned the following question to me in a very off-handed way. There is a slight inconsistency between what was prepared for Avrohom's guests' meal and what was actually served. Avrohom asked Sarah to prepare cakes, yet we don't find that they were ever served [18:6-8]. Rashi explains that Sarah had become a nidah {menstrual staining had rendered her ritually impure}. According to the standards of ritual purity that they maintained, she was unable to serve the food that she had prepared. (Actually, these standards only halachically applied during the time of the Temple.)

This, however, seems to contradict what is written just a few verses ahead.

One of these angels informed Avrohom that in a years time, a son will be born to Sarah. The passuk then relates that Avrohom and Sarah were advanced in years and that Sarah had stopped having her menstrual periods. Sarah, thinking that they were merchant travelers who were in no position to bless her or inform her of a miracle, reacted with laughter [18:10-12].

"You know you can't really take these things (the Torah) too seriously," he told me in a confiding tone. He showed me those verses and explained, "If Sarah had just gotten her period, then why did she find it so hard to believe that she would have a child!?" He wasn't asking a question, he was proving his point.

That sat with me and shook me for many years -- both the question itself and the fact that this guy didn't really believe. Many years later, when I had entered Yeshiva, I did the first thing that any person should do when they have a question on Rashi. I simply looked into the Siftei Chachamim (a commentator who

explains Rashi) and saw that he asks and answers the question. He explains that Sarah had a chance menstrual staining. She didn't imagine that her full cycle and the accompanying ability to give birth had returned at her age.

A simple answer to a simple question. It's only problematic if it's not posed as a question but as 'proof' against the validity of the Torah.

In the school I attended there was a Rabbi who was at the daily prayer. If we'd put on our t'filin incorrectly, we would receive either an angry hit or yell. Anyone caught talking during prayer was sent to the side and was unable to serve as chazzan {leader} during the rest of the service.

On the morning of my bar-mitzva, I was planning to read the Torah portion. I asked someone if I should say a full or half Kaddish after I'd complete the reading. "CINER!!! TALKING!!!" Off to the side, I was banished.

When it was time for the Torah reading, I defiantly approached the bimah. "You can't read!" I was told.

"It's my bar-mitzva and I asked a question about the Kaddish," I explained.

"You're not reading!" he yelled.

"Oh yes I am!" I countered.

"The nerve of you!" he bellowed.

"The nerve of you!!!" I responded and immediately ran for my life.

Needless to say, my friends and I were not developing the most tender feelings toward prayer and our new t'filin...

Many years later, after I was already married and living in Israel, I went back home for a visit. I returned to the school for the morning prayers. While there, I saw a boy putting on his t'filin incorrectly and watched in amazement as he was yelled at and sent off to the side. "Hey, that's my seat," I thought to myself. I walked over to the boy and whispered, "Don't worry, he used to yell at me also. Here, let me show you how to put them on right." (What a novel concept in education!) I explained that he was turning them the wrong way and showed him how to do it correctly. The kid looked at me like I was the Messiah.

After the prayers, I went over to introduce myself. He gave me a hearty greeting and told me how good it was to see me. After we had small-talked for a little while I took a deep breath. "Rabbi, there's something I have to tell you. When I saw you yell at that young boy it reminded me how you used to yell at my friends and I. I just had to tell you that many of us didn't wear t'filin throughout high school and you played a big role in that. I hope you'll think about that the next time you're about to yell at a young boy putting on his t'filin."

His response? "CINER!!! You used to have a lot of nerve and you still have a lot of nerve!!!" It was now his turn to make the quick exit...

Hashem's special love for Avrohom was because he would pass things on to others in a way that would last through the generations. We each carry a tremendous responsibility to influence our children, parents, friends, co-workers, neighbors and acquaintances. Let's not minimize or discount the profound effect we have on others. Let's earn that special love from Hashem. ©2016 Rabbi Y. Ciner and torah.org

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

“Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzchak, and go away to the land of Moriah and bring him up there...” (Bereishis 22:2)

Agenda. The word itself innocently refers to a list of things to be considered or done. When the word "secret" is added to it, as in "secret agenda," the word has a far more notorious connotation that usually means one thing: conspiracy.

Not all secret agendas are bad. Some mean well, and are actually secret for the benefit of others. Most, probably, are not meant to help others. Instead, they allow others to be duped and caught off guard while the one with the agenda gets what he wants with minimal or no cost.

When it comes to G-d and His agenda, it depends upon with whom He is dealing. If He is dealing with an evil person, then G-d's agenda will end up trapping the evil person in his own evil. When G-d deals with righteous people, such as Avraham, then His agenda, even if secret, can only be for the good of the person.

How much do you believe this? How much do you believe it with respect to yourself? How many times have things turned on you and you assumed that G-d did as well? How many times did your plans go awry and you assumed that G-d was against you, perhaps punishing you for a wrong doing that you may or may not have recalled?

Greater people have assumed exactly this in their time of distress: "And Yehudah said, 'What shall we say to my master? What shall we speak, and how shall we exonerate ourselves? G-d has found your servants' iniquity, behold, we are my lord's servants, both we and the one in whose possession the goblet has been found.'" (Bereishis 44:16)

Yosef's brothers had come down during the famine to buy food, free Shimon, and be on their way back home peacefully as soon as possible. They had even hoped to find Yosef alive, and to save him too. Instead, they were framed, accused of stealing, and on the verge of losing Binyomin as well. It was their worst nightmare, and their only explanation was Divine revenge for the sale of Yosef.

They weren't completely wrong. G-d can do

that. He can "pay" us back for bad things we did in the past while bringing about good results in the future. Yosef's brothers had to go through what they did to bring about the proper conclusion to the story. Their agony was not incidental.

The only thing is, they did not think that they had done anything wrong. They felt bad that their father was inconsolable, but they maintained that ridding the family of Yosef had still been the best thing for the Jewish people. Why did they automatically assume that they were worthy of Divine punishment once things did not go their way? In fact, their unfortunate circumstances even forced a public admission of guilt!

To begin with, nothing makes a person feel guilty than guilt. People sin and for the most part, they know it. If everything goes their way then they don't think twice about it. The moment life goes against them, however, it is a different story, as it should be: "Rava, and some say, Rav Chisda, says: If a man suffers, he should examine his actions." (Brochos 5a)

What did Avraham do on his way to the Akeidah? G-d had blessed him with the son for which he had longed for almost 100 years. Yitzchak was a miraculous son through whom Avraham had planned to pass on his spiritual legacy. Yet, 37 years later he was on his way to sacrifice him, to give him back to G-d.

What had he done wrong? Had he not appreciated the gift of Yitzchak enough? Had he not worked hard enough to teach him the ways of G-d? Had he lost favor in the eyes of G-d and become unworthy of the fantastic ending to his life he thought he would have? Was the Akeidah a punishment?

These questions would not have been a sign of weakness. They would have been a sign of Avraham's humility, who never deemed himself worthy of anything G-d gave him. He knew enough about G-d to know that anything G-d gave him was always only a gift, a chesed. He knew that there is nothing we human beings can do to earn anything, though G-d gives us so much.

Iyov (who happened to be the reincarnation of Terach, Avraham's father) knew similarly, and said so: "From my mother's womb I emerged naked, and I will return there naked. G-d gave and G-d took. May the Name of G-d be blessed." (Iyov 1:20-21)

In other words, G-d owes us nothing. The amazing thing is how many people live their lives as if G-d owes them just about everything. They don't necessarily thank G-d enough for the good, but they do make a point of complaining about the bad. It's as if the fact that G-d made us made us His debtors.

Such a mistaken point of view only emerges from believing more in this world than in the next one. A college student will put up with all kinds of abuse because he believes it will result in a degree that will result in the life of which he dreams. Employees will suffer a lot if they know that it could result in a future

promotion.

What would happen to college students who learned that there will not be any jobs for them once they graduate? How will that affect their attitude towards the lifestyle to which they are subjected just to get their degree? How much abuse will an employee take before quitting if promotion seems next to impossible?

It is a lot easier though to predict a future job or promotion than it is to imagine the World-to-Come. Although it is so talked about, not just in the Jewish religion but in all religions, there is nothing really known about it. It is the best-kept secret in all of history, because as the Talmud states, "only G-d's eye have seen it."

Even the Torah does not make a direct reference to Olam HaBa/the World-to-Come. That's like describing a demanding college course without mentioning what it will lead to. Few people have ever signed up for such a course just for the course itself. It's Marketing and Advertising 101: people want to know what is in it for them. They need to know how they will benefit from their sacrifices.

The trouble with a benefit, especially when it comes to serving G-d, is that it reduces the need to sacrifice oneself for a relationship with G-d. It becomes an ulterior motive to do the right thing, at least partially. Ironically, it even reduces one's ultimate reward in the World-to-Come, which is why we are told: "Antignos of Socho received the tradition from Shimon HaTzaddik. He would say: aDo not be as servants who serve their master for the sake of reward. Rather, be as servants who serve their master not for the sake of reward, and the fear of Heaven should be upon you." (Pirkei Avos 1:3)

This was the Akeidah. It was a test of Avraham's faith in G-d, but in truth, he passed that last week, as the Torah testifies: "And he believed in G-d, and He accounted it to him as righteousness." (Bereishis 15:6)

Rather, the Akeidah was a test of Avraham's belief in Olam HaBa, in his understanding that this world is only a corridor to the next one. Last week Avraham graduated top of his class as far as believing in G-d of the world. This week Avraham is doing post-graduate work, showing how much he takes serious the idea that G-d is G-d of the World-to-Come as well, and that this world is just the way to meet Him there.

When G-d asked Avraham to bring Yitzchak up as the Akeidah, He was really asking him to sacrifice Olam HaZeh, this world. This was the hidden agenda of G-d through which Avraham, if he complied, would distinguish himself from the rest of the nations of the world in the most incredible way possible.

Successful, not only did Avraham earn the "key" to the World-to-Come for himself. He earned it on behalf of all his descendants who would ever live with

the same belief. This is something that becomes evident from a person's "G-d owes me nothing" attitude, and his willingness to sacrifice this world to get to the next one. © 2016 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "And (Avraham) lifted up his eyes and he saw. And behold three men were standing near him and he saw and he ran to greet them from the entrance of the tent" (Genesis 18:2).

From verse 2 until verse 8, the Torah details each specific act of Avraham's hospitality towards his guests -- "he lifted up his eyes," "he saw," "he ran to greet them." Why does the Torah spend seven verses describing the details of Avraham's kindness?

Rabbi Yeruchem Levovitz commented on this with an analogy. When a person inherits a house, he will usually just say, "I have a house." He will not elaborate on all of the details since he received everything at one time. However, a person who builds a house for himself will talk about every detail from the beginning until the end. He will describe how he purchased the land for the site of the house, how he bought the material that went into building the house, and so on. Each aspect is very dear to him. The more effort he put into the house, the more he will talk about it.

Similarly, said Rav Yeruchem, the actions and behavior of the righteous are like a building. With each action, a righteous person is building a great edifice. For this reason, the Torah tells us about each detail of Avraham's chesed (kindness). Every movement was another stage in the building of a righteous person.

When you view yourself as building a great person, every detail of what you do is invested with meaning and importance. Every positive action you do is creating a great human being. Keep this in mind when you do an act of kindness for others. Every movement you make is a necessary part of the entire construction. Don't wait for the end to appreciate what you are doing. Rather, feel the joy of growth in even the smallest act of kindness that you do. *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2016 Rabbi K. Packouz*

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

Two vivid images of hospitable men emerge from the blistering pages of this week's parshah. In the first episode, the venerable Abraham, recuperating from his recent circumcision, prepares a lavish welcome on a mercilessly hot day for three dust-covered travelers who happen to pass by his home.

Later on, these same travelers -- actually angels in disguise -- continue on to the Sodom, which they are about to incinerate in divine retribution for the

thorough degeneracy of its people. In Sodom, the travelers are welcomed by Lot, Abraham's nephew, who invites them into his home. The people of Sodom, who are philosophically opposed to hospitality, are enraged, and Lot risks his life to defend his guests.

Nevertheless, although Lot's hospitality was apparently more important to him than life itself, we are never told to look upon Lot as a shining example of a kind and hospitable person. Abraham, who did not risk his life, is our role model, our paragon of virtue, not Lot. Why is this so?

Let us take a closer look at this man Lot, a man so devoted to kindness and hospitality that he is ready to defy all his neighbors in Sodom. But wait! Sodom? How could a man of such high principles choose to live in a thoroughly degenerate city like Sodom?

Here lies the key to Lot's character. Lot had spent many years in the household of his uncle Abraham. He had seen Abraham's way of life, his outstanding kindness, his legendary hospitality, his purity of character, and he had seen how these qualities had earned Abraham enormous stature and prestige. When he arranged his own way of life, Lot instinctively imitated the patterns of Abraham's life. Abraham had been kind, so he was kind. Abraham had been hospitable, so he was hospitable. These became the pattern of his existence to the point that he knew no other.

But it was all superficial. Lot's kindness did not stem from deep conviction or profound empathy with other people. All his acts of kindness were mechanical, the products of habit. To have acted otherwise would have been disrupted the equilibrium of his life. Underneath lay the true Lot, the greedy, self-centered man intent on gratification and insensitive to the needs of others. When he had to choose a place to live, this subterranean side of Lot's character made sure he would settle in a place suitable to his true character. That he chose Sodom, the ultimate in greed and selfishness, reveals to us the nature of his true character.

Nevertheless, even in Sodom, the old habits persisted, and Lot continued to go through the motions of hospitality -- even at the risk of his life. It is a well-known psychological phenomenon that people are often willing to risk death rather than disrupt the familiar patterns of their existence. Lot was such a person. He was a creature of habit, albeit good habits, not a man of principle.

The difference between Abraham and Lot manifested itself in their descendants. Abraham was the essence of kindness, and therefore, this trait was passed down to his descendants for all time, even to this very day. Lot's kindness, however, was only superficial, and his descendants, the ungrateful nations of Ammon and Moab, manifested his true nature.

The Talmud (Taanis 5b) relates that Rabbi

Nachman once asked Rabbi Yitzchak for a blessing.

"Let me tell you a parable," Rabbi Yitzchak replied. "A man was once traveling through the desert. Hungry, tired and thirsty, he arrived at an oasis where he found a fruit-laden tree and a stream of water beside it. He ate the fruit, drank the water and rested in the shade of the tree. Refreshed, he rose to go. But first, he wanted to bless this wonderful tree.

"'Tree, tree, how can I bless you?' he said. 'I cannot bless you with sweet fruit, for they are already sweet. I cannot bless you with ample shade, for you already have it. I cannot bless you with a stream of water, for you already have one. All I can say is, may it be the Will of Hashem that all shoots replanted from you should be just like you.'

"So is it with you, Rabbi Nachman,' he concluded. 'You have Torah, wealth and sons. All I can say is, may it be the Will of Hashem that your sons should be just like you.'"

The commentators wonder: Was Rabbi Nachman so totally blessed that he had no room for additional blessings for himself? Was there nothing left to do but bless his children?

The answer lies in Rabbi Nachman's connection to Torah. The blessing was that his connection to Torah and the nobility of character it engenders should become so deep and powerful that Rabbi Nachman and the Torah would become one and the same entity. In that case, his children would automatically follow in his ways. The blessing, therefore, was to Rabbi Nachman himself, but it would manifest itself in his children.

In our own lives, we must ask ourselves if our values and the patterns of our lives are only mechanical habits, or if they are the products of our convictions and genuine sensitivities. We must remember that the children of Lot did not emulate what he did. They emulated what he was. If we want our children to follow in our footsteps, we must be like Abraham -- what we do and what we are must be one and the same. ©2016 Rabbi N. Reich and torah.org

