

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The stories told in Bereishit chapters 21 and 22 – the sending away of Ishmael and the binding of Isaac – are among the hardest to understand in the whole of Tanakh. Both involve actions that strike us as almost unbearably harsh. But the difficulties they present go deeper even than that.

Recall that Abraham was chosen “so that he would instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just.” He was chosen to be a father. The first two letters of his name, Av, mean just that. Avram means “a mighty father.” Avraham, says the Torah, means “a father of many nations.”

Abraham was chosen to be a parental role model. But how can a man who banished his son Ishmael, sending him off with his mother Hagar into the desert, where they nearly died, be thought of as an exemplary father? And how could a man who was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac be a model for future generations?

These are not questions about Abraham. They are questions about the will of God. For it was not Abraham who wanted to send Ishmael away. To the contrary, it “distressed Abraham greatly,” because Ishmael was his son (Gen. 21:11). It was God who told him to listen to Sarah and send the child away.

Nor was it Abraham who wanted to sacrifice Isaac. It was God who told him to do so, referring to Isaac as “your son, your only one, the one you love” (Gen. 22:2). Abraham was acting on both occasions against his emotions, his paternal instincts. What is the Torah telling us about the nature of fatherhood? It seems very difficult indeed to draw a positive message from these events.

There is an even deeper problem, and it is hinted at in the words God spoke to Abraham in summoning him to the binding of his son: “Take your son, your only son, the one you love—Isaac—and go [lekh lekha] to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” These words inevitably remind us of God’s first

summons: “Go forth [lekh lekha] from your land, your birthplace and your father’s house” (Gen. 12:1). These are the only two places in which this phrase occurs in the Torah. Abraham’s last trial echoed his first.

But note that the first trial meant that Abraham had to abandon his father, thereby looking as if he were neglecting his duties as a son.¹ So, whether as a father to his sons or as a son to his father, Abraham was commanded to act in ways that seem the exact opposite of what we would expect and how we should behave.

This is too strange to be accidental. There is a mystery here to be decoded.

The barrier to our understanding of these events lies in the sheer abyss of time between then and now. Abraham, as the pioneer of a new kind of faith and way of life, was instituting a new form of relationship between the generations. Essentially, what we are seeing in these events is the birth of the individual.

In ancient times, and in antiquity in Greece and Rome, the basic social unit was not the individual but the family. Religious rituals were performed around the fire in the family hearth, with the father serving as priest, offering sacrifices, libations and incantations to the spirits of dead ancestors. The power of the father was absolute. Wives and children had no rights and no independent legal personalities. They were mere property and could be killed by the head of the household at will. Each family had its own gods, and the father was the sole intermediary with the ancestral spirits, whom he would one day join. There were no individuals in the modern sense. There were only families, under the absolute rule of its male head.

The Torah was a radical break with this entire mindset. The anthropologist Mary Douglas points out that the Torah was unique in the ancient world in making no provision for sacrifices to dead ancestors, and forbidding the attempt to communicate with the



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¹ See Rashi to Gen. 11:32.

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spirits of the dead.²

Monotheism was more than simply the belief in one God. Because each human was in His image, and because each could be in direct relationship with Him, the individual was suddenly given significance – not just fathers but also mothers, and not just parents but also children. No longer were they fused into a single unit, with a single controlling will. They were each to become persons in their own right, with their own identity and integrity.³

Such changes do not happen overnight, and they do not happen without wrenching dislocations. That is what is happening at both ends of the Abraham story. At the beginning of his mission, Abraham was told to separate himself from his father, and towards the end he was told to separate himself, in different ways, from each of his two sons. These painful episodes represent the agonising birth-pangs of a new way of thinking about humanity.

First separate, then connect. That seems to be the Jewish way. That is how God created the universe, by first separating domains – day and night, upper and lower waters, sea and dry land – then allowing them to be filled. And that is how we create real personal relationships. By separating and leaving space for the other. Parents should not seek to control children. Spouses should not seek to control one another. It is the carefully calibrated distance between us in which relationship allows each party to grow.

In his recent book on sporting heroes, *The Greatest*, Matthew Syed notes how important the encouragement of parents is to the making of champions, but he adds: Letting go – that is the essential paradox of parenthood. You care, you nurture, you sacrifice, and then you watch as the little ones fly into the great unknown, often shouting recriminations as they depart. You will experience the

² Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

³ See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, Doubleday, 1967, 117 where he speaks of “the highly individuated men” (and women) who “populate the pages of the Old Testament to a degree unique in ancient religious literature.”

stomach clenching pain of separation, but you do so with a smile and a hug, aware that the desire to protect and love must never morph into the tyranny of mollycoddling.⁴

It is this drama of separation that Abraham symbolically enacts in his relationship both to his father and to his two sons. In this world-transforming moment of the birth of the individual, God is teaching him the delicate art of making space, without which no true individuality can grow.

In the lovely words of Irish poet John O'Donohue our challenge is: “To bless the space between us.”⁵ *Covenant and Conversation 5778 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z”l* © 2017 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd it came to pass...that God tested Abraham, saying to him, 'Abraham,' to which he responded, 'Here I am!' And He said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, offering him there as a sacrifice on one of the mountains that I will show you' [Gen. 22:1-2].

Has Abraham lost his moral compass? When God presents Abraham with the most difficult and tragic command to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, Abraham rises early the next morning, loads his donkey, calls his servants and immediately starts the journey—without a word of protest.

Not long before, though, when God declares the imminent destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham passionately protests the Divine decree, pleading for the lives of their immoral inhabitants: “Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?” [ibid. 18:25].

If Abraham was willing to defend the wicked residents of Sodom and Gomorrah from a mass death, could he not have done at least as much for his righteous, beloved and Divinely-promised son? What has changed within Abraham?

Indeed, Abraham has undergone a change, and it is because of this change that he does not argue with God now. Abraham relates to God differently from how he related to Him before. He now has a more distant relationship with God that does not permit the camaraderie of questioning a Divine order. Why is this?

⁴ Matthew Syed, *The Greatest: the quest for sporting perfection*, London, John Murray, 2017, 9.

⁵ John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, Doubleday, 2008.

At first glance, this would appear to be a negative development. How could distance from God be positive? Paradoxically, in the case of Abraham, it was a necessary evolution. Permit to me explain why.

Fear of God and love of God are two fundamental principles of Jewish philosophy, forming the framework for our service to the Almighty. The former emanates from a sense of healthy distance from God, while the latter involves a sense of closeness to Him. Both relationships are necessary, and complement each other.

Fear of God is critical to the fabric of human existence. Those who love—either God or another human being—may sometimes rationalize away their own lapses and indiscretions with the sense that the beloved will understand, that those in love ‘need not say they are sorry.’ In contrast, fear of God brooks no exceptions, keeping us honest, constantly spurring us on to remain steady and steadfast despite the narrowness of life’s very narrow bridge.

Abraham is the paradigmatic example of loving God. He leaves the comforts of his homeland, birthplace and family and enters an unfamiliar land in order to be with God—much as a lover following his beloved.

Abraham establishes altar after altar in the name of his beloved God, about Whose ethical teachings and powers of creativity he never ceases to speak—and attempts to persuade others to accept Him. He is close to God and he understands God. Hence, his argument with the Divine on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah.

This changes when Abraham sojourns to the Land of Gerar, a place about which he comments, “Surely the fear of God is not in this place” [ibid. 20:11]. The final words we read before the account of the Akeda is that Abraham lived in the land of the Philistines for many days. Indeed, the very introduction to the Akeda story begins: “After these things...” [ibid. 22:1], a reference to his stay in Gerar. What was he doing in a place defined by its lack of fear of God?

This, in fact, is the basis for the segue to the incident of the Akeda, which bespeaks Abraham’s fear of God and his unquestioning acceptance of a Divine command he could not possibly understand. His experience in Gerar had apparently caused him to place an emphasis on a fear of God that he had not previously had to employ to such an extent in his service of God. And it had a balancing effect on him.

We can now see the significance of the climactic moment of the Akeda, when, as Abraham lifts the slaughtering knife, the angel of God cries out, “Do not harm the boy! For now I know that you fear God...” [ibid., v. 12]. In other words, ‘You had long shown your love of God. Now your fear of God has been tested, as well, and you have succeeded!’

It is at this crucial moment that a circle has

been completed, an event that began in the land of Gerar and ends on the mount of Moriah. It was in Gerar that Abraham honed his fear of God, a necessity in a culture in which it was sorely lacking.

Whereas Abraham’s first commandment to go to the Land of Israel epitomizes the love of God, this final commandment, the Akeda, most accurately embodies the fear of God. In the process of his life experiences, Abraham has found the proper balance of both religious dynamics, perfecting his relationship with the Almighty, and teaching his descendants the proper path for our service of God. ©2017 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There are many angels that walk amongst us in this world, unrecognized by others. Angels apparently adopt the coloration of the society into which their mission has taken them. The prophets of Israel describe in vivid detail the description of angels as they appear in heaven’s court. They have wings and many-faceted eyes. They are fiery and swift, fearsome and relentless. But when they are on earth, so to speak, they appear as ordinary members of the society that surrounds them.

That is why in some of the narratives described for us in the Bible they are not immediately recognized as angels. This happens in the case of Yehoshua and with the mother of Shimshon. In this week’s Torah reading, the three angels originally appear as wayfarers, wandering nomads, walking in the midday heat. Only when they enter into the environment of holiness that marked the dwelling place of Avraham and Sarah is their true nature and accurate identity revealed.

Some creatures could enter that tent as Bedouin Arabs and emerge as angels of God. In the environment of Avraham and Sarah, what Abraham Lincoln famously called “the better angels within us” emerged and became dominant. It was this ability to truly identify and draw forth the goodness inherent in humankind that made this couple the ancestors of human civilization in its most positive form.

Civilization is the story of human transformation. The many generations from Kayin the killer, to Avraham, the benefactor of all, is the story of this uphill climb in the saga of human development.

Our ancestors transformed the world. They exposed the falsehoods and superstitions of paganism and idolatry. They established monotheism as the common norm of faith and eternal belief. They reconnected human beings with their Creator. And they taught all later generations to search for and identify with the angels that the Lord constantly sends to walk amongst us.

By searching for angels we come to respect

others and open ourselves to the task of helping our fellow human beings. They taught us that human hospitality is a greater form of Godly service than meditating in the hope of being in God's presence, so to speak. They inculcated within us the spirit of compassion and goodness that lies at the heart of Jewish values and life.

They taught us to believe in angels no matter how devilish a world we are living in. The amazing survival of the Jewish people over the ages of persecution and discrimination is a triumph not only of will but of attitude. We always believed that tomorrow could and would be better than today and that we would yet walk amongst angels here on earth.

Even in a word dominated by the lifestyle of Sodom, Avraham sought to transform the evildoers rather than destroy them completely. He was always looking for angels. Sometimes that quest was fruitless and God's judgment naturally prevailed. But the greatness of Avraham was in the search and quest itself. ©2017 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

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

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

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

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

Rabbi David Silber notes that whenever the Torah uses the term to'eh it means to wander. Not in

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

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

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

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

Everyone will be to'eh. Inevitably everyone makes mistakes. The question is not whether one will stray, rather how will we respond when we stray. Will we give in to our leanings and continue to be in a state of to'eh, or will we stand up and rise against the tide and work on our souls and our lives until we get back on the road of holiness and connection and walk the straight path. ©2017 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 KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Avraham travels to Philistia, and introduces Sarah as his sister. So, Avimelech, the King, abducts Sarah with intention to marry her. The Almighty comes to Avimelech in a dream and tells him that Sarah is a married woman and that he will die if he marries her. Avimelech returns her to Avraham and demands an explanation for claiming to be Sarah's brother. The Torah states: "And Avraham said, 'Because I said there is no fear of God in this place, and they will slay me on account of my wife' (Genesis 20:11).

The Malbim, a 19th century rabbi, elucidates that Avraham told Avimelech that individuals or nations might appear to be great philosophers and humanitarians; they might even have proper manners and good character traits. However, as long as their morality is based on their own logic, we can never be certain that when their desire to do evil is strong, their

logic will be able to overcome that desire.

There is only one restraint that we can rely upon to prevent a person from committing a crime: fear of God. When a person has an overpowering desire to do something wrong, but realizes that God is aware of every hidden act, he will be ashamed to commit the offense. Avraham, therefore, said in effect: "Even if you are righteous, since you lack fear of God, I fear that you will murder me to take my wife."

It is interesting to note that the Philistines were not without moral scruples. They would not marry another man's wife. However, they had no problem in murdering the man in order to make his wife free to be married. Such is the power of "ethics" when left to the desires and logic of society. *Dvar Torah based on Love Your Neighbor by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2017 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com*

RABBI DAVID S. LEVIN

Who is a Righteous Person?

The conversation between Avraham and Hashem concerning the people of Sodom and her surrounding cities has always been difficult to explain. The whole experience of Avraham arguing with Hashem to save what we, in hindsight, can clearly see are unworthy people, appears to be an exercise in futility. Avraham must know before he begins his argument that there cannot possibly be fifty righteous people in the city or Hashem would not have considered these cities beyond hope. And why would Hashem tolerate this request when we see that His answer to the angels who question the death of the ten great Rabbis (Yom Kippur davening) indicates that He will not accept criticism of His decisions from someone of a lesser knowledge than He possesses.

If we examine the words more carefully, the reality of Avraham's conversation with Hashem will be clear. The discussion with Hashem begins with the words "vayigash Avraham, and Avraham approached". Our Rabbis tell us that this term can mean several different forms of approach. In the harshest term, it means that Avraham approached Hashem to do battle. But vayigash can also mean in prayer, and it is a combination of these two understandings that we find is relevant here. Avraham's language and argument are the sounds of battle, yet his prayer is to save the entire region of cities even though the inhabitants are unworthy of Hashem's rachamim, kindness. Avraham clearly recognizes that he is on dangerous ground. When No'ach was told that the entire world would be destroyed, he did not bargain with Hashem. He obeyed without question. Perhaps Avraham should have done the same. But Avraham did not see his position in life as one who could sit by while others suffer. He felt that he must bargain with Hashem to save their lives.

But what did Avraham have to bargain with? He knew there were no tzaddikim in Sodom, yet he said to Hashem "Ulai yeish chamishim tzaddikim b'toch ha'ir, perhaps there are fifty righteous people in the midst of the city". Are we forced to say that Avraham was bargaining, using an impossible entity? Is his question to Hashem one that could never be answered in the affirmative?

The Aznayim L'Torah gives us an understanding of this question. He speaks of going on a train to another city and overhearing a conversation with some Jewish men about their activities on Yom Kippur. They described how they went to a non-Jewish friend of theirs to eat drink, and gamble. One of the men asked about a fellow friend to find out if he had joined them. "No," they replied, "that tzaddik, who joins us every Shabbos for the same activity, was too good to join us on Yom Kippur." A short time later the Aznayim L'Torah arrived at his destination to check on a boy at the Yeshiva who was from his home town. The Rabbis in the Yeshiva said there was something wrong with his attitude and he could even be considered a Rasha, an evil person. When he asked what the problem was, they said he liked to read the local newspapers. The Aznayim L'Torah realized that this rasha was infinitely better than the tzaddik spoken of by the men on the train.

The term tzaddik can be relative. That is why Avraham qualified his request of Hashem to find fifty tzaddikim in the midst of the city. By limiting the term tzaddikim with the term in the midst of the city, Avraham intends for Hashem to look for people who might be considered righteous by the standards of Sodom, not by the standards of the world. A famous Midrash told about the people of Sodom involves the bed which they offered to guests. If a person was too big for the bed, they would cut off his feet. If he were too small, they would stretch him until he fit. According to the Aznayim L'Torah, the tzaddik of Sodom became involved when a person was exactly the right size for the bed. The Sodomites insisted on stretching this perfect fit until he was too large and then they would cut off his feet so he could again fit. The tzaddik would argue with them that they need not change this perfect fit, but simply find another way to torture him. This simple act of consideration is what caused the people of Sodom to label this individual a tzaddik.

It is obvious that this Sodomite tzaddik is far from being a real tzaddik by even our minimalist standards. Yet Avraham wants Hashem to save the entire city because of him. How could he possibly expect Hashem to agree? And what indication does Hashem have that this is a serious request? One need only look again at our text and the clarity and purpose of Avraham's request become evident. The term tzaddikim appears only four times throughout the discussion and each time it is chaseir, missing the

second letter yud. Also, this term is only used when talking about fifty tzaddikim. When Avraham mentions the other numbers (forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, and ten) he only lists the numbers but does not call them tzaddikim as that would be unnecessary. The yud that is missing is the yud of Hashem. Avraham is proposing to Hashem a true bargain, an opportunity to save the cities both physically and spiritually.

Avraham is saying to Hashem that these tzaddikim are only potentially righteous. This is why Avraham needs Hashem's help. Avraham asks Hashem to locate these people and identify them. Once they have been identified, Avraham promises Hashem that he will go to these cities and teach them about Hashem. He is willing to place his own life in jeopardy to insert the yud of Hashem into their lives. Avraham truly believes in the potential of man and the ability of man to change once he has been properly educated and sees an example of the proper way.

Too often we dismiss others who lack our commitment to Hashem and His mitzvot without giving them the opportunity to learn. There is always the potential with any Jew for success or failure, but the effort is worth everything. If we are not judgmental, if we are accepting of all Jews, and if we demonstrate by our own lives the beauty which can be found in a "kosher" way of life, then we can change even Sodomites. May we make every effort to utilize this approach to our fellow Jews. ©2017 Rabbi D.S. Levin

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Hachnassat Orchim

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit

by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

In this week's portion we learn that "greater is the mitzvah of "Hachnasat Orchim" than greeting the holy presence" ("Gadol hachnassat orchim mekabalat pnei schinah"). Today it is rare that one would have to make this choice. However circumstances could present themselves that one would have to forfeit the fulfilling of a Mitzva to tend to his guests. We are not referring to the simple and normal welcoming of guests, say, for a Shabbat meal. Here we are referring to a situation where people arrive at your home on Shabbat and they need a place to stay forcing you to clear out room for them, working hard so that they can eat, sleep and be comfortable.

Another dilemma that might occur, presents itself if, let's say, you are planning to attend a Shiur and suddenly these guests arrive. Do we cancel the learning of Torah for "Hachnassat Orchim?"

On the one hand we have the saying in the Talmud (Shabbat 127a) that "greater is the Mitzva of "Hachnassat Orchim" than waking in the morning to learn Torah" ("gadol Hachnassat Orchim yoter Mehashkamat Beit Hamidrash"), and yet we have the Mishna in Peah 1;1 that the learning of Torah

supersedes even the Mitzvah of "Hachnassat Orchim"! ("Talmud Torah kneged Kulam")

There are those who explain that when the Mishna is referring to the greatness of Torah when in conflict with Hachnassat Orchim, it refers to a case when there are others who are available to fulfill the mitzvah of "Hachnassat Orchim", or perhaps the statement in Tractate Shabbat is referring only to the assembling of the Rabbis and the students, but for actual Torah learning, Torah takes precedence. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"What is the difference between the prophesy of Moshe and that of all other prophets? All of the prophets [had their prophecies either] in a dream or a vision, while Moshe was awake and standing" (Rambam, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 7:6). Or, as others put it, only Moshe was able to have his five senses fully functioning even while receiving prophecy. However, Avraham seems to have had no problem hearing from G-d not only while awake and in full control of his senses, but while doing seemingly mundane tasks, such as preparing food and serving his guests.

G-d appears to Avraham (B'raishis 18:1), yet Avraham runs to bring in some wayfarers (18:2). He may have asked G-d to wait for him while he attends to his guests (see Rashi on 18:3), but when Sara seems incredulous about having a child, G-d asks Avraham why she laughed it off (18:13), indicating that Avraham is still in "prophecy mode." All of this happened while the guests were still there; it is not until after Sara's denial that they depart (18:16). [Although it is possible that G-d asking Avraham why Sara laughed and her denial (18:13-15) occurred after the prophecy had ended, and was just inserted here for continuity purposes.] Avraham escorts his guests part of the way, yet before they take leave of him (18:22) G-d tells him what is about to happen to S'dom and Amorah (18:20-21). How can Avraham be receiving prophecy, numerous times, while being fully awake and involved in ordinary activities?

Radak (B'reishis 18:1) and Rambam (Moreh N'vuchim 2:42, or, in some editions, 2:43) explain this whole incident to be a prophetic vision; there really weren't any visitors. While this might answer our question (as G-d's interjections were also part of the vision), it opens up a slew of other questions (many posed by Ramban). For one thing, how could Sara have heard what was told to Avraham in his vision, causing her to laugh (and be taken to task for laughing)? [Radak attempts to show that someone in close proximity of another having a prophetic vision can actually hear the sounds of the vision.] Also, if these "angels" only existed in Avraham's prophetic vision,

how could they have been seen by Lot (19:1), or by the wicked people of S'dom (19:5)? Certainly they weren't on the level of having a prophetic vision! Additionally, if it were only a vision that Lot was taken, by hand, out of S'dom, by one of the "angels" (19:16), why wasn't he, in reality, destroyed with it (since he was really still there)? [It is possible that Lot and his daughters did escape from S'dom in a more "natural" way, but their salvation was communicated to Avraham this way. However, we would need to find meaning in every aspect of the exchange between Lot and the angels while they are saving him.]

It is also obvious that Rashi understands things literally, as he explains (18:1) that G-d wanted to prevent any potential guests from visiting Avraham, but when He saw that this caused great anguish, sent these "messengers." How would seeing "guests" in a vision satisfy Avraham's strong desire to have guests to take care of? Does Rashi disagree with Rambam's premise that Moshe was the only prophet who reached such an intense stage of divine communication that he was able to experience it while fully awake?

Abarbanel (partly because of the "problem" of receiving prophecy while awake and doing mundane things) says that Avraham was on the level of focusing his thoughts on G-d and separating his mind from the tasks he was doing to the extent that he was able to receive prophecy while fully awake and involved in mundane activities. Ralbag entertains this possibility as well, even though he himself differentiates between Moshe's prophecy and everybody else's in regards to the ability to be awake and in control of the senses (Bamidbar 12:6 and D'varim 34:10).

Nevertheless, there is another way of explaining how Avraham could have received prophecy while all of this was going on. One of the other differences between Moshe's prophecy and that of all other prophets is the need to prepare for prophecy. Moshe could communicate with G-d at any time, almost at will. Every other prophet had to spend time preparing for the possibility of prophecy, by getting into the proper frame of mind, focusing and concentrating on G-d, and separating his thoughts from his body (see Rambam, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 7:4-6 and Ralbag, B'raishis 8:20, in his summary of that section after his "lessons"). Avraham had prepared for, and reached, the level of prophecy at the time of his circumcision. True, his prophecy was interrupted by the appearance of his "guests," but any chance he had, he tried to re-attain the level of prophecy -- even if he knew he might be, or would be, interrupted again soon after.

Our first impression is that Avraham was with his guests the whole time until they left, from the time he ran to get them until he escorted them on their way out. However, this is not necessarily the case, and is probably not the case. Yes, he hurried to Sara's tent to tell her to quickly bake some (unleavened) bread (18:6)

and then ran to get some cattle (18:7), but he didn't prepare the food himself. Sara did the baking, and Yishmael did the cooking (see Rashi on 18:7). After all, he wanted to train Yishmael to do good deeds, so gave him the cattle to prepare (18:7; see Abarbanel who says explicitly that the pronoun "he" used in the verse that says "and he hurried to make it" refers to Yishmael -- I don't know that anyone disagrees). For all we know, the pronouns in the following verse (e.g. "and he took" and "and he gave") also refer to Yishmael, as after giving him the instructions for preparing and serving the meal, Avraham was able to tend to other things.

Chizkuni (18:10) quotes the Targum Yerushalmi, which translates the words "and he was after him" as "Yishmael was behind him," meaning behind the angel. He explains that Yishmael had to be there so that there wouldn't be a "yichud" problem between Sara and the angel, whom she thought was human. If Avraham was there the whole time, there would be no concern that Sara would be left alone with anyone. Additionally, Rashi points out that the dots above the word "to him" (18:9) indicate that the angels not only asked Avraham where Sara was (because of her modesty, she was in her tent), but also asked Sara where Avraham was. Obviously, Avraham was not with them the entire time if they had to ask where he went.

Therefore, it can be suggested that at every opportunity (no matter how short), including while his guests were being served, Avraham resumed his spiritual quest, focusing on G-d and blocking out everything else. And he succeeded, receiving numerous prophecies between the time his guests arrived and when they left for S'dom. As a matter of fact, this might be what the verse means by "and Avraham was still standing before G-d" (18:22), i.e. despite becoming involved in mundane matters for moments at a time, he was still focused on being able to receive prophecy during the moments he wasn't needed. He need not have been awake during those moments of prophecy, and he wasn't involved in mundane things then, so even if he hadn't reached the level of prophecy of Moshe, he could experience frequent prophecy, as he did reach the level of being able to constantly switch back and forth between "prophecy mode" and "regular mode." And because Avraham was able to make use of the few minutes between each task to achieve the level of prophecy, when the angels left, the "conversation" between him and G-d could easily resume. © 2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg, Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne; Translated by Moshe Goldberg

“T”ake your wife and your two daughters who are here" [Bereishit 19:15]. The sages saw this verse as hinting at a spark of the light of the

Mashiach in Sedom. "Rava explained: what is the meaning of the verse, 'Then I said, behold I have come, I am written about in the scroll of the book' [Tehillim 40:8]? David said, I said that I came only now, but I did not know that the scroll (the Torah) writes about me. There it is written, '...daughters who are here,' while here it is written, 'I found my servant David, I anointed him with holy oil' [Tehillim 89:21]." [Yalkut Shimoni Ki Teitzei 933]. And it is written, "By the merits of David and the merits of the Mashiach we were saved, as is written, 'I found my servant David.' And David was a descendant of Ruth the Moavite and Rechavam came from Naama of Amon. And Mashiach will result from both of them." [Midrash Agadda Bereishit 19:15].

Thus, the first spark of Mashiach came out of Sedom. This fact paints in a new light the war of the four kings against the five kings that appeared in last week's Torah portion. At first glance it is clear that the war began as a revolt by the king of Sedom and his colleagues against the four kings. By accident, Lot happened to be there and he was taken prisoner, and Avraham therefore joined the war in order to rescue him. However, in the eyes of our sages something very different happened. The main thrust of the war was against Avraham and Lot, and it was the king of Sedom who happened to be caught up in a war that was not his own.

"The earth was confused..." [Bereishit 1:2]. The sages commented, "'Tohu' is the exile of Babylon, 'bohu' is the exile of Media, 'darkness' is the exile of Greece, and 'the depths' are the evil kingdom (Rome). 'And the wind of G-d blew across the water' [ibid] -- this is the spirit of Mashiach." [Bereishit Rabba 82:4]. Thus we see that from the beginning of the Creation, there was a plan for great struggles between the four kings and the spirit of the Mashiach. Therefore the moment that Avraham appears on the stage of history and Lot goes to Sedom, the world wakes up with excitement about the fact that Mashiach will descend from Lot. And the four kings attempt to prevent this momentous event. It is written [Bereishit 14:1], "In the days of Amrafel Ben Shinar" -- this refers to Babylon -- "and Aryoch King of Elasar" -- Greece -- "Kedarlaomer King of Eilam" -- Media -- and "Tid'al King of Goyim" -- this is the Kingdom of Edom.

Since in the future this struggle will end with a declaration by the nations of the world that Yisrael brought the truth to the world, they will all rise up to Jerusalem. All the nations will pour into Jerusalem, and they will say, "Let us rise up to the Mountain of G-d... for Torah will emanate from Zion, and the word of G-d from Jerusalem" [Yeshayahu 2:3; Micha 4:2]. And as an example of the principle that the actions of the forefathers are symbolic of the events of the descendants, the King of Sedom comes to meet Avraham "in the Valley of Equality, which is the Valley of the King" [Bereishit 14:17]. The sages explain that all

the nations gathered together to appoint Avraham as their king. And the king of Jerusalem also comes out to greet Avraham and to give him the "keys to the city" -- "And Malchitzedek, King of Shalem, took out bread and wine... and he blessed him, saying, Avraham is blessed..." [14:18-19].

The sages taught us, "Whoever observes the mitzva of succah in this world will have a portion in the future in the succah of Sedom" [Yalkut Shimoni Emor 653]. What is so special about the succah of Sedom? The kingdom of the Mashiach is called the succah of Sedom, as is written, "On that day I will rebuild the fallen succah of David" [Amos 9:11]. And the beginning of the succah of David was in Sedom. ©2014 Rabbi M. Greenberg & Zomet Institute

D'VORAH WEISS

Torat Imecha

“Kach na et bincha, et yechidcha, asher ahavta, et Yitzchak v'lech lecha el Eretz Hamoriah v'haalayhu sham l'olah al achad heharim asher omar aylecha." We understand these words to be Hashem's tenth and final test of Avraham: the command to take his beloved son Yitzchak and bring him as an offering on what we now know is Har HaMoriah.

Avraham's first test also contained the words, 'Lech Lecha' and there, Rashi comments the term "Lech Lecha" means go for yourself, that this will be for your benefit. In other words, 'Do this for you'.

With this in mind, ("Do this for you") let us consider the opening words, "Kach na et bincha.." "Please take your son..." Please, by definition, means 'Do this for me,' (as in: 'Please hold the door' or 'Please pass the sugar' because I need the door held and I need the sugar). Why would Hashem 'need' Avraham to do this?

Perhaps there are actually two tests here, each enormously challenging to Avraham. One, he must strengthen himself to bring Yitzchak to Har HaMoriah, to bind him, and to take the knife in his hand to sacrifice him. But there is another test here: Avraham must believe that Hashem, Who promised (more than once) that Yitzchak will be the progenitor of the Jewish People, will somehow save Yitzchak! Hashem promised Yitzchak a future - by some means, Hashem will provide that future.

Perhaps that is the meaning of the word "na." Hashem says, "Do this for Me, so that the Jewish People will forevermore have hope and know that even when a knife is at their throats, there is still a future! Through this, Am Yisrael will always have faith. It will strengthen them through persecution, pogroms, expulsions, and through the horrors of the Holocaust they will find the strength to sing Ani Maamin B'emunah shelayma b'viat HaMoshiach ©2017 D. Weiss

