

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

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

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

Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Several English translations take the second option. Here is one example: "The Lord appeared to

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

The same ambiguity appears in the next chapter (19:2), when two of Abraham's visitors (in this chapter they are described as angels) visit Lot in Sodom: "The two angels came to Sodom in the evening while Lot was sitting by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low he said, 'I pray you, sirs, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night there and bathe your feet.'"

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

The simplest reading of both texts-the one concerning Abraham, the other, Lot-would be to read the word in both cases as 'sirs'. Jewish law, however, ruled otherwise. In the second case-the scene with Lot-it is read as 'sirs', but in the first it is read as 'God'. This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that Abraham interrupted God as He was about to speak, and asked Him to wait while he attended to his guests. This is how tradition ruled that the passage should be read: "The Lord appeared to Abraham... He looked up and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them, and bowed down. [Turning to God] he said: 'My God, if I have found favour in your eyes, do not leave your servant [i.e. Please wait until I have given hospitality to these men].' [He then turned to the men and said:] 'Let me send for some water so that you may bathe your feet and rest under this tree...'"

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

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated
in memory of our beloved mother
Chana Rosenberg A"l

חנה בת יוסף ע"ה

נפטרה כ"ג מרחשון תשע"ב

by Itzy and Ruchie Weisberg

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

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

The forces of nature are impersonal, which is why those who worship them eventually lose their humanity. As the Psalm puts it: "Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils but cannot smell... Their makers become like them, and so do all who put their trust in them." (Psalm 115)

You cannot worship impersonal forces and remain a person: compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving. Precisely because we believe that God is personal, someone to whom we can say 'You', we honour human dignity as sacrosanct. Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the Divine presence when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the Divine presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

One of the most beautiful comments on this episode was given by R. Shalom of Belz who noted that in verse 2, the visitors are spoken of as standing above Abraham [nitzavim alav]. In verse 8, Abraham is described as standing above them [omed alehem]. He said: at first, the visitors were higher than Abraham because they were angels and he a mere human being. But when he gave them food and drink and shelter, he stood even higher than the angels. We honour God by honouring His image, humankind. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd they walked, the two of them, together." (Genesis 22:8) Whose sacrifice at the Akeda was greater, Abraham's or Isaac's? Instinctively, the first answer that comes to mind is Abraham. After all, the Torah portion is introduced with the words 'And God tested Abraham.' Indeed, Isaac was the very son Abraham had waited for all his life, the affirmation of his faith, the promise of his future.

Any father, let alone Abraham, would rather die than see his child die. Had God said, 'Sir, you have a choice, either your son or yourself,' Abraham would have done what thousands of others have done – push the child toward safety and climb Moriah himself, ever grateful that Isaac would live. Nevertheless, how can we overlook the depth of Isaac's suffering?

Whose life is it anyhow, whose flesh is bound to the altar, transformed into a whole-burnt offering? Father's or son's? And no matter how hard it may be to witness tragedy, can we deny that the real sacrifice belongs to the one going up in flames? Isaac is certainly no less a hero than Abraham. And it is clear that Isaac understands what is about to occur. According to Rashi he was thirty-seven years old, certainly old enough to fight his father's will or flee outright. And even if Ibn Ezra, who claims that Isaac was twelve, is more in consonance with the outline of the biblical story, Isaac still could have wept, protested, appealed to Abraham's mercy. No remonstrance on Isaac's part is mentioned in the biblical account; much the opposite, even after Isaac presumably is aware of what is about to occur, the text testifies, 'And they walked, the two of them, together.'

Despite the fact that the father in all of us identifies with Abraham's sacrifice, nevertheless there does exist one essential difference between father and son, which was told to me by Rabbi Moshe Besdin.

It was the voice of God which Abraham heard commanding him to take his son, his only son, his beloved son, and to bring him as an all- burnt offering. When Maimonides wants to prove the truth of prophecy, he turns to the Binding of Isaac. Had Abraham not believed in the absolute truth of his prophecy, could he have possibly lifted his hand to slaughter his son? Would he have sacrificed his entire future as well as the future of humanity unless he was absolutely sure of the divine source of the command?

But can we say the same about Isaac? After all, Isaac heard the command not from God, but from his father.

A close look at the text between the lines and words of the Bible will provide a glimpse into the nature of the relationship between this unique father and son. There is a frightening suspicion in the mind of Isaac, a growing awareness of what is about to happen, a desire to confront his father (albeit with great delicacy), and then a profound, acquiescence, even a unity of purpose and mission. Abraham rises in the morning to take his son on the fateful journey. What they talk about, if they talk at all, is not mentioned; but on the third day, after Abraham sends away the young servants, Isaac begins to speak. And what he says, or doesn't say, is of exquisitely sensitive significance.

Professor Nehama Leibowitz has taught us that when the Torah records a dialogue and wishes to inform us of a change in the speaker, it does so by

using the word 'Vayomer' – 'And he said'; after all, the Torah script is devoid of quotation marks. On the third day of their journey, Isaac notices his father preparing the knife and wood for the offering. For the first time since the journey began the Torah records Isaac's words. 'Vayomer,' the text begins; 'and he said to Abraham his father...'

Now we should expect to find the content of his words. But the biblical text records no such content. Instead, we get another 'Vayomer,' but this time with a word: 'Vayomer Avi' – 'And he said, "My father..."'

But why have one 'Vayomer' after another when both are referring to the same speaker, and Isaac actually said nothing at all after the first Vayomer? It's like having quotation marks with no quote in between them! At this point in the narrative Abraham acknowledges Isaac by saying 'Here I am, my son.' Now comes Isaac's third Vayomer in this context, 'And he said, "behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?"'

What is the meaning of the Vayomers?

Apparently, Isaac suspects the true purpose of the journey from the moment his father woke him and told him they were setting out. He tremblingly waits in silence for the first three days to either hopefully hear another explanation or to get a tragic confirmation of his worst nightmare. Abraham, understandably, cannot speak. Isaac yearns to ask the question, even if it means that he will hear the worst. Anything, he thinks, would be better than this gnawing uncertainty. But how can a son ask a father, 'Are you planning to slaughter me?' Given the closeness Isaac always felt as the beloved son of a father who waited until he was one hundred years old to have a son with Sarah, how could he even begin to formulate such an unthinkable act?

On the third day, Isaac tries: 'Vayomer...' But all that came out of his mouth was 'Aaah' – he could only stutter and stammer, he was incapable of formulating such a horrific idea. At length he tries again: 'Vayomer,' and this time he added, 'My father....' Once again, he falters in mid-sentence, to which Abraham gently responds, 'Here I am, my son.' This finally gave Isaac the wherewithal to delicately suggest: 'Vayomer,' – 'and he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the whole burnt offering?"'

Abraham's response really leaves no room for further question: 'The Almighty will provide for Himself the lamb for the whole burnt offering, my son.' If Abraham's words are devoid of a comma, he is clearly suggesting: 'for the whole burnt offering is my son.'

What is truly marvelous is the very next biblical phrase: '...so they walked both of them, together (yachdav).' We must be struck by the ominous use of 'together' to describe a journey to which both are traveling with equal dedication despite their common knowledge that only one of them will return alive.

We must likewise be struck by the willingness

of both of them to adhere to this most inexplicable command of God – despite the fact that the father heard it from God Himself and the son only heard it from his father.

And with these indisputable facts, Isaac emerges as a true patriarch, a model and paradigm for all future generations. After all, our penitential dirges (slichot and kinot) testify to the fact that Isaac is indeed the model of Kiddush Hashem (sanctifying of God's name, dying for one's faith and nation) throughout our blood-soaked and tear-stained history.

Did those who allowed themselves to be slaughtered, impaled on the Crusaders' swords rather than accept conversion, hear the voice of God directly? Is it not more correct to say that they were heeding their parents and teachers, the traditional texts and lessons transmitted through the generations which defined and delimited the command to give up one's life in sanctification of God's name?

Abraham may be the first Jew, but Isaac is the first Jewish son, the first Jewish student, the first representative of the mesora (tradition handed from parent to child, from master to disciple), whose dedication unto death emanates not from his having heard God's word directly, but from his adherence to the Oral Tradition.

The essence of Judaism is not a religion based on beatific visions along the road to Damascus, or even Jerusalem. Ours is a religion whose truth is passed down from generation to generation, parent to child, master to disciple, teacher to student. And the paradigm for this begins right at the Akeda. Who is the first Jew? Abraham. But who is the first historic Jew, the first representative of the historic chain of being Jewish whose links are forged by the frames of commitment and sacrifice? Abraham's son, Isaac. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinBereshit. © 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS

The Silence of Connection

This week's parashah, Parashat Vayeira, is rich with meaning—so much so that one could spend hours exploring its themes. It begins with the visit of HaKadosh Baruch Hu to Avraham Avinu, traditionally on the third day after his brit milah. The parashah then continues with Avraham's relationship with Sarah, the Akeidat Yitzchak, and many other pivotal moments.

Let us focus on the opening pesukim of the parashah. The Torah says:

"וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלֵי מִמְרָא, וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב פְּתֵחַ-הָאֵקֶל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם"
"And Hashem appeared to him by the terebinths of

Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day.” — Bereishit 18:1

Avraham, still recovering, sits at the entrance of his tent when he suddenly sees three men approaching. The Torah does not describe any conversation between Hashem and Avraham before this moment. Hashem appears to Avraham, and immediately afterward we are told that three strangers arrive. According to tradition, these were malachim—angels—each with a distinct mission: one to announce the birth of Yitzchak, one to rescue Lot, and one to destroy Sedom ve’Amora.

Rashi comments that Hashem came to visit Avraham as an act of kindness, since Avraham was recovering from his circumcision. When Avraham saw travelers approaching, he turned away from Hashem to welcome them—a remarkable act that teaches us the greatness of the mitzvah of hachnasat orchim, welcoming guests. Even while in direct communion with Hashem, Avraham chose to perform kindness for others.

Rav Soloveitchik offers a beautiful insight: the Torah’s silence here is not empty—it speaks volumes. Sometimes, when two people share a deep relationship, words are unnecessary. Silence itself can be full of presence and understanding. When Avraham and Hashem were together, perhaps no words were needed—their closeness spoke for itself.

In the Sefer Torah, we read black letters written on white parchment. The Rav notes that the white spaces are just as essential as the letters themselves—the Torah’s meaning emerges not only from what is written, but also from the spaces between the words. The Torah’s power lies not only in the text we read, but in the silence that surrounds it.

Rav Moshe Feinstein adds a practical dimension to hachnasat orchim. The true test of hospitality, he teaches, comes when guests arrive unexpectedly. Avraham did not plan for visitors; he was recovering. It was the hottest part of the day—and yet he ran to greet them and hurried to prepare a full meal. True hospitality is not about convenience, but about opening one’s door and heart even when it’s difficult.

Later in the parashah, when the angels leave for Sodom, the Torah says:

”וַיָּפְנוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיֵּלְכוּ סְדֹמָה, וְאַבְרָהָם עֹדֵנוּ עֹמֵד לִפְנֵי ה'”
 “And the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, and Avraham still stood before Hashem.” — Bereishit 18:22

It is there that their dialogue resumes, as Avraham pleads with Hashem to spare the city for the sake of the righteous. Perhaps this prayer continues the silent encounter that began earlier—what started in wordless presence now unfolds in words of compassion and courage.

From these moments we learn two powerful lessons: first, that true hachnasat orchim means

serving others even when it is difficult or inconvenient; and second, that in our relationship with Hashem, silence can sometimes express connection more deeply than words.

May HaKadosh Baruch Hu bless us to embody both lessons—to open our homes and hearts to others, and to find holiness not only in our words, but also in the quiet presence we share with Him. © 2025 Rabbi M. Weiss. Rabbi Mordechai Weiss is the former Principal of the Bess and Paul Sigal Hebrew Academy of Greater Hartford and the Hebrew Academy of Atlantic County where together he served for over forty years. He and his wife D’vorah live in Efrat. All comments are welcome at ravmordechai@aol.com

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT”L

Wein Online

Sacrificing one’s own son was undoubtedly the supreme test of Avraham’s life and faith. When Avraham and Yitzchak come down from the mountain of Moriah, their lives and the destiny of the Jewish people were changed forever. The akeidah remains the central story of Jewish history and destiny. Its grim reminder of Jewish vulnerability has never departed from the people of Israel. Though we have survived the myriad periods of akeidah in our history, it has always been with great cost and almost always some sort of permanent trauma.

Why God demanded that test from Avraham and why it is continuously still demanded of the Jewish people is a question that has no real answer. It is however a situation that remains a stark fact of life and an ever-present reality, its inscrutability notwithstanding. We will see in later parshiyot of the Torah how strongly Yitzchak remains affected by his near-death experience. It governs his personality and makes him to us the most inscrutable of all the avot of the Jewish people. Surviving the akeidah takes an enormous toll on one’s soul and psyche. And as the rabbis teach us, the occurrences in the lives of the avot are harbingers of the future of their descendants, as the akeidah has certainly become an oft repeated theme in Jewish history. We should not be pessimistic about our present situation and our future. But we should certainly be realistic and wary as to what difficulties certainly face us now and later.

There are two witnesses to part of the akeidah drama – Yishmael and Eliezer. Their impressions of the event are not related to us by the Torah itself. Yishmael will remain the antagonist of Yitzchak and his descendants until our very own time. The descendants of Yishmael will even attempt to substitute their ancestor Yishmael for Yitzchak as the central character of the drama of the akeidah. However, the history of the descendants of Yishmael does not conform to the pattern of historical akeidot. Yishmael remains the aggressor in history and his character, as delineated in the Torah as being warlike and constantly dissatisfied, has been amply justified in human history. It is not the

character of someone who has experienced an akeidah.

Yishmael is willing to be the hero of the akeidah but not to suffer its experience and trauma. Eliezer will play an important role in the life of Yitzchak. He is the person entrusted by Avraham to find the proper mate for Yitzchak and he performs his task flawlessly. But then he somehow disappears from the scene of biblical history and the story of the Jewish people. There is a lack of continuity in Eliezer and his descendants that does not allow him or them to remain any longer an integral part of the Jewish story. Thus, the two other participants in the akeidah story depart from the mountain of Moriah unchanged by the event. Apparently, immortality and eternity in Jewish history is gained only by experiencing the akeidah itself. Not necessarily a pleasant thought, but it is a proven reality. May the Lord test us with akeidot no longer.

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RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And Avraham spoke up and said, "Behold I desire to speak to my Master and I am but dust and ashes." (Beraishis 18:27) These words of Avraham reverberate through history. They stand as a paradigm of humility, where Avraham compares himself to these two seemingly lowly items. In return, Hashem gave Avraham's children two mitzvos: the ashes of Parah Aduma and the dust of the Sotah. (Sotah 17a, Chulin 88b)

The Beis HaLevi comments that dust is currently nothing, but could potentially be used to form something. Ashes, on the other hand, used to be something, but are now spent and unable to be used for anything meaningful. Avraham felt himself similar to the lesser aspect of each, and in return, Hashem gave us these mitzvos in which both dust and ashes are used to either clarify a woman's pure status, or purify someone who is not pure.

An obvious question arises. If Avraham felt so humble, what gave him the boldness to begin to bargain with Hashem for the lives of the people of Sodom? The wording of the posuk strengthens the question. Avraham uses the word "hoalti," which means I want, or I am pleased to, speak to Hashem. Shouldn't his humility override this desire?

Additionally, the conjunction "and" is used here, "and I am dust and ashes," instead of "but," where he would have said, "I want to speak to Hashem BUT I am dust and ashes," which would more closely comport with the general agreement that this was an expression of Avraham's humility. A look at Rashi gives us an insight into Avraham's statement, and an answer to our

questions.

Rashi tells us, "I was already worthy of becoming dust [by being killed] at the hands of the kings, and ashes [by being thrown in the furnace] at the hands of Nimrod, were it not for Your mercy that stood by me." Avraham acknowledged that he had only survived these dire circumstances through Hashem's kindness. But he was saved.

This is why Avraham was willing to fight for the people of Sodom. "Master of the Universe," he said, "You saved me from death on multiple occasions so that I might serve you. You showed Your mercy to me, and kept me alive. Was it not for a reason?"

What gave Avraham the courage to stand up and plead for mercy for those who didn't deserve it was the very fact that Avraham had been saved himself! He understood that in Hashem's world, even the sinner is given a chance to repent and be saved. He (in his humility) was living proof of this! If Hashem had kept him alive, it was for a purpose, perhaps this one. This, then, was what empowered him to speak.

In return, Avraham's children were granted these two mitzvos, the ashes of the Para Aduma and the dust of the Sota, which give people a second chance to turn their lives around and live.

A well-known speaker started off his seminar by holding up a \$20 bill. In the room of 200, he asked, "Who would like this \$20 bill?" Hands started going up. He proceeded to crumple up the \$20 dollar bill and asked, "Who still wants it?" There were still just as many takers.

"Well," he replied, "What if I do this?" He dropped it on the ground and started to grind it into the floor with his shoe. He picked it up, now crumpled and dirty. "Who still wants it?" All hands went into the air.

"My friends," he said, "we have all learned a very valuable lesson. No matter what I did to the money, you still wanted it because it did not decrease in value. It was still worth \$20. Many times in our lives, we are dropped, crumpled, and ground into the dirt by the decisions we make and the circumstances that come our way. We feel as though we are worthless. But, the truth is, no matter what has happened or what will happen, you will never lose your value. Dirty or clean, crumpled or finely creased, you are still priceless." © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Listen to Her Voice

Asad event occurred in Parashat Lech L'cha which had ramifications in this week's Parashat Vayeira.

After ten years in the land that Hashem had promised to Avraham and his children, Sarah remained an akara, childless. Sarah gave Avraham her handmaiden, Hagar, who was the daughter of Par'oh, as a surrogate wife to bear a son for Avraham. From Hagar came Avraham's first son, Yishmael, literally,

Hashem will hear. Sarah hoped that Hashem would hear her desperation and give her a son also. In this week's parasha, Avraham and Sarah finally have a son, whose name became Yitzchak, literally, he will laugh because Sarah laughed to think that she would have a son at the age of ninety. What followed shortly thereafter became a problem for Avraham, as Yishmael became a terrible influence on Yitzchak.

The Torah states: "Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Avraham, mocking. So, she said to Avraham, 'Drive out this slavewoman and her son, for the son of that slavewoman shall not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak.' The matter greatly distressed Avraham regarding his son. So Elokim said to Avraham, 'Be not distressed over the youth or your slavewoman; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice, since, through Yitzchak will offspring be considered yours. But the son of the slavewoman as well will I make into a nation, for he is your offspring.' So Avraham rose early in the morning, took bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar; he placed them on her shoulder and the boy, and sent her off."

There is a Rabbinic discussion as to the meaning of the word m'tzacheik. Rashi translates it to mean mocking, but the root of the word is the same root of Yitzchak's name, tzadi, chaf, kuf, laugh. Laughing can constitute mocking if it is laughter at someone's expense. But there are more serious meanings of the word, also. At several other incidents within the Torah, the meaning can include idolatry, sexual immorality, and even murder. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that "Yishmael is characterized here according to the two natures combined in him: He was the son of a Hamitic mother (descendants of Ham, Noach's cursed son), and also of the tzadik, Avraham. Sarah, who was the contriver of that birth, had hoped, by the influence of education, the Hamitic nature would be entirely overcome by the Avrahamitic spirit."

The Ramban quotes from Tosefta Sota that Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar (and some say ben Yochai) argued about which interpretation of m'tzacheik was appropriate to describe Yishmael's actions. Rabbi Shimon could not accept that, in this case, it meant idolatry, sexual immorality, or murder. These sins could not have happened in the house of a Tzadik. The only interpretation that is possible is that Yishmael argued over his inheritance. "I am my father's firstborn son, and am entitled to take a double share of the inheritance." The Midrash continues that Yishmael would take Yitzchak with him to the field and shoot arrows at him and claim that it was all in jest. The Ramban says that this mocking about the inheritance occurred on the day of the feast celebrating the weaning of Yitzchak. This would make Yishmael seventeen years old and would explain why he was still

referred to as a child. In Yishmael's time, many people lived to one hundred twenty to two hundred years. Compared to Yishmael's seventeen, he would still be called a child, even though physically he would be a young adult, certainly not needing his mother to watch over him.

The Torah often gives us only part of a conversation, leaving us to speculate on the reasons for each person's reaction to that conversation. A prime example is found here: "Drive out this slavewoman and her son, for the son of that slavewoman shall not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak." The matter greatly distressed Avraham regarding his son." Since the Torah does not give us the full conversation, it is unclear whether Sarah prefaced her demand by telling Avraham of Yishmael's faults, and it is difficult to understand what precisely distressed Avraham. Rashi says that Avraham was distressed to hear that his son (Yishmael) "had taken to degenerate ways." In this interpretation, Sarah must have told him about the Yishmael's sins. But Rashi also states that, "the plain meaning, however, is that he was grieved because she (Sarah) had told him (Avraham) to send him (Yishmael) away." The Ramban states that Avraham would not have been distressed had Sarah suggested that he send only Hagar away. Avraham was distressed because he still believed that his influence on Yishmael would turn him into a proper person. This interpretation indicates that Sarah did not state the reasons why Yishmael should have been banished, or Avraham might have changed his opinion.

Hashem told Avraham, "Be not distressed over the youth or your slavewoman; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice, since, through Yitzchak will offspring be considered yours." Sarah placed the slavewoman before her son, but Hashem changed the order and placed the son before the slavewoman. Sarah understood that Yishmael was influenced by his mother, so even if she was unable to send Yishmael away, Sarah wanted Hagar to leave. Hashem understood that the real problem came from Avraham's attachment to his son, not the slavewoman, his son's mother.

Hashem intervened in this disagreement between Sarah and Avraham. He told Avraham to listen to her voice. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that one should always listen to his wife's advice in matters of the world (secular), but not in matters of the Heavens (religious affairs). Avraham believed that the separation of Yishmael was a matter of the Heavens, and he should not listen to Sarah. Hashem explained to Avraham that "whatever Sarah tells you" you should listen to her, whether it is a secular matter or a religious matter. Our Rabbis learn from this that Sarah was greater than Avraham in prophecy.

Sarah was an exceptional woman. She was so

concerned with her inability to give Avraham a child, that she gave him Hagar as a surrogate wife. This led to the birth of Yishmael and all the tragedies that have come upon the world from his descendants. Yet, Sarah was blessed finally with a son, whom she fought to protect from evil influences. The life for a Jew is difficult, yet we are blessed with Sarahs, who protect us from all forms of evil. May we appreciate the sacrifices they have made for our well-being. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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SICHOT ROSHEI YESHIVA

HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN

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“**A**nd it came to pass after these things, that God did test Avraham, and said to him: Avraham; and he said: Here am I. And He said: Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, even Yitzchak, and get you into the land of Moriya; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you of. And Avraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Yitzchak his son; and he cleaved the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up, and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Avraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Avraham said to his young men: Abide you here with the ass, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship, and come back to you. And Avraham took the wood of the burnt-offering, and laid it upon Yitzchak his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife; and they went both of them together. And Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father, and said: My father. And he said: Here am I, my son. And he said: Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering? And Avraham said: God will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering Himself, my son. And they went both of them together.” (Bereishit 22:1-8)

One of the most striking expressions in the Akeida narrative is “and they went both of them together.” Avraham and Yitzchak were completely united when they went to the land of Moriya. This expression of unity between different people, moving forward together toward a common goal, reminds us of the walking together of Iyov’s friends: “Now when Iyov’s three friends heard of all this evil that was come upon him, they came each one from his own place, Elifaz the Temanite, and Bildad the Shuchite, and Tzofar the Naamatite; and they made an appointment together to come to bemoan him and to comfort him. And when they lifted up their eyes afar off, and knew him not, they lifted up their voice, and wept; and they rent each one

his mantle, and threw dust upon their heads toward heaven.” (Iyov 2:11-12)

When Iyov’s friends come to comfort him, they are able to unite and come with identical feelings and thoughts to comfort Iyov. The common purpose, the desire to confront the tragedy before them, unites them. The common denominator among Iyov’s friends -- the looming tragedy, and the willingness to confront it together -- is also present at the Akeida. Facing the tragic demand that the son give up his life, that the father sacrifice his son, Avraham and Yitzchak become one; they are able to unite in their feelings, thoughts, and actions and walk together.

Avraham and Yitzchak walking together was critical for the execution of the Akeida. The commandment was given to Avraham, and Yitzchak at the time was already an independent adult; if he had refused to cooperate, it is likely that Avraham would not have been able to physically bind him to the altar. But beyond this challenge, it seems that from the psychological standpoint as well Avraham would not have been able to bring himself to perform the Akeida if his son had not been wholeheartedly committed to the act, if they had not both come to the joint conclusion that this was the right thing to do.

The phrase, “and they went both together” occurs twice in the Akeida narrative. What is the difference between the first and the second occurrence?

In the middle is the dialogue between Avraham and Yitzchak: “And Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father, and said: My father. And he said: Here am I, my son. And he said: Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering? And Avraham said: God will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering Himself, my son. And they went both of them together.” (Bereishit 22:7-8)

It would seem that until that conversation, Yitzchak had not fully understood the full import of the Akeida. Only from his father’s response, “God will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering Himself, my son,” did Yitzchak understand the fate toward which he was headed; and yet he chose to go along with his father and participate in the Akeida. The second part of the journey, identical to the first despite Yitzchak’s understanding of the full tragedy that was about to unfold, testifies to the deep partnership that existed between the two and made the Akeida possible.

Thus, by virtue of their joint venture, we credit the act of the Akeida to both Avraham and Yitzchak: “And behold before You the binding of Yitzchak which Avraham our father bound upon the altar, and overcame his compassion to do Your will with a whole heart... For You are He who remembers forever all forgotten things, and there is no forgetting before the throne of Your glory. Remember in mercy this day the binding of Yitzchak for his descendants.” (the Zikhronot

blessing recited on Rosh Hashana)

In the face of the silence of the verses, one can only speculate about the thoughts that went through Avraham's mind during those three days of walking to Mount Moriya. It stands to reason that in the face of the impending tragedy, Avraham wrestled with the question -- "what about all that I have done up to now? Was the entire journey so far in vain?" The question is not asked on the theological plane, whether the promise of God will be fulfilled: "And God said to Avraham: Let it not be grievous in your sight because of the lad, and because of your bondwoman; in all that Sara says to you, hearken to her voice; for in Yitzchak shall seed be called to you. And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is your seed." (Bereishit 21:12-13)

Rather, it emerges from the personal feelings of Avraham: Does all his toil and labor in bringing Yitzchak up turn out in the end to have been for naught?

To this question there is one answer -- certainly not; and this for two reasons. One point is that each and every day is meaningful. Every moment in which a person is privileged to meet with God in His world is of tremendous significance. A young child whose parents dress him in tzitzit does not do so only so that he may know how to wear them in the future when he is grown and obligated in the mitzvot, but because of the spiritual significance that it has now; the act itself is of immense import, as it involves a meeting with God. So too Avraham knows that every moment of Yitzchak's life was of significance. Every moment of his life in which he taught Yitzchak to follow his path was a matter of immense significance, and it was not in vain.

Second, the Akeida will not nullify the path that has been followed up to now, but rather it will imbue it with a new and lofty meaning. Our Sages (Avoda Zara 17a) teach us that "there is one who acquires his World in one hour." There are people who, even though they were ordinary people throughout their lives, were privileged to have reached a single moment that crystallized their entire personality and gave their entire lives tremendous significance as preparation and participation in that peak moment. The same is true for Yitzchak, with the act of binding alone leaving an impression on his entire life until that point, and giving it meaning.

It should be remembered that study of the Akeida requires not only a consideration of the initial journey towards the Akeida, but also of the descent from the Akeida and the events that followed. The narrative itself almost ends with the Akeida, which was the climax of the trials of Avraham, and from there on Avraham wraps up his affairs and concludes his business in preparation for the transfer of the baton to the next generation.

But did Avraham remain unchanged by the Akeida? In a well-known passage, Rabbi Soloveitchik

describes what God demanded of him: "The Holy One, blessed be He, says to Avraham: 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, even Yitzchak, etc.' In other words, I demand of you the greatest sacrifice. I want your son who is your only son and also your beloved. Do not delude yourself, that after you hearken to My voice and offer your son as a burnt-offering, I will give you another son in place of Yitzchak. When Yitzchak is slaughtered on the altar, you will be left alone and childless. No son will be born to you. Your being will be enveloped in unparalleled loneliness. I want your only son, who has no substitute. Moreover, do not think that you will be able to forget Yitzchak and put him out of your mind. All your days you will ponder him. I am interested in your son whom you loved and will love forever. You will spend sleepless nights and rummage through your spiritual wounds. In your sleep you will call out to Yitzchak, and when you wake you will find your tent empty and deserted. Your life will become a long chain of mental agonies. And yet I demand this sacrifice." (Al Ahavat Torah u-Geulat Nefesh ha-Dor)

It is possible that even after the happy conclusion of the Akeida, the agonizing dilemma did not end for Avraham; that he still continued to wonder whether he had made the right choice, and what would have happened if the angel had not come from heaven and stayed his hand.

The demand that originated in the Akeida became a guiding principle in the thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik, summed up in a well-known phrase: "The religious act is essentially an experience of suffering." (ibid.)

The same uncompromising demand on the part of God, requiring of man that he sacrifice what is most dear to him, also appeared in subsequent generations. And so too those many sacrifices that were offered over the generations were accepted with favor before God. *[This sicha was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on Shabbat Parashat Vayera 5784.]*

