Vayeira 5787 Volume XXXIV Number 6

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And Hashem appeared to him in the terebinths (a type of tree) of Mamre, and [Avraham] was sitting at the door of the tent in the heat of the day." (Beraishis 18:1) On the third day after his circumcision, Avraham could have been excused from hosting guests. He was old and in pain, but yet, he was sitting in the doorway of his tent, looking for people to whom he could offer hospitality. Hashem didn't want Avraham to be bothered by guests. Therefore, He took the sun from its "covering" so it would be so warm no travelers would venture out.

Avraham sent Eliezer to see if anyone was outside. He came back and said there was not. Avraham didn't believe him. He went to see for himself. When he came outside, Avraham saw Hashem waiting to visit him. Understanding that Avraham was pained by not having guests, Hashem then sent three angels in the guise of men.

We might wonder. If there were no travelers because Hashem had taken the sun from its case, in order to release Avraham from having to have guests, why, when He saw that Avraham wanted guests, did Hashem not just put the sun away and make it cooler?

The simple answer is that it was already high noon, the heat of the day, and no one would begin their travels at that point. Further, it would have taken time for people to get on their way and once they were, few would be willing to stop to eat. It simply wasn't practical. But there's another reason as well.

Hashem did not want Avraham to be bothered by guests. He was infirm and needed to rest. However, he felt the urge to be kind to others, and to teach his family how to behave, so Hashem wanted Avraham to have that outlet. Rather than bring guests to Avraham, Hashem continued with His plan, which was to send angels to Avraham. One came to heal him, one came to announce the birth of Yitzchak, and one came to destroy S'dom.

They were always going to be sent, but because of Avraham's desire to host guests and show his care for them, Hashem made them look like human travelers. Hashem's ultimate will was going to be carried out, but he gave Avraham the chance to choose to do good. Though the angels didn't need his kindness, Avraham's offer fulfilled his mitzvah because of the choice he made.

We have free will in this world, but it will never overrule Hashem's plan. We get to make the choices, but we cannot decide the results. At the end of the day, it is Hashem's plan which will unfold as He wishes, but He gives us the opportunity to choose to assist. He doesn't need our help, nor will our efforts make a difference in the outcome, but the choices we make will earn us reward and Divine grace, for ourselves and for posterity.

On April 15, 1912, the RMS Titanic sank in the North Atlantic. Supposed to be "unsinkable," there weren't enough life boats and over 1500 people died in the frigid waters. A man who heard the news of the tragedy prayed to G-d, asking how He could let such a thing happen.

"Al-mighty G-d," the man said. "You are all-powerful. You control the sea and the dry land, the heavens and the earth. Why did You let this tragedy occur? How is it that You could not, or did not, stop the Titanic from sinking, and You allowed all those people to perish?"

"Are you kidding?!" G-d replied. "Do you have any idea what I had to do to get all those people on one boat?!"

[It is worth noting that American businessman Nathan Strauss was scheduled to be onboard, but during his visit to Mandatory Palestine, he felt connected to the land and people. He stayed behind to help them, building medical facilities, soup kitchens and supporting the wellbeing of the land. His life was saved by his compassion for others. His brother Isidore was not so fortunate (or caring), and he went down with the ship.]

© 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

The Torah does not have a word for ambivalence (the nearest is Elijah's question to the Baal-worshipping Israelites: "How long will you waver between two opinions?"). It does, however, have a tune for it. This is the rare note known as the shalshelet. It appears three

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated
in memory of our beloved mother
Chana Rosenberg A"H
חנה בת יוסף ע"ה
נפטרה כ"ג מרחשון תשע"ב
by Itzy and Ruchie Weisberg

times in Bereishit, each time at a moment of crisis for the individual concerned.[1] In each case it signifies an existential crisis. The agent is called on to make a choice, one on which his whole future will depend, but he finds that he cannot. He is torn between two alternatives, both of which exercise a powerful sway on him. He must resolve the dilemma one way or another, but either way will involve letting go of deeply felt temptations or deeply held aspirations. It is a moment of high psychological drama.

The shalshelet is an unusual note. It goes up and down, up and down, as if unable to move forward to the next note. It was the 16th century commentator Rabbi Joseph Ibn Caspi (in his commentary to Bereishit 19:16) who best understood what it was meant to convey, namely a psychological state of uncertainty and indecision. The graphic notation of the shalshelet itself looks like a streak of lightning, a "zigzag movement" (tenuah me'uvetet), a mark that repeatedly moves backwards and forwards. It conveys frozen motion — what Hamlet called the native hue of resolution sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought — in which the agent is torn by inner conflict. The shalshelet is the music of ambivalence.

One instance occurs in Genesis 24:12. Abraham has sent his servant (not identified in the text but taken by the commentators to be Eliezer) to find a wife for his son Isaac. He goes to the city of Haran where Abraham's family remained while Abraham himself went on to the land of Canaan. Arriving at the town's well, Eliezer proposes a test: the woman who comes to draw water, offers some to the traveller, and in addition gives water to his camels, will be the one chosen by God for his master's son. Over the "and he said" introducing his request of God that this test should succeed, the Masoretic tradition has placed a shalshelet.

The commentators identify multiple sources of ambivalence at this point. First, was the test permitted? Jewish law forbids relying on "omens" (Deut. 18:10, Hullin 95b), and Eliezer may have felt that his test was dangerously close to pagan practice.[2] Ibn Caspi himself suggests that Eliezer was unsure as to whether a single test like this was sufficient grounds on which to base so fateful a decision as the choice of a marriage partner for Isaac.

The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 59:9), however, offers the most insightful explanation. Eliezer had mixed feelings not about the test but about the whole mission itself. Until that point, says the Midrash, he had been 'sitting and weighing whether his own daughter was suitable for Isaac.' He had hoped, in other words, that one way or another, Abraham's estate would pass to him.

There are two cues that led the Midrash to this hypothesis. The first is that when Abraham first spoke to God about his childlessness, he said: 'My Lord God, what will You have given me if I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' (Gen. 15:2). Eliezer, at that time, had reason to hope that he would be Abraham's heir.

The second is that when Abraham charges him with the mission to find a wife for his son, he replies, 'What if [ulai] the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land?' As Ibn Ezra notes (Commentary to Psalm 116:16), the word ulai is not always neutral. Sometimes it signifies an eventuality one does not want to happen, but at others it indicates an event one does wish for. Eliezer's "what if" may have been an unconscious expression of the fact that, with half his mind, he wanted the mission to fail. That would once again place him or his daughter in a position to be Abraham's heir.

It was therefore with profoundly mixed feelings that he prayed for a woman to appear who would be God's choice of Isaac's wife.

More dramatic still is the case of Joseph. Child of a shepherd (Jacob), an almost youngest son, hated by his brothers and sold by them into slavery, he finds himself in Egypt as head of household to one of its prominent citizens, Potiphar. Left alone with his master's wife, he finds himself propositioned by her: Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph. "Lie with me," she said. But he refused… (Bereishit 39:6-8)

Over 'he refused', tradition has placed a shalshelet.

We can imagine the conflict in Joseph's mind at that moment. On the one hand, his entire moral sense said 'No'. It would be a betrayal of everything his family stood for: their ethic of sexual propriety and their strong sense of identity as children of the covenant. It would also be, as Joseph himself says, a betrayal of Potiphar himself: 'With me in charge, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?'

And yet, the temptation must have been intense. He was in an urban civilisation of a kind he had not seen before. It was his first experience of "bright lights, big city." He was far from home. No one could see him. After all the hostility he had suffered in his childhood, being propositioned by Potiphar's wife must have been flattering as well as seductive. It was a decisive moment. A slave, with no realistic hope of rescue, was he to

[1] The shalshelet note does appear a fourth time in the Torah — in Vayikra 8:23, where its significance is less apparent — but we will be focusing on the implication of the three occurrences in Sefer Bereishit.

[2] Ran to Hullin 95b, however, states that Eliezer's conduct was legitimate; he sought not an omen but a sign of the woman's character.

become an Egyptian, with all the sexual laissez faire that implied? Or would he remain faithful to his past, his conscience, his identity?

The Talmud gives a graphic description of his inner torment: The image of his father appeared to him in the window and said, "Joseph, your brothers' names are destined to be inscribed on the stones of the [High Priest's] ephod, and you will be among them. Do you want your name to be erased? Do you want to be called an adulterer?"

The shalshelet is an elegant commentary to Joseph's crise de conscience. In the end, Joseph refuses, but not without deep inner struggle.

Which brings us to the third case (chronologically the first) in Vayera. Here the conflict is explicit. Two of the angels who had visited Abraham now come to Lot in Sodom. They tell him the city and its inhabitants are about to be destroyed. He and his family must leave immediately. But Lot delays: The visitors said to Lot, "Who else do you have here — children-in-law, sons, or daughters, or anyone else in the city? Bring them out of here, because we are about to destroy this place. So great is the outcry against them before the Lord that He has sent us to destroy it." Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, the men who were betrothed to his daughters, and told them, "Get up and leave this place: the Lord is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought him laughable. As dawn was breaking, the angels hurried Lot, "Get up!" they said. "Take your wife and your two daughters here, or you will be swept away amid the city's sin." Still he hesitated. So the men seized him, his wife, his two daughters by the hand, and led them safely outside the city, for the Lord had mercy upon him. Gen. 19:12-16

Over 'he hesitated' is a shalshelet.

Lot's hesitation goes to the core of his identity. We recall that earlier, when he and Abraham agreed to separate to end the quarrel between their herdsmen, 'Lot raised his eyes and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan up to Tzoar was well-watered. It was like the garden of the Lord... So Lot chose for himself the entire plain of the Jordan. He travelled eastward…' (Gen. 13:10-11). He chose to make his home in Sodom, despite the fact that - as the Torah states - at that point its inhabitants 'were evil, great sinners against the Lord' (Gen. 13:13).

When we see Lot in chapter 19, he and his family have already become profoundly assimilated. His daughters are set to marry local men. On the phrase at the beginning of the chapter, 'Lot was sitting in the city gate,' the Sages said that 'he had just been appointed as a judge' - the gate of the city being the place where, in Abrahamic times, the judges and elders sat to resolve disputes. Lot does not see himself, as did Abraham, as a 'stranger and temporary resident'. He has decided to put down roots in the Jordan valley and the cities of the plain. This is henceforth where he belongs — so much so that the visitors have to physically drag him away.

Lot's sense of belonging, however, is either naiveté or self-deception. The text makes this clear at three points. The first is the attempted sexual assault on Lot's visitors (Gen. 19:4-5). Evidently the people of Sodom do not take kindly to strangers. This is the first hint that perhaps Lot too is, in their eyes, a stranger. In fact, he is. The Torah, in its second indication, is brutally explicit: "Get out of our way," they replied [to Lot, when he begged them to respect his visitors. Then they said,] "This fellow came here as a migrant, and now he is setting himself up as a judge! We'll treat you worse than them." (Gen. 19:9)

The third comes when he tells his daughters' husbands that they must escape because the city is about to be destroyed, 'But his sons-in-law thought him laughable' (Gen 19:14). Lot's elaborate new identity is about to come crashing down about him - not only because of the impending destruction but because he has discovered in successive blows that he has not been accepted in this place. Sodom hates strangers, they still consider Lot 'a migrant', and his sons-in-law regard him as a fool.

Yet despite this, he hesitates. He has invested too much of himself in the project of making his home among the people of the plain. He is a prime example of what Leon Festinger called 'cognitive dissonance'. According to Festinger, the need to avoid dissonance is fundamental to human beings, otherwise it creates unbearable tension. It is this tension that Lot cannot resolve - and which is signalled by the shalshelet over 'he hesitated'. It was the ultimate existential question, 'Who am I?' Having tried so hard to become one-of-them, he finds it almost impossible to tear himself away. (There were, tragically, many Jews in Germany and Austria in the 1930s who refused to leave because they would not or could not believe the evidence around them, that Hitler was serious in his threats to destroy Jews).

Incidentally, Festinger's theory also explains the behaviour of Lot's wife who 'looked back', against the explicit instruction of the angels, 'and was turned into a pillar of salt.' Festinger called this syndrome 'post-decision dissonance'. He predicted that the more important the issue, the longer the person delays a decision and the harder it is to reverse, the more he or she will agonise over whether they have made the right choice. They have second thoughts; they need reassurance; they 'look back'.

The shalshelet over Lot's hesitation is no mere detail of the biblical text. It is, in a real sense, the story of the modern Jew. Entering mainstream society for the first time, and yet encountering overt or covert antisemitism, many nineteenth-century European Jews became ambivalent about their identity. They tried to hide it and to assimilate. They became secular Marranos. It did not work. The more they strove to be like everyone else, the more conspicuous they were, and the

stronger antisemitism grew. They themselves lost much in the process - not only their Jewish heritage itself, but also the simple capacity to know and take pride in who they were.

The lives of Lot and Abraham exemplify for all time the contrast between ambivalence and the security that comes from knowing who one is and why. Lot, who tried to become someone else, found himself regarded by his neighbours as an alien, an arriviste, an interloper, a parvenu. To his own sons-in-law he was 'laughable'. Abraham lived a different kind of life. He fought a war on behalf of his neighbours. He prayed for them. But he lived apart, true to his faith, his mission and his covenant with God. What did they think of him? Early in the next sedra – Chayei Sarah - the Hittites call him 'a prince of God in our midst' (Gen. 23:6).

That equation has not changed. Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. They are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism. Never be ambivalent about who and what you are. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* *© 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Reflections

Remarkably, in response to Avimelech the king of Gerar's protest over being punished for taking Sarah, Hashem confirms the king's insistence that he had acted innocently, believing that Avraham and Sarah, as they had claimed, were brother and sister.

"I, too, knew," Hashem tells Avimelech in a dream, "that it was in the innocence of your heart that you did this" (Beraishis, 20:6).

Which raises the question of why the king and his entourage were punished. The postscript to the narrative states that "For Hashem had shut every womb of Abimelech's household, because of Sarah, Abraham's wife."

Hashem prevented Avimelech from touching Sarah. So what grounds were there for punishment?

The answer may lie in what Avraham told Avimelech in explanation for having misled him: "Because I said There is no fear of G-d in this place' " (ibid, 11).

Avraham had sensed a spirit of licentiousness in Gerar. And a leader of a country has the ability, and responsibility, to influence the mores of his society.

If the society evidences lack of "fear of G-d," its leadership is implicated. *© 2026 Rabbi A. Shafran*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And you shall call his name Ishmael…and on the face of all his brothers shall he dwell" (Genesis 16:12) The relationship between Isaac and Ishmael is one of the most complex – and ambiguous – in the Bible. Will they, can they, ever achieve a rapprochement? Who is really at fault – and how will their rivalry ultimately, if ever, conclude? On the one hand, the story of the Akeda – the Binding of Isaac – when God commands Abraham to bring his only son to Mount Moriah as a burnt offering – is one of the most difficult episodes in the entire Torah. The command to sacrifice the very child without whom there would be no descendants of Abraham and Sarah, no heir to spread the ideal of ethical monotheism, and no future nation, was a paradox that defied comprehension.

However, if we pay attention to the use of God's name in the unraveling story, the paradox becomes a little clearer. As we know, the two different names of God represent two different divine attributes; Elokim expresses justice and the strict letter of the law, while the YHWH four-letter name of God expresses mercy and compassion.

Throughout the beginning of this episode, the Torah only uses the name of Elokim, but in the final denouement, when Abraham is commanded to refrain from the sacrifice of his son, the four-letter name of God is invoked: 'Lay not your hand upon the lad…,' commands the angel of YHWH. Why the change in attributes? What of the initial command to offer up his son? Did that only emanate from one aspect of God, from the demand for justice? And if so, why?

The Akeda account opens with the words: "After these things…" What are these things? The penultimate biblical story before the Akeda is the account of Hagar and Ishmael sent off to the desert with minimal provisions by Abraham. I would suggest that the suffering of this mother and son is being replayed in the suffering of the father and son – Abraham and Isaac – when they ascend to Mount Moriah. Of course, there are transcendent reasons why Abraham must now undergo this particular test involving the sacrifice of his son, but the fact remains that, given the principle of 'measure for measure' – the tit-for-tat approach of biblical Jewish theology – we can discern a cause-and-effect link between the explicit torment of Hagar and Ishmael and the implicit torment of Abraham and Isaac.

Sarah was concerned about Ishmael's negative influence: "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had born unto Abraham, mocking." The word used for mocking is 'metzachek', the present tense of the future form of Yitzhak (Isaac). According to the commentaries, Ishmael's act of mockery was linked to adultery, idolatry and murder – immediate hedonistic gratification with no thought of ensuing punishment. Therefore, Sarah decides that Hagar and Ishmael are to be sent away, Yitzhak (delayed joy) dare not be mixed with the metzachek (joy now), and God Himself commands Abraham to listen to his wife. However, neither God nor Sarah insisted that the banished mother and son receive only minimal provisions for their desert sojourn. It was Abraham who sent them off with only

"bread and a skin-vessel of water." Rashi notes that, at the very least, Abraham should have sent them off with gold and silver. Abraham was condemning his concubine and son to an inevitable death, and indeed they would have died had it not been for the angel who showed Hagar the well of water after hearing her and her son's cries of desperation.

A careful reading of the biblical text strengthens the parallels between Hagar's journey with Ishmael and Abraham's journey with Isaac. The exact same phrase, "And Abraham rose up early in the morning (va-yashkem Avraham ba-boker)," is used when Abraham rises to give Hagar her supplies, and then again, when Abraham rises to start his journey with Isaac toward Mount Moriah. Abraham places the bread and jug of water on Hagar's shoulder, and Abraham places the wood on Isaac's back. Hagar wanders in the desert with Ishmael and Abraham goes to an uncertain place for the binding. An angel in the guise of a deus ex machina saves Ishmael's life and an angel in the guise of a deus ex machina saves Isaac's life. The striking parallelism between these accounts would suggest that the God of Justice makes Isaac the vehicle that enables Abraham to empathize, albeit only later, with the very anguish that Hagar must have experienced with Ishmael as a result of Abraham's insensitivity.

The interconnection between Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael is a recurrent biblical theme. Even before the banishment, once Hagar became pregnant, she began to treat Sarah condescendingly: 'her mistress (Sarah) was despised in her eyes.' When Sarah complains to her husband, Abraham tells her that she can do whatever she wants with her maid – and Sarah over-reacts: 'And Sarah dealt harshly with her (Hagar) and she fled from before her.'

The commentaries pay particular attention to Sarah's harsh behavior and Abraham's benign neglect. Radak writes as follows: "Sarai acted neither in accordance with the trait of ethical conduct, nor in accordance with the trait of piety; she was unethical because, even though Abraham relinquished his own honor and said to her, 'Do with her (Hagar) what is good in your eyes,' she should have stayed her hand out of respect for Abraham, and not have caused (Hagar) to suffer. And she didn't act out of piety or goodness of soul because it's not proper for a person to exercise all one's power against another who is in his service. A wise man says, 'How goodly is forgiveness whenever it is possible.' And therefore, what Sarai did was not good in the eyes of God. And Abraham didn't stop Sarai from treating Hagar badly, even though he knew it was wrong, in order to maintain domestic peace in the house. This entire narrative is written in the Torah in order to teach a person to 'keep away from the bad'…" (Radak on Gen. 16:6)

Radak refuses to condone Abraham and Sarah's behaviour toward Hagar, and his commentary reminds us how we are not to behave. Nahmanides concurs with the Radak, and goes one step further, insisting that Ishmael's descendants will do to us what Sarah did to his mother. On the verse, 'And Sarah dealt harshly with her,' he writes: "Our mother (Sarah) transgressed by dealing harshly, and Abraham also transgressed by allowing her (Sarah) to do so. And so, God heard her (Hagar's) affliction and gave her a son who would be a 'wild ass of a man,' to afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all kinds of torments." (Nahmanides, ibid.)

Long before the Akeda, Isaac and Ishmael are intimately connected with each other. Not only are they – and only they – both given names by God, but they both become significant patriarchal figures. We know that the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be blessed, but the fact is that Abraham's son Ishmael is blessed even before he is born. 'And the angel of God said unto her (Hagar), "I will greatly multiply your seed, and they shall not be numbered for multitude."' Isaac's son, Jacob, may become the father of twelve tribes, but this privilege is also granted to Abraham's other son: 'And as for Ishmael…behold I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly, twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation' (Gen. 17:20).

The Torah hints that Isaac was aware of the injustice committed toward Hagar and Ishmael, and identified closely with God's consideration and compassion for Ishmael. The geographical location where Ishmael's life was saved and where God revealed Himself to the banished mother and son was Be'er-lachai-ro'i. This place becomes significant throughout Isaac's life. Rebecca initially meets Isaac, her future husband, as he emerges from his meditations in the fields "from the way of Be'er-lachai-ro'i…"

What was Isaac doing in Be'er-lachai-ro'i? And why is it important for the Torah to tell us this now? According to Rashi, Isaac had gone there to bring Hagar back to Abraham so that he could marry her. It was almost as if Isaac attempted to compensate for the pain she (and Ishmael) had been made to endure previously. His mother Sarah had been instrumental in sending Hagar away, but now Isaac is instrumental in bringing her back. And Rashi goes on to inform us that the identity of Abraham's second wife, Keturah, is indeed Hagar, suggesting that Isaac had successfully started the process of reconciliation.

Furthermore, after Abraham's burial, which was taken care of by both brothers equally, we read an extraordinary verse, "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son, and Isaac dwelt by Be'er-lachai-ro'i." It is as though the text is teaching that Isaac becomes worthy of the ultimate blessing only after he atones for the injustice done to Hagar and Ishmael at Be'er-lachai-ro'i.

Isaac's son is Jacob – Israel, father of the

covenantal nation of twelve tribes, inheritor of the Promised Land. And there is room in that land for Isaac and Ishmael together as long as the 'wild ass of a man, whose hand is against every one,' ceases to be a metzachek, one who lusts after immediate gratification. And indeed, the Sages of the Midrash teach that Ishmael does return to his father Abraham in penitence, as the Bible records: "And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him at the Machpela Cave…" (Gen. 25:9, Rashi ad loc).

Conversely, God will continue to hear the pain of the descendants of Ishmael until the descendants of Isaac act toward the descendants of Ishmael in righteousness (Yisra-el, yashar-el, God is righteous). The destiny of Israel is apparently a function of how the descendants of these two brothers learn to relate to each other. And the ultimate destiny of our nation and the world will only be realized when the two sons of Abraham live together in peace, 'and on the face of all his brothers shall his (Ishmael's) portion fall' (Gen. 25:18). *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 BEREL WEIN ZT"L

Wein Online

God appears to Avraham in the opening verse of this week's parsha. How does God appear to him? The rabbis teach us that He appears to him in the form of a visitor there to cheer him in his illness and pain after the rite of circumcision. The Jewish value of visiting and cheering the sick stems from our imitation of this Godly virtue as first revealed to Avraham. In this instance, God reveals Himself to Avraham through three Bedouin Arabs who are apparently searching for a place to rest, eat and drink.

The apparent Arabs are angels and messengers of God. It is one of the great attributes of the house of Avraham and Sarah that visitors can enter their home as Arab desert dwellers and leave as angels. It is these wayfarers that deliver to Avraham and Sarah the message of continuity and eternity of Jewish life. Sarah will give birth to Yitzchak after decades of being a barren woman.

Earlier, God informed Avraham of this momentous news directly. Yet Sarah, the direct recipient of this blessing, He somehow chooses to inform in an indirect manner through the unknown strange visitors that arrive at her tent and that she hospitably feeds. There is a great insight in this chosen method of God, so to speak, in delivering the message to Sarah through seemingly human auspices. God often, if not constantly in our times, talks to us through seemingly human messengers. If we are able to listen carefully to what others say to us, oftentimes we will hear a divine message communicated to us through a human conduit.

I think that this also explains why Sarah was initially bemused by the words of the angel. She evidently thought that it was just a throw-away promise of a wandering Bedouin Arab and reacted accordingly. At the outset she did not hear the voice of God in the words of the angel that addressed her. Therefore she did not take those words seriously. God reprimands her for this attitude and asks "Why did Sarah not take these words seriously?"

Avraham who heard the tidings from God directly realized that the message was true and serious. Sarah had to believe what she thought was a human wish and therefore discounted it. But God demanded from her, as He does from each of us, that we pay proper attention to what other humans say to us. Perhaps in their statements and words we can realize that God Himself, so to speak, is talking to us.

God has many messengers and many ways of reaching us individually but we must be attuned to hear the messages that emanate from Heaven. They should never be allowed to fall on deaf or inattentive ears and minds. To a great extent this ability to listen to the otherwise unheard voice of Heaven is the measure of a Jew and of his ability to accomplish in life. Eventually Sarah hears and believes - and through this Yitzchak is born and Jewish continuity is assured and protected. *© 2009 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 MENI EVEN-ISRAEL

The Steinsaltz Center

Parashat Vayera teaches one central idea: we see only part of the story, while God sees all of it. That is why Gods judgment can be both truer than ours and more merciful.

Consider Lots daughters. After Sodom is destroyed, they believe the whole world is gone, and they conceive children from their father. The Torah does not approve, but it also does not condemn. It lets us see their fear and desperation. And from them come Ruth and King David. The act was wrong, but it was not the whole story.

The same principle appears with Cain. God punishes him, yet protects him with a sign. The Steinsaltz commentary cites the rabbinic connection between Cains exile and the later law of the accidental killer. As the first murderer, Cain could not fully understand what death meant. He is responsible, but God judges him with his full situation in view.

Sarahs laughter shows the limits of human expectation. At her age, a child seemed impossible. God answers, "Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:14). Her laughter becomes her sons name, Yitzchak. What looked impossible became joy.

At the binding of Isaac, the Steinsaltz commentary observes that the Torah tells us almost nothing about Abrahams thoughts during the three-day journey. He walks toward the mountain without knowing how Gods command to sacrifice Isaac and Gods promise that Abrahams children will multiply as the stars in the sky and the sand on the earth, can both be true. Only at the end does he see the full picture.

The true lesson for us is not to stop judging. Right and wrong are real. But we should judge with humility, remembering that we rarely know what a person has lived through or what they may still become. Mercy is not ignoring the truth. It is seeing the whole truth. Where we see only failure, God may already see the beginning of redemption.

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׳ בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא, וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח־הָאֹהֶל 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:

"וַיִּפְנוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיֵּלְכוּ סְדֹמָה, וְאַבְרָהָם עוֹדֶנּוּ 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 DAVID LEVIN

Hagar's Failure

In Lech Lecha we were introduced to Hagar, the daughter of Par'oh, who was given as a servant to Sarai. When Sarai proved infertile, she gave Hagar to Avram as a surrogate wife so that Avram could have children. Hagar became pregnant, and her new status caused her to belittle Sarai. When Sarai reprimanded her and treated her harshly, she ran away into the desert. There an angel of Hashem told her to return and face Sarai's punishment, as she would bear a son who would be a ruler of men. Yishmael was born, and thirteen years later, Avraham and Sarah had Yitzchak.

Yishmael began to tease and make fun of Yitzchak to the point that Sarah could no longer tolerate his presence. Avraham reluctantly sent Hagar and her son away with a supply of food and water. The Torah states: "The water of the skin (flask) was finished and

she (Hagar) cast off the boy beneath one of the trees. She went and sat herself at a distance, some bowshots (away) for she said, 'Let me not see the death of the child.' And she sat at a distance, lifted her voice, and wept. Elokim heard the voice of the youth, and an angel of Elokim called to Hagar from the heavens and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not for Elokim has heeded the cry of the youth as he is, there. Arise, lift up the youth and grasp your hand upon him, for I will make a great nation of him.' Elokim opened her eyes and she perceived a well of water; she went and filled the skin with water and gave the youth to drink. Elokim was with the youth and he grew up; he dwelt in the desert and became a shooter, an archer, He dwelt in the desert of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt."

Hagar's behavior must be analyzed since it appears unusual for a mother. We were first introduced to Hagar in last week's parasha, Lech Lecha. According to the Midrash, Hagar was the daughter of Par'oh, who gave her as a servant to Avraham saying, "It would be better for her to be a servant in the household of this Man of Hashem than to be raised as a princess in mine." Later we found that Sarai gave Hagar to Avraham as a surrogate wife to have children in her place. Hagar became arrogant and was forced to run away because of Sarai's reaction to that arrogance. An angel of Hashem told her to return to Sarai and listen to her, because her own actions were inappropriate. Now, in our parasha, her son, Yishmael, acted with that same arrogance towards Yitzchak, to the extent that Sarah told Avraham to send both Hagar and Yishmael away. Hashem told Avraham to listen to Sarah as it would have had a negative affect on Yitzchak to be Influenced by Yishmael.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the dismissal of Hagar and Yishmael highlighted the fact that they were sent away, not as a wife of Avraham and his son, but instead as a slave, a servant. Part of Hagar's problem was that she was a descendant of Cham (Egypt, Mitzrayim, was a son of Cham). HaRav Hirsch states: "Hagar's whole behavior is extremely characteristic and reveals the demerit, the imperfection of the Chamitic character. A Jewish mother would not have forsaken her child, even if all she could do would be to try to pacify him, even if it were only to soothe him for the millionth part of a second. To go away, just because 'Let me not see the death of the child,' is not sympathetic feeling for another, but is the cruel egoism of human nature which is still crude. In truly humane people, the feelings of duty master the strongest emotions." Hagar not only separated herself from her son, but she actually discarded him behind a tree that was growing there.

The Ramban is concerned with the word "vatashleich, she cast off." The Ramban implies that "cast off" here is used like, "And He cast them into another land," or "Cast me not away from Thy presence." This implies forcing another away. Ibn Ezra says that Hagar first took Yishmael on her lap, but when she saw that he might die, she placed him away from her. Our Rabbis said that Yishmael was already sickly when Avraham sent them away. That is why Avraham placed Yishmael on his mother's shoulder. According to the Rabbis, Sarah was not willing to give them gold or silver or a donkey or camel to carry them.

"Elokim heard the voice of the youth, and an angel of Elokim called to Hagar from the heavens and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not for Elokim has heeded the cry of the youth as he is, there.'" Our Rabbis ask why Hashem listened to the voice of the youth rather than the voice of the mother. Chizkuni explains that the prayers of a sick person are heard before the prayers of others who support him. The usual problem for an ill person is that they are too ill to concentrate on their own prayers, so others' prayers will still be needed.

The term, "ba'asher hu sham, as he is," was also discussed by the Rabbis. Rashi explains that, in terms of saving Yishmael, he would be judged only by the actions he had already done and not what he was destined to do. The Midrash says that the ministering angels "were impugning Yishmael, and saying, 'Master of the World! He whose descendants are destined to put Your children to death by thirst, would You cause a well to rise up for him?' He answered them, 'Where is he now, righteous or wicked?' They said to Him, 'Righteous.' 'In accordance with his deeds at present, I judge him.' This is an indication that no one is judged today based on his future misdeeds.

In spite of the fact that Hashem saved his life, Yishmael grew to be an archer, a worrisome profession. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that he lived in the desert and harassed travelers and stole from them. HaRav Sorotzkin contrasts Yishmael's behavior with that of Avraham's. Avraham planted an eshel tree to act as welcoming shade for travelers. This is the concept of hachnasat orchim, welcoming visitors. Yishmael's behavior proved Sarah's wisdome when she insisted that Avraham should send Yishmael away.

There are many questions which go unanswered in this section: (1) Why did not Hagar discipline her son while they were living with Avraham? (2) Why did Avraham protest when Sarah stated her concerns? (3) Why could Hagar not see the well that was always before her until Hashem opened her eyes? And (4) Why did Hashem save a future murderer of Jews even though He could not judge Yishmael now for future sins? As is true with all sections of the Torah, we can barely begin to deal with the large number of commentaries available on each passage. We must continually strive to find both the questions and the answers that we have yet to discover. May we be worthy of that task. *© 2026 Rabbi D. Levin*