

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd G-d said, 'Take now your son, your only one, whom you love, even Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and lift him up there as a dedication, on one of the mountains that I will show you.'" (Genesis 22:2)

The emotional and moral tensions of the above passage have a way of constantly reminding us that what we thought we understood about the sacrifice of Isaac is as elusive, and illusive, as ever.

Many agonizing questions must be asked concerning the two principal figures in this powerful and awe-ful encounter between G-d and Abraham. First, how is it possible that G-d, Who will eventually reveal Himself to Moses as "the Lord of Love, the Lord of Love, a G-d of compassion and freely-given love, patient, filled with lovingkindness, and truth" now addresses the very person who discovered this G-d of compassionate righteousness and morality with such an outrageous demand. Perhaps even more puzzling than G-d's request is the response of Abraham, his silent acquiescence; how could the man who remonstrated with G-d on behalf of the wicked inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah ("Will the Judge of the entire earth not dispense justice?" Gen 18:25) meekly accept a command that he sacrifice his pure and innocent son Isaac?

Furthermore, in the Torah portion of two weeks ago we read of a new stage in the evolution of humanity which emerged after the Flood, G-d's covenant with Noah that "...He who sheds the blood of another will have his blood shed, since the human being was created in G-d's image" (Gen 9:6). To add to the difficulty, G-d promised Abraham eternal progeny, even guaranteeing the Patriarch that "...through Isaac shall your progeny be called" (Gen.21:12). This Divine command to sacrifice Isaac seems not only totally incongruous but even contradictory to all that we have been taught about ethical monotheism, the new, path-breaking, pagan-

smashing, religion founded by Abraham.

To answer our questions we must turn to Abraham's wife Sarah, our first Matriarch, and attempt to understand her role in this family drama involving G-d, parent and child. After all, G-d commands Abraham "...to listen well to every word that Sarah says" (ibid), which prompts the Midrash to state that Sarah had greater prophetic powers than Abraham had (Rashi ad loc). As my rebbe Rav J.B. Soloveitchik has noted, Abraham lived thirty-eight years after Sarah's death (when Sarah died, her husband was 137 years old, ten years older than his wife, and he lived to the age of 175) - vigorous years during which he re-married and had more sons and daughters; nevertheless, during all those 38 years the Torah doesn't mention even once that G-d visited or appeared to Abraham. Apparently Abraham was the Rabbi because Sarah was the Rebbetzin, it was Sarah's living presence which created the proper conduit for Abraham's Divine visitations and missions.

Moreover, Abraham's sole accomplishment after Sarah's death was the appointment of Eliezer to find a suitable wife for Isaac; it seems that without his wife Sarah, he doesn't even trust himself to make such a decision alone!

Bearing all this in mind, we must ask a final question: in next week's Biblical portion we shall read, "And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to weep over her" (Genesis 23:2). But what was Sarah doing in Hebron? We know that after the "binding of Isaac," Abraham returned to Be'er Sheva, the desert area which had become the family homestead, so to speak, in the wake of the treaty that Abraham the Patriarch had made with Avimelekh the King (Genesis 21:32-34; ibid 22:19).

How did it come about that Sarah died in Hebron if their home was in Be'er Sheva? What was she doing in Hebron?

To give insight into all of these concerns, I would suggest the following scenario. On the early morning of his trip to Moriah, Abraham and Isaac's preparations must certainly have awakened Sarah. "Where are you two going so early in the morning? And why the slaughterer's knife?" Abraham had no choice but to reveal to his faithful wife - the loving mother of Isaac - the Divine command. Sarah demands to hear G-d's precise words. "He didn't say that you should

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for a refuah shelaima (a speedy recovery)**

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slaughter our child; He merely said to lift him up, to dedicate him to Divine service. G-d could not possibly have commanded you to slaughter an innocent child!"

And indeed Sarah was a greater prophetess than Abraham. The Sages of the Talmud (B.T. Taanit 4a) cite a verse from the prophet Jeremiah "'I did not command, I did not speak and I did not imagine' I did not command Mesha the King of Moab to sacrifice his eldest son; I did not speak to Jephtha to sacrifice his daughter; and I did not imagine Abraham taking Isaac to the binding." Based on this Talmudic passage, Rashi comments that Abraham misunderstood the Divine charge; G-d wanted a dedicated, committed Isaac, but not a dead Isaac!

Why does Abraham understand G-d differently than his wife Sarah does? Perhaps growing up in the shadow of the idol Moloch, the pagan world which demanded child sacrifice of the most faithful of the idolaters, affected his perception of the world. The S'fat Emet commentary of Gur Hassidut goes so far as to interpret the verse "And he [Abraham] saw the place (of the binding, Mt. Moriah) from afar" in the sense that Makom is that context should be seen as a synonym for G-d's name (as we use it in a house of mourning). Abraham saw G-d out of fear, rather than out of love; Abraham was - at this particular moment in his life - far removed from G-d and so G-d was far removed from Abraham. Abraham did not truly understand the Divine intent; Sarah did and she therefore opposed Abraham's journey.

Hence, when Abraham didn't listen to his wife and brought Isaac to the binding despite Sara's opposition, Sarah went to Hebron, to the burial-place of Adam and Eve, to pray to G-d in the place of the repose of the first two human beings, Sarah cried out to her forbears, Adam and Eve, who knew the pain of having been bereft of a son; Sarah called out to G-d from Hebron, the place where her husband had received the Covenant between the Pieces, which guaranteed future living progeny. And even if Abraham didn't listen to Sarah, G-d did; He stayed Abraham's hand, preventing him from taking Isaac's life.

But alas, Sarah herself died; the strain, the pain, was simply too much for this dedicated mother to bear. But Isaac lived - and so does Jewish eternity.

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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

One of the purposes of studying Sefer Beraishis is to learn from our forefathers. Parashas Vayeira contains two of the most well known episodes in the life of Avraham; his prayer on behalf of the wicked cities of Sedome (Sodom) and his willingness to offer his son Yitzchok to G-d. There are many profound lessons to be learned from both, but I would like to focus on one.

The Midrash (Tanchuma 8) tells us that G-d informed Avraham of his plans to destroy Sedome and its inhabitants because He knew that Avraham would try to defend them and ask that G-d save them. However, being that despite Avraham's lengthy multi-step prayer (Beraishis 18:23-32) Sedome was still destroyed, it seems strange that G-d would purposely solicit a request that wouldn't be granted. Previously (www.aishdas.org/ta/5765/vayeira.pdf), I quoted another Midrash (Tanchuma Yashan 7) to put Avraham's conversation with G-d into context.

"Rabbi Levi said, 'why did the Holy One, blessed is He, reveal to Avraham [what he was about to do to Sedome]? Because he [Avraham] was bothered by what had happened to those who perished in the flood, saying that it is impossible that there weren't any (other) righteous people (besides Noach). We know that this is so from [Avraham's] response, [asking] if [G-d]'s anger will wipe away the righteous with the wicked." A similar version of this Midrash (see Torah Shelaima 18:182) also includes what happened to those who were dispersed (after the attempt to build the "Tower of Babel"). Avraham had assumed that there had to be "20, or [at least] 10 righteous people" included in each of the punishments, leaving him to question whether this is really how G-d operates, i.e. wiping out the righteous with the wicked.

There were numerous reasons why G-d wanted to inform Avraham about what was about to happen to Sedome. As Rashi points out, G-d had promised the land, including (what was) the metropolitan Sedome area, to Avraham's children. This was prime real estate ("like G-d's garden, like the Land of Egypt"), and G-d wanted to explain to Avraham why such fertile land had to be destroyed. Besides, Avraham had recently put his life on the line (in the war with the kings) defending Sedome and returning its people and property, and it might upset him to awaken one morning to find it destroyed. G-d therefore knew that upon being informed of its impending doom, Avraham would ask that it be spared. These Midrashim are telling us that there was another reason why G-d wanted to tell Avraham about his plans for Sedome before it was destroyed: He knew that it would trigger a prayer/conversation that touched upon a topic that had

been eating at Avraham for some time; does G-d really allow the righteous to suffer along with the wicked.

It turns out, then, that not being fully confident that G-d was just did not deter Avraham from fulfilling His will. He allowed himself to be thrown into a fiery furnace rather than worship Nimrod's religion, left his homeland for the Promised Land, faced adversity on his trip to Egypt, circumcised himself and his household when he was 99 years old, and continued bringing others under G-d's wings, all while not being sure of G-d's sense of justice.

Upon seeing the mountain he thought he would sacrifice Yitzchok on from a distance, Avraham tells his young assistants to wait there until they return (Beraishis 22:5). By using the same word G-d had used when promising him numerous descendants ("koh"), Avraham was expressing his not knowing how G-d would be able to fulfill this promise after Yitzchok was brought as an offering (see Rashi). Yet, despite not understanding how the two could be reconciled, Avraham continued on his mission to fulfill G-d's commandment.

Trying to understand G-d is of paramount importance, and takes a lifetime of learning and searching to even begin to scratch the surface. Although Avraham eventually understood how Yitzchok could still be one of our forefathers, and G-d personally guaranteed him that He would not allow Sedome to be destroyed if there were at least a minyan of righteous people there, Avraham never wavered in his religious performance even when he had his doubts. Should we try to find the answers to any questions we may have? Of course. But Avraham Avinu showed us that searching for answers does not preclude keeping G-d's commandments. And, with His help, we might eventually find our answers too. © 2008 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

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

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

The Midrash fills in the empty spaces. As Avraham walked to Moriah to slaughter his son, the Midrash suggests that an elderly man approached him suggesting that it was improper for a father to sacrifice his son. Furthermore, the elderly gent questioned the

ethics of sacrificing life for G-d. (Bereishit Rabbah, 56:4)

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

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

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

Once arriving, the angel of G-d steps in and tells Avraham not to sacrifice the child. (Genesis 22:11) Here again the Midrash quotes Avraham as asking, "How can you so quickly change your mind? Yesterday, you told me to sacrifice my child and now you tell me to refrain from doing so?!" According to the Midrash, the angel responds, "I never told you to sacrifice (shehatehu) the child, only to take him up to the mountain (ve-ha'aleihu). You brought him up, now bring him down." (Bereishit Rabbah, 56:8)

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

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

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

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

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MACHON ZOMET**Shabbat B'Shabbato**

by Rabbi Yehoshua Shapira, Rosh Yeshivat Ramat Gan

There are many kinds of sacrifices, with different sets of detailed laws for each one. This includes such elements as the accompanying Mincha sacrifice for every animal, the amounts of the libation of wine and oil, the type of animal, and the place that it is slaughtered and the blood is sprinkled. But with all differences in the details, one principle is always maintained: no sacrifice is ever slaughtered on the altar itself but rather near the altar and not on its surface. The altar is not meant as a place where a sacrifice is killed but rather as a place for dedication and a closer approach to the Divine. On the other hand, the blood, which "is the soul" [Devarim 12:23], is sprinkled onto the altar. Afterwards, those parts of the animal which are to be sacrificed are placed on the altar, each sacrifice according to its specific rules.

It is thus somewhat surprising to see that Avraham, who presents us with the archetype for the very concept of a sacrifice, and whose altar is the foundation of our holy Temple, does not adhere to the above rule. Avraham was commanded to bring his only son as an Olah sacrifice, and he attempts to fulfill the command as well as he can. He puts his son Yitzchak on the altar and binds him in place, and only afterwards does he stretch out his hand with the intention of killing his son.

This unusual move especially stands out with respect to the binding of Yitzchak, since it makes the test even more difficult, both for the father and the son. When Yitzchak was put onto the altar it can be assumed that both father and son began to sense the feeling of sacrifice and the moment of impending death. Why wasn't Avraham driven in a natural reaction to remain as long as possible at a distance from the place where the actual sacrifice would be burned later on?

The answer is that Avraham understood very well the internal nuances of the Divine command: "And you shall raise him up there as an Olah" [Bereishit 22:2]. In this sacrifice, the main factor was the act of rising to a higher level? total dedication of the person towards G-d. This dedication cannot be compared to a regular sacrifice of an animal, which after all has not volunteered to be sacrificed. Others slaughter the animal, choose the elements which represent the soul (the blood) and the flesh to be offered on the altar, and do the actual act of bringing the sacrifice. However, a human being who is being sacrificed must act with full cooperation and acceptance. He must allow himself to be given over as a sacrifice. For this reason, the verse emphasizes twice that "they both went together" [22:6; 22:8] -- both the one who did the binding and the one who was bound.

Avraham's intuition was indeed correct, and as a result of his insight the slaughtering itself became superfluous. The moment that the blade would have taken Yitzchak's soul, there would no longer be a human being giving himself up to G-d with a full heart and a willing soul. The characteristic of a human sacrifice that G-d desires is one where we reach the ultimate level? where the blade actually touches the naked skin of the throat, but no further action is required. From this point on it would be terrible to actually harm the person, nothing more than an idolatrous ritual. What our Patriarch Avraham taught us, the root of all of our subsequent service at the same site, is how a person can and should show full dedication, up to the highest possible level, without any vestiges. And this is the special quality that the Jewish nation has inherited for all generations to come.

RABBI JONATHAN SACKS**Covenant & Conversation**

There is a mystery at the heart of Jewish existence, engraved into the first syllables of our recorded time.

The first words of G-d to Abraham were: "Go out from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house... And I will make you a great nation..."

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

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

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

Four escalating promises: Abraham would be the father of a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky. He would be the father not of one nation but of many.

What, though, was the reality? Early in the story, we read that Abraham was "very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold." He had everything except one thing—a child. Then G-d appeared to Abraham and said, "Your reward will be very great."

Until now, Abraham has been silent. Now, something within him breaks, and he asks: "O Lord G-d, what will you give me if I remain childless?" The first recorded words of Abraham to G-d are a plea for there to be future generations. The first Jew feared he would be the last.

Then a child is born. Sarah gives Abraham her handmaid Hagar, hoping that she will give him a child. She gives birth to a son whose name is Ishmael, meaning "G-d has heard." Abraham's prayer has been answered, or so we think. But in the next chapter, that

hope is destroyed. Yes, says G-d, Ishmael will be blessed. He will be the father of twelve princes and a great nation. But he is not the child of Jewish destiny, and one day Abraham will have to part from him.

This pains Abraham deeply. He pleads: "If only Ishmael might live under Your blessing." Later, when Sarah drives Ishmael away, we read that "This distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son." Nonetheless, the decree remains.

G-d insists that Abraham will have a son by Sarah. Both laugh. How can it be? They are old. Sarah is post-menopausal. Yet against possibility, the son is born. His name is Isaac, meaning "laughter":

"Sarah said, 'G-d has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.' And she added, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.'" Finally, the story seems to have a happy ending. After all the promises and prayers, Abraham and Sarah at last have a child. Then come the words which, in all the intervening centuries, have not lost their power to shock: "After these things, G-d tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied. Then G-d said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.'"

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

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

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

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

Throughout history, Jews were called on to value children. Our entire value system is built on it. Our citadels are schools, our passion, education, and our greatest heroes, teachers. The seder service on

Pesach can only begin with questions asked by a child. On the first day of the New Year, we read not about the creation of the universe but about the birth of a child-

Isaac to Sarah, Samuel to Hannah. Ours is a supremely child-centred faith.

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

Today, when too many children live in poverty and illiteracy, dying for lack of medical attention because those who rule nations prefer weapons to welfare, hostage-taking to hospital-building, fighting the battles of the past rather than shaping a safe future, it is a lesson the world has not yet learned. For the sake of humanity it must, for the tragedy is vast and the hour is late. Selfish genes have an interest in producing selfless people. © 2008 Rabbi J. Sacks & torah.org

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Sacrificing one's own son was undoubtedly the supreme test of Avraham's life and faith. When Avraham and Yitzchak came down from the mountain of Moriah their lives and the destiny of the Jewish people was 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 G-d demanded that test from Avraham and why it is continuously still demanded from the Jewish people is a question that has no real answer. It is 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 of 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 that the occurrences in the lives of the avot are harbingers of the future of their descendants, 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 descendents until our very own time. The descendents 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 descendents 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 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 descendents 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. © 2008 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/jewishhistory.

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's Haftorah reveals to us an incredible dimension of faith and its astounding result. Out of deep appreciation to a Shunamite lady's hospitality the Prophet Elisha promised that she would bear a son. This startling prediction raised major concern due to her elderly state coupled with her physical inability of bearing children. Indeed, she sensed some reservation in Elisha's words and expressed her strong desire that the child live a full, healthy life. (see Malbim's comment to 4:14,16) Elisha responded by repeating his promise and predicting the date of her son's birth. His promise was fulfilled and she gave birth to a boy on the exact date of prediction. When the boy matured, sudden tragedy befell him and he took seriously ill and died soon after in his mother's arms. The Shunamite lady did not despair and immediately traveled to Elisha. Upon arrival she calmly reminded him of his promise, whereupon Elisha ordered his servant to rush to the scene of her motionless child. Elisha prayed to Hashem and warmed the boy's body and Hashem responded and returned the child to life.

When reading these p'sukim we are overwhelmed by the Shunamite's manner in dealing with her son's sudden passing. Scriptures record her response and state, "She arose, placed the (dead) child on the prophet's bed, closed the door and left." (4:21) There is no mention here of any emotional outburst, cry of despair or feeling of grief or anguish. Scriptures continue to relate that she calmly requested a donkey and informed her husband that she was rushing to the prophet on a peaceful journey. Even after arriving at Elisha's doorstep she maintained that everything at home was in order. Only after entering his private quarters did she allude to his promise and hint to the seriousness of her situation.

This entire episode reveals the Shunamite's incredible strength of character rooted in her total faith in Hashem and His prophets. She displayed an unparalleled degree of trust and regarded physical impossibilities within the realm of reality. Her conviction in Hashem was so strong that she sincerely anticipated His performance of a miracle of major proportions. She simply refused to accept that her miracle boy's life ended so soon. She reasoned that if Hashem defied His rules of nature to grace her with a son He could likewise defy them and return her son to life. Since Hashem accepted Elisha's first request for a miracle Hashem would conceivably accept Elisha's second request for another miracle. Therefore, with total conviction she calmly awaited a nearly unprecedented experience—the revival of her dead son. Indeed, Hashem rewarded her for this perfect faith and she merited to witness one of Hashem's greatest revelations of all times.

Where did she develop such faith and conviction? Although we know that Hashem's ability is limitless we are also aware of the improbability of His altering His master plan for the world. The revival of the dead is an experience reserved, for the most part, for the end of days and is not meant to happen before then. Prior to the Shunamite's miracle world history saw the revival of two people, our Patriarch Yitzchok during the Akeida and the Tzorfati boy revived by the Prophet Eliyahu. (see Pirkei DR' Eliezer 31, M'lochim 1 17:22) How could this Shunamite even dream of such supernatural occurrences, let alone believe that they would happen to her son?

One could suggest that she drew her strength from a lesson in this week's sedra. We read this week about three common travelers who informed our Patriarch Avrohom that his wife, Sora would bear a son. Sora, a ninety year old barren lady whose husband was also quite elderly, didn't place much value on this prediction. In fact, she found the travelers' words somewhat amusing and chuckled at the notion of her bearing a child at her ripe age. Hashem reprimanded her and said, "Why did Sora laugh saying, 'Can I give birth when I am so aged?'" Hashem continued and

said, "Is anything out of Hashem's reach?" (Breishis 18:14) We are somewhat puzzled by this dialogue. Sora's response merely reflected the true improbability of child bearing at her ripe age. Why should she, physically incapable of giving birth and well past that stage, entertain the bizarre phenomena of returning to her youth? Nachmanides places this in perspective and reminds us that this prediction came from three angels disguised as ordinary Arabs. Our Matriarch Sora was totally unaware of their true identity and seemingly responded in a most appropriate way. She certainly appreciated their blessing but had long given up on considering such ridiculous things. Nachmanides questions why then did Hashem fault and reprimand her for a natural and logical response?

He answers that Sora's faith in Hashem should have exceeded such physical restrictions. With her level of knowledge she should have entertained the possibility of the nearly impossible. She should have believed that such miracles could actually happen or respond, at least, by wishing that Hashem willed them to be so. Sora's profound understanding of Hashem's ways should have left room in her mind for even the most remote of suggestions. She certainly realized that Hashem could do anything and should have eagerly entertained the fulfillment of this blessing. (Nachmanides to Breishis 18:15)

This interpretation, apparently, understands that Sora should have valued the blessing of common ordinary travelers. Indeed, the Sages teach us never to take anyone's blessing or curse lightly because of their possible degree of truth. (Mesichta Baba Kamma 93a) In this vein, even the seemingly ridiculous words of ordinary Arabs has merit. Who knows if their words were not a reflection of a miraculous development in the near future. Although it was highly improbable for this to be so, the possibility did exist and should not have been overlooked. Maybe these travelers were angels in disguise delivering a message from Above! Our Matriarch Sora's chuckle reflected that child bearing for her was outside of reality. Hashem reprimanded her and reminded her that nothing is ever outside of reality. If she had considered things from Hashem's perspective she would have concluded that nothing is beyond His capability or difficult to bring about.

Sora should have hearkened to the definitive tone of the travelers' prediction. As remote as it seemed the Arab travelers may have been sending her a message. After all, Sora was privileged to witness Hashem's involvement in every step of her life. Hashem therefore expected her never to limit His degree of involvement and respond favorably to this most remote prediction or blessing and contemplate its possible reality.

One could suggest that the Shunamite lady thoroughly absorbed this lesson and applied it to her

own predicament. She, in fact, already merited to witness a miracle of major proportions. She was also incapable of child bearing and well on in her years before she miraculously conceived her son. Once she experienced this, she thoroughly researched Hashem's guidelines for miracles and concluded that nothing was beyond reality. She totally identified with this principle and continuously viewed her son's existence in this light. When her sudden tragedy occurred she saw in it the perfect opportunity to practice her belief. Drawing on her inner principles of faith she immediately engaged them into action. She fully believed that her son's death was no cause for despair because Hashem could easily restore him if He so willed. Consequently, she immediately traveled to Elisha and elicited him to daven for a miracle. Her unwavering faith served her well and in its merit Hashem responded to Elisha's prayers and restored her son to life.

We consistently daven to Hashem to end our troubles and bring us the long awaited Messianic era. For many people it is difficult to conceptualize or fathom how this phenomena will come about. At present, there are so many obstacles in the way that any stage of redemption will require unprecedented miracles. In the recent tragic American experience Hashem displayed untold levels of compassion. Close to one thousand souls were spared from a horrifying death due to unexpected Divine intervention. For those fortunate people Hashem's perfectly timed miracles will undoubtedly remind them of His constant involvement in their lives. But, even we who are privileged to learn of these miracles can draw inspiration from them. Let us daven to Hashem that as He has begun showing us His open hand He should continue doing so until the entire world recognizes His sovereignty and warm relationship with His devout children. © 2008 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Vayeira records G-d's greatest test of Avraham's faith (22:1) by ordering him to sacrifice his only son to G-d. But almost all the commentaries listing the 10 tests G-d tested Avraham with list this one as the last. The first test was in Ur Kasdim, where Avraham stood up for his belief in G-d, against other idols, and was thrown into a furnace, where he was miraculously saved. The Lekach Tov wonders why the first test got an obscure one-line mention in the Torah, when it seems as if that test would be harder, since G-d still hadn't appeared to Avraham, and because he wasn't actually commanded to risk his life. On the other hand, G-d told Avraham to sacrifice his son, AND it was after he'd appeared to Avraham countless times so there was little doubt as to Hashem's will. So why was the sacrificing of Yitzchok that much greater a test?

Rav Lopian answers that Avraham believed in G-d, and wanted to teach the world. To that end, throwing himself into burning flames would have showed the world of his beliefs, and would ultimately help send the message of G-d. However, if Avraham were to sacrifice and kill his only son, what would his countless followers say of him then? They would surely give up any religion that required killing their own children. Or at least that's what Avraham could have been thinking when G-d told him to kill his son. Instead, Avraham didn't make excuses, didn't rationalize ignoring G-d's commandment, and accepted his orders completely, despite risking the efforts of over 50 years of his life. That was the real test, and that's also our test today: To stand up and do what's right, despite what others will say, or think. As Jews, we should not only avoid reasons to ignore our convictions, but we should also be proud enough to show them. © 2008 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

On Whose Account?

Avraham Avinu did not only perform kindness, he defined it, and he eternalized it. This week, the Torah tells us how three angels disguised as Arabs passed by Avraham's tent a mere three days after his bris milah. Avraham ran to greet them and offered them food and shelter from the blazing sun.

"Let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and recline beneath the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may sustain yourselves, then go on—inasmuch as you have passed your servant's way" (Genesis 18:

4-5). Avraham brings butter and milk; he slaughters cattle; Sora bakes. All for three total nomadic strangers. But his actions do not go unnoticed.

Each one of his services, every nuance of his actions, was repaid years later in miraculous fashion. The Medrash Tanchuma tell us that the Almighty repaid Avraham's children for every act that Avraham did towards the nomadic wayfarers. "Because Sora and Avraham gave their guests bread, the Jews were given bread from heaven (manna). Since he offered water, so too, water from a rock was offered to the Jews in the desert! As Avraham washed the travelers feet, so too, Hashem washes us from sin." And so on.

Even the manner in which the hospitality was expressed, merited reward. The Medrash tells us: "in the merit of Avraham saying "a little water be brought," Hashem declares, that He "will thrust these nations from before you little by little; you will not be able to annihilate them quickly, lest the beasts of the field increase against you" (Deuteronomy 7:22). And so for saying "a little," our enemies will disappear, little by little.

There are three powerful questions to ask. The first request, "let a little water be brought and wash your

feet," needs to be analyzed. Rashi tells us that Avraham did not bring water himself, rather he asked, "let water be brought." He asked his servant to bring water. Everything else he did himself. Why did someone else get water?

Second, Rashi also explains that the water was not for drinking; for that Avraham gave milk. Avraham wanted water to wash their feet, as the nomads of those days worshipped the sand, and Avraham did not want that form of idolatry brought into his home. But that, too, needs explanation. If the water was meant to wash idolatry, Avraham, the greatest adversary of idolatry, should have showered and hosed the potential spiritual contaminants with a deluge of water. GEVALT! AVODAH ZARAH! IDOLS! Get them out of my home! Yet Avraham only asks, "Have a little water brought." Why just a bit? Why someone else? And third, why is he rewarded for the words "a little bit of water?" Is getting only a little water meritorious?

Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant, known as Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the mussar movement, was invited to for a meal at the home of a wealthy individual. They began the meal with the traditional netilas yadayim, the washing of the hands for bread. Rabbi Salanter, opened the spigot, and filled the cup with the minimal amount of water required by Jewish law. He proceeded to slowly pour the minimal required amount of water on his hands and made the blessing. After he took his first bite of bread, his host expressed his wonder. "Rabbi!" He exclaimed, "Is it not written that he who washes with much water will be blessed with prosperity! Surely, I am not lacking for water, and you could have washed liberally. Why did you use such a meager amount for the ritual washing?"

Rabbi Salanter smiled. "Who schleps your water from the well?"

"Why, my maid!" Exclaimed the patron. "Surely I am not the water carrier!" "Aha," declared Rabbi Lipkin. "You want me to wash liberally, depleting the water supply in the barrel. And then your maidservant will have to schlep more water! I should be a tzaddik on her back? No! I would rather use the minimum amount of water, spare her the pain, and fulfill the standard requirement of the halacha. As far as blessing for prosperity, I guess that will come from somewhere else. But surely my blessings, nor any religious stringency, will be carried for me on the back of your maid."

Perhaps Avraham did not want to deal with the idolatrous sand. He did not to touch it or wash it. So he asked someone else. He asked an errand-boy. But if that was the case he made sure to say "a little water." In no way would Avraham, the great rival of idolatry ask for more water than necessary. Because you can't place the burden of your stringencies on the backs of others. © 2000 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org