

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

"Take your son, your only son, the one you love - Isaac -- and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." Thus begins one of the most famous episodes in the Torah, but also one of the most morally problematic.

The conventional reading of this passage is that Abraham was being asked to show that his love for G-d was supreme. He would show this by being willing to sacrifice the son for whom he had spent a lifetime waiting.

Why did G-d need to "test" Abraham, given that He knows the human heart better than we know it ourselves? Maimonides answers that G-d did not need Abraham to prove his love for Him. Rather the test was meant to establish for all time how far the fear and love of G-d must go. (Guide for the Perplexed 3:24)

On this principle there was little argument. The story is about the awe and love of G-d. Kierkegaard wrote a book about it, *Fear and Trembling*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954) and made the point that ethics is universal. It consists of general rules. But the love of G-d is particular. It is an I-Thou personal relationship. What Abraham underwent during the trial was, says Kierkegaard, a "teleological suspension of the ethical," that is, a willingness to let the I-Thou love of G-d overrule the universal principles that bind humans to one another.

Rav Soloveitchik explained the episode in terms of his own well-known characterisation of the religious life as a dialectic between victory and defeat, majesty and humility, man-the-creative-master and man-the-obedient-servant. ("Majesty and Humility," *Tradition* 17:2, Spring, 1978, pp. 25-37 <<http://j.mp/1x9ArfQ>>) There are times when "G-d tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most." We must experience defeat as well as victory. Thus the binding of Isaac was not a once-only episode but rather a paradigm for the religious life as a whole. Wherever we have passionate desire -- eating, drinking, physical relationship -- there the Torah places limits on the satisfaction of desire. Precisely because we pride ourselves on the power of reason, the Torah includes chukkim, statutes, that are impenetrable to reason.

These are the conventional readings and they

represent the mainstream of tradition. However, since there are "seventy faces to the Torah," I want to argue for a different interpretation. The reason I do so is that one test of the validity of an interpretation is whether it coheres with the rest of the Torah, Tanakh and Judaism as a whole. There are four problems with the conventional reading:

1. We know from Tanakh and independent evidence that the willingness to offer up your child as a sacrifice was not rare in the ancient world. It was commonplace. Tanakh mentions that Mesha king of Moab did so. So did Jephthah, the least admirable leader in the book of Judges. Two of Tanakh's most wicked kings, Ahaz and Manasseh, introduced the practice into Judah, for which they were condemned. There is archeological evidence -- the bones of thousands of young children -- that child sacrifice was widespread in Carthage and other Phoenician sites. It was a pagan practice.

2. Child sacrifice is regarded with horror throughout Tanakh. Micah asks rhetorically, "Shall I give my firstborn for my sin, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" and replies, "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your G-d." How could Abraham serve as a role model if what he was prepared to do is what his descendants were commanded not to do?

3. Specifically, Abraham was chosen to be a role model as a father. G-d says of him, "For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." How could he serve as a model father if he was willing to sacrifice his child? To the contrary, he should have said to G-d: "If you want me to prove to You how much I love You, then take me as a sacrifice, not my child."

4. As Jews -- indeed as humans -- we must reject Kierkegaard's principle of the "teleological suspension of the ethical." This is an idea that gives carte blanche to a religious fanatic to commit crimes in the name of G-d. It is the logic of the Inquisition and the suicide bomber. It is not the logic of Judaism rightly understood. G-d does not ask us to be unethical. We may not always understand ethics from G-d's perspective but we believe that "He is the Rock, His works are perfect; all His ways are just." (Deut. 32:4; This is a large subject in its own right, that I hope to be

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able to address elsewhere.)

To understand the binding of Isaac we have to realise that much of the Torah, Genesis in particular, is a polemic against worldviews the Torah considers pagan, inhuman and wrong. One institution to which Genesis is opposed is the ancient family as described by Fustel de Coulanges in *The Ancient City* (1864) (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956) and recently restated by Larry Siedentop in *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*. (London: Penguin, 2014)

Before the emergence of the first cities and civilizations, the fundamental social and religious unit was the family. As Coulanges puts it, in ancient times there was an intrinsic connection between three things: the domestic religion, the family and the right of property. Each family had its own gods, among them the spirits of dead ancestors, from whom it sought protection and to whom it offered sacrifices. The authority of the head of the family, the paterfamilias, was absolute. He had power of life and death over his wife and children. Authority invariably passed, on the death of the father, to his firstborn son. Meanwhile, as long as the father lived, children had the status of property rather than persons in their own right. This idea persisted even beyond the biblical era in the Roman law principle of *patria potestas*.

The Torah is opposed to every element of this worldview. As anthropologist Mary Douglas notes, one of the most striking features of the Torah is that it includes no sacrifices to dead ancestors. (*Leviticus as Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) Seeking the spirits of the dead is explicitly forbidden.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that in the early narratives succession does not pass to the firstborn: not to Ishmael but Isaac, not to Esau but Jacob, not to the tribe of Reuben but to Levi (priesthood) and Judah (kingship), not to Aaron but to Moses.

The principle to which the entire story of Isaac, from birth to binding, is opposed is the idea that a child is the property of the father. First, Isaac's birth is miraculous. Sarah is already post-menopausal when she conceives. In this respect the Isaac story is parallel to that of the birth of Samuel to Hannah, like Sarah also unable naturally to conceive. That is why, when he is

born Hannah says, "I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord." This passage is the key to understanding the message from heaven telling Abraham to stop: "Now I know that you fear G-d, because you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son" (the statement appears twice, in Gen. 22:12 and 16). The test was not whether Abraham would sacrifice his son but whether he would give him over to G-d.

The same principle recurs in the book of Exodus. First, Moses' survival is semi-miraculous since he was born at a time when Pharaoh had decreed that every male Israelite child should be killed. Secondly, during the tenth plague, when every firstborn Egyptian child died, the Israelite firstborn were miraculously saved. "Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to Me, whether human or animal." The firstborn were originally designated to serve G-d as priests, but lost this role after the sin of the golden calf. Nonetheless, a memory of this original role still persists in the ceremony of *pidyon ha-ben*, redemption of a firstborn son.

What G-d was doing when he asked Abraham to offer up his son was not requesting a child sacrifice but something quite different. He wanted Abraham to renounce ownership of his son. He wanted to establish as a non-negotiable principle of Jewish law that children are not the property of their parents.

That is why three of the four matriarchs found themselves unable to conceive other than by a miracle. The Torah wants us to know that the children they bore were the children of G-d rather than the natural outcome of a biological process. Eventually, the entire nation of Israel would be called the children of G-d. A related idea is conveyed by the fact that G-d chose as his spokesperson Moses who was "not a man of words." He was a stammerer. Moses became G-d's spokesman because people knew that the words he spoke were not his own but those placed in his mouth by G-d.

The clearest evidence for this interpretation is given at the birth of the very first human child. When she first gives birth, Eve says: "With the help of the Lord I have acquired [kaniti] a man." That child, whose name comes from the verb "to acquire," was Cain who became the first murderer. If you seek to own your children, your children may rebel into violence.

If the analysis of Fustel de Coulanges and Larry Siedentop is correct, it follows that something fundamental was at stake. As long as parents believed they owned their children, the concept of the individual could not yet be born. The fundamental unit was the family. The Torah represents the birth of the individual as the central figure in the moral life. Because children - all children -- belong to G-d, parenthood is not

ownership but guardianship. As soon as they reach the age of maturity (traditionally, twelve for girls, thirteen for boys) children become independent moral agents with their own dignity and freedom. (It is perhaps no accident that the figure who most famously taught the idea of "the child's right to respect" was Janusz Korczak, creator of the famous orphanage in Warsaw, who perished together with the orphans in Treblinka. See Tomek Bogacki, *The Champion of Children: The Story of Janusz Korczak* (2009).)

Sigmund Freud famously had something to say about this too. He held that a fundamental driver of human identity is the Oedipus Complex, the conflict between fathers and sons as exemplified in Aeschylus' tragedy. (He argued, in *Totem and Taboo*, that the Oedipus complex was central to religion also.) By creating moral space between fathers and sons, Judaism offers a non-tragic resolution to this tension. If Freud had taken his psychology from the Torah rather than from Greek myth, he might have arrived at a more hopeful view of the human condition.

Why then did G-d say to Abraham about Isaac: "Offer him up as a burnt offering"? So as to make clear to all future generations that the reason Jews condemn child sacrifice is not because they lack the courage to do so. Abraham is the proof that they do not lack the courage. The reason they do not do so is because G-d is the G-d of life, not death. In Judaism, as the laws of purity and the rite of the Red Heifer show, death is not sacred. Death defiles.

The Torah is revolutionary not only in relation to society but also in relation to the family. To be sure, the Torah's revolution was not fully completed in the course of the biblical age. Slavery had not yet been abolished. The rights of women had not yet been fully actualised. But the birth of the individual -- the integrity of each of us as a moral agent in our own right -- was one of the great moral revolutions in history. ©2014 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as G-d had commanded him. (Genesis 21:4) And it was after these things that G-d tested Abraham"Take your son... and bring him up there as an offering..." (Genesis 22:2)

"And an angel of the Lord from the heavens called out to him... and said: "Do not cast your hand upon the lad and do not do anything to him; now I know that you fear G-d since you did not withhold your only son from Me" (Genesis 22:12)

One of the most difficult narratives in our Bible is this story of the "binding" (akeda) of Isaac. How can the Almighty G-d, the G-d of compassionate righteousness and moral justice (Gen. 18:19),

command Abraham to sacrifice his beloved and innocent child? And, secondly, how can a father ever think of carrying out such a command without the slightest dispute with G-d such as the argument Abraham made for the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:23-33)? Let us begin with our first query: How can a compassionate G-d make such a request? The great existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, in his celebrated work *Fear and Trembling*, maintains that herein lies the precise nature of the Divine test, the reason why Abraham emerges as the supreme Prince of Faith: G-d expects of his most trustworthy servant the "teleological suspension of the ethical"; in response to a command by the ultimate value and ideal of life and world (telos is the Greek for "end" or "goal"), the individual must be able to still the ethical voice of his conscience.

We hearken to the word of G-d not because it is good, but rather because it was given by G-d! Fascinatingly, Rav Yosef ibn Kaspi suggests a very different approach: the entire story of the akeda was only meant to teach Abraham that G-d is not Molech, and He abhors child sacrifice. Hence Abraham, a child of this world of idolatry, may well have expected just such a command; and perhaps the real test may have been Abraham's (correct) decision to listen to the second "voice" of the angel of the Lord: "Do not lay your hand upon the lad."

A number of years ago, I visited the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad. As I stood before Rembrandt's celebrated painting of the akeda, I noticed that Rembrandt pictures Abraham's hand outstretched with the knife, ready to slaughter Isaac and an angel from the Lord staying Abraham's hand and forcibly preventing the father from sacrificing his son. Why does Rembrandt add an element which the Bible does not record? Clearly, Rembrandt was disturbed by how Abraham could favor the words of a mere angel telling him to desist from the act of slaughter which G-d had commanded. Rembrandt concludes that the angel actually prevented Abraham's action, so that Abraham emerges from the story as the Kierkegaardian Prince of Faith par excellence!

Rav A.I. Kook gives a most startling reason for Abraham's preference for the command of the angel over the command of G-d: The angel was actually Abraham's conscience telling him not to slaughter Isaac. Remarkably, he suggests that it is only he who does not silence his conscience who is truly G-d fearing. Apparently, Rav Kook is saying that the inner voice of the human conscience is actually the "image of G-d," the "portion of G-d from on high" within each and every one of G-d's human creations, which was the angel of the Lord who came to Abraham; it was a voice from within, not a voice from without.

In fact, it is quite possible that Rav Kook is hinting at the possibility that since G-d's words were

nebulous to begin with, His having said, "bring him up there as an offering" (or a "dedication"), but never saying explicitly to "slaughter Isaac" (see Rashi), Abraham misinterpreted G-d's words; G-d meant only that Isaac should be dedicated - in life, not in death! And this is what our Talmudic sages say (B.T. Ta'anit 4a) when explicating the words of the prophet Jeremiah regarding the sin of idolatrous child sacrifice: "'Which I never commanded, nor spoke of, nor thought about'; 'I never commanded' refers to Mesha, the King of Moab [who sacrificed his son to Moloch]; 'which I did not speak of' refers to Jephthah, who sacrificed his daughter [to G-d]; 'which I never thought about' refers to Isaac the son of Abraham.'" I do not believe that subjective human conscience can take precedence over the word of G-d; however, in the case of G-d's initial command to Abraham - which leaves room for two different interpretations - it makes perfect sense for Abraham to invoke the "angel of the Lord."

After all, Abraham certainly knew the biblical portions prior to his ministry, G-d's displeasure over Cain's murder of Abel, the lame excuse of Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (and if Cain is indeed his brother's keeper, how much more so is Abraham his son Isaac's keeper!), and - most of all - the dictum following the story of the flood: "Whosoever sheds his fellow's blood, his blood shall be shed by his fellow, since in the image of G-d was the human fellow created" (Gen. 9:6). These words previously given by G-d could very well have been the "angel of the Lord from heaven" which gave the correct interpretation to Abraham of G-d's true desire vis-à-vis Isaac. ©2014 *Ohrt Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

For the Jewish people, one of the hallmarks of our great founding parents was their ability to maintain communication with their Creator. G-d, so to speak, was a constant living presence in their lives, thoughts and actions. And they were able to hear G-d's voice, though G-d has no voice, and to visualize G-d even though G-d has no physical appearance. G-d spoke to them through the inner voice of their own souls which was always longing to reunite with the source of life from which it came.

When the stranger/angel guest informs Avraham and Sarah about the forthcoming birth of their son, this serves to confirm to Avraham the promise that he heard from G-d earlier regarding the same event. Previously Avraham heard it through his own inner voice of faith and attachment to G-d and now he and Sarah hear it in a literal sense, from the lips of the stranger/angel who stands before them in their tent.

Midrash explains and reinforces this idea of hearing G-d through one's own soul and spirit. When Moshe was sent on his mission to redeem Israel from

Egypt and to teach them Torah, he heard that call emanate from Heaven in the voice of his father Amram.

We hear G-d, so to speak, through familiar voices that reverberate within our soul and heart. First, Avraham himself believes that he will have a son with Sarah and later he has no doubts when that message is communicated to him by the stranger/angel.

Sarah, on the other hand, who did not spiritually "hear" these tidings beforehand, casts doubt and wonderment at the words of the stranger/angel. Avraham is made aware of this and explains to Sarah the source of her consternation.

I feel that many times in our lives we sense within ourselves a divine message and voice. It is this combination of soul and intellect that drives all human hopes forward. But, since we are not at the level of constant communication with our soul and our Creator, we do not always hearken to that voice nor do we attribute it to its correct source.

Jewish tradition teaches us that somehow the prophet Elijah appears regularly and constantly to human beings. He comes in different guises, forms and costumes. The truly righteous are able to identify him when he appears while we ordinary human beings are mostly unaware of his presence even as he stands before us.

Avraham, in his righteousness and faith, is constantly prepared for such encounters with G-d. Ordinary human beings, to whom G-d is at best an abstract idea, certainly are unable to truly sense His presence. That is what the great rebbe of Kotzk meant when he said that when G-d said: "Go forth from your land and home and family" any human being had the potential to hear that message, not just Avraham. But unless one is attuned to "hear" G-d regularly through one's own inner soul, all heavenly messages will fall on deaf ears. ©2014 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

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

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

"What have you done? Why did you disobey Me?"

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

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

Rabbi David Silber notes that whenever the Torah uses the term *to'eh* it means to wander. Not in the physical sense but in the metaphysical one-to stray from the right path. Not coincidentally the Torah in the Hagar narrative states she strayed, *va-teyta*, in the wilderness. (Genesis 21:14) This confirms our belief that in this case, Hagar had lost her spiritual way.

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

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

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

Everyone will be *to'eh*. Inevitably everyone makes mistakes. The question is not whether one will stray, rather how will we respond when we stray. Will we give in to our leanings and continue to be in a state of *to'eh*, or will we stand up and rise against the tide and work on our souls and our lives until we get back on the road of holiness and connection and walk the straight path. © 2005 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

What is the difference between the prophesy of Moshe and that of all other prophets? All

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

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

Radak (B'reishis 18:1) and Rambam (Moreh N'vuchim 2:42, or, in some editions, 2:43) explain this whole incident to be a prophetic vision; there really weren't any visitors. While this might answer our question (as G-d's interjections were also part of the vision), it opens up a slew of other questions (many posed by Ramban). For one thing, how could Sara have heard what was told to Avraham in his vision, causing her to laugh (and be taken to task for laughing)? [Radak attempts to show that someone in close proximity of another having a prophetic vision can actually hear the sounds of the vision.] Also, if these "angels" only existed in Avraham's prophetic vision, how could they have been seen by Lot (19:1), or by the wicked people of S'dom (19:5)? Certainly they weren't on the level of having a prophetic vision! Additionally, if it were only a vision that Lot was taken, by hand, out of S'dom, by one of the "angels" (19:16), why wasn't he, in reality, destroyed with it (since he was really still there)? [It is possible that Lot and his daughters did escape from S'dom in a more "natural" way, but their salvation was communicated to Avraham this way. However, we would need to find meaning in every aspect of the exchange between Lot and the angels while they are saving him.]

It is also obvious that Rashi understands things literally, as he explains (18:1) that G-d wanted to prevent any potential guests from visiting Avraham, but when He saw that this caused great anguish, sent

these “messengers.” How would seeing “guests” in a vision satisfy Avraham’s strong desire to have guests to take care of? Does Rashi disagree with Rambam’s premise that Moshe was the only prophet who reached such an intense stage of divine communication that he was able to experience it while fully awake?

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

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

Our first impression is that Avraham was with his guests the whole time until they left, from the time he ran to get them until he escorted them on their way out. However, this is not necessarily the case, and is probably not the case. Yes, he hurried to Sara’s tent to tell her to quickly bake some (unleavened) bread (18:6) and then ran to get some cattle (18:7), but he didn’t prepare the food himself. Sara did the baking, and Yishmael did the cooking (see Rashi on 18:7). After all, he wanted to train Yishmael to do good deeds, so gave him the cattle to prepare (18:7; see Abarbanel who says explicitly that the pronoun “he” used in the verse that says “and he hurried to make it” refers to Yishmael -- I don’t know that anyone disagrees). For all we know, the pronouns in the following verse (e.g. “and he took” and “and he gave”) also refer to Yishmael, as after giving him the instructions for preparing and serving the meal, Avraham was able to tend to other things.

Chizkuni (18:10) quotes the Targum Yerushalmi, which translates the words “and he was after him” as “Yishmael was behind him,” meaning behind the angel. He explains that Yishmael had to be

there so that there wouldn’t be a “yichud” problem between Sara and the angel, whom she thought was human. If Avraham was there the whole time, there would be no concern that Sara would be left alone with anyone. Additionally, Rashi points out that the dots above the word “to him” (18:9) indicate that the angels not only asked Avraham where Sara was (because of her modesty, she was in her tent), but also asked Sara where Avraham was. Obviously, Avraham was not with them the entire time if they had to ask where he went.

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

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Be'eros

And it was after these things that Avraham was told, saying, "Behold, Milcah as well has borne children to Nachor, your brother: Utz, his first-born, Buz, his brother..."

Be'er Mayim Chaim: While we, his more distant relatives, have little natural interest in Nachor's expanding family, Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah, 56:4) saw important events in this pasuk. Avraham, they tell us, became fearful of having to endure Divinely-ordered suffering. Hashem told him not to worry. Utz had been born. Otherwise known as Iyov, he would bear the burden of suffering, and spare Avraham.

We would call this puzzling, to say the least. Avraham had just been directly assured by Heaven of a rich berachah in the aftermath of the Akeidah. Why, of all times, would he now dreadfully anticipate Divinely-ordained suffering? And if he had some good reason to fear it, how could Iyov, an innocent stranger, assume that suffering and spare Avraham?

We have to move our focus back a bit to discover the solution to these enigmas. While it was

never Hashem's intention that Avraham go through with the offering of his son, Avraham still detected significant meaning in the very instruction, which could not have been arbitrary. Avraham reasoned that Yitzchok was linked to gevurah, including its strongest and harshest forms. The Akeidah, Avraham believed, was meant to bring this gevurah under the absolute dominion of chesed -- Avraham's own characteristic. (The Ari HaKadosh explained offerings as a class in this way. The slaughter of a korban would "sweeten" gevurah through an admixture of chesed.)

The Ari also taught that people's neshamos often returned through their own progeny. (This is what the Torah means when it speaks of Hashem visiting the sins of parents upon their children!) Avraham sensed that Yitzchok's neshamah was linked in part to this grandfather Terach, who had ample sins that remained unatoned. (Grandchildren are also reckoned as children in this regard.) When Yitzchok walked away from the Akeidah unscathed, Avraham now had reason to fear that the unpaid spiritual debts of Terach would be collected from himself!

With the news of the birth of Utz, Avraham's fears were allayed. While Terach may have been linked to the neshamos of Yitzchok (and even Avraham), Utz was even closer. Utz/ Lyov was a full gilgul of Terach; his life afforded an opportunity to right the wrongs committed by Avrohom's father. (Initially Lyov rejected his suffering. His friends all told him that he must somehow be guilty of some aveiros. Lyov knew, however, that he was guiltless! He could only see blind fate as somehow responsible for the way his life had turned out, and he cursed that natural fate. The intervention of Elihu changed his perception. Elihu introduced him to the concept of gilgul; Lyov then understood that his life was meant to remedy the misdeeds of an evildoer who had preceded him.)

Avraham was largely correct -- even if the suffering would catch up with his son, rather than himself. Yitzchok, according to Chazal, inaugurated the entire concept of living with suffering. To be sure, his suffering was minor, compared to that of lyov. It could have been different, were it not for the fact that when Hashem remembered Soro and allowed her to conceive, He worked the same miracle for Milcah -- resulting in the birth of lyov, who lightened the burden that Yitzchok otherwise would have borne.

Our pasuk alludes to this by opening with "and it was"/ vayehi, the ominous phrase that portends tragedy and unhappiness. It hints at the trials and suffering of lyov, who is introduced to us here under a different name.

Alternatively, the darkness hinted at is the birth of Rivkah to Besu'el. Had Rivka not been born to such a rasha, she would not have later produced an Esav!

This explains why the Torah's next topic is the death of Soro. It is well known that the Soton pounced

upon Soro's passing, attempting to undermine Avrohom's stellar accomplishment at the Akeidah. "See what that majestic gesture to HKBH achieved for you! No great berachah. Only the death of your wife, through the heartache of hearing about the near-sacrifice of her son!"

Even if the Soton had been correct about the cause of Soro's death, he still would have been off the mark. The Ari taught that Yitzchok's neshamah was only empowered to last for 37 years, after which he would have to die. Approaching the end of his allotted time, Yitzchok submitted to the Akeidah, causing his neshamah to jump from his body. To sustain him, Hashem gave Yitzchok a second, new neshamah. The Akeidah, therefore, did not result in the almost-death of Yitzchok. On the contrary. Without it, he would surely have died. Because of his eager participation in it, he was granted a new lease on life.

In fact, however, the Soton was not correct in linking Soro's death altogether to the news of the Akeidah. Soro had lived 137 glorious years. Her time had come. The harbinger of this was the birth of Rivka, the tzadeikes. As Chazal often observe, the bright sun of the successor generation begins to shine prior to the setting sun of the previous one.

As Soro's brilliant light began to fade, Rivkah's began to appear. Rivkah's birth signaled the end of Soro's mission, and the years allotted to their accomplishment. (Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bereishis 22:21) ©2014 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein & torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg

Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne

“**A**nd remember the Binding of Yitzchak for his offspring, with mercy" [High Holiday prayers]. The sages view the test of the Binding as a momentous event, the most exalted revelation of self-sacrifice and dedication. But many people wonder about this, after all the rivers of blood that were spilled from simple and perfect Jews in acts sanctifying G-d's name. Why, then, was the Binding considered such an important event? The answer is that Avraham and Yitzchak were first, they made this characteristic into a natural part of Yisrael. From that time on, the community of Yisrael has acted like a dove "which stretches out its neck ready to be slaughtered. And there is no other who will give up his life for the Holy One, Blessed be He, except for Yisrael, as is written, 'We have been murdered for your sake every day' [Tehillim 44:23]." [Tanchuma, Tetzaveh].

But in the end we learned from our ancestors not only how to die in order to sanctify the name but also -- and this is the most important point -- how to live while decreasing our own ego as compared to the will of the Holy One, Blessed be He.

Commenting on the verse, "Do not stretch out your hand towards the youth" [Bereishit 22:12], Rashi quotes the words of Avraham in the Midrash. "I will expand my conversation with you: Yesterday, You said to me, 'For your offspring will be named after Yitzchak' [21:12]. But then You said, 'Take your son' [22:2]. And now You tell me, 'Do not stretch out your hand'?" At first glance, we might wonder why Avraham didn't raise this point in the very beginning, when he was first given the command to put Yitzchak on the altar. The answer is that Avraham taught us an important lesson: In order to serve G-d we must obey completely -- and only after performing the mitzva are we allowed to start asking questions.

In Rabbi Mirsky's book, "The Logic of Halacha," he explains the link between the Binding of Yitzchak and the giving of the Torah, in line with what the sages taught us -- that the blowing of the shofar at Mount Sinai reminds us of the ram of Yitzchak. Yisrael's declaration, "We will perform and we will listen" [Shemot 24:7] is not natural for human beings, who usually prefer to understand something before they take action. Even the Holy One, Blessed be He, was startled and asked, "Who revealed this secret to My sons?" [Shabbat 88a]. The novelty of what took place is the very act of the Binding -- the dedication of our fathers to first perform a mitzva and only afterwards to ask about and try to understand. And it is this trait that they bequeathed to their offspring.

Note that "we will perform and we will listen" includes both positive action and prohibitions. And Rabbi Mirsky quotes the Malbim as saying that the Binding also included both positive and negative commands. At first Avraham is given a positive command -- "raise him up as an Olah Sacrifice" [22:2]. But then he is told, "Do not stretch out your hand." In both cases, Avraham was expected to obey the commands without any personal considerations. With respect to the positive command of offering his son as a sacrifice, it is clear that Avraham must be obeying in response to a heavenly command -- what father would want to offer his son as a sacrifice if not for a Divine command? However, we might assume that Avraham was gratified when he was told to remove Yitzchak from the altar, and he performed the action with joy. However, the truth is that for Avraham there was no difference between the two actions, and he released Yitzchak from the altar just as he had put him there, all with purely heavenly intentions. And that is what the angel meant with his statement, "Now I know that you fear G-d and you did not take your son away... because of me" [22:12]. That is, it was all done for the sake of G-d. And Rabbi Mirsky added in the name of his father that both verses, 22:2 and 22:12, are 18 words long, implying that they are equally important.

(Counting the words in the two verses shows that there are indeed more than 18 words. I asked

Rabbi Mirsky about this, and he replied that various sources indicate that two words which are separated by a hyphen should be counted as one. The reader is invited to check, and to see that counting in this way each verse is indeed 18 words long.)

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

As Parshat Vayeira clearly demonstrates, one of Avraham's most beautiful qualities was his kindness to others. This is demonstrated when his three guests came to visit: Almost everything was done with excitement, enthusiasm, and in excess, solely for the benefit of his guests. The only exception was that when Avraham offered the men water, he specified getting them "a little" water. Why did Avraham suddenly seem to get stingy?

The Lekach Tov explains that this act shows Avraham's sensitivity to others even MORE because water was the only item that Avraham didn't have time to fetch himself. Avraham's thinking was that if he was going to trouble his servants to get the water, he had no right to ask them to bring more water than is actually needed. It was Avraham's sensitivity to his staff that compelled him to only offer a small quantity of water to his guests. We, too, need to be mindful of the needs of those around us, especially our family and friends, and take no one for granted. ©2014 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

