

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he early history of humanity is set out in the Torah as a series of disappointments. God gave human beings freedom, which they then misused. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Cain murdered Abel. Within a relatively short time, the world before the Flood became dominated by violence. All flesh perverted its way on the earth. God created order, but humans created chaos. Even after the Flood, humanity, in the form of the builders of Babel, were guilty of hubris, thinking that people could build a tower that "reaches heaven" (Gen. 11:4).

Humans failed to respond to God, which is where Abraham enters the picture. We are not quite sure, at the beginning, what it is that Abraham is summoned to do. We know he is commanded to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and travel "to the land I will show you," (Gen. 12:1) but what he is to do when he gets there, we do not know. On this the Torah is silent. What is Abraham's mission? What makes him special? What makes him more than a good man in a bad age, as was Noah? What makes him a leader and the father of a nation of leaders?

To decode the mystery we have to recall what the Torah has been signalling prior to this point. I suggested in previous weeks that a -- perhaps the -- key theme is a failure of responsibility. Adam and Eve lack personal responsibility. Adam says, "It wasn't me; it was the woman." Eve says, "It wasn't me, it was the serpent." It is as if they deny being the authors of their own stories -- as if they do not understand either freedom or the responsibility it entails.

Cain does not deny personal responsibility. He does not say, "It wasn't me. It was Abel's fault for provoking me." Instead he denies moral responsibility: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Noah fails the test of collective responsibility. He is a man of virtue in an age of vice, but he makes no

impact on his contemporaries. He saves his family (and the animals) but no one else. According to the plain reading of the text, he does not even try.

If we understand this, we understand Abraham. He exercises personal responsibility. In parshat Lech Lecha, a quarrel breaks out between Abraham's herdsmen and those of his nephew Lot. Seeing that this was no random occurrence but the result of their having too many cattle to be able to graze together, Abraham immediately proposes a solution: Abram said to Lot, "Let there not be a quarrel between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are brothers. ^ Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I will go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." (Gen. 13:8-9)

Note that Abraham passes no judgment. He does not ask whose fault the argument was. He does not ask who will gain from any particular outcome. He gives Lot the choice. He sees the problem and acts.

In the next chapter of Bereishit we are told about a local war, as a result of which Lot is among the people taken captive. Immediately Abraham gathers a force, pursues the invaders, rescues Lot and with him, all the other captives. He returns these captives safely to their homes, refusing to take any of the spoils of victory that he is offered by the grateful king of Sodom.

This is a strange passage -- it depicts Abraham very differently from the nomadic shepherd we see elsewhere. The passage is best understood in the context of the story of Cain. Abraham shows he is his brother's (or brother's son's) keeper. He immediately understands the nature of moral responsibility. Despite the fact that Lot chose to live where he did with its attendant risks, Abraham does not say, "His safety is his responsibility, not mine."

Then, in this week's parsha of Vayera, comes the great moment: a human being challenges God Himself for the very first time. God is about to pass judgment on Sodom. Abraham, fearing that this will mean that the city will be destroyed, says: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing -- to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (Gen. 18:23 -- 25)

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

This is a remarkable speech. By what right does a mere mortal challenge God Himself?

The short answer is that God Himself signalled that he should. Listen carefully to the text: Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him"... Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached Me." (Gen. 18:17 -- 21)

Those words, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" are a clear hint that God wants Abraham to respond; otherwise why would He have said them?

The story of Abraham can only be understood against the backdrop of the story of Noah. There too, God told Noah in advance that he was about to bring punishment to the world.

So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth" (Gen. 6:13).

Noah did not protest. To the contrary, we are told three times that Noah "did as God commanded him" (Gen. 6:22; 7:5; 7:9). Noah accepted the verdict. Abraham challenged it. Abraham understood the third principle we have been exploring over the past few weeks: collective responsibility.

The people of Sodom were not Abraham's brothers and sisters, so he was going beyond even what he did in rescuing Lot. He prayed on their behalf because he understood the idea of human solidarity, immortally expressed by John Donne: "No man is an island, / Entire of itself... / Any man's death diminishes me, / For I am involved in mankind." (Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII.)

But a question remains. Why did God call on Abraham to challenge Him? Was there anything Abraham knew that God didn't know? That idea is absurd. The answer is surely this: Abraham was to become the role model and initiator of a new faith, one that would not defend the human status quo but challenge it.

Abraham had to have the courage to challenge God if his descendants were to challenge human rulers, as Moses and the Prophets did. Jews do not accept the world that is. They challenge it in the name of the world that ought to be. This is a critical turning point in human history: the birth of the world's first religion of protest -- the emergence of a faith that challenges the world instead of accepting it.

Abraham was not a conventional leader. He did not rule a nation. There was as yet no nation for him to lead. But he was the role model of leadership as Judaism understands it. He took responsibility. He

acted; he didn't wait for others to act. Of Noah, the Torah says, "he walked with God" (Gen. 6:9). But to Abraham, God says, "Walk before Me," (Gen. 17:1), meaning: be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility.

Judaism is God's call to responsibility. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"**F**or now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not withheld your only son from Me." (Gen. 22:12) The akeda ("binding" of Isaac) serves as a model for one of the most important questions in contemporary family life: to what extent should a parent continue to influence, direct, or channel their adult child's life? Can the power of a parent be taken too far? Ultimately, how much control can parents continue to have in their relationships with their adult children? The Torah offers an insight to these questions in describing the immediate aftermath of the akeda.

What happened to Isaac after the harrowing experience with his father on Mount Moriah? The Torah states, "So Abraham returned [singular form] to his young men [the Midrash teaches they were Eliezer and Ishmael, who accompanied them, but did not go to the actual place of the appointed sacrifice] and they [Abraham and the young men] rose up and went together to Be'er Sheva and Abraham dwelt in Be'er Sheva" [Gen. 22:19].

Where was Isaac? Didn't Isaac also descend from the altar and return to Be'er Sheva?

Yonatan Ben Uziel, in his interpretive Aramaic translation, writes that Isaac is not included as having returned home to Be'er Sheva because he went instead to the yeshiva of Shem and Ever. In other words, prior to the akeda, father and son magnificently joined together—"and they walked, the two of them, together" (Gen. 22:6)—but afterwards, they had to part ways.

Abraham returns to his household, while Isaac returns to his books, to an academy of solitude and study. In the vocabulary of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l, Abraham is the outer-directed, extroverted, aggressive Adam I, while Isaac is the more inner-directed, introverted, introspective Adam II.

In the conceptual scheme of the mystical Zohar, Abraham is the outgoing, overflowing symbol of hesed (loving kindness), while Isaac is the disciplined and courageous symbol of gevura (inner fortitude). The akeda is both the point of unity as well as the point of departure between father and son. Isaac enters the akeda as Abraham's son; he emerges from the akeda

as Jacob's father (Jacob will also study at the yeshiva of Shem and Ever).

Isaac's commitment to God is equal to that of his father, but his path is very different. Simultaneously, the akeda is the point of unity and separation, between father and son, for each must respect both the similarities as well as the differences within the parent-child relationship.

The commandment to circumcise one's son is most certainly modeled on the symbol of the akeda. After all, the basic law prescribes that it is the father who must remove his son's foreskin (even though most fathers feel more comfortable appointing the more-experienced mohel as their agent).

From a symbolic perspective, it is the parent's responsibility to transmit to the children the boundaries of what is permissible and what is not. Nevertheless, despite the fact that every child is a product of the nature and nurture provided by his/her parents—and the Torah teaches that a child must respect and even revere his/her parents—the existential decisions of how to live one's life, which profession to enter and which spouse to marry are decisions which can only be made by the adult child himself/herself. [See Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah, Chap. 240:25, Laws of Respecting Parents, the last comment of Rema, citing Maharik.]

We see the importance of parental restraint in the continuation of Gen. 22:12: "For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not withheld [hasakhta] your only son from Me."

However, we can also understand the verse to mean, "For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not done away with [the Hebrew h-s-kh can also mean to remove, or cause to be absent] your only son because of [My command]."

In the first reading, the angel praises Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac; in the alternative reading, Abraham is praised for his willingness not to sacrifice Isaac. [See Ish Shalom, 'Akeda,' Akdamot, August 1996.]

The critical lesson of the akeda, then, is not how close Abraham came to sacrificing his own son, but rather, the limits of paternal power.

Paradoxically, when a parent enables a child to psychologically separate, the child will ultimately move forward. Isaac returns from the yeshiva to continue his father's monotheistic beliefs and Israel-centered life. Our paramount parental responsibility is to allow our children to fulfill their own potential, and our challenge is to learn to respect their individual choices. ©2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**O**ne of the main issues in this week's Torah reading is the relationship between Yishmael and Yitzchak. Yishmael is the son of Abraham and

Hagar, while Yitzchak is the son of Abraham and Sarah. It is common knowledge that, as the half-brothers grow up together, the differences between them in character, spirituality, ambition, and behavior become increasingly apparent. Sarah notices that Yishmael is somehow more the son of Hagar than of Abraham. In a bold decision made to preserve the legacy of Abraham and the life and well-being of Yitzchak, Sarah asks Abraham to send Hagar and Yishmael away, and out of the house of Abraham and Sarah.

True to Sarah's intuition Yishmael, left to his own devices, becomes a famous archer and warrior. He is a person to be feared, and his influence and power, not limited to the land of Israel, will spread over the entire geographical area. Sarah senses that no amount of education, training or parental influence would change Yishmael's basic nature of being wild, unpredictable, dangerous and a threat to the lives and ideals that Abraham represents. Yishmael will profit from being the son of Abraham and his descendants have continued to do so, even until today. But descendants are not necessarily heirs—either in the physical sense or even more so in an eternal, spiritual legacy.

The Torah describes Yishmael as being wild and uncontrollable. That is his nature and personality; everything else that occurs throughout human history regarding him and his descendants is colored by this stark description. Sarah senses this almost from the beginning. The Torah records that she saw Yishmael "jesting". Rashi points out that the Hebrew verb which it uses means something far more sinister than merely exhibiting a sense of humor. It indicates a capacity for murder and immorality, for danger and irresponsibility. It is the same verb that the Torah itself will use when describing the mood and the behavior of the Jewish people when they worshipped the Golden Calf in the desert. Rabbis also point out that this same word can mean mockery through humor and sarcasm, as well as sexual immorality.

Humor, like all human traits, can have both a negative aspect as well as a positive one. We live in a generation when what is sacred is mocked at, and what is holy is easily trampled upon. The beginning of murder is to take many things lightly. Those things include human life and any moral restraint. An enemy that we can demonize, mock, laugh at, and constantly insult soon becomes an object not only of derision, but of violence and subjugation too. When Yishmael mocked Yitzchak for his piety, diligence, and an apparent lack of practicality in the world, Sarah sensed that Yishmael was capable of physically harming Yitzchak, even if not murdering him. All of history bears out the fact that persecutions and holocausts begin with insults and jokes, mockery, and degradation of others. This is why the Torah speaks out against such

behavior—in all forms and under all conditions. © 2020 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

### RABBI AVI WEISS

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**T**his week's portion (Va-yera) parallels last week's (Lech Lecha) with one significant exception. Lech Lecha is particularistic, dealing narrowly with Avraham (Abraham) and Sarah's family, while this week's portion is more expansive, encompassing the needs of the larger world. Note the following comparisons:

- Both portions deal with Avraham (Abraham) as savior of Sodom. In Lech Lecha, the focus is on family, as Avraham saves his nephew Lot who had moved to Sodom. (Genesis, Chapter 14) In Va-yera, Avraham tries to save the entire city filled with gentiles. (Chapter 18)

- Both portions deal with Sarah's declaring that she is Avraham's sister. In Lech Lecha that declaration is followed by their eviction from Egypt. (Ch. 12) In Va-yera the declaration is followed by Avraham understanding that he is part of a larger world. He thus enters into a covenantal agreement with Avimelech, King of Philistia. (Chapter 20, 21)

- Both portions deal with the expulsion of Hagar, Avraham's second wife. In Lech Lecha Avraham does not object. (Ch. 16) In Va-yera he is reluctant to have Hagar cast out. (Ch. 21) In the end, Avraham is thereby protective of the forerunners of Islam, Hagar and their son Yishmael.

- Both portions deal with God's promises to Avraham. In Lech Lecha, God makes a covenant exclusively with Avraham – promising him land and children. (Chs. 12, 15, 17) In Va-yera, God eternally connects with Avraham through the binding of Isaac. Still, whereas Avraham is described as walking together (yachdav) with Yitzchak (Isaac) to Moriah (Ch. 22:6), Avraham returns home together (yachdav) with his lads – Yishmael and Eliezer, non-Jews. (Ch. 22:19; Vayikra Rabbah 26:7)

Can it be suggested that Avraham in Va-yera had become so worldly that he forgot his family roots. The corrective is next week's portion of Chayei Sarah. Note that in Chayei Sarah, Avraham acquires part of the land of Israel and finds a wife for his covenantal son Yitzchak, echoing particularistic themes of Lech Lecha. (Chs. 23, 24)

One of the beauties of our tradition is that Judaism has Jewish as well as worldly dimensions. Yet, one should make sure that when embracing the world, it not be at the expense of one's inner circle, family or nation. © 2020 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

**"T**o the cattle ran Avraham, and he took a young calf, soft and good, and gave it to the lad; and he hastened to prepare it." (Beraishis 18:7)

The paradigm of chesed, Avraham hurried to see to his guests' needs, ensuring they received the best treatment possible. He had asked Sarah to prepare the bread, and now he went to get meat for the guests. Rashi points out that the lad Avraham gave it to for preparation was Yishmael, as a form of chinuch, training him into Avraham's profession of hospitality.

We know that nothing in the Torah is extra. Why did we need to have a blow-by-blow description of everything that took place? Obviously there's a lesson that we need to learn for posterity.

R' Ovadia Mi'Bartenura says that Avraham was doing everything by himself, why would he delegate this step to someone else, especially a young boy? That's how we know it must have been Yishmael and that Avraham was doing this for chinuch. Otherwise, it would have been denigrating to Avraham that he shirked part of this duty.

We learn from this episode some fascinating insights about teaching, chinuch, and getting your message across. First of all, Avraham didn't say to Yishmael, "Run to the barn and get a calf." It's easy to bark orders and expect people to jump. What they will learn from this is to bark orders and expect people to jump. Therefore, Avraham himself ran to get the calf and made sure it was the best. Only after setting the example did Avraham give it to Yishmael for the next step.

Why Yishmael? Not only to train his son, but there was a specific reason to give it to Yishmael for slaughtering. At that time, the bechorim, firstborns, were still supposed to perform the service in the Bais HaMikdash. Avraham was telling Yishmael how special he was and how fortunate to be able to offer korbanos. He further implied that serving guests was akin to offering sacrifices to Hashem. We learn from here that when providing chinuch to our children, we must lift them up, not beat them down.

So, did it work? Yes! The Torah then says, "And he hurried to prepare it." Yishmael, the boy charged with preparing the meat at its next step had learned the lesson properly. He saw how Avraham ran to take care of the guests. He saw that Avraham didn't trust anyone else to choose the quality of the animals. He understood that this was a lofty mission and he wanted to be a part of it. In fact, even today, thousands of years later, Yishmael's descendants still practice hospitality. That's because they got chinuch from Avraham Avinu.

If we learn these lessons and set the right example for our children, then they will become the people we want them to become, and, in the process, so will we.

*"Rebbe," the man sobbed, "I don't know what to do with my son! He has decided to leave Yeshiva and become a computer programmer."*

*"I don't see why that is so bad" replied the rabbi, "programming is an honest profession and he can still learn Torah. In fact, you yourself are a computer programmer."*

*"But Rebbe, you don't understand, I had such high hopes and aspirations that one day he would grow to be a big Talmid Chacham and a great leader! I wanted him to surpass me."*

*"I'm sure you did," said the sage softly, "but tell me, didn't your father feel the same way about you?"*

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### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Bikur Cholim

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

**T**he *Ba'al Halachot Gedolot* considers the mitzva of *Bikur Cholim* to be of biblical origin. He derives it from *Devarim* 13:5, "Follow the Lord Your G-d," which the Gemara explains to mean that we should follow in the ways of G-d. G-d visited Avraham when he was sick, so we too must visit the sick.

The mitzva of *Bikur Cholim* is different from other acts of *chessed* (kindness). According to the Sages, a person who visits someone sick takes part of the illness away with him, thus endangering himself.

The goal of *Bikur Cholim* is to take care of anything the patient needs and to pray for his wellbeing. Payment is not taken for visiting the sick. Obviously, a visitor should not be a burden to the patient. Therefore, when someone visits the sick, the patient's needs must always be primary and should determine when a visitor arrives and how long he stays for. For example, a visitor should be careful not to sit on the sick person's bed. Furthermore, if the visitor and the patient don't get along and the sick person may feel the visitor has come to gloat, a visit might be inappropriate.

When someone has a sick person to visit and a mourner to console, which mitzva should he do first? *Bikur Cholim* should take precedence. Since a visitor has the potential to improve a patient's health, sooner is better than later. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

### RABBI DAVID LEVIN

## In the Midst of the City

**A**s we have seen previously, there is much that can be learned from a single word in the Torah, and that word can shed light on an entire section which we would not be able to see were that word missing from the text. Such a word can be found in this

week's parasha which not only enlightens a section of our parasha but also strengthens our understanding of a parasha which we read two weeks ago, Parashat Noach. That word is "b'toch, in the midst of" and occurs in the argument between Avraham and Hashem to save the people of S'dom.

The Torah relates the plea that Avraham makes to save the city of S'dom and its surrounding cities. "And Avraham approached and said, 'Will You destroy the righteous one with the wicked one? Perhaps there are fifty righteous men in the midst of the city. Will You destroy and not lift up (save) the place for the sake of the fifty righteous men inside of it? It would profane You doing this thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked. Will the righteous be considered like the wicked? It would profane You, the Judge of all the land, should not do justice?' Hashem said, 'If I will find in S'dom fifty righteous men in the midst of the city, I will lift up (save) the entire place because of them.'"

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the Torah could have said simply "in the city, ba'ir", rather than "in the midst of the city, b'toch ha'ir". This "extraneous" phrase, b'toch, must be understood to limit Avraham's request. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that Hashem gave Avraham two scenarios of the destruction that He had planned: (1) complete destruction or (2) punishment of only the guilty, allowing the righteous in the city to continue. Avraham understood from this that even if Hashem decided to completely destroy the cities, the righteous within the cities would be saved, "and no innocent individual would be punished together with the guilty." Comprehending this, the argument then to save the cities "for the sake of" the righteous is difficult to understand. Hirsch explains that the righteous would suffer such pain at seeing the destruction of their fellowmen that the cities and the people must be saved as a reward for the righteous because of their compassion. It appears that their compassion is sufficient rather than any active role to save the city.

The ibn Ezra says that these righteous men must be clearly recognizable "in the midst of the city". They must publicly fear Hashem so that others can understand that there are those within their city who act according to the principles of Hashem rather than the "virtues" of the city. The Ramban disagreed with ibn Ezra in that he did not believe that these righteous needed to be recognizable. "Even if they are strangers therein, it is fitting that they save it." The Ramban does not attribute this, as Hirsch does, to any suffering that they will feel at seeing the destruction of their fellow citizens. It appears that their simple existence within the city should protect it whether or not they have compassion for the evil people who would die.

Two weeks ago, in parashat Noach, we discussed the differences between the description of Noach as a Tzaddik and as a Tamim. We saw that

there were two approaches to becoming an individual who was righteous. The Tamim secluded himself from the evil around him so that he would not succumb to its influence on him. One could sympathize with his position, saying that he understood his limitations. He felt himself not strong enough to face temptation daily, so he isolated himself to remain pure. The Tzaddik, on the other hand, understood that evil exists all around him, and he must be strong to withstand that evil while working to change it. It is not clear that the descriptions of the Tzaddik in Hirsch, ibn Ezra, or the Ramban meet this criterion of working to change the evil in the city.

HaRav Sorotzkin posits a third definition of a Tzaddik. It is possible that these fifty righteous men live in an enclave "in the midst of the city" but still somewhat isolated from the other citizens of the city. They are visible, they openly follow the standards set by Hashem and not the standards of the city, and their visibility may have an influence on others even though it is not an active attempt at influencing them. Yet HaRav Sorotzkin rejects these "Tzadikim" as part of the fifty in Avraham's request. Avraham already believed that no tzaddik would suffer the same fate as the evil people of S'dom. These men already would have been saved individually but would not have been enough to save the rest of the city. Avraham was already noted for his active influence on others. His tent was always open for guests and he spent his entire life teaching others about Hashem and His righteousness which they should emulate.

When Avraham spoke of "in the midst of the city", he understood the type of tzaddik described by Hirsch, ibn Ezra, and the Ramban. HaRav Sorotzkin explains, "there are Tzaddikim who live in a city but are not "in the midst of the city". They are isolated within the daled amot (the limited personal space) of the law. Tzaddikim like these do not have an influence on the people of the city and cannot return them to a path of good. For that reason, Avraham specifies "in the midst of the city", those who protect the gates, guard themselves from evil, and stand at the breach, for certainly these could guide others and save the inhabitants of the city." In this instance, it is not enough for the Tzaddik to exist "in the midst of the city", even if he openly displays his belief in Hashem and follows His principles. He must take an active role in teaching others about Hashem and how to live a proper life. He must castigate them for their evil actions and protest their evil laws. These Tzaddikim are the ones that Avraham seeks, those who have a chance at reforming the evil society of S'dom. Avraham understood the impossibility of finding such Tzaddikim in the city, and for that reason he only uses the word three times when discussing the fifty men at the beginning of his plea. Still he felt that there might be isolated pockets of men whom he could speak with who could become the Tzaddikim needed to change the people of S'dom. His

plea to Hashem was for assistance in locating these men and the promise that, if he could influence them to accept this task, Hashem would save the city on their behalf. That is why Avraham sought men who would actively take upon themselves the role of protector and guardian of the law.

There is a clear deterioration of morals today throughout the world. As Jews, we must strive to be the kind of Tzaddikim who will seek to influence the world to Torah values and ideals. May we each be worthy to save ourselves through our righteous actions, but may we also be worthy to influence others "in the midst of the city" to choose Torah as their standard and guide in life. © 2020 Rabbi D. Levin

**RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG**

## TorahWeb

"**A**nd I will make you a great nation' (Bereishis 12:2). Because the journey diminishes reproduction, Avraham needed a blessing to have many descendants" (Rashi). The Midrash Tanchuma explains differently, as follows: when did Hashem make Avraham into a great nation? When Am Yisrael accepted the Torah, as Moshe declared (Devarim 4:8), "And which is a great nation that has just statutes and laws, as the entire Torah that I place before you today?" (Tanchuma Lech Lecha 3).

Rashi understands a great nation quantitatively. Despite the arduous journey, which inhibits procreation, you will father a large nation. By contrast, the Tanchuma interprets a great nation qualitatively and links this greatness to the acceptance of the laws of the Torah.

In fact, the phrase "great nation" (goy gadol) is found twice more in Devarim (4:6-7), "When the nations of the world hear the Torah laws, they will comment, when seeing you observe the laws, 'This great nation is wise and understanding.' For which is a great nation that has a G-d Who is close to it, as HaShem whenever we call to Him?"

The Ba'al HaTurim writes that the blessing "I will make you a nation (goy)" is the greatest (gadol) of the seven blessings found in 12:2 and 12:3. This national experience includes slavery and emancipation. The mere fact that Avraham's progeny will emerge as a national unit that survives forever, as a national unit in good times and bad, is "gadol," the greatest bracha.

The series of the aforementioned three pesukim which contain the phrase "great nation" begins (4:6), "This is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations." The Gemara (Shabbos 75a) asks: What is the wisdom and understanding that is visible to the eyes of the nations? This is the calculation of the "tekufos umazalos." These astronomical and astrological phenomena, as interpreted by wise Jewish scholars, are later confirmed when their meteorological predictions come true (Rashi).

It is this wisdom which is called bina, understanding (Divrei Hayamim I 12:33, see Rashi Devarim 33:18) that the nations, which do not possess Torah wisdom, can ascertain (Maharsha).

This, in turn, leads to their statement that our great nation is wise and because we observe all of the laws of the Torah.

In earlier generations, Rabbinic scholars were recognized for their scientific and medical knowledge, which led to a great appreciation of Torah by their non-Jewish contemporaries. Today, Jewish scientists and doctors continue to enhance our great nation's international reputation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the Orthodox Jewish community disproportionately. All of the blessings of "I will make you a great nation" have been affected. The sheer number of fatalities, r"l, has quantitatively reduced our great nation. Of course, each loss is a terrible tragedy for the deceased and the close family and friends. But the cumulative losses in the Orthodox community have been devastating.

Our reputation as a wise and understanding nation has been tarnished. Despite staggering numbers of mortality and morbidity, and notwithstanding repeated warnings and predictions that have come true, appropriate precautions are often ignored. Nearly all physicians, including numerous Orthodox doctors, agree that masks and social distance reduce risk of transmission. In many if not most circumstances, lack of precaution adds danger. It is not only unscientific, it is against the halachic requirement to avoid danger whenever possible. The dozens of recent Covid-19 funerals across the spectrum of Orthodoxy, in the US and Eretz Yisrael, should lead to universal compliance. The failure to wear masks and to distance is a perplexing case of cognitive dissonance, unbecoming a wise and understanding nation.

Avraham's greatest blessing was the creation of an eternal national unit known as Am Yisrael. Based on halacha and mesora, Jews congregate in tefila and Torah, in simcha and aivel. However, the basis of these laudable practices is concern for a fellow Jew. We often go to extraordinary lengths to help and join with others. Today this same mandate demands that we reduce these communal activities to help us stay safe. As a single national unit, we may not practice extreme individualism which results in the spread COVID.

Similarly, young Jews many not unnecessarily risk getting COVID-19 based on relatively mild outcomes for youngsters. As a single national unit, the welfare of older Jews, who can be infected by younger ones with disastrous consequences, cannot be ignored. Shuls, schools, wedding and funerals are all potential spreaders and must proceed with caution. Teaching youngsters to engage in lies or subterfuge to circumvent local laws is terrible chinuch. Dishonesty leads some to leave Torah observance (See the book

"Off the Derech" by Faranak Margolese), and causes a chilul Hashem. It could lead to anti-Semitism by those claiming that Orthodox Jews spread disease.

Thankfully, many are now taking the precautions advocated by many gedolei rabbanim, doctors and governmental authorities. This will lead to the fulfillment of Hashem's promise to make us a goy gadol, a great nation. Our numbers will increase as we limit death by COVID-19. Our reputation as a wise and understanding nation, which the Torah attributes to scientific knowledge as well as halachic observance, both of which are reflected by adhering to sound medical advice, will be restored. And the greatest blessing is realized when, as a single national unit, we do whatever is necessary and appropriate to save lives, including staying home.

As members of this great nation, let us all call to HaShem Who is close to us. May Hashem answer our prayers, bring a refua shelaima to the sick, protect the healthy, end the pandemic speedily and fulfill the blessings He gave Avraham Avinu so many years ago.  
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#### **RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN**

### **Insights from Krakow**

"**H**e [Avraham] sat at the tent's entrance in the heat of the day." (Bereishis 18:1) Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 48:7) teach that Avraham wished to stand, but Hashem told him to remain seated. "Sit. You will be a sign for your children. In the future, they will sit in judgment, and I will stand at the side of the judges, while they sit, as it is written, "G-d stands in the divine gathering, in the midst of judges...." (Tehilim 82:1)

While this was certainly a welcome message for Avraham, why was this the time and place to inform him about the workings of the beis din in the future? What possible connection can there be between Avraham sitting in his tent three days after his bris, looking for guests to invite into his tent?

Perhaps we can explain the relevance through another allusion that Chazal see in Avraham's sitting at the entrance to his tent. (Yalkut Shimoni #82) Avraham, they say, will also sit at the entrance of Gehinom, and act as a gatekeeper. He will prevent any circumcised Jew from entering. (The reference to the "heat of the day" is, of course, fitting, as the navi of the day that "burns like an oven." (Malachi 3:19))

Avraham wished to stand because he entertained, in his humility, some doubt about his saving so many people from Gehinom. Hashem created it for a reason, after all. Was it right for him to attempt to contravene Hashem's purpose in creating it? He sensed that Hashem might be judging him for his large-scale rescue operation. Perhaps his tenacity in saving souls from Gehinom was an affront to Hashem's honor. Why should he flout His will?

Hashem instructed Avraham to remain seated. He was not being judged. Hashem was pleased with Avraham's mission; it was entirely in accordance with His will. When the righteous stand in the breach and plead for G-d's children, He is pleased. It brings honor to His name -- not the opposite.

In fact, Avraham's obstinate defense of Hashem's children would be rewarded measure for measure. Hashem told him: "I will do the same in the future. Dayanim who sit in judgment are instructed to be very serious and careful about their work. They are told to see Gehinom opening up under them, if they should cause a miscarriage of justice. (Yevamos 109b) I will follow from your lead, Avraham. Just as you saved people from descending into Gehinom, so will I. I will stand beside the judges in the courtroom, preventing them from making mistakes, and thus saving them from the punishment of Gehinom whose opening threatens to swallow them up. *Based on Chidushei R. Yosef Nechemia (Kornitzer) (1880-1933) ©2020 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein & torah.org*

**SHLOMO KATZ**

## Hama'ayan

"Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day." (18:1) Rashi z"l writes: [Hashem came] L'vaker / to visit the sick. Rabbi Chama the son of Chanina said: It was the third day after his circumcision and Hashem came and inquired into the state of his health. [Until here from Rashi]

R' Daniel Feldman shlita (rabbi in Teaneck, N.J.) writes: Many commentaries write that the correct translation of "L'vaker" -- which has the same root as the first word of "Bikur Cholim" -- is not "visiting" but, rather, "checking into." This supports the view that the Mitzvah of Bikur Cholim is not fulfilled by just visiting, but by looking into the patient's needs and seeing how one can help. Here, for example, Hashem came to see what Avraham needed, and He saw that Avraham needed guests to whom he could provide hospitality.

At the same time, R' Feldman notes, Rambam z"l ends his description of the Mitzvah of Bikur Cholim with the word "V'yotzei" / "And he leaves." As much as a visitor believes he is helping the ill, part of the Mitzvah is, apparently, knowing when to leave. (Divine Footsteps p.45-46)

"For we are about to destroy this place, for their outcry has become great before Hashem; so Hashem has sent us to destroy it." (19:13)

Midrash Rabbah teaches: Because the angels revealed Hashem's secrets, they were not allowed to return to His inner sanctum for 138 years. [Until here from the Midrash]

R' Chaim Zaichyk z"l (1906-1989; Rosh

Yeshiva of Yeshivat Bet Yosef-Novardok in Buchach, Poland; later in Israel) asks: Were the angels not sent to destroy S'dom; thus, would it not become public very soon why they were there? Moreover, did it not serve the evil people of S'dom right to hear about their fate and "twist in the wind" a bit before they were destroyed?

He explains: Hashem dispenses reward and punishment in precise measures, as He determines fits the good or bad deed that was done. For the people of S'dom, He determined that the suffering they would experience when their city was actually destroyed was all they deserved; apparently, they did not deserve the extra suffering of knowing their end was near. (If that knowledge would have caused them to repent, that would be a different story, but Hashem knew that was not the case.) Likewise, for Lot and his family, the actual fright they would experience at the moment of escaping S'dom was sufficient to atone for their sins; they also did not deserve the extra worry that the angels caused them. Therefore, the angels had no business revealing what their mission in S'dom was. (Ohr Chadash: Chanukah-Purim p.7)

"Elokim has heeded the cry of the youth [Yishmael] in his present state." (21:17) Rashi z"l explains: He shall be judged according to his actions now, and not according to what he may do in future. The angels said: "Master of the Universe, for one whose descendants will kill your children through thirst [at the time of the destruction of the Temple] will You provide a well?" Hashem asked them, "What is he now, righteous or wicked?" They replied, "Righteous." Hashem said to them, "I will judge him according to his present deeds." [Until here from Rashi]

R' Srayah Deblitzki z"l (1926-2018; Bnei Brak, Israel) explains: Hashem knows the future, but He chooses not to take that knowledge into account when judging a person. However, if the person being judged is already planning future wickedness, Hashem does take that into account.

R' Deblitzki adds: It would seem that a person does not need to have positive thoughts in order to be judged favorably, as long as he does not have negative thoughts. This would explain our custom of adopting stringencies for the duration of the Ten Days of Repentance-- for example, eating only Jewish-baked bread. Even though we have no plans to continue practicing this stringency after the High Holidays, our neutral thoughts combined with our positive action contribute to being judged favorably. (Ani L'dodi: L'nefesh Tidreshenu p.218) ©2020 S. Katz & torah.org

