Vayeira 5783 Volume XXX Number 6

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

Where is a mystery at the heart of the biblical story of Abraham, and it has immense implications for our understanding of Judaism.

Who was Abraham and why was he chosen? The answer is far from obvious. Nowhere is he described, as was Noah, as "a righteous man, perfect in his generations." We have no portrait of him, like the young Moses, physically intervening in conflicts as a protest against injustice. He was not a soldier like David or a visionary like Isaiah. In only one place, near the beginning of our parsha, does the Torah say why God singled him out: 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. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

Abraham was chosen in order to be a father. Indeed Abraham's original name, Av ram, means "mighty father", and his enlarged name, Avraham, means "father of many nations".

No sooner do we notice this than we recall that the first person in history to be given a proper name was Chavah, Eve, because, said Adam, "she is the mother of all life." Note that motherhood is drawn attention to in the Torah long before fatherhood (twenty generations to be precise, ten from Adam to Noah, and ten from Noah to Abraham). The reason is that motherhood is a biological phenomenon. It is common to almost all forms of advanced life. Fatherhood is a cultural phenomenon. There is little in biology that supports pair-bonding, monogamy and faithfulness in marriage, and less still that connects males with their offspring. That is why fatherhood always needs reinforcement from the moral code operative in a society. Absent that, and families fragment very fast indeed, with the burden being overwhelmingly borne by the abandoned mother.

This emphasis on parenthood – motherhood in the case of Eve, fatherhood in that of Abraham – is absolutely central to Jewish spirituality, because what Abrahamic monotheism brought into the world was not just a mathematical reduction of the number of gods from many to one. The God of Israel is not primarily the God of the scientists who set the universe into motion with the Big Bang. It is not the God of the philosophers, whose necessary being undergirds our contingency. Nor is it even the God of the mystics, the Ein Sof, the Infinity that frames our finitude. The God of Israel is the God who loves us and cares for us as a parent loves for and cares for a child.

Sometimes God is described as our father: "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?" (Malachi 2:10). Sometimes, especially in the late chapters of the book of Isaiah, God described as a mother: "Like one whom his mother comforts, so shall I comfort you" (Is. 66:13). "Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you" (Is. 49:15). The primary attribute of God, especially whenever the four-letter name Hashem is used, is compassion, the Hebrew word for which, rachamim, comes from the word rechem, meaning "a womb".

Thus our relationship with God is deeply connected with our relationship with our parents, and our understanding of God is deepened if we have had the blessing of children (I love the remark of a young American Jewish mother: "Now that I've become a parent I find that I can relate to God much better: Now I know what it's like creating something you can't control").

All of which makes the story of Abraham very hard to understand for two reasons. The first is that Abraham was the son told by God to leave his father: "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house." The second is that Abraham was the father told by God to sacrifice his son: "Then God said: Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah, and there sacrifice him as a burnt offering on the mountain I will show you." How can this make sense? It is hard enough to understand God commanding these things of anyone. How much more

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

so given that God chose Abraham specifically to become a role model of the parent-child, father-son relationship.

The Torah is teaching us something fundamental and counter-intuitive. There has to be separation before there can be connection. We have to have the space to be ourselves if we are to be good children to our parents, and we have to allow our children the space to be themselves if we are to be good parents.

I argued last week that Abraham was in fact continuing a journey his father Terach had already begun. However, it takes a certain maturity on our part before we realise this, since our first reading of the narrative seems to suggest that Abraham was about to set out on a journey that was completely new. Abraham, in the famous midrashic tradition, was the iconoclast who took a hammer to his father's idols. Only later in life do we fully appreciate that, despite our adolescent rebellions, there is more of our parents in us than we thought when we were young. But before we can appreciate this there has to be an act of separation.

Likewise in the case of the binding of Isaac. I have long argued that the point of the story is not that Abraham loved God enough to sacrifice his son, but rather that God was teaching Abraham that we do not own our children, however much we love them. The first human child was called Cain because his mother Eve said, "With the help of God I have acquired [kaniti] a man" (Gen. 4:1). When parents think they own their child, the result is often tragic.

First separate, then join. First individuate, then relate. That is one of the fundamentals of Jewish spirituality. We are not God. God is not us. It is the clarity of the boundaries between heaven and earth that allow us to have a healthy relationship with God. It is true that Jewish mysticism speaks about bittul ha-yesh, the complete nullification of the self in the all-embracing infinite light of God, but that is not the normative mainstream of Jewish spirituality. What is so striking about the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Bible is that when they speak to God, they remain themselves. God does not overwhelm us. That is the principle the kabbalists called tzimtzum, God's self-limitation. God makes space for us to be ourselves.

Abraham had to separate himself from his father before he, and we, could understand how much he owed his father. He had to separate from his son so that Isaac could be Isaac and not simply a clone of Abraham. Rabbi Menahem Mendel, the Rebbe of Kotzk, put this inimitably when he said, "If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you!"

God loves us as a parent loves a child – but a parent who truly loves their child makes space for the child to develop his or her own identity. It is the space we create for one another that allows love to be like sunlight to a flower, not like a tree to the plants that grow beneath. The role of love, human and Divine, is, in the lovely phrase of Irish poet John O'Donohue, "to bless the space between us". *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Take your son, your only son, the one whom you love, Isaac, and dedicate him there for a burnt offering [or a dedication; literally, a lifting up] on one of the mountains which I will tell you of." (Genesis 22:2) As we have seen, there are manifold possibilities of interpreting God's most difficult directive to Abraham. But in order for us to truly appreciate the eternal quality of Torah, let us examine how the martyrs of Jewish history have taken – and drawn inspiration from – this drama of the Akeda (binding).

In the city of Worms, in 1096, some 800 people were killed in the course of two days at the end of the month of Iyar. In The Last Trial, Professor Shalom Spiegel's study of the Akeda, he records a chronicle of that period that cites a declaration by one of the community's leaders, Rabbi Meshulam bar Isaac: "All you great and small, hearken unto me. Here is my son that God gave me and to whom my wife Tziporah gave birth in her old age. Isaac is this child's name. And now I shall offer him up as father Abraham offered up his son Isaac."

Sadly, the chronicle concludes with the father slaying the boy himself, in the presence of his wife. When the distraught parents leave the room of their sacrifice, they are both cruelly slaughtered by the murdering Christians.

Spiegel quotes from a dirge of the time: "Compassionate women in tears, with their own hands slaughtered, as at the Akeda of Moriah. Innocent souls withdrew to eternal life, to their station on high…"

The biblical story of the binding of Isaac is replayed via the Talmudic invocation of the ram's horn (shofar) each year on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment and Renewal. The shofar symbolizes the ram substitute for Isaac on Mount Moriah; God commands that we hearken to the cries of this shofar 'in order that I may remember for your benefit the binding of Isaac the son of Abraham, and I shall account it for you as if you yourselves bound yourselves up before Me' (Rosh Hashanah 16a).

This message of the shofar has inspired Jews of all generations to rise to the challenge of martyrdom whenever necessary, transforming themselves into Abrahams and Sarahs, placing their precious children

on the altar of Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of the divine name.

Indeed, there was apparently a stubborn tradition which insisted that Abraham actually went through with the act of sacrifice. After all, following the biblical command of the angel to Abraham (the deus ex machina as it were) – 'Do not cast your hand against the lad' (Genesis 22:19), where is Isaac? If, indeed, his life has just been saved, why doesn't he accompany his father, why don't they go together to the lads, why don't they – father and son – return home together to Beer Sheva and Sarah (as they have been described twice as doing – father and son walking together – in the context of the Akeda story)?!

Moreover, when they first approached the mountain of sacrifice, Abraham tells the young men to wait down below: 'I and the boy will go yonder; we will worship and we will come back to you' (Genesis 22:5).

So why does the text have Abraham return alone?

On the basis of this textual problem, Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) makes mention of an interpretation that suggests that Abraham literally followed God's command, slaying his son, and that God later on miraculously brought Isaac back to life. It is precisely that stark and startling deletion of Isaac's name from the conclusion of the biblical account of the Akeda itself which gave countless generations of Jewish martyrs the inspiration for their sacrifice; and this is the case, even though Ibn Ezra felt compelled to deny the tradition as inaccurate: "Isaac is not mentioned. But he who asserts that Abraham slew Isaac and abandoned him, and that afterwards Isaac came to life again, is speaking contrary to the biblical text" (Ibn Ezra, Genesis 22:1).

Ibn Ezra is obviously making reference to a commentary which Jewish martyrdom would not allow to fall into oblivion.

The earliest referencee to this notion of Isaac's actual sacrifice is probably the Midrash Hagadol which cites R. Eleazer ben Pedat, a first generation Amorah of the Talmud:

"Although Isaac did not die, Scripture regards him as though he had died. And his ashes lay piled on the altar. That's why the text mentions Abraham and not Isaac."

And perhaps one might argue that Isaac was so traumatized by the Akeda that a specific aspect of him did die, part of his personality which would always remain on the altar. After all, Isaac is the most ethereal and passive of the patriarchs, called by the Midrash – even after the binding – the olah temimah, the whole burnt offering.

But this psychological interpretation and Ibn Ezra's rejection notwithstanding, the penitential Slichot prayers still speak of the 'ashes of Isaac' on the altar, continuing to give credence to the version which suggests that Isaac did suffer martyrdom. And we have already cited recorded incidents of children who suffered martyrdom at the hands of their parents, who did not wish them to be violated by the pagan tyrants.

God's command to sacrifice Isaac, and Abraham's submissive silence, may actually help us understand how a people promised greatness, wealth and innumerable progeny comparable to the stars, find the courage and the faith to endure the suffering and martyrdom mercilessly inflicted upon them by virtually every Christian or Islamic society with which they come into contact.

The paradox in Jewish history is that unless we were willing to sacrifice our children for God, we would never have survived as a God-inspired and God-committed nation with a unique message for ourselves and the world. Perhaps that is why Mount Moriah, the place of the willingness to sacrifice, is the Temple Mount of the Holy City of Jerusalem: the place from which God will ultimately be revealed to all of humanity; the place of Jewish eternity.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Wars, family dysfunction, and the danger of future extinction are the challenges that confront our father Avraham and our mother Sarah in the narrative that dominates this week's Torah reading. In this era, correcting the past and editing personal biographies to make people's lives appear perfect, serene and smooth, is especially true. This methodology attempts to make the subject character the model and prototype for others to admire and perhaps even imitate.

Who wants to have a life of troubles, frustrations, domestic strife and risk of destruction – all for the sake of a noble but very unpopular cause? So, why would the Torah not wish to at least "pretty up" the story of Avraham and his family at least by omission if not by commission? Of course the Torah is the book of absolute truth and therefore brooks none of the human weaknesses that affect all of us when dealing – even in our most objective attempt – with narratives and biographies.

The message here is that truth is the most important value and outweighs all other considerations. The Torah is determined to teach us that life, even for the greatest of people, is oftentimes difficult, disappointing, and sometimes even cruel. And, that faith and commitment, goodness and morality are the supports that justify our very existence, no matter the challenges that constantly engulf human life. We are not bidden to emulate Avraham's life experiences. Rather, we are bidden to emulate his traits of belief and resilience, commitment and unwavering goodness.

We are taught that God's seal, so to speak, is truth. Truth is the gift that we ask God to grant to Yaakov and his descendants. Maimonides explains to us that we are not to serve idols, believe in superstitions and worship the dead, because all of these are false, little more than a pack of lies. And all of that is also applicable to belief in ideologies that have long lost any sense of truth, as to their goals and certainly as to their methods and policies.

Avraham sees that Sodom is to be destroyed because of its falseness. He recognizes that Avimelech cannot be trusted because he is a hypocritically false person. And Avraham reserves the right to serve the cause of God's truth even at the cost, originally, of his own life, and later that of his own beloved son. The Talmud describes our world as being "a world of falseness." Yet knowing that we inhabit a world of falseness is the first step towards advancing into a world of honesty and truth.

That is what is meant by the biblical admonition to attempt to go in God's ways. To be aware of the difference between falsehood and truth is the necessary ingredient for intelligent life and eternal faith. Avraham's difficulties in life point us towards the way of realism and truth. It knows no compromises or avoidances. It is eternal.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As Hagar sits a distance from her dying son Ishmael, an angel appears and declares, "Mah lach Hagar?" (What ails you, Hagar? Genesis 21:17). This question is actually rhetorical, for God's emissary obviously knows what is bothering Hagar.

Rhetorical questions play an important role in the Torah and usually appear in order to present a criticism. For example, when God asks Adam, "Ayeka?" after he eats from the tree of the Garden of Eden, He obviously knows where Adam is physically located (3:9). God's apparent question is actually a clear statement to Adam, criticizing him and challenging him: "What have you done? Why did you disobey Me?"

One wonders, then, why the angel is critical of Hagar in our narrative. Keep in mind that God previously promised Hagar that she would have a child who would "dwell in the face of all his brethren" (16:12). God later tells Abraham that Ishmael will become "a great nation" – a promise Abraham no doubt shared with Hagar (17:20). Still, here in the desert, Hagar fears for Ishmael's life, sensing that his death is imminent (21:16). Her feeling displays a loss of faith in the divine promise. When the angel asks, "What ails you, Hagar?" he actually is asking, "What is wrong? Have you lost faith in God?"

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 that she strayed (va'teta) in the wilderness (21:14). This confirms our belief that Hagar had lost her spiritual way.

This idea of to'eh is also found when Abraham, for a second time, declares that Sarah is his sister. He tells Avimelech, "And it came to pass when God caused me to wander [hit'u]" (20:13). Here, Abraham is straying. He misidentifies Sarah as his sister rather than stating that she is his covenantal wife from whom the second patriarch will come.

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

In all these cases, the personalities who were to'eh eventually found their way back. Ishmael is saved; Abraham recognizes that Sarah is his covenantal wife and Isaac his covenantal son; Joseph and his brothers unite.

Everyone will be to'eh. Inevitably, everyone, at times, loses their way. The question is not whether we will stray but how we will respond after having done so. Will we continue to inhabit a state of to'eh, or will we work on our souls and our lives until we return to the path of holiness and connection?

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Welcoming Guests

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

From Parshat Vayera, the Talmud (*Shabbat* 127a) learns that "The mitzva of *Hachnasat Orchim* is greater than greeting the Divine Presence (*Shechinah*)." Nowadays, opportunities to greet the Divine Presence are few and far between, so we are rarely faced with this choice. However, it does sometimes happen that tending to guests has an impact on other *mitzvot*. For example, let us say that guests arrive at one's home unexpectedly on Shabbat itself, and they need a place to stay. In order to accommodate them, he must work hard to clear space for them. Though normally we would avoid exerting ourselves on Shabbat, since this is for a mitzva it is permitted. Bear in mind, we are not talking about neighbors who drop in for a cup of coffee, but travelers who have nowhere else to go.

Another possible conflict presents itself if one is planning to attend a *shiur* (Torah lecture) when unexpected guests arrive. Should he sacrifice Torah study for *Hachnasat Orchim*?

On the one hand, the Talmud (*ibid.*) states that "The mitzva of *Hachnasat Orchim* is greater than waking up early in the morning to go to the *beit midrash* (study hall)." On the other hand, the Mishnah (*Peah* 1:1) states that "*Talmud Torah keneged kulam*," the study of Torah supersedes all other *mitzvot*. *Hachnasat Orchim* is certainly included, as it is mentioned explicitly in the same mishnah.

Some resolve this seeming conflict by explaining that one's Torah study takes precedence over *Hachnasat Orchim* only when there are others who will host the visitors if he does not. Alternatively, it may be that *Hachnasat Orchim* takes precedence over waking up early to go to the *beit midrash*. In contrast, when the conflict is between hosting guests and Torah study itself, Torah study takes precedence.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"He lifted his eyes and saw, and behold three men were standing over him, and he saw, and he ran to greet them..." (Beraishis 18:2) Rashi asks the obvious question: why does it say, "and he saw" twice? He explains that the first time, Avraham saw the travelers in the distance. He got excited. Here were the guests he so urgently desired. Then he looked again. This time, he focused on the scene, and began to infer the circumstances.

He saw they were not moving, though it was extremely hot and not a day for loitering. He understood that they were hesitant to disturb him. Now, his mission changed slightly. Instead of his usual generous hospitality and effusive greetings, Avraham had to assuage their feelings and make them comfortable. Indeed, this is part and parcel of hachnosas orchim, caring for guests.

He starts by minimizing what he will do. "Let a little water be fetched." This implies, "You're not troubling me at all." Then he continues. "You'll eat a bit and rest, and be on your way." He shows there's no pressure, and that he doesn't intend to deter them from their journey.

Finally, he says, "This is why you passed by." Saying it was meant to be reassures them that Avraham is not bothered by their presence, but on the contrary, he understands that they arrived there so he could wait on them because of a Higher Power. Again, his intent was to make them comfortable and not feel they were putting him out.

This concern for others in spite of his own feelings is a hallmark of Avraham Avinu. When he went to the Akeida, where he was about to sacrifice his son, he exhibited the same self-control and awareness of others. When the angel stopped him, the Torah says, (22:13) "And he looked up and he saw a ram…" Once again, the idea that he not only physically saw it, but thought about what he was seeing and perceived that this ram was placed there for him by Hashem, and that it would not be stealing from someone else. Only then did he take it to offer as a sacrifice.

Avraham Avinu was a Master of Chesed, kindness, because his focus was the other person and not himself. What he desired most of all was to be good to others. This is a true emulation of Hashem who is the Master Maitiv, one who is good to others. That's because Hashem is only a giver, for we cannot give Him anything. The more we become givers and the less we become takers, the more we act like Hashem, just like our father, Avraham.

In order to do that, when we look at others, we should see THEM, not just how they exist in relation to US. That means taking a second look, and thinking about what's good for them.

Once, when the Satmar Rebbe z"l was leaving the hospital after an illness, a very pushy fellow "insisted" on helping him put on his coat. The Rav told him he didn't need any help, even though he really did. When he was later asked why, he told the questioner: "I didn't let him help me because that man wasn't interested in helping a weak old Jew. Instead, he was focused on his mitzvah of Bikur Cholim, and I am not simply a "cheifetz shel mitzvah," (an object to be used for a good deed.)"

One day, a boy arrived late to school. The teacher asked him where he'd been. He apologized, explaining that as a boy scout, he was supposed to start each day with a good deed. Therefore, on his way to school, he stopped to help an old woman cross the street.

The teacher replied, "That's very nice of you, but you're forty-five minutes late. Why did it take so long?"

"Oh," responded the boy. "She didn't want to go." © 2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

As idolatrous practices go, worshiping the dirt on one's feet certainly ranks high, along with Baal Zevuv and Baal Pe'or, on the scale of strange.

Yet, we are informed in the parsha of "dirt of feet" idolatry, if in passing, implied by Avraham Avinu's offer to his three visitors to wash their feet before entering his tent (Beraishis 18:4).

Rashi, quoting the Gemara in Bava Metzia (86b), explains that Avraham "thought that they were Arabs who bow down to the dirt of their feet, and didn't want to bring idolatry into his home."

All idolatry is the projection of power onto a

creation rather than the Creator, and dedication to that perceived source of power. What could the dirt of one's feet represent?

What occurs to me is the possibility that a nomadic wayfarer, like the sort of people Avraham suspected his visitors to be, might view the dirt on his feet as symbolizing where he has been, i.e., his past. And regarded it as something powerful, to which he is beholden. He is a slave to his history, powerless to shed its influence.

The inclination to idolatry no longer exists (Yoma, 69b), yet some residue of it persists (in the form of things like good luck charms and "worship" of cultural figures).

And if my reading of foot-dirt worship isn't too outlandish, it might persist today in the feeling that one is confined by the events and choices of his past. While examining one's past is proper, toward the goal of repentance for bad choices, it is unhealthy to be obsessed by the past, to feel trapped by and unable to escape it. A Jew is meant to live fully in the present, and to have sights on the future.

CHAVA WILLIG LEVY

The Butterfly Effect

Reflections on Motherhood and Parshas Vayera

"A butterfly in Brazil alights upon a flower. The flit of the butterfly's wing sends out a small current of air. Flowing northward, the current gains energy until, reaching Texas, it sets off a tornado."

Last year, I had the pleasure of reading these evocative words, written by my friend Bernard Kabak, in Lincoln Square Synagogue's newsletter. With them, he introduced a thought-provoking midrashic insight into Parshas Vayera: Of the 42 locations in which the Jewish People encamped during their desert wanderings, it was at Aloosh, mentioned in Parshas Masei (Bamidbar 33:13), that the miraculous manna first fell. Why was Aloosh accorded this honor? Because its name alludes to a single word uttered 400 years earlier: looshi.

Parshas Vayera's dramatic prelude may have overshadowed that little word's significance. There is Avraham, sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Suddenly, he sees three passersby. Offering them hospitality, he rushes to arrange their meal. We then read (Bereishis 18:6): "Va'y'maher Avraham ha'ohella, el Sarah; vayomer, 'Mahari, shlosh s'im kemach soless; looshi, va'assi oogos.'" "And Avraham hurried to the tent, to Sarah, and he said, 'Hurry. Three measures of the finest flour, go knead [looshi] and make loaves.'"

Looshi. One little word that might have gotten lost in the shuffle. But it did not escape Chazal's attention. They explain that Hashem saw the devotion with which Sarah Imeinu prepared food for three strangers. And 400 years later at Aloosh, the encampment whose name alludes to looshi, Hashem reciprocated by providing three million of her descendants with manna.

A kind gesture for three. A miracle for three million. The butterfly effect over an expanse of time, not space.

Mr. Kabak's insightful analysis of these historical bookends prompted me to apply the butterfly effect to two other mothers who come to life on Shabbat Vayera: Hagar and the Ishah HaShunamit (the Shunamite woman).

From generation to generation, Jews have elucidated common denominators that each Torah portion shares with its haftarah. Many consider the link between Parshat Vayera and its haftarah (Melachim II 4:1-37) to be childlessness, the pain of infertility and its resolution as experienced by Sarah Imeinu and the Ishah HaShunamit.

But I see a different common denominator, or should I say a stark contrast, between Parshas Vayera and its haftarah, each introducing its own butterfly effect whose consequences speak to us — actually, shout to us — to this very day.

The contrast I want to introduce is between Hagar — not Sarah — and the Ishah HaShunamit.

In Bereishit 21:15-16, we read of Hagar and Yishmael's departure from Avraham and Sarah's home:

"Vayichlu hamayim min hacheimess, vatashleich es hayeled tachas achad hasichim. Vateileich vateishev lah mineged harcheik, k'mitachavei keshes, ki amra, 'Al er'eh b'mos hayeled.' Vateishev mineged va'tisa es kola va'teivch."

"When the water was consumed, she cast off the boy beneath one of the trees. She went and sat herself down at a distance some bowshots away, for she said, 'Let me not see the death of the child.' And she sat at a distance, lifted her voice and wept."

The text offers us several salient points. Hagar casts her son — dehydrated but nowhere near death — under a tree. Instead of tending to him, she walks away and wails. Although she loves her son, her priority is to mitigate her pain rather than see him suffer.

But in Parshat Vayera's haftarah, we meet a very different mother: the hospitable Ishah HaShunamit, whom Elisha HaNavi blessed with a son when it appeared she would never have one. In Melachim II 4:18-20, we read: "Vayigdal hayeled, vayehi hayom, vayeitzei el aviv, el hakotzrim. Vayomer el aviv, 'Roshi! Roshi!' Vayomer el hanaar, 'Sa'eihu el imo.' Vayisa'eihu vayivi'eihu el imo vayeshev al birkeha ad ha'tzaharayim, vayamos."

"The child grew up and it happened one day that he went out to his father, to the reapers. He said to his father, 'My head! My head!' His father said to the attendant, 'Carry him to his mother.' And he carried him

and brought him to his mother. He sat on her lap until noon, and he died."

No matter how much her heart is breaking, this mother never leaves her son, a child who is not merely dehydrated, but dying. But the contrast does not end here. What does she do when confronted with her child's death? The Ishah HaShunamit has no time for tears. Unlike the passive, helpless Hagar, she springs into action (Melachim II 4:24): "Vatachavosh ha'aton, vatomer el na'ara, 'Nehag valech. Al ta'atzor li lirkov ki im amarti lach.'"

"Then she saddled an ass, and said to her servant: 'Drive and go forward; don't slow down unless I tell you.'"

But there's more. When she reaches Elisha, this reserved, righteous woman behaves uncharacteristically (Melachim II 4:27-28): "Vatavo el ish haElokim...vatachazek b'raglav... Vatomer, '...Halo amarti, Lo tashleh oti?'"

"And when she came to the man of G-d... she caught hold of his feet... And she said, '...Did I not say: Do not deceive me?'"

Finally, when Elisha instructs his servant to rush to the child on his behalf, this distraught mother throws etiquette to the wind (Melachim II 4:30): "Vatomer eim hana'ar, 'Chai Hashem v'chei nafshecha im e'ezveka.'"

"And the child's mother said, 'As Hashem lives, and as your soul lives, I will not leave you [unless you yourself accompany me to my child].'"

Thousands of years later, what do we see if not the butterfly effect? Female descendants of Hagar wail as they turn aside, leaving their children, who are nowhere near death, to die — and not to die quietly under a bush, but to die in the eye of a monstrous hurricane of explosive flames.

In contrast, what do we see in the spiritual descendants of the Ishah HaShunamit if not the butterfly effect? This past summer offered us a tragic case in point: In Jerusalem, a terrorist behind the wheel of a bulldozer went on a rampage, crushing a woman — 33-year-old Batsheva Unterman, hy"d — to death. In the last seconds of her life, what did this quintessential Jewish mother (a woman who, like the Ishah HaShunamit, struggled with infertility) do? Quoting the Jerusalem Post, she "succeeded in unbuckling her five-month-old baby from the car-seat and passing her out through the window to safety," foregoing the chance to save her own life.

Yehi ratzon, may it be Hashem's will, that with every passing day we will witness and, through our Torah observance, intensify Jewish history's butterfly effect so that, in the words of Yeshayahu (40:31): "V'kovei Hashem yachlifu koach, ya'alu eiver ka'nesharim."

"They that hope in the Lord shall renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles."

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MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg
Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne

"And 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 ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

The theme of "lifting one's eyes and seeing" appears in several places in Parshas VaYera. Avraham is described as one who saw in this manner, whereas others in the parsha failed to observe things properly. Sitting outside his tent in the heat of the day, Avraham chooses to lift up his eyes to view potential guests (Breishis 18:2). Furthermore, years later, as Avraham is traveling to the Akeida, he once again lifts up his eyes and observes Har Hamoriya from a distance (Breishis 22:4). What is the significance of not merely seeing, but also lifting up one's eyes to see?

We can appreciate the manner in which Avraham observed things by contrasting this to others in the parsha who failed to see. Chazal note that after seeing Har Hamoriya from afar, Avraham turns to Eliezer and Yishmael and instructs them to remain behind as he and Yitzchak proceed to the Akeida. Avraham saw a cloud of glory hovering over the mountain whereas Eliezer and Yishmael saw nothing. Something special can be present, but if one fails to "lift one's eyes" and search for it, he may never notice it. Avraham actively sought out spirituality and thereby merited to see the Divine Presence.

Looking for opportunities to "lift our eyes" is not just important in searching for Hashem, but it is critical for developing our relationships with our fellow man as well. In this area, Avraham also excels and actively seeks out opportunities to perform acts of chessed. Notwithstanding recovering from his bris at the age of ninety-nine, he eagerly searches for guests despite the intense heat of the day. In contrast to when Avraham "lifts up his eyes" and sees the potential guests, Hagar also finds herself in a situation in which she can perform a great chessed. Her son, Yishmael is ill and in great need of her care. Rather than comforting her suffering child she deliberately distances herself by saying, "I do not want to watch him die." Hagar had not learned from Avraham regarding how to search for opportunities to perform chessed. Rather, she chose to close her eyes and ignore the dire situation that presented itself.

It is not coincidental that Yishmael did not see the Divine Presence as he stood before Har Hamoriya. He had not learned from his father to cease the opportunity and search for it. Rather, he followed the path of his mother, Hagar's example of turning away.

As the descendants of Avraham Avinu, we must follow his legacy of always "lifting our eyes" and finding ways to connect to Hashem and our fellow man. By actively searching for spiritual growth we will merit that Hashem will look to us as well. At the culmination of the Akeida Avraham names the very place that would later house the Beis Hamikdash, "Hashem will see." May we soon merit the fulfillment of the prophecy of Yeshayahu (60:4), "Lift your eyes and see that your children have gathered to come to you." We yearn to see the day that the place in which Hashem sees will once again serve as our vehicle to see His presence and inspire us to follow in His ways by bestowing chessed upon one another.