

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

It is one of the most famous scenes in the Bible. Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day when three strangers pass by. He urges them to rest and take some food. The text calls them men. They are in fact angels, coming to tell Sarah that she will have a child.

The chapter seems simple. It is, however, complex and ambiguous. It consists of three sections:

Verse 1: G-d appears to Abraham.

Verses 2-16: Abraham and the men/angels.

Verses 17-33: The dialogue between G-d and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

How are these sections related to one another? Are they one scene, two or three? The most obvious answer is three. Each of the above sections is a separate event. First, G-d appears to Abraham, as Rashi explains, "to visit the sick" after Abraham's circumcision. Then the visitors arrive with the news about Sarah's child. Then takes place the great dialogue about justice.

Maimonides (Guide for the Perplexed II:42) suggests that there are two scenes (the visit of the angels, and the dialogue with G-d). The first verse does not describe an event at all. It is, rather, a chapter heading.

The third possibility is that we have a single continuous scene. G-d appears to Abraham, but before He can speak, Abraham sees the passers-by and asks G-d to wait while he serves them food. Only when they have departed- in verse 17 -- does he turn to G-d, and the conversation begins.

How we interpret the chapter will affect the way we translate the word Adonai in the third verse. It could mean (1) G-d or (2) 'my lords' or 'sirs'. In the first case, Abraham would be addressing heaven. In the second, he would be speaking to the passers-by.

Several English translations take the second

option. Here is one example: "The Lord appeared to Abraham... He looked up, and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them. Bowing low, he said, 'Sirs, if I have deserved your favour, do not go past your servant without a visit.'"

The same ambiguity appears in the next chapter (19:2), when two of Abraham's visitors (in this chapter they are described as angels) visit Lot in Sodom: "The two angels came to Sodom in the evening while Lot was sitting by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low he said, 'I pray you, sirs, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night there and bathe your feet.'"

Normally, differences of interpretation of biblical narrative have no halakhic implications. They are matters of legitimate disagreement. This case is unusual, because if we translate Adonai as 'G-d', it is a holy name, and both the writing of the word by a scribe, and the way we treat a parchment or document containing it, have special stringencies in Jewish law. If we translate it as 'my lords' or 'sirs', then it has no special sanctity.

The simplest reading of both texts-the one concerning Abraham, the other, Lot-would be to read the word in both cases as 'sirs'. Jewish law, however, ruled otherwise. In the second case-the scene with Lot-it is read as 'sirs', but in the first it is read as 'G-d'. This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that Abraham interrupted G-d as He was about to speak, and asked Him to wait while he attended to his guests. This is how tradition ruled that the passage should be read: "The Lord appeared to Abraham... He looked up and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them, and bowed down. [Turning to G-d] he said: 'My G-d, if I have found favour in your eyes, do not leave your servant [i.e. Please wait until I have given hospitality to these men].' [He then turned to the men and said:] 'Let me send for some water so that you may bathe your feet and rest under this tree...'"

This daring interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: "Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine presence." Faced with a choice between listening to G-d, and offering hospitality to [what seemed to be] human beings, Abraham chose the latter. G-d acceded to his request, and waited while Abraham brought the visitors food and drink, before engaging him in dialogue about the fate of Sodom.

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated
in memory of our beloved mother

Chana Rosenberg

on her first yartzeit

אלטע חנה בת יוסף ע"ה

נפטרה כ"ג מר חשוון תשע"ב

by Itzy and Ruchie Weisberg

How can this be so? Is it not disrespectful at best, heretical at worst, to put the needs of human beings before attending on the presence of G-d?

What the passage is telling us, though, is something of immense profundity. The idolaters of Abraham's time worshipped the sun, the stars, and the forces of nature as gods. They worshipped power and the powerful. Abraham knew, however, that G-d is not in nature but beyond nature. There is only one thing in the universe on which He has set His image: the human person, every person, powerful and powerless alike.

The forces of nature are impersonal, which is why those who worship them eventually lose their humanity. As the Psalm puts it: "Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils but cannot smell... Their makers become like them, and so do all who put their trust in them." (Psalm 115)

You cannot worship impersonal forces and remain a person: compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving. Precisely because we believe that G-d is personal, someone to whom we can say 'You', we honour human dignity as sacrosanct. Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of G-d in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the Divine presence when G-d appears as G-d. What is difficult is to sense the Divine presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving G-d and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

One of the most beautiful comments on this episode was given by R. Shalom of Belz who noted that in verse 2, the visitors are spoken of as standing above Abraham [nitzavim alav]. In verse 8, Abraham is described as standing above them [omed alehem]. He said: at first, the visitors were higher than Abraham because they were angels and he a mere human being. But when he gave them food and drink and shelter, he stood even higher than the angels. We honour G-d by honouring His image, humankind. © 2012 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Take your son... and bring him up as a dedication..." (Gen 22:1) A little more than four decades ago, when I was telling my young children the story of the week's Biblical portion, my elder daughter, Batya, tearfully interrupted my tale saying, "Stop lying to me Abba, and stop telling stupid and scary stories. Hashem loves everyone - that's what you always tell us. He couldn't have asked Abraham to do to Isaac what you said." Trembling, she then ran into the bedroom to complain to my wife - and refused to listen to my Biblical renditions for the next two weeks.

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For the first time, I was forced to reexamine the Biblical account from the viewpoint of a naïve, potential victim - and I saw the words of the Scripture in all of their awesome terror. I have been wrestling with the import of the akeda story ever since. Now, I shall attempt to answer Batya's question; How could G-d have made such a cruel request of Abraham?

"And it happened after these things that G-d tested ,or proved (Ramban) or held aloft as a banner (Maimonides, Guide) Abraham, and said to him, 'Take your son, your only one, whom you love, and bring him up as a dedication upon one of the mountains that I shall show you'" (Gen 22:1,2).

The opening words, "And it happened after these things (or events)" suggest that the Divine commandment came as a result and a punishment of the two preceding Biblical events. Fascinatingly, the event immediately preceding the command of the akeda could be construed a transgression according to Israel's political right wing - a sin of giving away part of the Promised Land of Israel - and the event before that could be considered a sin by Israel's political left wing - a sin against Yishmael.

Let us first analyze the episode immediately preceding the akeda - the treaty Abraham makes with Abimelekh the King of the Philistines, allowing him and his people to live in the Negev portion of the Promised Land (Gen 21:22-33). The Rashbam, maintains that "After the event in which Abraham made a covenant with Avimelekh, the Holy One Blessed be He became angry with him for that, since this land of the Philistines is subsumed under the (Divinely granted) borders of Israel... Hence G-d vexed and punished Abraham as if to say, "You acted in a high-handed manner against the son I gave you by making a treaty between yourselves (You and Avimelekh) and your children and his children, giving away the patrimony promised to Isaac.... Now go and bring him (Isaac) as a dedication and see how you will be benefited by this treaty!" (Rashbam ad loc).

Close to four-thousand years later, before the Partition Plan of Nov 29, 1947, a less generous division of land was offered to David Ben Gurion. Uncharacteristically, he found it difficult to reach a decision; he asked the one person in the Labor Party he truly respected Yitzhak Tabenkin, to make the decision for him, promising that he would go along with whatever Tabenkin decided. Tabenkin agreed, but requested time

to take counsel with two people. The next morning, Tabenkin advised Ben Gurion to reject the deal. "I will listen to you," said the Jewish leader, "But tell me, with whom did you take counsel?" "I asked two individuals," answered Tabenkin, "I asked my grandfather and I asked my grandson. I asked my grand-father who died ten years ago and I asked my grand-son who has not yet been born. The land of Israel belongs to them!"

Abraham's penultimate act prior to the akeda may be called, "The sacrifice of Ishmael". It begins when the older and more sophisticated Ishmael mocks the younger and more naive Isaac which leads Sarah to demand that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham at first demurs, but then complies with the Divine command that he heed his wife Sarah. This narrative has striking parallels to the akeda story which suggests that G-d's request that Abraham sacrifice Isaac comes as a punishment for his having callously sacrificed Ishmael one chapter before!

The Bible describes the banishment of Ishmael:

"Early the next morning, Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba". (Genesis 21: 14)

Rashi's commentary on this verse, points out, "Abraham (sent them out with) bread and water and not with gold and silver". This was nothing short of a death mission! And then we find the parallel phrases to the akeda: "Abraham rose early in the morning" (Genesis 22: 3), and "Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac" (Genesis 22:6) just as he placed the meager supplies of bread and water on Ishmael.

G-d sends Abraham with his "olah" on what seems to be a death mission and they too must wander towards an unknown destination (ibid 22: 3). In both incidents, it is an angel who saves both boys (21:17, 22: 11) and the angel who blesses each with the blessing of becoming a great nation. (21: 17 22: 15-19).

The command of Akedat Yitzhak comes as the punishment for Akedat Yishmael! © 2012 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Godliness is a matter of perception - the perception of the individual himself or herself, as well as the perception of the outside society. Avraham is recognized, even by his pagan peers, as being a person of G-dliness in their midst. A G-dly person is recognizable to others through behavior, speech, and interpersonal relationships. That is what Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant meant in his famous statement: "The other person's welfare in this world is the key to my welfare in the eternal world."

The rabbis of the Talmud always emphasized the importance of one's reputation amongst others in his society. "What do the other human beings say about him?" was always their test of resident G-dliness in an individual. Avraham has an open hand and an open heart, a concern for others - even those who are his spiritual enemies and are wrongdoers.

Avraham, however, is not a pacifist nor is he weak and naïve in the face of evil. He goes to war to save Lot and outwits both Pharaoh and Avimelech in their nefarious behavior toward his wife, Sarah. He is the perfect example and role model for the necessary practicality and realism of life, coupled with the G-dly compassion for other human beings and their physical and spiritual plights.

In Judaism, service of G-d is always inextricably bound to the service of human society. As has often been pointed out, this was the central point of Avraham's faith, something that apparently was found lacking in his otherwise righteous predecessor, Noah.

A G-dly person has super-sensitive faculties. Avraham hears the heavenly message to leave his homeland and to journey and settle in the Land of Israel. The great Rabbi of Kotzk observed that G-d's directive was made to all publicly but only Avraham heard it and acted upon it.

His G-dliness in the attitude he exhibited towards others, his self-sacrifice in defense of his G-dly convictions, his opposition to paganism and its societal and moral ills, and his acts of kindness and devotion to the help others, all combined to give him the ability to hear what others were deaf to and to see what others were blind to.

He is able to "see" G-d appear before him and to conduct a conversation, so to speak, with his Creator. That is the reward for and the measure of true G-dliness in a person. His G-dly personality and home environment transforms the three Bedouin Arabs who enter his tent into angels. G-dliness can be contagious just as evil is also contagious. ,

G-dliness sees the Creator in every activity and occurrence in one's life and society. It therefore prevents pettiness, selfishness and self-aggrandizement from dominating our behavior, speech and attitudes. King David in Psalms proclaimed: "I have placed G-d before my eyes permanently!" By so doing he captured in a phrase the essence of G-dliness and Jewish life. A society that does not strive for at least a modicum of G-dliness in its private lives and public environment will be afflicted with ears that hear not and eyes that see not. Hopefully, not so the people of Israel, Avraham's children and heirs. © 2012 *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*

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA
HARAV BARUKH GIGI SHLIT"A

Translated by Kaeren Fish

The stories about Avraham occupy three parashot in the Torah, with the longest of them-Chayei Sara-dealing mainly with the deaths of Sara and of Avraham, and the transition from Avraham to Yitzchak.

The two main parashot that tell us about Avraham are enclosed in a well-defined framework. The first parasha begins with the command, "Take yourself (lekh-lekha) out of your country and your birthplace" (Bereishit 12:1), while the second concludes with the command, "... and take yourself (lekh-lekha) to the land of Moriya" (22:2). Chazal view these two commands as the first and last of Avraham's ten tests.

Concerning the first "lekh lekha," Rashi (12:1) comments: "For your own benefit and your own good." Clearly, Avraham gains from the first "lekh lekha." But what about the second one?

The commentators are divided as to the point of the test of the akeda.

Rashi (22:2) offers two possibilities.

a. The akeda is a response to the Satan, who accuses Avraham before G-d, asserting that he failed to offer a single sacrifice at the lavish feast that he made when Yitzchak was weaned. G-d assures the Satan that although Avraham did everything in honor of his son, if he were commanded to offer up his son to G-d he would not hesitate.

b. The akeda is a response to Yishmael, who boasts that while Yitzchak was circumcised at the age of eight days, he himself underwent circumcision at the age of thirteen years, without protest. Yitzchak assures him that while Yishmael boasts concerning his willingness to endure the suffering of a single organ of his body, if G-d were to tell Yitzchak to sacrifice himself, he would not hesitate to do so.

What is common to both scenarios is that they took place many years prior to the akeda, and it is therefore difficult to understand why this test would come in response to them after such a long time.

Rashbam (22:1) takes a different approach, and explains the test of the akeda within its more immediate context-the preceding unit in the text: "Wherever the Torah says, 'After these things,' it relates to the preceding unit... Here, too, 'after these things'-that Avraham forged a covenant with Avimelekh, concerning Avraham's descendants, and he gave him seven ewe lambs, and G-d was angry because of this... as if to say, 'You are acting arrogantly concerning the son I have given you, in forging a covenant between you and them. And now, go and offer him up as a sacrifice, and see what your forging of the covenant is worth....'"

Does this tell us anything about the benefit of G-d's command here, as we found in the first command of "lekh-lekha"? I believe that the answer is in the affirmative.

All of Avraham's actions are undertaken out of kindness and rooted in kindness - "You have given truth to Yaakov, kindness to Avraham" (Mikha 7:20). This attribute is central to his being, to the extent that he is capable of leaving G-d waiting while he attends to his guests: "And he said, My Lord, I pray You, do not pass over from before Your servant" (18:3). Rashi explains: "He asked the Holy One, blessed be He, to wait for him while he ran to welcome the guests."

In forging a covenant with Avimelekh, too, Avraham acts out of kindness; he is unable to refuse the request to enter into this pact.

Unquestionably, the attribute of kindness is exceedingly great, and it is for this reason that the Torah starts by recounting the stories of the forefathers, rather than simply beginning with the first mitzva given to Am Yisrael - "This month shall be for you..."-in order to teach us that "If there is no civility, there is no Torah." However, by the same token, "If there is no Torah, there is no civility." If kindness and courtesy do not emerge from the perspective of the Torah, then they may extend beyond their proper proportions, to the point where they may become negative and cause damage.

This is what G-d seeks to teach Avraham, and all of us. G-d leads Avraham to a situation whereby, out of his attribute of kindness, he may come to slaughter his son-and then He shows him that everything depends of G-d's command: "Do not lay your hand upon the lad." When one's responses arise from within G-d's command, from within the Torah, then they produce a positive effect. History is full of examples of events and developments that grew out of good intentions, with a desire to show kindness, but ended with acts of fearsome savagery and immorality. Through the test of the akeda, G-d shows Avraham the goodness that is inherent in the attribute of kindness, as well as the boundaries that must be placed upon it.

YEHOSHUA STEINBERG

Abraham's Legacy of Paradox

Which is the true Abraham - the Abraham of the beginning of this week's Torah Sidra, in which he defends the wicked Sodomites in a confrontation with G-d, or the Abraham of the end of the portion, where he takes his guiltless son to be slaughtered on an anonymous summit?

Here is a man whose entire life is dedicated to helping and providing for others. When confronted with the horrifying reality of the depravity of Sodomite society—particularly their attitudes and actions vis-a-vis outsiders, foreigners (see San. 109b) - the very

antithesis of everything Abraham believed in, Abraham should have been expected to rejoice at their impending destruction. Instead, in one of the greatest apparent displays of both irony and chutzpa in the Torah, Abraham confronts G-d: "It is forbidden for You to do such a deed... will the Judge of the whole earth not do Justice?" (18:25)

But, still more ironically, Abraham is criticized by the Zohar not for his gall in questioning G-d's express will—in the most direct of terms—but rather that he did not go far enough in fighting for the Sodomites. The Zohar (1:105b) compares Noah, Abraham and Moses. Noah, upon hearing of the impending destruction of his generation, did not even open his mouth. Abraham requested that Sodom be spared for the merit of whatever righteous individuals might reside there. Moses, on the other hand, upon being told by G-d to "leave Me... that I might destroy them" (Ex. 32:10), wasted no time. He began forthwith to pray that the entire nation be saved - whether or not they deserved it; whether there were righteous among them or not.

Whether Abraham went far enough or too far in striving to save Sodom, how does his decidedly activist stand on behalf of the wicked Sodomites jibe with his button-lipped response to the command to slaughter his righteous son with his own hands? Which is his true nature?

The truth is, neither; and this itself is perhaps Abraham's greatest legacy. Abraham's nature would certainly have allowed Sodom to be destroyed, and of course to protest against his beloved son's sacrifice. But, as a leader, he had trained himself to transcend his natural inclinations; never to react emotionally or impulsively, never to either protest or submit—even to G-d Himself—based on what seemed right to Abraham alone, but first to be absolutely sure that his own desires were not clouding his decisions.

Abraham demonstrated repeatedly that he was willing to bow to G-d's will no matter how painful the consequences. But he did not use this as a self-righteous excuse for treading on others, even those who were thoroughly evil, even when G-d himself expressed his will to destroy them.

Abraham is aptly called "Haivri," literally meaning "from the other side," possibly because he was constantly examining each event from every side, from every angle. His great legacy to humanity is humanity - never to react automatically like a machine, but to take each action thoughtfully - this is the essence of the human being. © 1995 Y. Steinberg.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

After the binding of Yitzchak (Isaac) episode (akedat Yitzchak), the Torah tells us that Nachor, Abraham's (Abraham) brother, was blessed with

eight children. (Genesis 22:20-24) The listing of Nachor's progeny seems odd as it comes after an event of such dramatic proportions. Why the need to give us this information here?

The mainstream answer is that since Yitzchak's life has been saved, it is time for him to marry. In the end he weds Rivka (Rebecca) whose lineage is explained in the final sentences of the passage.

From here we learn an important message. Yitzchak is saved from death. But to be fully saved means not only to come out physically unscathed, but emotionally healthy as well. Displaying an ability to marry, establish a family and continue the seed of Avraham would show that Yitzchak truly survived the episode. Thus, the last sentences dealing with Yitzchak's future wife are crucial to the binding story for without marriage, Yitzchak's life would have been only partially saved.

Another thought comes to mind. The Avraham story begins and ends with the words lech lecha. (Genesis 12:1, Genesis 22:2) But, in truth, it starts a few sentences before chapter 12 with the listing of Avraham's complete family. This listing includes his brother Nachor who does not accompany Avraham to Canaan. As the Avraham story is introduced with the mentioning of Nachor, so too is it closed with the listing of Nachor's full progeny. The narrative is, therefore, presented with perfect symmetry, beginning and ending with Nachor.

Here too, another important message emerges. Often in families, we think of individuals who are more important and less important. Here the Torah states that Nachor, who at first glance seems less important, begins and ends the Avraham narrative for he plays a crucial role in the development of Avraham's future - he was, after all, the grandfather of Rivka and the great grandfather of Leah and Rachel.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik offers yet another insight. The birth of Nachor's children is recorded to contrast Avraham's and Nachor's lot in life. Avraham, the pathfinder of a new faith, the absolute believer in G-d, struggled to have a child with Sarah. And even after the long anticipated birth, this miracle child, Yitzchak, almost dies in the binding story. Nachor on the other hand, a man of questionable faith, is blessed with child after child. It all comes so easy to him.

Here too, there is another essential lesson to be learned. Avraham could have challenged G-d and argued, "why should I struggle while Nachor reaps such great reward?" Still, Avraham never doubts G-d, and remains a staunch believer.

I remember receiving a \$500 check to our synagogue in the fall of 1986. The writer of the letter indicated he was sending the donation in the wake of the miraculous game six victory by the N.Y. Mets over the Boston Red Sox (the famous Bill Buckner game). "This check," he wrote, "is the fulfillment of a promise I had made at the bottom of the 10th inning with two outs

and two men on. In closing, all I can say is that as a Jew and a Met fan I've learned to believe in miracles."

The young man who sent the check meant well. May he be blessed for giving so generously. But still, I couldn't help but think of the countless synagogues and churches which may have lost out when Boston fans made similar type promises if the Red Sox would win.

The test of faith is to believe in G-d not only when our prayers are answered, but even when they are not. © 2010 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

"Far be it for You, the Judge of all the land, to not do justice" (B'raishis 18:25). This week's piece is being written in memory of my Uncle Herbie, better known in New York legal circles (and elsewhere) as the Honorable Judge Herbert Kramer (www.brooklyneagle.com/articles/sentinel-bench), who passed away this past Sunday, and whose dedication to justice was evident and widely acknowledged.

Avraham Avinu (Abraham our forefather) challenged G-d, implying that His decree against the residents of the five-city metropolis of S'dom was not just. As I have previously discussed (<http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5765/vayeira.pdf>, pg.3), G-d told Avraham what He was about to do to because He knew that Avraham would try to defend them (see Tanchuma 8), which would start a conversation that would lead to Avraham's uncertainty about G-d's justness being abrogated (see Tanchuma Yashon 7; Avraham wasn't sure if there were any righteous people who perished in the flood). G-d's reassurance that if there were 50/45/40/30/10 righteous people in S'dom He wouldn't destroy it made it clear to Avraham that G-d is just. It becomes apparent, though, that even if the conversation achieved its desired result (from G-d's perspective), Avraham's arguments were not the most effective. After all, the cities were destroyed, and even the one that was saved was not saved through Avraham's objection, but through his nephew Lot's (B'raishis 19:20-22). A closer look indicates that this was not the only aspect of the conversation that, from Avraham's perspective, seems flawed.

As I just alluded to, trying to save a city based on it having 10 righteous residents didn't work, because there weren't 10 such residents in any of the five cities. Lot's argument, however, that Tzo'ar should be spared because it hadn't yet reached the necessary sin-limit (as it was settled more recently, see Rashi on 19:20), seemed to work. It is possible, though, that even if Avraham had made the same argument, G-d wouldn't have agreed to spare the city (yet). When Lot refused to leave the area, and the only way to save Avraham's nephew was to spare the city, then the city was spared.

Not because they deserved to be spared, but because G-d didn't want Avraham to suffer, and Lot forced G-d's hand (as it were) to spare the city in order to spare Avraham's anguish about his nephew.

Avraham didn't ask G-d if He would save a city if it had only eight righteous residents, as there were eight righteous people in Noach's family (or so Avraham assumed), and that didn't protect anyone else (see Rashi on 18:32). However, Noach's sons (and likely his daughters-in-law as well) were less than 100 years old (see Rashi on 5:32), and at that point no one was punished by heavenly decree until they were at least 100 years old (which is why, Rashi explains, G-d made sure none of Noach's sons would reach that age before the flood). It is therefore theoretically possible that had there been eight righteous residents in one of the cities, it wouldn't have been destroyed. For some reason, though (see <http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5764/vayeira.pdf>, pg. 4, for a possible explanation), Avraham didn't ask. Nevertheless, there likely weren't eight righteous individuals, so it made no practical difference that Avraham never asked; the main point is that Avraham was able to clarify his question about whether or not G-d was just.

Why didn't Avraham ask G-d if He would save a city if it had nine righteous individuals? Rashi (18:32) says that he already had, and was told that there weren't. However, this request is not mentioned in the Torah. The commentators say Rashi means that this configuration was included in previous requests, either because 45 righteous individuals living in the five cities was the same ratio as nine living in one (see Sifsei Chachamim) or because after the concept that nine per city was enough (with G-d Himself counting as the 10th) was established, each subsequent request (40 saving four cities, 30 saving three, 20 saving two and 10 saving one) also included a request that nine (per city) be enough as well (36/27/18/9). Since G-d said there weren't enough righteous individuals to save even one city, there must not have been even nine (see Mizrahi).

Nevertheless, this formula doesn't seem to work. The same way Avraham felt the need to ask if 40 righteous individuals would save four cities even after he was told that 50 would save five, shouldn't he have verified that 36 would work the way 45 would? He asked if 30 would save three, 20 would save two and 10 would save one; why was it so obvious that nine per city worked no matter how many cities were involved if it wasn't so obvious that 10 per city worked without asking for each explicitly? Ramban (18:24) explains that 50 righteous individuals can accomplish more than five times what 10 can, which is why Avraham had to ask for each lower set of 10; shouldn't he have asked whether "nine plus G-d" would work for the lower sets of nine as well? [This same question applies to the way Tosfos (18:32) explains the different wording of G-d's answers to Avraham's questions. I don't have an explanation for

why Avraham thought he had already been told that there weren't nine righteous individuals; suggestions are welcome and appreciated (RabbiDMK at Yahoo.com).] Here too, whether or not Avraham could/should have asked about nine is not the primary issue, as the conversation was meant to help Avraham understand G-d better.

This conversation took place when Avraham was 99 years old (17:24), after G-d had promised to have a special relationship with him and his descendents (17:7), that He would give them the land he was traveling through (17:8), and after He had bestowed accolades upon him (18:17-19). Avraham not understanding everything about G-d didn't prevent him from being able to fulfill G-d's wishes and spread monotheism. If anything, it was Avraham's confidence that G-d had to be just that allowed him to ask G-d about it. As a matter of fact, G-d's praises of Avraham just prior to this conversation included that he would "teach his children and his household after him to keep the ways of G-d, to do charity and justice."

Uncle Herbie, you were loved, respected, and appreciated. And will be sorely missed. © 2012 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Meting Justice – Meeting Kindness

In what must be one of the greatest transitional scenes in the entire Biblical narrative, this week the Torah transposes us from the gracious home of Avraham in one scene and to the evil city of S'dom in the next. Avraham's home was one of kindness. It was a home where the master of the house would run to greet nomadic wanderers, and invite them into his abode only three days after a bris milah! It was a home in which Sora had opened a door in every direction, ensuring that there was an unrestricted invitation to any wayfarer, no matter which direction he or she came from.

The scene switches to S'dom, a city in which kindness and charity were unheard of. A city in which a damsel who committed the terrible crime of feeding a pauper, was smeared with honey and set out for the bees. Sdom was a city where visitors who had the audacity to ask for overnight lodging were treated to a special type of hospitality. They were placed in beds, and then, if they were too short for the beds, their limbs were tortuously stretched to fit the bed; if they were larger than the beds their limbs were chopped off.

How does the Torah make the transition from the world of kindness and charity to the world of evil? The Parsha tells us the story of three angels who visited Avraham. Each had a mission. Rashi tells us, "one to announce to Sarah the birth of a son, one to overthrow Sodom, and one to cure Abraham." You see, three

were needed as one angel does not carry out two commissions. "Raphael," explains Rashi, "who healed Abraham went on to rescue Lot, as healing and saving may be one mission." And so the scene moves from Avraham in Eilonai mamrei to Lot in S'dom, where the angels posing again as wayfarers were graciously invited. They saved the hospitable Lot and destroyed the rest of the city.

I have a simple question. Why did the angel who was sent to destroy S'dom make a stop at Avraham's home? Two angels could have gone to Avraham's home, one to heal Avraham and the other to inform Sora of the good news. The third could have gone directly to S'dom and waited there for the others to catch up. Why make a detour to Avraham?

Traditionally, young children who start learning Talmud, are introduced to Tractate Bava Metzia in general and the chapter Eilu M'tziyos in particular. The tractate deals with property law and emphasizes respect for other people's possessions. Eilu M'tziyos stresses the laws of returning lost items and the responsibilities of a finder of those objects. Some wanted the boys to learn about the blessings, but Rav Moshe Feinstein insisted that the custom not be changed. He wanted to imbue the youngsters of the enormous responsibilities that they have to their fellow man. One cannot be a Jew only in shul where he can sway, pray, and recite blessings, but one must also be also be a Jew in the outside world, where the tests of honesty arise each day.

I heard the story of one of those youngsters, who found his way off the beaten yeshiva path. His college-years search for spirituality found him studying with a yogi in Bombay, India who railed against Western comforts and derided the culture of materialism. He preached peace, love, and harmony while decrying selfishness and greed. The young man was enamored with his master's vociferous objections to Western society, until he was together with him on a Bombay street. A wallet lay on the ground. There was cash and credit cards sticking out from it. It was clearly owned by an American tourist. The Yogi picked it up and put it in his sarong. "But it may belong to someone," protested his young charge. "It is a gift from the gods," he answered, "heaven meant it for us" The young man's protests fell on deaf ears.

At that moment, the words of his Rabbi back in fifth grade rang in his ears. "These are the items that must be announced for return; any item with an identifying sign"

He was stirred by truth of his traditions, and the purity of his past. He left the Yogi and the wallet, and eventually returned to a Torah life.

It is easy to rail against others. It is easy to talk about loose morals and unethical behavior. It's even easy to destroy Sdom. But Hashem did not let the angels do just that. He told them all to them first visit Avraham. He wanted them to see what kindness really

means. See an old man run to greet total strangers. See a 90-year-old woman knead dough to bake you fresh bread. Meet the man who will plead for mercy on behalf of S'dom. And then, and only then can you mete the punishment that they truly deserve. Because without studying the good, we cannot understand the true flaws of the bad. Without watching Abraham commit true kindness, we should not watch the inhabitants of Sdom get their due. © 2001 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

The Midrash relates that after Avraham would feed the guests who passed his way, he would say, "Now thank G-d whose food you have eaten." If the guest refused, Avraham would say, "Then pay me! The wine costs such-and-such, the meat costs such-and-such, the bread costs such-and-such. Who would give you wine in the desert? Who would give you meat in the desert? Who would give you bread in the desert?" At that point, Avraham's guests would agree to thank G-d.

The commentaries ask: Why did Avraham do this? Of what value is a blessing which is extracted under financial duress? R' Yitzchak Or Zarua z"l (13th century) answers that Avraham did not actually ask his guests for money. Rather he argued, "Think how much you would be willing to pay for food and drink in the desert. Behold! G-d has prepared that food and drink for you by causing me to be here in your time of need. Moreover, it's all free. You would have been willing to pay a small fortune had I requested it, but I ask you for nothing for myself."

Upon realizing that G-d indeed looks out for each person's needs, Avraham's guests would willingly thank G-d for their food, the Or Zarua explains.

R' Moshe Zuriel shlita (former mashgiach of Yeshivat Shaalvim) adds: At first glance, the above Midrash appears to say that Avraham practiced "kefiyah datit" / forcing others to observe halachah against their will. However, the Or Zarua's explanation reveals that the opposite is true. Avraham caused people to serve Hashem by showing them how Hashem cares for every human and by demonstrating the beauty of serving the One G-d. (Otzrot Hatorah Vol. I. p.54)

"He said, 'Please take your son... and go to the land of Moriah; bring him up there as an offering...' (22:2)

R' Elazar M. Shach z"l (Ponovezh rosh yeshiva) asks: If G-d spoke to any of us, would we hesitate for an instant to fulfill His command, no matter how strange? Certainly we would not! If so, what was Avraham's test?

He answers: R' Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam) writes that Moshe Rabbeinu's prophetic experience differed from the experiences of all other prophets before and after him. Specifically, Moshe saw his

prophecies clearly—the Torah describes it as G-d speaking to Moshe face-to-face—while all other prophets saw "parables and riddles." In other words, all prophets except Moshe had to interpret their own prophecies. And, as Chazal say about a person's dreams, the interpretations that those prophets gave to their visions actually had an impact on how those prophecies came true.

It follows that when Hashem appeared to Avraham and instructed him to bring Yitzchak to Har Ha'moriah as an offering, Avraham did not hear an unambiguous command. Rather, Avraham had to interpret the prophecy. It turns out, then, that our original question was not valid. Of course, if G-d spoke to one of us, we would not hesitate for an instant to fulfill His command, no matter how "strange." However, that would only be true if He spoke to us unambiguously. If we had to interpret His command, would we have the courage and the intellectual honesty to realize what He was saying, or would we rationalize the command away? (Mai'rosh Amanah)

"He [the angel] said, 'By Myself I swear—the word of Hashem—that because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only one, that I will surely bless you...' (22:16-17)

The Midrash relates that after the Akeidah, Avraham said to G-d, "I will not budge from here until You swear to me that I will never be tested again, for if I had not obeyed You, I would, G-d forbid, have forfeited all that I accomplished in my lifetime." Therefore we read, "By Myself I swear..."

R' Shmuel Yaffe Ashkenazi z"l (Turkey; 1525-1595) ask: How are we to understand Avraham's demand? Was he refusing to fulfill the tasks that G-d had in store for him?

He answers: The Akeidah was the hardest test that a person could face short of physical suffering like that of Iyov (Job). Avraham did not know whether he could withstand such suffering. Indeed, many generations later, Chananiah, Mishael and Azaryah would be thrown into a furnace just as Nimrod had done to Avraham, yet the Gemara tells us that if those three tzaddikim had been tortured, they would not have withstood the ordeal.

Avraham therefore asked that he not be tested further, in fulfillment of the Mishnah: "Do not feel confident in your righteousness until the day you die." (Quoted in Meorei Ohr on Avot D'Rabbi Natan p.307)

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