

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The early history of humanity as told in the Torah is a series of disappointments. G-d gives human beings freedom, which they then misuse. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. Cain murders Abel. Within a relatively short time the world before the Flood has become dominated by violence. All flesh had perverted its way on the earth. G-d creates order. Man creates chaos. Even after the Flood humanity, in the form of the builders of Babel, is guilty of hubris, thinking they can build a tower whose top "reaches heaven."

Humans fail to respond to G-d, which is where Abraham enters the picture. We are not quite sure, at the beginning, what it is that Abraham is summoned to. We know he is commanded to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and travel "to the land I will show you," but what he is to do there, we do not know. On this the Torah is silent. What is Abraham's mission? What makes him special? What makes him, not simply a good man in a bad age, as was Noah, but 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 essays 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 author of their own acts -- 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.

Understand this and we understand Abraham. He exercises personal responsibility. A quarrel breaks out between his 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'll 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 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, whom he returns 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 -- not the image of Abraham the nomadic shepherd we see elsewhere. Its presence 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 had chosen to live where he did with its attendant risks, Abraham did not say, "His safety is his responsibility not mine."

Then, in this week's parsha, comes the great moment at which for the first time a human being challenges G-d himself. G-d 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?"

This is a remarkable speech. By what right does a mere mortal challenge G-d himself?

The short answer is that G-d 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. If not, I will know.'"

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

The material presented in this publication was collected from email subscriptions, computer archives and various websites. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any synagogue or organization.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL
(973) 277-9062 OR EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

Those words, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" are a clear hint that G-d 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, G-d told Noah in advance that he is about to bring punishment to the world.

So G-d 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."

Noah did not protest. To the contrary, we are told three times that Noah "did as G-d commanded him." Noah accepted the verdict. Abraham challenged it. Abraham understood the third principle: collective responsibility.

The people of Sodom were not his brothers and sisters, so he was going beyond what he did in rescuing Lot. He prayed on their behalf because he understood the idea of human solidarity, immortally expressed by John Donne (in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, 1623):

"No man is an island, / Entire of itself... / Any man's death diminishes me, / For I am involved in mankind."

But a question remains. Why did G-d call on Abraham to challenge Him? Was there anything Abraham knew that G-d didn't know? The 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 G-d 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 -- 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 G-d." But to Abraham, G-d himself said, "Walk before me," (Gen. 17: 1), meaning:

be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility.

Judaism is G-d's call to responsibility. © 2013
Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd the two of them went together...” (Genesis 22:6, 8) In previous commentaries, I have queried which of the two major protagonists of the akeda (binding of Isaac) story suffered the greater test: Abraham (Abram), the father who had to take the responsibility for the sacrifice of his son, or Isaac, the son who had to undergo the anguish of being laid out upon the altar. I have offered the interpretation of my mentor, Rav Moshe Besdin, who explained that Abraham received the command directly from G-d, which made his acquiescence almost understandable; Isaac is even more praiseworthy, because he only heard the command from his father, yet he was still willing to submit himself to the sacrificial act. In doing so, Isaac becomes the paragon of the ideal Jewish heir, who continues the traditions of his father even though he cannot be certain of their truth because he himself has not heard the Divine command.

However, Isaac is not the only biblical model of a continuator among the founders of our faith. What about Abraham, the very first patriarch, who is pictured by the midrash as well as by Maimonides as a rebellious and a revolutionary iconoclast? Abraham's father, Terah was a prominent Chaldean idolater, a leader of the royal council, a purveyor of idols and idolatry. Abraham - as a result of his own reasoning and his individualistic understanding, smashed his father's idols and ideals in favor of his newly discovered vision of ethical monotheism.

I would submit that the midrashic and Maimonidean picture of Abraham the iconoclast, the breaker of his father's idols, is not the only possible understanding of the patriarch's early life; indeed, a careful reading of the biblical text might very well lead us to an opposite conclusion. Maimonides seems to base his acceptance of Abraham as the midrashic rebellious son upon the fact that the Bible is uncharacteristically silent about why G-d suddenly commanded Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees for the unknown land which G-d would show him (which turned out to be Canaan) and considered him worthy of becoming a great nation and a blessing for the world. Why Abraham? Maimonides concludes that Abraham must have discovered ethical monotheism through his own rational thinking and therefore merited G-d's election. However, this is not a necessary conclusion. The last verses of the portion of Noah, which identify Terah as the father of Abraham, Nahor and Haran, also record that "Terah took his son Abram, and Lot, the son of Haran, his grandson, and his daughter-in-law Sarai...

and they departed with them from Ur Kasdim to go to the Land of Canaan; they arrived at Haran and they settled there... and Terah died in Haran" (Gen. 11:31, 32).

Why must scripture tell us that Terah had originally set out for the Land of Canaan if he never reached it because he died on the way in Haran? The Bible will soon record a fascinating meeting between Abraham and Melchizedek, king of Shalem (Jerusalem, capital city of Canaan, see Ramban ad loc), and the text goes on to identify him as a "priest of G-d Most High" to whom Abraham gives tithes (Gen. 14:18- 20). Is it not logical to assume that there was one place in the world where the idea of a single G-d who had created the world and created the human being in His own image was still remembered from the time of Adam, and that place was Jeru-Shalem, Canaan, Israel? And if Terah had left Ur of Kasdim to reach Canaan, might it not have been because he wanted to identify with that land and with that G-d of ethical monotheism? And if Abraham, Terah's son, had joined his father in the journey - while Nahor had not - may we not assume that Abraham identified with his father's spiritual journey even though his brother did not? From this perspective, we understand why this story is followed by G-d's command to Abraham: Conclude the journey you began with your father and reach the destination, and perhaps the destiny, which unfortunately eluded him.

We now can similarly understand a heretofore difficult verse at the conclusion of G-d's Covenant Between the Pieces with Abraham, wherein He guarantees the patriarch "you will come to your fathers in peace and will be buried in a good old age." (Genesis 15: 15)

To which of Abraham's fathers will he come in peace after he dies? Which direct ancestor of Abraham was righteous? According to the version we have just suggested, the verse refers to Terah, who repented in his journey to Canaan.

Abraham, then, emerges as the true continuator of his father's mission. The biblical message, through the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is that it behooves us to continue in our parents' footsteps and to pass down the mission of ethical monotheism from generation to generation. Indeed, we must even attempt to improve upon their vision and accomplishments and to take proper advantage of the new possibilities the unique period in which we live may provide for us. © 2013 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The story of the miraculous birth of Yitzchak to his ninety-year-old mother Sarah is not only one of the highlights of the parsha but it is one of the foundation narratives of all of Jewish history. Without

Yitzchak there simply isn't a Jewish people. The birth of Yitzchak is one of the triumphal moments of Jewish life, a reflection of G-d's mercy and guidance in creating His special people.

It is therefore all the more surprising - indeed shocking - that the story of Avraham sacrificing Yitzchak appears in this very same parsha. In effect, this story of the binding of Yitzchak on the altar of Mount Moriah completely negates the miraculous birth of Yitzchak.

Of what necessity or purpose is the miracle of Sarah's giving birth to Yitzchak if the entire matter will be undone by the succeeding story of Avraham sacrificing Yitzchak? What is the point that the Torah wishes to teach us by unfolding this seemingly cruel sequence of events? Is not G-d, so to speak, mocking His own Divine Will and plans by this sequence of events, recorded for us in this most seminal parsha in the Torah?

Much ink has been used in dealing with this most difficult issue. It has been the subject of much commentary in Midrash and Jewish thought throughout the ages. Amongst the many mysterious and inscrutable issues that G-d raises for our analysis in His Torah, this contradiction between the miraculous birth of Yitzchak and the challenge of his being bound on the altar ranks high on that long list of Heaven's behavior that requires Jews to have faith and acceptance.

But is this not the nature of things in today's Jewish world as well? After the most negative of extraordinary events of sadistic cruelty that we call the Holocaust, miraculous positive events have occurred to the Jewish people. The old woman of Israel, beaten and worn, was revived and gave birth to a state, to a vibrant language, to myriad institutions of Torah learning and good deeds, to the miraculously successful ingathering of the exile communities to their homeland, to a scale of Jewish affluence unmatched in Jewish history.

In short, the story of the Jewish people in its resilient glory over the last seventy-five years defies rational and easily explained historical logic. And yet the danger and tension of open hostility to the State of Israel, the threats to its very existence, the attempts to delegitimize it and boycott its bounty, all are evident in our current world.

In the story of Yitzchak, the Torah teaches that we have to live in a world of almost absurd contradictions. Logic plays a very small role in the events of history that occur to the people of Yitzchak. Yitzchak is a product of miracles and his very maturation and survival is also a product of supernatural stuff. So too is this the story of the Jewish people in our age. Just as Yitzchak survived and proved successful, so too shall we, his progeny, survive and be successful and triumphant. © 2013 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more*

information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's portion (Va-yera) parallels last week's (Lekh Lekha) with one significant exception. Lekh Lekha is nationalistic, while this week's portion is universalistic.

Both portions deal with Avraham (Abraham) as savior of Sodom. In Lekh Lekha, 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 non-Jews. (Chapters 18,19)

Both portions deal with Sarah's declaring that she is Avraham's sister. In Lekh Lekha 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 Avimelekh, King of Philistia. (Chapter 20, 21)

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

Both portions deal with G-d's promises to Avraham. In Lekh Lekha, G-d makes a covenant exclusively with Avraham - promising him land and children. (Chs. 12, 15, 17) In Va-yera, G-d eternally connects with Avraham through the binding of Isaac. Still, whereas Avraham is described as walking together (yahdav) with Yitzchak (Isaac) to Moriah (Ch. 22:6), Avraham returns home together (yahdav) with his lads - Yishmael and Eliezer, non-Jews. (Ch. 22:19)

It can be suggested that Avraham in Va-yera had become so universal that he forgot his national roots. The corrective to Avraham's universal leaning is next week's portion of Hayeei Sarah. Note that in Hayeei Sarah, Avraham acquires part of the land of Israel and finds a wife for his son--both minding the home front and echoing the nationalistic themes of Lech Lecha. (Chs. 23, 24)

One of the beauties of our tradition is that Judaism has nationalistic as well as universalistic dimensions. The way that we care for our own informs us how to treat the larger world. Indeed, the test of the way we love the world is how we show love toward our own brother or sister, our fellow Jew.

The flow of the Avraham / Sarah narrative indicates that one should realize that both elements are critical, yet one should make sure that when embracing the importance of universalism, that it not be at the expense of one's inner circle, family or nation. © 2011 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

“And Sara was listening at the entrance of the tent, and he was behind him" (B'reishis 18:10). The meaning of the last two words of this verse, which I translated as "and he was behind him," is unclear. Who was behind who? ArtScroll, following Rashi, translates it as "which was behind him," i.e. the entrance of the tent, from where Sara was listening, was behind the angel who was talking to Avraham. The angels had asked Avraham where his wife was, to which he responded that she was inside the tent (18:9). The "lead" angel then told Avraham that in exactly a year his wife would have a son, words that Sara heard. In case we couldn't picture where everyone was situated (besides knowing that Sara was inside the tent), the verse then tells us that the angel was facing Avraham while having his back to the tent (as the tent was behind the angel while he was addressing Avraham).

This explanation seems rather strained, for several reasons. First of all, does it really matter where each of them was standing? Isn't it the contents of the message that was important, not their relative positions to each other? Once we are told that Sara could hear the conversation from the doorway, do we need to know how she was able to hear it since the angel who was talking was nearby? Secondly, if the angels asked where Sara was so that she could hear the message, why aren't we told that she came to the doorway before the message is delivered? The way it's presented makes it seem as if she was eavesdropping on a conversation between the angels and her husband. Additionally, if the first "he" refers to the doorway, shouldn't the wording (in the text, as opposed to how it was translated) have been "which was behind him" ("she'haya acharav") rather than "and he was behind him" ("v'hu acharav")?

Targum Yonasan and B'reishis Rabbah (48:16) explain the "he" to be Yishmael, who was either behind the angel so that Sara wouldn't be alone with him or behind the door listening to what the angel was telling Avraham. It would be difficult to say that this is "p'shat" (the plain, straightforward meaning) in the verse, since Yishmael is not mentioned in this narrative. Even if Yishmael was the "young lad" who helped prepare the food (see Rashi on 18:7), the pronoun "he" is used five times since then, with at least the last four of them (and perhaps all five) referring to Avraham, as the pronoun "you" is used in conjunction with it (18:9), referring to the same person as the "he" (which obviously refers to Avraham since Sara is his wife). Nevertheless, it can be suggested that the plain meaning is as Rashi explained it, with the awkward wording used to include the Midrashic inference to Yishmael.

Meshech Chuchma has a very different approach, explaining the last two words as being directed towards Sara. After telling Avraham that Sara would give birth to a son, the angel then turned to Sara, who was still in the tent (for modesty reasons) yet able to hear the conversation, and told her that "he," the son that I just told Avraham you would give birth to, "will be after him," i.e. will follow in Avraham's footsteps and continue the mission (as opposed to Yishmael or the sons of K'turah). Meshech Chuchma quotes several instances where the promises made to Avraham for become circumcised were also made "to your descendants after you" (17:7-10), indicating that the word "after you" (or in this case "after him," since the "him" is referring to Avraham) is a euphemism for "those who will continue the Abrahamic mission." I would add that the very same word ("acharav," i.e. "after him") is used later in this same narrative, when G-d explains why he is going to tell Avraham about His plans are for S'dom; "for I know that he will command his sons and his household after him, and they will keep the way of G-d, by doing righteousness and justice" (18:19). The angel was informing Sara (and Avraham) that the son born to Sara would be the progeny through which all of their dreams would be realized.

Although at first glance this approach seems strained (Meshech Chuchma cites other examples as well as the justification for reading the verse this way), a closer look at the context of the verses frames them in a way that reads quite well: The angels asked Avraham where Sara is (18:9) because the message was intended for her as well. The answer (that she is in the tent) was not meant to indicate that she is not around to hear it, as is obvious from the next verse. Rather, it explains why the first part is directed to Avraham, as Sara is out of sight, even though they want her to hear what they say to Avraham. Sara was not eavesdropping on a conversation between her husband and others; she was being included in the conversation. Nevertheless, just as Avraham addressed the leader of the angels (18:3 and the first part of 18:4) even though his intended audience was all three, the angel addressed Avraham even though he was talking to Sara as well. Had the Torah told us right away that Sara was listening from the entrance of the tent, we might have thought she had been listening even before the angel asked where she was. By waiting until after the first part of the message was delivered, we not only know that she wasn't eavesdropping, but its location serves as a place marker to show us at which point the message was directed towards her rather than Avraham (even though Avraham was supposed to hear it too). The information, that it will be through the son she bears that Avraham's mission will be fulfilled, was directed at her because she will be the one who makes sure that others will not get in the way of Yitzchok going "after him," by protecting him from Yishmael's influence even though Avraham wasn't thrilled about sending his older

son away (21:9-12). The words "and Sara was listening at the entrance of the tent" are a parenthetical statement, placed in the middle of the angel's words, separating the part of the message that was directed to Avraham from the part that was directed at Sara. The message, though, was clear. Sara will give birth in a year to a son who will continue the mission "after" Avraham. © 2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg, Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne; Translated by Moshe Goldberg

“Take your wife and your two daughters who are here" [Bereishit 19:15]. The sages saw this verse as hinting at a spark of the light of the Mashiach in Sedom. "Rava explained: what is the meaning of the verse, 'Then I said, behold I have come, I am written about in the scroll of the book' [Tehillim 40:8]? David said, I said that I came only now, but I did not know that the scroll (the Torah) writes about me. There it is written, '...daughters who are here,' while here it is written, 'I found my servant David, I anointed him with holy oil' [Tehilim 89:21]." [Yalkut Shimoni Ki Teitzei 933]. And it is written, "By the merits of David and the merits of the Mashiach we were saved, as is written, 'I found my servant David.' And David was a descendant of Ruth the Moavite and Rechavam came from Naama of Amon. And Mashiach will result from both of them." [Midrash Agadda Bereishit 19:15].

Thus, the first spark of Mashiach came out of Sedom. This fact paints in a new light the war of the four kings against the five kings that appeared in last week's Torah portion. At first glance it is clear that the war began as a revolt by the king of Sedom and his colleagues against the four kings. By accident, Lot happened to be there and he was taken prisoner, and Avraham therefore joined the war in order to rescue him. However, in the eyes of our sages something very different happened. The main thrust of the war was against Avraham and Lot, and it was the king of Sedom who happened to be caught up in a war that was not his own.

"The earth was confused..." [Bereishit 1:2]. The sages commented, "'Tohu' is the exile of Babylon, 'bohu' is the exile of Media, 'darkness' is the exile of Greece, and 'the depths' are the evil kingdom (Rome). 'And the wind of G-d blew across the water' [ibid] -- this is the spirit of Mashiach." [Bereishit Rabba 82:4]. Thus we see that from the beginning of the Creation, there was a plan for great struggles between the four kings and the spirit of the Mashiach. Therefore the moment that Avraham appears on the stage of history and Lot goes to Sedom, the world wakes up with excitement about the fact that Mashiach will descend from Lot. And the four kings attempt to prevent this momentous event. It is written [Bereishit 14:1], "In the days of Amrafel Ben

Shinar" -- this refers to Babylon -- "and Aryoch King of Elasar" -- Greece -- "Kedarlaomer King of Eilam" -- Media -- and "Tid'al King of Goyim" -- this is the Kingdom of Edom.

Since in the future this struggle will end with a declaration by the nations of the world that Yisrael brought the truth to the world, they will all rise up to Jerusalem. All the nations will pour into Jerusalem, and they will say, "Let us rise up to the Mountain of G-d... for Torah will emanate from Zion, and the word of G-d from Jerusalem" [Yeshayahu 2:3; Micha 4:2]. And as an example of the principle that the actions of the forefathers are symbolic of the events of the descendants, the King of Sedom comes to meet Avraham "in the Valley of Equality, which is the Valley of the King" [Bereishit 14:17]. The sages explain that all the nations gathered together to appoint Avraham as their king. And the king of Jerusalem also comes out to greet Avraham and to give him the "keys to the city" -- "And Malchitzedek, King of Shalem, took out bread and wine... and he blessed him, saying, Avraham is blessed..." [14:18-19].

The sages taught us, "Whoever observes the mitzva of succah in this world will have a portion in the future in the succah of Sedom" [Yalkut Shimoni Emor 653]. What is so special about the succah of Sedom? The kingdom of the Mashiach is called the succah of Sedom, as is written, "On that day I will rebuild the fallen succah of David" [Amos 9:11]. And the beginning of the succah of David was in Sedom.

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 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 & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

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

The Lekach Tov explains that this act shows Avraham's sensitivity to others even MORE because water was the only item that Avraham didn't have time to fetch himself. Avraham's thinking was that if he was going to trouble his servants to get the water, he had no right to ask them to bring more water than is actually needed. It was Avraham's sensitivity to his staff that compelled him to only offer a small quantity of water to his guests. We, too, need to be mindful of the needs of those around us, especially our family and friends, and take no one for granted. © 2013 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

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." © 2008 Chava Willig Levy is a New York-based writer, editor and lecturer who communicates about the quality and meaning of life. She can be reached via her web site: <http://www.chavawilliglevy.com>.

ZEV S. ITZKOWITZ

A Byte of Torah

"Sarah saw that the son who Hagar the Egyptian had born to Abraham, was laughing. She said to Abraham, Send away this slave together with her son. The son of this slave will not share the inheritance with my son Isaac." (Genesis 21:9-10)

What was it about Ishmael's "laughing" that concerned Sarah? Ishmael had immersed himself in strange and evil practices. Yet, he claimed that since he was the firstborn, he should still receive the double inheritance portion that is the firstborn's privilege (see also Duet. 21:17). He even physically threatened Isaac with this claim. Sarah, then ordered Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael, for Ishmael showed that he was not worthy of inheriting anything from Abraham (Rashi).

Another possibility is that the word "laughing" refers to the normal taunts, teases and toughness that young boys often exhibit to one another (Ibn Ezra). Isaac, however, was a very young boy and could not readily defend himself from the taunting behavior of his older brother. Sarah, witnessed this outrageous behavior, became furious, and ordered Abraham to send them away (Chizkuni).

Alternatively, Ishmael was belittling Isaac's lineage. His claim was that only he was the true heir of Abraham, whereas Isaac's true father was Abimelekh, King of Gerar. Since children often repeat what they hear at home, Sarah knew that this scoffing was instigated by Hagar (who had previously treated her with contempt, see Gen. 16:4) and, thus, ordered both Hagar and her son, Ishmael, expelled from Abraham's home (HaKesav VeHakabalah). © 1995 Z. Itzkowitz