

Toras Aish



Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L

Covenant & Conversation

"Take your son, your only son, the one you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." (Gen. 22:2) Thus begins one of the most famous episodes in the Torah, but also one of the most morally problematic. The conventional reading of this passage is that Abraham was being asked to show that his love for God was supreme. He would show this by being willing to sacrifice the son for whom he had spent a lifetime waiting.

Why did God need to "test" Abraham, given that He knows the human heart better than we know it ourselves? Maimonides answers that God did not need Abraham to prove his love for Him. Rather the test was meant to establish for all time how far the fear and love of God must go.¹

On this principle there was little argument. The story is about the awe and love of God. Kierkegaard wrote about it² and made the point that ethics is universal. It consists of general rules. But the love of God is particular. It is an I-Thou personal relationship. What Abraham underwent during the trial was, says Kierkegaard, a "teleological suspension of the ethical," that is, a willingness to let the I-Thou love of God overrule the universal principles that bind humans to one another.

Rav Soloveitchik explained the Binding of Isaac episode in terms of his own well-known characterisation of the religious life as a dialectic between victory and defeat, majesty and humility, man-the-creative-master and man-the-obedient-servant.³ There are times when

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on her tenth yartzeit
חנה בת יוסף ע"ה
נפטרה כ"ג מר חשון תשע"ב
by Itzy and Ruchie Weisberg

¹ Guide for the Perplexed III:24.

² Søren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling, and The Sickness Unto Death*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954.

³ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility", *Tradition* 17:2, Spring, 1978, pp. 25–37.

"God tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most."⁴ We must experience defeat as well as victory. Thus the Binding of Isaac was not a once-only episode but rather a paradigm for the religious life as a whole. Wherever we have passionate desire – eating, drinking, physical relationship – there the Torah places limits on the satisfaction of desire. Precisely because we pride ourselves on the power of reason, the Torah includes chukim, statutes, that are impenetrable to reason.

These are the conventional readings and they represent the mainstream of tradition. However, since there are "seventy faces to the Torah," I want to argue for a different interpretation. The reason I do so is that one test of the validity of an interpretation is whether it coheres with the rest of the Torah, Tanach, and Judaism as a whole. There are four problems with the conventional reading: We know from Tanach and independent evidence that the willingness to offer up your child as a sacrifice was not rare in the ancient world. It was commonplace. Tanach mentions that Mesha, King of Moab, did so. So did Yiftah, the least admirable leader in the book of Judges. Two of Tanach's most wicked Kings, Ahaz and Manasse, introduced the practice into Judah, for which they were condemned. There is archeological evidence – the bones of thousands of young children – that child sacrifice was widespread in Carthage and other Phoenician sites. It was a pagan practice.

Child sacrifice is regarded with horror throughout Tanach. Micah asks rhetorically, "Shall I give my firstborn for my sin, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Mic. 6:7), and replies, "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Mic. 6:8) How could Abraham serve as a role model if what he was prepared to do is what his descendants were commanded not to do?

Specifically, Abraham was chosen to be a role model as a parent. God says of him, "For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." How could he serve as a model father if he was willing to sacrifice his child? To the contrary, he should have said to God: "If you want

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36

me to prove to You how much I love You, then take me as a sacrifice, not my child.”

As Jews – indeed as humans – we must reject Kierkegaard’s principle of the “teleological suspension of the ethical.” This is an idea that gives carte blanche to religious fanatics to commit crimes in the name of God. It is the logic of the Inquisition and the suicide bomber. It is not the logic of Judaism rightly understood.⁵ God does not ask us to be unethical. We may not always understand ethics from God’s perspective but we believe that “He is the Rock, His works are perfect; all His ways are just” (Deut. 32:4).

To understand the Binding of Isaac we have to realise that much of the Torah, Genesis in particular, is a polemic against worldviews the Torah considers pagan, inhuman and wrong. One institution to which Genesis is opposed is the ancient family as described by Fustel de Coulanges⁶ and recently restated by Larry Siedentop in *Inventing the Individual*.⁷

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

The Torah is opposed to every element of this worldview. As anthropologist Mary Douglas notes, one of the most striking features of the Torah is that it includes no sacrifices to dead ancestors.⁸ Seeking the spirits of the dead is explicitly forbidden.

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

The principle to which the entire story of Isaac, from birth to binding, is opposed is the idea that a child is the property of the father. First, Isaac’s birth is

miraculous. Sarah is already post-menopausal when she conceives. In this respect the Isaac story is parallel to that of the birth of Samuel to Hannah who, like Sarah, also is unable naturally to conceive. That is why, when Samuel is born Hannah says, “I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of Him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.” (I Sam. 1:27) This passage is the key to understanding the message from heaven telling Abraham to stop: “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son” (the statement appears twice, in Gen. 22:12 and 16). The test was not whether Abraham would sacrifice his son but whether he would give him over to God.

The same principle recurs in the book of Exodus. First, Moses’ survival is semi-miraculous since he was born at a time when Pharaoh had decreed that every male Israelite child should be killed. Secondly, during the tenth plague when every firstborn Egyptian child died, the Israelite firstborn were miraculously saved. “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to Me, whether human or animal.” The firstborns were originally designated to serve God as Priests, but they lost this role after the sin of the Golden Calf. Nonetheless, a memory of this original role still persists in the ceremony of Pidyon HaBen, redemption of a firstborn son.

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

That is why three of the four matriarchs found themselves unable to conceive other than by a miracle. The Torah wants us to know that the children they bore were the children of God rather than the natural outcome of a biological process. Eventually, the entire nation of Israel would be called the children of God. A related idea is conveyed by the fact that God chose as His spokesperson Moses, who was “not a man of words” (Ex. 4:10) He was a stammerer. Moses became God’s spokesman because people knew that the words he spoke were not his own but those placed in his mouth by God.

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

If the analysis of Fustel de Coulanges and Larry Siedentop is correct, it follows that something fundamental was at stake. As long as parents believed

⁵ For more on this subject, see Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, NY: Schocken, 2015.

⁶ Fustel De Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, (1864), Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956.

⁷ Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, London: Penguin, 2014.

⁸ Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

they owned their children, the concept of the individual could not yet be born. The fundamental unit was the family. The Torah represents the birth of the individual as the central figure in the moral life. Because children – all children – belong to God, parenthood is not ownership but guardianship. As soon as they reach the age of maturity (traditionally, twelve for girls, thirteen for boys) children become independent moral agents with their own dignity and freedom.⁹

Sigmund Freud famously had something to say about this too. He held that a fundamental driver of human identity is the Oedipus Complex, the conflict between fathers and sons as exemplified in Aeschylus' tragedy.¹⁰ By creating moral space between fathers and sons, Judaism offers a non-tragic resolution to this tension. If Freud had taken his psychology from the Torah rather than from Greek myth, he might have arrived at a more hopeful view of the human condition.

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

The Torah is revolutionary not only in relation to society but also in relation to the family. To be sure, the Torah's revolution was not fully completed in the course of the biblical age. Slavery had not yet been abolished. The rights of women had not yet been fully actualised. But the birth of the individual – the integrity of each of us as a moral agent in our own right – was one of the great moral revolutions in history. *Covenant and Conversation 5775 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©5775 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd it came to pass...that God tested Abraham, saying to him, 'Abraham,' to which he responded, 'Here I am!' And He said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, offering him there as a sacrifice on one of the mountains that I will show you' (Gen. 22:1-2). Has Abraham lost his moral compass? When

⁹ It is perhaps no accident that the figure who most famously taught the idea of "the child's right to respect" was Janusz Korczak, creator of the famous orphanage in Warsaw who perished together with the orphans in Treblinka. See Tomek Bogacki, *The Champion of Children: The Story of Janusz Korczak* (2009).

¹⁰ Freud argued, in *Totem and Taboo*, that the Oedipus complex was central to religion also.

God presents Abraham with the most difficult and tragic command, to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, Abraham rises early the next morning, loads his donkey, calls his servants and immediately starts the journey—without a word of protest.

Not long before, though, when God declares the imminent destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham passionately protests the Divine decree, pleading for the lives of their immoral inhabitants: "Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?" [ibid. 18:25].

If Abraham was willing to defend the wicked residents of Sodom and Gomorrah from a mass death, could he not have done at least as much for his righteous, beloved and Divinely-promised son? What has changed within Abraham?

Indeed, Abraham has undergone a change, and it is because of this change that he does not argue with God now. Abraham relates to God differently from how he related to Him before. He now has a more distant relationship with God that does not permit the camaraderie of questioning a Divine order. Why is this? At first glance, this would appear to be a negative development. How could distance from God be positive? Paradoxically, in the case of Abraham, it was a necessary evolution. Permit to me explain why.

Fear of God and love of God are two fundamental principles of Jewish philosophy, forming the framework for our service to the Almighty. The former emanates from a sense of healthy distance from God, while the latter involves a sense of closeness to Him. Both relationships are necessary, and complement each other.

Fear of God is critical to the fabric of human existence. Those who love—either God or another human being—may sometimes rationalize away their own lapses and indiscretions with the sense that the beloved will understand, that those in love 'need not say they are sorry.' In contrast, fear of God brooks no exceptions, keeping us honest, constantly spurring us on to remain steady and steadfast despite the narrowness of life's very narrow bridge.

Abraham is the paradigmatic example of loving God. He leaves the comforts of his homeland, birthplace and family and enters an unfamiliar land in order to be with God—much as a lover following his beloved.

Abraham establishes altar after altar in the name of his beloved God, about Whose ethical teachings and powers of creativity he never ceases to speak—and attempts to persuade others to accept Him. He is close to God and he understands God. Hence, his argument with the Divine on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah.

This changes when Abraham sojourns to the Land of Gerar, a place about which he comments, "Surely the fear of God is not in this place" [ibid. 20:11]. The final words we read before the account of the Akeda is that Abraham lived in the land of the Philistines for many days. Indeed, the very introduction to the Akeda story begins: "After these things..." [ibid. 22:1], a reference to his stay in Gerar. What was he doing in a place defined by its lack of fear of God?

This, in fact, is the basis for the segue to the incident of the Akeda, which bespeaks Abraham's fear of God and his unquestioning acceptance of a Divine command he could not possibly understand. His experience in Gerar had apparently caused him to place an emphasis on a fear of God that he had not previously had to employ to such an extent in his service of God. And it had a balancing effect on him.

We can now see the significance of the climactic moment of the Akeda, when, as Abraham lifts the slaughtering knife, the angel of God cries out, "Do not harm the boy! For now I know that you fear God..." [ibid., v. 12]. In other words, "You had long shown your love of God. Now your fear of God has been tested, as well, and you have succeeded!"

It is at this crucial moment that a circle has been completed, an event that began in the land of Gerar and ends on the mount of Moriah. It was in Gerar that Abraham honed his fear of God, a necessity in a culture in which it was sorely lacking.

Whereas Abraham's first commandment to go to the Land of Israel epitomizes the love of God, this final commandment, the Akeda, most accurately embodies the fear of God. In the process of his life experiences, Abraham has found the proper balance of both religious dynamics, perfecting his relationship with the Almighty, and teaching his descendants the proper path for our service of God. ©2021 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Our father Abraham experiences the revelation of the Lord when he is sitting alone at the opening of his tent. Only a few days had passed since his circumcision and the day itself is being described. He appears to us as a solitary figure, wrapped in his own thoughts, searching for attachment to his Creator. We are accustomed to think of this situation as being one of preparation for the visit of the three angels. However, if we but take a broader view of the matter, we readily can see that the Torah is describing for us the permanent and regular state of being of our Father figure.

He constantly experiences the presence of the Lord within and without. All his life, in everything that he does, is measured by the metric that the Lord is looking over his shoulder and recognizing the potential reward

for his actions and goodness. King David centuries later said that he always envisions the presence of the Lord before him permanently. This is the highest level of attachment to the Creator that is humanly possible.

This emotional attachment is described for us in detail in many of the holy Psalms of King David. These depictions are based on the formative experiences of our father Abraham in founding the Jewish people. Wherever he goes and whatever he does, our father Abraham feels within himself that the Lord is appearing before him and accompanying him on his new and difficult journey through life.

Even in his moments of sleep and while dreaming, Abraham is constantly aware of, if not in fact interacting, with his Creator. The gift of prophecy is one of the highest forms of communication and attention to God. There were, in ancient times, schools that trained people to become prophets. I have often wondered how that is possible, since the service of prophecy seems to be a one-off moment of revelation bestowed upon certain human beings. So how can one go to school to become a prophet?

Upon deeper reflection, it is obvious that even if the moments of recorded prophecy are rare and few, part of the necessary attribute to become a prophet is that one constantly trains oneself to visualize Heaven and to attempt to maintain a constant attachment to one's eternal soul and Creator. And this required training includes study, effort, sacrifice, and the attainment of a special relationship with impunity and eternity.

So, the description of the Lord that begins this week's Torah reading should be viewed as a description of the constant and permanent state of the relationship between God and Abraham, and not merely as a one-time fortuitous experience of holiness. Perhaps, this is what the rabbis meant when they stated that the all-merciful One desires our hearts. God desires our permanent attention, goodness, and righteousness, and that we not be distracted by the vagaries of life. We must become a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. ©2021 *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*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

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. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

After Ishmael is born to Abraham and Hagar, Abraham is told by God that he will have another child – this time with Sarah (Genesis 17:16).

Abraham responds, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You" (17:18), which Rashi understands to mean, I am not worthy of so great a reward and would be satisfied if only Ishmael lived before You. This an indication that, at that point, Abraham favored Ishmael as his potential heir.

No wonder God utters a strong response: "But Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac and I will establish my covenant with him..." (17:19).

Abraham's uncertainty about Isaac and God's constant reminder that Isaac is indeed destined to be Abraham's heir is a theme repeated throughout this section of the Torah.

• Chapter 18. After the angels tell Abraham that a child will be born to Sarah, she laughs. God then asks Abraham why Sarah was skeptical (Genesis 18:13). Most commentators understand this as God's criticism of Sarah. Some, however, suggest that God is instead critical of Abraham. After all, if Sarah is laughing, it means she has been taken by surprise: apparently

Abraham, not overly excited by the promise of Isaac's birth, never told Sarah of God's earlier promise that she'd bear a child – perhaps because Abraham was satisfied with Ishmael. (I first heard this thought from my dear colleague Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky.)

• Chapter 20. For a second time in his life, Abraham tells a foreign leader whose country he is visiting that Sarah is his sister. On some level, this may indicate Abraham's thinking that, as his sister, Sarah could not be expected to bear his heir.

• Chapter 21. Abraham's love for Ishmael is clearly enunciated as he objects to Sarah's plan to evict Ishmael after Isaac is born (Genesis 21:11).

• Chapter 22. Matters come to a head when God tells Abraham to take his son to Moriah – the place where the covenantal promise reaches its crescendo (Genesis 22:2). Note the Midrashic commentary. God says, "Take now your son," to which the Midrash has Abraham respond, but I have two sons. God then states, "Your only son," to which Abraham according to the Midrash replies, but each is the only son of his mother. God continues, "Whom you love," to which the Midrash has Abraham say, but I love both. In other words, at this late moment, Abraham expresses equal love for Ishmael. Finally, God says "Isaac," an unequivocal declaration that the covenant continues through Isaac (Bereishit Rabbah 55:7).

Hence Chayei Sarah tells the story of Abraham carefully choosing a wife for Isaac, as Abraham has come to understand that his seed will be continued through Isaac and not Ishmael.

It should be recalled that Isaac loved Esau more than Jacob (Genesis 25:28). As Isaac initially favored the wrong son, so did Abraham. And as Rebecca (Isaac's wife) correctly favored Jacob, so too does Sarah correctly favor Isaac. In time, of course, both Abraham and Isaac come to recognize who their true covenantal heirs will be.

The threefold message is as follows: First, as great as the patriarchs were, they sometimes erred. Second, the matriarchs' understanding of their children was greater. Third, even though we are the chosen people, the fact that Abraham loved Ishmael and Isaac loved Esau relays the message that we must do all we can to respectfully and graciously interact with other faith communities – the offspring of Ishmael and Esau. ©2021 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 AVROHOM LEVENTHAL

They are Watching You

The kindergarten teacher arranged the table for the weekly Shabbos party in her class. Little "Moshe" was the Shabbos Abba that week and stood at the end of the table with the kiddush cup in his hand. After

making the blessing over the grape juice, he sat down, sipped from the cup and exclaimed, "Oy, what a difficult week. Boy, am I tired. Let's get this show on the road!"

The incredulous teacher, never at a loss for words, stood in silent disbelief (or perhaps shock) at little Moshe, who, not yet 5 years old, had perfectly mimicked his father's weekly post kiddush ritual.

Dorothy Law Nolte touched on the foundation of practical "chinuch" (she called it by another name...) in her 1955 poem "Children Live What They Learn" (<https://childrenlearnwhattheylive.com/>). The simple lines in that piece inform us that our children will absorb and mimic the behavior of their role models.

Parshat Vayera, perhaps more than any other, provides many examples of how the deeds of parents, and other influencers, can so affect the actions of those observing.

The first example comes from G-d Himself who comes to check up on the recuperating Avraham on the third day after his Brit Milah (major surgery for a 99 year old). This visit is the Torah source of Bikur Cholim, visiting the sick.

During that same episode, while speaking with G-d Himself (!), Avraham notices 3 travelers off in the distance. The rare opportunity arises to entertain guests. Avraham excuses himself from the conversation to perform the mitzva of Hachnasat Orchim. From here we learn that having guests is equal to experiencing the Divine Presence.

Despite his delicate condition, Avraham runs to prepare food and drink for the guests. He made certain to include his son Yishmael in order to train him in this crucial mitzva.

In discussing the fate of Sodom, G-d says about Avraham: "For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the Lord to perform righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18:19).

The greatness in Avraham was not only his personal righteousness. He was a living example, a true role model, for his children and the others in his presence. Even those normally "unreachable" people were positively affected by what they saw in Avraham.

The parsha describes the infamous Sodom where Lot has taken residence. While not exactly a righteous person, Lot, as he learned in the house of Avraham, sought out guests. This practice was particularly dangerous as hosting strangers was considered a capital offense in Sodom.

And this dedication to chesed continued down with Lot's daughter, Paltit. The Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (Chapter 25), relates that Paltit was put to death for sustaining a poor man. Disregarding Sodom's evil statutes against chesed, she took the risk and provided him with food. She was sentenced to be burned. It was her cries while being punished that reached the heavenly Throne and brought G-d's judgement on

Sodom. Sodom was destroyed by heavenly fire commensurate with the sentence that Paltit received.

The chinuch of chesed, so ingrained within the family of Avraham, had the power to shape even those considered "less than perfect". Monotheism thrives today due to Avraham's impact.

As parents, teachers and people of the world, we, perhaps without realizing, greatly influence our children, students and everyone around us.

Those who look up to us will seek to imitate our words, actions, and behavior.

It is both a wonderful opportunity and a daunting responsibility.

While nature is a major part of our lives, nurture greatly contributes to whom our children can be.

Children will live what they learn. Their speech, attitudes, and behavior will mirror what they see and hear.

Consider the following scenario:

Week after week a parent emphasizes to their child the importance of being honest, to always tell the truth, no matter what.

Vacation comes and the family goes to the local amusement park.

Admission Price: 12 and over: 10.00

Under 12: 5.00

As they approach the ticket booth, this parent, who has spoken so much about honesty, winks and whispers to his 12 and half year-old son, "tell them you're 11".

Yes, he might have saved 5 dollars. But at what cost?

While it takes tremendous discipline to think before we speak or act, that investment of time and deliberation will pay dividends for generations to come.

Just ask Avraham... ©2021 Rabbi A. Leventhal, noted educator and speaker, is the Executive Director at *Lema'an Achai lemaanachai.org*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Malei and Chasier

The writing of the Torah has many intricate rules that must be followed by every scribe. Certain letters must be enlarged or made small, dots occur over some letters or words in the text, and various words are written either malei, full, or chaseir, missing a letter but sounded the same with a vowel substitute. Since the Torah in its exact form is the direct written expression of Hashem, the Rabbis sought to comprehend every aspect of that written word.

In this week's parasha we find an example of a word which is chaseir, missing a letter. We find in the first pasuk, "And Hashem appeared to him in the Plains of Mamre and he was sitting (yosheiv) at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day." The key word here is yosheiv which is spelled in our text yud, shin, vet. Here a letter (vav) which can be a vowel sound is replaced

with a dot making the same sound. Since vowels are not in the Torah, this could lead to misreading the word.

Some argue that when Hashem came to Avraham he was already standing and Hashem told him to sit. Others, like Rashi, say that he was sitting and sought to get up. Rashi explains, "he (Avraham) wanted to stand but the Holy One Blessed is He said to him, 'sit and I will stand.' You are a foreshadowing for your children, for I am destined to stand in the assembly of judges (dayanim) while they are sitting, as it says, 'And Hashem stands in the Divine assembly.'" Rashi explains that both events are necessary: (1) the word written chaseir, and (2) the fact that Avraham is sitting at the opening of his tent. The opening of Avraham's tent was equivalent to the gates of a city, the place where the courts were to sit.

There are two other cases where the word yosheiv is written chaseir and the person is sitting in an appropriate spot. Two of the angels who visited Avraham set out to destroy S'dom and to save Lot. "And the two angels came to S'dom in the evening and Lot was yosheiv, sitting at the gate of S'dom...." Rashi comments, "it is written yashav (chaseir), that very day they appointed him (Lot) as a judge (shofeit) over them."

The next case is found in next week's parasha when Avraham needs to bury his wife. He approaches Efron the Hittite, "and Efron was yosheiv sitting among the people of the Hittites." Rashi quotes from Medrash Raba, "it is written chaseir, on that day they appointed (Efron) an official over them because of the importance of Avraham who needed him he rose to greatness. Notice: (1) Efron is not sitting at the entrance to the city, but he is sitting among the people, and (2) Efron is not appointed a judge but instead a "policeman-enforcer" of the decisions of the judge. Efron's greatness was caused by someone else, so his elevation is significantly lower.

HaRav Shmshon Rafael Hirsch discusses this difference in Parashat Shoftim in Sefer Devarim. A dayan must be knowledgeable in the law. He must be of a certain character to be appointed since he must listen to a case as Hashem would listen. He must have an unprejudiced ear as well as a sympathetic heart to judge in righteousness. A shofeit may judge lower-level cases where the knowledge of the entire law is unnecessary. The qualities mentioned for him are the same as for the dayan. A shoteir, a glorified policeman, may only carry out the wishes of the court. Efron, who says a lot but does very little, is hardly of a judge's character. But there is one other item which should be noted. There is nothing here for him to judge. Efron is merely here to sell the land to Avraham so he can bury Sarah.

We must understand that Rashi will often quote a Midrash to give us an insight that he believes to be the simplest understanding of the phrase. Medrash

Raba is used here in all three cases, yet in none of the cases does Rashi stay true to the wording of the Medrash. All three midrashim were altered to enable Rashi's comments to have continuity and to expound a more suitable message. Rashi specifically calls Avraham a precursor to the dayanim, Lot a shofeit, and Efron a shoteir. Rashi clearly wishes to demonstrate that Avraham was on a higher level than Lot who was on a higher level than Efron. We know from their own actions that this analysis is true, but we also see that the Medrash does not make that distinction. Efron rises to power, though it is only due to his good fortune that he owns the land that Avraham desires. Lot, however, is somewhat worthy of being a judge. This is only partly due to his own behavior but more due to the difference between his behavior and the terrible behavior of his fellow citizens.

Lastly, we come to Avraham. Rashi does not say that Avraham was a dayan, only that his children will be dayanim. Rashi is giving us a hidden message, namely that Avraham is permitted to judge, also. Avraham uses this new power to judge Hashem concerning the people of S'dom. Avraham braces himself to confront Hashem, "it would be sacrilege to You, shall the Judge of all the earth not do Justice?" Avraham repeated to Hashem the very idea that Hashem had planted in his mind, that a judge must do justice and Hashem will be present to witness that judgment. Avraham says that Man will also learn from the actions of Hashem. If Hashem is merciful then Man is permitted to be merciful too. If Hashem judges righteously, then Man must judge righteously also. If, instead, Hashem destroys the righteous together with the wicked, He will be equating the two. Though it is clear that we can never judge Hashem, Man must be able to comprehend His actions enough for him to emulate Hashem in judgment.

We can see now why Rashi changed the midrashim in order to conform with his message. The changes that he made were not significant to the general meaning of each section but added an important message that was worth learning. We can also see that, like Rashi, one must look carefully at any quoted text to determine if a change was made. If we find a change, we must try to understand the reason for that change. The Torah is very careful about the words that are used, so when changes to an expected text occur, we must understand that there was a purpose to this change. May our study of the Torah help us to understand that each change is significant, and each change carries a message to elevate our service to Hashem. © 2021 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Lelamed Weekly Dvar

G-d visits Avraham as he recovers from his circumcision on a hot day. Suddenly Avraham

notices three men, rises to greet them, and begs them to stop so that he may provide for his guests (18:3-5). When the men agree, Avraham enlists the help of his entire family. How could Avraham seemingly interrupt G-d's visit to care for three strangers? Even if we justify his actions, how could he possibly know that such actions were acceptable?

Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel reveals that every act of Avraham's generosity was a positive reflection of his deep understanding and emulation of G-d's chesed (kindness). This acute awareness of G-d's infinite benevolence fueled Avraham's endless pursuit of kindness as well as his confidence that G-d would forgive the interruption in the case that an opportunity to show compassion presented itself. Avraham's unshakeable, uncompromising dedication to being kind should inspire us to prioritize kindness to others over all else. ©2021 Rabbi S. Ressler and Lelamed, Inc.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And Avraham answered and said, "Behold I have taken upon myself to speak to my Master and I am but dust and ashes." (Beraishis 18:27) In one of history's great negotiations, Avraham pleaded with Hashem not to destroy the metropolis of Sodom despite the evil ways of its people. He argued that if there were but fifty righteous people in it (ten per city in the area) that would be a reason for Hashem to spare them. Hashem agreed, whereupon Avraham countered as above.

After calling himself "dust and ashes," he proceeds to ask Hashem to be even more lenient, to allow the cities to remain in five of the aforementioned fifty are missing. Hashem agreed to save the cities for forty-five people, then forty, thirty, twenty, and ten. When it turned out there were not even ten people worth saving, the fate of the cities was sealed.

However, Avraham's attempt was not for naught. The Gemara in Sotah (17a) teaches in the name of Rava: "In the merit of calling himself dust and ashes, Avraham's children merited two mitzvos: the ashes of the Red Heifer and the dust of the Sotah." Why did Avraham use these terms and why were these mitzvos a reward for them?

Though the common explanation is that these phrases connote humility and lowness, Rashi further expounds on them. He says that Avraham said, "I am dust – for I should rightly have been killed in the war with Sodom, yet You saved me," and "I am ashes – as I would have been burnt in the furnace of Nimrod had You not rescued me."

If Avraham was trying to convince Hashem to let him ask for something, why would he a) present himself as lowly and unworthy, and b) recount other times when his merits were already accessed and his life spared? And if he did this, why would he deserve

two mitzvos, and why these two?

To explain, we must understand that Hashem doesn't give us things because we are great, but rather because He is. Avraham was acknowledging Hashem's undeserved kindnesses towards himself and praising Hashem for them. The only thing that gave Avraham the courage to speak up was the confidence he had in Hashem's compassion.

Therefore, when he dared to ask for more, He praised Hashem for his limitless benevolence and merely asked that it extend even further, as it most certainly could. As a reward, Hashem granted Avraham's children two very intriguing mitzvos. First, the ashes of the Para Aduma, which could purify one who had been contaminated by a corpse. Just as Avraham was "resurrected" by not being killed in war or by Nimrod, so did Hashem revive he who was impure.

The second is even more enigmatic. The Sotah procedure enabled a woman who had acted questionably to be exonerated from the suspicion of even worse behavior. It was a miracle necessary to bring harmony between a husband and wife. When Avraham showed compassion even to the people of Sodom who didn't deserve it, he was following the paradigm Hashem established. Therefore, Hashem responded favorably to Avraham's requests, and memorialized them for all time with these two mitzvos of human redemption.

Everything belongs to Hashem. Whatever we take or use is a loan we will need to pay back. The more we indulge, the more we owe. Over a lifetime we will accrue massive amounts of debt that will need to repay.

But there's an out. When you go to a hotel everything you take is marked down and upon your departure you are hit with a bill. The only one who doesn't pay is a hotel employee. The waiter takes food from the kitchen when he is hungry and no one cares. The concierge drinks a bottle of water at no charge. It is all free since they are helping others.

The trappings of our lives are very expensive and one day we will need to pay for them. However, if others are welcome in our home, our car is a Chesed on wheels, and our food and money are shared with the less fortunate, then we will not be sent a bill for our use of Hashem's property because we are working for Him - helping Him provide for His children.
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