

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

There is an image that haunts us across the millennia, fraught with emotion. It is the image of a man and his son walking side-by-side across a lonely landscape of shaded valleys and barren hills. The son has no idea where he is going and why. The man, in pointed contrast, is a maelstrom of emotion. He knows exactly where he is going and why, but he can't make sense of it at all.

The God who gave him a son is now telling him to sacrifice his son. On the one hand, the man is full of fear: am I really going to lose the one thing that makes my life meaningful, the son for whom I prayed all those years? On the other hand, part of him is saying: just as this child was impossible -- I was old, my wife was too old-yet here he is. So, though it seems impossible, I know that God is not going to take him from me. That is not the God I know and love. He would never have told me to call this child Isaac, meaning "he will laugh" if He meant to make him and me cry.

The father is in a state of absolute cognitive dissonance, yet-though he can make no sense of it-he trusts in God and betrays to his son no sign of emotion. Vayelchu shenehem yachdav. The two of them walked together.

There is just one moment of conversation between them: "Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, 'Father?'

"Yes, my son?' Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here,' Isaac said, 'but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'

"Abraham answered, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.'" (Gen. 22: 7-8)

What worlds of unstated thoughts and unexpressed emotions lie behind those simple words. Yet as if to emphasise the trust between father and son, and between both and God, the text repeats: Vayelchu shenehem yachdav. The two of them walked together.

As I read those words, I find myself travelling back in time, and in my mind's eye I see my father and me walking back from shul on Shabbat. I was four or five years old at the time, and I think I understood then, even if I couldn't put it into words, that there was something sacred in that moment. During the week I would see the worry in my father's face as he was trying to make a living in difficult times. But on Shabbat all those worries were

somewhere else. Vayelchu shenehem yachdav. We walked together in the peace and beauty of the holy day. My father was no longer a struggling businessman. Today he was a Jew breathing God's air, enjoying God's blessings, and he walked tall.

Shabbat was my mother making the food that gave the house its special Shabbat smell: the soup, the kugel, the lockshen. As she lit candles, she could have been the bride, the queen, we sang about in Lecha Dodi and Eshet Chayil. I had a sense, even then, that this was a holy moment when we were in the presence of something larger than ourselves, that embraced other Jews in other lands and other times, something I later learned we call the Shekhinah, the Divine presence.

We walked together, my parents, my brothers and me. The two generations were so different. My father came from Poland. My brothers and I were "proper Englishmen." We knew we would go places, learn things and pursue careers they could not. But we walked together, two generations, not having to say that we loved one another. We weren't a demonstrative family but we knew of the sacrifices our parents made for us and the pride we hoped to bring them. We belong to different times, different worlds, had different aspirations, but we walked together.

Then I find my imagination fast-forwarding to August this year, to those unforgettable scenes in Britain-in Tottenham, Manchester, Bristol- of young people rampaging down streets, looting shops, smashing windows, setting fire to cars, robbing, stealing, assaulting people. Everyone asked why. There were no political motives. It was not a racial clash. There were no religious undertones.

Of course, the answer was as clear as day but no one wanted to say so. In the space of no more than two generations, a large part of Britain has quietly abandoned the family, and decided that marriage is just a piece of paper. Britain became the country with the highest rate of teenage mothers, the highest rate of single parent families, and the highest rate -- 46% in 2009 -- of births outside marriage in the world.

Marriage and cohabitation are not the same thing, though it is politically incorrect to say so. The average length of cohabitation is less than two years. The result is that many children are growing up without their biological father, in many cases not even knowing who their father is. They live, at best, with a succession of stepfathers. It is a little-known but frightening fact that

the rate of violence between stepfathers and stepchildren is 80 times that between natural fathers and their children.

The result is that in 2007, a UNICEF report showed that Britain's children are the unhappiest in the developed world-bottom of a league of 26 countries.

On 13 September 2011, another report by UNICEF, compared British parents unfavourably with their counterparts in Sweden and Spain. It showed that British parents try to buy the love of their children by giving them expensive clothes and electronic gadgets-"compulsive consumerism". They fail to give their children what they most want, and costs nothing at all: their time.

Nowhere do we see more clearly the gap between Jewish and secular values today than here. We live in a secular world that has accumulated more knowledge than all previous generations combined, from the vast cosmos to the structure of DNA, from superstring theory to the neural pathways of the brain, and yet it has forgotten the simple truth that a civilisation is as strong as the love and respect between parent and child-Vayelchu shenehem yachdav, the ability of the generations to walk together.

Jews are a formidably intellectual people. We have our Nobel prize-winning physicists, chemists, medical scientists and games theorists. Yet as long as there is a living connection between Jews and our heritage, we will never forget that there is nothing more important than home, the sacred bond of marriage, and the equally sacred bond between parent and child. Vayelchu shenehem yachdav.

And if we ask ourselves why is it that Jews so often succeed, and succeeding, so often give to others of their money and time, and so often make an impact beyond their numbers: there is no magic, no mystery, no miracle. It is simply that we devote our most precious energies to bringing up our children. Never more so than on Shabbat when we cannot buy our children expensive clothes or electronic gadgets, when we can only give them what they most want and need-our time.

Jews knew and know and will always know what today's chattering classes are in denial about, namely that a civilisation is as strong as the bond between the generations. That is the enduring image of this weeks parsha: the first Jewish parent, Abraham, and the first Jewish child, Isaac, walking together toward an unknown future, their fears stilled by their faith. Lose the family and we will eventually lose all else. Sanctify the family and we will have something more precious than wealth or power or success: the love between the generations that is the greatest gift God gives us when we give it to one another. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* ©2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

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

In the city of Worms, in 1096, some 800 people were killed in the course of two days at the end of the month of Iyar. In *The Last Trial*¹, Professor Shalom Spiegel's study of the Akeda, he records a chronicle of that period that cites a declaration by one of the community's leaders, Rabbi Meshulam bar Isaac: “All you great and small, hearken unto me. Here is my son that God gave me and to whom my wife Tziporah gave birth in her old age. Isaac is this child's name. And now I shall offer him up as father Abraham offered up his son Isaac.”

Sadly, the chronicle concludes with the father slaying the boy himself, in the presence of his wife. When the distraught parents leave the room of their sacrifice, they are both cruelly slaughtered by the murdering Christians. Spiegel quotes from a dirge of the time: “Compassionate women in tears, with their own hands slaughtered, as at the Akeda of Moriah. Innocent souls withdrew to eternal life, to their station on high...”

The biblical story of the binding of Isaac is replayed via the Talmudic invocation of the ram's horn (shofar) each year on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment and Renewal. The shofar symbolizes the ram substitute for Isaac on Mount Moriah; God commands that we hearken to the cries of this shofar ‘in order that I may remember for your benefit the binding of Isaac the son of Abraham, and I shall account it for you as if you yourselves bound yourselves up before Me’ [Rosh Hashanah 16a]. This message of the shofar has inspired Jews of all generations to rise to the challenge of martyrdom, whenever necessary, transforming themselves into Abrahams and Sarahs, placing their precious children on the altar of Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of the divine name.

Indeed, there was apparently a stubborn tradition which insisted that Abraham actually went through with the act of sacrifice. After all, following the biblical command of the angel to Abraham (the *deus ex machina* as it were) – ‘Do not cast your hand against the lad’ [Gen. 22:19]. Where is Isaac? If indeed, his life has just been saved, why doesn't he accompany his father, why don't they go together to the lads, why don't they –

¹ S. Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (Woodstock, vt. 1993)

father and son – return home to Be'er Sheva and Sarah together (as they have been twice described as doing – father and son walking together – in the context of the Akeda story)?! Moreover, when they first approached the mountain of sacrifice, Abraham tells the young men to wait down below: 'I and the boy will go yonder; we will worship and we will come back to you' [Gen. 22:5]. So why does the text have Abraham return alone? On the basis of this textual problem, Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) makes mention of an interpretation that suggests that Abraham literally followed God's command, slaying his son, and that God later on miraculously brought Isaac back to life. It is precisely that stark and startling deletion of Isaac's name from the conclusion of the biblical account of the Akeda itself, which gave countless generations of Jewish martyrs the inspiration for their sacrifice; and this is the case, even though Ibn Ezra felt compelled to deny the tradition as inaccurate: 'Isaac is not mentioned. But he who asserts that Abraham slew Isaac and abandoned him, and that afterwards Isaac came to life again, is speaking contrary to the biblical text' [Ibn Ezra, Gen. 22:1]. Ibn Ezra is obviously making reference to a commentary – which Jewish martyrdom would not allow to fall into oblivion.

The earliest reference to this notion of Isaac's actual sacrifice is probably the Midrash Hagadol which cites R. Eleazer ben Pedat, a first generation Amora of the Talmud: "Although Isaac did not die, Scripture regards him as though he had died. And his ashes lay piled on the altar. That's why the text mentions Abraham and not Isaac."²

And perhaps one might argue that Isaac was so traumatized by the Akeda that a specific aspect of him – the part of his personality which would always remain on the altar – did die. After all, Isaac is the most ethereal and passive of the patriarchs, called by the Midrash – even after the binding – the olah temimah, the whole burnt offering. But this psychological interpretation and Ibn Ezra's rejection notwithstanding, the penitential Slichot prayers still speak of the 'ashes of Isaac' on the altar, continuing to give credence to the version which suggests that Isaac did suffer martyrdom. And we have already cited recorded incidents of children who suffered martyrdom at the hands of their parents, who did not wish them to be violated by the pagan tyrants.

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

The paradox in Jewish history is that unless we were willing to sacrifice our children for God, we would never have survived as a God-inspired and God-

committed nation with a unique message for ourselves and the world. Perhaps that is why Mount Moriah, the place of the willingness to sacrifice, is the Temple Mount of the Holy City of Jerusalem, the place from which God will ultimately be revealed to all of humanity, the place of Jewish eternity. ©2024 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

God appears to Avraham in the opening verse of this week's parsha. How does God appear to him? The rabbis teach us that He appears to him in the form of a visitor there to cheer him in his illness and pain after the rite of circumcision. The Jewish value of visiting and cheering the sick stems from our imitation of this Godly virtue as first revealed to Avraham. In this instance, God reveals Himself to Avraham through three Bedouin Arabs who are apparently searching for a place to rest, eat and drink.

The apparent Arabs are angels and messengers of God. It is one of the great attributes of the house of Avraham and Sarah that visitors can enter their home as Arab desert dwellers and leave as angels. It is these wayfarers that deliver to Avraham and Sarah the message of continuity and eternity of Jewish life. Sarah will give birth to Yitzchak after decades of being a barren woman.

Earlier, God informed Avraham of this momentous news directly. Yet Sarah, the direct recipient of this blessing, He somehow chooses to inform in an indirect manner through the unknown strange visitors that arrive at her tent and that she hospitably feeds. There is a great insight in this chosen method of God, so to speak, in delivering the message to Sarah through seemingly human auspices. God often, if not constantly in our times, talks to us through seemingly human messengers. If we are able to listen carefully to what others say to us, oftentimes we will hear a divine message communicated to us through a human conduit.

I think that this also explains why Sarah was initially bemused by the words of the angel. She evidently thought that it was just a throw-away promise of a wandering Bedouin Arab and reacted accordingly. At the outset she did not hear the voice of God in the words of the angel that addressed her. Therefore she did not take those words seriously. God reprimands her for this attitude and asks "Why did Sarah not take these words seriously?"

Avraham who heard the tidings from God directly realized that the message was true and serious. Sarah had to believe what she thought was a human wish and therefore discounted it. But God demanded from her, as He does from each of us, that we pay proper attention to what other humans say to us. Perhaps in

² Midrash Hagadol, Margulies edition, p. 360

their statements and words we can realize that God Himself, so to speak, is talking to us.

God has many messengers and many ways of reaching us individually but we must be attuned to hear the messages that emanate from Heaven. They should never be allowed to fall on deaf or inattentive ears and minds. To a great extent this ability to listen to the otherwise unheard voice of Heaven is the measure of a Jew and of his ability to accomplish in life. Eventually Sarah hears and believes - and through this Yitzchak is born and Jewish continuity is assured and protected. ©2024 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

The Akeidah opens with the words “And it came to pass, after these events, that God tested Abraham” (Genesis 22:1). The biblical Hebrew word for test is *nisah*. But for whom was the test intended?

For Ralbag, the test was meant for God. God knows the future in general terms, but not in its specifics. Once Abraham shows a willingness to sacrifice his son, God declares, “Now I know that you are a God-fearing man” – implying that He did not know beforehand (22:12).

For Nachmanides, the test is meant for Abraham, to help him recognize the depth of his commitment. Even Abraham was unaware how deep his faith was until facing the Akeidah challenge. Through the Akeidah, Abraham proved to himself his high level of belief.

Maimonides feels the test was meant for the world, showing to what degree Abraham was committed (Guide for the Perplexed 3:24).

Others understand *nisah* not as a test but as a reproof. In other words: “And it came to pass after these events that God reprovved Abraham” (Genesis 22:1). After which events?

According to Rashbam, the phrase refers to the immediate past incident wherein Abraham made a treaty with Avimelech, king of Philistia, giving him part of Israel (21:22–34). In response, God critiques Abraham, telling him he had no right to give away part of the land without His permission. To make this point, God says, if I wish, you’ll sacrifice your son, and you’ll have no future.

Alternatively, it could be suggested that the Akeidah was a reproof for the banishment of Ishmael, as also found in the previous chapter (21:9–21). Notice the similarities in the two stories. God tells Abraham to expel Ishmael just as He tells Abraham to take Isaac to Mount Moriah. Both narratives tell of a parent and child in a desert. The child is close to death. At the last moment, the child is saved through the intervention of an angel. Note, too, the parallel in language. Both stories specify,

“And Abraham rose up in the morning” (21:14; 22:3). In both, the intervention is phrased similarly: “And the angel of God called to Hagar”; “The angel of the Lord called to him” (21:17; 22:11).

So powerful is the parallel that some call the expulsion of Ishmael, Akeidat Yishmael (the Binding of Ishmael), just as Isaac’s story is called Akeidat Yitzchak (the Binding of Isaac). Perhaps the message embedded in these parallels is that more sensitivity should have been shown to Hagar and Ishmael. Indeed, as Rabbi David Kalb points out, when God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah, He doesn’t mean to banish Ishmael but to listen deeply to and empathize with Sarah’s plight (21:12). If the Akeidah was indeed a reproof, might it relate to the inappropriate expulsion of Ishmael?

When considering the debate in contemporary Israel concerning the future of Judea and Samaria, these opposing views resonate. Rashbam seems to issue a warning to think carefully before giving away any part of Israel. At the same time, we can also say, be careful not to mistreat Palestinians. Which is it? Or is it both simultaneously? ©2024 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

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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Avraham came forward and said, "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (Beraishis 18:23) Knowing that Avraham was going to be the father of a great multitude, as well as an influencer of the entire world, Hashem chose to let Avraham know about His plan to destroy Sodom and the other cities. As Hashem expected, Avraham stepped up to negotiate on their behalf and plead their case.

Though everyone knows the story of Avraham's numerical queries, asking to save the cities for the sake of 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, or even just 10 righteous people, what most of us don't realize is that Avraham didn't actually say the words, "Please spare them in the merit of these righteous people."

Instead, Avraham focuses on the midos of Hashem, His attributes as seen through His running of the world. Avraham asked Hashem, "Will you punish the righteous along with the wicked?" He was asking, "Are You the type of Master who will not discern between those who deserve punishment and those who don't?" I wouldn't believe such a thing, that YOU, Judge of the entire world, would do that. It would be a desecration of Your holy name to disregard the good people and destroy everyone.

He continued by asking with examples. "What if there were fifty righteous people in the city, how would You handle that? Would You destroy the whole city? Would you just save some of them? What if there were fewer, how would it change? I want to understand You better." So it continued through each of the numbers Avraham asked about, each time with him gaining a new perspective in Hashem's manner of judgment and guidance of the world.

The way Avraham pleaded with Hashem for the people of Sodom was not about them at all, but rather, about Hashem. Avraham made the Creator the focus, and through this, obtained a promise that if ten righteous people existed (sadly, they did not) He would save the city.

We find similarly that when Aharon HaKohain found people who were sinners, he would befriend them. He would speak to their hearts and praise their good qualities. The people would feel reflective, saying that if Aharon knew what they were really like he would not befriend them. This would cause them to do Teshuva

and change their ways, so as not to let him down.

The Mishnayos in Pirkei Avos speak of being students of Avraham Avinu and of Aharon HaKohain, and indeed, we can learn from these two great tzaddikim how to bring out the best in people. It is not by focusing on their flaws and repeatedly pointing them out. Rather, it is by expressing an interest in others, and causing them to want to be better, kinder, and more. In this way, we can have the desired effect of improving others, without hurt feelings or pain.

The Chofetz Chaim heard that a bochur was caught smoking on Shabbos and asked to speak to him. The boy was prepared for a lengthy rebuke with a lot of angry yelling. Nobody heard what the Chofetz Chaim said to him, but that boy was never mechallel Shabbos again.

Years later, he revealed what took place. "I was prepared to be yelled at, but that didn't happen. Instead, the Chofetz Chaim sat me next to him at his table. He grasped my hands in his and held them firmly and said one word, "Shabbos." He repeated that word again and again as tears began streaming down his face. "Shabbos!" he sighed, "Shabbos."

"Had I tried to remove my hands I would not have been able to, for I felt paralyzed. One of his holy tears fell onto my hand and I could feel the searing heat of the tzaddik's concern for me and the Holy Shabbos."

Absent-mindedly rubbing his hand, the man continued, "I can still feel the burning of that tear on my hand. It was at that moment I vowed never again to hurt this tzaddik by desecrating the Shabbos. It is too holy, and, apparently, the sage of Radin felt that I was too holy as well." ©2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrاند

Transcribed by David Twersky

Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman

It is certainly a sobering ethical lesson that even though the people of Sodom were the antithesis of all that Avraham stood for morally, nevertheless Avraham's ahavas habriyos (love of all creation) compelled him to try to save the city upon hearing that they were facing imminent destruction. However, I would like to focus our attention today on a comment Avraham made in "apologizing", so to speak, to Hashem for his brazen defense of the city. Avraham says "...Behold, now, I have begun to speak to my L-rd although I am but dust and ashes." (Bereshis 18:27).

Avraham excuses himself for speaking to the Master of the Universe when he himself is "only afar v'efer" (dust and ashes). Rashi here notes that "afar v'efer" is not merely a colloquial expression. Rashi interprets: "and behold I should have already been nothing more than dust as a result of my battle with the kings." Avraham Avinu had just engaged in war with the mightiest army in the world. They should have crushed

him; pulverized him into dust -- and yet he emerged victorious. Furthermore, "I should have already been ashes as a result of my encounter with Nimrod (who threw me into the fiery furnace in Ur Kasdim)."

In other words, "I am afar v'efer" is not merely a rhetorical expression. Avraham states "If not for Your mercy towards me, saving me from two certain death sentences, I would have already been turned into afar v'efer!"

Rabbi Avraham Buxbaum, a former talmid of Ner Yisroel, came out with a very nice sefer on the weekly parsha, in which he makes the following observation: Avraham states over here, "I am afar v'efer" in the present tense. This is noteworthy because Avraham is not afar v'efer now. Avraham really means I was almost dust and I was almost ashes, but right now I am alive and well. Yet Avraham speaks in the present tense.

We learn from here the key to remaining appreciative of something that has happened sometime in the past. It is an extremely common scenario for a person to go through a near death experience and then recover. He may be cured from a life-threatening illness. He may have been in a terrible accident and have walked away from it. It is the nature of people that when they emerge from those type of situations, they proclaim "I am now a new person. From now on, I will never miss davening. I am never going to speak lashon ha'rah. I am always going to daven with a minyan." However, invariably, what happens to most people is that with the passage of time, it becomes "same old, same old."

I know a very fine fellow, who, by his own admission -- I am not accusing him of this -- experienced this. This fellow was in a terrible car crash. He was hit by a truck and walked away from it without a broken bone. The State Trooper who pulled up to the accident site, upon seeing the car, proclaimed it to be a miracle. "No one walks away from such a crash." The person made a seudas ho'da'ah (meal of thanksgiving). He was very shaken and moved by the whole experience. He told me that he started learning various mussar sefarim, etc., etc.

Now, almost a year later, the effect of the experience dissipated. By his own admission, he does not feel the same way. What is the key to a person maintaining that same feeling of hakaras hatov and gratitude to the Ribono shel Olam, thus enabling the person to maintain the kabalos he accepted upon himself at the time of the "salvation"?

The key is to keep the day of the crash in mind. Live in THAT time frame rather than in the present. That is what Avraham is saying: Right NOW I consider myself afar v'efer because I should really be a dead man! I remember to this day the moment I entered into the fiery furnace and I didn't burn up. That miracle is ever-present in my mind.

However, if a person focuses on how he is TODAY, rather than immediately after the incident, then

his feelings of overwhelming gratitude will inevitably dissipate. The key is to stay focused on the day that it occurred.

Rabbi Buxbaum gives an example: A person has been unemployed for several months. To say the least, it is a very depressing situation. He can't pay his debts. He must come onto the largesse of other people. It can be humiliating and ego destroying. Then someone gives him a job. The day he receives the job and the day he starts receiving a paycheck again, it literally becomes "Layehudim hoysa orah" (To the Jews there was light -- Esther 8:16). The person is so grateful: "I am working. I am making money. I am being productive. I have a job."

However, six months later he does not like the working conditions. He thinks he should be getting a raise already. He doesn't like this. He doesn't like that. The boss yells at him. He is grumpy, etc., etc., etc. How does that happen? Why does this happen? It is because the person looks at himself in the present and thinks "I have a job. I don't like the job. What did my boss do for me?"

A person must try to bear in mind the way he felt the day BEFORE he got the job. "Remember how depressed you were -- those feelings of worthlessness that you had!" A person should always try to look at where he is NOW, relative to the day BEFORE he got the job! That is the key. "I am afar v'efer."

General Motors once ran a commercial which said, "It is typically American to ask -- 'What have you done for me lately?'" This is such an improper attitude! It is the diametric opposite of hakaras hatov. Hakaras hatov is constantly bearing in mind what someone else or what the Ribono shel Olam did for you. It is not a question of "What have you done for me LATELY?" That is not a Jewish mentality. That is not our mesorah.

Put differently, Pete Rose famously once said "You are only as good as your last at-bat." That also is a treife hashkafa. A person must constantly be makir tov. This certainly is a challenge. It is human nature to feel otherwise. It is a chessed that the Ribono shel Olam blessed us with shikcha (forgetfulness) because if people would be obsessed for the rest of their lives with the impact of 'the crash,' they would go crazy. That is why we were granted shikcha. The Gemara says in Pesachim that there are three things without which the world could not exist, and one of them is shikcha.

If we didn't have shikcha, we would always be confronted by the greatest tragedies in our lives. When a person, chas v'shalom, loses a relative, there is a decree that the deceased will be (somewhat) forgotten from their loved one's heart after twelve months. It is not as painful as it once was. If it were as painful as the day it happened, people would not be able to go on.

So, emotionally it is a beracha. However, intellectually a person needs to be able to think "I remember what it was like when I did not have a job. I remember when that car hit me and I walked away

unscathed. I looked at that car and thought 'And I am but afar v'efer.' I remember how it was when I got the diagnosis and I thought 'That's it! But, chasdei Hashem, I was cured.' That is what we need to remember: Keep THAT day in mind.

This is the lesson that Avraham Avinu is teaching us when he says "I am but afar v'efer." ©2024 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

A Special Conversation

The beginning of Parashat Vayeira speaks of the three angels that were sent by Hashem to perform three tasks: (1) to tell Sarah that she would have a son in a year, (2) to heal Avraham from the brit milah that he experienced three days earlier, and (3) to destroy the cities of Sodom and her four evil partners. The first of these tasks, telling Sarah that she would have a son, presents an interesting insight into the character of both Sarah and Avraham.

The Torah tells us that Avraham ran to gather food and drink for his "guests." He had Sarah prepare the food and he delivered it to them and they ate. When they were finished, "they said to him, 'Where is Sarah your wife?' And he said, 'Behold! – in the tent.' And he (the angel) said, 'I will surely return to you at this time next year, there will be life; and behold a son to Sarah your wife.' Now Sarah heard at the entrance to the tent, and it was behind him. Now Avraham and Sarah were old, well on in years; the course of women had ceased to be with Sarah. And Sarah laughed at her insides, saying, 'After I have withered, shall I again have clear skin? And my husband is old!' Then Hashem said to Avraham, 'Why is it that Sarah laughed, saying: "Is it even true that I shall give birth, though I have aged?" Is anything beyond Hashem? At this appointed time, I will return to you at this time next year, there will be life; and Sarah will have a son.' Sarah denied, saying: 'I did not laugh,' for she was frightened; and he said, 'No, but you laughed.'"

It appears to be very unusual for the men (angels) to ask about Sarah. Women were very private, and it would be inappropriate for these three strangers to ask Avraham about her. Sarah was separate from the men and stood inside her tent. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the Torah placed dots over the letters "aleph, yud, and vav" to indicate that "while it is correct etiquette for male guests to inquire after the lady of the house, to whom indeed they probably owe the greatest thanks, ... this should be done through the husband." Sforno explains that the angel's task was to give Sarah the good news that she would have a son. Avraham had already been told this news by Hashem, but he had not told Sarah. It is possible that Avraham did not wish to make her feel bad as she had not, as yet, had any children. The Ohr HaChaim explains that the angels did not speak directly to Sarah, respecting her

privacy, but spoke loudly enough to Avraham so that both Sarah could hear and that Avraham would know that she had heard.

We are told that Avraham and Sarah were old, but two expressions are used for being old: (1) "z'keinim, old," and (2) "ba'im bayamim, advanced in years." The Zohar explains that each day in a person's life carries its own challenge that must be accomplished that day. Many people fail to deal with these daily challenges and postpone them to a tomorrow that already was assigned additional challenges. Only those who understand the importance of fulfilling each day's challenge on its day, can really come through life having utilized each day properly. Avraham and Sarah not only had lived long lives but had used every moment of their lives dealing with the challenges that they faced each day.

Avraham and Sarah both laughed when they heard that they would have children so late in their lives. Last week's parasha saw that Hashem was not critical of Avraham for laughing yet this week was critical of Sarah. Avraham's laughter was different than Sarah's. When Avraham heard, the Torah states, "And Avraham fell on his face (bowed down) and laughed, and he thought, 'To a man of a hundred years shall there be a son, and shall Sarah, a woman of ninety years, give birth?'" Rashi explains that Avraham's laughter was preceded by his acceptance of the message, indicated by the fact that he fell to the ground. His response, then, was one of joy, not one of doubt. Sarah's answer implied disbelief, "After I am withered shall I now have clear skin? And my husband is old." The Torah explains that Sarah had ceased menstruating and assumed that it would be impossible for her to then get pregnant. It is also clear that Sarah did not know that these three men were angels. She did not know that the prophecy was the word of Hashem, but instead believed that it was just a kind word said by one of the three men who visited Avraham and politely blessed him that he should have a child with Sarah.

Hashem asked Avraham, "Why is it that Sarah laughed?" Hashem was upset with Sarah because her response indicated that she placed her trust in the natural order of things rather than in Hashem's ability to supersede that order. The Ramban says that she should have said, "Amen, may Hashem, do so!" This would indicate that she believed that this was the word of Hashem. Hashem stated, "Is anything beyond Hashem?" We believe that Hashem plays a major role in conception, and Sarah should have realized that Hashem could accomplish what was prophesized. We know that Sarah was a prophetess and should have perceived the truth of the angels' prediction. Rashi implies that Sarah had temporarily lost her prophetic perception to the extent that she failed to realize that the menstrual flow that she had that day was really a sign of rejuvenation. She mistakenly understood the flow to be unrelated to menstruation.

The Torah points out that Hashem changed Sarah's words when He related them to Avraham. Sarah said, "After I have withered, shall I again have clear skin? And my husband is old!" Hashem chose not to embarrass Avraham, so He told Avraham that Sarah had said, "Is it even true that I shall give birth, though I have aged?" The Gemara uses this incident as an example of whether a person is permitted to lie in such a way as to not embarrass someone. The argument concerns whether a person should describe a bride as "beautiful" or whether one should describe the bride as she really is. The Ramban explains that Hashem omitted Sarah's negative statement about Avraham's age because reporting it would have only caused hurt. Every bride can be described as beautiful without clarifying that one may be describing her as compared to her regular appearance. When Sarah was confronted with her reaction, she lied and said, "I did not laugh." The Ramban interpreted this to mean that Sarah did not laugh at Hashem but instead at these "men," whom she did not see nor recognize as angels. Had she understood that they were messengers from Hashem, she would have accepted their message joyfully.

Avraham and Sarah both believed that Hashem could change Sarah's nature and grant them a son after so many years. Neither doubted Hashem's Word or His ability to miraculously grant Avraham's wish. The difference between them was caused by their perception. May we learn to perceive Hashem and understand His messages to us through His Torah.

© 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

Last weeks parsha concluded with Avrams name being changed to Avraham. His new name represented his role as a father for the entire world. Throughout the parshios of Lech Lecha, Vayera, and Chayey Sarah that deal with the events of Avrahams lifetime, the Torah records many interactions that Avraham had with leaders and members of other nations. Avraham is accorded great respect and admiration from the leading personalities of his time. He is blessed by Malchizedek, sought after by Avimelech to enter into a treaty, and referred to as a prince of Hashem by the tribe of Efron when negotiating purchasing a burial plot for Sarah. What was it about Avraham that won him the honor and respect from his contemporaries?

Chazal comment that the title Avraham Halvri not only describes his birthplace as being ever Inahar (the other side of the river) but also refers to Avraham being distinct from the rest of humanity. His values and behavior were "on the other side of the river" from the rest of the world. Not only did Avraham not espouse the values of those around him, he challenged those who subscribed to idolatry and those who sanctioned unethical behavior. Chazal relate to us the story that

occurred during Avrahams youth when he smashed the idols that led to his fleeing from Ur Kasdim. He confronts Avimelech in Parshas Vayera and informs him that Avimelechs own servants are guilty of stealing Avrahams wells. Someone who lives up to a higher ethical and spiritual standard than others and also attempts to correct others is usually met with animosity. How did Avrahams behavior not only not earn the scorn of those around him, but also win their admiration and respect?

The secret to Avrahams success with his contemporaries was that they realized that he truly cared about them. Notwithstanding his absolute belief that idolatry had no place in the world, he cared even about the idol worshippers themselves. His tent was open to all and Chazal teach us that he treated the three angels royally even though he thought that they worshipped the sand of the desert. His care for all did not minimize his attitude towards idolatry and he insisted that they wash their feet and remove the sand before entering his tent. Once they did, he served them with love hoping to show them the proper path to avodas Hashem. The inhabitants of Sodom lived in a way that was antithetical to everything that Avraham held dear. Yet, when told of the imminent destruction that would befall them, Avraham interceded on their behalf. When one is perceived by others to be self-centered and arrogant because of ones higher spiritual standards, envy and eventually hatred of that person will result. However, if the righteous individual truly cares for others, he will not only be tolerated, but he will be respected and admired. Those around him will realize that his correcting of others does not stem from arrogance, but rather from a genuine care and concern for the welfare of all.

We often find ourselves in situations in which we have to subscribe to a higher ethical and religious standard than many of those around us. It is critical to never be aloof and uncaring, even of those whose actions and beliefs we do not approve of. We should never compromise our standards to win the favor of others, rather we should relate to others in a kind and caring manner. By bringing honor and respect to our values and actions, we are truly magnifying the honor and respect of Hashem Who expects us to live a life of emulating the values and actions of Avraham Avinu.

© 2018 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky and TorahWeb.org

