

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Vayeira

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לע"נ פעסל בת ישראל מנחם / לזכות חילינו

JUST BEING THERE

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

"G-d appeared to him [Avraham]..." (18:1)

At the beginning of the *parashah*, Rashi tells us that Hashem appeared to Avraham three days after his *bris milah* in order to visit him and to perform *bikur cholim*.

The Rosh notes that if Hashem came to visit Avraham and to find out how he is feeling, why is that conversation not reported in the text? Why does the Torah make no mention of Hashem asking Avraham how he felt or how the operation went? Why is there no mention of all the usual questions that one would ask when visiting someone who was unwell?

The Rosh learns from here that the Torah is teaching us that when we visit the sick, sometimes there is no need to speak! Just being there and letting the person know that you care is sufficient and is a fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*.

Many people are afraid that they will not know what to say in such a situation, or they are shy and uncomfortable. The Rosh is instructing us that the essence of *bikur cholim*, or for that matter being *menachem avel*, is to let them know that you care, are thinking of them, and are available to help if needed. This doesn't necessarily have to involve talking. Sometimes your presence itself is sufficient to let people know that you care.

Therefore, the conversation between Hashem and Avraham Avinu is not recorded because there may not have been any conversation. After all, Hashem's presence itself was, in fact, the *bikur cholim*. (Otzar Pela'os HaTorah, p. 233)

REVEALING THE DIVINE

Sefas Emes

"G-d appeared to him [Avraham]..." (18:1)

Everything in the universe has a Divine aspect within it. All we have to do is peel away the shell - the material parts - and the Divine within it will appear.

NO ENTRANCE ALLOWED

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman

"G-d appeared to him [Avraham] in the Plains of Mamrei while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day." (18:1)

From this *pasuk* the Sages inferred that Avraham is perpetually stationed at the gate of *Gehinnom*, barring admittance to all males who have been circumcised (Eruvin 19 and Bereishis Rabbah 48). They interpreted the *pasuk* as follows:

"As he sat" (the Hebrew verb is in the present tense): He is always sitting in the door of the tent where the wicked are being judged, a place denoted by the expression "the heat of the day" (compare with Malachi 3:19: "For behold, the day comes, burning like a furnace, and all the proud, and all the doers of wickedness shall be stubble, and the day that comes shall set them ablaze...").

JUST GETTING STARTED

Reb Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye

"G-d appeared to him [Avraham] in the Plains of Mamrei while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day." (18:1)

It is the sign of a truly righteous person that he is always "at the entrance." This means that he is aware that he still has much to do and much to accomplish.

OPENING TO SPIRITUALITY

Gerrer Rebbe

"G-d appeared to him [Avraham] in the Plains of Mamrei while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day." (18:1)

The reason Avraham kept an open door was to invite people to learn the true nature of G-d. He sat by the door to personally greet the passersby and teach that one should be free from pride, aloofness, and envy, for that would be the path to spiritual perfection.

COMFORT TO ALL

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

"G-d appeared to him [Avraham]..." (18:1)

Parshas Vayeira begins with Hashem appearing to Avraham after his *bris mila*. During this "meeting," Avraham saw the three angels whom he thought were wayfarers, and he proceeded to invite them and graciously serve them a large meal.

Commenting on the words וירא ה' אליו - "G-d appeared to him", Rashi writes, לבקר את החולה - "To visit the sick." The purpose of G-d's appearing to Avraham, Rashi explains, was ביקור חולים, paying Avraham a visit following the painful *bris mila* which he had just undergone, at an advanced age.

Rav Yisroel Meir Druck, in his new *sefer* entitled *Lahavos Eish*, raises the question of where in the text we find any indication that this was the purpose of G-d's appearance to Avraham. The Torah states merely that G-d came to Avraham, without giving us any other information about this prophecy. What in the text of this *pasuk* implies that G-d came to Avraham to visit him because he was ailing?

Rav Druck answers that the basis for this understanding is the word "אליו" (to him). In all other instances where G-d appeared to Avraham and began speaking to him, the Torah relates that G-d spoke to "Avraham," mentioning him by name. Here, however, the Torah chooses to omit Avraham's name, saying simply that G-d appeared "to him." The reason, Rav Druck explains, is that in this instance, G-d did not appear to Avraham because he was Avraham, because of his greatness, but rather because he was ill.

The Gemara in *Maseches Nedarim* (40a) teaches that the *Shechina* is present above the bed of an ill patient. Hashem visits, as it were, every ill patient, regardless of who he or she is. He is present not only in the room of an ailing *tzaddik* or *Rosh Yeshiva*, but in the room of anybody who is unwell. Therefore, in this case, G-d appeared אליו, to him, just as He appears to all those who are ailing...

G-d's presence above every ill patient sets an example which we are all bidden to follow. The Gemara tells that Rabbi Akiva left his yeshiva to visit a student who was ill. We do not know who this student was, but it does not matter. Rabbi Akiva found it necessary to stop what he was doing, to take a pause from his learning and teaching, in order to visit an ailing student.

Every patient, no matter how distinguished, prominent or famous he is, deserves our care, concern and attention. Whenever a fellow Jew is in need, whoever he is, we must all do what we can to help.

Our concern and generosity must not be reserved for the "high profile" cases. We are to extend ourselves for anyone in need of assistance - just as Hashem does.

EARNING DIVINE REVELATION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"G-d appeared to him [Avraham]..." (18:1)

When, as a young boy, Shalom Dover of Lubavitch (the future fifth Rebbe of the Chabad movement) learned this verse for the first time, he came in tears to his grandfather, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (the third Rebbe). He cried, "If G-d appeared to Avraham, why doesn't He appear to me, as well?"

Rabbi Menachem Mendel replied: Avraham had indeed refined himself enough to attain a very elevated level of Divine consciousness. However, he knew that G-d is infinite, and that therefore there were still an infinite number of levels of Divine consciousness to attain. This left Avraham feeling woefully inadequate, as though he were still encrusted by layers of insensitivity to Divine awareness that still needed to be removed - to be "circumcised" - in order to sensitize himself to G-d. In recognition of this humble attitude, G-d revealed Himself to Avraham.

From the child's impassioned question and from his grandfather's answer, we learn firstly that we must yearn - even cry out - for G-d to reveal His presence to us. Secondly, we learn that we, too, can merit to see G-d's presence if we realize that no matter how much we may have achieved spiritually, we still need to "circumcise" ourselves - to remove "the foreskin of the heart" (*Devarim* 10:16) - which prevents us from attaining yet higher levels of Divine consciousness. (*Likutei Sichot*, vol. 1, pp. 23-27) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

SELFLESS SERVICE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"G-d appeared to him [Avraham] in the Plains of Mamrei while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day." (18:1)

G-d's self-revelation here to Avraham was on a fundamentally higher plane than His previous appearances to him. By circumcising himself in response to G-d's command, Avraham became the first human being to surrender his selfhood entirely to G-d. Avraham could now experience G-d directly, without his ego getting in the way. Thus, Avraham's circumcision paved the way for the Giving of the Torah, through which this direct experience of G-d became the hallmark of Jewish existence.

This means that by accepting the Torah from G-d and committing ourselves to living according to His vision for us, we can remove all barriers between G-d and ourselves. This, in turn, enables G-d to reveal Himself in our lives in increasingly tangible ways. (*Likutei Sichot*, vol. 10, pp. 49-54) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

THE GIVER ALWAYS GETS

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

"...he saw and ran towards them..." (18:2)

The opening section of *Parashat Vayeira* elaborates in great detail about Avraham Avinu's hospitality, describing how he welcomed three strangers, who turned out to be angels sent to him by G-d to inform him that his wife would soon conceive. Although Avraham was ailing in pain, having just undergone *bris mila* at an advanced age, he nevertheless ran to greet the three men and serve them a meal.

The Alter of Kelm raises the question of why the Torah chose this specific episode as the one through which to illustrate Avraham's quality of hospitality and kindness. Later in this *parsha* (21:33), the Torah tells, ויטע אשל, that Avraham set up a site for welcoming and feeding people in need. But the Torah gives no elaboration about Avraham's hospitality at this site. It elaborates only in the context of the three angels - who did not even need Avraham's hospitality. Ironically, the Torah chose to describe in detail only this episode - Avraham's welcoming angels, who do not need to eat, drink, sleep or bathe. Why would the Torah present specifically this instance of Avraham's hospitality as the prime example of his *chesed*?

The Alter of Kelm answered that the Torah chose this story precisely to teach us that the value and significance of *chesed* extend beyond the assistance received by the beneficiary.

Upon reading the story of Avraham's welcoming the angels, we might think, "What a waste!" All that time, all that money, all that energy - it was all invested for the sake of feeding three beings who didn't need food. What a shame!

But the Torah is teaching us that the value of *chesed* lies not only in the help given to the recipient, but also in the benefactor's cultivation of a generous, kind, compassionate character. Giving helps to transform us from selfish people to selfless people; it molds our personalities, leading us to become magnanimous and kind. And so *chesed* is precious and valuable even if it turns out that the recipient did not need the help provided, as in the case of Avraham's hosting the three angels. *Chesed* is as much about refining our characters as it is about ensuring that people receive the assistance they need.

Sometimes we discover that the person we helped did not truly need or deserve the help we provided, or that our efforts to help proved unsuccessful. When this happens, we must not feel as though our sacrifice was for naught, that we wasted our time, money or energy. Anything we do to help our fellow, or to sincerely try to help our fellow, is immensely valuable for ourselves, for our own growth, for our development into kind, generous people. And this itself suffices to make our *chesed* worthwhile, regardless of the outcome.

UNBIASED ASSISTANCE

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"And behold there were three men standing over him; he saw and ran towards them..." (18:2)

The *parshah* opens (18:1-16) with the story of Avraham who welcomed and invited three angels to his home where he would find out that he was going to have a child, among other things. The *parshah* then continues (18:17-33) with the negotiations between Hashem and Avraham regarding whether to save Sodom or allow it to be destroyed.

Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetsky (Emes L'Yaakov) explains that the juxtaposition of these two episodes teaches us an important lesson. We are first introduced to the incredible *chesed* of *hachnosas orchim* - welcoming guests, which was constantly on display in Avraham and Sarah's house. Immediately afterwards, we are told about the well-known transgression of Sodom, which was their lack of *hachnosas orchim*.

Knowing that Avraham was someone who devoted his life to *chesed*, and in particular *hachnosas orchim*, one would have expected that Avraham would be the last person on earth trying to defend Sodom. Typically, one who is passionate about a *mitzvah*, or anything else for that matter, has a difficult time relating to those who don't have that same fervor. Yet, Avraham argued vehemently in defense of Sodom in the hopes of saving the inhabitants. It is for this reason that the two stories are linked in order to highlight the incredible middos of Avraham, who went against his natural inclination in defense of others.

As the descendants of Avraham, it is our responsibility to separate our personal biases from those who we have the capacity to help. We all have our weaknesses. Instead of distancing ourselves from those who may have deficiencies in areas in which we have strengths, we must overlook them and try to positively influence those around us. This will certainly result in unity, which will give much nachas to Hashem.

PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"...while he [Avraham] was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day... he saw [the wayfarers] and ran towards them..." (18:2)

The Torah describes the extent of Avraham's desire for G-dliness: "He was sitting at the opening to the tent in the heat of the day." When a person seeks spirituality, he must learn to wait for an opening and never give up. He must wait patiently, despite the "heat" - despite his burning desires. If he holds out, he merits that G-d will appear to him. "He saw three wayfarers" - for the ascent to holiness demands several efforts; one cannot enter on the first try. "He ran" - because Avraham performed the *mitzvot* with joy and zeal. (Likutey Halakhos VI, p. 40a)

QUICK SERVICE

Avnei Ezel

"And behold there were three men standing over him; he saw and ran towards them..." (18:2)

The Torah teaches us that hospitality requires us to act quickly in order not to keep a hungry traveler waiting too long.

PREPARED FOR THE TASK

Toldos Yaakov Yosef

"And behold there were three men standing over him; he saw and ran towards them..." (18:2)

The Mishnah in Avos (1:2) teaches that the world stands on three pillars: Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilus chassadim*. These three pillars correspond to our three forefathers: Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

At this point, Yitzchak and Yaakov were not yet born, and the world only had the *amud ha'chesed* - the pillar of kindness that was embodied in Avraham - upon which to stand. Avraham realized that the responsibilities of "three men" - himself, Yitzchak, and Yaakov - were "standing over him." They were relying on him to hold up the world, and, rather than shy away, he ran toward his responsibilities and eagerly fulfilled them.

KEY TO HOSPITALITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"And behold there were three men standing over him; he saw and ran towards them..." (18:2)

We can be sure that during the course of his conversation with G-d, Avraham was profoundly engrossed in the Divine revelation that he was experiencing. After all, when we pray, we are enjoined to first clear our minds of any distracting thoughts (see Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Orach Chaim 98:1).

The fact that Avraham noticed these men and tended to their needs, despite the intensity of his concentration, shows his extraordinary sensitivity to others.

This sensitivity is the key to hospitality. When offering hospitality to guests, we must do much more than merely offer them a free meal. We must focus fully on them and be attentive to their needs, displaying sincere concern for their welfare and comfort, taking a genuine interest in their conversation, and in general, making them feel at home when they are with us and that we were enriched by their company when we escort them on their way.

Avraham was the paradigm of such sensitivity to others: in the very midst of a conversation with G-d, he took notice of three travelers and excused himself from G-d's presence to tend to their needs. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 25, pp. 70, 78) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

SACRIFICING SPIRITUALITY

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

"He [Avraham] said, 'If I find favor in Your eyes, please do not pass your servant by.'" (18:3)

The Torah relates that before Avraham saw the three angels, G-d appeared to him. And as he approached them to invite them, Avraham said, *אדני אל נא תעבור מעל עבדך* (18:3). According to one view, this means that Avraham turned to Hashem and said, "Wait here." Avraham interrupted his meeting with Hashem in order to attend to three strangers. The Gemara (Shabbos 127a) establishes on the basis of this episode - גדולה הבנסת - אורחין מהקבלת פני שכינה - that extending hospitality is even greater than speaking with Hashem.

Rav Zaydel Epstein, in Sefer He'aros, elaborates on the meaning of this concept. It is clear, he writes, that we are to allocate a portion of our material resources to help others through charity. And, even when it comes to *ruchniyus* (spirituality), we are to sacrifice for the sake of others.

Indeed, Rav Moshe Feinstein writes that just as we are required to donate one-tenth of our earnings to charity, we are to take away some time from our own Torah learning and growth in order to teach and learn with those who need guidance.

However, Rav Zaydel writes, the story of Avraham teaches us that we are also enjoined to sacrifice our *ruchniyus* for another person's *gashmiyus* (physical needs). Avraham abruptly ended his conversation with Hashem for the sake of bringing water to three strangers so they could wash their feet, preparing meat for them, and serving them like a waiter. When somebody needs any kind of help, we are expected to close the *sefer*, leave the *beis midrash*, and miss minyan if necessary in order to provide assistance. We are to sacrifice spiritually even to help somebody materially. This is the model of *chesed* set for us by Avraham Avinu.

LIFE SAVER

Trisker Maggid

"He [Avraham] said, 'If I find favor in Your eyes, please do not pass your servant by.'" (18:3)

The Trisker Maggid commented that he never understood the saying of our Sages (Shabbat 127a), "Greater is hospitality than accepting the Divine Countenance." Until there was one incident that made him see its significance.

He was traveling on an extremely cold day so that he could not wait until he came to a Jewish inn. His gabbai knocked on the door of the inn. The innkeeper refused to let them in until he knew who they were. Upon entering the warmth of the inn, the Maggid realized the significance of the words of our Sages... The *mitzvah* of hospitality can save a human being from danger; however, the Divine Spirit is never in danger.

FULL-BODY EXPERIENCE

Reb Meir of Primishlan

"He [Avraham] said, 'If I find favor in Your eyes, please do not pass your servant by.'" (18:3)

We learn from this that to extend hospitality is even more important than to receive the Shechinah. (Shabbos 127a)

Even Avraham's physical body was so utterly dedicated to G-d's service that his limbs acted of their own volition to do their Maker's will. Hence, when Avraham felt his feet rise of themselves to rush to meet his guests, he knew that, according to G-d's Law, hospitality took precedence even over receiving the Shechinah.

FUELED BY KINDNESS

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"He [Avraham] said, 'If I find favor in Your eyes, please do not pass your servant by.'" (18:3)

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 - when an opportunity to show compassion presented itself. Avraham's unshakable, uncompromising dedication to being kind should inspire us to prioritize kindness to others over all else.

RAISING THE FALLEN

Novominsker Rebbe

"I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may nourish your heart...' They said, 'So shall you do, just as you have said.'" (18:5)

The Midrash (48:11) comments that because the angels do not need food, therefore they said, "You do for yourself as you do, but not for us. Hashem will permit you to merit to make another feast for the son that will be born to Sarah."

When the angels saw that through Avraham's hospitality of serving food he brought people closer to serving Hashem, they were impressed. They knew that with all their greatness, they could only relate to perfect people but were unable to lower themselves to lift ordinary people to perfection.

Therefore, they said to Avraham that since he gave food and drink, and brought people closer to the service of Hashem, "So shall you do, just as you have said" - therefore, he will merit to make another feast in honor of his son.

SUSTAINING ANGELS

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may nourish your heart. After, you shall pass, inasmuch as you have passed your servant's way." (18:5)

At first glance, it would seem improper for a host to tell his guest, "You are seeking my hospitality in order to eat my food."

Avraham's behavior in this regard can be explained as follows: All angels receive their sustenance from the *mitzvos* that the Jewish people perform. Now, G-d had taken the sun out of its shield [making it extremely hot, so nobody was out traveling. G-d did this in order that Avraham, who was in pain on account of his circumcision, would not have to exert himself to host passersby.] Thus, Avraham was not able to perform the *mitzvah* of receiving guests. As a result, the sustenance that the Heavenly angels normally received from Avraham's observance of *mitzvos* was withheld from them.

This is why Avraham - aware that his guests were angels - said, "because this is why you have passed your servant's way," meaning, "in order that I should be able to fulfill the *mitzvah* of receiving guests, and thereby give you your sustenance."

[Thus, the *mitzvos* that we perform in this world "sustain" the angels. Angels are the Divine messengers who convey our merits to G-d and G-d's beneficence - in its many forms - throughout the worlds. Thus, by "sustaining" the angels, we help G-d, so to speak, ensure that the spiritual mechanism that He has established to run the universe functions properly.]

STANDING ON THEIR LEVEL

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"He took butter, milk, and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them. He stood over them beneath the tree, and they ate." (18:8)

It has been explained elsewhere that as a rule, a host should not behave in front of his guest in a manner indicating that the host's greatness is superior to the greatness of his guest, in order that the guest not be envious of the host.

Now, a righteous person is called "one who walks," for he continually progresses from his present spiritual level, ascending higher and higher. An angel, by contrast, is called "one who stands," since angels do not progress, but remain always at their native level of spirituality.

(Zechariah HaNavi records a vision in which G-d tells Yehoshua the Kohen Gadol, "If you walk in My ways and keep My charge... [your sons will merit to] walk [in the afterlife] among these [angels] who stand" (Zecharia 3:7). Thus, the Jewish soul is contrasted with angels as being an entity that spiritually "walks" rather than "stands.") Here, Avraham - being a good host - did not want the angels to envy him, so he assumed the demeanor of an angel - standing still. This is why the verse says, "He stood over them."

NOT OUR PLACE TO JUDGE

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

"He took butter, milk, and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them..." (18:8)

Although Avraham initially mistook the three angels for ordinary travelers, he most certainly came to the realization that they were angels - at very least, when they informed him that his wife, Sarah, would miraculously beget a child within a year. Yet, the impression we are given from the text is that Avraham continued serving and hosting the angels even after it became clear to him that these were not human beings, but heavenly beings who had no need for food.

Rav Noson of Breslov explains that Avraham continued serving the angels because he wanted them to experience the spiritual challenges that we human beings face in our physical world.

The angels have no physical drives, no sinful temptations, and no negative impulses. They are instinctively drawn to do precisely what G-d instructs them to do; they have no inner resistance, no desires that they need to oppose in order to fulfill Hashem's will. This is why, as Chazal describe in numerous contexts, the angels prosecute against us in the heavens. Already at the time of creation, the angels argued that human beings should not be created, because they are so flawed. When Moshe Rabbeinu ascended to the heavens to receive the Torah, the angels demanded that the sacred Torah not be entrusted with frail, blemished human beings. They view us harshly and critically, because they are oblivious to just how difficult it is for us physical creatures to live a pristine, spiritual life here in our world.

Avraham wanted to silence the angels by showing them what kind of challenges we face, the fierce struggle that we need to wage to avoid wrongdoing. He served them a large meal so they could experience physicality, understand what being human is like, so they will stop prosecuting against us.

During a recent trip to Israel, I met with a certain rav who was telling me about a time when he consulted with one of the gedolim regarding a dilemma he faced in his community. The gadol urged him to continue showing kindness and compassion to the individual in question, regardless of what he did.

"If you were in his situation," the *gadol* said to this rav, "you might not have passed the test, either. You have no idea what he was going through, the struggles and challenges he had that led him to do what he did."

This is such an important lesson for all of us. Just as angels cannot fully understand the challenges facing human beings, we are not aware of the myriad internal struggles which our fellow is waging. We have no right to judge those who have acted wrongly, because we cannot know whether we would have passed the tests that they faced, whether we would have withstood the religious and moral challenges that they deal with.

We need to live with greater compassion and greater sensitivity, humbly recognizing that we will never fully understand other people's unique struggles.

SELF-SACRIFICING KINDNESS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"He took butter, milk, and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them. He stood over them beneath the tree, and they ate." (18:8)

The Gemara (Bava Metzia 86) teaches: "In the merit of three, they merited three. In the merit of '*chemah v'chalav* - butter and milk' [that Avraham gave to the *malachim*], the Jewish people merited the manna in the desert. In the merit of '*v'hu omeid aleihem* - and he stood over them,' they merited to have the Clouds of Glory. In the merit of '*Yukach na me'at mayim* - let a bit of water be brought,' they merited to drink from the well of Miriam."

It is quite remarkable that as a reward for the seemingly mundane actions of Avraham Avinu - serving his guests water, butter, and milk - his descendants enjoyed Heavenly delights and basked in a spiritual glory. How does the exceptional reward reconcile with the action? How may we understand the *middah k'neged middah*?

R' Simcha Bunim Berger shlit'a explains: Rashi quotes the Gemara that Hashem removed the sun from its sheath in order to keep roving guests away from the tent of Avraham Avinu. This action represents the world on a higher spiritual plane - a manifestation of Olam Haba on Earth, similar to what Hashem will do in future days, when the nations of the world will be unable to resist the extreme heat and spirituality and will turn their backs on G-d (and even kick their sukkahs - see Nedarim 86).

Thus, the greatness of Avraham's actions was in the fact that in the midst of experiencing a revelation of pure Heavenly spirituality, and even talking to Hashem, he put himself back into the mundane world in order to fulfill a seemingly ordinary *chesed*. He was willing to set aside Olam Haba just to perform *chesed*.

It was in the merit of this extraordinary self-sacrifice, that his descendants were rewarded with spiritual glory and Olam-Haba-like gifts in the desert.

TASTE TEST

Reb Noson of Breslov

"He took butter, milk, and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them. He stood over them beneath the tree, and they ate." (18:8)

Why did Avraham feel it was necessary to feed the angels?

The effort to purify one's eating is a major battle, one that angels do not have to fight. Yet Avraham knew that one day the angels would try to prevent G-d from giving the Torah to his children, the Jewish people. The angels would claim that the Jews would be unable to withstand all the tests to purify their eating and their souls in order to merit the great gift of Torah.

When Moshe ascended to Heaven to receive the Torah, the angels indeed tried to push him away. G-d turned Moshe's features into those of Avraham and asked the angels, "Isn't he the one you ate by?" The angels were silenced (Shemot Rabbah 28:1).

The angels visited Avraham after he had performed the *mitzvah* of circumcision, which is categorically equivalent to accepting the entire Torah. Therefore, Avraham gave the angels something to eat, showing them the challenges that human beings must endure in the material world before they can ascend to true spirituality. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 136)

REPENTING WITH LOVE

Sefas Emes

"And Sarah laughed inside, saying, 'After I have withered shall I again have clear skin? And my husband is old!'... Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh, for I was frightened,' and he said, 'No, but you laughed.'" (18:12,15)

Sarah repented immediately so that the transgression was as if it were null and void, for she said, "I did not laugh." However, the Torah calls it a denial, for her repentance was out of fear, as it is stated: "She feared."

After such repentance there always remains a trace of the sin. Therefore, Avraham said to her, "You did laugh," for one must repent out of love so that the laughter itself should become a merit. And so it was that from the laughter, Yitzchak (meaning "laughter") was born. Sarah later said (21:6), "G-d has made laughter for me." Thus the laughter turned into a meritorious act.

CLEAR CONTRAST

Klei Chemdah

"And the men arose from there and gazed toward Sodom. And Avraham walked with them to send them off..." (18:16)

What is the connotation of the expression "from there"?

To indicate the contrast between Avraham's hospitality and Sodom's evil. When the three angels saw Avraham's righteousness and hospitality and then thought of Sodom's evil, their anger at Sodom grew more intense than before.

When the angels "rose up from there," from Avraham's house where they had seen true righteousness, they "looked out toward Sodom"; i.e., they were strengthened in their view that Sodom must be destroyed.

A LESSON FOR ALL

Avnei Ezel

"Shall I hide from Avraham what I am doing? ... For I have known him, that he will command his children and his household after him. They will observe the path of G-d, doing righteousness and justice..." (18:17-19)

Good educators make use of life's daily mundane occurrences to inspire or reprove their students. Actual instances of reward for good deeds or punishment for evil provide teachers with impressive object lessons through which they can urge their students to avoid evil and instead choose good.

Thus, Sodom's destruction provided Avraham with an excellent object lesson for his endeavors to teach people "to do righteousness and justice," for it was a visible demonstration of the results of evil and injustice.

Therefore, G-d said, "Shall I hide from Avraham what I am doing?" Knowing that Avraham will "command his children and his household after him," and, indeed, teach his entire generation "to do righteousness and justice," should I really hide from him My plan to destroy Sodom because of its sins? If I make it known to him in advance, it would only serve to help him in his holy endeavors, for then the people will not be able to argue that Sodom's fall was nothing but chance.

GREAT AND MIGHTY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Avraham will become a great and mighty nation, and through him all the nations of the world will be blessed." (18:18)

The phrase "great and mighty" is not to be understood literally, since Avraham's descendants, the Jewish people, never became "great" in numbers or "mighty" in power.

Rather, the phrase means that each individual Jew is spiritually "great and mighty," possessing all the strength necessary to transmit the message of the Torah to the world and promote the practice of goodness everywhere. (Sefer HaSichot 5704, p. 165) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

HASHEM WANTS TO GIVE

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"For I have known him, that he will command his children and his household after him. They will observe the path of G-d, doing righteousness and justice, so that G-d will bring upon Avraham what He has told him." (18:19)

When a person believes with a consummate faith that G-d enjoys being beneficent to the Jewish people, it follows that by petitioning G-d for goodness and blessings, the real object of his petition is G-d's own pleasure.

G-d enjoys bestowing His beneficence on the Jewish people because the Jewish people follow G-d's Torah and adhere to it. This is why G-d enjoys bestowing His beneficence upon them.

(This, then, is the import of the verse "because he commands his children... that they keep the way of G-d." Because Avraham instructs his children to adhere to G-d's Torah, G-d will enjoy bestowing His beneficence upon them, this being the intent of the words "in order that G-d may bring upon Avraham everything He said concerning him." Thus, Avraham knew that instructing his children to keep G-d's ways would "inspire" G-d to bestow His benevolence upon them, for he knew that G-d enjoys bestowing His benevolence upon those who keep His ways. This is why Avraham instructed his children to keep G-d's ways.)

Thus, we may certainly perform G-d's commandments with the intent that by doing so G-d will bring "upon Avraham everything He said concerning him" - i.e., that G-d will, on that account, bestow His benevolence upon us.

This is not considered serving G-d "on the condition of receiving reward" (Avos 1:3), for G-d is bestowing beneficence upon us because He delights in doing so, since we adhere to the directives of G-d's Torah. He therefore certainly enjoys bestowing His benevolence upon us. Understand this.

UNIFYING CONTRASTS

Reb Noson of Breslov

"For I have known him, that he will command his children and his household after him. They will observe the path of G-d, doing righteousness and justice, so that G-d will bring upon Avraham what He has told him." (18:19)

In our world, compassion and justice are not really compatible, but they are unified in G-d's system of reward and punishment. Even so, one must do his part to arouse Divine compassion during times of Divine judgment. Avraham knew this. Although an angel had already been sent to destroy Sodom, and although Avraham knew the people were sinners, he prayed for Sodom to be saved.

While Avraham's prayers did not save the people of Sodom, he accomplished his objective. He managed to arouse Divine compassion towards Lot and his daughters, and through them, the soul of Mashiach was channeled

to the world (Lot's older daughter gave birth to Moav, the ancestor of Rus, the great-grandmother of Dovid HaMelech, the ancestor of Mashiach).

Avraham's example teaches us that we, too, must engage in prayer to arouse Divine compassion, even in times of justice and judgment. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 28b-29a)

RIGHTEOUS JUSTICE

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"They will observe the path of G-d, doing righteousness and justice..." (18:19)

When the Torah introduces the story of Sodom, it begins by describing G-d's justification in involving Avraham (18:19): G-d explains that Avraham has been teaching his family to "keep the path of G-d with righteousness and justice" (18:19). How is that detail a justification? Also, Why does the Torah describe Avraham as keeping the path of righteousness and justice? What is the difference between (1) the path of G-d, (2) righteousness, and (3) justice?

Rabbi David Forman helps us understand this by pointing out that while justice is a fair way to live, there needs to be kindness (righteousness) as well, and an understanding of the balance between the two. Avraham walked the path of both justice and righteousness, displaying this balance in his dynamic exchange with G-d, and teaching us that this path is worth emulating. If we can strike a balance between justice and the right thing to do in life, we, too, will walk the path of the Tree of Life.

DUAL EFFECT

Reb Noson of Breslov

"They will observe the path of G-d, doing righteousness and justice..." (18:19)

How can one do *tzedakah* (righteousness) and *mishpat* (judgment and/or justice) at the same time? By giving *tzedakah* (charity) to Torah scholars, one allows these scholars to pursue their Torah studies and draw *halakhic* conclusions - legal and binding judgments which bring forth *mishpat*. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 72b)

KEEPING HASHEM'S WAYS

Yalkut HaGershuni

"They will observe the path of G-d, doing righteousness and justice..." (18:19)

"Hashem's way" must be kept, and not violated, not even in order "to do righteousness and justice." We must not imitate charitable organizations that, in charity's name, arrange fundraising events where the basic rules of modesty are blatantly flouted, for that is truly "committing a sin in order to fulfill a commandment." In doing "righteousness and justice" we must also "keep G-d's way."

SPREADING AWARENESS

Reb Noson of Breslov

"For I have known him, that he will command his children and his household after him. They will observe the path of G-d, doing righteousness and justice, so that G-d will bring upon Avraham what He has told him." (18:19)

The main devotion of the *tzaddikim* lies in drawing knowledge of G-d into the world for all generations. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 23a)

MOTIVATING HASHEM

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"For I have known him, that he will command his children and his household after him. They will observe the path of G-d, doing righteousness and justice..." (18:19)

The Name of G-d used in this verse (YHVH) indicates G-d's mercy. Thus, the deeper meaning of "keeping G-d's ways" means ensuring that G-d will sustain the world through His attribute of mercy. This ensures, in turn, that the world will be blessed with an abundance of spiritual and material beneficence.

We "motivate" G-d to bless us to sustain the world through His attribute of mercy by "acting with righteousness" (*tzedakah*), which means showing mercy and generosity toward others.

But besides motivating G-d to treat the world with mercy, we must also motivate Him to employ His attribute of justice. Without justice, mercy would act indiscriminately, sustaining negative forces as well. We awaken G-d's attribute of justice by exercising justice on ourselves, evaluating candidly how much of what G-d has blessed us with we really need for our own sustenance - spiritually and materially - and then sharing the surplus with others. (Torah Or 63b; See Likutei Sichot, vol. 25, p. 84; *ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 148) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

SELFLESS HONESTY

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"The older [daughter] bore a son, and she called his name Moav... The younger one also bore a son, and she called his name Ben Ammi; he is the ancestor of the children of Ammon until this day..." (18:19)

Parashas Vayeira contains the story of Lot, who escaped the destruction of Sodom by hiding in the mountains with his two daughters. When his daughters thought the entire world was destroyed, as it was with the Flood, they thought their only hope for continued human existence was to procreate with their father. While in their minds that may have been their only option, and an obvious last resort, they decided to name their children Amon and Moav, which literally means "son of my people" and "from my father." Were they proud of what they did, or was it a necessary evil?

Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that although Lot's daughters were not proud of what they felt they needed to do, they also thought it was important for people to know that their births were not supernatural. To avoid people making a religion out of a presumably miraculous birth, Lot's daughters were willing to publicize their admittedly shameful acts to avoid any misunderstandings in the future. Their honesty and willingness to face ridicule to avoid future misguidance are so impressive that Mashiach will come from their lineage. This pursuit of intellectual honesty, regardless of the price, is worth admiring and striving for.

MANIFESTING MIRACLES

Rebbe Nachman

"The men turned away from there and went towards Sodom. Avraham was still standing before G-d." (18:22)

"Standing" represents prayer. When a person prays in a *makom kavua* (מקום קבוע, designated place), the G-d of Avraham will help him. (Berakhot 6b)

Kavua (קבוע, designated) can also be translated as "persistently."

Avraham represents the *sefirah* of *Chesed*, as in "The world is built on kindness (*chesed*)" (Tehillim 89:3).

When a person prays persistently, he can attain the equivalent of a new world - i.e., the manifestation of miracles. (See Likutey Moharan I, 44)

TRANSCENDING OUR NATURE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[Avraham] came forward and said [to G-d], 'Would you obliterate the righteous along with the wicked?!'" (18:23)

When Avraham saw that the angels were already headed toward Sodom in order to annihilate it, he realized that he had to go against his naturally kind disposition and that he could not mince words. He had to argue vehemently and demand of G-d that He annul His decree.

From Avraham's example we learn that when we are presented with the opportunity to save another person, either physically or spiritually, we must not hesitate. We should immediately do all in our power to come to the person's aid, even if that means acting in direct opposition to our natural dispositions. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 10, pp. 58-59) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

FROM THEIR PERSPECTIVE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Suppose there are fifty righteous people in the midst of the city. Would You still destroy it, and not bear with the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people inside it?" (18:24)

Avraham pleaded with Hashem not to destroy the cities of Sodom and Amorah using an interesting choice of words: "Perhaps there are fifty righteous people in the midst of the city." Why did Avraham emphasize "in the midst of the city"?

The definition of *tzaddik* and *rasha* is all relative. R' Zalman Sorotzkin zt'l describes how he once overheard some irreligious youth detailing how they had spent Yom Kippur carousing in bars, even though a certain friend of theirs had not come along that day, "because he's a *tzaddik*!" On the other hand, a learned and diligent bachur from a well-known yeshiva was regarded as, "lacking in *yiras Shamayim*," because he was once seen reading a newspaper! We see from this that in certain circles, one can become a relative *tzaddik* for doing almost nothing.

Similarly, Avraham Avinu knew that there were no actual righteous citizens in Sodom, so he appealed on behalf of those who were upright "in the midst of the city" - by comparison to the rest of the people. For if these "*tzaddikim*" were destroyed, Hashem's name would be profaned, since others saw them as "*tzaddikim*" and would not understand why they were being punished.

To this, Hashem generously responded, "If I will find fifty *tzaddikim* in the midst of the city, I will forgive the entire place." Even for those who were on a higher level simply because they were living "in the midst of the city," Hashem was willing to spare the entire city. In the end, though, lacking at least ten such "*tzaddikim*," there was no chance for Sodom and Amorah to be saved.

DUST AND ASHES

Rebbe Nachman

"Avraham answered and said, 'Behold! I desired to speak to my Lord, though I am dust and ashes.'" (18:27)

To pray properly, one needs the qualities of both "dust" and "ashes." "Dust" refers to humility and to connecting oneself to *tzaddikim* who have died and are resting in the dust. "Ashes" corresponds to overcoming one's evil traits.

Because the *tzaddik* is humble, he is comparable to the element of earth. And just as the earth draws objects to itself, so too, the *tzaddik* draws people to himself. (See Likutey Moharan I, 70)

HUMBLED BY GREATNESS

Reb Simchah Bunim of Pshischa

"Avraham answered and said, 'Behold! I desired to speak to my Lord, though I am dust and ashes.'" (18:27)

Every person must carry two notes in his pocket. On one should be written, "The world was created for me" and on the other, "I am but dust and ashes." And one must be judicious to read each note in its proper time.

CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN

Ruzhiner Rebbe

"Avraham answered and said, 'Behold! I desired to speak to my Lord, though I am dust and ashes.'" (18:27)

In Tehillim (121:1-2) we read, "I will lift my eyes to the mountains; from where shall come my help. My help is from Hashem." Our Sages interpret it to mean that one should look to our forefathers to comprehend the meaning of greatness, so that one may feel humility. Therefore, because he will feel that he is "but dust and ashes," with a broken heart, he will plead to the Almighty that He should send His help.

CALL OF DUTY

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

"[Avraham asked,] 'What if ten should be found there?' [Hashem answered,] 'I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten.'" (18:32)

Later, we read that Hashem disclosed to Avraham His plan to destroy Sodom and the surrounding cities due to their grave misconduct. Avraham responded by pleading to Hashem to spare the city. G-d ultimately agreed that even if He would find just ten righteous people in the city, He would spare the entire population in their merit.

The Alter of Klem asks how Avraham knew that this is what G-d wanted - that he would pray for the city. What justification did he have to brazenly petition Hashem to rescind His decree to destroy Sodom?

The Alter answers, very simply, that Avraham reached this conclusion on the basis of the fact that Hashem informed him of His decree. Avraham reasoned that if Hashem brought him this knowledge, there must be a reason why. Hashem must have wanted Avraham to respond, to react, to do something to help. And so he proceeded to petition G-d on the city's behalf.

The Alter applied this message to information which is brought to our attention. If we find out about somebody who is struggling, who faces some problem, this is not just coincidental. If Hashem has given us this information, He has done so for a purpose - so we try to help, either through offering assistance when possible, or through prayer. When we hear of somebody who is ill, Heaven forbid, or somebody who faces any other kind of difficulty, we cannot just go on as usual. We learn from Avraham that we must respond and beseech G-d on behalf of those who need help, because it is precisely for this purpose that Hashem made us aware of our fellow's plight.

MY HOME IS YOUR HOME

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman

"And [Lot] said: 'Behold now, please my lords, turn aside, into your servant's house..." (19:2)

Lot requested his visitors to enter “your servant’s house.” Avraham, however, had said to his guests, “...please do not pass away from your servant” (18:3). He made no mention of his house, for when he received visitors, he ceased to think of himself as master of his house but instead placed his home entirely at his guests disposal, regarding himself as nothing more than his guests’ servant.

DEFENDING OTHERS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“The men of the city, of Sodom, surrounded [Lot’s] house, young and old, all the people from every quarter.” (19:4)

Despite the wickedness of the inhabitants of Sodom, Avraham tried to defend them before G-d. In fact, Avraham was the first person in history to speak up in defense of others.

G-d was very pleased when Avraham spoke up in defense of humanity, for in doing so, he was imitating G-d’s own ways. As Dovid HaMelech expressed it (Tehillim 145:9), “G-d is good to all, and His mercy extends to all His creatures.”

For this reason, the Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 12:9) teaches us that the world is sustained - and was even created - in the merit of Avraham.

Similarly, by defending other people’s behavior, finding mitigating factors and reasons for their misdeeds as Avraham did, we become partners in sustaining the world.

Moreover, we thereby sustain our own personal “worlds” - the circles of family, friends, students, and co-workers among whom we live - arousing G-d’s mercy on them and on us. (Se’er HaMa’amarim 5686, p. 108) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

MISGUIDED PIETY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“[The angels said,] ‘...because we are about to destroy this place, for the outcry before G-d has increased, and G-d has sent us to destroy it.’” (19:13)

The wickedness of Sodom and its neighbors was a misguided overreaction to Noach’s Flood. The generation of the Flood had been wiped out chiefly because they practiced and condoned robbery - the forceful and unjust taking of one person’s property by another. The residents of Sodom, aware of this, declared private property rights absolute, outlawing charity and hospitality as unjust uses of another person’s possessions.

In their zeal, the people of Sodom did not realize that this opposite extreme was just as destructive as condoning robbery. So, since the world cannot fulfill its purpose of being G-d’s true home if we human beings cannot get along with each other, Sodom and its neighbors had to be

eliminated, just like the generation of the Flood. Nonetheless, since their intentions, however warped, stemmed from a desire to do the right thing, we are told that these cities will be restored in the Messianic Era (Yechezkel 16:53).

We can learn from this that our challenge is to find proper balance rather than live a life of extremes. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 35, p. 74) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

THE GOLDEN RULE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“[The angels said,] ‘...because we are about to destroy this place, for the outcry before G-d has increased, and G-d has sent us to destroy it.’” (19:13)

There were five cities that G-d intended to destroy on account of their wickedness (Rashi on 19:25). Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire that descended from heaven (19:24); Admah and Tzevoyim were overturned (by an earthquake); Tzo’ar was spared at Lot’s request that it serve as a refuge for him and his daughters.

The reason why Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by heavenly fire while Admah and Tzevoyim suffered a less horrific fate is because the former two cities were guilty of having made mistreatment of their fellow human beings an essential part of their culture (see Bereishis 18:20). The latter two cities, in contrast, sinned primarily against G-d, and less so against their fellow human beings.

This teaches us that G-d is more concerned with our treatment of our fellow human beings than He is with our respect for Him. As the Talmudic sage Hillel said (Shabbat 31a), treating your fellow human being as you would like to be treated is the essence of the Torah; all the rest is commentary. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 35, pp. 70-74) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

DON’T LOOK BACK!

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“And he said, ‘Flee for your life! Do not look back!’” (19:17)

We each have a yetzer hara that tries to ensure that we do not succeed in our avodas Hashem. It is shrewd and conniving and manages to disguise itself in many shapes and forms. Often it causes that which is forbidden to seem so alluring that we simply cannot withstand the temptation. When this does not work, it will switch tactics and make what is forbidden seem like a righteous and pious act. The yetzer hara can make us feel so conceited that we believe we have nothing left to work on or to improve.

However, says Rabbi Dr. Avraham J. Twerski zt”l, one of the most common and dangerous schemes of the evil inclination is when it makes us feel so depressed that we have no desire or energy to do anything at all. It tells us, “Look at all the terrible things you’ve done. How can you possibly have a relationship with Hashem?”

When this happens, it is not apparent that it is the workings of the evil forces inside us. In fact, we often believe that such inner voices are coming from our yetzer tov urging us to repent.

The way to avoid being trapped by the yetzer hara is to heed the advice that the angel gave Lot: "Escape with your life; do not look behind you!" Don't dwell on your past mistakes. There is a fine line between introspection and inner destruction! If your thoughts are causing you to feel uplifted, then you are on the right track. But if your feelings are causing you to feel worthless and depressed, know that this can only be the work of the yetzer hara. Stop looking at the past and instead focus on building a better future. As Rabbi Twerski says: "If you fall into mud, get up and wash yourself off. Don't dwell on how you fell in and how it felt to wallow in it." We must always look forward if we wish to escape the wily tactics of the evil inclination.

FINDING REFUGE

Rebbe Nachman

"And he said, 'Flee for your life! Do not look back or stop anywhere in the plain. Flee to the mountain or else you will be swept away!'" (19:17)

Flee to the "mountain" - to Avraham. (Rashi)

A mountain is a place of refuge. The Torah is compared to a "mountain," as is Avraham, the paradigm of kindness. When a person faces difficulties, he can find refuge in the Torah and in acts of kindness. (See Likutey Moharan I, 38:7)

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"And Avraham got up early in the morning to the place where he had stood before in the presence of Hashem." (19:27)

After the destruction of Sodom and Amorah, the Torah tells us that Avraham Avinu woke up early and prayed to Hashem.

Rashi quotes the Gemara (Brachos 26b), that at that moment Avraham instituted *Shacharis*, the morning prayer, an idea which was augmented by his son, Yitzchak, who instituted *Minchah*, and his grandson, Yaakov, who instituted *Maariv*. Similarly, he stood "in his place before Hashem." This, too, is a lesson we absorbed and continue to practice: that one should have a set place for *tefillah*.

As important as *tefillah* is, setting an example and providing direct instruction with davening is often a source of conflict between parents and children. An all too common sight in shul is a father raising his voice, reprimanding, or even hitting his son to compel him to daven, rather than teaching by example. This approach has been criticized by many *gedolim*.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner zt'l once observed a father disciplining his son during davening. Every time the child would get up or lose focus, the father sternly reprimanded him until he redirected his gaze. R' Hutner asked the father what he was doing.

"I'm teaching my son to daven," the father answered.

"No, you're not," said R' Hutner. "You're teaching your son that when he grows up, he should tell his own son, 'Be quiet! Sit down! Pay attention!' It won't help his davening! If you want to teach your son to daven, then daven yourself!"

Interestingly, parents who use this approach tend to be poor "*Daveners*" themselves. They are, therefore, more intolerant of normal deficiencies in their children's davening, based on the dictum of Chazal (Kiddushin 70a): *Kol haposel b'mumo posel* - "One who invalidates is invalidated with the same defect." In other words, when a person disqualifies another's actions, he often does so in an area in which he himself is deficient. This is a classic example of "do as I say, not as I do!"

SKEWED MORALITY

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Didn't he say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she also said, 'He is my brother.' In the innocence of my heart and the purity of my hands, I did this." (20:5)

Avimelech was surprised when G-d accused him of immorality with Sarah; he thought he was innocent of any wrongdoing. According to Avimelech's perception of truth, Avraham was the guilty party because he had led Avimelech to believe that Sarah was his sister and was not married. Therefore, G-d told Avimelech, "I know you did what you did thinking you are innocent. But you are not clean of immorality. Were you clean of immorality, you would never have asked Avraham about Sarah in the first place. Because you are so steeped in immorality, your perception of truth is skewed, and you think of yourself as innocent when you are not."

LOST WITHOUT FAITH

Malbim

"Because I said, 'There is but no fear of G-d in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.'" (20:11)

Avimelech asked Avraham why he had lied by saying that Sarah was his sister. Avraham replied that where there is no fear of G-d the people would kill him in order to take his wife.

Do not believe that if someone has no fear of the Lord he can still be noble and decent in his relationships with others. Where fear of G-d is lacking, human qualities cannot exist, and people will commit the grossest murder and inhumanity in order to gratify their lusts. Faith in G-d and fear of Him are the only defenses against doing evil to others.

FEARING THE FEARLESS

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"Because I said, there is but no fear of G-d in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife." (20:11)

In this verse, Avraham explains that he had not admitted being married to Sarah for fear of being killed by the people of Grar in their desire to take her for themselves. Avraham's choice of words is difficult to understand. Why did he say, "only there is no fear of G-d in this place," suggesting that a lack of fear of G-d was their only shortcoming?

The Malbim learns that indeed Avraham was pointing out that the people of Grar had only one major fault. However, this flaw made all their virtues worthless. For, despite being a society of decent, philosophical, and intelligent people, since they lived without fear of G-d, nothing could prevent them from succumbing to temptations when they arose. As such, when Avraham saw that these people solely relied on their subjective moral compass and not an objective Divine standard, he knew that there was no real safeguard to prevent them from killing him if they came to desire his wife. (The Chasam Sofer explains that Avraham saw that they would have killed him from the fact that they asked about his wife before asking about his welfare.)

We need look no further than Germany to see how true this message is. Renown worldwide for its decency, morality, etiquette, and high-class, Germany turned - almost overnight - into the cruelest society in modern history. This message was powerfully related by Rav Yitzchak Hutner who once became involved in a heated discussion with a fellow student of Slobodka who vehemently argued that one should learn how to behave from the refined German people. To prove his point, the student said that whenever a German answered a question, he would humbly ask, "nicht wahr, is it not so?" Surely, explained the student to Rav Hutner, a people so humble and gentle should be admired and their ways imitated? It was half a century later when Rav Hutner would meet this student again. When they met, Rav Hutner extended his hand in greeting only to be greeted by a hook in place of his friend's hand.

"I was wrong," the man declared. "You remember when I told you how polite the Germans were because they ended every answer with nicht wahr? Well, when the beast chopped off my hand, you know what he said to me? 'It hurts, nicht wahr?'"

The importance of following Hashem's moral compass - the Torah - and not our own personal one ensures that we are always heading in the right direction as well as providing a safeguard to protect us from steering off course when temptation arrives.

FOUNDATION OF FAITH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"And Avraham said, 'Because I said, there is but no fear of G-d in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.'" (20:11)

In this statement, Avraham voiced the two principles underlying his life's work:

The first was that making the world into a home for G-d means, above all, encouraging virtue and the practice of justice.

The second was that it is impossible to encourage virtue and the practice of justice unless they are based on the belief in G-d as the creator and master of the world.

History has proven Avraham right: We have unfortunately seen all too many failed attempts to base morality on any other foundation. Belief in G-d must therefore be the underlying foundation both of our own morals and ethics as well as of the education of our children.

Only when we and our children know that G-d created the world and wants it to be made into His home through righteous and just behavior, can we be assured that both we and our children will behave virtuously and justly. (Hitva'aduyot 5743, vol. 2, pp. 899-900) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

CHOOSING LOVE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Sarah conceived and bore a son to Avraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which G-d had spoken with him." (21:2)

Our inner thoughts and emotions are mirrored on our faces, and even from birth, our faces reflect our inborn personalities. Thus, since Avraham's innate personality was pure kindness (*chesed*) and Yitzchak's was pure severity (*gevurah*), Yitzchak should naturally not have resembled his father. The only way Yitzchak could look like Avraham, even though his inner nature remained the opposite of Avraham's, was for G-d to perform a miracle.

G-d could have just as easily made Avraham resemble his yet-to-be-born son, Yitzchak. The fact that He chose instead to make Yitzchak resemble Avraham teaches us that when we have the choice between accomplishing something either in a loving way (appearing to others like Avraham) or stern way (appearing to others like Yitzchak), we should choose the loving way. The path of love is more likely to succeed, and even if it does not, we will have still fulfilled the commandment to love our fellow. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 20, pp. 100-106) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

ATTAINING LONGEVITY

Rebbe Nachman

“Sarah conceived and bore a son to Avraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which G-d had spoken with him.” (21:2)

Sarah conceived on Rosh HaShanah, the Day of Judgment. (Rosh HaShanah 11a)

Yitzchak represents the *sefirah* of *Gevurah*, which is known as the Divine attribute of judgment, and which represents fear and awe.

Shlomo HaMelech teaches (Mishlei 10:27), “The fear of G-d adds to one’s days.” Thus, the birth of Yitzchak - who represents the fear of G-d - led to the state of “old age.” (See Likutey Moharan I, 60:5)

HOLY JOY

Reb Noson of Breslov

“Sarah said, ‘G-d has made me rejoice. Whoever hears will be happy for me [lit. laugh at me].’” (21:6)

Yitzchak was the first child to be born Jewish. He was called Yitzchak (the root of which is צחק - laughter and joy), because the holiness of the Jewish nation depends on their joy when doing *mitzvot* and in their service of G-d. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 146a)

PROVING THEM WRONG

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Sarah said, ‘G-d has made me rejoice. Whoever hears will be happy for me [lit. laugh at me].’” (21:6)

The literal meaning of Sarah’s words is “whoever hears will laugh at me,” for it is unbelievable that a man of 100 and a woman of 90 could have a child.

This is exactly how our people’s detractors have scoffed at us throughout the ages. “It is ridiculous to think that your young people will continue to abide by your old-fashioned, outdated values and practices. How can you be so old-fashioned and hope to have a child (that is, someone who will perpetuate your lifestyle)? Do you really think your children will lay down their lives rather than engage in idolatry, as Avraham did? Or that they will remain true to their beliefs even in an immoral environment, as Sarah did in Egypt?”

Yet, history has proven that if we dedicate ourselves to educating our youth uncompromisingly, as Avraham and Sarah educated Yitzchak, we too will be able to raise offspring selflessly dedicated to our ideals.

Furthermore, by furthering Avraham and Sarah’s goal of spreading Divine consciousness, we can even change those who laughed “at” us to friends who laugh “for” us and “with” us. (Hitva’aduyot 5731, vol. 2, pp. 158-160) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

OPENING OUR EYES

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“And Hashem opened her [Hagar’s] eyes and she saw a well of water...” (21:19)

The Torah relates that Sarah was concerned about Yishmael’s negative influence on Yitzchak. As the Torah records, Sarah insisted that Avraham force Hagar and Yishmael’s departure from their house. Avraham was reluctant at first but agreed to exile them once Hashem shared that Sarah was correct in her request. Hagar and Yishmael were homeless and confronted with the reality that they would likely die. Hagar couldn’t stand the possibility of witnessing her son’s demise and settled him under a tree. She walked away and began to cry. An angel of Hashem heard her and assured her that not only would they survive, but that her son Yishmael would be the father of a great nation. Shortly thereafter, Hagar feared for Yishmael’s life as there was no water accessible. Suddenly, Hagar opened her eyes to notice a well filled with water, which she would be able to provide to her son.

The Midrash Rabbah highlights something incredible. The Midrash points out that Torah does not say that Hashem placed or created a well for Hagar. Rather, the Torah says that Hashem opened her eyes to see a well that was already present. The Midrash proceeds to teach us that we are often blind to so many opportunities which lay before us. We need Hashem to open our eyes so that we can take notice of them.

The Midrash is teaching us a powerful and inspiring lesson. So many of us are waiting for those personal or professional opportunities to present themselves. The Midrash is telling us that the world is literally at our fingertips, but we need to reach out to Hashem and ask Him to help us see the many opportunities that we have waiting for us.

Based on this Midrash, the Chiddushei HaRim suggests that we can now understand what we mean when we say the words *v’haer eineinu b’sorasecha*. We ask Hashem to open our eyes to the Torah because once He does the result is *v’dabeik libeinu b’mitzvosecha* - “Our hearts cling to the *mitzvos*” and Hashem, which allows us to actualize our potential.

These insights provide incredible *chizuk*. Let us do our part in recognizing the brachos we have in front of us and take advantage of them. We must also daven to Hashem to help us uncover the amazing opportunities that already exist so we can maximize who we are and what we can become

HEIGHTENED SENSES

Rabbi Ari Ciment

“And Hashem opened her [Hagar’s] eyes and she saw a well of water...” (21:19)

Rebbi said: Investigate three things and you will not come to sin: Know what is above you: a seeing eye, a hearing ear, and all of your deeds will be written in a book. (Avos 2:1)

The simple interpretation of this ethic is as the Abarbanel says: "An omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent power continuously keeps an eye on us... and with this in mind, we will not come to sin." G-d sees our every action, He hears us, and will write down all of our deeds - so we'd better watch out!

Does knowing that there is a G-d above us really stop us from sinning? Although this is certainly ideal, there are many people who believe and even fear G-d, yet still sin and regularly so. So is there another strategy here to explain this ethic?

A possible answer derives from analyzing a scene from this week's *parashah*:

Hagar was crying about the imminent death of her starving, thirsty child in a desert, and yet when she "opens" her eyes, a well of water is right there! Did G-d miraculously create a well for her, or was the well really there all along? The midrash states here that "all may be presumed blind until G-d enlightens their eyes" (Bereishis Rabbah 53:14). In other words, some things are right before our eyes, and yet because of our sins or spiritual blurriness, G-d doesn't privilege us with seeing them.

With this in mind, דע מה למעלה ממך (Know what is above you) may in fact be saying: דע, מ"ה, from five (senses), למעלה ממך, you can be even better than you are now. You can elevate yourself beyond where you are by using your very own five G-d-given senses, which are heightened when you are without sin! Know that "your five senses" can be elevated and magnified when you avoid sin, and it is in our hands to take advantage of this amazing gift!

The Baal Shem Tov likewise said that if one did not sin, his eyes would see much more (עין רואה) and his ears would hear from the edges of the earth (אזן שומעת). According to this, the phrases in the aforementioned ethic - עין רואה [seeing eye] - actually refer to *our* eyes and ears and not to G-d's! Sins insulate our superhuman abilities! Perhaps Hagar's well was there all along, but her imperfections blurred that reality until she desperately and wholeheartedly pleaded with G-d.

The emphasis may be less on G-d watching our every step and more on us all watching out for sin, knowing that it is self-destructive and can blur our senses.

Takeaway Message: Rather than avoiding sin due to fear, perhaps we are being encouraged to recognize how much greater our potential is when we avoid sin, and we will have clear vision. By realizing that our human senses can become supernatural if they are not clouded by an imperfect spiritual reality, we will be motivated to avoid sin. Just like Hagar eventually came to see the well that was before her eyes the whole time, we likewise hope that our five senses will not be clouded by sin.

Our five senses can elevate us to supernatural heights. Sinning can dull the five senses, but teshuvah removes the impediment, as evidenced by Hagar's later detection of the well right in front of her eyes.

PERSONAL POTENTIAL

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"Hashem was with the youth, and he grew up and dwelt in the desert and became a shooter, an archer." (21:20)

Imagine a child raised by Hashem Himself. What a *tzaddik* he would be! He would surely spend his whole life learning Torah and performing *Mitzvos*. But look at what happened to Yishmael, someone who was raised personally by Hashem after being sent away by Avraham, he became... an archer?!

Rav Yitzchak Berkovits quotes Rav Chaim Shmuelevits, who highlights the remarkable lesson we learn from this verse: Every child must be educated "according to his own way" (Mishlei 22:6) and it seemed that Yishmael's potential was in shooting arrows.

From here we see how much we must appreciate that every child is different and has different characters and strengths. As parents and educators, we must remember that their interests come first, even at the expense of what we always hoped they would achieve, for we are charged with the responsibility to develop their potential and not try to fulfill our dreams through these children at their expense.

FIT FOR BLESSINGS

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"[Avraham] planted an Eshel [and opened an inn] in Be'er Sheva. There he proclaimed the name of G-d." (21:33)

(Rashi, quoting the Midrash, explains that this verse implies that Avraham made use of his inn as a means to disseminate monotheism among the pagan travelers whom he hosted.)

Let us explain the statement of the Sages in the Midrash (Bereishis 49:4) that Avraham told his guests after they ate the food that he provided for them for free, "Bless the G-d of the world for what you have eaten!" Why did Avraham not ask his guests to pronounce a blessing before they ate?

The answer can only be as follows. Before they ate, these guests were pure heathens, so how could they be expected to accept upon themselves "the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven," i.e., G-d's sovereignty? Once they ate, however, they had by eating performed a commandment, inasmuch as they gave Avraham the merit of performing the *mitzvah* of hosting guests, and giving someone else the merit of performing a *mitzvah* is itself a *mitzvah*. Thus, by dint of this merit, they became able to fulfill and accept the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.

INFLUENTIAL INSTITUTIONS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[Avraham] planted an Eshel [and opened an inn] in Be'er Sheva. There he proclaimed the name of G-d." (21:33)

Avraham's inn was the first public institution devoted to the dissemination of the belief in monotheism and to the ethical behavior that follows from this belief. By establishing a public institution that challenged the world's hallowed tenets, Avraham promoted the awareness of monotheism even among people who never actually visited his inn. As its renown spread, Avraham's inn wielded increasingly profound and broad influence.

Likewise today, the very existence of synagogues and institutions of Torah study exert great positive influence upon a city simply by the mere virtue of their presence. (Sefer HaMa'amarim 5686, p. 82) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

RECTIFYING THE PAST

Vilna Gaon

"[Avraham] planted an Eshel [and opened an inn] in Be'er Sheva. There he proclaimed the name of G-d." (21:33)

Avraham Avinu planted an אשל tree in Be'er Sheva, which stands for eating (אכילה), drinking (שתיה) and lodging (לינה). This was done as a tikkun for the three terrible acts that were done which brought tremendous damage to the world; Adam HaRishon who "ate" from the Tree of Knowledge; Noach who planted a vine and "drank" until he became drunk; the people of Sodom who never provided "lodging" for any guest or stranger.

SOURCE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[Avraham] planted an Eshel [and opened an inn] in Be'er Sheva. There he proclaimed the name of G-d." (21:33)

Avraham at first tried to teach his guests about G-d through explanations and parables, but some of them remained unimpressed by his words. With these doubters, Avraham resorted to a bolder approach, designed to break down their spiritual wall of resistance. All people believe in G-d on some level, yet some are so spiritually detached that they are in need of added encouragement to awaken their dormant knowledge of G-d.

From Avraham's example, we can learn to motivate others to ascend to a heightened level of spiritual connection, even when doing so requires the occasional use of added encouragement. For example, some might argue: "Why approach someone with the suggestion to put on *tefillin* or light Shabbat candles when they may agree only because someone else prompted them to do so? Is the fulfillment of a commandment in this way of any value?"

The answer to this is that fulfilling a Divine commandment, even at the encouragement of others, is a great achievement in and of itself, and can awaken the individual's latent desire to fulfill the commandment. Since "one good deed leads to another" (Avot 4:2), that person will very likely eventually come to observe more and more commandments, joyfully and on his own initiative. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 15, pp. 122-128) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

ADDING TO ONE'S DAYS

Rebbe Nachman

"Avraham stayed in the land of the Pilishtim many days." (21:34)

It states, "The fear of G-d adds to one's days."

When Avraham made his first trip to the territory of the Pilishtim, they did not fear G-d, as exemplified by Avimelech's kidnapping of Sarah. Avraham was able to reveal the fear of G-d even in that land, and therefore he was able to stay there "many days" - corresponding to "adding to one's days."

The same thing occurred when Yitzchak entered the Pilishtim territory of Gerar (Bereishis 26). Initially, their king, Avimelech, lacked fear of G-d and forcibly took Rivkah to his home (until G-d told him to return her to Yitzchak). Yitzchak succeeded in bringing the fear of G-d to Gerar, and thus, "Yitzchak was there a long time" (26:8) - corresponding to "adding to one's days."

FOR ALL TO SEE

Reb Saadiah Gaon

"G-d tested Avraham..." (22:1)

The purpose of testing a *tzaddik* like Avraham Avinu is so that the *tzaddik* should succeed in the test and show the entire world why Hashem is close to such a person and why he merits Divine levels of *ruach hakodesh* and prophecy. Thus, a trial for the *tzaddik* is like a *neis*, a banner, to prove to the whole world his righteousness and loyalty to Hashem.

SWEETENING SEVERITIES

Baal Shem Tov

"G-d tested Avraham..." (22:1)

Some angels are only permitted to sing praise before G-d once a week, or even only once every fifty years. When their turn comes, they are exceedingly brief. Some proclaim "*Kadosh* - Holy!", others proclaim "*Baruch* - Blessed!", and still others chant a verse from Tehillim, such as "Give thanks to G-d because He is good, for His kindness is eternal!" A Jew, by contrast, may utter praise whenever he wishes and extend all manner of praises and songs.

This can be explained with a parable:

A king ordered his servants and ministers to praise him. Each was allotted a time and duration according to his rank. This continued as long as the king was in a good mood, but if he was furious, they were afraid to praise him at all, as it is stated, "How can you praise the King at a time of fury!" Due to this concern, they were constantly terrified that something would arouse his displeasure; they offered praise with brevity and left hastily.

The king's son had no such concern. If the king was furious, his anger would melt into joy and delight at the sight of his cherished child. When love and joy arrive in force, they cause fury to rise to its source and become tempered, because severities are sweetened only at their original source.

This is the significance of "*Elokim nisah et Avraham* - G-d tested Avraham." *Elokim* represents Divine severity. *Nisah*, tested, also means elevate (Shemos 20:17). We can read the verse as follows: "*Elokim nisah*" - Divine severity is elevated, "*et Avraham*" - with Avraham, through love and kindness, as personified by Avraham, as it is stated (Michah 7:20), "The loving-kindness of Avraham."

LESSON IN LOVE

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

"Please take your son, your only one, the one you love, Yitzchak..." (22:2)

Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson notes that the first time that the word אהבה - love, is used in the Torah is in this *pasuk* when Hashem instructs Avraham Avinu to take his son Yitzchak and offer him *pas* sacrifice: קח נא את בנך את יחידך אשר - אהבת את יצחק, whom you love, Yitzchak." The second time the word אהבה is used in the Torah is in connection to Yitzchak's love for Rivkah (Bereishis 24:67): ויבאה האהלה שרה אמו - ויקח את רבקה ותהי לו לאשה ויאהבה - "Yitzchak brought her into the tent of Sarah, his mother, he married Rivkah, she became his wife, and he loved her."

As Yitzchak had been the recipient of love, he knew how to love others. Since Avraham had shown love to Yitzchak, he was able to show love to Rivkah.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the third time the word אהבה is used in the Torah involves both Yitzchak and Rivkah! In connection to their children, Yaakov and Eisav, the verse says (Bereishis 25:28): ויאהב יצחק את עשו כי ציד - "And Yitzchak loved Eisav for game was in his mouth, but Rivkah loved Yaakov."

The lesson being taught so clearly is that if we wish for our children to grow up as loving, productive, and well-balanced members of society, we need to show them love. (Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson, Emet Outreach Couples Gala; 7:32)

Our children will not know how to love others unless they have experienced being loved properly.

It was because Yitzchak had experienced his father's love that he was able to love Rivkah, and it was because Rivkah received her husband's love that she, in turn, was able to love her son Yaakov.

LOVING FATHER

Chiddushei HaRim

"Please take your son, your only one, the one you love, Yitzchak..." (22:2)

G-d commanded Avraham to offer up Yitzchak with all the love a father feels for his son.

Some people can bring themselves to be cruel, divesting themselves of all love for their children for G-d's sake. ("Black as ravens - these are Torah scholars who are like ravens in that they have no mercy on their children" - Midrash Rabbah comment on Shir HaShirim.)

Avraham, however, was explicitly asked to use all his strength to restrain - rather than to ignore - his love for Yitzchak and, in this state of mind, to offer him as a sacrifice to G-d. Therein lay the significance of the test to which G-d put Avraham.

NEWFOUND CLOSENESS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Please take your son, your only one, the one you love, Yitzchak, and go to the land of Moriah. Take him up there as an ascent-offering, on one of the mountains that I will designate to you." (22:2)

The primary aspect of this test was not the self-sacrifice it entailed, but the challenge it posed to Avraham's implicit faith in G-d: G-d had promised Avraham that Yitzchak would be the one to perpetuate his legacy; now G-d was commanding Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak, in seeming contradiction to His very own word. Yet Avraham unquestioningly carried out G-d's command.

G-d tests us in order to bring our hidden soul-powers to the fore. In fact, life in general is such a test. Before it descended into this world, the soul related to G-d within the limits of reason; the soul never experienced a love for Him that transcends reason. But once the soul is encased in a physical body, which is by nature antagonistic to spirituality, it must summon its innermost strength to remain faithful to G-d despite life's daily trials and tribulations. With this newfound strength, the soul comes to understand and appreciate G-d in a much more profound and intimate way than it ever could have before descending into this world. (Sefer HaMa'amarim 5700, p. 37) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

HIDE AND SEEK

Reb Noson of Breslov

“Please take your son, your only one, the one you love, Yitzchak, and go to the land of Moriah. Take him up there as an ascent-offering, on one of the mountains that I will designate to you.” (22:2)

G-d did not tell Avraham immediately which mountain he should ascend. This is G-d’s way: He momentarily withholds information from *tzaddikim* and afterwards reveals it to them. This increases their reward. (Rashi)

G-d works the same way with us. He hides Himself to encourage us to seek and search for Him. Then, after we find G-d through our own efforts, we discover what He really wants from us. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 110)

SACRIFICING WITH JOY

Sefas Emes

“[G-d] said [to Avraham], ‘Please take your son...’” (22:2)

This was not a command but a plea. G-d pleaded with Avraham that he should take his only son as a sacrifice, even though Avraham would not have another son of such a caliber. Because he brought Yitzchak as a sacrifice with joy and his own free will, so would the generations to come also bring sacrifices with joy and their own free will.

SELFLESS MATRIMONY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Rivkah was born to Besuel. Milkah bore these eight to Nachor, Avraham’s brother...” (22:23)

The juxtaposition of the narrative of the binding of Yitzchak with that of the birth of his future wife, Rivkah, demonstrates that self-sacrifice is an integral component of a healthy marriage.

When we marry, and especially when we start to have children, our primary focus becomes the immediate tasks of supporting our families and dealing with the material world and its attendant mundane matters. No longer are we free to focus as intensely on our personal spiritual development. Whatever degree of self-orientation characterized our focus before marriage, even very spiritual self-orientation, it must be largely replaced by selfless devotion to others and preoccupation with prosaic matters after marriage.

It is imperative that, as this happens, we keep in mind that marrying and raising a family are just as much a part of fulfilling our Divine mission to make the world into G-d’s home as are more explicitly spiritual pursuits. In fact, making a Jewish home, filled with the knowledge of the Torah and the performance of G-d’s commandments and good deeds in general, is the primary way that we transform the world at large into G-d’s true home. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 25, p. 137) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

SALVATION IS ON THE WAY

Reb Noson of Breslov

“On the third day, Avraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from a distance.” (22:4)

Avraham saw the place of the Temple, where his descendants would serve G-d. (Yalkut Reuveini)

But what he saw was at a distance, for at that moment he was going to that very place to slaughter Yitzchak. Slaughtering Yitzchak meant that he would not have any descendants. Yet in his prophetic vision, Avraham saw his descendants serving in the Temple.

After G-d told him not to slaughter Yitzchak, Avraham set about finding a wife for his son. This marriage, too, was distant, for Yitzchak was thirty-seven years old and Rivkah had just been born. And despite G-d’s promise that the Land would be given to him and his descendants, Avraham had to pay a fortune for a burial place for Sarah. Then Rivkah was barren, and there were many trials and tribulations yet to come with Esav and Yaakov. Still, Avraham saw and knew that salvation would come; it is just at a distance.

Avraham teaches us never to give up hope, for salvation, though in the distance, will come. In fact, if we look, we will see it coming. But we must have the patience to wait. (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 136a)

DECIPHERING THE TRUTH

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“Stay here by yourselves with the donkey whilst I and the young man [Yitzchak] will go there and we will worship, and we will return to you.” (22:5)

Thinking that Yitzchak was about to be sacrificed and therefore not able to return home with him, Avraham should have said to the young men waiting, “I will return to you” or not said anything at all. Since he said “we will return to you” Rashi learns that Avraham unknowingly prophesied that Yitzchak would not be sacrificed and that they would both return from the mountain.

The simple understanding of Rashi’s interpretation is that Avraham said his prophecy without actually realizing what he had said. However, this approach seems difficult to understand based on two questions: The first question is simply, why would Hashem grant Avraham a prophecy with no relevance and nothing to learn from? And secondly, we must ask, how could it be that someone as great as Avraham would not have noticed the words coming out of his mouth? It is said that the day before Yom Kippur, the Vilna Gaon made an account of all the time he had wasted that year and only came to a total of several minutes. Similarly, the Chofetz Chaim is known to have testified that he had never spoken lashon hara in his entire life. How much more so would Avraham, one of the greatest people to ever live, take note of the words that came out of his mouth? Is it possible to say that Avraham would not have noticed what he had said?

The following approach answers our questions:

The commentators explain that the test of being told to sacrifice his son was the greatest test that Avraham could ever face because it posed an ultimate contradiction to everything he believed in. On the one hand, Avraham had discovered Hashem through his deep perception of the world, so much so that the Gemara states that he kept the entire Torah even though it was only given around five hundred years later. Therefore, Avraham knew that Hashem considered child sacrifice as abhorrent (Yirmiyahu 32:35), and it is something that he was fighting against his entire life. And yet, the same G-d of righteousness that Avraham had discovered in his search for truth was telling him to sacrifice his son.

Avraham's test was whether he would choose to follow what he knew to be the "truth" by not sacrificing his son, or whether he would choose to follow Hashem Who was telling Avraham to deny the truth which he had followed his whole life.

With this in mind, we can answer our question as follows: When Avraham "unconsciously" said "we will return to you," he knew that it was a prophecy. It was another part of his test; another factor to consider which made the test so much harder to face. On the one hand, he had received a prophecy - a vision of truth - that he would not sacrifice his son, yet on the other hand, he was being asked to follow Hashem and disregard everything that he considered to be the truth.

We can bring this point even further. The Midrash explains that whatever happened to Avraham would also happen to his children. This being the case, where do we find this aspect of Avraham's strength being able to ignore a prophecy in his children? The answer is that when Yosef was placed in Potiphar's household, the Torah explains that Potiphar's wife desired him and continuously tried to seduce him. Her final ploy was to show him through prophecy that they were destined to have children together (see Rashi on 39:2). Here, Yosef was faced with an incredible test, much like Avraham before him: would he follow the clear prophecy that he was shown, or would he choose to follow Hashem? With the strength he had inherited from Avraham, Yosef was able to ignore the prophecy, to see past the "truth," and follow Hashem just like his great-grandfather Avraham did all those years before.

ACCUMULATED STRENGTH

Tiferes Yonason

"...and he took in his hand the fire and the knife..." (22:6)

In order to be strong enough to perform the commandment to sacrifice his son wholeheartedly, Avraham took with him two of the merits he had accumulated. The "fire" symbolized the fiery furnace into which he had cast himself previously to glorify G-d. The "knife" signified his hospitality in which he would hurry to prepare food for passing travelers.

FULLY PRESENT

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"Then Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father and said, 'Father...' And he [Avraham] said, 'Here I am, my son...'" (22:7)

Avraham is instructed to offer his son Yitzchak as a sacrifice to G-d. Avraham had been promised a large number of offspring through Yitzchak, but he still planned to do as he was instructed, despite the apparent contradiction. On his way up the mountaintop, the Torah relates the only recorded conversation between Avraham and Yitzchak (22:7-8). At the center of this conversation, where Avraham tells Yitzchak that he is the offering, Yitzchak calls to his father, and his father responds, *"Hineni"* - I am here for you, my son.

Rabbi David Fohrman points out that Avraham's response to his son is the same word he used when G-d initiated this task by calling for Avraham. Avraham responded, *"Here I am"* (22:1). It also happens to be the same word Avraham uses when the angel calls out to prevent him from going through with his action, with Avraham again responding, *"Here I am"* (22:11). Avraham wasn't just there. He wasn't just going through the motions requested of him. He was all in; he was present and fully engaged with G-d, his son, and anyone around him.

Being there for others means being mindful of what makes them happy, their challenges and fears, and, most importantly - knowing what they need to hear and when they need to hear it.

TRUST IN HASHEM

Reb Noson of Breslov

"They came to the place that G-d had told him. Avraham built the altar there and arranged the wood. He bound his son Yitzchak and put him on the altar, on top of the wood." (22:9)

This was the most difficult of all of Avraham's ten tests. (Sanhedrin 89b)

Avraham's real test was not to question G-d at all, though the messages he had received from Him seemed contradictory. First G-d had promised that the Jewish people would be born through Yitzchak. Now He was calling for the sacrifice of Yitzchak.

Yet Avraham did not dwell on this contradiction. He knew that G-d's ways are not man's ways; G-d transcends all and therefore can do opposing things that are incomprehensible to man.

Thus, Avraham named the mountain *"The Mountain That G-d Sees"* (22:14). Though man cannot see or understand G-d's ways, *"G-d sees."* In fact, the very mountaintop upon which Yitzchak was to be sacrificed was the Temple Mount, where Avraham's descendants would ultimately serve G-d. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 34b-35a)

In the end, Avraham did not sacrifice Yitzchak. But the two of them gained tremendous merit from their immense desire to perform G-d's will. This great desire for self-sacrifice for G-d was implanted in the Jewish nation, which explains why we see so many, many Jews throughout the generations who have willingly sacrificed themselves for G-d. (Likutey Halachot VIII, p. 163b)

NO PLACE FOR CRUELTY

Devash HaSadeh

"The angel of Hashem called to him out from Heaven, and said, 'Avraham... Do not set forth your hand at the child nor do anything to him...' (22:11-12)

Why was the order to refrain from slaughtering Yitzchak given by a mere angel, when the command to sacrifice him had been pronounced by G-d Himself?

This teaches us that we must never obey anyone who commands us to harm a person, not even an angel. However, when the command is to desist from doing harm, even an angel's word is sufficient.

FOR THE LOVE OF G-D

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"...for now I know that you fear Hashem, and you have not withheld your son, your only one from me." (22:12)

Mashal: When a distinguished member of the Agudas HaRabbanim in New York passed away a number of years ago, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, R' Menachem Mendel Schneerson zt'l, paid a surprise shivah call to the family of the deceased. No one knew that he was coming and when he entered the home, a great tumult erupted as everyone pushed and jostled to get a glimpse of the rebbe.

Among the people sitting there at the time, was a high-ranking member of one of the left-wing political parties in Israel. The man was a pompous, self-important individual, who had been at the center of the conversation before the rebbe walked in. He had never met the rebbe before, but as he spoke words of comfort, words that raised the spirits of the bereaved and gave everyone a much needed spiritual boost, the politician became visibly impressed and excited. Unable to restrain himself any longer, he said with great fervor, "Lubavitcher Rebbe, I am afraid that I am becoming your *chassid*!"

The rebbe looked at him with clear shining eyes, and answered with a smile: "Why are you afraid? Why do it out of fear, when you can do it out of love?"

Nimshal: Hashem tested Avraham ten times to see if he had a true Fear of Heaven. Avraham passed each test "with flying colors." But in fact, Avraham followed the commands of the Almighty not so much out of fear as he did out of a genuine love for his Creator. One can only do so much when forced into it - when he does it out of love, the sky's the limit!

LIGHT WITHIN THE DARKNESS

Rebbe Nachman

"...for now I know that you fear Hashem, and you have not withheld your son, your only one from me." (22:12)

Chasakhta (חשכת, withheld) is similar to *Choshekh* (חשך, darkness). The "darkness" of doubts holds a person back from holiness. However, even within the "darkness," one can find the light of G-dliness. (See Likutey Moharan I, 115)

CREATING ANGELS

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"And he [the angel] said, 'Do not send forth your hand to the young man, and do not do anything to him, for now I know that you fear Hashem, and you have not withheld your son, your only one from me.'" (22:12)

The angels words are difficult to understand. First, the angel says, "now I know that you fear Hashem." Surely the angel should have said, "now Hashem knows that you fear Him"? In addition, why does the angel praise Avraham from not withholding his son "from me"; the angel should have said "from Hashem," after all, Avraham did not do anything for the angel, he acted solely for Hashem!

The Darchei Mussar (Bereishis 32:24) provides the following enlightening explanation. He explains that there are two types of angels: ones created by Hashem in the first six days of creation and others created by us - formed by every one of our *mitzvos*. Moreover, the strength of the angels that we create directly correlate to the purity of the *mitzvah* we perform. Avraham, who had just successfully completed his final and most difficult test, thus created a perfect angel. This was the same angel who was talking to him in this verse, which can now be reread and re-understood as follows:

"...for now I [the angel] know that you fear Hashem, and you have not withheld your son, your only one..." [How can I see that?] "from me" - by looking at myself as a strong angel I can see that you fear Hashem, for if you did not, I would not have been created so powerful and pure.

The Nefesh HaChaim (1:11) takes, in fact, the concept further by telling us that angels only have the strength to praise Hashem as a result of our actions in This World.

Although the upper worlds are a mystery to us, this knowledge alone should empower us to perform *mitzvos* with greater sincerity and enthusiasm.

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