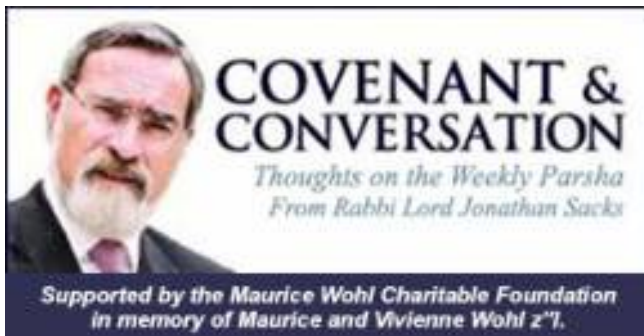


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Answering the Call

The early history of humanity is set out in the Torah as a series of disappointments. God gave human beings freedom, which they then misused. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Cain murdered Abel. Within a relatively short time, the world before the Flood became dominated by violence. All flesh perverted its way on the earth. God created order, but humans created chaos. Even after the Flood, humanity, in the form of the builders of Babel, were guilty of hubris, thinking that people could build a tower that “reaches heaven” (Gen. 11:4).

Humans failed to respond to God, which is where Abraham enters the picture. We are not quite sure, at the beginning, what it is that Abraham is summoned to do. We know he is commanded to leave his land, birthplace and father’s house and travel “to the land I will show you,” (Gen. 12:1) but what he is to do when he gets there, we do not know. On this the Torah is silent. What is Abraham’s mission? What makes him special? What makes him more than a good man in a bad age, as was Noah? What makes him a leader and the father of a nation of leaders?

To decode the mystery we have to recall what the Torah has been signalling prior to this point. I suggested in previous weeks that a - perhaps *the* - key theme is a failure of responsibility. Adam and Eve lack *personal* responsibility. Adam says, “It wasn’t me; it was the woman.” Eve says, “It wasn’t me, it was the serpent.” It is as if they deny being the authors of their own stories – as if they do not understand either freedom or the responsibility it entails.

Cain does not deny personal responsibility. He does not say, “It wasn’t me. It was Abel’s fault for provoking me.” Instead he denies *moral* responsibility: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Noah fails the test of *collective* responsibility. He is a man of virtue in an age of vice, but he makes no impact on his contemporaries. He saves his family (and the animals) but no one else. According to the plain reading of the text, he does not even try.

If we understand this, we understand Abraham. He exercises *personal* responsibility. In parshat

Lech Lecha, a quarrel breaks out between Abraham's herdsmen and those of his nephew Lot. Seeing that this was no random occurrence but the result of their having too many cattle to be able to graze together, Abraham immediately proposes a solution:

Abram said to Lot, "Let there not be a quarrel between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I will go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." (Gen. 13:8-9)

Note that Abraham passes no judgment. He does not ask whose fault the argument was. He does not ask who will gain from any particular outcome. He gives Lot the choice. He sees the problem and acts.

In the next chapter of Bereishit we are told about a local war, as a result of which Lot is among the people taken captive. Immediately Abraham gathers a force, pursues the invaders, rescues Lot and with him, all the other captives. He returns these captives safely to their homes, refusing to take any of the spoils of victory that he is offered by the grateful king of Sodom.

This is a strange passage – it depicts Abraham very differently from the nomadic shepherd we see elsewhere. The passage is best understood in the context of the story of Cain. Abraham shows he is his brother's (or brother's son's) keeper. He immediately understands the nature of *moral* responsibility. Despite the fact that Lot chose to live where he did with its attendant risks,

Abraham does not say, "His safety is his responsibility, not mine."

Then, in this week's parsha of Vayera, comes the great moment: a human being challenges God Himself for the very first time. God is about to pass judgment on Sodom. Abraham, fearing that this will mean that the city will be destroyed, says:

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (Gen. 18:23–25)

This is a remarkable speech. By what right does a mere mortal challenge God Himself?

The short answer is that God Himself signalled that he should. Listen carefully to the text:

Then the Lord said, "*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?* Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him" ... Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached Me." (Gen. 18:17–21)

Those words, “*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?*” are a clear hint that God wants Abraham to respond; otherwise why would He have said them?

The story of Abraham can only be understood against the backdrop of the story of Noah. There too, God told Noah in advance that he was about to bring punishment to the world.

So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth” (Gen. 6:13).

Noah did not protest. To the contrary, we are told three times that Noah “did as God commanded him” (Gen. 6:22; 7:5; 7:9). Noah accepted the verdict. Abraham challenged it. Abraham understood the third principle we have been exploring over the past few weeks: *collective responsibility*.

The people of Sodom were not Abraham's brothers and sisters, so he was going beyond even what he did in rescuing Lot. He prayed on their behalf because he understood the idea of human solidarity, immortally expressed by John Donne:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself ...
Any man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.¹

But a question remains. *Why* did God call on Abraham to challenge Him? Was there anything Abraham knew that God didn't know? That idea is absurd. The answer is surely this: Abraham was to become the role model and initiator of a new

faith, one that would not defend the human status quo but challenge it.

Abraham had to have the courage to challenge God if his descendants were to challenge human rulers, as Moses and the Prophets did. Jews do not accept the world that is. They challenge it in the name of the world that ought to be. This is a critical turning point in human history: the birth of the world's first religion of protest – the emergence of a faith that challenges the world instead of accepting it.

Abraham was not a conventional leader. He did not rule a nation. There was as yet no nation for him to lead. But he was the role model of leadership as Judaism understands it. He took responsibility. He acted; he didn't wait for others to act. Of Noah, the Torah says, “he walked *with* God” (Gen. 6:9). But to Abraham, God says, “Walk *before* Me,” (Gen. 17:1), meaning: be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility.

Judaism is God's call to responsibility.

QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. What could Adam, Eve, Cain and Noah have said or done differently, to face up to their various responsibilities?
2. What was Abraham's greatest quality?
3. How can we continue Abraham's legacy today?

NOTES

1. John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, Meditation XVII.



The Inadvertent Trial of Sodom

The Parasha begins in a peculiar way:

(1) God appeared to **him** by the oaks of Mamre, as **he** sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. (2) **He** lifted up his eyes and looked, and saw that three men stood opposite him. When **he** saw them, **he** ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself to the earth, (3) and said, "My lords, if I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass by your servant. (4) Now let a little water be fetched, wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. (5) I will get a morsel of bread so you can refresh your heart. After that be on your way, for this is surely why you have passed by your servant." They said, "Very well, do as you have said."

There are two oddities in the text. The first is the lack of identity of the subject; Avraham is not mentioned by name, and is alluded to by pronouns only. The Hebrew equivalent of "him" and "he" are used, but the normal convention of naming the protagonist at the start of the section, at the very least, is not followed.

The second point is more curious than the first: The text informs us of an awesome event, but appears to gloss over it entirely. God appears to him (obviously, to Avraham), yet the content of the visit seems strangely absent or perhaps not immediately clear. Instead of elaborating on this Divine communication, the text moves on without missing a beat, focusing on the other guests who arrive and receive the full attention of their host, Avraham. At face value it seems quite strange that God could "arrive," that God could appear to Avraham, and yet no content is imparted.

Both of these textual anomalies are resolved if we see this new chapter, this *parasha*, as a continuation of the previous episode, in which Avraham is clearly the subject. The preceding *parasha* ends with the change Avram's name to Avraham, and the commandment of circumcision.

(1) When Avram was ninety-nine years old, Hashem appeared to Avram and said to him, "I am *El Shaddai*. Walk before me and be faultless. (2) I will set My covenant between Me and you and will multiply you exceedingly." (3) Avram threw himself on his face and the Almighty spoke to him, saying, (4) "As for Me, here is My covenant with you: You will be the father of a multitude of nations. (5) No longer will you be called by the name Avram, but your name will be Avraham, because I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. (6) I will make you exceedingly fruitful; I will make you into nations and kings will come forth from you. ... (24) Avraham was ninety-nine years old when he was

circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. (25) And his son, Yishmael, was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. (26) On that very day both Avraham and his son Yishmael, were circumcised. (27) And all the men of his house, those born in the house, and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Linking this section with the verses that follow – the visitation by God and by the three guests – Rashi resolves the textual challenges: Vayera begins precisely where Lech Lecha ends; Avraham is the subject of the narrative, and because he has just undergone a painful medical procedure God appears to him, visits him during his convalescence. There is no need to mention the protagonist by name because the narrative continues seamlessly, nor is there a need to describe the content of the revelation, because the visit itself was the objective.

In this vein, Rashi makes various comments on this verse, all of which refer or relate to circumcision:

AND THE ETERNAL APPEARED UNTO HIM to visit the sick. R. Hama the son of Hanina said: it was the third day after his **circumcision** and the Holy One, blessed be He, came and enquired after the state of his health (Bava Metzia 86b)

BY THE OAKS OF MAMRÉ – It was he (Mamre) who advised him (Avraham) regarding the **circumcision** and therefore He revealed himself to him in his

(Mamre's) territory (Bereishit Rabbah 42:8).

Literally, WAS SITTING – The word is written שׁוּב (without the ו) and therefore may be translated “he sat”: **He wished to rise, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, Sit and I will stand. You shall form an example to your descendants – that I, in time to come, will stand in the assembly of the judges while they will sit, as it is said, (Psalms 82:1) “God standeth in the assembly of the judges”** (Bereishit Rabbah 48:7)

AT THE TENT-DOOR – that he might see whether anyone passed by, and invite him into the house.

IN THE HEAT OF THE DAY – The Holy One, blessed be He, brought the sun out of its sheath that he might not be troubled by travellers, and when He perceived that he was grieved that no travellers came He brought to him angels in the form of men (Bava Metzia 86b). Rashi Bereishit 18:1

The episode described in the verses that follow, Rashi explains, took place in the plains of Mamre – because Mamre advised Avraham to perform the circumcision. As a result, Avraham is in pain and God visits him, fulfilling the mitzva of visiting the sick. God finds Avraham in a state of distress because no travelers are out that day due to the unusual heat – which was engineered by God in order to facilitate Avraham's recuperation with some much-needed rest.

In the midst of this circumcision-focused commentary, Rashi adds an additional comment that seems unrelated: Avraham was sitting at the opening of his tent; although he wanted to stand, God instructed him to remain seated – as would his descendants in future generations: When sitting in judgement, judges will sit while God will stand in the courtroom. This comment seems like a non-sequitur, and we are at a loss as to how it fits in to the larger theme of visiting the sick or circumcision.

Rashbam's understanding of these verses differs considerably: In contrast to Rashi's reading, Rashbam¹ understands that the revelation, described in Verse 1, consists of the events described in Verse 2 and thereafter. In other words, the arrival of the three visitors, and their message of Sarah's impending pregnancy and the birth of Yitzchak, were the content imparted to Avraham when God appeared to him:

And the Eternal appeared to him – How? In the three men who came to him, for they were angels. In many instances, when an angel² appears, it is referred to as *Shechina* (God's Presence), as it says 'for My name is within him;' a person's agent is like the person himself. Similarly, 'an angel of God appeared to [Moshe] in the midst of the burning bush,' and then it says, 'God appeared, for [Moshe] had turned to look.' Rashbam Bereishit 18:1

In a nutshell, Rashbam explains that the three men who visit and deliver a message **are the revelation** described in the first verse. In Rashi's

portrayal, God had come to visit and found Avraham depressed and pining for visitors in order to perform *hesed*. God therefore sends three emissaries – and stands on the sideline (as it were), allowing Avraham the space to attend to the visitors. This scenario may be supported by God's response to Sarah's incredulous laughter upon hearing that she will bear a child:

(12) Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old will I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" (13) **God said to Avraham**, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Will I really bear a child, yet I am old?' (14) Is anything too hard for God? At the set time I will return to you, when the season comes round, and Sarah will have a son." (15) Then Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh." Bereishit 18:12-15

God, who has been patiently waiting on the sidelines, enters the narrative to question Sarah's response.³

The entire episode remains unclear. If God is waiting on the sidelines, only to "reappear," are we to imagine that a visit by God was not satisfying enough for Avraham? Was he so hyper-focused on his own need to perform acts of kindness, of *hesed*, that a visit by the Almighty Himself was unappreciated?

The next verse makes the question even more pointed: In what may appear to be a bit of literary foreshadowing, Avraham's guests prepare to take their leave and they take a long, hard look at the city of Sodom:

The men arose from there and turned their gaze toward Sodom, and Avraham walked with them to escort them. Bereishit 18:16

Sodom is apparently their next destination, and Avraham starts them on their journey (ostensibly leaving his original “guest,” God Himself, waiting for him back in the tent). It is at this point that God addresses Avraham and negotiations regarding Sodom commence.

Before continuing the narrative, let us revisit the first of our textual anomalies: the use of pronouns to replace the protagonist’s name. In retrospect, the fact that Avraham’s name is not mentioned creates some drama, particularly when we consider this chapter a continuation of the previous one. The message of the previous chapter was not only the impending birth of Yitzchak; a mitzvah was given – circumcision – and a covenant was forged. But there was one more point: Avram and Sarai were given new names. What is the significance of this change? Are these the same people? Have they undergone some type of “rebirth” or conversion?⁴ If the change of their names reflects some deeper change, how does it manifest itself? Later in the Torah, Yaakov will be given a new name, but his original name is never lost; his dual names reflect a dual reality. The name Yaakov lives on, referring to the private persona, while the name Yisrael refers to patriarch of the emerging nation. Here, when only pronouns are used so soon after the new names are conferred, we are forced to consider whether Avraham continues to be Avram, whether Sarah is still Sarai.

The significance of Avraham’s new name is articulated by God: Avram is to be “the father of many nations”- but this seems quite ironic. At the moment God informs him that he will have a single heir, a son who will be named Yitzchak and that his son Yishmael is “out of the picture,” we cannot help but wonder how or why the name Avraham – father of many nations – is suitable

(1) When Avram was ninety-nine years old, God appeared to Avram, and said to him, “I am I am *El Shaddai*. Walk before me and be blameless. (2) I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” (3) Avram fell on his face. The Almighty spoke to him, saying, (4) “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you. You will be the father of a multitude of nations. (5) Neither will your name any more be called Avram, but your name will be Avraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. (6) I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you. Kings will come out of you. (7) I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your descendants after you. (8) I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land where you are traveling, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession. I will be their God.” (9) God said to Avraham, “As for you, you will keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

(10) This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. (11) You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin. It will be a token of the covenant between Me and you. (12) He who is eight days old will be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations, he who is born in the house, or bought with money from any foreigner who is not of your descendants. (13) He who is born in your house, and he who is bought with your money, must be circumcised. My covenant will be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. (14) The uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people. He has broken My covenant.” (15) God said to Avraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but her name will be Sarah. (16) I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. Yes, I will bless her, and she will be a mother of nations. Kings of peoples will come from her.” Bereishit 17:1-15

Perhaps we can go so far as to say that while Avram fathered Yishmael, Avraham will have a son, Yitzchak, and only a son of Avraham and Sarah is a real son. This would explain the concern that Avraham immediately expresses regarding the status and stature of Yishmael:

(18) Avraham said to God, “Oh that Yishmael might live before you!” (19) God said, “No, but Sarah, your wife,

will bear you a son. You shall call his name Yitzchak. I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. (20) As for Yishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He will become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. (21) But My covenant I establish with Yitzchak, whom Sarah will bear to you at this set time next year.” Bereishit 17:18-21

This distinction leaps out of the dialogue leading up to the Akeidah (the ‘binding of Yitzchak’) later in the *parasha*, when God demonstrably calls Avraham by name – by that very particular name:

(1) It happened after these things, that God tested Avraham, and said to him, “Avraham!” He said, “Here I am.” (2) He said, “Now take your son, your only son, whom you love, Yitzchak, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there for an *olah* offering on one of the mountains which I will tell you of.” (3) Avraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took his two young men with him, and Yitzchak his son. He split the wood for the *olah* offering, and rose up, and went to the place of which The Almighty had told him. Bereishit 22:1-3

Avraham had but one son – Yitzchak. Moreover, according to the Midrash, Yishmael was there – but he is not referred to not as a son but as one of Avraham’s “young men.”

His two young men – Yishmael and Eliezer. Rashi Bereishit 22:3

Yishmael and Eliezer, each in their own way a potential heir of Avraham, are now seen to be mere pretenders, ‘extras’ in the unfolding drama; a third candidate for surrogate son or heir, Lot, had left the stage long ago, choosing Sodom over the tent of Avraham – even though Sodom was already an infamously wicked city when Lot made his terrible choice:

(11) So Lot chose the Plain of the Jordan for himself. Lot traveled east, and they separated themselves the one from the other. (12) Abram lived in the land of Canaan, and Lot lived in the cities of the plain, and moved his tent as far as Sodom. (13) Now the people of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinners against God. Bereishit 13:11-13

How was the evil, the wickedness of Sodom, manifest? While some commentaries attribute every possible sin to the people of Sodom,⁵ the prophet Yechezkel is very specific: He accuses them of maltreatment of the poor and the weak.⁶

Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. Yechezkel 16:49

With this value judgment, offered by God via the prophet, a question emerges: If Sodom was already considered spiritually dysfunctional in the 13th chapter of Bereishit, why does God only

heed the cry now (in chapter 18)? What has changed? Why is the time now ripe for Sodom’s destruction?

This question brings us back to the point in the text where we paused: Avraham’s visitors look toward Sodom and take their leave, and God, quite remarkably, tells us what He is thinking.

(17) God said, “Will I hide from Avraham what I do, (18) since **Avraham will surely become a great and mighty nation**, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him? (19) For I have known him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they will keep **the way of God, to do righteousness and justice** such that God will bring on Avraham that which He has spoken of him.” (20) God said, “The cry of Sodom and Amorrhah is great, and their sin is very grievous.” Bereishit 18:17-20

The question that has troubled so many philosophers is answered in the text itself: Why is Avraham chosen? Because **he will command his children** to follow the path of God and perform acts of charity and justice. Avraham’s name was changed because he was destined to be “the father of many nations,” a change that can take place only through Yitzchak. Avraham can assume his role as the father of many nations – the role that is his destiny, the role that is reflected in the name God gave him in the previous chapter – with the birth of his one true heir, Yitzchak. This is the start of a nation that will be dedicated to decency and justice.

God tells Avraham about the outrage in Sodom. Avraham-the-father-of-many-nations takes up the proverbial gauntlet and takes on the role of defense attorney⁷ in the trial of Sodom, attempting to defend the indefensible.

Prima facie, Avraham's seamless segue into this role seems strange and counterintuitive; the people of Sodom are the antithesis of everything Avraham stands for. Nonetheless, Avraham argues on their behalf, insisting that the doomed cities must contain some good.

In retrospect, this brings God's visit to Avraham's tent into clear focus: this must have been the point from the outset. The reason God appeared to Avraham was to conduct the trial of Sodom, which may explain Rashi's seemingly disconnected reference to judges in a trial. Yet Avraham's valiant defense should give us pause: Is it possible that Avraham's arguments for Sodom tell us far more about Avraham and his righteousness than they tell us about Sodom itself? If the roles were reversed, would the king of Sodom have argued to save Avraham? Could the arguments presented by Avraham have served to highlight the chasm between the wickedness of Sodom and the righteousness of Avraham? With each round of negotiation, Avraham's arguments make the guilt of Sodom more and more obvious.

This insight unlocks the entire chapter: The first section of the *parasha*, whether we were aware of it or not, was also about the trial of Sodom; we might say that it was "Exhibit A."

God appears to Avraham; the trial is about to begin. Three visitors arrive, and Avraham treats them like royalty, like angels who have come to

visit from heaven; he spares no cost or effort to make them feel welcome and valued. Avraham's tent is open for business, and this is "business as usual." The message these guests bear is that there will be continuity. A child will be born, precisely because this enterprise is investment-worthy, because these people will teach their children kindness and decency. This couple deserves a child; their legacy, the "business" they have built – kindness, charity, justice – must continue.

In stark contrast stand the people of Sodom; in the words of Yechezkel, these people do not stretch out their hand to those in need. The poor, the hungry, the disenfranchised are left to die in Sodom; there is no mercy, and not a tear is shed.

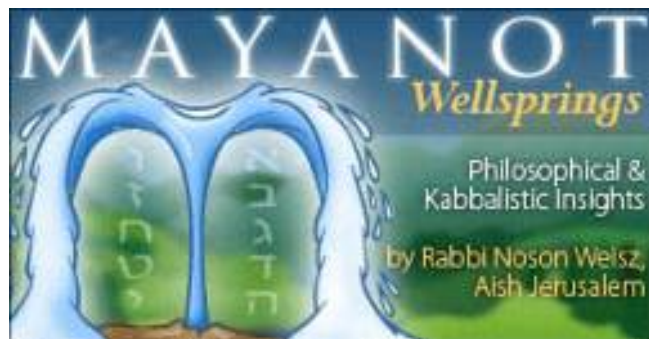
When the angels arrive in Sodom they witness firsthand the deplorable moral state of the city, and the trial of Sodom continues – but this is 'Exhibit B.' The first piece of evidence introduced at the trial was the extraordinary kindness of Avraham and Sarah. The juxtaposition is not a coincidence: The behavior of Sodom seems even more pale in comparison to the reception of these guests in Avraham's tent. It is the shining example of how things should be that damns Sodom to destruction, and the fate of the city is sealed. Avraham will have an heir, whereas there is no justification for the continued existence of Sodom.

The overriding theme of the narrative, then, concerns Avraham becoming the father of many nations. Nations that follow Avraham's lead will be uplifted by his moral guidance and enlightened by his teachings; those that do not will be damned for failing to adhere to those teachings and for

falling so short of the benchmark of decency set by Avraham.

Ironically, while Avraham's words argued for Sodom to be saved, Avraham's deeds inadvertently sealed their fate. They had chosen misanthropy and moral decay, despite the opportunity to follow Avraham's lead.⁸ Their time was up; Avraham's was just beginning.

1. See Rambam, Guide to the Perplexed 2:42, who gives a similar explanation; according to the Rambam the entire episode was a vision. This position is severely attacked by Ramban (Bereishit 18:1). Also see the comments of Ralbag on Bereishit 19:37.
2. Note that in chapter 18 the visitors are described as "people" in contrast to chapter 19 where the visitors are described as *malachim* – angels. The Ralbag opines that the people visiting were prophets.
3. According to the Rashbam, God was never an active participant in the narrative.
4. See **Reshimot Shiurim** (Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik) Yevomot 45b for discussion of this issue.
5. See Talmud Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:3; Targum Pseudo-Yonatan Bereishit 13:13; various commentaries to Bereishit 13:13, including Rashi, Radak, Baal Haturim, Haamek Davar.
6. See Hizkuni and Ibn Ezra *ad loc.*
7. See Rashi 18:33. AND THE LORD WENT AWAY – As soon as the counsel for the defense had nothing more to say the Judge took his departure.
8. See the events described in Chapter 14.



Gently Down the Stream

And it happened after these things that God tested Abraham and said to him,

"Abraham," and he replied, "Here I am." And He said, "Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Bring him up there as an offering upon one of the mountains which I shall tell you." (Genesis 22, 1-2)

The story of this test, known as the *Akeida*, is one of the seminal events of Jewish history.

Furthermore, the *Akeida* is perhaps the single greatest point of merit in the Jewish treasury. Whenever the Jewish people need to beseech God on a matter that requires His extraordinary indulgence, the mention of the merit of the *Akeida* inevitably constitutes one of the chief points of their presentation. The blessing of remembrance recited on Rosh Hashana, the Day of Judgement, provides a good illustration:

Remember the Akeida of Isaac when you look at his children today and therefore remember your covenant with us.

It is a very difficult thing to write about the *Akeida*, as there is always the fear that anything the writer might say in the effort of bringing it down to earth could reduce the majesty of the event. In our analysis, we cannot presume to encapsulate the smallest part of its drama in what follows.

With that in mind, let us broach the question that arises immediately: How can we relate to the idea of God putting Abraham through such a barbaric experience for the sake of a test that God must have known He would pass? For a test is not a punishment. The very fact that the Torah

describes it as a test indicates that neither Abraham or Isaac had done anything wrong.

A SIGN OF MERIT

Nachmanides, in his treatise on reward and punishment, "Sha'ar Hagmul," explains at length that the fact that God decided to test Abraham is a sign of his great merit. God never tests anyone who faces the slightest risk of failure.

When the potter wants to test the power of his kiln, he doesn't test it by striking his weak pots that he knows will shatter from a single blow. How does he test it? By striking his strongest pots that he knows can withstand being repeatedly hammered by his strongest blows. Similarly, God never tests the *rasha* who cannot measure up to intense scrutiny. Who does He test? The *tzadik*, the "holy man." As it is written: *God will test the Zadik* (Tehilim, 11, 5) and it says, *God tested Abraham*. (Bereishis Raba, 55, 2)

In fact, he goes on to explain that when the Torah tells us that someone is being tested, this characterization is only valid from the point of view of the one undergoing the test. As the human subject has free will and does not necessarily know his spiritual potential, he feels like he is on trial and is terrified of failure. Moreover, this is certainly the proper attitude to adopt towards the prospect of undergoing Divine scrutiny. One of the very first blessings we recite each morning contains the request: "Do not put us to the test." But to God these are not tests as He is always sure of the outcome.

What then is the purpose of this exercise?

Nachmanides explains that the purpose is to actualize hidden spiritual potentials. By dint of much hard labor, a person may have fully developed his potential to reach certain spiritual heights, but unless he is called upon to apply his potential to a real life situation, it will never be actualized.

Heroes are produced by circumstances. The brave soldier who crawls through enemy fire to rescue his wounded comrade always had the necessary courage, but even he was not aware of this inner resource until the need for the rescue arose. He can only be awarded the glory and honor that are the proper dues of his great courage after he has actually performed the heroic deed.

FEAR OF GOD

Thus God tested Abraham to actualize his spiritual potential and to merit receiving the great spiritual awards that He wished to bestow on him. Accordingly, a study of the *Akeida* ought to expose a quality of spiritual greatness in Abraham that had not appeared previously as part of his spiritual profile.

At the conclusion of the *Akeida*, the Torah says:

"Do not stretch out your hand against the lad nor do anything to him for now I know that you are a God-fearing man, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me." (Genesis 22:12)

Apparently, hidden in Abraham's personality was the spiritual potential for the fear of God, but it required the imposition of this test to be actualized.

But how can we possibly understand this? After all, previous to this test, Abraham was willing to jump into a fiery furnace rather than renounce his loyalty to God even before God ever spoke to him! Abraham consumed every bit of energy in his possession to sanctify God's name in the world for a solid 136 years up to this point in his life! Why, after all that, did he require this test to actualize his fear of God?

Spiritual events are difficult to assess by means of their outer real life manifestations. By definition, the dominant portion of such events take place in the inner world of the human soul, where they are well concealed from prying eyes. Sometimes you can only comprehend the spiritual dynamics of such events by analyzing how they altered the spiritual dimensions of the world at large.

When we study the *Akeida* in this light, we find that it inaugurated two monumental spiritual changes in the world.

1. The first of these was the creation of the possibility of having the presence of God living among us in His Temple.
2. The second was the establishment of the connection between mortal human beings and the world of *Techiyat Hametim*, or "the resurrection of the dead." Let us examine both of these changes and see how they are related.

A PLACE FOR THE TEMPLE

After the *Akeida* the Torah tells us:

And Abraham called the name of that site 'YHVH Yireh', as it is said this day, on the mountain the Lord will be seen. (Genesis 22:14)

In bestowing this name to the site, Abraham informs us that until the *Akeida* there was no place on earth that God could be clearly perceived. Abraham's mission in the *Akeida* was to bring this perception down to the world. Indeed, it was on this very spot that the Temple was later erected and the altar for sacrificial offerings was placed where Isaac once lay, bound as a sacrifice.

The holy name of God which Abraham uses here -- the unpronounceable Tetragrammaton, YHVH -- has a special significance among the various titles that God selected in His Torah as a means of teaching us His various attributes. This name -- Hebrew for "was, is and will be" -- identifies God as the source of all being in the past present and future. It introduces the idea that God is not only the Creator of all that exists, but that continued existence is impossible without constant Divine input.

Until this aspect of His being could be perceived down here in our world, God could not maintain a residence among us humans in this aspect. And the revelation of this aspect of God is necessary for the establishment of the Temple. No other name of God is ever mentioned in the Book of Leviticus in association with the sacrifices offered in the Temple.

We hope to be able to explain why. Apparently, the *Akeida* so clearly crystallized the possibility of appreciating God in this aspect that it literally actualized the potential for the Temple.

TO SEE IS TO FEAR

In Hebrew the word *Yirah*, which means "fear" also means "see." Generally speaking, we humans are only frightened of dangers that we can detect and understand. Thus a God-fearing man is also a God-seeing man. Moreover, the level of one's fear/awe of God is directly proportional to the clearness of one's vision of God.

If Abraham is described by the Torah after having passed through the *Akeida* experience as a God-fearing man, this indicates that the *Akeida* allowed him to obtain a glimpse of one of the attributes of God that were previously invisible to human beings. Despite the great fear of God that served as the driving force of his life up to the *Akeida*, it was impossible even for Abraham to experience the fear of God on a level that is engendered by an attribute of God invisible to man. What he could not see, he could not fear.

The perception of God as YHVH was the spiritual experience whose potential in Abraham the test of the *Akeida* was designed to actualize. Once human beings could relate to God on this level, they could play host to God's presence in terms of this attribute. The Temple and its sacrifices were the result.

RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

To bring this idea down to earth, let us look at the second change in the world brought about by the *Akeida*, the ability to make spiritual contact with

God at the level of *Techiyat Hametim*, "the resurrection of the dead."

Rabbi Yehuda said: "When the knife touched Isaac's neck, his soul flew out of his body. When the Voice emerged from between the cherubim and commanded, *"Do not send your hand to hurt the youth..."* his soul returned to his body, and Isaac stood up on his feet, and realized that just so would the dead be eventually resuscitated, and he declared, "Blessed are you God, who resuscitates the dead." (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, 30)

We still recite this blessing uttered by Isaac. It has been handed down to us as the concluding words of the second blessing of the *Shmoneh Esreh*. In uttering Isaac's words, we internalize Isaac's feelings as he originally pronounced them, mesmerized by the actual living experience of his freshly returned life. To fully appreciate the profound significance of these words, we must analyze this blessing:

*You are mighty forever, My Master,
You are the Resurrector of the dead,
the Powerful One to deliver us.
Causer of the wind to blow and the
rain to fall. Sustainer of the living
with kindness, Resurrector of the
dead with great mercy, Supporter of
the fallen, and Healer of the sick and
Releaser of the imprisoned and
Fulfiller of His faithfulness to those
who sleep in the dust. Who is like You
Master of mighty deeds and who can
be compared to You? King Who
causes death and restores life and
causes deliverance to sprout forth.*

And you are faithful to restore the dead to life. Blessed are You, Lord, Resurrector of the dead.

There is a very perplexing aspect to these words. We praise God for sending us rain, providing us with our livelihoods, for supporting us when we fall, for healing us when we are sick, for releasing us when we are confined by circumstances. We combine these examples of Divine assistance with the praise of God as the One who will return us to life after our deaths. But how can these other manifestations of Divine benevolence, all integral to our everyday existence, be mentioned in the same breath as the phenomenon of returning to life after death? What can they possibly have in common?

More specifically why mention the resuscitation of the dead at all in our everyday prayers?

We can highlight the problem by referring to the well-known Jewish practice of reciting Psalms when someone is sick. Jewish custom dictates that we stop reciting the Psalms if the person we are praying for dies. Why? We address God three times daily as the resuscitator of the dead, so why not keep reciting the Psalms in the hope that God will bring the dead person back to life? The answer is obvious.

We only pray for God's help when it can be extended to us in terms of solutions that are a part of the phenomena of our world. The resuscitation of the dead will take place in the World to Come. There is no such phenomenon in our world and therefore the power of prayer does not extend to it.

In other words, God is invisible to us in His aspect of resuscitator of the dead. So why mention this aspect of God altogether in our daily prayers?

The purpose of these prayers is to connect to God in the here and now. Such connections can only be established in terms of those attributes that God displays in our world, as it is this aspect of Himself that He rendered accessible and visible to us.

THE KEY

This question is the key we need to unlock the secret of the *Akeida*. In fact we are declaring in our prayers that when God sends us rain, or heals us when we are sick, or provides us with our livelihood, He is displaying this very Divine attribute of the Resuscitator of the dead. In other words we can only connect to God's visible attributes because we are people who will eventually undergo the resuscitation of the dead! We must reach all the way to *Techiyat Hametim* -- the very resurrection of the dead -- to gain access to the attributes of God that are part of our own world!

Daily contact and interaction with the Infinite is only possible for people who are themselves infinite to some degree. For those who exist only in the realm of the finite God provided the resources of the natural world. There is natural rain, natural powers of healing and natural abundance. God does not interfere with these. In the world of nature, there is only so much to go around and it is not His way to deprive one person to benefit another. But for one who exists in the

world of the infinite, there are infinite resources available to draw on.

ABRAHAM'S VIEWPOINT

Abraham spent his entire life in teaching the world the evils of idol worship and human sacrifice. If he would have interpreted God's command to sacrifice Isaac as a command to simply kill him, he surely would have protested. For Abraham did have objections to God's command. The Midrash informs us about the objections he wanted to utter but disciplined himself to suppress.

"Master of the universe, when you told me to take Isaac and offer him up as a sacrifice I had what to answer. I could have said, 'Yesterday you promised me, *Only Isaac's offspring will be considered yours* (Genesis 21:12), and now you tell me to offer him up as a sacrifice?' But I said nothing. Therefore I ask of you, just as I suppressed my mercy to carry out your will without protest, when my children come up before you for judgment you also suppress your anger and do not allow the mention of their negative deeds." (Bereishi raba, 56,10)

There are many other Midrashic sources that are substantially in conformity with this one.

Rabbi Dessler asks, why does no source quote the most obvious objection? Surely it is absolutely immoral to kill a human being and offer him up as a sacrifice! How could God command Abraham to do something so absolutely horrendous in His service? How could Abraham keep silent on this issue?

CORRECT INTERPRETATION

The substance of his answer is that Abraham interpreted the *Akeida* correctly from the very beginning.

If the Midrash tells us that Isaac experienced the resuscitation of the dead as a result of almost going through it, we understand that this is what it was meant to accomplish all along. The difference between the *Akeida* as originally planned and the way it was finally executed is only in the degree of strength of the revelation.

As the *Akeida* was not executed to conclusion in the actual world it only managed to establish a connection with the world of *Techiyat Hametim* on the lofty level of spiritual experience. Had it actually gone to its culmination as a real event, it would have connected our world to the world of *Techiyat Hametim* physically and would have abolished the need to die altogether.

Thus we find that Abraham is actually disappointed when the angel revokes the Divine command. Rashi tells us in the name of the Midrash that each act of service Abraham preformed on the ram (which replaced Isaac on the altar) he uttered the following prayer: "May it be the will of God to regard what I am doing as though I was doing it to my son Isaac; as though

it was my son who was being slaughtered, as though it was his blood that was sprinkled on the altar, as though it was he who was being skinned, as though it was his flesh that was being burned and transformed into ashes."

The withdrawal of God's command to sacrifice Isaac was not understood by Abraham as the timely revocation of a horrendous edict. He understood that God had taught him an enduring lesson through the *Akeida*. The *Akeida* was an essential aspect of his Divine service but he could only perform this act of service symbolically at the present time.

PROFOUND TRANSFORMATION

The idea is simple yet profound. When you offer your life to God and He gives it back to you after accepting it, your life returns to you profoundly transformed. It is no longer life that emanates from the world of nature. It flows to you directly from the wellsprings of God. You are eternally linked to God through life itself.

The *Akeida* was given to Abraham, the first Jew, as a means of changing the direction of the flow of life. Instead of originating in nature and flowing back to God, which is the direction in which life flows for the rest of humanity, a Jew's life flows from God towards the world. The flow of every individual Jewish life originates in the wellsprings of eternity, and the spiritual currents that power this flow end in the minor tributary of the finite world.

Whatever assistance God sends through Divine providence to a Jew flows along this river of life. All the supplies carried by the barges that float on

this river driven by the powerful current of the Jewish life-force originate in the world of the infinite. Their destination is this world, but their embarkation point is located in the world of *Techiyat Hametim*.



Refinement Without Fear

The trouble began when Avraham introduced his wife Sarah to the people of Gerar as his sister. One thing led to another, and she was taken to the palace of Avimelech, king of Gerar, as a prospective new wife. Avimelech came very close to sinning with Sarah, but Hashem revealed her true identity to him.

Avimelech was upset. "You almost got me into terrible trouble," he said to Avraham. "You told me she was your sister when she was really your wife. Why didn't you tell me the truth? Why did you do this to me?"

"For I thought," said Avraham, "only there is no fear of the Lord in this place (Gen. 20:11)."

The word "only" in this verse seems to be out of place. What is it supposed to imply?

Rav Elchanan Wasserman raised this question when he addressed a group of rabbis in Germany during the 1930's. Then he shocked them with the Malbim's explanation.

"Your city is wonderful," Avraham was telling the people of Gerar, according to the Malbim's interpretation. "It is a place of culture and refinement, of exemplary citizens. There is only one thing wrong with it. The Lord is not feared in your city. And if the Lord is not feared, then all your other refinements and accomplishments are meaningless. If you are not governed by fear of the Lord but by your own human standards, there is no hope for you. You cannot be trusted not to kill a man with a desirable wife. Your civilized ways mean nothing. They will not be allowed to get in the way of your passions and ambitions, because you do not fear the Lord."

The implications of what Rav Elchanan was saying were clear. Germany was a civilized country, but there was no fear of the Lord. Therefore, it was a dangerous place. Anything could happen there.

"Not so," some of the German rabbis objected. "Germany is a land of laws, culture, civilization, high moral standing, science, technology. We are not some backward backwater from the Middle Ages. Jews are not at risk here. We are protected by the law."

Germany was indeed a country of laws, but what were those laws? Rabbi Reuven Bulka of Ottawa, Canada, recalls attending *cheder* in Germany during Kristallnacht. One of the children ran into the classroom and informed the *rebbe* that his house was on fire. The *rebbe* immediately

telephoned the fire department and reported the fire, but his pleas for assistance fell on deaf ears. He got through to the fire chief, but to no avail.

"We are sorry," said the fire chief, "but we cannot put out the fire. It is against the law."

It was now against the law to put out fires in Jewish homes. Germany was still a land of laws. That had not changed. Only the laws had changed. All the culture and the civilization meant nothing. When there is no fear of God in a place, the laws mean nothing.

When Rav Yitzchak Hutner was learning in Slobodka, Rav Avraham Elya Kaplan came back to the *yeshivah* after spending some time in Germany. The Alter of Slobodka invited Rav Avraham Elya to convey to the *yeshivah* his impressions of the German people. What were they like?

"It seems to me that the Germans are a kind and refined people," he replied. "When you ask directions from someone, he will give you very precise instructions for getting there, and then he will say to you, '*Nicht wahr?*' Isn't that so?' Now, he knows that you have absolutely no idea about how to get there. In fact, that's why you're asking directions. He also knows perfectly well that he doesn't need nor can he expect any confirmation from you. And still he says in such a deferential tone, '*Nicht wahr?*' I see this as a sign of refinement. The Germans are a refined people."

At this point, an argument broke out among the students of the Slobodka Yeshivah. Some argued, Rav Hutner among them, that we should seek to learn good traits only from the holy Torah, the

repository of all desirable ethics and values, and not from the Germans or any other gentile communities. Besides, if they were not rooted in the Torah, it was quite possible that refined manners were no more than a superficial cloak for a dark interior.

"I disagree," declared one student. "A wise person learns from everyone. If we see something admirable among the gentiles, we should give credit where credit is due and adopt it for ourselves as well. I think the practice of saying *nicht wahr* is a sign of politeness, refinement and a very becoming modesty. We should learn from the virtues of the Germans."

Nearly 50 years later, Rav Hutner was saying a *shiur* (Torah class) in Yeshivah Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin when an old man walked in. He sat in the back and waited until the *shiur* was over. Then he approached Rav Hutner.

"You don't remember me, do you?" he said. "I am the student in Slobodka who argued with you about admiring the refined manners of the Germans."

"Ah, of course I remember you," said Rav Hutner. "Ah, it is good to see you again after all these years."

He reached out to take the old man's hand, but there was only a hook where the hand should have been. Rav Hutner's hand remained suspended in midair.

"I lost it in the concentration camps," the old man explained. "When the Nazi was sawing off my right hand, he kept saying, 'This is hurting you, *nicht wahr*? The pain is intense, *nicht wahr*? And

even as I was screaming as if my lungs would burst, he was smiling all the time. Such a gentle, refined smile. Reb Yitzchak, you were right, and I was wrong."

When "there is no fear of the Lord in this place," when people live by their own rules, all the culture and refined manners mean nothing. It was true in Gerar. It was true in Germany. It is true everywhere.

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