

# PARSHAS VAYERA

*by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari*

Abarbanel raises 72 questions on this parshah but we will only address 5 of them, that will show both how he differs from almost all the classical commentators and remains true to his concept of the discerning intellect as the distinguishing factor of Mankind and how through the revealed Torah, this achieves perfection in the Jewish People.

*"And Sarah laughed within herself.....And the Lord said, 'Why is it that Sarah laughed?' (18:12-13). Why did Hashem criticize Sarah for laughing? After all, He did not rebuke Avraham, whose reaction at the promise of a son was similar (17:17).*

Hashem's visit to Avraham, with which the parshah opens, is seen by many to teach us the importance of Hachnashat Orchim or of Bikur Cholim whereas Abarbanel sees it as coming to tell him about the forthcoming destruction of Sodom as a warning to his descendants that the same fate awaits them if they will imitate the evil of Sodom. The timing of the visit was appropriate to Avraham's new spiritual status achieved by his readiness to accept through the milah the subjection of all his physical and material desires and needs to the will of Hashem. Following the Rambam, he sees the former appearances of G-d, specific to certain times and places as being on a lower level than this one and those following, since they come suddenly, spontaneously and even when he is recovering his health, seated in the front of his tent in the heat of the day. This elevated spiritual status leads to Avraham's understanding of the 3 visitors as important and spiritually significant personages, rather than the assorted types- idolaters, Bedouin, merchants, soldiers etc- envisaged by the midrash. This would logically explain Avraham's great efforts, care and expense as befits royalty, in their reception.

Sarah laughed at their promise that she would give birth and that may be incorrectly understood as a lack of faith in Hashem's ability. However, she saw it merely as ridiculous. Surely it was only imagination to believe that she who had ceased to be after the manner of women could give birth, since that was a prerequisite in nature for birth? Could she and her husband who were both old have a child; she who no longer had edna, which Abarbanel explains as sexual pleasure and Avraham who since he is old no longer had sexual desire without which birth cannot take place, although he had the sexual ability as witness his having sons even some 40 years later. Thus Abarbanel avoids the ethical danger of 'ameshanim mitoch darchei shalom' arising from that explanation of Hashem's substitution of 'vani zakanti'. Her sin lay in that this was the second time she heard this news. It is true that Avraham had also laughed but that was at the first time he heard it, whereas she had prior

to the visit of the angels, heard it together with the commandment of the mila from Avraham.

*"I will go down now and see whether they have done according to the cry ... and I shall know" (18:21).*

Abarbanel dismisses the various attempts to see in this verse references to specific acts that have to be investigated and rather sees in it the question of G-d's knowledge. How to reconcile His All Knowing even of the future with 'going down' and only then knowing? First he explains and accepts the Rambam's attitude; Hashem's knowledge is radically and intrinsically different from human knowledge even though we speak of both in the same terms, that it is part of Him and not something deduced or learnt and does not require external confirmation, so that He has absolute knowledge even of the hidden, the future and the changeable. The verse uses 'go down' in the sense of the *hanivrah* appearing on a special object or place as for instance, - "the Lord descended on it [Sinai] in fire" or the Lord descended in the cloud (Shmot 34: 5), or to show the identification and connection of G-d with a person as in the case of Yaakov, "I will go down with you to Egypt" (Ber.46:4). As to the word 'eida' in this sense he sees it not as knowing but rather referring to G-d's might and punishment as with Gideon's whipping of the men of Sukkot - *vayadah et anshei Sukkot* "(Shoftim 8:16). Alternatively, the seeing and knowing in the verse apply to the angels who were sent to Sodom, as to whether the evil laws forbidding aid to the poor or strangers, would be implemented.

*"The people Sodom were wicked and sinners" (Ber. 12:13).*

It is necessary to discuss the verse in Lech Lecha, here since it is essential to understanding why the destruction of Sodom mentioned in our parshah was necessary. We know that they were especially evil since unlike other nations they legalized evil as communal policy, not just practiced it as individuals; we are also familiar with the mishnah that describes one who says, "Mine is mine and yours is yours" as being of Sodom. (Avot, chapter 5, mishnah 10). Ramban teaches that although they were no worse than other nations, the presence of their sin and evil in the Land promised as the inheritance of the Holy Nation and having a holiness of its own, made their continued existence impossible. All these were known to Abarbanel and he comes to add a new insight. A sinner is a person who does wrong because of his lust and desire but not while his intelligence is in control. So they are capable of understanding the wrong they have done; so they are capable of accepting the importance of teshuva and its possibility. However, an evil one is guided by the agreement of both his lusts and his intelligence, so that a rasha never regrets the acts and can therefore never be cured. That is the difference between Sodom and the people of Giveah (Shoftim 20); the latter acted only in momentarily lust and desire, without a reasoned and logical process that made their evil act public policy.

*"Cast out this bondswoman and her son; for he will not be heir together with my son, with Yitschak" (21:10).*

Like the Ramban and most of the classical commentators, Abarbanel sees the motive for her

demand to be the question of Yitschak being the sole inheritor of the Abrahamic promise of the Chosen People and of the Chosen Land. Not only is there no reference to any fault or shortcoming on the part of Ishmael but there is only praise and appreciation for his spiritual greatness befitting the son of Avraham; "Also of the son of the bondswoman will I make a nation for he is your seed " (21:13). Sarah demands the removal of both mother and son not because of any wrong on their part but because the inheritance is indivisible. It would be insufficient to only send Ishmael away with gifts as indeed Avraham did to the sons of the concubines that include Ishmael. If his mother remained as a legal and legitimate wife equal to Sarah while Ishmael left, then there was always the possibility that her son would return after the death of Avraham as did many sons of great people, who had left home only to return when the father died. So even if Avraham was sorry both because of his love for Ishmael and for Hagar, Hashem told him to listen to Sarah because his seed was to be called on Yitschak, who would inherit him.

*"And offer him as a burnt offering" (22:2)*

The purpose of the Akeida was not so that Hashem could know the extent or certainty of Avraham's faith in Him. After all there is nothing that is outside of His knowledge. However, the nisayon that the text talks of is not derived from *âto test'* but rather from *ânes'* ie a standard, for the awesome and great action of Avraham at His command, has indeed become a wonderful and significant flag for all nations. Indeed all the acts that were an introduction to the Akeidah- , the miraculous birth of Yitschak following the milah, Avimelech's request that the sons of Avraham should not dispossess him and the sending away of Yismael his son- have all been a lesson for the world which has indeed studied and considered them; all of them to the honor and glory of Hashem.

Since there were no witnesses to that action and the only evidence are the words of the Torah, this is the glory of Hashem that nations accept it and the words of His prophets as the truth, as though they witnessed them with their own eyes. [To this day the Tanach remains the world's best-seller]. Men can and have learnt from Avraham how to have great love and devotion for His ways and how to desire to cleave to Him in sincerity and intelligently.

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