

TAKE A FRESH LOOK

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Vayera

Take a Fresh Look

R' Bachya ben Yosef ibn Pekuda z"l (Spain; 11th century) writes: Reconsider all you have known since your youth and the beginning of your education about G-d and His Torah, about the words of the earlier generations, the riddles of the Sages, and the prayers, for these subtle matters are not the same to one whose understanding is immature [i.e., a youth] as they are to one whose understanding is mature.

Therefore, don't be content with the images you have in your mind from the beginning of your studies. Rather, when your mind has matured, begin again to study the Torah of Elokim and the books of the Prophets. Learn them like someone who is first learning to read, and accustom yourself to explain them, to elaborate upon their allusions, and to look carefully at their wording and phraseology. Also, recognize which statements are meant to be understood straightforwardly (peshat), and which are not meant to be understood that way. . . If you do this, you will see the secrets of the Torah and the secrets of the Prophets and Sages in way that is impossible if you continue to learn the way you learned as a child. (Chovot Ha'levavot: Sha'ar Cheshbon Ha'nefesh ch.3)

R' Isaac Sher z"l (1875-1952) applies these words to studying the Book of Bereishit: One learns Sefer Bereishit as a child and grasps it on a childish level. This forms his understanding of the Patriarchs and their deeds. The typical person doesn't thereafter re-examine his understanding of these "stories" as the years pass.

He continues: As a result, we are unable with our limited perspective to understand the Torah's stories and to learn about the deeds of the Patriarchs. We don't appreciate their depth. Worse yet, some of their deeds appear to us to have been sins, and we have the nerve to say, "After all, there is no tzaddik who is perfect." This is wrong! Rather, we must say, "When will my deeds reach the level of the Patriarchs' deeds?!" (Lekket Sichot Mussar Vol. I p.37)

"Avraham arose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before Hashem." (19:27)

The Gemara (Berachot 6b) derives from this verse that Avraham Avinu had a makom kavua / set place for prayer. The sefer Gvul Binyamin asks: How does this verse teach that Avraham Avinu had a makom kavua for prayer? It would seem that he merely returned to the place where he had prayed for Sdom in order to see what the city's fate was.

He answers: This verse is out of place, since the verses that follow return to describing Lot's escape from Sdom. Why didn't the Torah finish that episode first? It must have wanted to call to our attention to something special about the place where Avraham prayed. Moreover, the verse should have said, "the place where he had prayed before Hashem." By using the word "stood," the Torah implies that he stood there regularly. (Quoted in Asefat Zekeinim: Berachot 6b)

"Avraham called the name of his son who was born to him -- whom Sarah had borne him -- 'Yitzchak'." (21:3)

In last week's parashah (17:19), we read that Hashem commanded Avraham to give his son this name. R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania) asks: Why did Hashem give names to Yitzchak (Bereishit 17:19) and Yaakov (25:26; see Rashi z"l), but in Avraham's case, He merely added one letter to the name his parents gave him?

R' Chaver explains: We read in Parashat Bereishit, as explained by our Sages, that Adam used his wisdom to recognize the inherent characteristics of every creature and name it accordingly. Similarly, G-d inspires parents to give their child a name that reflects his qualities. That is true, however, only when the child has a natural existence. Yitzchak and Yaakov were both born to parents who were naturally barren. And, just as their births required direct Divine intervention, so did their names. In contrast, Avraham's birth was natural; therefore, the name given him by his parents was adequate. Later, when a minor "adjustment" was required, that came from Hashem. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Yad Mitzrayim: Potei'ach Yad)

"Sarah said, 'G-d has made laughter for me; whoever hears will laugh for me'." (21:6)

Rashi z"l explains: "Many barren women were remembered with her."

R' Moshe ben R' Nachman Kosover z"l (18th century) asks: If many barren women gave birth on the same day as Sarah, then how was anyone to know that it was in her merit? Perhaps *she* gave birth in the merit of one of the other barren women.

The verse does not mean that many barren women gave birth on that particular day. Rather, it is teaching that whenever a previously barren woman gives birth, it is an extension of the miracle that occurred to Sarah. (Quoted in B'lvavi Mishkan Evneh: Chanukah p.2)

"He planted an eshel in Beer Sheva, and there he proclaimed the Name of Hashem, Elokim of the Universe." (21:33)

Rashi z"l quotes the Gemara (Sotah 10b) which describes the eshel--according to one interpretation, a type of tree--as the center of Avraham's chessed and kiruv / outreach activities. There he would offer travelers food and then teach them to thank G-d for what they had received.

R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l (Yerushalayim; 1910-1995) observes: Surely, Avraham engaged in these activities for decades, yet the Torah only hints at them in passing. In contrast, the visit of the angels at the beginning of our parashah was a one-time event, yet the Torah describes it in detail. Moreover, every action that Avraham did for the angels made an impression on the future (see, for example, Rashi to 18:14). Why?

R' Auerbach explains: Avraham's kindness for the angels was performed when he was weak from his brit milah, when every movement required tremendous effort. A mitzvah performed under such circumstances is far more beloved to Hashem than a mitzvah performed over and over without this level of effort. (Quoted in Halichot Shlomo: Moa'dim II p.287)

"Then Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father and said, 'Father--' He said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?'" (22:7)

R' Eliezer Ashkenazi z"l (1512-1585) writes: Yitzchak's question was the question of a wise son. He asked: "You have brought fire and wood even though you could have found wood that was hefker / ownerless and started your own fire, yet you did not bring a sheep, though you are unlikely to find a hefker sheep. Why?" This is a question that has a logical premise and which seeks to understand the details. Similarly, the wise son of the Haggadah asks: "I know there are laws. Please explain them to me."

Esav exemplifies the wicked son, who poses his question as a challenge. Esav asked (Bereishit 33:8), "'Why are all these possessions yours?' Similarly, the wicked son asks, "What is this service to you?"

Yaakov is called a "tahm" / innocent person (25:27). The tahm asks: "What is this?" Similarly, Yaakov asked simply (29:25), "What is this you have done to me?" Finally, Yishmael is the son who doesn't know how to ask. Indeed, he has no speaking part in the Torah.

We say in the Haggadah: "Blessed is G-d, blessed is He. Blessed is the One who gave Torah to His nation Yisrael, blessed is He. The Torah spoke of four sons." Why are we praising G-d? Because, writes R' Ashkenazi, the Torah can be interpreted on many levels such that it provides answers suitable for all types of children. (Ma'asei Hashem: Ma'asei Mitzrayim p.24d)

Memories of Yerushalayim

The following is a letter that R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270) wrote to his son Nachman:

May Hashem bless you my son, Nachman; may you see the good of Yerushalayim [paraphrasing Tehilim 128:5]; may you see the children of your children [ibid. verse 6]; and may your table be like the table of Avraham Avinu [see Bava Metzia 86b].

I am writing this letter to you from Yerushalayim. Praise and thanks to the Rock of my salvation--I merited to arrive here in peace on the 9th of Elul and I remained here until the day after Yom Kippur. I am headed to Chevron, the city where the Patriarchs are buried, to pray at their graves and to prepare a burial place for myself, with G-d's help. [Ramban's actual burial place is unknown.]

What can I tell you about the Land? Its state of abandonment is great, and it is very desolate. In general, the holier a place is, the more desolate it is--Yerushalayim most of all, Yehuda more than the Galil. Despite its destruction, it is very good. There are approximately 2,000 inhabitants. . . There are no Jews among them because, since the Tatar invasion [in 1260], they have fled or been killed. The exception is two brothers who are painters. They buy paint from the ruler. Up to a minyan of people gather in their house on Shabbat. I encouraged them and we found a ruined house with marble columns and a beautiful dome, and we took it for a shul, for the city is hefker / ownerless and lawless, and anyone who wants to lay claim to property may do so. We donated money to rebuild the shul and we have begun to send to Shechem for sifrei Torah that used to be in Yerushalayim and were spirited away to Shechem when the Tatars came. They will establish a shul there, for many men and women come to Yerushalayim regularly from Damascus and Aleppo and the provinces to see the site of the Bet Hamikdash and cry over it. May the One who allowed us to see Yerushalayim in its destruction allow us to see it rebuilt, when the Shechinah returns to it. May you, my son, and your brother and the whole house of your father, merit to see the good of Yerushalayim and the consolation of Zion.

Peace to my student R' Moshe son of Shlomo, your mother's brother. Tell him I ascended Har Ha'zeitim, which is opposite the Temple Mount, and near it--only the Valley of Yehoshafat separates them--and I read his poems with many tears.

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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