

A BINDING LIGHT

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

This week's parsha begins with Avraham recovering from the bris he gave to himself, and ends with the son he almost physically gave to G-d. But, from the moment the parsha begins, there are constant references to seeing, sight, vision, and perspective. Why? What is the message from all of this?

By the end of the parsha it is clear that one reality can appear differently to many people, depending upon each person's perspective in life. For example, the people of S'dom were punished with blindness for seeing only with their eyes and not with their mind's eye. For looking back towards S'dom while fleeing, Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt. Because Lot's warning to his sons-in-law was "a joke in their eyes," they suffered the same destruction as the rest of the people of S'dom.

Later in the parsha, Avraham sojourned with the Philistines. When the people of the city asked about his wife Sarah, he told them that she was his sister, fearing that they would kill him to take her. The king, Avimelech, did take Sarah, and was therefore Divinely punished with a painful sickness. He was then told by G-d that Sarah was Avraham's wife, not his sister. A harried and suffering Avimelech asked Avraham,

"What did you see that made you act this way, calling your wife Sarah your sister?"

Avraham answered, I saw that "there was no fear of G-d here."

In Hebrew, the word for fear is the same word as seeing.

How did Avraham see that they were lacking fear of G-d? Because, says Rashi, the Philistines were more interested in Sarah than in doing chesed for strangers. As Avraham understood only too well, one's propensity for chesed is a clear measure of one's understanding of human potential, and of the purpose of creation. A nation that does chesed is a nation that is connected to the deeper meaning in life, to G-dliness. This, Avraham saw, was not the Philistine people.

After all, why was Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt for looking back at S'dom? Answers Rashi, because when Lot was doing chesed for the three strangers (angels sent by G-d to overturn S'dom and save Lot, though he did not know this at the time), he asked his wife for some salt for them. She answered,

"Do you intend to introduce this evil custom here as well?"

The salt she detested sharing became the symbol of her own limited outlook on giving.

At the end of the parsha, when G-d tests Avraham the tenth and final time, He commands him to bring Yitzchak up as an offering. He tells him to bring Yitzchak to the place that will be revealed along the way. Sure enough, on the third day of his journey, Avraham "lifted his eyes" and saw the Divine sign: a mountain encompassed with fire from earth to heaven and the Clouds of Glory hovering above it.

The midrash says that when Avraham asked Yitzchak what he saw in the distance, he answered, "The Divine Presence." However, when he asked Yishmael and Eliezer who accompanied them what they saw, they answered, "Nothing." This, Avraham understood, was the Divine sign that only he and Yitzchak were to continue on from that point.

The method G-d uses to relate to His creatures is dependent upon their capacity to relate to Him. If a person rises to a high spiritual level, then G-d communicates with him more directly. The highest level was the prophecy of Moshe, who spoke directly to G-d while in a conscious state. In other words, the more one fulfills his potential and becomes like G-d, the closer his relationship will be to G-d.

What about a person who lives with a lesser spiritual awareness? G-d communicates with him through more natural means (which makes belief in G-d more difficult and belief in nature more comfortable). When Eliezer and Yishmael were denied a direct vision of the Divine Presence, it was clear that they were not on a great enough spiritual level, and therefore Avraham had no choice but to leave them behind with the donkey.

Judaism is different from all other aspects of life because its vision of life, G-d, and purpose are different. Torah is like a pair of glasses, except that when you look "through" it, you see into a whole different reality, a spiritual reality, one of miracles and of higher purpose. Torah provides the axioms of truth that allows one to build the proper intellectual and spiritual framework with which to see the hand of G-d, even in nature.

That is why without Torah, and all its sections (the Oral Law, etc.), it is next to impossible to see how G-d orchestrates His world through nature. Without such a vision, one only sees nature, and is bound by its laws, just like the proverbial "donkey," the symbol of a completely "natural" existence.

Shabbos Day:

As the episode of the Akeida reveals, it is our assumptions that make what is obvious to heaven, not so obvious to us.

The story of the Akeida is one of the most dramatic and moving in the entire Torah. Avraham and Sarah had waited for decades to have a child. By the time Avraham was ninety-nine years old, and Sarah eighty-nine years old, their dream of a child seemed nothing but a lost memory. Therefore, it is perfectly understandable that they felt unsurpassed joy when, the following year Sarah gave birth to Yitzchak, beginning the fulfillment of the promise about Avraham's offspring.

However, even before Yitzchak could produce his own offspring, G-d commanded Avraham:

"Please, take your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzchak, and go to the land of Moriah. Bring him up there as an offering ..." (Bereishis 22:2)

The same Yitzchak, who was promised to be the ancestral stepping stone to nationhood, was to be slaughtered. But how could that be? Had Yitzchak already married and fathered a son, then the Akeida would not have created a significant intellectual problem. For "G-d gives, and G-d takes," and after having fulfilled His previous promise of a son who would produce descendants for Avraham, he could have wanted Yitzchak back.

However, G-d, seemingly, was asking for Yitzchak back before the promise of descendants could be fulfilled. Had G-d changed His mind? Assumption Number One says that G-d does not change His mind. Did G-d intend for Yitzchak to live after the Akeida? Assumption Number Two says that G-d intended for Yitzchak to be slaughtered on the altar.

It was a contradiction. Or maybe, it was a paradox.

The midrash says that the satan played up this point. First he appeared as a man who questioned Avraham, asking him how he could offer a human sacrifice to a G-d he had previously said abhorred human sacrifices. Wasn't he being hypocritical? Still, Avraham persisted-the will of G-d was the will of G-d.

Later, the midrash continues, the satan appeared in the form of a river in the path of Avraham and Yitzchak. But they were like steel in their resolve to carry out the command of G-d. Avraham waded into the water until he was neck-deep, at which point Avraham cried out to G-d, "I've gone as far as I can go! If you wish me to carry out Your command, then please remove this river." The river disappeared. Powerless to interfere anymore, the satan, too, vanished.

The water rising to the neck of Avraham may have symbolized Avraham's inability to completely grasp the ways of G-d (by the way it rose up to his head, as if to say, his intellect alone would not be enough to save him). The satan's question was a good one, but Avraham's assumption was stronger: "G-d is good, G-d is just, and all that G-d does is for the best. Perhaps one day we'll all merit to see and understand how this is true."

Avraham's plea for Divine assistance symbolized his willingness to fulfill G-d's command, even when his own intellect could not comprehend the intent of G-d. With such a commitment, the Satan-intellectual doubt-was powerless to deter Avraham from completing his mission.

On top of the mountain, however, at the moment of truth when Avraham was about to carry out the deed, the paradox was finally resolved, and his own faulty assumption was revealed:

[The angel] said [on behalf of G-d], "Don't stretch out your hand to the young man-don't even blemish him, for now I know that you fear G-d and that you would not deny your son, your only one, to Me." (Bereishis 22:12)

Did G-d change indeed His mind? As we said before, G-d does not change His mind. Then how could G-d first command Avraham to bring Yitzchak up as an offering, and then tell him to bring him back down again alive? That was exactly the point, exactly the missing information and exactly the assumption G-d knew Avraham would make.

G-d never intended that Avraham should slaughter Yitzchak, as the verse says:

"Bring him up as an offering on the altar ..."

Bring him up as an offering, yes, but who ever said anything about actually slaughtering him? But doesn't bringing Yitzchak up as an offering, at the very least, imply slaughter him too?

It can, but it doesn't necessarily have to, and in this case, it didn't. However, it was Avraham's assumption that it did that made the test a test. And the opportunity was there to prove his loyalty to G-d. Just as Avraham had predicted, after all the choices had been made, the missing information was revealed, and the faulty assumptions were exposed. This is why he named the place of the Akeida, the future Temple mount, "G-d will be seen."

For all of us too, when the time is right, G-d will fill in the intellectual gaps that Amalek and the yetzer hara came to create, and everything, yes everything, will then become crystal clear.

The only question a person will have to ask himself then is,

"How did I deal with the paradox? Did I take it at face value? Did I check out my assumptions and consider possibilities I did not see? Did I seek out the hidden truth and build my intellectual world upon it? Or did I capitulate to the yetzer hara, succumb to the Amaleks of history (the Hamans, the Hitlers, the Stalins, etc...) and let doubt fester and infect my point of view?"

It is a question that G-d will eventually answer for us. But why wait until then? If we answer the question now, then we will allow ourselves time to become strong in our faith, and fulfill ourselves and the purpose of creation.

Seudos Shlishi:

S'dom was evil. S'dom was so evil that G-d went out of His way to destroy that city, in spite of the fact that He prefers to the evil to repent and avoid Divine wrath. They must have harbored the worst thieves, murderers, adulterers, etc. Why else would G-d have seen fit to so obliterate them, hitting them with what must have equaled an atomic explosion?

Here comes the shocker. Yes, they were evil, but unlike the generation of the Flood, they were not taken to task because they robbed, stole, or committed illicit relationships. The mishnah in Pirke Avos explains what was at the base of S'dom's rotten heart:

There are four human traits: One who says, "What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours." That is the average person; some say that is the trait of S'dom. (Pirke Avos 5:10)

Wait a second: what's wrong with "what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours"! That sounds fair! If I believed that what's mine is mine and what's yours is mine, then that would be evil, like the mishnah says. But claiming my rightful property, and abstaining from your rightful property seems like the moral thing to do ...

... That is, until the mishnah states that it is the ultimate trait to say, "What's mine is yours, and what's yours is yours."

Even the biggest disbeliever in Torah knows to distance himself from S'dom. He may not believe that such a place ever existed, or that it suffered Divine destruction, but he knows that, at least conceptually, S'dom was a highly immoral place. It would not be so acceptable in most circles to say, "Yea, I could probably live in S'dom if it was still around today."

Yet, what many people don't know, including those who do believe S'dom existed and was punished directly by G-d is that, S'dom may be alive and well, and destroying the moral fabric of society. Justice is crucial, and fair is fair, but, as Dovid HaMelech wrote in Tehillim, "A world of chesed you have created ..." and giving is the name of the game.

Melave Malkah:

Then he said, "I will return to you this time [next year], and by that time Sarah your wife will have a son." Sarah heard this by the entrance to the tent, behind him. Avraham and Sarah were old,

advanced in age, and the way of women had ceased from Sarah. Therefore, Sarah laughed to herself saying, "After I have grown old, can I have [such] pleasure, when my husband is old?" God said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed give birth, being so old?' Is anything too wondrous for God? At the appointed time I will return to you, in this season, and Sarah will have a son." (Bereishis 18:10)

The difference between sarcasm and cynicism is as great as the difference between B'nei Yisroel and Amalek: the former accepts a better reality, but questions the present reality; the latter denies the possibility of a better reality, and mocks the present one. Sarcasm may not be pleasant, but only cynics are the "parasites of society."

On a far less dramatic level, perhaps this was the difference between Avraham's laugh when Hashem announced the future birth of Yitzchak (Bereishis 17:17), and Sarah's laugh when she herself found out about the foretold miraculous birth in her old age (Bereishis 18:12). Avraham's laugh went uncriticized by G-d, whereas Sarah was not only berated for her laughter, but held accountable for it (according to Sefer Chasidim, this is why she was made aware of the Akeida at the time it was occurring, which caused her soul to leave her).

As the possuk states, when Avraham laughed, he had laughed "out loud," and "thought to himself"; Sarah laughed "within herself," and "thought out loud"-an expression of cynicism. For, to laugh out loud is to share one's sense of the absurdity of reality, but not a disbelief in its real occurrence. However, laughing to oneself indicates an inner doubt in the possibility of the absurd, a quiet mock of the unbelievable.

This is why Sarah could deny the accusation of laughter (Bereishis 18:15), because, from her point of view, she didn't laugh since an inner laugh can occur without notice, even by the person himself. However, from Hashem's point of view, even an inner laugh is definitely a laugh, perhaps the most dangerous of all. (Perhaps this is why "Yitzchak" is bound, to make the point of laughing, but in a controlled and meaningful way.)

Dealing with the paradox of life, the absurdity of our miraculous reality, is what makes B'nei Avraham unique. From Avraham and Sarah, we can learn that life isn't an issue of whether or not you laugh, but how you laugh, and when. That's why Yitzchak is named as he is, which means "will laugh," to make the point of just what kind of pure laugh we should give "birth" to, namely, the kind of laugh that results from seeing how the wonderfully impossible is in fact very possible-when G-d runs the world and gets directly involved.

This is why Dovid HaMelech wrote of the End-of-Days, after the curtain comes down on the stage of history, and the "actors" stop playing the roles, and reward and punishment is then meted out:

A song of Ascents. When G-d will return the captivity of Tzion, we will be like dreamers. Then our mouths will be filled with laughter ... (Tehillim 126)

Have a great Shabbos, and a meaningful laugh, one filled with the vision of truth ...

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