

THE AKEIDAH: HEAVEN-BOND

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d appeared to [Avraham] at the Oaks of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. (Bereishis 18:1)

As the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh points out, this was a rare appearance for G-d. Normally, the Master of the Universe makes Himself known when He has a message to communicate to someone. However, this time, The Holy One came simply to make a "sick call" to His beloved Avraham, on the third day after he performed Bris Milah.

The Torah has an interesting way of communicating sub-plots. In last week's parshah, Rashi wrote: He went on his journies ... (Bereishis 13:3)

When he returned from Egypt to Canaan he stayed at the same inns as he had stayed when he travelled to Egypt. This teaches you derech erez (good manners): one should not change his inn (Arachin 16b). (Rashi)

In the midst of fulfilling G-d's promise to make Avraham wealthy, and on his journey to personal greatness, the Torah did not miss the opportunity to convey a single character trait that most of us would have considered to be, at least in this context, unimportant. It is certainly nice to patronage the same hotel, but need we learn that here, and now? Yes, apparently.

In this week's parshah we learn about the mitzvah of bikur cholim--visiting the sick. And lest one feel it is beneath his dignity to perform this mitzvah, he should remember that G-d didn't feel that way when He visited Avraham!

"Ahhhhh," but you'll say, "visiting someone of Avraham's stature is a different story!" The Talmud begs to differ, citing that:

Greater is the miracle for a sick person than was the splitting of the sea. (Nedarim 41a)

That's the splitting of the Red Sea, which, one would have to agree was quite a spectacular miracle. No wonder we make a brochah after using the bathroom, mentioning and praising G-d for all the things that could go wrong but don't. In the words of one doctor, the question is not "Why am I sick?"

but, "Why don't I get sick more often?!"

To greater appreciate the importance of visiting the infirmed, the Talmud adds:

Whoever visits a sick person takes away one-sixtieth of his suffering. (Nedarim 39b)

Whoever visits a sick person causes him to live, but whoever does not visit a sick person causes him to die ... Whoever visits a sick person will be saved from the judgment of Gehinnom ... Whoever visits the sick should not sit upon the bed, nor even upon a bench, but he should wrap his mantle around him and sit on the ground, for the Divine Presence resides above the bed of a sick person ... (Nedarim 40a)

These are the things of which a man eats of their "fruits" in This World, while the "principle" remains for him in The World-to-Come ... Visiting the sick ... (Shabbos 127a)

However, very little emphasizes how deeply attached this act of chesed is to the Jewish neshamah than G-d Himself visiting Avraham after performing Bris Milah. There is something very godly about visiting the sick, and accepting the mitzvah of Bris Milah meant accepting responsibility to be godly. Next time you visit someone who is not well, don't think about it as just another mitzvah. Think about it as a fulfillment of the covenant made with the Master of the Universe!

Shabbos Day:

Lot left Tzoar and lived on the mountain with his two daughters. He was afraid to live in Tzoar, so he lived in a cave with his two daughters. This elder said to the younger one, "Our father is old, and there are no men in the land to marry. Let's give our father wine to drink and lie with him, and we will bear children from our father." They made their father drink wine that night, and the elder came and lay with her father. He wasn't aware when she lay down, or when she got up. The next morning the elder said to the younger, "I lay with my father last night. Let's make him drink wine again tonight, and you will come and lie with him, and we will bear children from our father." They made their father drink wine that night also, [and] the younger one lay with him. [Again] he [Lot] wasn't aware when she lay down, or when she got up. (Bereishis 19:30-35)

Rabbah bar Bar Chana said in the name of Rebi Yochanan, "Why is it written, '... The ways of G-d are straight, and the righteous walk in them, while the sinners stumble in them.' (Hoshea 14:10)? Lot and his daughters are good examples of this, for they (the daughters) intended to do a mitzvah--the righteous walk in them--but his intention was to sin--the sinners stumble in them. Maybe he also intended to do a mitzvah? Rebi Yochanan said: All such verses indicate intention of sin ... Why is there a dot over the "vav" in the word "uv'kuma" (she got up) regarding the firstborn daughter? To reveal that he (Lot) didn't know about her lying down, but he was aware of what happened when she

arose (and still he did nothing to prevent it from happening again with his younger daughter; Nazir 23a)

This wasn't the first time that Lot was given a choice of directions to follow, nor was it the first time that he chose the wrong one. In last week's parshah, Avraham also presented Lot with a choice:

An argument broke out between the herdsmen of Avram's flocks and of Lot's flocks. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were living in the land. Avram said to Lot, "Please, let no argument occur between me and you, between my herdsmen and your herdsmen. We are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right. If you go to the right, then I'll go to the left." Lot looked and saw the whole plain of the Jordan, and how it was well watered (this was before G-d destroyed Sodom and Gemorah), like a garden of G-d, like the land of Egypt as you come to Tzoar. Lot chose the whole plain of the Jordan for himself, and journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from one another. (Bereishis 13:7-11)

We know where this choice led to, and its results. After moving to S'dom, Lot was the victim of a major Canaanite war, necessitating a miraculous rescue by his uncle, Avraham. However, his troubles were far from over. Next, he was almost murdered for taking in the two visitors (who turned out to be angels), by the people of his "community." The final result of his decision to leave Avraham in last week's parshah was what occurred with his two daughters, leaving him unable to rejoin Avraham's camp even if he wanted to--which he didn't.

That, perhaps, was the worse result of all.

Avraham has been criticized for encouraging Lot to leave his camp. Some even say that for doing so, he was later forced to rescue his nephew when S'dom had been conquered by the four enemy kings. However, for someone involved in outreach, it is difficult to accept that Avraham would so easily relinquish his connection to his own nephew. Whatever happened to "outreach begins at home"?

Perhaps he didn't. Perhaps what Avraham was doing was testing Lot, or better yet, confronting him about his attitude toward truth. After all, he had spent all that time with Avraham until then, and still had failed to absorb some of the most basic messages Avraham's life and journey transmitted. It is not unlike the choice that Moshe put before the quarrelling Jewish nation, hundreds of years later:

"How can I alone bear your troubles, your burden, and your strife? Get wise and understanding men, known among your tribes, and I will make them heads over you." And you answered me, "What you have said is good to do." (Devarim 1:12)

"You immediately decided the matter for yourselves. You should have said, 'Our teacher, Moshe! Who is it better to learn from, you or your students ... Not from you, who have worked so hard over it?' But I know what you were thinking, 'Many judges will be appointed over us ... If one of them does not recognize us, we will bring him a gift and he will show us favor.'"" (Rashi)

Hence, what appeared in Parashas Yisro to be an option was later revealed in Parashas Devarim to be a test; a test of loyalty, a test of strength of character, a test of self-sacrifice for truth. For Lot it had been the same type of situation. Lot, in last week's parshah, heard Avraham give him a choice, but as Lot's daughters revealed in this week's parshah, Avraham had given him a test, and sadly, Lot didn't see it and therefore failed.

This is the deeper meaning of the above posuk,

'... The ways of G-d are straight, and the righteous walk in them, while the sinners stumble in them.'
(Hoshea 14:10)

Tricky, perhaps, but straight. They are designed to help us take stock of who we are, of where we are, and where we are heading in order to help us constantly work on self-perfection. The honest, growth-oriented person sees options, but views them also as tests, as a function of Divine Providence designed to facilitate spiritual self-growth. Such a person "walks in them"--a true "lech-lecha." However, the fool and sinner only see options, and very often makes choices that in the end cause them to stumble, the ramifications of which, as we see from Lot, are disastrous and often irreversible.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she bore for Avraham, scoffing. She told Abraham, "Banish that maidservant and her son! The son of that maidservant shall not inherit with my son, Yitzchak." Avraham was very concerned regarding his son [Yishmael]. G-d told Abraham, "Do not be bothered because of the boy and your maidservant. Everything that Sarah tells you, listen to her, because through Yitzchak will your seed be called. However, the son of the maidservant I will also make into a nation since he is your offspring." (Bereishis 21:9-13)

The Torah testifies to the fact that Yishmael is a son of Avraham, and in that merit he too will father a large people. However, as the Talmud points out:

Mishnah: Someone who swears not to benefit from the seed of Avraham cannot do so from a Yisroel, but can from non-Jews. Talmud: What about Yishmael [who was also a "seed of Avraham"]? [No, the verse says,] "because through Yitzchak will your seed be called." What about Eisav [who was later born from Yitzchak]? [No, because the Torah says] "b'Yitzchak," through Yitzchak, and not all that comes from Yitzchak. (Nedarim 31a)

Hence, the Talmud cites the technical reasons to exclude the descendants of both Yishmael and Eisav from being called the "seed of Avraham." However, neither the Torah or the Talmud explains the reason for the exclusions (though in the case of Eisav it is clear that his personal choice of direction in life drove him living a Jewish life).

What about Yishmael? There it seems to be a matter of who the mother was. Hagar for all the trouble she caused her mistress in this week's parshah was still quite a righteous woman. As Rashi points out, she left her royal Egyptian lifestyle to be a simple concubine for the righteous Avraham. In fact, in next week's parshah, after Sarah dies, Avraham takes Hagar back as a wife. She must have been a very special person in her own right to merit this.

However, a fundamental difference between Sarah and Hagar lies not on the level of the visible, but on the level of the invisible, that is, on the level of the soul. According to the book, Seder HaDoros, Avraham inherited the Nefesh of Adam HaRishon, while Sarah was the reincarnation of Chava. Theirs was a match truly made in Heaven, for they were brought together to begin serious work on the rectification of the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

This is why only Avraham with Sarah could continue his work into the next generation, and pass it on to the coming generations as well. There is no question that Hagar had a special soul as well, and that she played some important role in the history of mankind. But only a Sarah could provide the true opportunity to give rise to a Yitzchak, and the complete rectification of mankind.

Melave Malkah:

On the third day, Avraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. (Bereishis 22:4)

As the Torah informed us, Avraham was not told ahead of time the exact location to perform the Akeidah, and as the Midrash explains, it was because that He saw the Divine Presence hovering over the mountain that he knew he had arrived at the desired location to fulfill his tenth and final test. What he saw "in the distance" was the miracle taking place above Har HaMoriah.

However, the Zohar adds another dimension to this verse:

Why does it say "On the third day, Avraham looked up and saw the place in the distance."? Because it said that "through Yitzchak would be called his seed," which referred to Ya'akov who would come from him. This is the meaning of "On the third day, Avraham looked up and saw the place in the distance" just as it says, "From the distance G-d appeared to me" (Yirmiyahu 31:3). "[He] saw the place ..." This refers to Ya'akov ... He saw that Ya'akov would eventually come from him ... "In the distance" That is, in the future, but not at that time. (Zohar 1:21a)

However, if this is so, then it poses a philosophical dilemma: If Avraham was party to a prophecy before actually carrying out the Akeidah that Yitzchak would father Ya'akov, then what was the test of the Akeidah? He already knew that Yitzchak would survive somehow!

The truth is, the Zohar asks this question itself, and answers that this only served to strengthen the paradox that Avraham was struggling with. Yitzchak was simultaneously the seed from which the

House of Avraham was to be built, and yet, he was to be bound and sacrificed to G-d. Perhaps the first part was no longer going to be true, and instead, Yitzchak was meant to die?

However, once Avraham saw Ya'akov in the future, and he still believed that Yitzchak was to be offered up to G-d as requested, then he was forced to accept that G-d's original promise was still in effect, even though He commanded Avraham to bring Yitzchak up as a sacrifice. Yet, says the Zohar, Avraham did not think twice about it, and instead waited to see how the events would unfold. He felt intellectually and spiritually "bound" to do so, and for this reason he became Heaven-bound.

That was the true test of the Akeidah, and that's what Avraham passed with flying colors, it is this that he passed on through Yitzchak on to all of his descendants to be. This is especially important for us to know, for as the days of Moshiach quickly approach, "they" say that the paradoxes of life will increase until the test of faith will be almost unbearable for the believing Jew. Remembering Avraham and the test of the Akeidah will be an important "rope" to hang on to while the winds of history whip up quite an intellectual and emotional storm.

As a final note, I would like to mention that in Parashas Bereishis, I discussed the "Fine Tuning" of the constants of physics. I failed to mention that the material quoted was from a Jewish outreach web site entitled, "The 2001 Principle" at <http://www.jencom/2001> (click on US MIRROR SITE link on home page). Being involved in outreach, I am aware of the tremendous impact this site is having, especially on previous unaffiliated Jewish professionals working in important positions in American society. In the words of many who have visited this site, "It is a must!" Anyone wishing to receive supplementary hard material, which can be used as a "Dialogue Opener" can do so free-of-charge upon request from the site. This site, like the book before it, is another example of how modern technology can be used to reveal the hand of G-d in every day life.

Have a great Shabbos,

Pinchas Winston
