SIMCHAS TORAH : MY SON, THE STRANGER

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"...his brothers he did not give recognition and his children he did not know..."(33:9)

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos records that Avraham was subjected to ten trials of faith.1 According to most of the commentaries, the final and most difficult of these trials was the "Akeida", the binding of his son Yitzchak. [2] Avraham was called upon to offer his beloved son as a sacrifice to his Creator. Although his actions reflected a monumental expression of faith, they were not, by any means, unprecedented. Throughout the ages, until present day, many religions have required of its adherents to prove their faith by sacrificing their kin. In this week's parsha we find that the tribe of Levi slaughtered its family members who partook in the sin of the golden calf. What then, is the unequalled feat accomplished by our Patriarch Avraham?

Analyzing the juxtaposition of the verses in this week's parsha sheds light upon the aforementioned question. The verse states that Levi showed no favoritism to his father and mother, no recognition of his brothers and did not know who his children were. Rashi explains that this refers to the response shown by the tribe of Levi when Moshe summoned assistance to eradicate those individuals who worshipped the golden calf; without regard to family ties, the tribe of Levi slew the idolaters.[3] The verse then states that Levi preserved Hashem's covenant.[4] Rashi explains that this is a reference to "Bris Milah" - "circumcision".[5] The Talmud teaches that for the entire duration of their stay in the desert, Bnei Yisroel abstained from performing circumcision for they feared that the climatic conditions in the desert would not allow the wounds to heal.5 The only tribe that continued to circumcise their children was the Levites. Hence, they preserved the covenant. The verse immediately following begins "Yoru mishpatecha l'Yaakov" - "They shall be the teachers of the Law and dispensers of justice to Yaakov".[6] Rashi comments "for they have shown their worthiness".[7] What is the connection between the three above- mentioned concepts, Levi's actions after the golden calf, their commitment to circumcise their children and their becoming teachers and judges?

The Ohr HaChaim explains that by displaying steadfastness and objectivity in the performance of their duty without bias, they proved that they were worthy of being the teachers and judges of Bnei Yisroel.[8] The Torah is praising Levi for their ability to disconnect themselves from those emotional frailties which blur an individual's ability to make dispassionate and impartial decisions. It is this same quality which allowed them to overcome the natural fear that a parent may have when a child

undergoes circumcision. By emotionally detaching themselves from their children they were able to behave in a manner which would otherwise have been impossible for a parent. This is the psychological technique employed by those adherents to other religions when sacrificing their children.

The Torah stresses that when Avraham was called upon to sacrifice his child, his compliance was not accompanied by any indication of his severing that relationship; on the contrary, he professed his great love for Yitzchak.9 The greatness of our Patriarch is manifest in his ability to perform an act which contraverted the very nature of a parent-child relationship, without emotionally detaching himself from his son. The ability to fulfill the wishes of his Creator without conflict is what make Avraham's actions unparalleled.

1.Avos 5:3 2.Avos D'Rav Nosson 33, Rashi, Rabbeinu Yonah et al. 3.33:9 4.Ibid. 5.Yevamos 63a 6.33:10 7.Ibid. 8.33:9 9.Bereishis 22:2 See Rashi

Bereishis: Great Expectations

And Hashem made the two big luminaries, the greater luminary...and the smaller luminary..."(1:16)

Among the various prayers recited at the circumcision ceremony are blessings for the child's future well-being. The onlookers wish for him to enter into marriage, Torah and the performance of good deeds. "Zeh hakatan gadol yihiyeh" - "this small child will be big", the statement made when naming the child, requires further elaboration. What are we blessing him with by expressing our desire that he become "gadol"?

The Vilna Gaon teaches that in order to understand the true definition of a word or expression, we should analyze the first time it is used in the Torah. The first occurrence of the contrast of the words "katan" and "gadol" is found on the fourth day of Creation, when describing the luminaries. The Torah initially refers to the sun and moon as the "me'oros hagedolim" - "big luminaries", but then the verse refers to the sun as the "me'or hagadol" - "big luminary" and the moon as the "me'or hakatan" - "small luminary". Citing the Midrash, Rashi explains that the sun and moon were originally created with equal power, but subsequently, Hashem diminished the moon's power.[1] By what standard is the Torah gauging the size of the sun and moon by initially referring to them as "gedolim" and subsequently "gadol" and "katan"?

The Midrash is teaching us that initially the sun and moon were capable of being their own source of light, but Hashem removed from the moon its capacity to produce its own light, and left it capable only of reflecting the light generated by the sun. We see therefore, the Torah defines "gadol" as one that is its own source and "katan" as one that only has the ability to reflect that which is generated by another source.

It is this very notion which we express at the circumcision ceremony; a child grows and learns from

his parents and teachers, reflecting that with which they imbue him. We wish for that child that he reach a stage in his development when he will harness all he has learned, and become a "gadol", a source that radiates his own light for others to reflect.[2]

1.1:16 2.It Has been brought to my attention that the same insight has been made by HaRav Y.D. Soleveitchik - m.s.

Simchas Torah: Dancing With The Bride

"The Torah that Moshe commanded us is a heritage to the Congregation of Jacob"(33:4)

Simchas Torah is a day in which we celebrate the Torah. Why did Chazal see fit to designate a separate day for Simchas Torah? Would not Shavuos, the day we received the Torah, be a more appropriate time for this celebration?1

The Talmud instructs a father that as soon as his child is able to speak, he should teach him. "Torah tzivah lanu Moshe morasha Kehilas Yaakov" - "The Torah that Moshe commanded us is a heritage to the Congregation of Jacob."[2] Why is this the verse selected when there are earlier verses in the Torah which convey a similar message, such as "vezos Hatorah asher sam Moshe lifnei Bnei Yisroel" - "This is the Torah that Moshe placed before Bnei Yisroel"[3]?

The last four parshios in the Torah record the events that transpired on the day of Moshe's death. A major event which ensues is the new covenant in Parshas Nitzavim. The concept of "kol Yisrael araeivim zeh bazeh" - "each Jew is a guarantor for his fellow Jew" in regard to mitzvos and aveiros, is introduced as a result of our responsibility to the covenant.[4] The general concept of a guarantor is discussed by the Talmud. The Talmud teaches that one who accepts upon himself to repay a loan should the borrower default, is required by Torah law to honor his commitment to pay.[5]

The commentaries raise the following difficulty: Legally, for a person to be liable to perform a service, there must be consideration, such as money. What is the instrument which obligates a guarantor to honor his commitment? The Ritva answers that although the guarantor does not receive money, nevertheless he receives the satisfaction that the lender is relying upon his credibility to issue the loan. This benefit serves as the instrument for the transaction in lieu of money.[6] In light of this explanation, the following difficulty arises: Why are Bnei Yisroel bound to their commitment to be guarantors? What benefit that they do not already have, are they receiving?

To begin answering the aforementioned questions, we must analyze another concept which was introduced on the day of Moshe's death. This is the concept of "lo bashamayim hee" - "Torah is no

longer in the Heavens."[7] This means that as long as Moshe was alive, he consulted with Hashem concerning all difficult Torah legislation. Since Hashem was the final arbiter for Torah legislation while Moshe was alive, Torah was still in the Heavens. However, on the day of Moshe's death, Bnei Yisroel was given unilateral authority over all Torah legislation. This is what is meant by "The Torah is no longer in the Heavens." This new authorization which Bnei Yisroel received was the instrument which obligates them to honor their commitment to be guarantors.

At Sinai, when Bnei Yisroel received the Torah, Chazal describe the relationship formed as that of bride and groom.[8] Hashem was the groom and Bnei Yisroel was the bride. On the day that Moshe died, a new relationship was formed; Bnei Yisroel were the groom and the Torah was the bride. This is alluded to in the verse, "Torah tzivah lanu Moshe morasha Kehilas Yaakov". In the word "morasha" Chazal see an allusion to the word "me'orasa" - "betrothed", i.e. the Torah that Moshe commanded us is also betrothed to us.[9] The notions that the Torah is not in the Heavens and that Torah became Bnei Yisroel's bride are one and the same. The Talmud instructs a father to begin teaching his son Torah with the verse which reflects this new relationship.

Shavuos celebrates Bnei Yisroel becoming a bride to Hashem, while Simchas Torah celebrates Bnei Yisroel becoming betrothed to the Torah. This is reflected in the customs of the day. In most Jewish communities, a representative is chosen to be the "chassan Torah", the groom to the Torah. Additionally, we dance with the Torah as a groom dances with his bride.

1.See Ramoh Ohrech Chaim 669 for source to Simchas Torah 2.See Tosefes Bracha, Zos Haberacha 3.Vaeschanan 4:44 4.See Rashi 29:28 5.Bava Basra 173b 6.Kidushin 7a 7.30:12 8.See Rashi VeZos Haberacha 33:2 9.Sanhedrin 59a

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Bereishis:Thought for Food

"Behold I have given to you all herbage yielding seed..." (1:29)

Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, the redactor of the Mishna, categorized the Oral Torah into six Orders. The titles conferred upon each of these Orders reflect the underlying theme contained within the Tractates of which the Orders are comprised. The second Order discusses all the laws that are found in connection to the holidays celebrated during the Jewish calendar year. It is therefore appropriately named "Moed" - "Designated Time". Similarly, the third Order, which deals primarily with the laws governing the interpersonal relationships between men and women is aptly titled "Nashim" - "Women". The first Order elaborates upon all the spiritual preparations that a Jew must make before he is permitted to partake of the physical benefits of this world. The first Tractate in this Order delineates the various blessings associated with different foods, and the subsequent

Tractates deal with the agricultural laws.1 With the exception of kilayim (which discusses the laws prohibiting the intermingling of seeds from different species) all of the laws are only applicable to produce and foods in their completed form. Why, then, is the first order of the Mishna called "Zera'im" - "Seeds", a word which represents the first stage of produce?

At the conclusion of creation, when Hashem instructs Adam as to the foods of which he may partake, He states that "all herbage yielding seed and every tree that has seed-yielding fruit shall be yours for food".2 Although all produce has the quality of self-perpetuation through the seeds contained within them, this notion has already been discussed on the third day of creation.3 Why, then, does Hashem repeat this characteristic in His instruction to Adam? Furthermore, in the very next verse, when the Torah records the foods from which the animal kingdom may partake, why is there no mention made of the fact that their food contains seeds as well?4

Hashem is instructing man that even though he has been granted permission to partake of the produce of this world, it is still man's responsibility to insure that his consumption does not lead to depletion of the world's resources. This message is given to Adam by Hashem stressing that all produce was created with the ability to perpetuate itself. Adam is being notified that he has access to the benefits of this world, not indiscriminate rights. This explains why the description of produce containing seeds is not mentioned in reference to the animals, for such a message can be delivered to man alone. An animal cannot be instructed to ensure that the world's resources are not depleted.

The first Order of the Mishna deals with the blessing which we are required to make prior to eating, as well as all of the agricultural mitzvos that are prerequisites for the consumption of produce. The compiler of the Mishna, Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi is delivering the same message that is found in the Torah; the message of "seeds". Even when we have performed all the requirements which permit consumption of food, we must still remember that we may only partake, and not deplete the world of its resources.

1.See Rambam's Introduction to the Mishna 2.1:29 3.1:11 4.1:30