

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Vayeira

Genesis 18:1-22:24

Torah Reading for Week of November 8-14, 2003

"Because I know him," says G-d of Abraham in a key passage in the Parshah of Vayeira, "that he will command his children and his household after him that they shall keep the way of G-d, to do *tzedakah* and justice."

Indeed, this week's Torah reading is replete with examples of Abraham's *tzedakah* (commonly translated charity but actually meaning "righteousness") — a trait which Abraham cultivated to the extent that it came to define his very identity.

The first verse of Vayeira describes a Divine revelation experienced by Abraham: "G-d revealed Himself to him by the Oaks of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day." But the Divine visit is interrupted when Abraham excuses himself from G-d's presence (!) to rush toward

three wayfarers who suddenly appear, and offer them hospitality.

He raised his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him; when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself to the ground.

And he said: "My Lord! if now I have found favor in your eyes, pass not away, I beg you, from your servant.

"Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort your hearts; after that you shall pass on—seeing that you are come to your servant..."

And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said: "Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes."

And Abraham ran to the herd, and fetched a calf tender and good, and gave it to the lad; and he hurried to prepare it. And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they ate.

Sarah Laughs

Commentary

AND G-D REVEALED HIMSELF TO HIM... AS HE SAT IN THE TENT DOOR IN THE HEAT OF THE DAY (18:1)

It was the third day from Abraham's circumcision, and G-d came to inquire after Abraham's health.

G-d drew the sun out of its sheath, so that the righteous one should not be troubled with wayfarers. Abraham sent Eliezer out [to seek travelers], but he found none. Said Abraham, "I do not believe you," and himself went out, and saw G-d standing at the door.

(Talmud, Bava Metzia 86b)

HE RAISED HIS EYES AND LOOKED, AND, LO, THREE MEN STOOD BY HIM (18:2)

Who were the three men? The angels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. Michael ("Who is like G-d?") came to bring the tidings to Sarah of Isaac's birth; Raphael ("Healing of G-d"), to heal Abraham; and Gabriel ("Might of G-d"), to overturn Sodom. But is it not written, "And there came the two angels to Sodom at evening"? Michael accompanied Gabriel to rescue Lot.

(Talmud, Bava Metzia 86b)

AND HE SAID: "MY LORD! IF NOW I HAVE FOUND FAVOR IN YOUR EYES, PASS NOT AWAY, I BEG YOU, FROM YOUR SERVANT. (18:4)

This verse has two meanings. One meaning is that Abraham is addressing the most prominent of the three guests, asking him and the others not to pass by his tent without availing themselves of his hospitality. Another meaning is that Abraham is addressing G-d, asking Him to stand by while he attends to his guests.

Said Rabbi Judah in the name of Rav: This is to teach us that taking in guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence.

(Rashi on verse; Talmud, Shevuot 35b)

FOR I KNOW HIM... (18:19)

Said the Divine Attribute of *Chessed* (love): "As long as Abraham was around, there was nothing for me to do, for he did my work in my stead."

(Sefer HaBahir)

THE WAY OF G-D, TO DO TZEDAKAH AND JUSTICE (18:19)

What is the meaning of the verse, "You shall walk after the L-rd your G-d?" Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the Divine, which is described as a "devouring fire"? But the meaning is to follow the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He.

G-d clothes the naked, as it is written: "And G-d made for Adam and

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Vayeira

Genesis 18:1-22:24

Torah Reading for Week of November 8-14, 2003

And then one of the three mystery guests makes an announcement:

"I will certainly return to you at this time next year; and, lo, your wife Sarah shall have a son."

In the previous Parshah, we read how Abraham laughed upon hearing the news that Sarah will bear him a son. Now the Torah reports that,

Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; and it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

And Sarah laughed within herself, saying: "After I am grown old shall I have my heart's desire, my lord being

old also?"

And G-d said to Abraham: "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, who am old?' Is anything too difficult for G-d? At the time appointed I will return to you, at this season, and Sarah shall have a son."

Abraham Pleads for Sodom

Abraham's guests had another mission to attend to that day: to destroy the city of Sodom and its four sister-cities, "Because the cries of [the victims of] Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous."

Abraham's love of his fellow man does not allow him to stand by silently:

Abraham confronted G-d and said: "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous persons within the city; would You also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein?"

"It behooves You not to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked... Shall the Judge of all the earth not act justly?"

Commentary

for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21); so should you, too, clothe the naked.

G-d visits the sick, as it is written: "And G-d appeared to him by the Oaks of Mamre"; so should you, too, visit the sick.

G-d comforts mourners, as it is written: "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that G-d blessed Isaac his son" (Genesis 25:11); so should you, too, comfort mourners.

G-d buries the dead, as it is written: "And He buried him in the valley" (Deuteronomy 34:6); so should you, too, bury the dead.

(Talmud, Sotah 14a)

BECAUSE THE CRY OF [THE VICTIMS OF] SODOM AND GOMORRAH IS GREAT, AND BECAUSE THEIR SIN IS VERY GRIEVOUS (18:20)

In Sodom it was decreed: "Whoever hands a piece of bread to a pauper or stranger shall be burned at stake"

Plotit the daughter of Lot was married to one of the leading citizens of Sodom. One day, she saw a pauper starving in the street, and her soul was saddened over him. What did she do? Every day, when she went to draw water from the well, she would place from all the foods of her home in her pitcher and feed the pauper. But the people of Sodom wondered, "This pauper, how is he surviving?" until the mat-

ter became known and she was taken out to be burned, and her cries rose to the Divine Throne.

(Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 25)

Our Rabbis taught: The men of Sodom were corrupted only on account of the good which G-d had lavished upon them... They said: Since there comes forth bread out of our earth, and it has the dust of gold, why should we suffer wayfarers, who come to us only to deplete our wealth? Come, let us abolish the practice of lodging travelers in our land...

If a person had rows of bricks the Sodomites came and each took one brick, saying, 'I have taken only one.' If a person spread out garlic or onions to dry, each one came and took one, saying, 'I have taken only one.'

There were four judges in Sodom: Shakrai, Shakurai, Zayyafi, and Mazle Dina. If a man assaulted his neighbor's wife and caused her to miscarry, they would say to the husband, 'Give her to him, that he make her pregnant for you.' If one cut off the ear of his neighbor's ass, they would order, 'Give it to him until it grows again.' If one wounded his neighbor they would say to the victim, 'Give him a fee for bleeding you.'

They had beds upon which travelers slept. If the guest was too long, they shortened him; if too short, they stretched him out.

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Vayeira

Genesis 18:1-22:24

Torah Reading for Week of November 8-14, 2003

Abraham continues to bargain with G-d: What if there be 45 righteous individuals in the "Cities of the Plain"? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Only when he had received G-d's promise to spare the cities if even only ten righteous ones be found, did "G-d go His way... and Abraham returned to his place."

The Destruction of the Sodom Valley

Two of the three angels (as they are now identified in the verse) proceed to Sodom: one of them went to destroy the city, and the other to rescue Abraham's nephew, Lot, who had taken up residence in the city.

And the two angels came to Sodom at evening, and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom: and Lot seeing them rose up to meet them; and he bowed himself with his face to the ground.

Lot, who had acquired something of his uncle's legendary

hospitality, invites them to his home, and feeds them matzot (unleavened bread).

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter: and they called to Lot, and said to him: "Where are the men who came in to you this night? Bring them out to us, that we may rape them."

Lot confronts the mob in an effort to defend his guests; they push past him and are about to break down the door; only the intervention of the angels, who smite the mob with blindness, disperses them.

At this point the angels reveal to Lot that G-d has sent them to destroy the evil cities of the Sodom Valley, and only he and his family will be spared.

And when the morning arose, then the angels hastened Lot, saying: "Arise, take your wife, and your two daughters, who are here; lest you be consumed in the iniquity of the city..."

And it came to pass when they had brought them outside, that he said: "Escape for your life; look not behind you, neither stay in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed."

Lot's wife violates this command, looks back to witness G-

Commentary

If a poor man happened to come there, every resident gave him a *dinar*, upon which he wrote his name, but no bread was sold to him. When he died, each came and took back his *dinar*.

A certain maiden gave some bread to a poor man, hiding it in a pitcher. When the matter becoming known, they daubed her with honey and placed her on the parapet of the wall, and the bees came and consumed her. Thus it is written: "And G-d said: 'The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah, because it is great.'"

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 108b-109a)

ABRAHAM CONFRONTED G-D AND SAID: "WOULD YOU ALSO DESTROY THE RIGHTEOUS WITH THE WICKED? (18:23)

The Zohar compares the actions of two righteous men, Noah and Abraham, when confronted with the knowledge that G-d intends to destroy their fellow human beings for their wickedness. Noah set about building an ark that would shelter the handful of righteous individuals remaining in a corrupt world. In addition, the Midrash describes how he tried to convince his generation to mend their ways and thus be saved from the Divine decree. But the Zohar faults Noah for not also praying for their sake, as Abraham did for the wicked inhabitants of Sodom.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that the fact that Noah did not *pray* for the wicked of his generation implies that, ultimately, it did not matter to him what became of them. Had he truly cared, he would not have sufficed with "doing his best" to bring them to repent, but would have implored the Almighty to repeal His decree of destruction—just as a person whose own life is in danger would never say, "Well, I did my best to save myself," and leave it at that, but would beseech G-d to help him..

In other words, Noah's efforts on behalf of others derived solely from his sense of what *he* ought to do for them, as opposed to a true concern for their well-being. This was the extent of his "love"—his own need to do the right thing.

This also explains a curious aspect of Noah's efforts to reach out to his generation. When the Flood came, Noah and his family entered the ark—alone. His 120-year campaign yielded not a single *baal teshuvah* (repentant)! Perhaps public relations was never Noah's strong point, but how are we to explain the fact that, in all this time, he failed to win over a single individual?

But in order to influence others, the Rebbe explains, one's motives must be pure; in the words of our sages, "Words that come from the heart, enter the heart." Deep down, a person will always sense

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Vayeira

Genesis 18:1-22:24

Torah Reading for Week of November 8-14, 2003

d's destruction of Sodom, and turns into a pillar of salt.

G-d rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from G-d out of heaven. And He overturned those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.

Lot, however, prevails upon the angels to spare the smallest of the five cities, Zo'ar. Lot and his two daughters go there, but, fearing that the city is enjoying only a temporary respite from G-d's wrath, they escape to the mountains and take refuge in a cave.

Abraham rose early in the morning and went to the

place where he had stood before G-d. And he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up like the smoke of a furnace.

Believing that "there is not a man left alive in the earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth," the daughters of Lot get their father drunk ("drunk as Lot") and lie with him, both becoming pregnant. Their respective sons, Moab ("from father") and Ben-Ami, father the two nations of Moab and Amon.

The Birth of Isaac

Abraham's journeys take him southward to the Negev, to Gerar in the territory controlled by Avimelech, king of the Philistines. Here Abraham and Sarah experience a replay of what happened to them in Egypt: Sarah is presented as Abraham's sister; she is taken to Avimelech's palace; a plague breaks out in the palace, and Avimelech has a dream in which he is warned "You are a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife."

Commentary

whether you truly have his interests at heart or you're filling a need of your own by seeking to change him. If your work to better your fellow stems from a desire to "do the right thing" and fulfill the mitzvah to "love your fellow as yourself," but without really caring about the result, your call will be met with scant response. The undercurrent of personal motive, be it the most laudable of personal motives, will be sensed, if only subconsciously, by those to whom you reach out, and will ultimately put them off.

Abraham, on the other hand, possessed a selfless love for his fellow man, as demonstrated by his daring intervention on behalf of the five sinful cities of the Sodom Valley. Abraham petitioned G-d on their behalf, using the strongest terms to demand of G-d that he spare these cities for the sake of the few righteous individuals they might contain. "It behooves You not to do such a thing!" he challenged G-d. "Shall the judge of the universe not act justly?!" Abraham was prepared to incur G-d's wrath upon himself for the sake of the most corrupt of sinners, giving precedence to their physical lives over his own spiritual integrity!

And because people sensed that he had their own good, and only their own good, at heart—they responded. When Abraham and Sarah left Charan for the Holy Land, they were joined by the "souls which they had made in Charan"—the community of men and women who had rallied to their cause. Sixty-five years later Abraham was able to say to his servant Eliezer: "When G-d summoned me from the house of my father, he was G-d of the heavens but not of the earth: the inhabitants of the earth did not recognize Him and His name was not referred to in the land. But now that I have made His name familiar in the mouths of His creatures, He is

G-d in both heaven and earth"

(Genesis 24:7, as per Rashi on verse.)

AND THE TWO ANGELS CAME TO SODOM AT EVENING (19:1)

Here they are called angels, whereas earlier they were termed men?

Earlier, when the Divine Presence was above them, they were men; but as soon as the Divine Presence departed from them they assumed the form of angels.

Rabbi Levi said: To Abraham, whose spiritual strength was great, they looked like men; but to Lot they appeared as angels, because his strength was feeble.

Rabbi Chunia said: Before they performed their mission they were called men; having performed their mission, they assumed the style of angels.

(Midrash Rabbah)

IN ALL THAT SARAH SAYS TO YOU, HEarken TO HER VOICE (21:12)

This teaches us that Sarah was superior to Abraham in prophecy.

(Rashi)

AND G-D HEARD THE VOICE OF THE LAD (21:17)

This teaches us that a person's prayer for himself is preferable to others praying for him, and is sooner to be accepted. (For though the verse speaks of Hagar's weeping, it tells us that it was Ishmael's cry

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Vayeira

Genesis 18:1-22:24

Torah Reading for Week of November 8-14, 2003

Sarah is returned, untouched, to Abraham with much apologies and gifts from the repentant king.

Then, exactly one year after the three angels visited Abraham and Sarah and delivered G-d's promise that a son shall be born to them (as related in Genesis 18),

G-d remembered Sarah as He had said, and G-d did to Sarah as He had spoken.

Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which G-d had spoken to him.

Commentary

which G-d heard).

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

FOR G-D HAS HEARD THE VOICE OF THE LAD WHERE HE IS (21:17)

The ministering angels hastened to indict him, exclaiming: "Sovereign of the Universe! Would You bring up a well for one who will one day slay Your children with thirst?" "What is he now?" asked G-d. "Righteous," said the angels. Said G-d: "I judge man only as he is at the moment."

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

AND HIS MOTHER TOOK HIM A WIFE OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT (21:21)

Said Rabbi Yitzchak: Throw a stick into the air, and it will fall back to its place of origin (the ground). It is written, "And she had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar" (Genesis 16:1); therefore, "his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt."

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THESE THINGS, THAT G-D DID TEST ABRAHAM (22:1)

Said Rabbi Jonathan: A potter does not examine defective vessels, because he cannot give them a single blow without breaking them. What then does he examine? Only the sound vessels, for he will not break them even with many blows. Similarly, the Holy One, blessed

The boy is named *Yitzchak* ("will laugh"), because, as Sarah declared, "G-d has made laughter for me, so that all that hear will laugh with me."

Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as G-d had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born to him.

The Torah then tells of a great feast that Abraham made "on the day that Isaac was weaned."

The Banishment of Hagar and Ishmael

Abraham already had a son, Ishmael, born 14 years earlier to Hagar, the Egyptian maid whom Sarah urged him to marry in her barren years. As had been predicted, Ishmael grows to become "a wild man—his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him." Sarah, fearing Ishmael's negative influence upon her son, urges Abraham to "Banish this maidservant and her son: for the son of this maidservant shall not be heir with my son, with Isaac."

Abraham is reluctant to do so until G-d intervenes, telling

be He, tests not the wicked but the righteous.

(Midrash Rabbah)

Isaac and Ishmael were engaged in a controversy... Said Ishmael to Isaac: "I am more beloved to G-d than you, since I was circumcised at the age of thirteen, but you were circumcised as a baby and could not refuse." Isaac retorted: "All that you gave up to G-d was three drops of blood. But lo, I am now thirty-seven years old, yet if G-d desired of me that I be slaughtered, I would not refuse." Said the Holy One, blessed be He: "This is the moment!"

(Midrash Rabbah)

Jewishness is not a matter of historical conscious, outlook, ethics, or even behavior; it is a state of being. This is the deeper significance of the debate between Ishmael and Isaac. When the Jew is circumcised on the eighth day of life, he is completely unaware of the significance of what has occurred. But this "non-experience" is precisely what the covenant of circumcision is all about. With circumcision the Jew says: I define my relationship with G-d not by what I think, feel or do, but by the fact of my Jewishness—a fact which equally applies to an infant of eight days and a sage of eighty years.

(From the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe)

AND HE SADDLED HIS DONKEY (22:3)

This is the very same donkey which Moses Rode to Egypt (cf. Exodus 4:20); and this is the very same donkey upon which the Messiah will arrive (cf. Zechariah 9:9)

(Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 25)

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Vayeira

Genesis 18:1-22:24

Torah Reading for Week of November 8-14, 2003

him: "In all that Sarah says to you, hearken to her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called."

Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Be'er-Sheva.

Their water, however, runs out quickly in the desert heat, and soon Ishmael is faint with heat and thirst; Hagar

cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went off... the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Let me not see the death of the child." And she sat over against him, and lifted up her voice, and wept.

And G-d heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of G-d called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her "What

ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for G-d has heard the voice of the lad where he is..."

And G-d opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink.

And G-d was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran: and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt.

The Covenant with Avimelech

Avimelech the king of the Philistines, who had earlier driven Abraham from his country, now comes seeking a covenant of peace with the Hebrew. "G-d is with you in all that you do," says the king; let us swear to each other that neither of us will show hostility to the other or the other's offspring.

Abraham agrees, and gives Avimelech seven sheep as a testimony to the resolution of a past controversy between them over a well that Abraham had dug. The place is thus named Be'er Sheva ("Well of the Oath" and "Well of the Seven").

Abraham establishes an *eshel* (wayside inn) at Be'er Sheva, where he "called the name of G-d, G-d of the world."

The Binding of Isaac**Commentary****AND HE BOUND ISAAC HIS SON (22:9)**

Can one bind a man thirty-seven years old without his consent?

But when Abraham made to sacrifice his son Isaac, Isaac said to him: 'Father, I am a young man and am afraid that my body may tremble through fear of the knife and I will grieve you, whereby the slaughter may be rendered unfit and this will not count as a real sacrifice; therefore bind me very firmly.'

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND AN ANGEL OF G-D CALLED TO HIM... "LAY NOT YOUR HAND UPON THE LAD, NEITHER DO ANYTHING TO HIM" (22:11-12)

The founder of Chabad Chassidism, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, once related:

In Mezeritch, it was extremely difficult to be accepted as a disciple of our master, Rabbi DovBer. There were a group of Chassidim who, having failed to merit to learn directly from our master, wanted to at least serve his pupils: to bring them water to wash their hands upon waking, to sweep the floors of the study hall, to heat the ovens during

the winter months, and so on. These were known as "the oven stokers."

One winter night, as I lay on a bench in the study hall, I overheard a conversation between three of the "oven stokers." "What was the speciality of the test of the *Akeidah*?" the first one asked. "If G-d had revealed Himself to me and commanded me to sacrifice my only son, would I not obey?"

Answering his own question, he said: "If G-d told me to sacrifice my only son, I would delay my doing so for a while, to keep him with me for a few days. Abraham's greatness lay in that 'he arose early in the morning' to immediately fulfill the divine command."

Said the second one: "If G-d told me to sacrifice my only son, I, too, would waste not a moment to carry out His command. But I would do so with a heavy heart. Abraham's greatness lay in that he went to the *Akeidah* with a heart full of joy over the opportunity to fulfill G-d's will."

Said the third: "I, too, would carry out G-d's will with joy. I think that Abraham's uniqueness lies in his reaction upon finding out that it was all a test. When G-d commanded him 'Do not touch the child, and do nothing to him,' Abraham was overjoyed—not because his only child would not die, but because he was being given the opportunity to

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Vayeira

Genesis 18:1-22:24

Torah Reading for Week of November 8-14, 2003

And it came to pass after these things, that G-d did test Abraham. And He said to him: "Abraham!"

And he said: "Here I am!"

And He said: "Please, take your son, your only son, the one whom you love, Isaac; and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of."

And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and broke up the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went to the place of which G-d had told him.

Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said to his young men: "Stay here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you."

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and the knife; and they went both of them together.

And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and said, "My

father!" and he said, "Here I am, my son."

And he said: "Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

And Abraham said: "G-d will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering, my son." And they went both of them together.

And they came to the place which G-d had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

And an angel of G-d called to him out of heaven, and said: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am!"

And he said: "Lay not your hand upon the lad, neither do anything to him: for now I know that you do fear G-d, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked; and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in place of his son.

And Abraham called the name of that place Adonai-Yireh ("G-d will be revealed"); as it is said to this day: "On the mount G-d will appear."

Vayeira concludes with report of a granddaughter born to Abraham's brother, Nachor, named Rebecca (destined to become Isaac's wife).

Commentary

carry out *another* command of G-d."

Rabbi Schneur Zalman concluded: "Do you think this was mere talk? Each of them was describing the degree of self-sacrifice he himself had attained in his service of the Almighty."

AND ABRAHAM CALLED THE NAME OF THAT PLACE ADONAI-YIREH (22:14)

Shem (the son of Noah) called it Salem, as it is written "And Melchizedek king of Salem" (Genesis 14: 18). Said the Holy One,

blessed be He: If I call it Yireh as did Abraham, then Shem, a righteous man, will resent it; while if I call it Salem as did Shem, Abraham, the righteous man, will resent it. Hence I will call it Jerusalem, including both names, Yireh Salem.

(Midrash Rabbah)

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

From the Chassidic Masters

WANT IT ALL

There's a story the Lubavitcher Rebbe liked to tell about a five year old child and a 99 year old man. The child was Rabbi Sholom DovBer Schneerson, born on the 20th of Cheshvan 5621 (1860), who served as the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe from 1882 until his passing in 1920. The 99-year old man lived 36 centuries earlier; his name was Abraham and he was the first Jew.

The story goes like this:

On the occasion of his fourth or fifth birthday, Rabbi Sholom DovBer visited his grandfather, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch. Upon entering his grandfather's room, the child burst into tears. His teacher in *cheder* had taught them that week's Torah reading, *Vayeira* (Genesis 18:1-22:24), which begins, "And G-d revealed himself to Abraham..." Why, wept the child, doesn't G-d reveal Himself to me?

Rabbi Menachem Mendel replied: "When a Jew, a *tzaddik*, realizes at the age of 99 that he must circumcise himself — that he must continue to perfect himself — he is worthy that G-d should reveal Himself to him."

The Rebbe must have told this story dozens of times. The story, followed by a discussion of the manifold meanings and lessons the Rebbe saw in it, was a regular feature of the *farbrengens* (Chassidic gatherings) he held each year on the anniversary of Rabbi Sholom DovBer's birthday, which often falls (as it does this year) on the Shabbat on which *Vayeira* — which begins with the account of G-d's revealing Himself to Abraham following Abraham's circumcision at age 99 — is read.

I think I know why the Rebbe liked this story so much. The child's question and the grandfather's explanation express two extremes, whose contrast and synthesis are a hallmark of the Rebbe's approach to life.

Imagine: a five year old *weeping* because *G-d* doesn't not *reveal* Himself to Him! To "" G-d — to attain a consummate vision of the Truth of Truths — is the ultimate goal of every spiritual quest. It is a

goal that takes the greatest of the great at least a lifetime to achieve. Yet here is a child — a very special child, but one who nonetheless is still at the very beginning of his spiritual journey — who is disturbed, to the point of tears, by the fact that he has not yet attained this goal!

And on the other hand we have a man who has 99 years of the most extraordinary spiritual achievements behind him, who recognizes that he is still not perfect — that he must continue to change, grow and improve himself.

The Rebbe saw these two prototypes not as conflicting visions of life, but as complimentary and indispensable to each other. To strive for the ultimate, yet never feel that one has arrived. To have huge aspirations, yet remain humble and unassuming. To say: I want to, and can, do it *all* — yet, no matter how much one has done, know that there is still more to do.

By Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com; based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, www.therebbe.org

THE BINDING OF ISAAC

This particular question—what is it that sets apart the *Akeidah* from the countless other instances of human martyrdom and self-sacrifice—is raised by almost all the commentaries and expounders of Torah.

For the "Binding of Isaac" has come to represent the ultimate in the Jew's devotion to G-d. Every morning, we preface our prayers by reading the Torah's account of the *Akeidah* and then say: "Master of the Universe! Just as Abraham our father suppressed his compassion for his only son to do Your will with a whole heart, so may Your compassion suppress Your wrath against us, and may Your mercy prevail over Your attributes of strict justice."

And on Rosh Hashanah, when the world trembles in judgment before G-d, we evoke the Binding of Isaac by sounding the horn of a ram (reminiscent of the ram which replaced Isaac as an offering) as if to say: If we have no other merit, remember Abraham's deed. Remember how the first Jew bound all succeeding generations of Jews in a covenant of self-sacrifice to You.

Obviously, the supreme test of a person's faith is his willingness to sacrifice his very existence for its sake. But what is so unique about Abraham's sacrifice? Have not countless thousands of Jews given their lives rather than renounce their covenant with

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

From the Chassidic Masters

the Almighty?

One might perhaps explain that the willingness to sacrifice one's child is a far greater demonstration of faith than to forfeit one's own life. But in this, too, Abraham was not unique. Time and again through the generations, Jews have encouraged their children to go to their deaths rather than violate their faith. Typical is the story of "Chanah and her seven sons," who, seeing her seven children tortured to death rather than bow before a Greek idol, proclaimed: "My children! Go to Abraham your father and say to him: You bound one offering upon the altar, and I have bound seven offerings..."

Furthermore, while Abraham was *prepared* to sacrifice his son, in thousands of *Akeidot* throughout our history Jews actually gave up their lives and the lives of their entire families. And, unlike Abraham, G-d had not directly spoken to them and requested their sacrifice; their deeds were based on their own convictions and the strength of their commitment to an invisible and often elusive G-d. And many gave their lives rather than violate even a relatively minor tenet of their faith, even in cases in which the Torah does not require the Jew to do so.

Nevertheless, as the Abrabanel writes in his commentary on Genesis, it is the Binding of Isaac "that is forever on our lips in our prayers... For in it lies the entire strength of Israel and their merit before their Heavenly Father..." Why? What about the many thousands who made the ultimate sacrifice in reiteration of our loyalty to G-d?

The same question may be asked in regard to Abraham himself. The *Akeidah* was the tenth and final "test" in Abraham's life. In his first test of faith, Abraham was cast into a fiery furnace for his refusal to acknowledge the arch-idol of his native *Ur Casdim*, the emperor Nimrod, and his continued commitment to teaching the world the truth of a one, non-corporeal and omnipotent G-d. All this *before* G-d had revealed Himself to him and had chosen him and his descendents to serve as a "light unto the nations" and the purveyors of His word to humanity.

This early act of self-sacrifice seems, in a certain respect, to be even greater than the latter ones. A man, all on his own, comes to recognize the truth and

devotes himself to its dissemination—to the extent that he is even willing to sacrifice his very life to this end. All this without a command or even sign from Above.

And yet, the Binding of Isaac is considered the most important test of Abraham's faith. The Talmud asks: Why did G-d, in commanding Abraham on the *Akeidah*, say "Please, take your son"? Answers the Talmud: "G-d said to Abraham: 'I have tried you with many tests and you have withstood them all. Now, I beg you, please withstand this test for Me, lest they say that the earlier ones were of no substance'" (Talmud, Sanhedrin 89b).

Again we ask, Why? Granting that the *Akeidah* was the most demanding test of all, why are the others "of no substance" without it?

The Chassidic Masters explain the significance of the *Akeida* with a metaphor:

Once there was a untamed wilderness. Not a trail penetrated its thick underbrush, not a map charted its forbidding terrain. But one day there came a man who accomplished the impossible: he cut a path through this impregnable land.

Many trod in his footsteps. It was still a most difficult journey, but they had his charts to consult, his trail to follow. Over the years, there were some who made the journey under even more trying conditions than those which had challenged the first pioneer: while he had done his work in broad daylight, they stumbled about in the black of night; while he had only his determination for company, they made the trip weighed down by heavy burdens. But all were equally indebted to him. Indeed, all their attainments could be said to be but extensions of his own great deed.

Abraham was the pioneer of self sacrifice. And the first instance of true self sacrifice in all of history was the Binding of Isaac.

For to sacrifice one's self is not the same as to sacrifice one's life—there is a world of difference between the two.

The human story includes many chapters of heroic sacrifice. Every generation and society has had its martyrs—individuals who gave their lives for their faith, for their homeland, and for virtually every cause under the sun. They did so for a variety of reasons. For some it was an act of desperation: to them, their lives were not worth living unless a certain objective could be attained. Others believed that their

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

From the Chassidic Masters

deed would be richly rewarded in the hereafter, so they readily exchanged the temporal benefits of physical life for the soul's eternal gain. Finally, there were those for whom their cause had grown to be more significant to them than their lives: they had come to so completely identify with a certain goal that it became more integral to their "self" than their existence as individuals.

In all the above cases, the martyr is sacrificing his life, but not his self. Indeed, he is sacrificing his physical life *for the sake* of his self, whether it is for the sake of the self projected by his obsession, the spiritual self of his immortal soul, or a broader, universal "self" he has come to identify with. Ultimately, his is a selfish act; "selfish" in the most positive and altruistic sense of the word—here is an individual who has succeeded in transcending the narrow, material definition of "self" which dominates in our corporeal world—but selfish nonetheless.

Abraham was a man with a mission. A mission for which he sacrificed everything, a mission more important to him than his own life.

For many years he had agonized over the fact that there was no heir to this mission, that his work of bringing the beliefs and ethics of Monotheism to a pagan world would cease with his passing from the world. Then came the Divine promise: miraculously, at the age of 100, he will have a son, out of whom will stem the people of Israel. "You shall call his name Isaac," said G-d, "and I shall establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him."

And then G-d told him to destroy it all.

When Abraham bound Isaac upon the altar, it was not in the service of any calling or cause. In fact, it ran contrary to everything he believed in and taught, to everything he had sacrificed his life for, to everything G-d Himself had told him. He could see no reason, no purpose for his act. Every element of his self cried out against it—his material self, his spiritual self, his transcendent, altruistic self. But he did it. Why? Because G-d had told him to.

Abraham was the pioneer of *self* sacrifice. Before Abraham, the self was inviolable territory. Man could

enlighten the self's priorities, he could even broaden and sublimate it, but he could not supersede it. Indeed, how could he? As a creature of free choice, man's every act stems from within: his every deed has a motive (conscious or otherwise), and his every motive has a rationale—a reason why it is beneficial to his own existence. So how could he be motivated to annihilate his own self? The instinct to preserve and enhance one's self is the source and objective of a creature's every drive and desire—man could no more transcend it than lift himself up by pulling on the hair of his own head.

Yet Abraham did the impossible. He sacrificed his self for the sake of something beyond the scope of the most transcendent of identities. Had he not done so, no other act of self-sacrifice—previous or subsequent, of his own or of his descendants—could be presumed to be of any "substance," to be anything more than a product of the self. But when Abraham bound Isaac upon the altar, the heavenly voice proclaimed: "Now I know that you fear G-d." Now I know that the will of G-d supersedes even your most basic instincts. Now I know that *all* your deeds, including those which could be explained as self-motivated, are, in essence, driven by the desire to serve your Creator. Now I know that your entire life was of true, selfless substance.

So when we speak of the *Akeidah*, we also speak of those who trod the path this great deed blazed. Of the countless thousands who died for the creed of Abraham, of the many millions who lived for its sake. Their sacrifices, great and petty, cataclysmic and everyday, may, on the surface, seem but the outgrowth of their personal beliefs and aspirations: commendable and extraordinary, but only the fulfillment of an individual soul's identity. But the *Akeidah* revealed them to be so much more than that.

For Abraham bequeathed to his descendants the essence of Jewishness: that at the core of one's very being lies not the self but one's commitment to the Creator. And that, ultimately, one's every choice and act is an expression of that "spark of Divinity" within.

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, www.therebbe.org; adapted by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com.

The content on these pages is produced by Chabad.org, and is copyrighted by the author, publisher and/or Chabad.org. If you enjoyed this article, we encourage you to distribute it further, provided that you comply with our copyright policy