Points to Ponder

Parshas Vayera 5783

**בְּאֵֽלֹנֵ֖י מַמְרֵ֑א In the tents of Mamre (18:1)** - Chazal tell us that Mamre gave Avraham advice about milah. **Daas Zekeinim** wonder what kind of advice Avraham needed. In one of their answers, they suggest that Avraham wasn’t sure how to convince the other members of his household to do milah. Mamre told him that if he performs milah first, the members of his household will follow suit .**Rav Henoch Leibowitz** notes that one could have presented the opposite argument. After the milah, Avraham was weak and his ability to inspire others would be limited. Why did Mamre advise the opposite and why did Avraham listen? Rav Leibowitz notes that we see from here that the best way to teach and inspire is by example.

**וַתִּצְחַ֥ק שָׂרָ֖ה בְּקִרְבָּ֣הּ Sarah laughed (18:12) - Rav Chanan Porat** explained that her laughter was not only hidden from others but also from herself.  It had slowly seeped into her subconscious mind, and was expressed in her lack of faith to become pregnant and give birth. Aside from the Master of the Universe, no one knew about Sarah’s laughter and she, too, was not conscious of it. Therefore, in response to G-d’s question “Why did you laugh?” she answered “I didn’t laugh". Why does the Master of the Universe insist on uncovering Sarah’s dark secret? Because as long as Sarah’s laughter will not ascend from her subconscious into her conscious mind, this lack-of-faith laughter will continue to seep into the depths of her soul, without her being able to deal with it openly and remove it at the root. And lack of faith does not only have influence in the spiritual realm but in the realm of action, too. The Master of the Universe “has to do flips” around Sarah in order for her to deal with her emotional and spiritual blockage on the subject of her fertility. We see that this is true with the individual who fights alone, as well as with a nation at war with its enemies. The capacity to be victorious depends on internal faith. This new, higher level of consciousness will change the character of Sarah’s laughter from that of mockery and faithlessness to that of faith, joy, and gratitude: And Sarah said, "G-d has made laughter (joy) for me; whoever hears will laugh (rejoice) over me."

**הִנֶּ֣ה נָּֽא־אֲדֹנַ֗י ס֣וּרוּ נָ֠א אֶל־בֵּ֨ית עַבְדְּכֶ֤ם Please now my masters turn to the home of your servant (19:2)** - Why Avraham is recognized for his Hachnosas Orchim and Lot is not, even though Lot risked his life to save his visitors? **Rav Aharon Kotler** explained that Chesed was ingrained in Avraham as a way of life. Lot never internalized the concept of Chesed and only did so for external reasons. Although we encourage performance of mitzvos even for external reasons, one must allow the mitzvos to be transformative in order for them to have a lasting effect. **Rav Mordechai Willig** noted that Avraham embodied Chesed and therefore performed acts of kindness to all types of people. Since it didn’t matter who came to his door, the angels were called “Anashim.” Lot only performed Chesed when there was something in it for him, such as greeting important guests. He only greeted the angels because they were angels and not ordinary people. That’s why they are referred to as “Malachim.”

**וַתְּהִ֖י נְצִ֥יב מֶֽלַח She became a pillar of salt (19:26) - Rashi** cites a Midrash which explains that salt was the chosen punishment for Mrs. Lot since when the Malachim came to Lot disguised as human guests, he asked his wife to serve the guests a bit of salt. She responded: “since when do you want to establish this new, evil custom in this place?” And so, since she sinned with salt, she was punished by being turned into salt.  **Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm** added that Mrs. Lot was so fixated upon old and conventional patterns of conduct that she insisted upon them even when they violated the most elementary rules of human conduct and ethical living. Sodom had an old custom of turning away strangers, and she resented the effort of Lot to change the sacrosanct ways of her community. Not only was salt a sin and punishment, it was also the symbol of her psychological attitude. Salt is a crystalline chemical, which is very difficult to change. Whether you heat salt or freeze it, dissolve it or mix it, it is unchanging and inflexible and immutable. Salt it was, and salt it remains. Salt symbolizes the lifeless rigidity of Lot’s wife.

**וְהִ֖וא בְּעֻ֥לַת בָּֽעַל She is a married woman (20:3)** - בעולת בעל is a coarse way of considering marriage isn’t it? The Gemara in Sanhedrin notes that the entirety of a non-Jewish marriage is accomplished through biah reflecting on its role in the life of the partners. **Rav Schachter** noted the contrast adding that the non-Jewish marriage is a physical one, while the Jewish marriage is based on both the physical and the spiritual.

**וְנִשְׁתַּֽחֲוֶ֖ה וְנָשׁ֥וּבָה אֲלֵיכֶֽם: And we will bow and then return onto you (22:5) -** The Torah never says that Avraham and Yitzchak bowed. Why didn’t they bow? Furthermore, the midrash says that the histachavaya was the whole zechus of the akeidah, how could it be forgotten? **Rav Dessler** suggests that השתחויה here doesn’t mean bowing but התבטלות. The akeidah was going to undermine everything he believed in. Avraham had to give in and “bow” to HaShem and recognize that He is in charge. **Rav Shalom Rosner** pointed out that things don’t always go as planned. Life is about Plan B, not Plan A. HaShem is in charge and we have to live our lives based on what He gives us, not what we plan.

**הִ֠נֵּ֠ה יָֽלְדָ֨ה מִלְכָּ֥ה גַם־הִ֛וא בָּנִ֖ים Behold Milkah had children with Nachor as well (22:20)** - Why do we need to hear about Nachor’s children in context of the Akaidah? **Rav Soloveitchik** explained that part of Avraham’s nisayon was that he had to compare his life to his brother’s.  In his mind he saw his brother have twelve children without much nisayon.  Yet, he struggled to have one child and that child was almost taken away from him.  We read the portion about Nachor’s children because it was part and parcel of the akeidah. **Rav Menachem Genack** adds that Avraham realized that destiny required a trial. Avraham realized that true destiny didn’t lie with an Utz or a Buz but rather through Yitzchak (Kee B’Yitzchak Yikareh Lecha Zara). And true destiny – true kiyum needs something more. That something more comes to the forefront in times of trial and challenge. It happens in nisayon. This idea – the appreciation of the challenge as well as the resolution of it – forms the core of our hallel to hashem. We declare Odecha Ki Anisani – I thank you HaShem for challenging me – for putting me into moments that made me realize VaTehee Li L’Yishuah.

**Haftara**

**כִּ֖י אִם־אָס֥וּךְ שָֽׁמֶן The Oil story (Melachim II:4:1-7)** - The Haftara is long enough without it. Why is it included in the Haftara? What’s its connection to the Parsha? **Rav Haim Jachter** suggested that Hashem chose Avraham since he would command his children appropriately to do Tzedaka and Mishpat (Berashis 18:19) and the 2 stories here highlight the attribute of Tzedaka and fact that one would take children captive as payment is a cause for the destruction of part of the nation (a lack of Mishpat).