

O H R N E T

SHABBAT PARSHAT VAYERA · 20 CHESHVAN 5761 · NOV. 18, 2000 · VOL. 8 NO. 4

PARSHA INSIGHTS

ONLY WORDS

“And Sarah laughed at herself, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, though I have aged?’” (18:13)

The price of everything goes up and up. With one exception. Words. Talk is cheap and gets cheaper by the month. We live in a world where hyperbole has become the normal means of communication. I once scanned a piece of enthusiastic prose in a newsletter, trying in vain to find a sentence which didn’t end with an exclamation mark! Most ended with two!! Or three!!!

Wow!!!! If the most banal statements are so overpoweringly exciting, where is the emotional space for enthusiasm at something genuinely remarkable? We’ve already run off the Richter scale of enthusiasm and there’s nowhere else to go.

One of the casualties of modern life is our appreciation of the importance of words.

Judaism doesn’t see words as just important; to the Jewish mind, words are fundamental. G-d created the universe with words. There is a mystical concept that the building blocks of creation are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In Hebrew, the word for “word” is *davar*. Interestingly *davar* also means “thing.” To the Jewish mind, “things” are no more than the “words” of G-d. That’s what physical reality consists of. Words.

There’s an interesting anomaly in this week’s Torah portion. Sarah laughed at the prediction of her pregnancy and said, “Shall I in truth bear a child, though I have aged?” Then G-d reiterated the *bracha* that Sarah would have a child. In last week’s *Parsha*, however, Avraham also laughs when he hears the prediction that he will have children. But, in that case, G-d does not repeat the blessing. What is the difference between the two?

The power of speech.

When Avraham heard of his incipient parenthood, he didn’t verbalize his incredulity. Sarah did. Sarah by her skepticism annulled the blessing that rested on her and thus G-d gave her another blessing.

Interestingly, we can see this idea illustrated in the *haftara* as well: When the child of the Shunamite woman dies, she doesn’t say anything to her husband. She merely takes her leave with “*Shalom*.” Even when she comes to the prophet Elisha to beseech him to revive the boy, she doesn’t say the boy is dead.

The Shunamite woman didn’t want to say that her boy had died because she didn’t want to lend her speech to making it a fact. Similarly, because Elisha’s servant Gehazi stated that the “*lad has not awakened*” he was unsuccessful in reviving him, and it needed *Elisha* to revive the lad.

It’s only words.

Sources:

• Rebetzin Chana Levin as heard from Rabbi Rafael Stephansky

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

LAND OF THE LIVING

Eretz Yisrael is called the “lands of the living” by King David, who prayed to Hashem that he merit to walk before Him in the lands of the living (*Tehillim* 116:9). If living means enjoying material prosperity, ask our Sages, there are certainly places on earth



where one can enjoy a greater abundance at affordable prices. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish explained that when the dead are resurrected following the arrival of *mashiach*, the first ones to come to life will be those who are buried in Eretz Yisrael (*Jerusalem Talmud, Kilayim* 9:3).

Three days after performing *brit mila* on himself, Avraham is visited by Hashem. When three angels appear in human form, Avraham rushes to show them hospitality by bringing them into his tent, despite this being the most painful time after the operation. Sarah laughs when she hears from them that she will bear a son next year. Hashem reveals to Avraham that He will destroy Sodom, and Avraham pleads for Sodom to be spared. Hashem agrees that if there are 50 righteous people in Sodom, He will not destroy it. Avraham “bargains” Hashem down to 10 righteous people. However, not even 10 can be found. Lot, his wife and two daughters are rescued just before sulfur and fire rain down on Sodom and her sister cities. Lot’s wife looks back and becomes a pillar of salt. Lot’s daughters fear that as a result of the destruction there will be no husbands for them. They decide to get their father drunk and through him to perpetuate the human race. From the elder daughter, Moav is born, and from the younger, Ammon. Avraham moves to Gerar, where Avimelech abducts Sarah. After Hashem appears to Avimelech in a dream, he releases Sarah and appeases Avraham. As promised, a son, Yitzchak,

is born to Sarah and Avraham. On the eighth day after the birth, Avraham circumcises him as Hashem commanded. Avraham makes a feast the day Yitzchak is weaned. Sarah tells Avraham to banish Hagar and Hagar’s son Yishmael because she sees in him signs of degeneracy. Avraham is distressed at the prospect of banishing his son, but Hashem tells him to listen to whatever Sarah says. Yishmael nearly dies of thirst in the desert, but an angel rescues him, and Hashem promises that he will be the progenitor of a mighty nation.

Avimelech enters into an alliance with Avraham when he sees that Hashem is with him. In a tenth and final test, Hashem instructs Avraham to take Yitzchak, now 37, and to offer him as a sacrifice. Avraham does this, in spite of ostensibly aborting Jewish nationhood and contradicting his life-long preaching against human sacrifice. At the last moment, Hashem sends an angel to stop Avraham. Because of Avraham’s unquestioning obedience, Hashem promises him that even if the Jewish People sin, they will never be completely dominated by their foes. The *Parsha* ends with the genealogy and birth of Rivka.

HAFTARAH

MELACHIM II 3:1 - 37

Just as the nation of Israel came into existence through the miraculous birth of Yitzchak to an aged mother, so G-d ensures our continuity with countless miracles throughout history.

This week’s *haftara* recounts some of the miracles performed by the Prophet Elisha. In one incident, Ovadiah’s widow is saved from an implacable creditor when her last flask of oil is miraculously blessed; from this one little bottle she fills every vessel and container in her home with precious oil, providing more than enough money to pay her debts.

In another incident, Elisha promises his elderly host and hostess a child within a year. The child is born and grows, but one day he falls ill and dies.

The mother journeys to Elisha; Elisha returns with her and revives the child from the dead.

TUNE IN

“And he placed his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes and his hands upon his hands...and the body of the child became warm.” (Melachim II 4:34)

Like the child brought to life through his contact with the prophet, so the Jewish People are brought to life when we live and breathe the Torah as delivered to us from our teachers. All we have to do is to lean close and tune in, then we will feel ourselves come alive with the warmth of the Torah.

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CHINUCH FOR GIRLS

Even though a boy who has not yet reached the age of *bar mitzvah* is not obligated by Torah law in any of the *mitzvot*, there is a rabbinical command for a father to train his child even at a young age in the performance of *mitzvot*. Does this parental obligation of *chinuch* extend to the mother as well, and does it apply to training a daughter as well as a son?

The impression gained from our *gemara* is that the responsibility of *chinuch* is limited to a father training a son. The Sage Reish Lakish explains the *mishna* ruling that a father can impose on his pre-*bar mitzvah* age son a vow to be a *nazir* as being a function of *chinuch* and not a Torah law. When challenged as to why it is only the father who can impose such a vow and only in regard to a son, Reish Lakish responds that a mother is exempt from the obligation of *chinuch*, and that even a father is responsible only for the *chinuch* of a son and not of a daughter.

Regarding a mother's obligation for *chinuch* there is a difference of opinion amongst the authorities. Magen Avraham (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 243:1*) concludes from our *gemara* that she has no such obligation, and that Queen Helenie's training of her young children in the *mitzvah* of *succhah* (*Mesechta Succah 2b*) was something she did voluntarily. Machatzit Hashekel, however, cites authorities who contend that a mother is also obligated as the case of Queen Helenie would indicate, and dismiss the view stated in our *gemara* as the position of Reish Lakish which is not in accordance with the halacha.

With respect to the parental obligation to train a daughter, even Magen Avraham agrees that the rabbinical *mitzvah* of *chinuch* applies to girls as well. This is based on the observation made by Tosefot here that the *gemara* (*Mesechta Yoma 82a*) clearly states that a parent should train both underage sons and daughters in fasting on Yom Kippur. Since this seems to be in direct contradiction to what Reish Lakish says in our *gemara*, Tosefot concludes that some distinction must be made, but does not elaborate on what that distinction is.

Magen Avraham expresses an uncertainty as to the nature of this distinction: It is either that fasting on Yom Kippur is such an important *mitzvah* because it is a day of atonement, and therefore even a girl should be trained, while *chinuch* will not apply to her in other *mitzvot*; or that all *mitzvot* are like fasting on Yom Kippur and she should be trained in all of them except for the *mitzvah* of *nezirut* which is not really obligatory and may never be relevant to her adult life. He cites a midrash (*Yalkut Parshat Emor*) which supports the latter approach, and Machatzit Hashekel cites a Tosefot Yeshanim (*Yoma ibid.*) to the same effect. This is why the halachic authorities such as Mishna Berura categorically state that *chinuch* applies to daughters as well as sons.

• Nazir 29a

ANTICIPATION OF DESTRUCTION

The general rule regarding a sage's annulment of a vow is that he cannot suggest to the vow-maker an opening of regret at having made the vow based on something which happened *after* the vow was made. [Even Rabbi Eliezer, who initially held (*Mesechta Nedarim 64a*) that such an opening could be used for annulment, eventually came around to the position of the other sages, as is evident from his dissenting opinion not being mentioned in our *mishna* here.] The logic of this is that when one takes a vow he does not even consider that something improbable will happen, so we view his vow as being a categorical commitment which cannot be annulled on the basis of his having made that vow in error.

One of the examples cited in the *mishna* of this principle has an interesting historical background. Some people had taken vows of *nezirut* outside of *Eretz Yisrael*. When they came to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifices incumbent on a *nazir* at the end of his period, they were disappointed to find that the *Beit Hamikdash* had been destroyed. Unable to be liberated from their *nazir* status because they could not offer the necessary sacrifices, they sought annulment of their vows. One sage, Nachum Hamodi, asked them whether they would have made their *nazir* vows had they known the *Beit Hamikdash* would be destroyed. When they answered in the negative he annulled their vows. This was an erroneous judgment, says the *mishna*, and it was overturned by the other sages because this is a classic example of regret based on something which took place only after the vow was made.

Rabbi Yosef added an interesting postscript to this story. Had he been in Jerusalem when these *nezirim* came, he declared, he would have chided them for making such a vow without fear that the *Beit Hamikdash* would be destroyed as prophesied by Yirmiyahu (7:4). The Sage Abaye, however, rallied to the defense of these *nezirim* by pointing out that even if they were aware of this possibility, and even if they could calculate the year of destruction based on a passage in Daniel (9:24), they could still have assumed that their period of *nezirut* would end before the destruction took place in that year.

• Nazir 32b

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PARSHA Q&A?

1. Why did Hashem appear to Avraham after the *brit mila*?
2. Why was Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent?
3. What were the missions of the three angels?
4. Why did Avraham enjoin the guests to wash the dust off their feet?
5. Why did Avraham ask specifically Yishmael, and not someone else, to prepare food for the guests?
6. Why did the angels ask Avraham where Sarah was?
7. When Hashem related Sarah's thoughts to Avraham, He did not relate them precisely. Why?
8. What "cry" from Sodom came before Hashem?
9. How many angels went to Sodom?
10. Why was Lot sitting at the gate of Sodom?
11. Lot served the angels *matza*. Why?
12. Why did Lot delay when he left Sodom?
13. Why were Lot and his family not permitted to look back at Sodom?
14. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Why was she punished in this particular way?
15. In what merit did Hashem save Lot?
16. Why did Avraham relocate after the destruction of Sodom?
17. Why did Avimelech give gifts to Avraham?
18. Why was Avraham told to listen to Sarah?
19. Why did Hashem listen to the prayer of Yishmael and not to that of Hagar?
20. Who accompanied Avraham and Yitzchak to the *akeidah* (binding)?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 18:1 - Avraham was sick, so Hashem came to "visit" him.
2. 18:1 - He was looking for guests.
3. 18:2 - To announce Yitzchak's birth, to heal Avraham and to destroy Sodom.
4. 18:4 - He thought they were among those who worship the dust, and he didn't want any object of idolatry in his home.
5. 18:7 - To train him in the performance of *mitzvot*.
6. 18:9 - To call attention to Sarah's modesty, so as to endear her to her husband.
7. 18:13 - For the sake of peace.
8. 18:21 - The cry of a girl who was executed for giving food to the poor.
9. 19:1 - Two; one to destroy the city and one to save Lot.
10. 19:1 - He was a judge.
11. 19:3 - It was Passover.
12. 19:16 - He wanted to save his property.
13. 19:17 - As they, too, deserved to be punished, it wasn't fitting for them to witness the destruction of Sodom.
14. 19:26 - She was stingy, not wanting to give the guests salt.
15. 19:29 - Lot had protected Avraham by concealing from the Egyptians the fact that Sarah was his wife.
16. 20:1 - Because travel in the region ceased and Avraham could no longer find guests.
17. 20:14 - So that Avraham would pray for him.
18. 21:12 - Because she was greater in prophecy.
19. 21:17 - Because the prayer of a sick person is more readily accepted than the prayer of others on his behalf.
20. 22:3 - Yishmael and Eliezer.

I DIDN'T KNOW THAT!

Because Avraham invited the angels to "sit under the tree" (*Bereishet 18:4*) his offspring were rewarded with the *mitzvah* of *succah*.

• *Midrash Tanchuma*

KASHA! (KASHA MEANS "QUESTION")

How would you answer this question on the Parsha?

"Behold! Three people stood upon him..." (*Bereishet 18:2*). Rashi explains that these were angels. One angel came to announce Sarah's birth, one to destroy the city of Sodom, and one to heal Avraham. The angel who came to destroy Sodom, why did he need to visit Avraham first? What was the purpose?

Answer:

Sodom was destroyed because they did not act with kindness and charity to the poor and the stranger. Their sin was

multiplied many times by the fact that they lived near Avraham, the pillar of kindness and charity. They should have learned from his example, at least a little. Instead, they treated visitors cruelly as part of their law and culture.

So, in order to take away any excuse from the people of Sodom, the angel first needed to experience Avraham's hospitality. Once the angel saw Avraham's super-human kindness, Sodom could no longer claim that they had no example to learn from.

Do you have a KASHA? Write to kasha@ohr.org.il with your questions on any Parsha!

THOUGHTFUL WORK

From: Isaac Bergman in Brooklyn
<Lecrules@aol.com>

Dear Rabbi,

Recently I read (probably in Scientific American, I don't recall) of a newly-developed brain-scanning device which enables a person to control an onscreen cursor with just his thought alone. If research progresses to the point that a person with his thoughts alone can, say, turn on and off lights, would such "thought actions" be allowed on Shabbat? Technically, all he is doing is thinking! Don't forget that every time a thought goes through your mind, electric currents are generated too, and the same goes for every time you move a muscle.

Dear Isaac Bergman,

In general, the Torah forbids all constructive, pre-meditated acts on Shabbat.

Interestingly, the Torah refers to such acts as "thought-actions" (*melech machshevet*; Exodus 35:34), the term which you used.

So, for example, it is forbidden to turn on a light since it causes the filament to glow red (or white) hot; and it is even

considered "building" a circuit according to some authorities. Similarly, walking into a dark room and completing the circuit not by manual switch but rather by passing an infra-red beam is regarded as the person's action and is forbidden by the Torah.

In both cases, the person did an action which turned on a light, even though in the second case all he is doing is walking. So too, if a light were to be turned on using just the brain, even though no physical act was performed, since the result is in the physical realm, Jewish Law would forbid it on Shabbat.

Regarding currents in our brain and nervous system during normal activity: The Torah does not forbid using your brain, or any other body part, on Shabbat, even though it generates electric currents. Similarly, the Torah allows eating on Shabbat, even though eating causes the break-down and separation of food into usable and unusable components, activity forbidden if done in a laboratory.

It's actually a commandment to eat and enjoy Shabbat, as Moses said to the Jews, "Eat (the manna) today, because today is Shabbat." (Exodus 16:25) In short, natural bodily functions are allowed on Shabbat.

According to Kabbala, doing *mitzvot* actually creates spiritual worlds — still, it is permitted to create these worlds on Shabbat!

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Comments, quibbles and reactions concerning previous "Ohrnet" features

Re: First Jew in North America (Ohrnet Bereishet):

Re: Who were the first Jews in N. America? It is widely understood that the Sephardic refugees from Belem, Brazil, who were rescued by a French ship when they were shipwrecked en route back to Holland after their expulsion from Brazil by the Portuguese in 1654, were the first. However, in the American Jewish Historical Society's publication (June '98, Vol. 86, p. 195) is the story of Joachim or Chajjim Gans of Prague who arrived in America in summer 1585 aboard one of Sir Walter Raleigh's ships.

• David Welsh, Calabasas, California <dwelsh@pacbell.net>

Re: Our Thoughts:

Your thoughts and insights are wonderful....keep them coming.

• Eric <ELayLo@aol.com>

YIDDLE RIDDLE

Last week we asked: I was eating a snack when I had a sudden urge for some bread. I asked my Rabbi, "Should I wash my hands in the special ritual way which is usually required before eating bread?" "No," said my Rabbi. "Should I say the 'hamotzi' blessing usually said before eating bread?" "No," he said. After eating, I asked, "Should I say the 'birkat hamazon' — the 'Grace after Meals' — which is normally required after eating bread?" "No," said my Rabbi.

Can you explain what's going on in the above story? Why do the "usual" *halachot* (Jewish Laws) seem not to apply?

Answer: The "snack" I ate at the beginning of the story was a jalapeño pepper. It burned my mouth so much that I had to eat a little bread (less than an olive-size) to cool the burning sensation. I had no desire to eat bread at all except to cool my burning mouth. In such a case, washing is not needed, and *hamotzie* and *birkat hamazon* are not said. (Rather, the *shehakol* blessing is said on the bread, unless at the time of blessing over the tangy food there was intention to eat the bread as a "chaser.")

Sources:

• Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 212:1 • Mishneh Berura 158:10, 212:5 • Aruch Hashulchan 212:5 • Thanks to Michael Treblow