

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

VAYERA

Haftarah: Melachim II 4:1-23

NOVEMBER 18-19, 2016 18 HESHVAN 5777

DEDICATION: In memory of Yosef ben Esther

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Editors Notes

Overcoming nature and nurture!

The Rabbis teach us that Abraham, Avraham Avinu, was tested ten times and he passed each one. There is disagreement among the Rishonim (ten generations of Rabbis who lived between the 11th and 15th centuries of the common era), as to what exactly those ten tests were. If we combine the various lists, we see in reality whether we deem them one of the ten tests or not, Abraham faced many more than ten tests which seemed to continue even after they were supposedly completed (as we will see next week when Abraham who was promised the entire land cannot find a place to bury his wife Sarah). Undoubtedly two of the most difficult tests as we read this week came in the command to listen to Sarah and to drive away Ishmael and Hagar and finally the ultimate test in being commanded to bring and bind Isaac as a sacrifice. These tests as some of the others are all the more difficult as they go completely contrary to Abraham's nature.

In our society it has become very common whether judging one for a crime, drug abuse, academic failure, or poor social mobility, to blame the parents (And we must admit that many if not most social problems are linked to bad parent-child relationships). But taking this further, it is becoming more and more accepted for lawyers to present neuropsychiatric genetic evidence in criminal courts in defense of their clients. The argument basically says that it wasn't my client's fault; it was his genes that made him do it. Studies into blaming one's genes or one's nature for one's behavior continue around the world. And as a society we have grown to give much leeway to a person because of their nature. One hears again and again, "what can we do, he (or she) was born that way"!

The Rabbis teach us that although we may not understand it, there is some truth to astrology. And whether we accept this or not is unimportant as the

lesson can be taught as relating to nature or nurture, genes or upbringing in exactly the same vein and perhaps some rabbis had this in mind.

We are told that Abraham was the world's most pre-eminent astrologer, the son of Terach who was the astrologer to Nimrod. Scientists of the day came from the entire world to study with him. The Rabbis go on further and explain that when Abraham turned to Hashem complaining that he would have no children, he did so based on his understanding of the stars and destiny.

The Talmud in Shabbat writes: Abraham said G-d: "Master of the Universe, my steward inherits me . . ." Hashem replied to him: "No, only he that shall come forth from within you . . ." He (Avraham) said before Him: Master of the Universe, I have already consulted my horoscope, and I see that I am not fit to bear a son! Hashem said to him: "Disregard your horoscope; for the constellations hold no power over Israel! What do you think, that Jupiter is situated in the west (and therefore you are infertile)? I will simply move it around and situate it in the east."

Rashi explains that when Abraham was born, his zodiac sign, Jupiter, was located in the west—a cold place, not suitable for fathering children (or perhaps he saw that the future ends or sets as does the sun in the west with him). Therefore, Hashem moved it to a warmer location in the east (showing Abraham that he would not be the end, but he as the sun rising in the east would be the beginning). Setting aside this reconfiguring of the constellations, I was intrigued as to what the Rabbis wrote about Jupiter.

The fact that Avraham's zodiac sign was Jupiter is explained by the Maharsha as quoted by Rabbi Pinches Friedman, "a person who is born during the hour of Jupiter will be a moral and righteous person". As Rashi explains, this refers particularly to one who focuses on giving Sedakah to the poor; the generic term "mitzvah" refers to Sedakah. It was for this reason that Avraham was the epitome of chesed; he welcomed guests into his home and was charitable toward everyone. This is the message conveyed by the Midrash. The constellation of Jupiter influenced him; Rabbi Reuven said: Jupiter would cry out declaring that if not for Avraham, there would be no one to represent him.

So although Abraham would now be able to have children, he remained under the influence of Jupiter

which had always established his nature. Rabbi Abittan's teacher Rav Eliyahu Dessler explained that Abraham is known as the man of kindness. His nature was to do good and this came from a burning desire to give. His kindness was proactive. We see this through the stories of his hospitality in the opening verses of this week's portion. We see it in his pleas for Sodom later in this week's portion. We saw it in his action of going to war to save his nephew Lot.

So the two tests in driving away Ishmael and Hagar and being commanded to bring and bind Isaac as a sacrifice become even more difficult as they completely go against Abraham's nature. A man who spent his life taking in the poor, feeding them, housing them and educating them is commanded to cut off Yishmael and Hagar. The son he should educate and raise is sent afar as a teen. The woman who bore that son, who left her father's palace and Egypt to become a follower of Abraham and Sarah is abandoned in a desert. Can we imagine the anguish of Abraham?

The rabbis suggest that if Abraham had a single pet project it was eradicating the worship of Molech. Molech worship included child sacrifice, or "passing children through the fire." It is believed that idols of Molech were giant metal statues of a man with a bull's head. Each image had a hole in the abdomen. A fire was lit in or around the statue. Babies were placed in the hole. In order to drown out the cries of the suffering infant, loud drums would be played at the time the child was placed in the fire. When a couple sacrificed their firstborn, they believed that Molech would ensure financial prosperity for the family and future children. Abraham fought against this wherever he went.

Now Hashem was asking Abraham to go against his nature to nurture, to go against his lifework of preventing human sacrifice and to bring his own child. It made no sense which is exactly the argument that Satan used hoping that either Abraham or Isaac would be unwilling to complete the test. Satan argued that it couldn't possibly be God's Will for Isaac to be sacrificed. He told Abraham that he must have heard wrong and told Isaac that Abraham must be out of his mind. Yet both continue together as one.

The lesson in the test is that as Abraham is tested, so will we be tested. We are not tested to follow our nature. We are tested in going against our nature. I guess it's good that the Talmud tells us that for many of us it's natural to desire that which is not ours, for many of us it's natural to take that which does not belong to us and for most of us it's natural to withhold the truth or to lie. Then our tests are in overcoming

this nature. But for others the test is more difficult. The test may be to overcome or to control what seems right and feels good to me.

Rabbi Abittan always taught us that when we want to know our tikkun in life, we don't need to run to the Kabbalist. Our greatest test, our greatest repair, he would explain, is in fixing that which is most difficult for us to do. The test is in overcoming our nature.

The Rabbis teach that G-d gives us no test which we cannot pass. (And each test will be to our benefit as through being sent away Yishmael repents and returns and through the binding, Isaac is elevated). May we all find the strength and fortitude sometimes buried deep within our Abrahamic gene to set aside the excuses and overcome that which is most difficult for us.

Shabbat Shalom,

David Bibi

**The war against history
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"He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past." This, as you may recall, was the slogan of the totalitarian state imagined by George Orwell in "1984," his classic novel.

Today, various groups of Islamists -- which we can define as those committed to Islamic supremacism -- are operationalizing this concept, attempting to alter the historical record in support of their totalitarian ambitions.

Six months before the attack of September 11, 2001, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar ordered the destruction of Afghanistan's ancient Buddhas of Bamiyan. Why? Because those monumental statues were reminders of a time when the country was not Islamic.

In 2012, Ansar Dine, a jihadist group affiliated with al-Qaida, destroyed ancient shrines, tombs and mosques in Timbuktu. Why? Because they represented a version of Islam marinated in African culture -- and were therefore seen as heretical.

Most infamously, the Islamic State has been demolishing the religious and historical heritage of

Syria and Iraq, turning into rubble such sites as a temple in Palmyra dedicated to the Canaanite god Baal, Christian churches in Nineveh and shrines built by Muslims whose interpretation of scripture differs from that of the would-be caliphate builders.

UNESCO, a United Nations agency whose ostensible mission is to advance world culture, has been taking a less kinetic -- but perhaps no less effective -- approach to this war on history. The intention is to establish that Jerusalem's holiest sites belong to Muslims and that Jews and Christians have no valid religious or historical claims in that ancient city -- never had, never will.

A resolution to this effect, backed by seven Muslim-majority nations on behalf of Palestinian leaders, was passed by UNESCO members last month. Only the U.S., Germany, the U.K., the Netherlands, Lithuania and Estonia voted against it. Twenty-six countries chose to abstain -- as if they didn't know the truth or as if the truth were a matter of no consequence.

Some prominent individuals have been speaking out. Irina Bokova, UNESCO's own director general, said that the vote violated the organization's responsibility to "bridge the divisions that harm the multifarious character" of Jerusalem.

A spokesman for U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon said that "the shared heritage of the three monotheistic religions of the holy sites should not be put into question."

More than three dozen members of Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike, deplored the resolution. "World bodies do not have the right to rewrite history," said Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-Fla.). Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) called the resolution "a dangerous effort to erase history." Rep. Ted Lieu (D-Calif.) labeled it "rabidly anti-Semitic and anti-Christian." Rep. Peter Roskam (R-Ill.) recognized it as a "drastic violation of international religious freedom."

Last month, Palestinian Authority officials also announced the "Balfour Apology Campaign," a separate but related attempt at historical manipulation. To jog your memory: The Balfour Declaration was a letter written 99 years ago this month by British Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur Balfour recognizing the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in part of their ancient homeland.

It was adopted by the League of Nations, the international community of that era. The PA and its

allies are now charging that the Balfour Declaration was "a crime" -- and demanding an apology.

In truth, the Balfour Declaration expressed progressive views. For centuries, most of the Middle East had been ruled by the Ottoman Empire. But Turkish Sultan Mehmed VI made the mistake of allying with the Germans in World War I. Not long after the conclusion of that conflict, his once powerful empire would be dismantled by the victorious British and the French.

They were hardly saints but they were prepared to grant autonomy to peoples who had long been Ottoman subjects. The Balfour Declaration also spoke of the "civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

Three years later, the League of Nations gave Britain a mandate to govern Palestine. The eastern three-fourths of that territory became what is now the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Other new Arab nations on territories formerly under the Ottoman yoke include Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

In 1947, the U.N. proposed the founding of two states in western Palestine -- one Arab and one Jewish. Palestinian Jewish leaders accepted this two-state solution. Palestinian Arab leaders (they had not yet appropriated the name "Palestinian" as theirs and theirs alone) rejected it. The following year, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq attacked the fledgling Jewish state.

The conflict ended not with a peace agreement and borders but only a truce and armistice lines -- lines that held from 1949 until 1967 when Israel fought another defensive war against its neighbors, one that ended with Israel taking Gaza from Egypt and the West Bank, including east Jerusalem, from Jordan.

This should not be forgotten: During the years of Jordanian occupation, Jews were banned from Jerusalem's Old City and prohibited from praying at the Western Wall. Numerous Jewish religious sites in Jerusalem were desecrated or destroyed.

And now a U.N. agency is endorsing a falsified version of that city's past while the Palestinian Authority portrays the Balfour Declaration -- a statement in support of a diverse Middle East -- as a criminal act.

It doesn't end there: The Palestinians are now also reportedly considering asking UNESCO to demand that the Israelis turn over to them the Dead Sea Scrolls, nearly 1,000 religious texts, most in Hebrew

and Aramaic, dating back to the time of the Second Temple.

One is tempted to say, "You can't make this stuff up." But, of course, you can. Orwell did. The question is whether we've learned anything since.

Summary of the Perasha

Va'yera - Sedom is destroyed, Akedat Yitshak

- 1- 3 malachim come to visit Abraham. Abraham feeds them. Sara hears that she will have a baby.
- 2- Abraham hears Sedom will be destroyed and pleads with Hashem to spare them
- 3- The malachim come to save Lot
- 4- Sedom is destroyed. Abimelech takes Sara. Yitshak is born.
- 5- Abraham sends away Yishmael and Hagar
- 6- Abraham and Abimelech make a peace treaty
- 7- Akedat Yitshak

6 interesting/important Rashis to see in Parashat Va'yera - Final

18:24/26/28/29- Sedom was a metropolis made up of 5 cities*** (when Abraham said if there are 40 sadikim...he was suggesting that if there are 10 sadikim in each of 4 cities so save those four cities and only destroy one city. And so too when he asked if there were 30, 20, or 10 sadikim. He was asking Hashem if he could at least save three, two, or one city in Sedom).

19:20- Sedom was destroyed 52yrs after dor ha'haflaga

20:1a- Why Abraham left Hebron. Abraham stopped getting visitors after sedom was destroyed

21:34a- The life and travels of Abraham**

22:11a- What the connotation is when the pasook says Abraham's name twice (Note: This is a general Klal. Saying a person's name twice is a lashon of love).

22:20a/23a - Why are the pesookim telling us about the descendants of Nachor here. (Note, this is an important pasook because Rashi learns from here that Rivka was born at this point when Yitshak did akedat Yitshak. That makes Yitshak 37yrs old than Rivka).**

FROM THE RABBIS OF THE JERSEY SHORE

"And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." (Beresheet 12:3) What was the purpose of Hashem telling Abraham to leave Haran and go to the Land of Canaan? The answer is found in the above verse: "That the families of the earth will be blessed through you." Rashi explains this to mean: "And the following is its simple meaning, a man says to his son 'Be like Abraham.'"

Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch shlit" a explains that the purpose of Abraham leaving Haran was to publicize the idea that Hashem is the G-d of the world and to sanctify His Name everywhere. How is this accomplished? That by Abraham and his children traveling and people see the righteous, wholesome ways of those that walk in the ways of Hashem, they will bless themselves by saying that they should be like Abraham.

Even though the main misvah of sanctifying Hashem's Name is amongst the Jewish People, our early Sages have explained that we as Jews must also cause Hashem to have honor in the eyes of the gentile world as well. And this is the purpose of the exile, that the nations should recognize and know the greatness of Israel when they observe the Torah and its misvot.

The above verse begins with the phrase "I will bless those who bless you etc." I would like to relate to you an amazing story told to me by my student, Hymie Dana.

"Rabbi, an amazing thing just happened. I am in Dayton Ohio Airport coming home from a business trip, sitting in a private corner with my kippah on learning perush Ramban and a police officer walks up to me. He sticks out his hand and gives me a hardy handshake, telling me the following: 'May those who curse you be cursed and may those who bless you be blessed...May G-d bless you and your people, and know you are always welcome at this airport for as long as I am here.'"

Hymie concludes, "I happened to be reading the following from the Ramban when the officer approached me. 'And when you come to the land that you were promised, I will bless those that bless you.'"

Apparently the purpose of the exile to Dayton Ohio has been fulfilled. Rabbi Reuven Semah

"Look now toward the heaven and count the stars... so shall your children be." (Beresheet 15:5)

Hashem told Abram. "Look at the stars and count them, so shall your children be." Did Abram really count the stars - we know it's impossible to count them?

Rabbi Meir Shapiro says that when Abram began to count the stars, Hashem stopped him and told him it's not possible to fully count them. However, He told him, "Just as you attempted to do something impossible because it was my will, so too your descendants will try to do the will of G-d, even when it seems impossible." This is the greatness of the Jewish people. We are not daunted when we are faced with commandments and challenges. Although they may look difficult, we know that Hashem told us to do it. He gives us the strength and ability to accomplish it. The main thing is not to give up

initially just because it seems beyond us. We have seen throughout history how the greatest accomplishments have been achieved, the writing of the greatest books, the building of the finest institutions, etc. We must be like Abram and attempt what we are told; the rest is up to Hashem! Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

Why Not?

Once upon a time, young people would decide on a career path and pursue their goals, combating the ups and downs that inevitably confront success-oriented individuals. This was also a time when, upon reaching a certain age – a point of no return – switching fields of endeavor was not an issue that would even be considered.

There is a trend in the U.S.A today to change career paths at any age. It might be a result of the pressures of society or the idealism of a post-9/11 world, but people are more inclined today than ever before to chase their dreams.

Asking why you should pursue your passion leads to self-doubt, over-analysis, and questioning your ability to succeed. Instead, ask “Why not?” Changing the question from “Why?” to “Why not?” puts things into perspective. It encourages you to identify obstacles and plan strategies to overcome them.

So ask yourself the right question and then follow your dream. Your passion can be your success! (One Minute with Yourself – Rabbi Raymond Beyda) “Hashem, if it pleases you that I find favor in Your eyes, please pass not from before your servant.” (Bereshheet 15:3)

There are two versions of whom Abraham was talking to in the above verse. One is that he was talking to one of the three “men” that approached him. The second is that he was talking to Hashem.

Picture the scene, Abraham is having a prophetic experience communicating directly with Hashem. He then sees three guests and says to Hashem, “Pardon me, Almighty, I have to go take care of my guests, I’ll be right back.” Amazingly, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 127b) teaches us that Abraham was actually correct in what he did, for welcoming guests is greater than experiencing the Divine Presence.

How do we understand what the Talmud is saying? Rabbi Noah Weinberg zt”l explains, the answer is clear. Greater than talking to Hashem is emulating Him. The most powerful way to understand and connect to Hashem is by becoming like Him. The Almighty is infinite and perfect, which means there is nothing He needs. He does not gain anything from our keeping the misvot. His creation of the universe is a perfect act of altruism! It is 100% hesed, aimed at

giving us the deepest pleasure and meaning simply because He loves us.

If you want to really appreciate the Almighty, then undertake to be like Him and take care of as many people as you can, even if you’re sick. Try to give another human being pleasure, work at it, make it your priority, and by doing so you will understand just a bit more what existence is all about.

If you don’t change yourself in inculcating Hashem’s attributes, you’ll never fully understand Hashem. He will remain an abstraction. Rabbi Reuven Semah

“For [Hagar] said, ‘Let me not see the death of the child’” (Bereshheet 21:16)

Hagar moved away from her son, Yishmael, when he was dying of thirst because, as she said, “I can’t bear to see him in this state.” One of the commentators points out that although this may be acceptable for Hagar, it is not an attribute for a Jewish mother. Even when things are as difficult to cope with as someone in extreme thirst, a mother stays by her child to see what can be done.

We must apply this to most of life’s situations, not only the dangerous ones. It may be more pleasant for a parent not to know when a child is doing something wrong, rather than confront the child and face the problem. This is not the way of life for a Jewish parent. One must be involved in his child’s upbringing, and if anything needs correcting, one must face the situation directly. It may be unpleasant but it is the only way that will yield positive results in our children. Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

RABBI ELI MANSOUR

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The Child's Needs Come First

Toward the end of Parashat Vayera we read the story of Hagar, Sara’s maidservant who married Abraham and bore him a child, Yishmael. Abraham was forced to send Hagar and Yishmael away from the home due to the threat that Yishmael posed to his younger son, Yitzhak, and the Torah tells that Hagar and Yishmael wandered in the desert. Their water rations were depleted, and Yishmael nearly died of thirst. Hagar placed Yishmael under a bush and left him there, moving a far distance away from her child, because she did not want to see him die (21:16).

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808-1888) noted that Hagar’s conduct in this episode is antithetical to the model of parenting that we are to follow. Rabbi Hirsch writes that a Jewish parent never abandons his or her child, regardless of what is

entailed. Hagar put her own emotions and feelings before her child's needs, leaving him alone in his time of dire distress to spare herself the torment of watching him suffer. The proper model of parenting is one which suspends all personal feelings and emotions when the child's needs are at stake. We must never abandon a child or deny him his needs because of our own personal concerns. Parents must be prepared to make difficult sacrifices on behalf of their children's education and upbringing. This means being prepared to forego on certain material luxuries for the sake of paying for Torah education and providing the child with the extra help or therapy that he might need. True, it might be difficult for parents to accept a lower standard of living and forego on vacations or a luxury car in order to pay for their children's education and, if necessary, special services. But this is the duty of a Jewish parent, which trumps personal concerns and material ambitions.

A particularly sensitive area where this issue commonly arises is Shidduchim. It occasionally happens that a boy will bring home a girl he had been dating, who is herself a worthy and suitable match, but the parents disapprove because of personal concerns, usually involving reputation and social stature. They might not think very highly of the family, or the family might have less money, and the parents will thus worry what their friends will say when they hear about the match. Of course, parents should intervene if their child wishes to marry somebody who is truly unsuitable. But they must never intervene out of personal concerns, because of their personal feelings. It is wrong to cause a child pain and abandon him to spare oneself unease.

The story of Hagar and Yishmael teaches us what parenting should not be. Our model of parenting is one which places the needs of our children before our own, being prepared to sacrifice our own wishes and desires for the sake of our children's happiness. We don't abandon children to spare ourselves; we remain with them, offering all the help and support their need, despite the sacrifices that this demands.

**VICTOR BIBI
SOD HAPARASHA**

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**Rabbi Wein
UNPOPULAR LEADERS**

There have been many instances in human history when people were not universally popular with their

subjects and citizens. No ruler has ever had unanimous popularity and approval – witness Moshe and Korach, for example – but like everything else in life, popularity is never absolute but only relative. In elections a candidate that achieves a fifty-five percent majority is deemed to have attained a landslide victory even though forty-five percent of the population disapproved of the ruler.

Even in times of absolute rulers such as the monarchical system that existed in the Jewish world of First Temple times, such towering figures as David and Solomon never enjoyed universal approbation, as the revolutions against their rule evidenced. The fact that a portion of the population disapproves of the personality and/or policies of the ruler does not diminish the positive accomplishments of those rulers.

History has the luxury of taking a long view of matters, people, policies and decisions. Most of us have strong, preconceived notions about people and policies. Usually, we do not allow uncomfortable facts to change our preconceived notions. But that is a very temporary and shortsighted view of things that dominate most of our lives. History has often shown us that one generation's villain may turn out to be another generation's hero and what appeared to be wrong-headed policies then, turn out to have been prescient wisdom. The true leader has the capacity to shoulder the unpopularity and to make decisions that are temporarily controversial and unpopular.

A leader has to always be cognizant of the fact that even one's own most convinced and wisest decision may not stand the test of history. Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement to Hitler's Germany in his mind brought peace for his time. His policy of appeasement was wildly popular at the time, with Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden being the lonely dissenting voices. Yet it turned out rather quickly that the popular Chamberlain and his policies were foolishly wrong, dead wrong, while Churchill became one of the most heroic figures in the annals of the twentieth century.

In Jewish history, the great Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai made a fateful choice when he was offered wishes by the then triumphant Roman general and future Emperor Vespasian. Rabbi Yochanan chose the continuity of the yeshiva at Yavneh over other possible options. And he was very firm in his decision, devoting the rest of his life to building and protecting the academy and its students from Roman persecution. Yet at the end of his life he ruefully speculated whether or not he has truly made the correct decision and right choice.

How to believe in one's decision and follow through on it, and yet retain the realization that history may judge that decision and less charitably, is truly the ultimate challenge and test of wise leadership. It is entirely possible - perhaps even likely - that it is the unpopular leader that is the one that history will view most positively. This is an important factor to remember when judging our leaders and their policies.

Abraham Lincoln, the greatest of American leaders who saved the country, was a wildly unpopular leader. Vilified by most of the press, portrayed pictorially as a gorilla or baboon, hated by the South whose rebellion he was warring and opposed by most of his generals and even cabinet members, Lincoln and his policies have clearly been vindicated by history. There are other examples in American history of the reverse, of temporarily popular leaders who history has discredited and criticized.

It is one of the weaknesses, of our mortal and necessarily temporary viewpoint, that one cannot view the future. Therefore popularity is a very slippery way to judge the correctness of policies and the competence and temper of our leaders. Yet, there is no denial that popularity is a positive asset for any leader. So, like all values and assets in our social world, there is no one thing that guarantees success in governing and in implementing policies.

There is a famous aphorism that has been attributed to Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant though it may be older than that. The saying is that any rabbi of a community that is universally popular and has no critics is not really a rabbi. But any rabbi who is universally unpopular and is a repugnant personality, then that leader is not a *mentsch*. So we have to be patient, realistic and hopeful about our leaders even if they may not be overwhelmingly popular at some time in their rule.

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks The Miracle of a Child

There is a mystery at the heart of Jewish existence, engraved into the first syllables of our recorded time.

The first words of God to Abraham were: "Go out from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house . . . And I will make you a great nation . . ."

In the next chapter there is another promise: "I will make your children like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust of the earth, so shall your offspring be counted."

Two chapters later comes a third: "God took him outside and said, 'Look at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.' Then He said to him, 'So shall your children be.'"

Finally, the fourth: "Your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations."

Four escalating promises: Abraham would be the father of a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky. He would be the father not of one nation but of many. What, though, was the reality? Early in the story, we read that Abraham was "very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold." He had everything except one thing – a child. Then God appeared to Abraham and said, "Your reward will be very great."

Until now, Abraham has been silent. Now, something within him breaks, and he asks: "O Lord God, what will you give me if I remain childless?" The first recorded words of Abraham to God are a plea for there to be future generations. The first Jew feared he would be the last.

Then a child is born. Sarah gives Abraham her handmaid Hagar, hoping that she will give him a child. She gives birth to a son whose name is Ishmael, meaning "God has heard." Abraham's prayer has been answered, or so we think. But in the next chapter, that hope is destroyed. Yes, says God, Ishmael will be blessed. He will be the father of twelve princes and a great nation. But he is not the child of Jewish destiny, and one day Abraham will have to part from him.

This pains Abraham deeply. He pleads: "If only Ishmael might live under Your blessing." Later, when Sarah drives Ishmael away, we read that "This distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son." Nonetheless, the decree remains. God insists that Abraham will have a son by Sarah. Both laugh. How can it be? They are old. Sarah is post-menopausal. Yet against possibility, the son is born. His name is Isaac, meaning "laughter":

Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Finally, the story seems to have a happy ending. After all the promises and prayers, Abraham and Sarah at last have a child. Then come the words which, in all the intervening centuries, have not lost

their power to shock:

After these things, God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you."

Abraham takes his son, travels for three days, climbs the mountain, prepares the wood, ties his son, takes the knife and raises his hand. Then a voice is heard from heaven: "Do not lay a hand on the boy." The trial is over. Isaac lives.

Why all the promises and disappointments? Why the hope so often raised, so often unfulfilled? Why delay? Why Ishmael? Why the binding? Why put Abraham and Sarah through the agony of thinking that the son for whom they have waited for so long is about to die?

There are many answers in our tradition, but one transcends all others. We cherish what we wait for and what we most risk losing. Life is full of wonders. The birth of a child is a miracle. Yet, precisely because these things are natural, we take them for granted, forgetting that nature has an architect, and history an author.

Judaism is a sustained discipline in not taking life for granted. We were the people born in slavery so that we would value freedom. We were the nation always small, so that we would know that strength does not lie in numbers but in the faith that begets courage. Our ancestors walked through the valley of the shadow of death, so that we could never forget the sanctity of life.

Throughout history, Jews were called on to value children. Our entire value system is built on it. Our citadels are schools, our passion, education, and our greatest heroes, teachers. The seder service on Pesach can only begin with questions asked by a child. On the first day of the New Year, we read not about the creation of the universe but about the birth of a child – Isaac to Sarah, Samuel to Hannah. Ours is a supremely child-centred faith.

That is why, at the dawn of Jewish time, God put Abraham and Sarah through these trials – the long wait, the unmet hope, the binding itself – so that neither they nor their descendants would ever take children for granted. Every child is a miracle. Being a parent is the closest we get to God – bringing life into being through an act of love.

Today, when too many children live in poverty and illiteracy, dying for lack of medical attention because those who rule nations are focused on fighting the battles of the past rather than shaping a safe future, it is a lesson the world has not yet learned. For the sake of humanity it must, for the tragedy is vast and the hour is late.

AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL "And he was standing over them under the tree and they ate" (18:8)

We learn hospitality from Abraham, but he learned it from the Creator. Abraham saw that nothing in the Universe is without purpose, and he saw that men utilized a tree to sit in its shade. This demonstrated the Creator's hospitality. When the tree also provides fruit, it is an additional gift of Hashem's hospitality. Abraham followed the system of "You shall walk in His ways" (Debarim 28:9).

Since we know that Abraham constantly proclaimed in the name of Hashem (12:8, 13:4, 21:33) everywhere, it is certain that he also did so when he stood over (served) his guests. As they ate and drank, they thanked him and praised his hospitality; but it is certain that he replied: "Who is the owner?"

Abraham always utilized the opportunity to speak at length on the necessity to recognize the Creator from His creations. It is certain that he pointed out the miracles of rain and wind and sunshine that produce food. And he spoke of the wonder of seeds in the fruit (1:11). And of the miracle of reproduction of species after their own kind (1:11, 1:21, 1:24) and of all the wonders of plan and purpose which fill the earth.

It is certain that he dilated on the kindly purpose of all G-d's phenomena, in the same vein as the Psalmist: "For You have caused me happiness by Your work, Hashem; I sing at the deeds of your hands. How great are your works, Hashem! How very deep are your thoughts!" (Tehillim 92:5-6).

Abraham's kindness to wayfarers was a reflection of Hashem's kindness to Mankind.

Quoted from "The Beginning" By R' Miller ZT'L

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