

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

VAYERA

OCTOBER 18-19, 2013

15 HESHVAN 5774

DEDICATIONS: in memory of Steve Iraqi (Shalom Rav ben Chana)



At Beth Torah - Around 1973 From Left to Right Mr. Esses, Mr. Hannan, Jack Kattan, David Tawil, Albert Shalom, Rabbi Jacob S Kassin, Rabbi Saul Tawil, Haham Ovadia Yosef , Haham Baruch Ben Hayim, Izzy Shammah, Harry Tawil with Rabbi Zevulun Leiberman behind him, Isaac Cabasso, Uncle Moe Gindi, Joe Gindi, Mr. Shmalo and the last two guys on the right we need help identifying.

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B'H, I will be in Florida this Shabbat

Editors Notes

Maran Haham Ovadia Yosef, z'sl

Our world changed last Monday afternoon when Maran, Haham Ovadia Yosef passed from this world into the world of truth. Within hours of his passing hundreds of thousands of people converged on Jerusalem for his funeral and burial. Estimates ranged from 750,000 people at the levaya at Porat Yosef Yeshiva in the Geula neighborhood to a million who had passed through the cemetery in the Sanhedria neighborhood by midnight. Imagine that more than 10% of Israel's population came to pay respects. The crowd, observers said, consisted of a cross-section of Israelis, from hareidi to Religious Zionist to secular. The evening showed a tremendous outpouring of love towards the Rishon LeZion.

A prayer at the Disco

On the Shabbat prior while we were all praying for a refuah and hoping and I must say believing that Haham Ovadia would recover; Rabbi Eli Mansour told a story that had been texted to him by a religious student in Israel. This young man rented an apartment in Ashdod. He thought he was in a nice quiet neighborhood. But at 10PM, the floors started to vibrate and the walls started to shake. Music was coming from everywhere. It turns out that there was a disco across the street and the pounding continued for most of the night. The young scholar needed to find a new place, but that would take time. Friday night at 10PM, it started up again. Blaring music coming through the walls and vibrating floors would mean another night without sleep. This was no way to spend Shabbat. But then suddenly the music stopped. The disc jockey told the people that they were pausing for a moment to say a prayer for Haham Ovadia and he asked that all answer Amen. This was Friday night with a club filled with what we might define as chilonim, irreligious Jews, and they were stopping to pray for the Rabbi. He really was able to cross all paths. He was loved by everyone.

What Made Him So Beloved ? He loved everyone as a father!

I received the following story from Rabbi Saul Kassin. He told of Elishai, a teacher in Eretz Yisrael, who works with immigrant youth. Recently Elishai was travelling on a bus and met an older man. The older man wore clothing that clearly identified him as a religious Jewish Rabbi, including a long coat and black hat. This Rabbi began to engage with Elishai in Torah learning during the bus ride.

As the bus approached their destination, the older Rabbi turned to Elishai and asked him about his work. Elishai told him about his young students, and noted that many of them feel far from Torah and the Jewish religion.

The Rabbi was silent. After a few minutes, he began to tell Elishai a story:

"Next month, I'm going to take early retirement from the Beit Din where I have worked as a judge for the past 25 years. But you should know that I didn't always look like this. These clothes, the beard, the religion, it's not something I learned from at home. My parents were older Holocaust survivors, and they didn't have the emotional ability to give me the attention that I needed. I spent my time in the streets, and before my Bar Mitzvah I was already practically a criminal.

By age 15, my antics had earned me the inglorious title of "the criminal" among my local community. My friends and I often spent the Holy Shabbat playing soccer near a local synagogue, and the ball would often fly into the synagogue courtyard. One week, I kicked the ball very hard. It flew out of the field and toward the synagogue just as the Rabbi came out. The ball went so far and hard, that it hit the Rabbi's black hat and knocked it to the ground. My friends and I fell down laughing.

The Rabbi came over. I then said mockingly, 'Shabbat Shalom, would his honor like to make Kiddush, or to join the game?' The Rabbi was not upset, he looked at me and asked, 'Where are your parents?' I answered, still mocking, 'My parents are dead.'

The Rabbi said, 'Come with me.' It amused me, so I decided to play along and go with him. We reached his house. He went in and I followed. He made Kiddush and gave me some to drink, and asked, 'Are you hungry?'

'Starving,' I said.

The Rabbi gestured to his Rebbetzin, and they set the table and gave me food. I ate like someone who hadn't eaten in a week. The Rabbi ate just a little, and mostly looked at me and talked. I later realized that I had eaten his share, too.

When I finished eating, he asked, 'Are you tired?' 'Exhausted,' I said.

The Rabbi offered me a bed. I went to sleep, and slept there the whole day. When I woke up it was Saturday night. The Rabbi asked me, 'What would you like to do?' I told him I wanted to go to the cinema and see a movie.

'How much does the cinema cost?' he asked. I told him one and a half shekels. He gave me the money and sent me on my way, and before I went he told me, 'Come again tomorrow.'

I came again tomorrow. I ate, slept, and got money for the cinema. Then another day, and more days to

follow. Over time I discovered that there were 12 kids like me, from off the street, who came to this Rabbi's house. I couldn't be ungrateful, and I also indeed began to really love him.

With time, he started to teach me about the Mitzvot. He bought me a pair of Tefillin. He would sit and teach me Torah. All thanks to him, I eventually went to Yeshiva, and ended up learning to be a Rabbi, and ultimately, a judge on a Beit Din. He married me off, came to my children's weddings, and was Sandek at my grandsons' Brit Milah's.

So don't despair of your students," the older Rabbi told Elishai.

"You see me as I am today, a judge in a Beit Din, but once I was just like them. Just Love them. Love them like they were your own Children, just as my Rabbi did with me."

As the two began to descend from the bus, Elishai asked the Rabbi, "What was the Rabbi's name?" The man responded, "What do you mean, was? He still is. He's very old, 92, but Baruch Hashem he is still alive."

"And what is his name?" Elishai asked again.

"Rabbi Ovadia Yosef," his fellow passenger answered.

His concern for others was unparalleled.

Rabbi Joey Haber told how his brother in law, Rabbi Shelby witnessed the Rabbi stop everything to speak with a widow. He overheard their conversation. The Rabbi asked her about her day, and they discussed the Machaneh Yehuda market and which stall had the least expensive tomatoes and which had the best bread. The rabbi who couldn't spare a moment, set aside whatever time he needed to help and care for others. This woman would come week after week. And one Sunday they saw the Rabbi crying over what she had been through. Haham Ovadia was a man of empathy.

The Rabbi's sons recalled that at age 79, Rav Ovadia had his first heart attack and the doctors said that he needed immediate bypass surgery. He asked to defer the surgery for three hours so he could return home first. His family begged him to first do the surgery, but Rav Ovadia insisted.

He said that he was in the midst of writing an answer to a question for an agunah (a woman whose husband is missing and who does not have a Jewish bill of divorce and is thus not free to remarry). Since he did not know how and when he would come out of the surgery, he said that he worried that if he did not first halachically free the agunah to marry, who would do so, who would care about her predicament?

He returned home to complete the written explanation of the Jewish legal reasons why this woman was free to marry. Only then did he return to the hospital for his surgery.

Depth of Knowledge

More than anything Haham Ovadia was known for his brilliance, his incredible memory and his organized thought process. Rabbi Yosef Mizrahi remarked that he was doing a radio show where the Rabbi would answer questions from callers. A journalist called into the station with a question on going to Egypt to interview President Sadat. Rabbi Mizrahi later realized that Haham Ovadia's twenty five minute answer included well over 100 sources.

My friend Rabbi Michael Wagner heard an Ashkenaz Rabbi in Monsey this Shabbat state that any Rabbi who did not have a set of Yabia Omer to refer to shouldn't consider himself a rabbi. When one contemplates just this one work, among the dozens of the rabbi's projects and realizes that each answer includes on average 50, 100 or more sources and some show 500 sources.

I heard of an Intricate question that was brought to Rav Elyashiv z'sl regarding a case in Nidah. After examining the case in detail the rabbi agreed to matir or permit the case, but only provided that three rabbis would agree to Matir.

So they approached Rabbi Shemuel Vozner of Bnai Berak, who said that with all due respect to Rav Elyashiv, he could not permit the case.

They then came to Haham Ovadia. He asked what the other rabbis said. When he heard that Rav Vozner refused to permit it, he suggested that they return to Rav Vozner and refer him to a certain page in the Sefer – the book titled Shevet HaLevi. This was a book authored by Rav Vozner himself and based on his response there, he would matir this situation. Rav Vozner responded, "it is amazing that Rav Ovadia knows my sefer better than me."

Photographic Memory

Many people say that Rav Ovadia had a photographic memory. There was a point in time that I believed in such a term, but today, based on science and experience, I doubt that such a thing exists.

In our Synagogue I am honored to share responsibilities with a number of wonderful rabbis and scholars. Our resident scholar is Rabbi Aharon Siegel of Yeshiva University. When I first met Rav Aharon, I was giving a class and he sourced as I spoke every statement I made. Any idea one draws upon, any story, law or idea, Rabbi Siegel can reference to the page or pages that idea can be found in the Talmud. I was sure that Rav Aharon was blessed with a photographic memory. We were all amazed. How else could he do it?

But once I got to know Rav Aharon and saw his diligence and dedication towards learning, I realized that whatever photograph he saw in his mind was

only there because he engraved the image into his mid by learning it again and again and again. Everything he learns, he reviews and repeats until it becomes a part of him. He is a living walking source of Torah. But with all Rav Aharon's greatness, he would be the first to state that compared to Haham Ovadia he is but a drop in the great scholars ocean. I was told that Rav Ovadia had 15,000 books in his library and knew everyone. But I am sure it was not because of some parlor trick, but the fact that he trained and focused his mind and reviewed and reviewed and reviewed.

Rabbi Mansour told of a student who came to the Rabbi with a question on a Tosafot – a medieval commentary on the Talmud from the tractate Baba Kama. This happens to be one of the longest comments of the Tosafists and discusses the Red Heifer. It is very difficult and in terms of applicable or practical Halacha has little relevance to our daily lives. Yet while the student opened his Gemara to read, Rav Ovadia knew the page by heart. After explaining it, Rav Ovadia told the student that he had gone over this piece more than 200 times.

Growing up, I had friends who knew the stats of every player on the Yankees, others who could tell you the football betting line and every stat and score by Sunday night, others who bragged that they knew every word to every Beatles song. Our minds are truly amazing, but I guess it depends what we focus on.

My son Jonah's Rosh Yeshiva at Netiv Aryeh, Rav Binah recounted that when he was tested by Rav Ovadia for Semicha, he was asked to read through a commentary of the Bet Yosef. After reading through the text, Haham Ovadia told him to go back to the third word on the fourth line which he pronounced incorrectly. The holy books were literally written over in his mind.

The Rabbi spent 18 hours a day studying. Any free moment was spent with a sefer, reviewing, learning and reviewing again. Nothing comes easy, but with effort anything is possible. What a lesson to all of us!

Greatness Earned and Not Inherited

Our teacher and Rabbi, Haham Baruch Ben Hayim, was for his entire life one of the closest friends of Haham Ovadia. They studied together as children and as rabbis under the tutelage of Haham Ezra Attia at Porat Yosef. Haham Baruch recalled that one day, Haham Ezra noticed that 14 year old Ovadia had been absent from school for a few days. He asked where he was and was told that Ovadia's father insisted that he put away the books and come to work to help with the family grocery store. Haham Ezra went to the family home that evening and confirmed the story. The shopkeeper explained that his son had a very sharp mind and was blessed with

an excellent memory and would be of great help in the shop. The father couldn't afford an employee. Now young Ovadia could open each day. Haham Ezra left without an argument.

The next morning when the father arrived at the shop he discovered that behind the counter was not his son, but instead the rosh yeshiva Haham Ezra was ready to help customers wearing an apron. "Better I should come to work in the store than the boy," cajoled the Rosh Yeshiva. "My bittul Torah matters less than his." The father was convinced and agreed to send his son back to Porat Yosef. There Haham Ezra became and would remain a surrogate father to Haham Ovadia.

When Haham Ovadia's brothers filled his boots with mud to prevent him from going to Yeshiva, he patiently dug out the mud and went to learn. When Haham Ovadia's own son passed away recently and while the Rabbi was an onan forbidden from any of the misvot, his son's discovered him learning. Father they pleaded. The Rabbi responded, I know, I just find it too difficult to stay away from my books.

Not of this Age

The Baba Sali once stated that the Neshama or soul of Haham Ovadia was not from the present but from the Geonim, the sages of a millennium ago. Rav Sharabi who studied Sod – the secrets of the Torah - with Haham Ovadia stated that he bore the soul of none other than Saadia Gaon himself.

Rabbi Benschushan told of a letter he saw written by Rav Kiduri where he noted that when it came to establishing law one should know that, "Kevar Hichrizo BaShamayim, Shehalacha kemoto bechol makom – that it was already decided in Heaven that the Halacha is decided in his (Haham Ovadia's) favor in all cases.

The Plight of the Agunot

One of the battles that Rabbi Ovadia took on was the plight of the agunot. This was especially true for women who would lose their husbands at war. Following the Yom Kippur war as Rishom LeZion, Haham Ovadia was responsible for "freeing" the over 900 agunot of missing and presumed dead soldiers following the Yom Kippur War. Over the years he wrote up papers allowing more than 2500 women to remarry.

On Sunday I was discussing this and explained that had the rabbi made an error, the ramifications would have been terrible. It would mean that any children, grandchildren and descendants of the second marriage would be classified as mamzerim. Rabbi Lefkowitz who was sitting with us recounted stories and said that we should know that when a great rabbi issues a pesak Halacha, Hashem will see to it that the pesak will not be in error.

Rabbi BenShushan told the story of one woman, a known anti-religious liberal leftist, who wanted to do everything in her power to discredit the rabbi and discredit the rabbinate. Decisions such as these she felt, should be made by secular courts and not the rabbis.

Rehearsing her story and forging documents she came before the rabbi with tears in her eyes to plead her case. She was an excellent actress. In the end though, the Rabbi told her he had to think about it. He asked her to come back in a week. A week later, she returns. She is driven there by her husband. She hoped to receive the document and take the story with him directly to the news to prove her accusations.

Again she pleaded her case with tears swearing up and down that her husband had died in war. She had all the documents and her tears didn't stop. Finally Haham Ovadia agreed to write the document asserting that her husband was at that time no longer alive and permitting her to remarry.

Victorious and with documents in hand, she ran down the stairs towards her husband in the car. She knocked on the window thinking he had fallen asleep while waiting. Still he didn't respond. Her husband in fact he had a heart attack while sitting in the car a few moments before. The ambulances were called, the medics were called, but it was too late he died. The story circulated throughout the country.

The law was decided already in Heaven as Rav Ovadia had decided it. The rabbi had stated the husband was dead and as such he was. I'm sure though that the Rabbi still felt horrible.

Touched each of us

There were close to a million people at the funeral and millions more were watching from around the country and around the world. Thinking about it, I realized that it is likely that every one of those people was touched in some personal way by the rabbi. I too was personally touched by the rabbi. I recall first meeting him when I was about 11 years old. He came to the Yeshiva and a few of us were brought out by Cantor Meir Levy who had just come to Ahi Ezer from Israel and the Israeli Army. We were there to sing for the Rabbi. Then I was brought up to be "tested". I guess with my Great Uncle David Bibi and Isadore Dayan and my dad there with Rabbi Wolf, I was selected, if for nothing else than my name alone. I was asked to read and explain something and I did get that great smile and the tap across the cheek. I recalled him coming to visit over the years in Deal and Brooklyn and always asking for a Beracha. The only time I spoke with the Rabbi was right after I was married. Chantelle and I went to Israel and there we were sort of adopted by Bert and Adele Chabot, A'H. Mr. Chabot took me to pray by Haham Ovadia in

his small Synagogue located by the Great Synagogue. There he took me up and introduced me and told him who my family was. The Rabbi spoke with me for a few minutes. The gist was that although my father's family had the crown of malchut and my mother's family the crown of Kehunah, the most important crown was the crown of Torah and that I would need to earn. He concluded his blessing with a double tap across the cheek. For some reason, I can feel that tap now. I saw the Rabbi many times after that, but never again spoke with him. Chantelle asked me why not and when I told her that for some reason I became tongue tied with my Hebrew she was surprised. As I aged, I had a greater appreciation of how great he truly was and yes, I got nervous in front of such greatness.

Rabbi Daniel Bouskila tells how in 1975, when Rav Ovadia first came to Los Angeles," I was 11 years old. Our entire school went to the airport to greet him with songs, and the few Sephardim amongst us approached him to kiss his hand, as is our custom. After speaking at our school, Rav Ovadia was scheduled to speak all over Los Angeles. A schedule of his appearances was distributed, and my father promised to take me to hear him every night. I was excited, because I thought his robe and turban were from another world, and he looked so cool in his dark sunglasses. (His eyes were very sensitive to light.) I was also amazed at how he stood in front of audiences without a single book or note cards, and quoted pages of Talmud by heart.

"My father took me to hear him for three consecutive nights. One night, my father had to work late, and he asked my mother to take me. Of all nights to ask my mother, this was the one night where Rav Ovadia was speaking in a yeshiva, where no women would be in attendance. My mother took me, and upon arrival, she was, indeed, the only woman there. We stood outside contemplating what to do, when Rav Ovadia suddenly arrived. As he walked by us, he greeted my mother, and when I kissed his hand, he gave me a loving caress on my cheek. I guess by now he recognized me from the previous nights! He walked into the Beit Midrash, and my mother and I stayed outside. Apparently he noticed that we did not come inside, for, less than a minute later, he walked back outside and signaled to us to come in. As we walked in – a woman in pants with her 11-year-old son – to a room filled with men, Rav Ovadia respectfully asked the men in the first row to make room for me and my mother. He then got onto the stage to speak, and started by looking at my mother and saying, "Blessed are the parents who raise their children in the path of Torah."

What does the future hold?

We have barely touched on the life and greatness of Haham Ovadia. These stories though give us a glimpse into the man our generation was privileged to be blessed with. He was a once in a lifetime. Rav Ovadia was a brilliant genius with a heart of gold who worked tirelessly for his people. We have not touched upon his unifying the Sephardic World and his successful efforts to embolden us with pride. We have not touch upon his creation of Shas. We have not touched upon his bringing Maran Yosef Karo and the Shulchan Aruch into modern times. In the coming days, weeks and months, we will hear many more stories. And perhaps in time we will really begin to understand what we lost.

This man was the pillar of Torah, kindness, and prayer. He was the leader of the generation in so many ways: In his humility, in his holiness, in his discourses, in his halachic rulings, and in his understanding. Maran was dedicated to the collective needs of the entire nation with every fiber of his being.

The world changed last Monday. With Hama Ovadia gone, we have two choices. Without him we can lose what he did and splinter and fight, or we can rally together and continue his efforts with his merit shining upon us from above.

When Rabbi Abittan passed away eight years ago, our little Synagogue in Long Beach had a choice; we could have fizzled out of existence or built upon his memory. By repeating his teachings, Rabbi Abittan lives on forever. If we few, can do this with Rabbi Abittan's memory, we can expect nothing less from Kelal Yisrael with the memory of Maran, Haham Ovadia Yosef. It is a fact that His teachings will be repeated somewhere in the world for every minute of every day of the rest of our lives. But let's not forget his dreams, to unify all of Israel, to be kind and understanding, to look for ways to say yes, rather than a quick no, to dedicate ourselves to learn more and to open our hearts and our homes to our neighbors who have not been as fortunate as us both materially and more important spiritually. Let us make sure his dream lives on as well.

May his zechut protect and defend us. Tehi Nafsho Serurah Be'Sror HaChayim.

Excuses Excuses

As we begin this week's portion we find that Abraham is sitting outside his tent. It's been three days since he circumcised his entire household and as the rabbis teach us, the third day is the most difficult. G-d lets the sun really shine that day as he comes to visit Abraham teaching us the importance of Bikur Holim. It's a classical Middle Eastern Hamseen or heat wave and nobody is out.

Then suddenly Abraham sees three men in the distance and he pardons himself from Hashem in order to attend to them. Here we see how much G-d values man who goes out of his way for his fellow man. And we see the true kindness of Abraham. Abraham had many potential excuses not to get up himself to serve the guests. He was a wealthy man with many servants who could be called upon to serve the guests. He was an honored man, known among the populace as a Priest of G-d, and serving guests might be beneath one of such honored stature. He was recovering from surgery on the hottest of days, both excellent reasons to simply say, "not today". And possibly the greatest excuse of all was that at that moment, he was talking to G-d and nothing else should matter.

How often are we presented with an opportunity to do a misvah, yet we come up with an excuse? I remember Mr. Siegel, my seventh grade teacher quoting George Washington Carver, "Ninety-nine percent of the failures come from people who have the habit of making excuses. "

He wasn't into excuses. I recall hearing a story where the morning flight of four men from Telz in Cleveland and headed to New York is diverted to Washington. After arriving in BWI, they meet up with and form a minyan with six Chasidim who have also been on their plane. Another man appears, says kaddish and as he does so, bursts into tears. When queried he relates that his recently deceased father had, the night before, come to him in a dream reminding him that it was his yahrzeit and asking him to say Kaddish. The man offered some feeble excuse as to why he couldn't get to a minyan. The father inquired, ? What if I were to send you a minyan? Would you say kaddish for me then?? ?

Most of us are not so lucky to have someone in heaven adjust weather and airport traffic control to overcome our excuse. Excuses are the nails used to build a house of failure.

As children of Abraham, our DNA has built into it the ability to overcome any excuse.

Haham Ovadia z'sl often told us of our responsibility to have guests over especially those less fortunate and less involved. Often we think we are doing them a favor by inviting them, but typically in doing Chesed, chesed is done for us. Let's never forget the phrase coined by my friend Jack Doueck that chesed is a boomerang. And we never can realize where the good will come from, but we should be assured that although we don't do chesed expecting a return, return it will.

Let's close this week with a beautiful story told by my dear friend Rabbi Paysach Krohn.

He writes: The Sages (Nedarim 81a) teach, Be attentive to the children of the poor, because from them Torah will flourish [because they are not encumbered by other involvements (Ran)]. The word Torah literally means teaching, hence the Talmudic phrase can be understood to mean that we should be attentive to the children of the poor, for there is much we can learn from them. In this touching story told to me by my son-in-law, Rabbi Shlomo Dovid Pfeiffer, we learn sensitivity from a poverty-stricken family.

Chezky Silverman (names have been changed) of Chicago was learning in a yeshivah in Jerusalem and loving every minute of it. His chavrusas were all Americans except for his afternoon chavrusa, Yankel Bernstein, an ebullient young married Yerushalmi. Yankel and his wife had five children and although the family was poor, his enthusiasm for life and Torah was contagious.

One Thursday afternoon Yankel invited Chezky for the Friday-night meal. Chezky delightedly accepted the invitation as he looked forward to meeting Yankel's family. The Bernsteins lived in an apartment complex on Rechov Shmuel Hanavi. Chezky had been told that the Bernsteins were poor, but he was not prepared for what he saw in their apartment. After Kiddush, when he made Hamotzi, Yankel was cutting the challah into very thin slices. Could the family be relying on this challah to last for all the Shabbos meals? Chezky, who came from a well-to-do home, could not bear the thought.

The meal soon became an anguished ordeal for Chezky as he saw the minuscule portions of fish, soup, and chicken Mrs. Bernstein served the children. Chezky's own portion was larger than anyone else's, and he felt guilty, for he understood that he was getting more at the expense of the Bernsteins. Although the divrei Torah and zemiros were lively and the children certainly seemed happy, Chezky vowed he would never come there again for a meal. It just wasn't fair to Yankel's family.

A few weeks later Yankel again invited Chezky for a Shabbos meal but Chezky said he already had other plans. Again and again Yankel invited his younger chavrusa, and each time Chezky had another excuse for not coming. Finally Yankel understood that Chezky's excuses were just that -- excuses.

One afternoon Yankel said directly, "I've invited you numerous times since you came that Friday night months ago, and each time you refuse me. Did we not treat you right that first time? Were our standards

of kashrus not up to yours? Did any of my children say something that upset you?" Chezky was surprised at how sensitive Yankel was to his refusals. He couldn't hide the truth any longer. "I'll tell you honestly, Reb Yankel," he said. "I had no idea how you and your family lived. That Friday night I couldn't help but notice there was not much food to go around the table and frankly I felt guilty eating anything because I knew it was at the expense of your wonderful children." Chezky had to hold back his urge to cry.

Yankel put his hands on Chezky's shoulders and said, "You really are considerate, but let me explain and I think you'll understand.

"My wife and I come from poor families. When we were married, we discussed the likelihood that we would live the rest of our lives below the standards of many of our friends. We decided from the start that if we were to be blessed with children, we would invite guests once in a while to teach the children the middah (trait) of hachnasas orchim (hospitality to guests).

"We don't have guests very often, but when we do, it is to show the children that we share the Ribono Shel Olam's blessings with others."

Chezky understood Reb Yankel's explanation but still couldn't allow himself to eat again at Reb Yankel's home. Maybe sometime in the future he would reconsider, but not now.

As Lag B'Omer approached, Chezky planned a trip north to Miron, where thousands gather every year at the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. He mentioned it to Reb Yankel, who assured him that the trip was worthwhile. Reb Yankel said he would go along and bring his two eldest sons. They planned to meet on Rechov Malchei Yisrael where the buses to Miron were gathering. In a festive mood, Chezky got up early and decided to surprise Yankel's children. He went to a nearby makolet (grocery store), bought a few ice-cream sandwiches, and brought them to Yankel's apartment. As he entered the home he called out to the children, "Here, look what I bought for you lich'vod (in honor of) Lag B'Omer.

The children took the ice-cream sandwiches, dutifully said their quick thank-you's, and scampered out of the apartment.

Chezky was surprised. The Bernstein children could not have been accustomed to eating ice-cream sandwiches too often, and surely it was something

special to them. Why hadn't they reacted with greater enthusiastic thanks, instead of just muttering a few words and running off?

A few minutes later, Chezky could hear rumbling up the steps. Before he could turn around there were 15 neighborhood children in the Bernstein dining room around the table. They were each excited as they waited for the two oldest Bernstein children to come into the room.

In a moment the two Bernstein boys came to the table with the ice-cream sandwiches and knives in their hands. With meticulous care they cut the ice-cream sandwiches into small portions and with beaming smiles handed a section to each of the children who were present. Then, in unison, the Yerushalmi children theatrically licked the white lining of ice cream frozen between the brown top-and-bottom crackers, smiling and joking as they devoured their special morning treat.

Chezky observed the scene and turned to Reb Yankel who stood beaming at the dining room entrance. Their eyes met. There was no need for words -- they both understood. Indeed the children had absorbed the message.

Shabbat Shalom
David Bibi

Summary of The Weekly Torah Reading:

1st Aliya: The three angels appear to Avraham and foretell the birth of Yitzchak. Upon hearing the news, Sarah laughs to herself.

2nd Aliya: The angels depart to destroy Sodom, and Hashem [G-d] tells Avraham about His plans for destroying Sodom. Pasuk 18:18-19 proclaims G-d's confidence in Avraham to teach the world the concept of justice. Avraham negotiates, unsuccessfully, on behalf of Sodom.

3rd Aliya: The story of the destruction of Sodom is told. Lot's generosity to the "two visitors" is rewarded and he, his wife, and only two of their children are saved from Sodom.

4th Aliya: Lot's wife looks back upon the destruction of Sodom and dies, and Lot and his two daughters escape into the mountains. Lot's daughters conspire to rebuild humankind, and taking advantage of Lot's drunkenness, they become pregnant from Lot resulting in the birth of Ammon and Moav. Avraham encounters Abimelech after which Sarah gives birth to Yitzchak in the year 2048.

5th Aliya: Yishmael and Hagar are forced out of Avraham's home, and an angel reassures Hagar of Yishmael's destiny.

6th Aliya: Abimelech and his general Phichol resolve their conflict with Avraham over water rights, and they "sign" a covenant of peace.

7th Aliya: In the year 2085, when Avraham was 137 and Yitzchak was 37, Avraham is commanded to sacrifice Yitzchak. This amazing story heralds the end of Avraham and Sarah's era, and the beginning of Yitzchak and Rivkah's era.

Sometime around the year 3043 - 705 b.c.e., Elisha took over the mantle of prophecy from Eliyahu. Elisha served the Jewish people as their mentor and protector, and this week's Haftorah relates two of the miraculous incidents that he performed. The first story is of Ovadya's widow and the pitcher of oil that continued to pour until she had enough oil to pay off all her debts and make a decent living.

The second is the Shunamis who was unable to conceive children. After being blessed with a son, the child dies and Elisha performs the miracle of resurrecting the boy's life. In both instances, basic human needs were satisfied through the righteous individuals trust in the Navi and in Hashem's providence. The widow's husband was the great Ovadya who risked his own life and fortune to protect 100 prophets from the murderous purge of Achav and Ezevel. The Shunamis and her husband were wealthy, G-d fearing people who generously provided for all who needed. Both women could have expected that their basic needs for income and family be deservedly provided by G-d.

The theme of Vayera is trusting Hashem beyond the limits of rational and assumed justice. As with Sarah and Avraham, the trust that Ovadya's widow and the Shunamis had in Hashem was unrelated to their limited human expectations. They trusted Hashem to provide as He saw fit, without any strings attached.

EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

"And He said, 'By Myself I swear – the word of Hashem.'" (Beresheet 22:16)

After the incredible act of Abraham willing to sacrifice his only son, Hashem makes an oath to Abraham and blesses him with great blessings. The Midrash asks: What was the purpose of this oath? The Midrash answers that Abraham asked Hashem to swear never to test him or his son Yitzhak again.

However, this is difficult, because according to Rabenu Yonah in Pirkei Abot, the difficulties that Abraham had in burying Sarah were a test. Despite the fact that Hashem promised Abraham the entire land of Israel, he had to struggle to bury her and paid an enormous price. So we see he was tested again! What happened to the oath?

Rabbi Shimshon Pincus z"l answers that the test of burying Sarah was not a separate test. It was part of the test of the sacrifice of Yitzhak. The nature of man is that when he does a great heroic deed of self-sacrifice for the sake of Hashem, he expects a special treatment from Hashem. That due to this great act, Hashem will "smile" upon him. But, if the opposite happens, he will have a complaint in his heart, "Is this the type of treatment I get after what I did?" So when Abraham came back after Akedah Yitzhak, he was tested right away with the burial of Sarah. This was a continuation of the test of the Akedah to see if he performed the Akedah with a full heart, not expecting anything in return.

This is a great lesson for all people. One shouldn't expect that after doing a great deed he will now receive special treatment. On the contrary, it might be expected that the opposite will happen as a test of his true devotion to Hashem. As the Torah says, "Tamim tihyeh in Hashem Elokecha – be wholehearted and trusting with Hashem your G-d." Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Reuven Semah

We are all familiar with the story of the three angels appearing to Abraham, and how he ran about doing kindness for them in order to show them hospitality. We also see in this same perashah that Lot received angels graciously and exerted himself on their behalf. There is, however, a major difference in how they are referred to in the Torah. When the angels came to Abraham, they are called ohabt - people - and indeed, the Midrash says they looked like Arab peasants. When they came to Lot, they are called ohftkn - angels - because they looked like what they were. This is not coincidental, but rather to teach us an important lesson about the different types of hesed done by Abraham and Lot. Lot went out of his way to entertain his guests because they looked like angels. Had they appeared as regular people, and for sure as peasants, they would not have gotten such treatment. Abraham was on a higher level and even when he saw peasants, he went all out to take care of them. We, who are descendants of Abraham, must emulate our forefather and do kindness to everyone, not only the important people who need favors but even (and especially) the regular folks. That shows our hesed to be genuine and part of our inner self. Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

The early history of humanity as told in the Torah is a series of disappointments. God gives human beings freedom, which they then misuse. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. Cain murders Abel. Within a relatively short time the world before the Flood has become dominated by violence. All flesh had perverted its way on the earth. God creates order. Man creates chaos. Even after the Flood humanity, in the form of the builders of Babel, is guilty of hubris, thinking they can build a tower whose top "reaches heaven."

Humans fail to respond to God, which is where Abraham enters the picture. We are not quite sure, at the beginning, what it is that Abraham is summoned to. We know he is commanded to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and travel "to the land I will show you," but what he is to do there, we do not know. On this the Torah is silent. What is Abraham's mission? What makes him special? What makes him, not simply a good man in a bad age, as was Noah, but a leader and the father of a nation of leaders?

To decode the mystery we have to recall what the Torah has been signalling prior to this point. I suggested in previous essays that a, perhaps the, key theme is a failure of responsibility. Adam and Eve lack personal responsibility. Adam says, "It wasn't me; it was the woman." Eve says, "It wasn't me, it was the serpent." It is as if they deny being the author of their own acts – as if they do not understand either freedom or the responsibility it entails.

Cain does not deny personal responsibility. He does not say, "It wasn't me. It was Abel's fault for provoking me." Instead he denies moral responsibility: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Noah fails the test of collective responsibility. He is a man of virtue in an age of vice, but he makes no impact on his contemporaries. He saves his family (and the animals) but no one else. According to the plain reading of the text, he does not even try.

Understand this and we understand Abraham. He exercises personal responsibility. A quarrel breaks out between his herdsmen and those of his nephew Lot. Seeing that this was no random occurrence but the result of their having too many cattle to be able to graze together, Abraham immediately proposes a solution:

Abram said to Lot, "Let there not be a quarrel between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land

before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." (Gen. 13: 8-9)

Note that Abraham passes no judgment. He does not ask whose fault the argument was. He does not ask who will gain from any particular outcome. He gives Lot the choice. He sees the problem and acts.

In the next chapter we are told about a local war, as a result of which Lot is among the people taken captive. Immediately Abraham gathers a force, pursues the invaders, rescues Lot and with him all the other captives, whom he returns safely to their homes, refusing to take any of the spoils of victory that he is offered by the grateful king of Sodom.

This is a strange passage – not the image of Abraham the nomadic shepherd we see elsewhere. Its presence is best understood in the context of the story of Cain. Abraham shows he is his brother's (or brother's son's) keeper. He immediately understands the nature of moral responsibility. Despite the fact that Lot had chosen to live where he did with its attendant risks, Abraham did not say, "His safety is his responsibility not mine."

Then, in this week's parsha, comes the great moment at which for the first time a human being challenges God himself. God is about to pass judgment on Sodom. Abraham, fearing that this will mean that the city will be destroyed, says:

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?"

This is a remarkable speech. By what right does a mere mortal challenge God himself?

The short answer is that God himself signalled that he should. Listen carefully to the text:

Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him" ... Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

Those words, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" are a clear hint that God wants Abraham to respond, otherwise why would He have said them?

The story of Abraham can only be understood against the backdrop of the story of Noah. There too, God told Noah in advance that he is about to bring punishment to the world.

So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth."

Noah did not protest. To the contrary, we are told three times that Noah "did as God commanded him." Noah accepted the verdict. Abraham challenged it. Abraham understood the third principle: collective responsibility.

The people of Sodom were not his brothers and sisters, so he was going beyond what he did in rescuing Lot. He prayed on their behalf because he understood the idea of human solidarity, immortally expressed by John Donne (in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, 1623):

No man is an island,
Entire of itself ...
Any man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.

But a question remains. Why did God call on Abraham to challenge Him? Was there anything Abraham knew that God didn't know? The idea is absurd. The answer is surely this: Abraham was to become the role model and initiator of a new faith, one that would not defend the human status quo but challenge it.

Abraham had to have the courage to challenge God if his descendants were to challenge human rulers, as Moses and the prophets did. Jews do not accept the world that is. They challenge it in the name of the world that ought to be. This is a critical turning point in human history: the birth of the world's first religion of protest – a faith that challenges the world instead of accepting it.

Abraham was not a conventional leader. He did not rule a nation. There was as yet no nation for him to lead. But he was the role model of leadership as Judaism understands it. He took responsibility. He acted; he didn't wait for others to act. Of Noah, the Torah says, "he walked with God." But to Abraham, God himself said, "Walk before me," (Gen. 17: 1),

meaning: be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility.

Judaism is God's call to responsibility.

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky Meting Justice - Meeting Kindness

In what must be one of the greatest transitional scenes in the entire Biblical narrative, this week the Torah transposes us from the gracious home of Avraham in one scene and to the evil city of S'dom in the next. Avraham's home was one of kindness. It was a home where the master of the house would run to greet nomadic wanderers, and invite them into his abode only three days after a bris milah! It was a home in which Sora had opened a door in every direction, ensuring that there was an unrestricted invitation to any wayfarer, no matter which direction he or she came from.

The scene switches to S'dom, a city in which kindness and charity were unheard of. A city in which a damsel who committed the terrible crime of feeding a pauper, was smeared with honey and set out for the bees. Sdom was a city where visitors who had the audacity to ask for overnight lodging were treated to a special type of hospitality. They were placed in beds, and then, if they were too short for the beds, their limbs were tortuously stretched to fit the bed; if they were larger than the beds their limbs were chopped off.

How does the Torah make the transition from the world of kindness and charity to the world of evil? The Parsha tells us the story of three angels who visited Avraham. Each had a mission. Rashi tells us, "one to announce to Sarah the birth of a son, one to overthrow Sodom, and one to cure Abraham." You see, three were needed as one angel does not carry out two commissions. "Raphael," explains Rashi, "who healed Abraham went on to rescue Lot, as healing and saving may be one mission." And so the scene moves from Avraham in Eilonai Mamrei to Lot in S'dom, where the angels posing again as wayfarers were graciously invited. They saved the hospitable Lot and destroyed the rest of the city.

I have a simple question. Why did the angel who was sent to destroy S'dom make a stop at Avraham's home? Two angels could have gone to Avraham's home, one to heal Avraham and the other to inform Sora of the good news. The third could have gone directly to S'dom and waited there for the others to catch up. Why make a detour to Avraham?

Traditionally, young children who start learning Talmud, are introduced to Tractate Bava Metzia in general and the chapter Eilu M'tziyos in particular. The tractate deals with property law and emphasizes respect for other people's possessions. Eilu M'tziyos stresses the laws of returning lost items and the responsibilities of a finder of those objects. Some wanted the boys to learn about the blessings, but Rav Moshe Feinstein insisted that the custom not be changed. He wanted to imbue the youngsters of the enormous responsibilities that they have to their fellow man. One cannot be a Jew only in shul where he can sway, pray, and recite blessings, but one must also be also be a Jew in the outside world, where the tests of honesty arise each day.

I heard the story of one of those youngsters, who found his way off the beaten yeshiva path. His college-years search for spirituality found him studying with a yogi in Bombay, India who railed against Western comforts and derided the culture of materialism. He preached peace, love, and harmony while decrying selfishness and greed. The young man was enamored with his master's vociferous objections to Western society, until he was together with him on a Bombay street. A wallet lay on the ground. There was cash and credit cards sticking out from it. It was clearly owned by an American tourist. The Yogi picked it up and put it in his sarong. "But it may belong to someone," protested his young charge. "It is a gift from the gods," he answered, "heaven meant it for us" The young man's protests fell on deaf ears.

At that moment, the words of his Rabbi back in fifth grade rang in his ears. "These are the items that must be announced for return; any item with an identifying sign"

He was stirred by truth of his traditions, and the purity of his past. He left the Yogi and the wallet, and eventually returned to a Torah life.

It is easy to rail against others. It is easy to talk about loose morals and unethical behavior. It's even easy to destroy Sdom. But Hashem did not let the angels do just that. He told them all to them first visit Avraham. He wanted them to see what kindness really means. See an old man run to greet total strangers. See a 90-year-old woman knead dough to bake you fresh bread. Meet the man who will plead for mercy on behalf of S'dom. And then, and only then can you mete the punishment that they truly deserve. Because without studying the good, we cannot understand the true flaws of the bad. Without watching Abraham commit true kindness, we should not watch the inhabitants of Sdom get their due.