

# JewishTimes

VOL. XII NO. 2 — NOVEMBER 2, 2012

## The Many Perfections of **ABRAHAM** **THE NOAHIDE**

ANCIENT  
CLAY TABLET:  
EVIDENCE OF  
**SODOM'S  
DEMISE?**



# **GOD'S JUSTICE**



# SODOM SEEN

A clay tablet that has baffled scientists for 150 years has been identified as a witness's account of the asteroid suspected of being behind the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Researchers who cracked the cuneiform symbols on the Planisphere tablet believe that it recorded an asteroid thought to have been more than half a mile across.

The tablet, found by Henry Layard in the remains of the library in the royal place at Nineveh in the mid-19th century, is thought to be a 700 B.C. copy of notes made by a Sumerian astronomer watching the night sky. He referred to the asteroid as a "white stone bowl approaching" and recorded it as it "vigorously swept along." Using computers to recreate the night sky thousands of years ago, scientists have pinpointed his sighting to shortly before dawn on June 29 in the year 3123 B.C.

About half the symbols on the tablet have survived and half of those refer to the asteroid. The other symbols record the positions of clouds and constellations. In the past 150 years scientists have made five unsuccessful attempts to translate the tablet.

Mark Hemsall, one of the researchers from Bristol

University who cracked the tablet's code, said: "It's a wonderful piece of observation, an absolutely perfect piece of science." He said the size and route of the asteroid meant that it was likely to have crashed into the Austrian Alps at Köfels. As it traveled close to the ground it would have left a trail of destruction from supersonic shock waves and then slammed into the Earth with a cataclysmic impact. Debris consisting of up to two-thirds of the asteroid would have been hurled back along its route and a flash reaching temperatures of 400 Centigrade (752 Fahrenheit) would have been created, killing anyone in its path.

About one million sq kilometers (386,000 sq miles) would have been devastated and the impact would have been equivalent to more than 1,000 tons of TNT exploding. The researchers say that the asteroid's impact would explain why at Köfels there is evidence of an ancient landslide 3 miles wide and a quarter of a mile thick.

Dr Hemsall said that at least 20 ancient myths record devastation of the type and on the scale of the asteroid's impact, including the Old Testament account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. ■

## ABRAHAM'S PERFECTIONS

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

In His Torah, God profiles Abraham's many perfections. Clearly, God intends to educate all generations on Abraham's ways that we are to emulate, explaining why God selected him and informed him of His ways of justice, including Sodom's destruction. It is nothing less than remarkable that Abraham possessed and cultivated such a keen sensitivity towards charity and justice. And I don't refer simply to monetary charity. I refer to a finely-honed understanding and insight into psychology, justice and politics, through which Abraham was charitable. God highlights many examples for our study.

When famine struck and he had no choice but to seek sustenance in Egypt, Abraham actually asked (not told) Sarah his wife to lie and say she was his sister. For if they were married, the Egyptians might murder Abraham so as to take Sarah. It is fair to suggest (based on Gen. 12:5) that Abraham traveled to Egypt with many people, perhaps even a minimum of 318 men (Gen. 14:14). Yet, Abraham, being charitable, preferred political strategies to military force, for he was a man of charity first, and then justice (Gen. 18:19). Thus, Abraham did not engage his men using military tactics at first, rather, he opted for a political course, as he asked Sarah to lie, "...so that they might do good to me for your sake and save my life on your account (Gen. 12:13)." This obviated military recourse. Of course life is more important, but Abraham mentioned it second, since here, his life depended on the first consideration as a friend explained: "Abraham assumed the Egyptians would treat him well financially (bribe him), if he posed as Sarah's brother. (They would not use force unless they were married...he being viewed as a threat.) Once gifts were given to Abraham, they could not possibly harm him or retract afterwards." Certainly, Abraham would quickly rise to save Sarah, who he must eventually disclose as his wife. Abraham would not have left Sarah for long. He would surely attempt a rescue her as he did regarding Lote, who also was kidnapped. Now, after having been treated so well by Egypt, it would not bode

well with that society, had they attacked Abraham once he disclosed his true relationship to the officers and to Pharaoh. The people would rebel, had Egypt's government benefited Abraham and suddenly reversed their kindness. This was Abraham's plan, "that they might do good to me for your sake and save my life on your account." The "doing good" at first, would politically save his life.

Although Abraham's plan was wise, God still intervened plaguing Egypt to save Sarah, taken against her will to Pharaoh. This was possibly done if Pharaoh approached Sarah sooner than Abraham anticipated. It appears Abraham's plan did not have time enough to succeed, explaining why God had to intervene. We learn how God protects his righteous followers...perhaps after they have exhausted their resources and strategies.

Abraham was not fearful about waging battle against men of great stature; he battled four powerful kings who conquered the five opposing kings and their armies. He fought them victoriously to save Lote. Genesis 14:16 carefully tells us that Abraham first returned the possessions and then afterwards "also Lote", and all the people. Lote was not returned first, perhaps as Abraham did not wish others to wrongly view him as fighting his own selfish battles, and caring nothing for others. Therefore, he was careful to return their property first. This displays another sensitivity possessed by Abraham.

When returning all the people and possessions, Abraham refused to take any reward from Sodom's King, raising his hand to God (ibid 14:12) "the One who owns heaven and Earth." He wished his success in life to be solely derived God who owns all. He used this opportunity as a chance to educate others about God's world design that sustains all life. He also did not wish others to think he warred for money instead of justice; refusing the reward conveyed this truth too. Abraham's fame would thereby sanctify God's name, the One on whom Abraham relied...and Abraham would also be famous as one who cares for all people, not just his relative. Thirdly, Abraham was most probably acutely aware of Sodom's vile ways, and did not wish to tarnish his teachings through any association with Sodom, via receipt of his reward.

After Abraham is shown as perfect with all mankind, being charitable and just with Pharaoh, not allowing fear of battle to dissuade his saving of Lote, and acting

honorably with Sodom...Genesis 15:5 teaches that God promised to increase Abraham's seed as the stars of heaven. God then tells him his seed will inherit the land.

Regarding his descendants' receipt of Israel and concerning Sodom's fate, Abraham inquires of God's justice. In contrast, regarding the famine, and both Sarah's and Lote's kidnapping, we do not see Abraham inquiring from God. We can answer that matters of reward and punishment demand an explanation of God's justice. But about famine and people's free will (kidnapping) there is no question on God's justice. For famine must occur based on the essential natural laws, and mankind's injustice is not God's fault. Thus, Abraham does not inquire about famine and kidnapping, but when God rewards (his seed) and punishes (Sodom) Abraham rightfully inquires. Nonetheless, God does intervene to save his righteous followers. God plagues Pharaoh, and perhaps helped Abraham conquer those mightier and more numerous than he, when saving Lote. Abraham also did not inquire regarding the obligation to circumcise himself and his household, or to sacrifice Isaac. These too are not areas of justice, but rather, perfection.

*"Once the destroyer is given permission, it does not distinguish between righteous and evil people. Not only this, but it commences [death] starting with the righteous people (Baba Kama 60a)."*

Did you notice the contradiction? If the destroyer does not distinguish, how can it commence with the righteous?! That's distinguishing! Additionally, why start with the righteous people?

This quote above was said in connection with Moses' warning on the night of the Firstborn Deaths in Egypt, "No man shall exit from the opening of his house." Now, although God did not command this upon the Jews, Moses added it of his own. Perhaps Moses meant to emphasize the attitude of the Jews, that although their salvation was promised by slaughtering Egypt's god and painting their doorposts with its blood, they should not take lightly the death of the firstborns by exiting their homes. They should also remain indoors, contemplating the blood on their doorposts, accepting the animal god of Egypt as a mere animal and fully rejecting idolatry. "No man shall exit from the opening of his house" clearly focusses on the doorpost, "the opening of his house". Moses could have said "Don't go

outside.” But he wished to emphasize that it is the blood on the doorpost that requires our attention. Denial of idolatry and accepting God's command is the only means to avoid God's plague of Firstborns.

But let us be clear: God is not limited, “Harbeh shluchim l'Makom; God has many messengers.” It is man's flawed projections onto God that cause man to err, assuming it is impossible that God can control all variables for a precise and perfectly just outcome. However, we must heed God's very words, as God openly says He will pass over the Jewish homes bearing lamb's blood. King David too teaches, “Many evils befall the righteous, and from all of them he is saved (Psalms 34:20).” God need not kill everyone – righteous and evil – in one fell swoop. When God drowned the world, He save Noach and his family. When God destroyed Sodom, He saved Lote and his family. When the Twin Towers fell, God had no shortage of ways to ensure all those who would arrive late, those who were already out of town, left early, etc. and escaped harm. How does He orchestrate such fine details? He can. Period. God can save one, and He can save millions. It boggles our mind how many details must be controlled, but it does not boggle His mind. Abraham said: “Forbid it from You to act so, to kill the righteous with the wicked, and the fate of the righteous will equal that of the wicked. Forbid it to you. The judge of the entire Earth won't perform justice (Gen. 18:25)?!” This was not a question. Abraham was certain that He who is the judge, will be completely just. It is wrong to suggest God kills the righteous together with wicked; meaning that they meet the same fate. The Egyptians drowned in the Reed Sea through various means. The extremely wicked ones sunk like straw; those a bit better sunk like stone (faster), and the least corrupt sunk like lead (immediately). In proportion to their sinful natures, God delayed their deaths, thereby applying complete justice for each person.

We must be careful not to guess at situations where children die, where innocent people die, or where the many die as a whole, saying that God is unjust. Nothing stands in His way to be perfectly righteous. The Rabbis have written on this, and God knows how to deal justly. It may be painful for us that a family members dies young, perhaps they were so perfect God says they need not live further. Perhaps their deaths help them avoid calamities. During the first Temple, the righteous were killed first so they were saved

from witnessing the nations' death, and the pain it could have caused them. God also removed Chanoch before his time (Gen. 5:24) as Rashi teaches, he might have left his righteous life, had he lived longer.

So how do we explain “Once the destroyer is given permission, it does not distinguish between righteous and evil people”? Ibn Ezra (Koheles 3:19, 9:4, 9:7) says that King Solomon used a particular method of teaching. He made statements that sounded heretical: “How can the wise man die with the fool (ibid 2:16)?”, “Both animal and man die (ibid 3:19)” and other similar verses. It seems on the surface that the King himself posed these disturbing questions. However, Ibn Ezra reveals many times that the King was merely quoting the words of the people. He used this method – in my opinion – to allow the people to say, “Yes, I feel that way too.” It is only once a person admits to a problem, that a solution might cure his wrong notions. So the King spoke as if he was lamenting, only to get others to agree with his verbalized position. Then, he corrected them.

The same may be said of “Once the destroyer is given permission, it does not distinguish between righteous and evil people”. This is not the Rabbis' position, but the opinion of untrained minds viewing the dead righteous and wicked people; they feel the wicked and the righteous suffered the same fate, since they were all dead. But they did not know the principle we discussed earlier, that God will remove the righteous before his time, so he need not suffer at the death of his people. The ignorant people also do not consider this crucial truth: death is not the end, but the beginning. Fools discount the reality of the soul's existence after death. Saadia Gaon states that justice is meted out after life is over. Therefore, we must not assess God's justice based only on what we witness on Earth. Herein is the seed of the error.

“Once the destroyer is given permission, it does not distinguish between righteous and evil people” is a false, indiscriminate assessment. As we see the statement ends with “it commences [death] starting with the righteous people”, the destroyer (God's force of death) can select to kill the righteous first to save them from pain. It (God) can distinguish! I repeat: God openly says He will pass over the Jewish homes painted with lamb's blood, and, “Many evils befall the righteous, and from all of them he is saved.”

Due to Abraham's many perfections, God desired that Abraham possess correct ideas concerning God's justice so he will transmit it to others (Gen. 18:19). This explains why He engaged Abraham in conversation before overturning Sodom where God made available greater knowledge of His justice. ■

## THE TORAH'S METHOD: SUBTLE CLUES

*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim*

Genesis 14:11 says the four kings plundered Sodom and “left”. The next verse says they took Lote, “the brother of Abraham, and left”. Why did they leave twice? We already know Lote is Abraham's brother (nephew) - why tell us this again? The next verse says that this news was told to Abraham the “Ivri”. Why in this verse alone is Abraham given the appellation “Ivri”? (As we said last week, Ivri means he was of a different philosophy than the idolaters.) Finally, in verse 16, Abraham returns “the spoils, and Lote his brother”. Shouldn't the verse first mention Lote, and then mention the spoils? After all, is this not why Abraham retaliated?

I believe there is one answer: Abraham retaliated primarily as a defense of monotheism. Recognizing that the kings captured Lote, a secondary act, unconnected with their initial plunder of Sodom, Abraham understood Lote's capture as an act of attacking Abraham's fame, his monotheism, expressed in kidnapping Abraham's brother. This is why Abraham is referred to only here as Ivri: here, he was acting in the capacity of a monotheist. This also explains why Lote is not mentioned first upon Abraham's return of the spoils: Lote was not the focus; rather, it was the defense of monotheism. Had Lote been mentioned first, the reader might assume Abraham was merely protecting an individual life, or that he was partial to a relative. In fact, Abraham's mission here, was much broader: he retaliated to protect not one life, but all of mankind by defending monotheistic beliefs, insuring that no attack of God's fame is successful. ■

## RUSH TO JUDGMENT

*Rabbi Reuven Mann*

In this week's parsha, Vayera, we read about the destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Amarah. Apparently, people are extremely stubborn and refuse to learn the lessons of history. It was not long ago that Hashem had brought a flood to obliterate mankind because of the terrible sinfulness of that generation. Only Noach and his family were saved because of his righteousness. Hashem made a covenant with Noach that He would never again bring a flood to destroy the earth. However this did not mean that He would thereafter turn a "blind eye" to the treacheries of people and simply leave them to their own devices. G-d continues to oversee the affairs of mankind and to mete out justice when necessary. This does not preclude the administration of harsh punishment as required. G-d would not destroy the entire world but this did not provide immunity for particular societies whose deeds reached the level of absolute evil. Thus, the Torah says, that Hashem took note of the corruption in the world and said, "The outcry of Sodom and Amarah is great and their iniquity is very severe. I will go down and see if the outcry is commensurate with their evil deeds, and if it is I will destroy them, and if not, I will know." These verses present us with a great difficulty. A fundamental principle of Judaism is that G-d is incorporeal and omniscient. Thus, Hashem's knowledge is absolute and the notion that He has to make a personal inspection in order to reach conclusions is essentially blasphemous. Yet the Torah depicts G-d as "descending" to earth in order to get a clearer picture of the situation in Sodom and Amarah. What is the meaning of this passage?

A similar statement is found in the story of the Tower of Babel where the Torah says that, "Hashem went down to see the city and Tower that the sons of man had built." Rashi maintains that we are not to take these words literally. Rather, the Torah is employing a metaphor in order to convey a lesson. Says Rashi, "This was not necessary except to teach judges not to convict someone until they see clearly and understand." The same lesson can be gleaned from Hashem's words regarding the wickedness of Sodom. He

depicts Himself as descending to observe at close range in order to teach us an important lesson, i.e., things are not always as they appear and we must do everything possible to avoid rushing to judgment. This lesson has great moral and practical importance. Very often we hear about things that bring forth powerful feelings and we reach conclusions without taking the time to get all the facts, hear both sides and contemplate the matter calmly and judiciously. We sometimes allow ourselves to be influenced by one side's version of events and take actions or make statements we later come to regret. Pirke Avot teaches, "Be deliberate in judgment." This advice applies to all areas of life. We should seek to remain calm and not be overly swayed by first impressions. We should seek to give decent people the benefit of the doubt. Most importantly, we should be able to discern when we are acting or speaking based on powerful emotions or from a state of calm and clear thinking. We live in a world of instant communication where we can respond to things immediately via texting and emails. This can be dangerous for it may lead us to issue statements which we haven't had a chance to review. Someone recently suggested that one should not send out "instant" emails. After composing a statement in the heat of the moment one should refrain from clicking the send button. Rather he should wait a while, until he has calmed down and reread what he has written. There is no harm in delaying one's response but after words are uttered or sent out they can't be taken back. Let us learn not to be hasty in judgment, avoid knee jerk reactions and to watch what we say, very carefully. It will make for a much happier life.

Shabbat Shalom ■

## THE DESTRUCTION OF SODOM

*Rabbi Israel Chait*  
*Written by a student*

When G-d advised Abraham of His decision to destroy Sodom, Abraham vigorously tried to prevent the destruction. He seemed to question G-d's judgment and seek

some sort of reprieve for the people of Sodom from such an ostensibly, harsh verdict. However, when Abraham was commanded to take his beloved son Isaac as a sacrifice, he attempted to fulfill G-d's will with alacrity. This puzzling contrast can be explained by analyzing G-d's system of justice with respect to mankind.

When a mortal judge sentences a criminal, the severity of the sentence is commensurate with the harshness of the offense. In pragmatic terms, the judgment is seeking to protect society and not benefit the criminal. However, G-d's punishment generally seeks to benefit man, so as to elevate the individual to act upon a higher moral plane. There are exceptions to this principle, as illustrated by the destruction of Sodom. G-d's decree to destroy Sodom was evidently not the type of judgment intended to benefit them. Rather, it was a determination by G-d that the people of Sodom were no longer deserving existence. The corruption of their lifestyles was without any merit that could justify their continued existence. However, Abraham's great love of his fellow man propelled him to be an advocate on their behalf. Abraham was questioning whether this type of punishment from G-d, clearly detrimental to the people of Sodom, was just. In Genesis chapter 18, verse 25, Abraham questioned "That be far from Thee to do after this manner to slay the righteous with the wicked, that so the righteous should be as the wicked; that be far from Thee; shall not the Judge of all the Earth, do justly?" Abraham was questioning the justice in G-d's execution of this detrimental punishment. He was not questioning G-d, but rather trying to comprehend G-d's administration of justice. Could it be that G-d would slay a righteous person together with a wicked person? G-d's punishment of Sodom was obviously not beneficial to man, and Abraham was attempting to comprehend the method in which G-d's justice was being performed.

When Abraham was commanded by G-d to slaughter Isaac, no questions were asked. It was evident to Abraham that this was a decree from G-d, intended to benefit man. Isaac was not a wicked person, deserving extinction. On the contrary, Abraham realized that this commandment was being executed for the benefit of man. Thus, Abraham could not ask any questions. He realized that it is humanly impossible to comprehend how G-d's action is intended to benefit man. A person cannot

question the manner in which a punishment from G-d benefits man. The benefit may be the punishment itself. However, if a judgment is of the kind that is meted out not for the benefit of man, but rather because man no longer deserves to exist, then a person can try to analyze the implementation of G-d's justice. Abraham, motivated by his great love of his fellow man and his intellectual nature, felt compelled to comprehend G-d's justice in destroying the entire city. However, this cannot be misconstrued as questioning how G-d's actions are just. This is beyond human comprehension.

The destruction of the city of Sodom also led to the rescue of Lot and the attempted effort to rescue his wife. This incident is a vivid example of the unfortunate manner in which people view many of the events recited in the Bible. People are overwhelmed with the miraculous fable-like qualities of these stories, which, when learned in their youth, are so appealing. All too often people do not overcome their childhood impressions of the Torah, and fail to appreciate the insightful teachings of the Torah. An analysis of the story of Lot and his wife can help us learn to value the beauty of the Torah's teachings.

Lot's wife was punished after she looked back at the destruction of the city of Sodom. Genesis chapter 19, verse 26 states, "And his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt." To comprehend this punishment, we must also understand what was so terrible about her looking back.

Chazal, the Rabbis, teach us that she was turned into a pillar of salt because G-d's punishment is "measure for measure". Whenever guests were invited to the house, she didn't give them salt for their food. This is the reason she was turned into a pillar of salt. We must analyze the significance and the relationship between these two factors to appreciate G-d's justice being measure for measure.

The decree was that Sodom and all its citizens must be destroyed. Lot, however, was not truly a citizen of Sodom. The people of Sodom were not hospitable. Lot was. He greeted the angels and extended to them the courtesy of welcomed guests. In fact, Lot felt such compassion for his guests that when the people of Sodom wanted his guests to be handed over to them, Lot refused. His kindness to his guests even extended to his

offering his daughters to the people of Sodom in their stead. However, he insisted that no harm be visited upon his guests. Thus Lot was charitable and deserved salvation since in spirit he was not truly a resident of Sodom. His kindness though, seems misplaced. He was kind to his guests at the expense of being promiscuous with his daughters. This seems to be an awkward type of kindness and rather immoral behavior.

However, we must appreciate Lot as an individual. The Torah is telling us about his exploits because he obviously was a worthy individual. He was not simply an eccentric fool, or the Torah would not elaborate the details of his salvation. Lot was a relative of Abraham, and was a member of his household. He learned the importance of kindness from Abraham and was a true balanced, a charitable person. Lot, though, did not adopt Abraham's concept of kindness. Lot was drawn to Sodom because of his instinctual desires. Genesis chapter 13 at the conclusion of verse 12 states "...and pitched his tent towards Sodom." Lot was attracted to the sexual permissiveness that pervaded Sodom. Although Lot espoused the concept of loving kindness, he had no concept of sexual morality. Therefore, his behavior was understandable. His theory was to treat his guests with the utmost kindness, even if it compromised the sexual integrity of his daughters. This to Lot was completely logical. It was entirely within his framework. However, it evidences that he was completely divorced from any sense of "kedusha" - sanctity. This attests to the fact that Abraham's concept of kindness itself was totally different from Lot's. Kindness for Abraham was based upon his sense of justice. Abraham was the first person to recognize G-d as creator of the universe and possessed a great intellect. His kindness for his fellow man stemmed from his wisdom.

Lot had no philosophical basis for his kindness. It was just emotional goodness based on his sense of being nice. Thus, "kallos rosh", levity, was not inconsistent with his philosophy. He had no concept of sanctity whereby man was to live his life based upon a higher intellectual plane of kedusha. However, Lot was worthy of salvation. He practiced kindness to his fellow man and was not a consummate citizen of Sodom. Therefore, G-d sent the angels to save him from the destruction of Sodom since the decree was directed against the citizens of

Sodom.

Lot's wife did not share her husband's value of kindness. The Rabbis tell us that she never gave her guests salt. This is truly indicative of her nature. Her withholding salt was an expression of her emotional state. She was a vicious person who disdained her fellow man. She really did not desire to accommodate guests that visited her house. However, because Lot was a kind person, she had no choice. But she felt compelled to withhold something, not to be totally giving to a fellow human being. Lot's wife was truly a citizen of Sodom. The Rabbis tell us that she partook. She was unable to be happy if another person was enjoying himself. However, since she was Lot's wife, G-d gave her an opportunity for salvation. If she did not look back at the destruction of Sodom, she would be saved. Lot's wife was very happy in Sodom. She shared the values of its citizens and totally identified with them. However, G-d gave her a chance to express a proper ideology. If she repented and realized her wrongdoings and was capable of emotional kindness towards her fellow man, as was Lot, then she would be spared. If she did not look back at Sodom's destruction, it would reflect that she no longer identified with that evil society, and thus, was worthy of salvation. However, she looked back. She still identified with the people of Sodom and felt badly that they were being destroyed. Therefore, her fate was sealed. She was destined to turn into a pillar salt. This reflected the salt that she was unable to share with her fellow man. Thus, G-d's method of punishment is measure for measure.

Abraham returned to the site of the destruction the following morning. Abraham also desired to look upon the destruction of Sodom. However, his looking was different than Lot's wife. Genesis chapter 19, verse 28 states, "Vayashkaf", Abraham looked, he investigated. "Vayashkaf" indicates not merely looking, but rather, viewing with an intellectual curiosity. Abraham had no identification with the people of Sodom. He came to view the destruction after its conclusion the following morning. His looking was the viewing of a wise individual who wanted to observe the manifestation of G-d's justice. The Torah is contrasting the method in which an emotional person views the event, to the observation of one who is perfected. The former looks with a sense of despair, yearning, and commiseration. But one such as Abraham, looked to investigate, to comprehend, and to analyze the manner in which G-d's justice works. ■

# AVRAHAM'S MISSION

Rabbi Bernie Fox

*And the boy grew-up and he was weaned. And Avraham made a great party on the day that Yitzchak was weaned. (Beresheit 21:8)*

1. Two interpretations of Avraham's "great" celebration

At the opening of Parshat VaYerah, Avraham and Sarah are told that they will have a son in the coming year. Later in the parasha, this prophecy is fulfilled and Yitzchak is born. After two years, Yitzchak is weaned and Avraham makes a party. The above passage describes this celebration as a "great" party. To what specific characteristic of this celebration does the term "great" refer? According to Rashi the celebration was great because the most prestigious personalities of the generation attended. Rashi specifically identifies Shem and Ever as participants. These two ancestors of Avraham were great scholars and like Avraham they had rejected idolatry and were dedicated to the service of Hashem. According to Rashi, Avimelech the King of the Philistines – the Philistines – also attended.

The midrash, in many places, seems to affirm Rashi's interpretation of the term "great". However, in most of these discussions in the midrash, specific personages who attended are not identified. The Midrash Rabbah on Sefer Devarim does provide a more specific description of the guests. According to this midrash these "great" guests were the kings and princes of the region. This interpretation seems somewhat different than Rashi's. According to Rashi, the guests were not merely great personalities; they were individuals of proven moral character and religious enlightenment. The midrash seems to suggest that the great personages at the celebration were powerful rulers. They were great in their power and might, but not in their moral or religious stature. In fact, the midrash suggests that Og – the evil ruler later defeated by Moshe – was among these kings.

Rashi's interpretation is easily understood. Avraham made this party in order to express

his gratitude to Hashem for giving a son to him and Sarah. It was reasonable for him to invite those individuals who shared his dedication to Hashem and would share in his joy and gratitude to Hashem. However, the midrash's interpretation is more difficult to understand. Why would Avraham include the region's rulers among his guests? The inclusion of Og is especially odd!

Yalkut Shimoni – a collection of midrashic literature – adds a comment that is even more astounding. According to this midrash, the kings who attended Avraham's celebration were the same kings that were later defeated by Yehoshua in his conquest of the Land of Israel. In other words, the midrash makes the point that these kings were both in attendance at the celebration and were also subsequently overthrown by Yehoshua. What message does the midrash intend to communicate by linking these two events?

*And Avraham approached Hashem and he said: Will you even destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps, there are fifty righteous people within the city. Will You even destroy and not spare the place on behalf of the fifty righteous people that are in its midst? (Sefer Beresheit 18:23-24)*

2. Avraham's strange petition on behalf of Sedom

Earlier in the parasha, Hashem reveals to Avraham that He will destroy Sedom. Avraham appeals to Hashem and asks him to spare the city if fifty righteous individuals can be found among its inhabitants. This request leads a prolonged negotiation. Eventually, Avraham learns that Hashem will spare Sedom if only ten righteous individuals can be found among its citizens.

It is interesting that Avraham asked that the entire city be spared. He was certainly aware of the evil of Sedom's citizens. Sparing the city would save the righteous but it would also allow the wicked to continue to torment and persecute the innocent. Why was Avraham not concerned with the negative aspects of sparing Sedom? Would it not have made more sense for Avraham to celebrate Hashem's decision to destroy evil and ask merely that the righteous be rescued from the destruction?

Arise and travel through the land – its length and breadth – for to you it will be given. And Avraham pitched his tent and he came and dwelled in Elonai Mamrai that is in Chevron. And he built there an altar to Hashem. (Sefer Devraim 13:17-18)

3. Avraham the teacher

In these passages Hashem promises Avraham that his descendants will be given the Land of Canaan. Avraham is commanded to transverse the land from north to south and from east to west. He completes this assignment and settles in Elonai Mamrai. There he constructs an altar. What was the purpose of this altar and why does the Torah discuss its creation? Radak explains that the various altars that Avraham erected were intended to serve as points of congregation. Avraham would encourage the residents of the region to come to the altar and there he would teach the people about Hashem and enlist them into exclusive worship of Him.

According to this interpretation, the passages present an interesting juxtaposition. Avraham is told that his descendants will possess this Land of Canaan and Avraham responds by intensifying his efforts to rescue the indigenous people from paganism and idolatry. What is the message in this juxtaposition?

Maimonides' opening chapter of his discussion of the laws of idolatry includes a biographical sketch of Avraham. One of the interesting elements of this sketch is that Maimonides describes two distinct stages in the development of Avraham's mission. In the initial stage, Avraham directed his educational efforts to the people of his own city – Uhr Kasdim. However, after his abandonment of Uhr Kasdim, Avraham expanded his mission. He understood himself to be humanity's teacher. Instead of focusing on educating his neighbors, Avraham set as his goal the reformation of the religious thinking of humankind. In fact, the Torah describes Avraham as an itinerate teacher. He moves from place to place. In each place he calls on the inhabitants to join him in the service of Hashem.

What point is Maimonides making by describing these two distinct stages? The initial stage of Avraham's mission can be interpreted as self-serving. Avraham had discovered a set of truths by which he wished to live. He attempted to build around himself a community that shared his views. By creating a community, Avraham would make

his own life more secure. Therefore, he focused his efforts upon his neighbors. In its second stage, Avraham's mission was fundamentally altered. Avraham no longer focused his attention and efforts upon his neighbors. He now directed his efforts to the entirety of humanity. The communication of truth became paramount and self-interest was no longer a priority.

#### 4. Avraham's interpretation and pursuit of his mission

Now, the message communicated by the above juxtaposition can be identified. Avraham understood that his descendants were destined to displace the people of Canaan. Also, he understood that Hashem is just and that his descendants would not be permitted to destroy and dispossess an innocent people. His descendants' possession of the Land of Canaan was directly linked to the degeneration of the land's indigenous peoples. Self-interest would have suggested that Avraham not interfere with these people's rapid descent into perversion and corruption. After all, their rapid degeneration would only hasten the rise of his own descendants. Nonetheless, Avraham reached out to the people of the region. Nothing was more important to Avraham than his message for humanity. His love of Hashem was more dear to him than the destiny of his descendants.

This attitude provides some insight into his response to the news of Sodom's impending destruction. Avraham was in the process of teaching the people of that region. He certainly recognized that these were especially difficult people to reform. However, he was devoted to the salvation of all of humanity. Hashem's message to Avraham evoked from him a request to allow him to continue his work. He asked Hashem to consider whether he was making progress. He asked that should fifty – or even ten – righteous people be found that the city be spared. Avraham was fully aware of the awful wickedness of the people of Sodom. Nonetheless, he wished to have the opportunity to reform them. If fifty – or even ten – righteous individuals could be found among the wicked, then he was making progress. He asked Hashem to postpone judgment and allow him to continue his efforts.

5. The impact of Avraham and his teachings

The various interpretations of Avraham's party can now be better understood. The Torah tells us that Avraham made a "great" celebration to rejoice over the weaning of Yitzchak. What message is the Torah communicating to us by describing this celebration and referring to it as "great"? According to Rashi, the Torah is communicating to us that Avraham rejoiced in his gratitude to Hashem. He understood that Yitzchak represented the beginning of an unfolding destiny that would impact all of humankind. He invited those unique individuals who had the wisdom or insight to share in this realization. These guests were great people by virtue of this wisdom and enlightenment. In other words, the guests identified by Rashi define the purpose of the celebration.

The midrash understands the message of passages differently. These guests were great rulers. They were kings and princes. In the future, they or their descendants would be the corrupt, degenerate rulers destroyed by Yehoshua. However, at this earlier time in history, these same rulers or their ancestors were overwhelmed with awe of Hashem and His teacher Avraham. The birth of Yitzchak provided undeniable evidence of Hashem's omnipotence, and His providence. Even these kings – who would later revert to idolatry and the most disgusting forms of paganism – realized the truth of Avraham's teachings. According to this interpretation, the passages convey a different message. They assert that Avraham succeeded in his mission. He reeducated and reformed a generation. ■

## THE WISDOM OF THE VERSES

*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim*

Lately, I have been concentrating on articles that focus on how to learn the Torah's verses. I have been compelled to do so, as more and more often I hear others repeating

what they've learned, and it is disappointing. Disappointing because they have not been exposed to God's brilliant method of revealing ideas through the very text. I hear notions that do not fit the text, and notions that are not true. Teachers themselves are not aware of how God hides and reveals Torah insights. This forfeits the transmission and the delight possibly imparted. The only way to correct this problem is through many examples. Once a Torah student is exposed to the precise and insightful methods God uses in constructing the verses, that student will become imbued with an appreciation for Torah over all else he or she encounters. This is what we call "Love of God". We cannot know "Him" so as to love Him, but we can know some of His wisdom, on a human level. We love God through seeing His wisdom. And although it is minute wisdom, to us, it can be remarkable. For this reason, we must not be satisfied with mediocre explanations and mere possibilities; we must insist on understanding why each word is found in each verse. I intend to show such an example now.

In this week's parsha God says the following:

*"Shall I keep hidden from Abraham what I plan to do? And Abraham will surely become a great, mighty nation, and all nations of the land will be blessed due to him. For he is beloved on account that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will guard the path of God, performing charity and justice, so that God will bring upon Abraham what He has spoken.*

*And God said [to Abraham], 'the cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I will descend and see if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me I will annihilate them; and if not, I know'."* (Exod. 18:17-21)

We understand from the following verse 18:25 that Abraham had a clear understanding of God – God would never kill the righteous on account of the sins of others: "Far be it to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, and the righteous and the wicked would be equal, far be it...the judge of the Earth would not do justice?!"

Abraham was correct in this exclamation. This was Abraham's knowledge of God all along: the wicked deserve punishment, and the righteous do not. This is justice.



However, God said earlier “Shall I keep hidden from Abraham what I plan to do?”

This is the first lesson: there are areas of knowledge which man cannot penetrate. And this is rightfully so, for man cannot possess all knowledge; only God does. Therefore, God expresses a sentiment to the Torah reader that if He does not disclose His wisdom on this topic of ‘justice’, Abraham will remain in the dark...it will be “hidden” from Abraham.

God also expressed His reasoning for inviting Abraham to investigate this matter: “Abraham will surely become a great, mighty nation, and all nations of the land will be blessed due to him. For he is beloved on account that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will guard the path of God performing charity and justice...” That is, God wishes the world to increase in their knowledge of Him. And since Abraham teaches his household of God’s ways (and greatly benefits other nations by rebuking their idolatry, as Sforno states), God imparted to Abraham greater knowledge of morality. Examining the world or theorizing moralistic philosophy cannot uncover the secret we are about to discuss. That is the meaning behind the phrase “Shall I keep hidden”. God therefore opened up a new area of knowledge so that Abraham should learn, and teach others.

The glaring question is this: If God decides ‘not’ to hide this secret, where in this account do we see God informing Abraham of it?

Somehow, Abraham knew to ask God whether He would spare the wicked, based on numbers of righteous people. This mercy was not what Abraham knew before...this was the new piece of information God disclosed and did not hide. He assured Abraham that if at least 10 righteous people were in Sodom, He would spare all of them, even the wicked.

So we now know the secret: previously, Abraham assumed the wicked must die – no exceptions. But now Abraham understood that God’s mercy can allow wicked people to remain, provided there exists the influence of at least 10 righteous people can turn them back towards repentance and God. We understand this.

But again: from where did Abraham derive this new concept of mercifully sparing

the wicked people on account of the righteous? God does not say this in the entire account!

However, God does talk. The hints must be in what He told Abraham. Read it again:

“And God said [to Abraham], ‘the cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I will descend and see if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me, I will annihilate them; and if not, I know.’”

This is from where Abraham derived the new concept that God will spare the wicked.

Do you see the hint?

Do you see any questions?

I have one: If their sin is “greatly heavy”, why should they not receive punishment? This is compounded by God’s very words, “if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me, I will annihilate them”. God is saying that in accordance with their corruption, they deserve annihilation. Yet, God says there exists the possibility of Him ‘not’ annihilating them! Now, if their current state of sin requires God’s punishment, for what reason would God abstain? There is only one possibility where the merit to save them exists: the righteous inhabitants.

Abraham listened to God’s words, “in accordance with their state, they deserve annihilation.” But God also said a possibility exists that they will be spared. In God’s very words was the clue. Abraham now realized a new concept: God does not work with strict justice, but He also performs charity, “tzedaka”. Abraham knew about tzedaka, but he did not know all of its applications. It was necessary that God teach him this specific case. We might even add that God’s concluding words “I know” are meant to indicate to Abraham that this knowledge is what “God” knows, and not man. It is concealed until God imparts it through this prophecy. God intended to teach that this idea is of a concealed nature. He taught this to us through the future-given Torah narrative “Shall I keep hidden”, and He taught this to Abraham through the words “I know”.

Thus, God taught Abraham a new idea in justice that man could not arrive at alone: the wicked could be spared. And He also taught him that there are ideas, which are concealed if God does not offer man clues.

We learn that God presented just enough clues in His words to allow Abraham to think into the matter. Once he realized this new concept, the next question was how many

righteous people are required to save the wicked.

But why did God inform Abraham in such a subtle manner?

God does so as this increases a person’s intelligence, his reasoning power. Just as a Talmudic scholar is not born with his skills, but gains them over decades of practice...Abraham too grew in his capacity to reason for himself through this experience. With thought, Abraham questioned his current beliefs and principles. Abraham moved beyond his previous boundaries, and excelled to greater wisdom.

Many times we prevent ourselves from alternative choices, simply because we are incapable of reasoning out all possibilities, or due to false assumptions. For example, a student may accept all ideas in books, simply due to his mind being crippled by the false notion that “all books must be true”. People are quite impressed by authors and feel each author knows about what he or she writes. But once the student sees an error in one book, this broadens his horizons and he will never again blindly accept any notion, just because it’s printed.

A wise Rabbi once cited Rav Moshe Feinstein’s critique of the Ramban. Ramban condemned Abraham for leaving Canaan and descending to Egypt due to the famine. Rav Moshe zt”l said that Ramban’s comment should be torn out of the Chumash. The lesson: even Ramban can be wrong. But we incorrectly tend to shy away from such statements. We fear reputations. But you must know that the greatest of our teachers – Maimonides – openly invited anyone at all to correct his errors. Maimonides did not feel infallible; he admitted that those below him in wisdom could correct him. No one is always correct.

People sometimes say, “Who am I to argue with Ramban?” This means they credit Ramban, or any Rabbi, as possessing tools to attain accurate understanding. But God did not give Ramban alone the Tzelem Elokim – intelligence. God gave it to every human. He did so in order that we engage it, and not make such statements. If we continually refrain from challenging our teachers, we reject God’s will that we employ this great gift of intelligence. Of course we are respectful of all Torah scholars and teaches. But as one Talmudic Rabbi said, he cherished questions on his words more than words of support.

Furthermore, any person who assesses the Rabbis as brilliant thereby admits he can accurately determine truth, i.e., that they are brilliant. And if he can determine truth, he then

contradicts himself when saying he cannot argue with them. For if one can determine truth, and does so in a specific case, he must disagree with anyone who opposes that truth. Regardless of who it is. It is a false humility, or a corrupt mind that will at first passionately support his view, and then back down when he learns a Torah scholar holds the opposite. If he was firm on his understanding at first, he must be honest and say he disagrees, regardless of whom he opposes. Again, the Torah commentaries disagree with each other, and do not blindly accept even the words of those far greater than them. A Talmudic Rabbi once said, "Had Joshua bin-Nun said it, I would not hear it". (Tal. Chullin, 124a)

Although I carried an awe of the Rabbis from youth, once I heard Rav Moshe's critique of Ramban's words, I realized that no one is infallible. This was one of the greatest lessons that had the most dramatic affects on my studies. Furthermore, there is no Torah obligation to accept any idea outside of halacha. In matters of philosophy, there is no "psak" – ruling. Many times people say, "Maimonides is only a minority view, I need not follow him". Their error is in applying halachik principle of "majority rule" to hashkafa – philosophy. The Torah teaches, "According to 'law' that they will teach you and the judgment that they will tell you, you should behave. You should not deviate from that which they tell you to the right or left." (Deut. 17:11) This means the Rabbis have authority on 'laws' and nothing more. Not philosophy.

Additionally, a wise Rabbi once taught that no one – not even great Rabbis – can tell you what you think. Meaning, it is impossible that anyone be compelled to believe something, which they do not. Yes, in halacha I can be compelled to 'act'. But philosophy is all about our beliefs. Thus, there cannot be a ruling on philosophy. This is something we come to on our own. Either we accept a belief, or we don't. And if I do not believe something, no one can possibly force that belief.

The refusal to accept popular opinions was Abraham's greatest trait. It was through questioning what he was taught, that he discovered the error of his father and that entire idolatrous generation. This trait led him to discover God after 40 years of study on his own. There were yet areas that Abraham could not penetrate, but God assisted him. God also assists us in the form of His Torah. And if we continue to question the Torah, as is God's will, we will then unlock numerous other 'hidden' treasures. The verses are truly astonishing. ■

## NOT QUITE DONE

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg

Parshas Vayera ends with the akeidah, the dramatic story of the near sacrifice of Yitzchak. This would seem to be a fitting end to the entire sedrah, yet we see one additional event squeezed in. After the akeidah, Avraham is informed of the birth of Rivkah, among other relatives. Why is this important to know?

The parsha ends with Avraham receiving news of births among his extended family (Bereishis 22:20):

*"And it came to pass after these matters, that it was told to Abraham saying: 'Behold Milcah, she also bore sons to Nahor your brother.'"*

According to some commentaries, this announcement served merely to inform us of the birth of Rivka, who would become the second of our matriarchs. Rashi, based on a Midrash, sees something else entirely going on here:

*"When he returned from Mount Moriah, Abraham was thinking (hirhur) and saying, 'Had my son been slaughtered, he would have died without children. I should have married him to a woman of the daughters of Aner, Eshkol, or Mamre. The Holy One, blessed be He, announced to him that Rebecca, his mate, had been born, and that is the meaning of after these matters,' i.e., after the thoughts of the matte that came about as a result of the 'akedah.' - [from Gen. Rabbah 57:3]"*

Rashi is citing a Midrash, where one additional concept is mentioned. Avraham wanted to marry his son to one of the daughters of his talmidim, as they were righteous. Instead, God wanted Avraham to stick with yichus, a specific genealogy.

This Rashi puts Avraham in a fascinating light. First, there is the concept of Avraham having this "hirhur", type of thinking. Why state his thoughts as such? What angle does "hirhur" add to the equation?

We also see Avraham having a reflection that is strange. We know that the akeidah was an experience lacking any simple description. No doubt, it was a time of tremendous intellectual and psychological challenges. When it was over, Avraham had risen to new heights of perfection, with avenues opened to understand God and His ways that were previously blocked. Yet this reflection seems a bit, for lack of a better term, ridiculous. What does Avraham mean when he

says "had my son been slaughtered", and thereby regretting not having Yitzchak married earlier? Are we to believe that Avraham should have in some way predicted the command by God to bring his son to Har HaMoriah and kill him? Beyond the akeidah and its potential outcome, should Avraham have been obsessed with the possibility of Yitzchak meeting an early death? Yes, we are never in control of events --Yitzchak might have been struck by lightning. Yet rational people do not spend time focusing on events that are not within the normal realm of probability. What, then, was troubling Avraham?

Finally, there is another, even stranger, idea that this Midrash brings forward. When faced with the decision to marry Yitzchak, Avraham turns to the daughters of his talmidim. This seems like a well thought out decision. These women were described as righteous. And yet, God "replies" with the news of Rivkah's birth, indicating to Avraham to go with yichus, (genealogy) over righteousness. How is this possible?

Let's begin with the final question. Clearly, it is impossible to think that God desired Avraham to forego righteousness for a birth line. In fact, in the beginning of Parshas Chayei Sara, we see the lineage of Rivka repeated. There Rashi explains how this is praise to Rivka, as she was able to withstand the evil nature of her upbringing and surroundings. She was a person of remarkable abilities. Therefore, this was not a question of ignoring righteousness for some type of racial purity. Instead, this was referring to a certain concern that would emerge had Yitzchak indeed married one of the daughters of Avraham's talmidim. Part of the role Avraham played in ensuring that the ideology of monotheism is passed along properly was to present a certain type of image. Anything that might lead to a distortion or inappropriate conclusion was to be avoided. This was a tenuous time in the early history of Judaism. At this point, Avraham recognized why having a natural born son was indeed the ideal method of perpetuating the system. However, based upon the information he had in front of him, he naturally assumed that taking the most direct route, where his son would marry a daughter of one of his talmidim, was the way to go. God therefore directs Avraham otherwise. Why? Let's say, for example, an Israeli marries and American (just a random hypothetical). People perceive such a union as more than two people joining together. There is a union of cultures as well, backgrounds and practices included. Over time, the two mix together, eventually leading to a dilution of both, or at the very least an incorporation. Without question,

nationalities and cultures have this quality to them. But Judaism cannot survive in such a manner. True, Yitzchak would be marrying a great person. But people would see the son of Avraham, the progenitor of monotheism, marrying a Canaanite. It would imply the ability for the two to co-exist, to become one. Obviously, this is an impossibility. Therefore, God shows Avraham that another path is now open. By marrying someone from Avraham's family tree, the notion of a potential ideological union between Jew and non-Jew was dispelled.

This helps clarify the state of mind of Avraham, and why he was somewhat remorseful of his failure to have Yitzchak married. This cannot be understood as an issue of the remote possibility of Yitzchak being struck by lightning. Instead, it had to do with a perception of his personal role in God's mission. After Yitzchak's birth, Avraham came to the natural conclusion that his primary objectives as leader and perpetuator were now complete. He would focus on teaching Yitzchak, passing along the important ideas taught to him by God. But that was it. There would be no reason to assume he would be responsible for finding a wife for Yitzchak (who was certainly of age at the time of the akeidah). One of the lessons of the akeidah, though, was that his role was not complete. Avraham realized now that he was not done, that it was his responsibility to ensure the proper union between Yitzchak and his potential spouse.

We are not done, though, as there is still, the issue of "hirkur". There are many instances in halacha when we see this term used. One example involves arayos, areas of sexual prohibition. A man is not supposed to stare at a woman (who is not his wife) who is dressed in a non-tzniyus way, as this leads to hirkur. The concern involves a person placing his psychological energies into such an area. A man focusing his energies on the realm of the sexual can be destructive, leading him down a path that is difficult to stop. The main point here is how hirkur refers to a person focusing his psychological energies on one particular issue. Avraham, once he realized his role had not changed, threw every ounce of his being into solving the problem of Yitzchak and his future spouse. It was not just his mind that was occupied by this - it was every part of his psyche as well. At this point God intervenes. On one level, this reinforces Avraham's conclusion concerning his role. On another level, it indicates that the road is clearer, that he need not focus all his energies on this. Thus, Avraham recognized that his job was not complete, but was able to balance his unfinished mission with his teaching of Yitzchak. ■

Hurricane Sandy left little time to compose a regular Jewishtimes this week. Despite the lacking design, we hope you enjoy the content.

The Jewishtimes wishes to recognize the many public servants and do-gooders who helped victims weather this storm and start returning to normal. We know this will take much time for many of you, and our hearts go out to all who were affected, lost property, and certainly who lost loved ones.

We ask any and all agencies and relief efforts to email us your contact info so we might share this with those who need your help.

Let's pull together, even if all we can offer is a helping hand, a smile or a phone call. You'll be surprised how much relief and emotional support a simple "Hi" can offer another person during this time.

And for those of you whom God blessed with wealth, now is the time to make the best use of it through sharing it charitably with others. This too will be a source of increase.

I end with my favorite image of the week.

*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim*

