



In this issue, we study Abraham's stand against idolatry, Solomon's wisdom and the Akeida: "Brutality against children", and God's justice. Accurate knowledge of these and all areas are learned from God alone.

FORTUNATE ARE WE, RECIPIENTS OF GOD'S TORAH.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

VAYERAH	1,3,4
GOD'S NAME	1,2
TANYA'S HERESY III	4
SODOM	5,6
BOOKS: INTUITON	7
SOLOMON'S WISDOM	8-11
SATAN & ABRAHAM	12
ABRAHAM/GOD'S JUSTICE	13,14
AKEIDA: Q&A'S	14-17

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Weekly Parsha

VaYerah

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"It would be a sacrilege for you to do this thing – to kill the righteous with the wicked. Then the righteous would be like the wicked. It would be a sacrilege for you. Should the judge of all the land not do justice?" (Beresheit 18:25)

(continued on page 3)

Sanctification of GOD'S NAME



Abraham's Identity

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

The Medrash states that Terach informed on Abram, his son. (God had not yet changed his name to "Abraham") Terach reported to Nimrod that Abram was a societal deviant, not adhering to the philosophies of the masses. We learn from Maimonides' history of Abram, (Laws of Idolatry 1:3) that Abram realized and educated many on monotheism. Abram exposed the flaws of idolatry to the masses. These included the entire generation in which Abram lived. Understandably, Abram was not particularly liked, and his father too did not tolerate him. Terach then informed on Abram to the current leader Nimrod. According to Medrash, Abram was then cast into a furnace, but was miraculously saved.

Informing on his son, Terach did not display normal, parental behavior. It is normal for a child to rebel against the father, but not the reverse. However, later on, Terach had a change of heart and took Abram and his

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*It appeared that
Abram's former
prosecutor was converted to his
supporter. This was Abram's new
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Sanctification of GOD'S NAME

& Abraham's Identity

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT



nephew Lote from Ur Kasdim: (Gen. 11:31) "And Terach took Abram his son, and Lote, son of Haran, son of his brother, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, wife of Abram his son, and they exited with him from us Kasdim to travel to the land of Canaan. And they came to Charan, and they dwelled there."

Terach's remaining in Charan - not continuing on to his initial destination of Canaan - teaches that Terach's goal was not so much to reach Canaan, but rather, to leave Ur Kasdim. In Charan, he decided he was far enough out of reach of Ur Kasdim.

Abram's influence in Ur Kasdim was tied to his identity as a citizen of Ur Kasdim, who was a revolutionary in religion. The authorities considered him an irreligious person, who had renounced the religion of the state. He was nevertheless influential. People came to him to hear his ideas. After his conviction and miraculous escape, he assumed another identity: an exile, who had convinced his greatest adversary, his own father, to stand along side him. Terach did not really repent; he did not really embrace the ideas of his son's new religion, but was sorry for acting against him. He felt guilty as a father for wronging him, and took him out of Ur, together with the son of his deceased son who died at the hands of Nimrod. Although Terach acted out of guilt, to the world, it appeared that Abram's former prosecutor was converted to his supporter. This was Abram's new platform for the world. People would no doubt be curious to meet with such a person; a former rebel against the state, who had escaped miraculously, and had won over his greatest adversary, his own father.

Abram expected to use his new identity as a means to influence people and teach them the true idea of God. At this point, God intervened through

prophecy and told him to leave his land and all the attachments he had to it, and to leave the house of his father. He would concern himself only with attaining his further perfection by breaking all attachments and emotional ties to his roots, and emerging as a totally independent individual - not only intellectually, but emotionally as well. As to his identity and public platform, which would be lost due to his travels, God would supply this for him. "...I will bless you and make your name great." (Gen. 12:2) This injunction freed Abram to work only on the world of his inner perfection, while the platform for his success would be supplied by the Almighty.

Why does the Torah not reveal anything about Abram's greatest accomplishments, his own discovery of the true idea of God, the Creator of the universe? The Torah is not a book about personal accomplishments. It is a book about the sanctification of God's name, by making Him known to the world. This could only be accomplished through God's assistance and constant providence. As great as Abram's personal accomplishment was, it would have vanished in time, were it not for God's intervention, which began with the injunction, "Lech Lecha" ("Go forth") to Abram, and found its culmination in the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people.

Thus, the Torah introduces us to Abram under the injunction of "Lech Lecha" - the means through which the eternal sanctification of God's name became possible. ■



Terrible things happen to people every day! We wonder why. Hashem is omniscient and omnipotent. How can He allow these catastrophes to occur? The question of why apparently good people suffer in this world is one of the most basic theological problems. At some point, almost every person is confronted with this question. Unfortunately, some who do not find an adequate answer abandon the Torah.

Avraham confronted Hashem with this very question. Hashem tells Avraham that He is prepared to destroy Sedom. Avraham challenges Hashem. He asks Hashem how He can destroy the entire city. Certainly, within the city there are some righteous individuals. Is it fitting that the righteous should perish with the evildoers? Rashi expands on Avraham's argument. He explains that Avraham was concerned with the lesson that humanity would derive from such indiscriminate destruction. They would assume that the Almighty does not distinguish between the innocent and the guilty. They would recall other incidents of widespread destruction visited upon humanity – for example, the Deluge – and conclude that these incidents also represent examples of indiscriminate destruction. They would conclude that the fate of the righteous and the wicked are the same.[1]

Hashem responds to Avraham and agrees that if there is a righteous community in Sedom – even a few individuals – He will spare the city from destruction on their behalf. Ultimately, this righteous community is not found in Sedom and the city is destroyed. But not before the one righteous individual – Lote – and his family are rescued. The apparent lesson of this narrative is that Hashem is not indiscriminate in His punishments and the innocent are not destroyed along with the wicked. Instead, the righteous will be rescued from the fate of the wicked.

But this lesson does not seem to correspond with out everyday experiences. We observe innocents suffer and we cannot help but wonder why Hashem does not respond to the cries of these people as He responded to Avraham.

It is difficult to answer this question. The following comments are not an attempt to provide a comprehensive response. But our parasha does provide some important insights into this issue. These insights are not a complete answer. They do provide a basic foundation and should not be overlooked. But before we can consider these insights, we



must evaluate the question more thoroughly.

Although this question is very troubling, it is also somewhat simplistic. From where does the question arise? People turn to and embrace religion for a variety of reasons. Some are seeking meaning and direction in life; some find that religion provides a needed sense of community and belonging. For others, religion provides a sense of security in a very frightening world and many find consolation in the love bestowed upon us by Hashem. But each of these motivations impacts and shades our relationship with Hashem. The motivation inevitably prejudices the way in which we perceive Hashem and relate to Him. For example, a person turning to religion for security will tend to envision Hashem as an omnipotent deity that cares for and provides for those who loyally follow Him. One who seeks love, will interpret Hashem as a compassionate, loving heavenly father. The issue is not whether these characterizations are correct. The important issue is their origin. These perceptions of Hashem are subjective and the product of a personal need. They are not the product of objective analysis.

When we ask where is Hashem when the innocent are suffering, we must be careful to fully consider the origin of the question. If the question arises from a sense of abandonment and disappointment, we must be wary. We have no right to assume that the Almighty is what we want Him to be or what we need Him to be. He is not the product of

our needs. We are the product of His will. We cannot establish expectations for His behavior. If we ask the question from the perspective of expectations we have of Hashem, the question is simplistic. Instead, we can only try to learn and except the lessons that the Torah teaches us. In other words, if our question arises from our own personal needs, it may not have a suitable answer. We cannot require Hashem to be what we want Him to be. We can only approach the issue of suffering if we are willing to give up our subjective perspective and learn from the Torah.

Let us now return to Avraham's petition. Avraham argued that Hashem should not destroy the righteous of Sedom with the wicked. The innocent and wicked should not experience the same fate. Hashem seemed to accept this argument and agreed to spare Sedom for the sake of the righteous. Of course, this is a wonderful response. It is the response that provides contentment and gratification to every reader of the Torah. It corresponds with the way we want to perceive Hashem. But is it this response consistent with what we know about Hashem? It would not seem so! We are so pleased with Hashem's response that we neglect to consider it with a critical eye. The Torah does tell us that sometimes the innocent do suffer with the wicked! Where does the Torah teach us this disturbing lesson? Actually, the source is very well-known.

Hashem is poised to redeem Bnai Yisrael

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from Egypt. The moment has come for the final plague – the Plague of the Firstborn. All of the firstborn of Egypt will be killed. But those of Bnai Yisrael will be spared. However, there is one condition. The blood of the Pascal lamb must be spread on the doorposts and lintels of the homes of Bnai Yisrael. Hashem will pass over these homes and they will be untouched by the plague. But Hashem warns Bnai Yisrael; they must not leave their homes that night. Why can they not stir from their homes? Rashi quotes the well-known comments of our Sages. He explains that once the Almighty give permission to the forces of destruction to visit death upon humanity, these forces do not distinguish between the righteous and wicked! On this last night in Egypt the forces of destruction will rule the darkness. They cannot invade the homes of Bnai Yisrael that are protected by the mitzvah of the Pascal Lamb. But outside these homes these forces have complete reign. They will spare no one – not even the righteous.[2]

For most of us this is a difficult idea to acknowledge. Rashi's comments and their implications are hard to accept and easy to forget. But they are clear and undeniable. Sometimes, Hashem releases forces of natural disaster and disease upon humanity. These forces are blind and indifferent. If we expose ourselves to these forces, we cannot expect to be spared through our righteousness or innocence.

But how can we reconcile these comments with Avraham's dialogue with Hashem. Does Hashem not acknowledge that the wicked and innocent deserve different ends? How can Hashem allow these forces of destruction to destroy the innocent with the evildoer?

"And it was when he took them outside he said, 'Escape with you life. Do not look behind you and do not tarry anywhere on the plain. Escape to the mountain so that you are not destroyed.'" (Beresheit 19:17)

Let us consider another incident in the parasha. Two angels visit Lote in Sedom. One has been assigned the mission of destroying Sedom. The other has been charged with the responsibility of saving Lote and his family. The rescuing angel admonishes Lote to leave the city swiftly. He and his company should not tarry or even pause to glance behind themselves at the destruction of the city. Radak explains that Lote and his family fled the city a few moments before its destruction. They could not be saved from the midst of the

devastation. They could only flee ahead of the fire and destruction that would fall upon the city. Any delay, even the pause needed for a quick backwards glance, would have placed them in the midst of a destruction from which they would not be spared.[3] In other words, the angel could only save Lote and his family by removing them from the city before the destruction began. The angel did not have the power to rescue them from the midst of the destruction.

Lote understands this distinction. He fears that he will not be able to outrun the destruction of Sedom. He asks the angel if he and his family might not seek refuge in a nearby city. In this request the same concept is evident. Lote could only be saved by remaining ahead of the path of devastation. But if he would be overtaken by the devastation, he would not be spared.

The angel also acknowledges this limitation. He tells Lote that his request has been granted. He urges Lote to quickly flee to the city. The angel explains that he cannot destroy Sedom until Lote is safe. Again, the same principle is apparent. Lote cannot be saved from the midst of destruction. He can only escape by remaining outside of its path.

The fundamental message that emerges from these interchanges between Lote and the angel is that Hashem would only save Lote by removing him from Sedom before its destruction. But He would not protect Lote if he remained in Sedom or allowed himself to be caught in the midst of the destruction.

Torah Temimah uses this concept to resolve the apparent contradiction between Rashi's comments in regard to the Plague of the Firstborn and Avraham's successful appeal to Hashem. Hashem agreed with Avraham that the righteous should not be destroyed with the wicked. However, He did not agree that the righteous should be rescued from the midst of destruction. The rescue of the righteous requires that they remain outside of the path of destruction. Even Hashem's angels can only save us by removing us from this path. But the forces of destruction – once released by Hashem – do not exercise discretion. They act indiscriminately and destroy the wicked and innocent who are caught in their path.[4]

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 18:24.

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 12:22.

[3] Rabbaynu David Kimchi (Radak), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 19:17.

[4] Rav Baruch HaLeyve Epstein, Torah Temimah on Sefer Beresheit 18:25. ■

Tanya's Heresy III

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: Dear Rabbi Moshe Ben Chaim: I saw your articles on the Tanya, and it appeared to me that you had a good point when you said that the Tanya contradicts the 13 Principles of Maimonides. I told my rabbi about this apparent contradiction, and he suggested as follows: The Tanya is, in fact, not saying that a person's soul is a part of G-d, as a piece of pizza is part of a pie. Rather, a person's soul is a part of G-d in the sense of a candle lit from a torch is a "part" of that torch. The candle does not take away from the original flame. Thank you for your time.

Mesora: Your rabbi misquotes. His candle analogy is borrowing from the case where the seventy elders were imbued with wisdom from Moses. However, such an instance can in no way be transposed onto God. This is a fatal error, and a baseless equation. Simply equating cases, which may seem to have slight similarities, without due reflection, and at times, just to offer an answer, does such great harm to the Torah, and the questioner. One forfeits his eternal life in the next world when possessing such heretic views.

This is what God Himself says about any analogy made to Him: "To what shall your equate Me that I should be similar?" so says G-d." (Isaiah, 40:25) God clearly denies man the ability to create any analogy to Him, as your rabbis just made.

God also said, "For man cannot know Me while alive." (Exod. 33:21) God says there is no knowledge of God available to man, as God told the greatest of men, Moses, in this verse. Now, if Moses could not possess any knowledge of God, how does your rabbi feel he may surpass Moses with his positive description of God?

We cannot describe anything about God, primarily because we have no understanding of what He is. I don't understand how rabbis and teachers deviate so grossly and carelessly from the most central of sources, I mean the Torah's very words, and those words of the Prophets. It is very disturbing, and they should not be teaching if this is their view. They oppose the Torah and harm the many in a manner, which is irrevocable. Inform him of my concerned comments and these sources.

If one wishes to teach the Torah, he must possess knowledge of the Torah. ■

THE DESTRUCTION OF SODOM

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

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

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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 *bal chessed*, 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 of 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. ■



Taken from "Getting It Straight" Practical Ideas for a Life of Clarity

Intuition

DOUG TAYLOR & RABBI MORTON MOSKOWITZ

"Do you ever have hunches?"

The steam from my near-boiling chicken soup rose as I posed the question to him. My friend, the King of Rational Thought, was just digging into his garden salad across the table. I figured he would dismiss the question as trivial, saying that hunches have no place in clear thinking. I was wrong.

"Yes," he said, after his first bite. "Quite often."

My eyebrows rose. "You do?"

"Yes," he replied, smiling. "Why does that surprise you?"

"Well, uh, I thought- I just figured, that, uh, you didn't bother with such things."

"Why wouldn't I?" he asked, still smiling.

"Well, what do you do about them?" I asked back, trying to cover my surprise by methodically stirring my soup.

"It depends," he said. "If they're interesting or important enough to explore, I'll pursue them."

"How?"

"By attempting to collect facts that either prove or disprove my intuitive hunch," he replied. "You shouldn't automatically accept an intuitive hunch, but you shouldn't dismiss it either. The best course of action is to pursue it to see whether it's true. But you have to be patient. You may have to wait awhile until you get enough facts."

"Can you give me an example?" I asked, nearly scalding myself with an initial spoonful of soup.

"Sure," he said. "In fact, I'll give you an example your readers can help with, if they wish."

"Sounds good to me," I said, silently estimating that my soup would not be cool enough to consume until sometime next month.

"Ok," he began, "let me give you some background. From my observation, there seems to be a theme in history that a nation becomes great, then topples."

"Like the U.S.," I interrupted, only half-joking.

"I understand what you're saying, but we can't really use the U.S. as an example because it hasn't toppled... yet." He smiled. "But there are lots of real examples. Rome and Greece, just to name two. Now when a nation starts out, it has to be practical in order to survive. The focus is on



practical things. Protecting borders, maintaining supplies, fighting off enemies, things like that.

"But as nations grow and become successful," he continued, "they seem to turn toward fantasies and away from practicalities. For example, take a guy who wants to conquer the world. Protecting yourself from enemies is one thing. That can be practical. But conquering the whole world? That's clearly a fantasy. My theory - and I admit that it's an intuitive theory - is that nations ultimately topple because, as they grow and become successful, their objectives move farther and farther away from the practical and more toward fantasy. And the more they do that, the greater the chance they will fail."

"Now that I think about it," he mused, "this would seem to apply to individuals and businesses too."

I had finally managed to cool my soup by discretely adding ice cubes from my water glass. "Makes sense to me," I said, as I put the rich chicken stock where it belonged.

"Yes," he said, "it makes sense to me too. But that doesn't make it true. What I need are examples from history. And I just haven't had time to go ferret them out at the library. Perhaps your readers, some of whom probably have facts about the history of nations at their fingertips, can suggest some examples that either confirm or deny this theory."

I stared across the table. "You want examples that deny your theory?" I asked.

He looked up. "Of course," he replied, surprised. "I'll take any examples I can get. I'm not invested in proving that 'my intuitive theory' is true. I'm interested in proving whether or not 'it' is true. Our intuition is only a guide for us to do the real work of uncovering facts that either prove or disprove our intuitive hunches." He paused. "By the way, how's your soup?"

I smiled. "Delicious. And, I have an intuitive hunch about how the cook heats it."

"What's your hunch?"

"I think he uses a nuclear laser cannon." ■

the Wisdom of KING SOLOMON

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



Knowledge

vs

wisdom

Reader: I have heard many times that we should strive to live life based on wisdom. It has just occurred to me after all these years, that I don't quite know what is meant by "wisdom". What is wisdom? It seems to be different from knowledge, but how, I don't know. I often see the word "chachma" a lot. Is wisdom the correct translation of it?

Related to that, I ask: how could King Solomon be wiser than Moshe? I have seen a statement that goes something like, "Who is wise? One who can anticipate the consequences of his actions." Now with Moshe being the great prophet that he was, can't we say he saw more into the future, more than anyone, including Solomon? Regards, Omphile.

Mesora: "Knowledge" refers to learned facts and theories. One gains "knowledge", after having been ignorant. Thus, one may say, "he has acquired knowledge of biology", when beforehand, he possessed no such "knowledge". Learning something means we are newly cognizant. But does this "knowledge" equate to one being "wise"? Knowledge may contribute to one's wisdom, but wisdom is not "of" matters. We don't say one is wise "about" the structure of a tree. One is "knowledgeable" of a tree's structure. So what is "wisdom"?

"Wisdom" refers to the refined level of precise, analytic and clear thought, which results in intelligent and accurate statements and theories. In English, "wisdom" refers to both the "results", and to the "process": through wisdom, one gains greater wisdom. But herein we will refer to wisdom as the human 'faculty' of higher thinking, not the results of

wise study.

Thinking is available to all members of mankind, but not all men are wise. One arrives at a state of wisdom, not due to his amassed, encyclopedic knowledge base. Such a knowledge base does not offer man the ability to think properly. Wisdom is a far higher level, than one who is simply knowledgeable. A wise person reflects on his knowledge – his facts – and then arrives at new truths by analysis, inductive and deductive reasoning. It is the refined act of critical, Talmudic thought, leading one to real truths, which earns one the appellation of a chacham, a "wise man". With wisdom, one arrives at reasonable conclusions and decisions, accurately explaining phenomena. With wisdom, man uncovers reality. One, who sees more of reality, is referred to as greater in wisdom. Conversely, knowledge alone does not equip man with a refined intellect capable of arriving at conclusions.

King Solomon's Wisdom

Let us take an example in which wisdom is referred. This area in Prophets is immediately subsequent to God's imbuing of King Solomon with his great wisdom, and will also answer your question as to King Solomon's wisdom, in contrast to Moses.

Kings I, 3:16 states that two harlots came before King Solomon. Both bore a child. One, the careless harlot, slept on her child and killed it. While the innocent woman slept with her infant nearby, the murderess switched the living infant with her dead infant. In the morning, the innocent woman awoke, and recognized what the murderess did. They came before the King, both claiming that the living child was theirs. King Solomon arrived at his conclusion to cut the infant in two, and to give half of the child to each woman. Of course he would not have gone through with this barbaric act. However, the King's seemingly bizarre and ruthless suggestion caused the lying harlot to display her heretofore-concealed carelessness for the infant, as she subsequently said, "both to me and to her, the child will not be, cut the child!" The king successfully brought into the open, the spine-chilling, cold nature of the true murderess. Justice was served, and the baby was given to his true mother.

The Jews were in awe of King Solomon's wisdom, "And all the Israelites heard the ruling that the King judged, and the people feared the King, for they saw that God's wisdom was in him to mete out justice." (Kings I, 3:28) What was King Solomon's great "wisdom"?

The Jews were struck by King Solomon's plan to expose who was telling the truth. They were taken by his "justice", as this verse repeats the word justice or judgment three times. As you quoted, the Talmud states, "Who is wise? One who sees the outcome."

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*What did
Solomon detect
in the
harlot's words?*

(Tractate Tamid, 32a) Why is this the definition of wisdom? I believe it is because wisdom exists – only when there is no ignorance. One may have all the present facts, and use a cunning mind. However, if he cannot anticipate all outcomes, his current decision may prove tragic - he would not be termed “wise”. One may only be spoken of as wise, if he considers not only what is true now, but also what may be true in the future. The future is no less real to a wise person. He considers all of reality, and that does not refer only to the present. But as the element of “time” is a factor, he considers all possible outcomes by anticipating subsequent results of a given decision. So one is called wise when he rationally considers all factors in a given case, including all possible effects.

But even prior to his “decision” to cut the infant in two, the King had to have some knowledge, in order that he would feel this to be the most effective response. How did he arrive at his ploy? What did King Solomon consider? A closer examination of the verses reveals that the King already knew who was innocent and who was guilty - before his suggestion to cut the child in two. However, perhaps he did not feel his observation would be accepted. Let me explain.

Verses 22 and 23 in our chapter state the quarrel

between the two harlots:

“[22]...mine is the living infant and yours is the dead. And the other harlot said, ‘no, the dead child is yours and the living child is mine’. [23] And the King said, ‘this one said ‘mine is the living, and yours is the dead child’, and this one said, ‘no, the dead one is yours, and the living is mine’.”

At this point, he commanded that a sword be brought. Thus, he had a plan. But what did the King already know, and how did he know it?

Why does Kings I record verse 23, where King Solomon reiterates (albeit perhaps to himself) what each woman said? Kings I is not being redundant. I feel this verse is here to indicate that King Solomon detected a distinction in the harlots’ words, he pondered this, and then devised his plan. Therefore, Kings I records, for us, what the King pondered. He was pondering the harlots’ words. So we must ask, what did he detect? These words in verse 23 appear as containing no clue whatsoever; a mere repetition of what they already said in verse 22. But there is one, subtle difference: the first woman refers to the living child ‘first’, while the second woman refers to the dead child first. Read it again: “mine is the living

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infant and yours is the dead. And the other harlot said, 'no, the dead child is yours and the living child is mine.'

Perhaps, the King derived a principle: 'a woman always refers to her child first'. From this principle, the King knew to whom belonged the dead infant. It was to the latter woman, the one who referred to the dead child first. But perhaps, this subtle observation and his conclusion would not be appreciated by the masses in his court and in Israel, without demonstrative proof. Thus, he instantly thought of how he could demonstrate the true callousness of the murderess. He created a scenario, in which, he anticipated that the murderess might express her true nature. It worked!

King Solomon's wisdom straddled what the outcome of his plan might be; the murderess might express her callousness again. Forecasting this possibility as a reality, he created a plan now, based on his wisdom of the outcome. He created a possibility for the murderess to express her very nature, which allowed her to carelessly sleep on her child, thereby killing it. "Who is wise? One who sees the outcome." We now understand why Kings I repeats for the reader, what exactly were the words that the King pondered. It directs us to study the King's specific observation, appreciating the level of knowledge he received from God.

The Jews were awed by such insight and wisdom. Today, we are equally awed, not at only the King's wisdom, but by God's formulation of these verses; how a verse's subtle clues reveal more knowledge than what the Jews witnessed back then.

God Granting Solomon Wisdom

Having come this far, let us see if we can determine why God imbued King Solomon with such unparalleled wisdom. Solomon became king at the age of 12. God then appeared to him in a nighttime dream (Kings I, 3:5-14):

[5] "In Gibeon, God appeared to Solomon in a dream of the night, and He said, 'Ask what I will give to you.' [6] And Solomon said, 'you have done with Your servant, my father David, great kindness as he walked before you in truth and charity and in an upright heart with You, and You guarded this great kindness, and You gave him a son sitting on his chair as this day. [7] And now God, my God, You have made Your servant king under David my father, and I am a young lad, I know not of going out and coming. [8] And Your servant is in the midst of Your people You have chosen, a numerous people that cannot be counted from their size. [9] And give to your servant a hearing heart, to judge Your people, to distinguish between good and evil, for who can judge Your people, heavy as they are?' [10] And the matter was

good in God's eyes, that Solomon asked for this thing. [11] And God said to him, 'On account that you asked for this thing, and you did not ask for long days, and you did not ask for yourself riches, and you did not request the life of your enemies, and you asked for yourself understanding, to hear righteousness, [12] behold I have done according to your words, behold I have give to you a wise heart, and understanding, that none were like you before you, and after you, none will rise like you. [13] And also what you did not ask, I give to you, also riches and also honor, that none will be like you, a man among kings, all your days. [14] And if you go in My ways, to guard My statutes and commands as David your father went, then I will lengthen your days.'

God commences His vision to Solomon with the words, "Ask what I will give to you." How do we understand such a general offer? I would suggest that God only makes such an offer, when one, such as the son of David, would not make such a request from his own understanding of reality. Correctly so, Solomon did not think wisdom is arrived at other than through his own diligence. God also knew what Solomon's new concern was, having been made king immediately before this vision and requiring wisdom to rule the people. But why then didn't God simply imbue Solomon with this new wisdom without a dialogue, in question form at that? God knew what Solomon desired! As Rabbi Reuven Mann stated, God wishes that man use his mind at all times. For this reason, God did not create miracles for Pharaoh that were undeniable. This would remove Pharaoh's chance to arrive at a realization with his mind that God in fact sent Moses. Being awed by overt miracles, Pharaoh's mind would be disengaged. This is not how God desires man to arrive at truths. Similarly, when Solomon may have the opportunity to think into a matter, and arrive at knowledge on his own, God will not remove this opportunity from him. Therefore, God framed this vision in a dialogue so that Solomon would be afforded this opportunity to learn something new with his own mind; a new idea about how God operates. Aside from receiving his newfound wisdom, God desired that Solomon's mind be engaged in the very dialogue itself.

Solomon then realized something new: "God would not make such an offer for a matter I may achieve independent of His interaction. God must be intimating that He offers to me that which is naturally unavailable." Solomon immediately seized the true sense of God's offer, and asked for the most admirable request: wisdom to judge God's people. Solomon desired to fulfill his role as king as best he could. This demanded that he, a 12-year-old lad, be equipped with wisdom.

Solomon was perfectly in line with God's will.

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*Why did God imbue
Solomon with
unparalleled
wisdom?*



wisdom. This is why he was granted such wisdom.

Unparalleled Wisdom: Why was it Necessary?

This case of the two harlots is the first event recorded after God imbued King Solomon with His great wisdom. We understand that the king's wisdom was of a far, superior nature. The king, successfully exposing the true murderess, had a profound effect on the Jews.

Previously, we read in verse 13, "...behold I give to you a wise and understanding heart, that before you none were similar, and after you, none will rise like you." If this is so, who was greater: Moses or Solomon? Radak answers that Solomon surpassed Moses in knowledge of 'nature', but in knowledge of God, none surpassed Moses. Radak also suggests another possibility; God's elevation of Solomon's knowledge over all "others", is limited to "kings", excluding all who were not kings, such as Moses. Thus, according to Radak's second possibility, Solomon was wiser than all "kings", but in no manner wiser in anyway than Moses. This latter view is supported by verse 13, "...none will be like you, a man among kings, all your days." (However, one may argue well: this verse describes Solomon's wealth and honor, not his wisdom. His wisdom is described in verse 12, where he is not limited to kings alone.)

But we wonder: why did God grant Solomon wisdom in this high degree, "unparalleled by others, both, prior or subsequent to him"? For what purpose did God see it necessary to elevate Solomon's wisdom over all others - prior, and subsequent to him? Could not a lower, "natural" level of wisdom - on par with other prophets and kings such as David - suffice for Solomon to rule Israel effectively? Additionally, Solomon did not request wisdom of such a degree - God's gift was

Before asking for wisdom, he describes how God granted such kindness to David his father, and that he was now to replace David's position as king over "God's" people. Solomon was stating that based on God's will that the Jews exist as a "chosen" people, and must have a king, it is in line with God's will to ask for wisdom. Solomon requested something necessary to fulfill God's will. This is why he made such a lengthy introduction before asking for

over and above what the king requested. As such wisdom was never offered to all others, we must examine these verses to detect any clues, which might lead us to an answer.

For one, we can safely say that this degree of wisdom was viewed as "unnatural" - it was clearly granted through God's providence. As no other human attained such wisdom, purposefully stated in the verses, Israel would recognize that Solomon's wisdom was achieved only by means of a miracle of God. We must then understand why this was necessary.

I thought into this matter at length, over a few days, and although not arriving at what I feel is the most satisfying answer, yet, I do wish to propose one possibility. King Solomon was 12 when he became king. Perhaps such a youth would not be well received by the Israelites, with the exclusive, authoritative power deserving to him. Imagine a 12-year-old running the United States. Many would be reluctant to subject themselves to such a youngster. Perhaps this was why God, on only this occasion, wished to give a man an undisputed and unparalleled mind. Only with the wisdom that undeniably was granted miraculously by God, would the Israelites find themselves with no argument against the king's continued leadership - it was God's leadership, through him. It is Solomon's age that distinguishes him from all other rulers, that I feel this might be the reason for his receipt of such a gift.

Additionally, the verse may teach us another point. Verse 11 says that God gave Solomon this wisdom "on account of the fact that he did not seek riches, long days, or his enemy's lives." What does this verse teach? Perhaps God teaches us here, that it was precisely Solomon's "selection" of wisdom over all else, that he raised himself to a higher level through this very act of selection - a level where God would relate to him on such a plain, granting him unparalleled wisdom. It is only the person who selects wisdom as his full desire in life that God relates to on a higher level, than all other people. Solomon was not 'entitled' to this wisdom, without raising himself to the level where he responded properly to God's offer. Had Solomon selected something other than wisdom, he would not have received it.

Finally, why did God also grant Solomon those things he did not request? This teaches that had Solomon asked for riches, his enemy's deaths, or long life, that such requests were improper. Such requests display one's view that these matters are ends unto themselves, and this is against the Torah's philosophy. By requesting wisdom, Solomon displayed a proper character, one in which he would relate to those other areas in the correct manner. Therefore, God granted to him these other benefits as well. ■



the RABBIS' METAPHORS: SATAN *and* ABRAHAM

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Talmud Sanhedrin 89b: "And it was after these things, and G-d tested Abraham." (Genesis 22:1 regarding G-d's command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac).

"Rabbi Yochanan said in Rabbi Yosi ben Zimra's name, 'after these things' refers to 'after the words of Satan'. As it says, 'the lad grew and was weaned.' Upon which Satan said to G-d, 'Master of the world, this old man (Abraham) you graciously gave a child at 100 years of age. At all his feasts, did he not have one turtledove or one pigeon to offer to you? G-d said, 'Has he done this only for his son? If I would say sacrifice your son before me, he would do so. ' Immediately G-d tested Abraham saying take 'na' (please) your son.....' Rabbi Simeon ben Abba said 'na' refers only to a pleaded request.' This is allegorical to an earthly king who fought many wars and was victorious through the help of a great warrior. In time, the king was faced with a very strong battle. He pleaded with the warrior, 'stand with me in this battle, so my previous battles won't be disparaged saying there were no previous successes'. So too is the case here, G-d pleaded with Abraham, 'I tested you with many trials, and you were triumphant in them all. Now, stand though this test so they should not say the we are no real triumphs in your previous trials.'"

Was does it mean that G-d pleaded with Abraham? What is the concept being taught that the purpose in Abraham's trial required

sacrificing his son? It seems it is only a response to Satan. Who does Satan represent here?

Sometimes, Satan refers to the person himself, i.e., Abraham, his own instincts. But this is not the case here. Abraham was telling G-d something negative about himself. To whom can Satan refer? I believe it is the people of the land, those who seek to mock Abraham.

Upon Abraham "celebrating" his son's physical maturity, this raised suspicion among the people as to Abraham's true level of perfection. The people (Satan) harbored feelings that Abraham was not as great as he made himself out to be. Perhaps they were astounded at his ability to have a child at 100 years of age. The people of the land were jealous of G-d's divine intervention with Abraham. Why did this pose such jealousy? People saw someone as righteous as Abraham, being successful in all of his trials. His trials were undoubtedly publicized as the allegory teaches, and such perfection in Abraham conveyed to them by contrast, their own lack of perfection. They were jealous and felt animosity towards Abraham.

Why jealousy and animosity? They sought to degrade his perfection, portraying him no better than they are. Belittling Abraham's triumphs over G-d's trials, they can now live with themselves. They no longer feel less than perfect, as Abraham himself is not perfect. They can say, "If Abraham couldn't pass the hardest test, he probably didn't pass the easier ones". The people - referred to here as Satan - harbored the notion that Abraham would not sacrifice Isaac and he could not achieve ultimate perfection. In order to substantiate to the world that man can indeed reach perfection, G-d

commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. G-d's will is that His desired lifestyle for man be displayed as achievable, not something so lofty that no man can succeed. To teach the world that man can reach the heights of perfection, G-d instructed Abraham in this most difficult trial. It is recorded as G-d "pleading" with Abraham, to teach us that such a trial is essential for mankind to witness.

We learn that this trial of sacrificing Isaac was not only to actualize Abraham's own perfection, but it was also designed to teach us that G-d's desired perfection for mankind is within reach. When the world sees a man who can perfect himself to such a degree, it removes all rationalizations posed by weaker peoples, which justify their continued laziness and lack of perfection. But now that Abraham passed this test too, the world must admit that G-d's plan for man is achievable - by all mankind. Abraham's ultimate trial teaches such a valuable lesson; that G-d's will is achievable.

Our metaphor means that Abraham - the warrior - made G-d's system successful on many occasions. He followed and taught G-d's monotheism, and perfected his character traits. But people still felt if Abraham doesn't stand the toughest test, he is nothing. They sought justification for their immoral lives. G-d 'pleaded' with His warrior to help Him succeed in this great battle - sacrificing Isaac. G-d could not win the battle Himself, as the only victory (G-d proving His system as perfect and within man's reach) must be through mortal man and the use of his free will. Only by a man - Abraham - displaying such devotion to G-d, will G-d's system emerge victorious, and achievable. ■

Abraham Learning God's Justice

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

How did Abraham know what G-d's justice was, prior to G-d's communication with him? As he had no Torah, or any communication with G-d as of yet, by what means did Abraham arrive at a true understanding of G-d's will? G-d said "hamichaseh ani mayAbraham", "will I keep hidden from Abraham." Of what knowledge was Abraham bereft, which couldn't acquire on his own, and what was it in G-d's words, which introduced Abraham to new concepts?

Without the Torah, Abraham first posited that there is a Cause for all existences. The sciences, which relentlessly guide the spheres and all matter, were all too well organized - catering precisely to the world's daily needs - that it should exist without a Designer. There is a G-d. One initial Cause. Monotheism.

Abraham saw man as part of creation. He concluded; man is not merely to live his life without self-guidance, drifting aimlessly with no purpose. The existence of man's mark of distinction - his mind - taught Abraham that the Creator desired man to engage this very faculty. It was given only to man, and thus, it must be G-d's will that the mind is to be used by man, above all other faculties. Abraham therefore thought into all matters. Essentially, Abraham thought, "How does this Creator desire I live my life?"

Abraham understood that the primary acknowledgement of man's thinking must be his complete understanding and embrace of monotheism. To this end, Abraham debated with many individuals and proved - through rational arguments - that ditheism and atheism are false notions.

Once Abraham understood the pursuit of wisdom as G-d's wish

for man, Abraham pondered many aspects of the world. They included natural law, philosophy, and laws of government. Abraham thought, "as G-d desires many men to populate the world, and all men have the goal of learning, all mankind must work together to ensure a safe haven geared towards that goal of obtaining wisdom. Therefore, moral codes must be followed, i.e., man must ensure another's pursuit of the good."

As Abraham proceeded to teach his neighbors, G-d desired that Abraham have the correct ideas. Abraham was able to understand a great amount on his own, but many ideas would go unrealized without Divine intervention.

This brings us to G-d's statement, "will I keep hidden from Abraham..." G-d therefore introduced some new idea to Abraham. But what was it? G-d spoke very few words. He said, (Gen. 18:20):

"The cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I (G-d) will go down and see if in accordance with their cry they do, and I will destroy them, or not, I will know."

In these words alone was a new lesson to Abraham. (It is essential when learning to isolate wherein lays the answer.) Upon this prophecy, Abraham thought, "G-d knows whether they deserve to be destroyed, He knows all, so he knows their sin. However, G-d is saying that there are two possibilities here, destroying Sodom, or sparing them. Abraham then responded:

"Will you wipe out these cities if there are 50 righteous souls there? It is mundane that You should kill a righteous person with a wicked, and the righteous will suffer the same as the wicked, the Judge of

the entire world won't do justice?!" G-d then responds, "If find 50 righteous in the midst of the city, I will spare the entire place for their sake".

What did Abraham ask, and what did G-d respond? Abraham made a few statements, but one was not a question. When Abraham said, "It is mundane that You should kill a righteous person with a wicked, and the righteous will suffer the same as the wicked, the Judge of the entire world won't do justice?!", he was not asking, but rather, he was stating, "this is not how You work". Abraham repeats the concept of justice in that passage, teaching us that he was only talking about justice. Abraham had no question on this, a righteous person should live, and a wicked person should die. Justice demands this. What Abraham was asking on was "tzedaka", charity, i.e., whether G-d would save even the wicked, if enough righteous people were present in the city. And this is precisely what G-d answered Abraham:

"If I find 50 righteous in the midst of the city, I will spare the entire place for their sake".

The question is, from where did Abraham obtain this idea, that G-d would not only work with justice, but He would engage traits over and above pure justice, something we would call charity, or tzedaka?

Abraham realized this idea from G-d's few words, "I (G-d) will go down and see if in accordance with their cry they do, and I will destroy them, or not...". G-d said there was an option, meaning, although G-d knew Sodom and Amora were sinful, and He knew the exact measure of their sin, nonetheless, there was an option regarding their fate. Abraham deduced from G-d's words that there are criteria, other than the sinners' own flaws, which G-d views to evaluate the sinners' fate. This is precisely what G-d intended Abraham to learn. This is not something a person can determine from his studies. And

since Abraham was to be a "mighty nation", and that he was going to "teach his household to keep the ways of G-d", (Gen. 18:18-19) Abraham needed to be instructed in those ways. (Note: We learn that G-d teaches man through engaging his mind, and not simply spelling out the idea. G-d made Abraham use his reasoning to learn the concept.)

What does is this idea, that G-d will spare even the wicked, provided righteous people are present? I believe it teaches us that G-d will tolerate the wicked, provided there are proper influences with the potential to change the wicked. In such a case, the wicked are not doomed to a failed existence, not yet, provided a possible cure is close at hand. This teaches us the extent to which G-d endures sinners. "...do I desire the death of the wicked? Rather, in the repentance of the wicked and that he lives. Repent, repent from your evil ways, and why shall you die, house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11)

We also see earlier that G-d desires Abraham to know both charity and justice, (Gen. 18:19) "...and he will keep to G-d's ways to do charity and justice."

What is the difference between charity and justice, and why is charity so essential, that G-d made certain Abraham possessed this concept? Justice, we understand, is necessary for any society to operate. Deterrents must exist to prevent people from outletting their aggression and destroying society. Where does tzedaka come in? I believe tzedaka is necessary for the individual, as opposed to justice, which is for the society. If there is injustice, it must be corrected so a society may continue. But what if a person has endured a tortured existence, now facing penalties from a justice system, which treats him equal to all others, with no consideration for the unique side effects affecting him, resultant from pure, strict justice? Won't this person have the potential to break at some

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point? He may even commit suicide. Without tzedaka, charity, one may feel that his specific situation is not recognized. Feelings of persecution and victimization may lead him to self-destruction.

It is man's nature when things go bad, to close in on himself, feeling that a streak of misery is upon him. This feeling strips him from all hope. He eventually feels alienated from society at large which seems to be 'doing fine', and the "why me" attitude sets in. He begins a downward spiral. Without another person showing him pity, and a desire to assist, he may be doomed.

This is where I feel tzedaka plays a vital role in society. If we are to ensure the well being of society with the aforementioned goal of securing mankind's haven for intellectual pursuits, we need to recognize and insure the presence of more than justice alone. We must also recognize that man needs individual attention in the form of sympathy, empathy, care, hospitality, generosity, and all other forms. The fortunate among us must also initiate such care, and not wait until the fallen person calls out, for it might be too late, and he never calls out, but ends matters drastically. For this reason, the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) teaches, that giving tzedaka is not simply giving money. We are obligated to commiserate with the unfortunate soul. The uplifting of his countenance is the goal, and money is only one item through which we accomplish this goal. Maimonides states that the highest level of man is when he is concerned with his fellow man.

Man's nature is that he needs to be recognized as an individual. Without this recognition, man feels no integrity, and will not move on with his life. Therefore, tzedaka is essential to a society's laws. Justice and charity must go hand in hand. Justice serves the society, while charity addresses the individual. Both are essential. ■

Is Akeidas Yitzchak Brutality?

Reader I: A story occurred in the Bronx approximately 3 years back. The headlines read that a woman had stuffed her baby into an oven and let the baby burn. What was the reason? The woman said that "The devil was in the baby." This killing took place in the name of G-d and religion (obviously Christianity). Were one to look at this story at face value, as most people do when they read a newspaper or hear about something on TV, they would find it utterly repulsive and would call the woman an insane monster. So what makes Akeidas Yitzchak any less repulsive?

Others and I have long been troubled by the notion that Hashem would ask a man to sacrifice his son to Him on an altar. Even more troubling is the fact that Abraham was eager to fulfill this command, to shed his son's blood for G-d. But if G-d is all merciful as we say, then even if it was to test Abraham's faith, why this? Is the story of Abraham almost killing his son because G-d told him to (when we look at it at face value), any less troubling or horrible than the story concerning the mother stuffing her baby into the oven, listed above? I realize that one answer to this question is that there is an answer and understanding of the narrative, however we are not on the madrega (intellectual level) that



we should understand it. But does not the Gemarah in Maseches Megillah say, "The Torah is written in the language of man"?

As a result, shouldn't we be able to understand it? I hope you can give me an answer, for it is a very troubling issue. My thanks.

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(Akeida: Brutality? continued from previous page)

Mesora: It should first be noted that there is a great distinction between pain and murder. The Torah does not condone inflicting pain. Slaughtering in accordance with the Torah must be done with an extremely smooth and sharp blade. This is to insure that the animal feels no pain. Aside from killing, what this woman did was clearly wrong, as she suffered the child great pain.

Regarding the issue of murder, we once again make recourse to the Torah. G-d caused life. He is the Only One who may determine what is acceptable and moral behavior. Without G-d saying so, murder would not be a crime. It is only due to His plan that something is either "against" His plan, such as murder, or "in line" with His plan, and again, murder may fall into this category as being permissible, and even commanded.

If G-d determined that Abraham should slaughter his son, this then is in accordance with G-d's plan. What this woman did was not. There is no comparison. Abraham's zeal demonstrates how in line he was with his desire to effectuate G-d's will. He did not view killing his son as a crime, or as something questionable, as this was a decree directly from G-d. Abraham had no doubt that G-d had communicated this to him. Had Abraham restrained himself that would have been the crime. King Saul was dethroned because of such an act.

Your statement that "we are not on the intellectual level to understand" is incorrect, and sadly, very often heard in religious circles. It is unfortunate for you that you have been exposed to such a damaging philosophy. You should abandon entertaining this idea as true. We only make such a self-assessment after we have exhausted ourselves in study. But we never commence with this sentiment.

The entire purpose of the Torah is that man involves himself in the appreciation of G-d's wisdom. G-d did not create a Torah, which is "over our heads". Yes, there are times when areas are daunting, and answers elusive, but they are reachable, as Moshe said, (Deuteronomy, 30:13-14) "it is not in the heavens (that one

should) say 'who will go up to the heavens and take it for us and he will make us hear and we will do it'. And it is not on the opposite side of the river, that one should say 'who will traverse the other side of the river, and he will make us hear and we will do it'.

Here, Moshe taught us that the Torah is within our grasp, and we should not feign a humility, which cripples us from developing our minds further.

This false humility in reality is usually spoken, meaning, people don't think it, they "say" it, viz., "we cannot reach Rashi's level" or similar. Why is this spoken? It is quite clear that those who feign this humility are really seeking the admiration of others. Just the opposite of what you think! If they weren't, they need not speak these words in the presence of others. In truth, Rambam stated that we can reach the level of Moshe Rabbeinu, meaning that we can all reach our potential as Moshe did. But we won't if we make statements like these.

I urge you to keep your mind's eye on seeking the truth, as you did by asking this question. Do not rest until you feel you have uncovered an answer that is 100% satisfactory to you in any area. Do not allow people's notions to cripple your freethinking. Follow Chazal, not people of today who echo ignorant statements. We have the words of the Rabbis to learn from, use them solely as your guide.

Shlomo Hamelech said (Proverbs 2:6) "ki Hashem yitane chochma, m'piv daas u'svunah", "G-d gives forth wisdom, from His mouth come knowledge and understanding". This should teach you that if you have the zeal to learn, it is in G-d's hands to make knowledge known to you. He is the Source, and He is the Transmitter. (That is what this pasuk teaches by doubling the statement - Hashem is the granter "yitane" and He is the source "piv.")

If you desire the knowledge, G-d can grant it, as this is His plan.

Reader II: I will never be able to understand, let alone accept akeidat Yitzhak. How can you justify G-d's

demand of Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a sign of devotion? This is a most horrific request, which befits the most primitive, even barbarian cultures! And please don't tell me this is 'symbolic' - it is a real demand that G-d made on Abraham. The fact that we all know that Isaac was later spared because of "ram caught in the thicket" does not make it easier to accept the brutal demand in itself.

Mesora: Isaac was not spared due to the ram. That event was subsequent to G-d's command not to slay Isaac.

Secondly, asking to "justify" G-d's request assumes this error: that G-d must follow man's sense of justice. The converse is true: G-d has a higher system, wherein, He raises man to greater levels of perfection through the adherence to His word. G-d would not place someone in a trial as this, were it not for the fact that He knew that Abraham would comply. (Ramban) G-d created life, and He alone gives possesses rights over one's life. He does not "owe" mankind anything. It is wrong to assume otherwise. We are His creatures. Is death a bad? We do not hold death as an evil. We hold it is a good. True, killing is evil, but only if perpetrated unjustly. However, if G-d commands us to do so, it is not evil, (evil meaning "against G-d's word."). When we battle, here too killing is not evil. It ascribes to a higher principle. There is a great difference between death, and killing.

Is it wrong for Abraham to go through such trials? We must look at all aspects of the trial. There maybe a benefit which outweighs the suffering of losing his child. The higher benefit is Abraham's demonstration of devotion to G-d, a tremendous example, teaching all mankind how far one must go in his devotion to G-d, as stated by our Rabbis. Ramban said that G-d actualized the greatness which Abraham could achieve, thereby earning him a greater reward, otherwise unrealized, had he never experienced this trial. But the fact is that G-d did not wish Isaac dead. So we may conclude that no greater good is achieved through his slaughter via Abraham. ■

Akeidas Yitzchak: Q&A's

"...The second category (of commandments) are commands which are hidden, and there is not explained why they were commanded. And G-d forbid, G-d forbid that there should be any one of these commands which goes against human intelligence. Rather, we are obligated to perform all that G-d commands, be it revealed to us the underlying "Sode" (principle), be it hidden from us. And if we find any of them, which contradict human intelligence, it isn't proper that we should understand it as implied. But we should consult the books of the wise men of blessed memory, to determine if such a command is a metaphor. And if we find nothing written (by them) we (must) search it out and seek with all our ability, perhaps we can fix it (determine the command). If we can't, then we abandon that mitzvah as it is, and admit we are ignorant of it". (Ibn Ezra Exod. 20.1)

Reader: According to Ibn Ezra you quoted, "abandon that mitzvah as it is", refers to commands, which do not comply with human reason. My question is why Abraham accepted the command of slaughtering his only son. Isn't this in opposition to human reason? To kill your own child? This question is strengthened, as the Ibn Ezra's very example of incomprehensible laws is the command "circumcise the foreskin of your hearts". This is a matter of killing as well, but here, Ibn Ezra says it is impossible that we should take this literally, i.e., to cut out our hearts. If this is so

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impossible on the literal level, what made Abraham so willing to sacrifice his son? Shouldn't he abandon the command from G-d, just as Ibn Ezra says we should?

Mesora: Your question is very good. There is one distinction I would make. Regarding the Ibn Ezra, if a command FOR ALL JEWS would exist as literally "circumcise the foreskin of your hearts", this would cause the end of Jewish people, a direct contradiction to G-d's will that Jewish people should exist. Additionally, the second half of that verse reads, "and your necks shall no longer be stiff". This means that the command of "circumcising the foreskins of your hearts" must result in an improvement in man's nature, where he is no longer stubborn. Clearly, the command of "circumcising the foreskins of your hearts" is not a directive to kill ourselves, but rather to improve our ethics - to eradicate our stubborn nature in connection with Torah adherence.

Reader: That is not the reason that the Ibn Ezra says though. He doesn't mention the last part of the verse or anything about it contradicting another part of the Torah, namely that the Jewish people should exist to perfect themselves.

Mesora: But that last half of the verse does in fact exist, and is divinely connected with the first half. We do not require all to be written by Ibn Ezra. You must learn the Ibn Ezra, not simply read him, and you must use reasoning. If G-d placed two ideas in one verse, they are inherently intertwined and related.

Reader: Ibn Ezra says, "does He (Hashem) wish to murder us like a cruel person?" In other words there would be no benefit what so ever in taking the commandment literally, just the opposite; it is totally destructive and makes no sense, and so it goes against reason. It is for this reason alone that he mentions the example of "circumcise the

foreskin of your hearts". He doesn't say that if one commandment goes against another part of the Torah that we have to reinterpret it. He says if it goes against "reason" we can't take it literally. That is his point.

Mesora: But isn't that which opposes another part of the Torah something which you consider going against reason"? Of course. So we must look at the entire verse, and the entire Torah.

Reader: So my question on the Akeida stands. Forget about the example of "Umaltem". The fact is the Ibn Ezra (and not just him, Rav Saadia Gaon as well as many others mention this) says that if our understanding of a Mitzva goes against reason "it is not proper to believe it literally". So my question on the Akeida stands.

Mesora: A command to Abraham to slay his son doesn't contradict anything. It is not unreasonable for him to kill his son at G-d's command. He is only killing one person, and not the entire nation. A Rabbi taught, Abraham questioned G-d upon His decision to destroy Sodom. Why did Abraham question G-d on Sodom, but at the command to kill his own son, Abraham did not question? The Rabbi answered that in terms of determining G-d's justice, man may investigate and arrive at reasons. What G-d administers to man must be appreciated in man's terms of justice. But how killing Isaac would perfect Abraham, here, Abraham felt, "G-d may have a method unknown to me just how this will benefit me. If G-d commands me in this act, it must have a perfection somewhere, although I may not be able to see it. My ignorance does not remove the perfection of this act." Punishment is a different story; it is meted to man as a result of his actions, as a lesson to man or mankind. As such, "lesson" means that there is comprehension - there is understanding. Therefore, Abraham inquired about areas of justice - Sodom's destruction - but did not inquire into the command to kill Isaac. A command is G-d's

knowledge, far beyond that which mortal man comprehends.

Again, nothing in the act of killing Isaac contradicted reason - but wiping out the entire nation by taking literally "circumcise the foreskin of your hearts" is unreasonable, and must be interpreted. We do not allow our ignorance to question G-d's commands.

However, contradictions are different, and that which is contradictory cannot be followed. G-d gave us a mind to lead our actions, This means, by definition, that contradiction goes against G-d's wish for man's actions. Abraham slaughtering Isaac presented no contradiction. Jews following a command literally of "circumcising the foreskins of our hearts" is a contradiction to G-d's plan that mankind endures.

Now, you might say it contradicts G-d's very promise to make Abraham's seed as numerous as the stars and the sands. Perhaps Abraham thought there were new considerations to which G-d reacted, altering His original plan.

Reader: How can Hashem change his mind? First He tells Abraham to bring his son as a sacrifice, then He tells him not to. Either Hashem changed his mind or, G-d forbid, one of the commands was not true, since contradictory statements cannot both be true! (Even Hashem can't do that, that's not possible). Many commentaries ask this question.

Mesora: G-d altered His plan to have man live forever. But this is not a "change in His mind". After the first sin, man caused his death to become a reality. Why cannot G-d alter His plan, as "part" of His plan? G-d knows the future! Ibn Ezra teaches that G-d initially desired the firstborns to serve in the Temple, but were exchanged for the Levites subsequent to their sin of the Golden Calf. G-d knew this was to happen. He did not change His mind. Here too G-d changed His plan. In reality, G-d never intended that Isaac die, only that Abraham be tried by G-d's command. Once Abraham

prevailed, just before cutting Isaac's throat, G-d told Abraham the truth, that Isaac is not to be killed, but that it was a trial. G-d knows all future events. Based on this reality, we cannot say He has changed His mind, as His "mind" is never ignorant, therefore, no changes are required to compensate for unforeseen events.

Reader: Another question could be asked. If Hashem came to you and asked you directly to sacrifice your son would you be able to refuse? What was such a great test that Abraham went through?

Mesora: Jona refused G-d's command, anyone can refuse. The greatness of Abraham is that he didn't refuse, and was willing to sacrifice his beloved son.

Reader: The Ralbag points out that really there can be two understandings of Hashem's initial command to Abraham. 1) Bring him as a sacrifice. 2) To bring him up the mountain to bring a sacrifice with him, to educate him in bringing sacrifices.

Using this insight of the Ralbag I would suggest that Abraham was in a dramatic dilemma. Should he interpret Hashem's words literally and go against his reason? Or should he use his reason to reinterpret Hashem's words? Abraham simply did not know what to do! Don't forget, for the first period of his life Abraham discovered G-d using his intellect alone as the Rambam so beautifully describes. Then he merited prophecy later in life. But now these two "chords" that attached him close to Hashem contradicted each other! What should he do?

Now Abraham could have taken the easy way out. He could have reinterpreted Hashem's command to fit with reason. But he didn't! This was Abraham's great test! He figured that, if in doubt, he should show the maximum sacrifice to Hashem. This shows Abraham's Yiras HaShem.

Mesora: The Talmud (Sanhedrin 89b) presents the story of Abraham

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traveling to the mountain to kill Isaac. Satan - a metaphor for Abraham's own instincts - is recorded as trying to convince Abraham to abandon G-d's command, now that following G-d will prove to be the death of Isaac. What was the Satan (Abraham's instincts) saying? He was saying a principle we hear so often, "Why serve G-d when things go bad?" Satan was saying that adherence to G-d is worthless unless life is 100% good. But we know this life cannot be 100% good, as G-d gave all mankind free will. At some point in life we must be confronted with the harmful effects of corrupt individuals using their free will to harm others. But this is exactly what King David said in Psalms, "Many evils befall the righteous, but they are saved from them all". This means that although due to free will, many evils must exist, nonetheless, G-d will remove their harmful effects from reaching the righteous. G-d does not alter the free will of the evildoers - this cannot be. But G-d does protect the righteous.

So Satan (Abraham's emotions) was attempting to avoid killing his precious son. However, Abraham prevailed over Satan's arguments.

Abraham struggles further with his instincts, and posed another possibility to himself, as you suggest, (the Talmud continues), "Satan said, 'I heard behind the curtain (in heaven) "the sheep for a sacrifice, and not Isaac". Again this illustrates what Abraham was feeling inside himself.

That perhaps he is to merely sacrifice an animal, and not Isaac. It seems the Talmud entertains the idea that Abraham was unsure whether he was to actually kill Isaac, or a sheep. What was Abraham's response? "This is the punishment of a liar, that even when he tells the truth, he is not listened to." Abraham actually considered killing the sheep to be a very real possibility of the command's intent. But when he said to Satan (to himself) "that even when Satan tells the truth, he is not listened to", Abraham was saying that since this idea came from his instincts, its veracity is inconsequential. As this thought originated from the instincts, it is not trusted. Abraham completely denied any value his emotions presented through these rationalizations to spare Isaac. Abraham prevailed over Satan - over his strong emotions.

Another thought: When faced with the emotional appeal that an animal was to be killed and not Isaac, Abraham reasoned, "It is purposeless that G-d would make a statement so vague, allowing me to be doubtful as to which one I shall slaughter. If He wished an animal, He would say so clearly." Perhaps Abraham saw that his confusion is just the workings of the emotions, and he did not heed to his emotions. This is what is meant by, "that even when Satan tells the truth, he is not listened to", that is, "even when my emotions say rational possibilities, I cannot follow them (the emotions)." ■

Did Abraham Believe He was to Sacrifice Isaac?

Reader: In my opinion, G-d never asked Abraham to kill Isaac. Since He promised Abraham that his seed will continue with Isaac, and later, didn't tell him to kill Isaac but to bring him as sacrifice. So the test was this: if Abraham has bitachon, (trust in G-d) he will know what ever he does, nothing will happen to Isaac, because G-d keeps his promises. Therefore, he should know that even if he strikes Isaac with his knife, he cannot kill him - a miracle must happen.

Mesora: According to you, Abraham's perfection in following God's word is a game. He never really thought that he was sacrificing Isaac. But the Rabbis teach otherwise: Abraham was convinced that he was to kill his son. This is fact. See the Ramban and Maimonides on this point for verification.

Reader: Am I to follow majority opinions in this area, or can't I follow what my mind tells me?

Mesora: In philosophy - which this is - there is no Rabbinical or Torah "ruling." So you are correct to follow your mind as best as possible. But I wish to clarify for you these points which I see clear: Reason dictates that, the inclusion of this story in the Torah as a lesson in devotion; the storyline itself; and the response of the angel (Gen., 22:12) "...don't send your hand out to the lad, and do nothing to him, for now I know you fear God, as you have not held back your only son from me" teach clearly that Abraham had full intent to slaughter Isaac. ■

Killing Infants: G-d's Justice

Reader: I have always had a problem with the 10th Plague. How can anyone reconcile this punishment with "Tsedek, Tsedek, Tirdof", "strict justice shall you pursue"? After all, among the thousands upon thousands of firstborns who died, there must have been countless babies, infants, children and many others, totally innocent people who committed no sin. So, where is the ultimate Justice in this collective death sentence?

Mesora: In such a delicate area, one must be careful not to allow his tender mercies for children to cloud an objective analysis. Be mindful as well, we are not discussing torturing children, but death alone.

Your question is predicated on an assumption that G-d's owes a long lifespan to each member of mankind. Of course, G-d cannot "owe", as there is nothing above His laws obligating Him, in anything. The concept of G-d "owing" is impossible. His will determines who will live, and for how long. As He decides that man may be short or tall, He also possesses full rights over who shall live, and for what duration. In His plan, only He knows how ultimate justice is served. How can we know His thoughts? This answer alone suffices, but I wish to mention a few other thoughts.

In terms of man "deserving" justice, this applies to only those above age thirteen, when they have reached the state where they act with their minds, and are considered responsible for their actions, and are only now "meritorious" or "guilty". In this case, G-d cannot harm one who is guiltless, "Ish bicheto yamus", "a man in his own sin shall be killed". This means that man is punished for what he does, but only once he is an "ish", a man. That is, above thirteen years of age. (Maimonides, Laws of Repentance, 6:1) Below thirteen, Maimonides teaches that such a child is considered as man's property, and may be taken from his parent(s) as a punishment. This child has not reached an age where he is responsible, so he is not meritorious, nor is he guilty. His death is not a punishment to him, but to his parents.

But be clear, Egypt was not the first time G-d annihilated a people. During the Flood and Sodom, G-d also wiped out entire civilizations. In order to arrive at a true understanding of G-d's justice in this area, all cases must be studied. This is the reason G-d recorded them all in His Torah.

Many factors may contribute to G-d's decision of wiping out a civilization, society or culture, including infants. For example, a society may be so corrupt, that no possible remedy exists, and all who enter it, or are raised therein, will become irrevocably corrupt. Their removal prevents other people from becoming corrupt as they are.

If there is no hope for the infants of Sodom, of Noah's

generation, and of Egypt, there continued existence is futile for themselves, and destructive for others. For this reason, G-d commands in His Torah that we obliterate all members of the Amalek nation.

"Unquestionable mercy for children". This is the core of the problem. Man feels what he senses as unquestionable, is unquestionable. But this cannot be. G-d alone possesses absolute truth, and what He says, must be truth, in contrast to what we feel with our limited intelligence. Our's is to learn of G-d's knowledge, as He created all we see, and all that is just. He also created "justice"! It is foolish for man to complain that G-d must follow us! He created the entire universe. Let is be patient, and search out His great wisdom, instead of committing ourselves to ignorance, and abandoned, intelligent growth.

G-d created our ability to think - the tools with which to understand, far greater than what we initially possess when confronted with emotionally, wrenching issues. King Solomon said it so well, "...for what is man that he comes after the King, that all is already completed?" (Ecclesiastes, 2:12) "Do not be excited on your mouth, and (on) your heart do not hurry to bring forth a matter before G-d, because G-d is in heaven, and you are on Earth, therefore let your words be few." (Proverbs, 5:1) Earnest study of the Torah's cases of G-d's annihilation will bring forth an even greater appreciation for His system of justice. ■