

פרשת וירא

OVERVIEW

Divine messengers announce to Abraham and Sarah that a son would be born to them. Sarah is incredulous: "That T shall have the greatest fulfillment now that I am already worn out...". The messengers continue on their way to Sodom, a city doomed to be destroyed for the crimes and wickedness of its population. Abraham attempts to intervene on behalf of the city asking for divine mercy because of the presence of righteous men in the city.

The dialogue between G-d and Abraham brings no change in the decision regarding the fate of Sodom. Only Lot and his family will be saved by the messengers. Each of his two daughters, "who had lain with their father", give birth to a son, Ammon and Moab. An analogous incident occurs in Egypt where Abraham was forced to settle in the south of the land. Sarah barely escapes being violated by the Egyptians. – At the predicted time she gives birth to a son, Yitzchak, who initially is brought up together with Yishmael, his half-brother. Sarah insists on sending the maidservant and her son out of the house.

A treaty is concluded between Abimelech, king of the land, and Abraham. - When Yitzchak becomes 37 years old, Abraham receives a command by G-d to bring him as a sacrifice on the Mount Moriah. Abraham is ready to comply. At the last moment he is stopped by an angel with an already outstretched hand. A ram, caught in the thicket by his horns, is sacrificed instead as a whole-offering to G-d.

COMMENTARY

Receiving the messengers

Abraham is still suffering from the Milah that he had just undergone. Yet he does not neglect for a moment the duty of hospitality as he receives three strangers (all unknown to him) with extraordinary courtesy. Our sages rightly comment that this virtue of generous hospitality marks the customs and manners of Abraham's descendants to such a degree that one can almost recognize the worthy son of his ancestors by his selfless sacrifice of human needs. It is undoubtedly the reason for the intensity or mutual assistance and open-handed hospitality prevalent in the Jewish community. Conversely, tightfistedness and selfishness are often indications of a person's weakening adherence to Judaism's basic concepts. A striking example may be found in the continuing account in our Sidrah relating the cruel manner with which the people of Sodom treated the messengers who had come to the city in the evening. –

Announcement of the impending birth

There is nothing unusual in Sarah's reaction to the promise of her coming pregnancy. We can understand her skeptical smile when this is confirmed by her aging husband. She cannot know that this smile will accompany her descendants throughout their history; that a great world will shrug its shoulders at the spectacle of Israel's survival against all rules of human endurance. Our continued existence in the face of untold and unimaginable persecutions will unsettle our mighty enemies who will long have faded from the world arena while we, albeit weakened, will prevail. For we are inspired and strengthened by the noble

task to which the Divine will summons our people.

Intervention on behalf of Sodom's  
righteous men

The detailed account in Ch. 18 of the dialogue between G-d and Abraham regarding the fate of Sodom offers manifold difficulties. Haggling over numbers? (Fifty righteous men, then forty-five, etc.). There seems to be no real effort on the part of Abraham to ascertain how many righteous men were actually living in Sodom. His aim does not appear to be the salvaging of a population doomed to perish. For the first time in his life Abraham quasi participates in the formulation of a divine judgment. He was familiar with Sodom's inhabitants, for at the time of the "war of the kings" his nephew Lot had been among the captives of Sodom. The city's depravity was too apparent to preclude any doubt as to its deserved downfall. Abraham was conscious of the need to uphold the spirit of justice and law in the face of crime and moral corruption. The yardstick for human judgment must be the law of G-d.

It is for this reason that Abraham now assumes the role of the disciple who observes the master as he arrives at his judgment. He poses numerous questions designed to widen his perception and deepen his understanding. He learns to his great joy that the presence of only ten righteous men among a throng of guilty men could have changed G-d's judgment. This lesson is reflected in the assessment of guilt or innocence that prescribes the painstaking examination of every individual case.

The repeated stress on the words "the righteous in the midst of the city" uttered by both Abraham and G-d is worthy of note. Indeed our sages tell us

that at the (first) destruction of Jerusalem those pious inhabitants who observed every iota of the law but did not live "in the mist of the city" were among the first to perish. While living in strict accordance with the Torah law they paid no heed to the lot of their brethren (comp. Yechezkel Ch. 9).

The end of Sodom

The holy land offers even in our time impressive evidence of the catastrophic "sulphur and fire" which ruined down on Sodom and its environments, At the site of once flourishing cities we find the dead sea which tolerates no life in its vast expanse. Rarely has a punitive measure against man's immorality been applied with such dramatic intensity. Significantly, the crimes committed in Sodom were of both social and moral nature. Socially: the city's hatred of strangers (xenophobia) was notorious even at a period in ancient history when principles of humanity were not highly regarded. Morally: the manner in which the people of Sodom addressed the visitors suffices to give us an insight into the morals prevalent among the population. "Bring them out so that we may know them" (19:5), a euphemism for crude acts of immorality. The cancer extended even to the youth, "both young and old, the entire people, from either extreme" (19:4). It was the incredible extent of moral corruption, the unanimous participation of all citizens in the onslaught against morality that earned them a horrible fate. Let us be conscious of the generosity with which divine justice takes into account the possibility of improvement that a morally healthy young generation can effect.

Removal of Yishmael

Sarah orders her maidservant and her son Yishmael to leave her house. It was a harsh move especially in view of her own active involvement in Hagar's entry into the family. Why this change in her attitude and the manifest animosity which also puzzled Abraham? But a mother's instinct prevails. Sarah clearly recognizes the impossibility of educating her son in an atmosphere where Hagar's foreign influence was a strong factor. She realizes that a child cannot be properly brought up by two conflicting elements. How could she expect of Hagar whose youth was spent in the heathen surroundings of Ur-Kasdim, Canaan and Egypt to respond to the challenge of participating in the education of a child who is destined for great leadership?

Sarah's decision to remove Hagar and her son required courage in light of the suspicion that her motives were less than honorable, such as jealousy. Her goal was to ensure that her son's formative years should be spent in a harmonious environment, of one piece, without any foreign influence and ideas causing an estrangement from G-d's proximity. The young Jew must early enough join the battle of life and ideas. Youths guided by a father and mother who are ever conscious of their educational responsibility will be equipped with the weapons of Torah which will enable them to face any challenge with courage and uncompromising loyalty to the true values of Jewish living.

Yitzchak's sacrifice

The memorable event on Mount Moriah proved the wisdom of Sarah's decision. Abraham's trial finds father and son united to their unquestioning compliance with G-d's command, the purpose of which they did not comprehend. Here we find the outstanding trait of all Jewish martyrs who never hesitated, questioned or criticized when called upon to sanctify G-d's Holy Name. Far from being a slavish act of obedience, their sacrifice is the noblest demonstration of a trust that does not permit an a priori evaluation of a divine command. It should be remembered that at the time of his sacrifice, Yitzchak was no longer a child but a mature man.

"Akedath Yitzchak" (literally "the binding of Yitzchak") is considered the religious highlight of Jewish history. Inconceivable as it may seem, at no time did Yitzchak have any doubt as to his father's unwavering intention to obey the divine order. His is the same incomparable inner strength that enable the Jewish people to surmount all tribulations and sufferings. It is the living tradition handed down from father to son. It is the "הנני", clear and simple, courageous and self-understood, "Here I am", the Jew's proud pronouncement of his selfless devotion to the Word of G-d.

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