

KushnerComments

Parshat Vayeira

Friday, November 18, 2016

טו השון תשע"ז

From the Lower School

1. Why was Hashem upset with Sarah?
2. Which relative of Avraham lived in Sedom?
3. Why did the angels go to Sedom?
4. Why was Avraham and Sarah's son named "Yitzchak"?
5. Where did Avraham find the ram he used as a sacrifice instead of Yitzchak?

— *Andrew Rutner and Rabbi Aron Srolovitz, LS, Assistant Principal*
Answers can be found on the last page.

From the Middle School

Justice and Charity

My Rosh Hayeshiva from Mercaz Harav, Rav Shaul Yisraeli, identifies Avraham's commitment to transmitting the values of charity and justice as the core principles of Judaism. Taken together, justice and charity are the totality of Judaism.

A just society demonstrates fidelity to law and provides protection and security for its citizens. A commitment to justice assures consistency and fairness, and informs leaders' decisions and governments' policies.

However, justice cannot stand alone. Sometimes, a society's perspective of justice is merely a veneer for persecution and prejudice. Even Sodom followed a legal system, and yet its citizens engaged in corrupt and deviant practices. Some systems of justice can be unlawful and unethical under the guise of being normal and democratic.

For a society to thrive, charity and kindness must be woven into the fabric of the culture. Kindness, sensitivity and empathy mitigate and moderate justice and nudge law to be thoughtful and judicious.

From the Middle School

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But just as a legal system cannot be the only pillar of society, we must be concerned about a culture which manifests excessive kindness and consideration. Limits must be defined so that corruption and evil can be prosecuted and prevented.

Even Abraham drew a red line when praying for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, ending his pleas for mercy upon recognizing that the cities lacked even ten righteous people.

As we study Avraham's commitment to justice and compassion we should take inspiration from him and remain resolute to find such balance in all of our engagements and relationships.

- Rabbi Eliezer Rubin — Head of School

From the High School

Why Make a Sequel?

When a movie production company decides to put out a sequel of movie, it is almost always because the first movie was a tremendous success. The box office typically views movies as successes if they earn upwards of a hundred-million-dollars. Never, in the history of film, has a movie been made into a sequel when the first movie flops in the box office. Logically, why would the company invest in making a second movie if no one ever saw the first?

We are introduced to the concept of *tefilah* in this week's *parsha*. The *gemara Berachot* 26b comments that the source for *tefilah* is Bereishit 19:27, when the Torah tells us, "And Avraham arose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before Hashem." The context of that *tefilah* was Avraham *davening* for Hashem to save the people of Sodom. Rav Moshe Wolfson points out that the source for *shacharit*, and in fact for all future *tefilot*, comes from a *tefilah* that was not answered. Why don't we learn the source for *davening* from the *tefilah* of Chana, or from Avraham *davening* for a child? Why does the Torah's source for *davening* have to be from a *tefilah* that wasn't answered?

Rav Wolfson explains that the lesson the *gemara* is teaching us is that no *tefilah* ever goes unanswered. It can seem to us that our *tefilot* are not answered because we did not get the result that we requested, but that doesn't mean that that specific *tefilah* will not be used by Hashem for a future time period in our lives. We may become cynical of *tefilah* because we don't think it yields results, but that's only because we will never be able to see how Hashem uses our *tefilot*. If only we were shown a glimpse of what our *tefilot* accomplish, our *kavanah* in our daily *tefilot* would be forever changed. Although we will never be privy to that glimpse

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in this world, we must live with the *emunah* that every *tefilah* we utter will be answered by Hashem.

- Rabbi David Schlusberg — HS, Judaic Faculty

Looking is Believing

For the past two years we have seen countless articles detailing the background and upbringing of America's presidential candidates. One would expect to find similar information in the Torah regarding the childhood of the one who introduced monotheism to the world. Yet, surprisingly, we find nothing in the *pesukim* about Avraham Avinu's spiritual journey.

It is left to the Rambam to fill us in. In the Laws of *Avoda Zarah*, the Rambam informs us that Avraham recognized God at the age of forty (1:3). This information, however, is quite peculiar in light of the fact that the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* is a practical work. Why does he need to tell us this information?

Avraham was not the only one to discover God at the age of forty. In *Avot D' Rabbi Natan* we are told that Rebbe Akiva began to study Torah at the age of forty (1:6). Was it merely a coincidence that they both changed their lives around at the same age? Was it an ancient form of a mid-life crisis?

Observing a hole in a rock created by dripping water inspired Rebbe Akiva to realize that Torah could penetrate his heart. Similarly, Avraham was stirred by what he saw in everyday occurrences. *Bereishit Rabbah* 39:1 uses a parable of someone who encounters an illuminated building and then realizes it must have had a builder; this parable demonstrates how Avraham, upon looking at the world, realized it must have had a creator.

It seems that the age of forty was not a coincidence at all. The *mishnah* in Avot 5:25 points out that at the age of forty, one reaches the stage of *binah*. Chazal in several places write that *binah* is the ability to understand one thing from another, to gain insight from something one already knows. The age of forty allowed Avraham and Rebbe Akiva to look at everyday events and see what was obvious: that there was a Creator.

Perhaps with this we can understand a peculiar comparison in *Avot* made between Avraham and Bilaam, who are described as opposites (5:22). When did the nemesis of Avraham become Bilaam? Why does the *mishnah* choose to juxtapose these two individuals?

From the High School

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It seems that whereas Avraham searched for Hashem when He was not readily apparent, Bilaam saw Hashem clearly and chose to ignore Him. Bilaam was fortunate to speak to Hashem but did not obey Him; he saw the miracle of the speaking donkey but was not moved. The Talmud describes that even the revelation at Har Sinai (*Zevachim* 116a) and the fires of *Gehenom* (*Gittin* 57a) were not enough to inspire Bilaam. He was diametrically opposed to Avraham. Avraham searched and saw while Bilaam saw and ignored.

In *Parshat Vayera*, a phrase appears three times, though it only appears nine times in all of Chumash: “*Vayisa et einav vayar*,” “He raised his eyes and saw.” From the beginning of the parsha though the end, Avraham was looking. He looked at things we take for granted and saw miracles. This is how he discovered God. Countless things in nature and everyday occurrences are testimony to God’s existence. All we need to do is look.

- Rabbi Yaacov Feit —HS, Judaic Faculty and MS Director of Judaic Studies

Answers to questions on page 1

- (1) She laughed when the angels told her she would have a son
- (2) Lot
- (3) To save Lot from destruction
- (4) Because she laughed when she heard she would have a son
- (5) Stuck in the branches of a bush

Shabbat Shalom from

JKHA/RKYHS!