

Parshat Vayera

For the week ending 20 Cheshvan 5760
29 & 30 October 1999

Overview

Three days after performing bris mila on himself, Avraham is visited by Hashem. When three angels appear in human form, Avraham rushes to show them hospitality by bringing them into his tent, despite this being the most painful time after the operation. Sarah laughs when she hears from them that she will bear a son next year. Hashem reveals to Avraham that He will destroy Sodom, and Avraham pleads for Sodom to be spared. Hashem agrees that if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom, He will not destroy it. Avraham "bargains" Hashem down to ten righteous people. However, not even ten can be found. Lot, his wife and two daughters are rescued just before sulfur and fire rain down on Sodom and her sister cities. Lot's wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot's daughters fear that, as a result of the destruction, there will be no husbands for them. They decide to get their father drunk and through him to perpetuate the human race. From the elder daughter, Moav is born, and from the younger, Ammon. Avraham moves to Gerar, where Avimelech abducts Sarah. After Hashem appears to Avimelech in a dream, he releases Sarah and appeases Avraham. As promised, a son, Yitzchak, is born to Sarah and Avraham. On the eighth day after the birth, Avraham circumcises him as Hashem commanded. Avraham makes a feast the day Yitzchak is weaned. Sarah tells Avraham to banish Hagar and Hagar's son Yishmael because she sees in him signs of degeneracy. Avraham is distressed at the prospect of banishing his son, but Hashem tells him to listen to whatever Sarah tells him to do. After nearly dying of thirst in the desert, Yishmael is rescued by an angel and Hashem promises that he will be the progenitor of a mighty nation. Avimelech enters into an alliance with Avraham when he sees that Hashem is with him. In a tenth and final test, Hashem instructs Avraham to take Yitzchak, who is now 37, and to offer him as a sacrifice. Avraham does this, in spite of ostensibly aborting Jewish nationhood and contradicting his life-long preaching against human sacrifice. At the last moment, Hashem sends an angel to stop Avraham. Because of Avraham's unquestioning obedience, Hashem promises him that even if the Jewish People sin, they will never be completely dominated by their foes. The Parsha ends with the genealogy and birth of Rivka.

Insights

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU SAW G-D?

"And He appeared to him — Hashem" (18:1)

Once there was a man whose eyesight had started to fade. He didn't really notice it at first. But then he started to become aware that he couldn't read the exit signs on the freeway without squinting. He ignored that for a while (and he also ignored a couple of near-misses). One day he caught himself winding down his car window to peer at a street name no more than ten feet away. He decided it was time to visit the optician.

After about a quarter of an hour in the optician's chair in which he felt like he was in a remake of The Man in the Iron Mask, the optician pronounced with all due gravity "You need glasses." "Great," he thought to himself. "Isn't technology wonderful." The optician wrote out his prescription and a couple of days later he arrived to pick up his new glasses.

He put them on. The foreground was more muzzy than before, but the near-distance was amazing. It was as if someone had re-opened a vanished world for him. He drove around marveling at the clarity with which he could see every street name.

Some weeks later, the optician called. He asked him when he would be coming in to pick up his free cleaning kit. "What?" he said. "You have to clean these things?"

He drove downtown and picked up his cleaning kit. He applied a little of the special solution to the lenses and gently rubbed them with the lens tissue. The tissue turned black after one or two rubs. The optician had never seen such a grimy pair of spectacles.

The man put on the glasses once again and he was shocked. He was shocked not so much by the clarity with which he could see again but at how little he had noticed how blurry was his sight before he had cleaned his spectacles. Was it really possible that he had been walking around looking at the world through

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so much grime and had noticed it so little?!

"And He appeared to him (Avraham) — Hashem" The first sentence of this week's parsha seems reversed. Why didn't the Torah write *"And Hashem appeared to him (Avraham)?"*

G-d doesn't move. He doesn't change. He doesn't "appear" one moment and "disappear" the next. When we talk about G-d "appearing," we really mean that we have brought ourselves close to Him. To us, it looks like He has appeared. It's a bit like Ice Mountain ride at Universal studios, where you feel as though your car is turning over and over, when really the car is stationary and the scenery is revolving.

That's the meaning of the verse *"I am to my*

beloved and my beloved is to Me." Corresponding to our efforts to bring ourselves close to G-d, so will we sensitize ourselves to G-d's greatness. We will feel His awe the more. This is what is called in language of the mystics "the arousal from below."

Sometimes, we find it hard to see G-d in the world. But maybe it's not because He's far away. Maybe it's because we buy into a lifestyle of spiritual grime. Maybe if we used "G-d's cleaning fluid" — His Holy Torah — a little more often, we would be astounded at what a beautiful G-d filled world this is.

Sources:

Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim, Ohr HaChaim, Devash V'Chalav in Iturei Torah

Haftarah: Melachim II 3:1-37

Just as the nation of Israel came into existence through the miraculous birth of Yitzchak to an aged mother, so G-d ensures our continuity with countless miracles throughout history.

This week's *haftarah* recounts some of the miracles performed by the Prophet Elisha. In one incident, the Prophet Ovadiah's widow is saved from an implacable creditor when her last flask of oil is miraculously blessed; from this one little bottle she fills every vessel and container in her home with precious oil, providing more than enough money to pay her debts.

In another incident, Elisha promises his elderly host and hostess a child within a year. The child is born and grows, but one day falls ill and collapses in a dead faint. The mother journeys to Elisha; Elisha returns with her and revives the child from the dead.

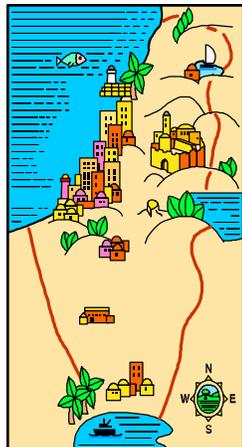
TUNE IN

"And he placed his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes and his hands upon his hands...and the body of the child became warm." (Melachim II 4:34)

In the same way that the child was brought to life through his contact with the prophet, so are the People of Israel brought to life when we live and breathe G-d's Word as delivered to us from our teachers. All we have to do is to lean close and tune in, then we will feel ourselves come alive with the warmth of the Torah.

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael



AZAIKAH

This is a little known city mentioned in the gemara (Masechta Ketuvot 122a):

"If a non-Jew enters a market place outside of Eretz Yisrael and announces that he is selling fruits from the city of Azaikah he is not believed, because we suspect that he is making this claim only to promote the quality of his wares."

Rashi explains that Azaikah was a city in Eretz Yisrael famed for its fruits. If its fruits are purchased by Jews even outside of Eretz Yisrael, they must be tithed before they can be eaten. The vendor's statement need not be taken seriously as a cause for tithing, since most fruits sold in that market are of local origin, and he is suspect of fabricating the source of his wares in order to better promote them.

Rabbi Shmuel Shtrashun (Rashash) suggests that this is the Azaikah mentioned in Yehoshua (10:11) where the Israelite forces defeated a coalition of Canaanite kings thanks to the boulders which Hashem rained down upon them from Heaven.

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