

VAYERA: Genesis 18:1-22:24

HAFTARAH: II Kings 4:1-37

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**Thought of the Week**

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**By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda**

*..ABRAHAM'S LEGACY: "Abraham is destined to become a great and mighty nation; and all the nations of the world shall be blessed by him. For I have confidence in him, since he instructs his children and his household after him, to keep the ways of the Lord, to establish righteousness and justice." This Divine description of the Patriarch (Gen. 18:18-19) is an eternal prescription for his descendents. "The deeds of the Fathers are symbolic for their children." It is this continual, dynamic transmission of Torah's values and ideas, from one generation to the next, that perpetuates Abraham's legacy. This is the people's mark of distinction.*

**VEYERA: Genesis 18:1-22:24**

**HAFTARAH: II Kings 4:1-37**

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***Thought of the Week***

**By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda**

**THE BINDING OF ISAAC:** When Abraham, about to slay his son, is stopped -- "Lay not your hand upon the lad!" (Gen. 22:12)--we reach the moment of truth. God did not tell him to slaughter Isaac, nor to prepare an altar, fire, wood, and a devouring knife; these were all initiated by Abraham. "Elevate him to be an 'olah,'" was the Word (V.3). "Olah," referring to a human being, is not meant to be a burnt-offering, but rather, as in "aliya," man's ascent and growth in worshiping Him -- alive. Man is "given" to God, not in his death, but through dedication to His service, as Hannah "gave" her son Samuel. In cherishing and enriching life, and not by taking and denying it, is man's true elevation.

THE CLEVELAND JEWISH NEWS Friday, November 13, 1970

**Candlelight time: 4:50 P.M. ... Sabbath Ends at 5:43**

*Scriptural reading for tomorrow morning:*

**VAYERA: Genesis 18:1-22:24**

**HAFTARAH: II Kings, 4:1-37**

*THOUGHT OF THE WEEK: The destruction of Sodom and her suburbs is the leading theme in Vayera. Why such a bitter end? The Sodomites did not break the "law." They were staunch advocates of a tough, rigid, inflexible legal system of "law and order," but, utterly indifferent to the needs and cries of the destitute and the oppressed. The prophet elucidates: "Behold, this was the iniquity of Sodom, you sister: arrogant, well-fed and idly apathetic was she and her daughters; and the hand of the poor or the needy she did not support." (Ezekiel 16:20). "Mine is mine and yours is yours" may sound like an ordinary, innocent motto; the Mishna, however, labels it "Sodomism" (Avot 5:13.) The rule "each for himself" leads to social collapse. Law without compassion, order lacking concern, and legalism disregarding brotherly love do not comprise Judaic justice. A charming, contrasting scene of Abraham's hospitality to the wayfarers opens "Vayera," showing us his descendants the correct way.*

.. . . Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

VAYERA: Genesis 18:1-22:24

HAFTARAH: II Kings 4:1-37

**Thought of the Week**

**By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda**

CONTINUITY AND RENEWAL: In prayer we turn to "God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob;" each of the "Avot" (Patriarchs) is specifically mentioned, and the name of God thrice repeated. This shows that rather than as a monolithic group, the Avot are revered as individuals, each asserting his own personality; and rather than just an adherent of tradition, each of them is considered an innovator - seeking and finding his God in his own way and through his own experience. The lives and deeds of the Avot are a model and symbol for their descendants: Every Jew, being an integral member of his people, is expected to cherish his unique individuality; and clinging to his heritage, to reaffirm it for himself; thus, to establish his own conception and relation to God. The ancient, deep-rooted legacy must constantly be revived and enlivened by one's personal quest and involvement. Thus, the Torah, although of old, is forever new; and its followers, always its builders.

Friday, September 5, 1975 THE CL

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**Thought of the Week**

**By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda**

**THE AKEDA: THE BINDING OF ISAAC:** When Abraham, about to slay his son, is stopped (Gen. 22:12)–“Lay not your hand upon the lad!” – we reach the moment of truth. God did not tell him to slaughter Isaac; nor did He order him to prepare an altar and to bring with him fire, wood and a devouring knife. All these were initiated by Abraham. In fact, he was told by God (v 3): “Elevate him to be an ‘olah.’” “Olah” – when it refers to a human being – is not meant to be understood as a “burnt-offering,” but rather as a spiritual “aliya:” man’s ascent and growth in worshipping God – while he is alive. This lesson, for all generations to come, Abraham had to learn through an agonizing ordeal. Man’s nearness to God is experienced through life. Man is “given” to God, not by his death, but by being dedicated to God’s service; in the same way, Hannah “gave” her son Samuel to God: he lived and grew in the Temple. Man’s true elevation – being like an “olah” – is not achieved by giving up and denying life, but by cherishing and enriching life.

VAYERA: Genesis 18:1-22:24

HAFTARAH: II Kings 4:1-37

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***Thought of the Week***

**By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda**

HOSPITALITY AND THE INVOCATION OF GOD (Gen. 22:33): Abraham "planted an 'eshel' in Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the Lord the Everlasting God." What is "eshel?" Plainly understood it is a tree (presumably the tamarisk). It may also be taken as an abbreviation of the three Hebrew words for eating, drinking and escorting (or lodging). Seeking a connection between the two parts of the verse, the rabbis saw in it a reference to Abraham's hospitality which led to the invocation of God's name. Abraham would provide his guests with all their needs ("eshel"); thereby he would influence them to turn to God. When the guests would rise to thank him, Abraham would say: "You owe thanks to the King of the universe whose bounty you have enjoyed. You think you have enjoyed what is mine! Truly you have enjoyed what is His – He who spoke and the world came into being."

**Thought of the Week**

**By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda**

PROTEST AGAINST INJUSTICE is in the core of the classic petition of Abraham (Gen. 18:25): "Will the Judge of the whole earth not do justice?" Injustice, whether attributed to man or God, is always deplorable and never excusable. To justify evil in man is no gesture of compassion; of God, no sign of piety. Both betray disguised cowardice and cruelty. True faith requires that we expect and demand justice from God, not "defend" Him. It is indeed problematic, in face of evil, to maintain faith in God. But two easy ways must be resisted: vindicating His injustice or denying His justice. The first discards morality for the sake of religion; the second, religion for the sake of morality. Defending evil, one way or another, is both irreligious and immoral. We have neither the duty nor the right to exonerate God by explaining away evil, which means condemning its victims and condoning its perpetrators. Our sensitivity to human suffering and our indignation against human brutality must never be sacrificed on the altar of theology. We must never ignore the agony and iniquity of man in order to praise the perfection and goodness of God. We must never put the sufferers in the wrong in order to put God in the right. However, we should also not disavow God's justice in our concern for man, lest we surrender to evil. In the ever powerful petition of Abraham, we continue to ask, to plea, and to protest.

VAYERA: Genesis 18:1-22:24

HAFTARAH: II Kings 4:1-37

**Thought of the Week**

**By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda**

SODOM AND GEMORRAH (S'dom and A'mora, now ruined and buried under the Dead Sea) are the proverbial models of utterly corrupt (and, therefore, destructible) cities. Gen. 18:20 tells us: "Their outcry is too much; their fault, exceedingly heavy," meaning, their "outcry" ("za'aka"), the pain and anguish of the oppressed; their "fault" ("hatat"), the wickedness and misconduct of the oppressors. Sodom-like conduct, in Judaic sources, indicates social oppression (rather than sexual perversion): the harshness and outrage of inhumanity and indifference towards one another; the insistence on strict legality and rigid property rights, without human compassion, consideration and mercy. The biblical example of Sodom and Gemorrah, as understood in Judaism, teaches us a lesson in human kindness: that, in order to survive, we must care for each other; we must be generous and helpful to neighbor and stranger alike.

### **Thought of the Week**

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

HOSPITALITY is the hallmark of Abraham. His heart and home are wide open for guests and wayfarers. He himself caters and attends to them. His hospitality is unconditional; it is not used as bait or instrument for seducing and converting his beneficiaries to his faith. Before the meal he does not ask his guests to recite any benediction to his God; nor does he demand any religious repayment after the meal is over. Abraham's hospitality stems not from missionary zeal and contrivance but from his genuine love and care for his fellow human being. This kind of "hesed" (loving-kindness) is recognized in Judaism as model for all.

**Scriptural reading for Saturday, Nov. 18:**  
**VAYERA: Genesis 18:1-22:24**  
**HAFTARAH: II Kings 4:1-37**

### Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

REVERENCE FOR GOD is the most effective antidote against crime. "If reverence for God is lacking in this place, then they may kill me on account of my wife," said Abraham to Abimelech king of Gerar (Gen. 20:11). Formidable are man's lust and greed, and raging and ravishing are his passions; but the vivid awareness of the ultimate power of the divine law and order may refine and curb human impulses. This reverence for God ("yirat shamaim") is more than just fear of divine punishment; it entails a sense of awe before the sublimity of the divine presence. Imbued with a sense of respect and marvel before the Creator's magnificent universe, impressed by the divine image shining through the human being—how can one recklessly and indifferently destroy and pollute property, hurt and abuse people? Reverence for God does not guarantee the elimination of crime; but without it—we are all in mortal danger.

**Thought of the Week**

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

THE PROPHET AND THE SHUNAMMITE WOMAN (II Kings 20:8-37): Elisha the prophet used to visit Shunem, a quiet little town in the north of Israel. In this town lived an influential woman; she was rich, married, but childless. She invited the prophet to her home for meals. To her husband the woman said:

Let us prepare for this holy man a small upper chamber, furnish it with a bed, table, chair, and lamp; it will be ready for him to stay there whenever he comes to us." Prophet Elisha was grateful for the care lavished on him and, in turn, promised the Shunammite woman a child: "At this season next year, you will be embracing a son." For her extraordinary hospitality and generosity, the woman received from the prophet the supreme gift of life: a son.

### **Thought of the Week**

**By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda**

A SOCIETY WITHOUT FEAR OF GOD--CAN IT BE TRUSTED? Abraham did not trust the people of Gerar, a Philistine town in the Negev. Arriving there, he introduced his wife, an extremely beautiful woman, as his sister. It is safer this way, he felt. His scheme, however, backfired. Explaining his irregular conduct to the local king, Abimelekh, Abraham claimed (Gen. 20:11): "I thought, since there is no fear of God in this place, they might kill me on account of my wife." Abraham was overly protective and untrusting. Can there be no moral integrity without the fear of God? And, does fear of God always lead to a more ethical and safer society?

## Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

PROTEST AGAINST INJUSTICE is the essence of Abraham's petition (Genesis 18:25): "The Judge of the whole universe! Will He not do justice?" Injustice, whether committed by humans or attributed to God, is forever deplorable and never acceptable. Toleration of evil is in the root and core of evil. To overlook or forgive human evil, in disregard for its victims, is not mercy but cruelty. To justify or vindicate evil as "God's will" is not piety but crude insensitivity. True compassion for human beings and genuine devotion to God must demand justice from all. Even from God. On the altar of theology we may sacrifice neither our sensitivity to human suffering nor our indignation against human brutality. In our devotion to God, we must never lose our concern for humanity. With Abraham we continue to ask, to demand: Where is God's justice?

Candlelight time 4:54 Sabbath ends 5:46  
Scriptural reading for Saturday morning, Nov. 1  
VAYERA: Genesis 18:1-22:24  
HAFTARAH: II Kings 4:1-37

## Thought of the Week

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By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

TWO MOUNTAINS, Moriah and Sinai, are chosen sites in Jewish tradition: Upon Mt. Moriah the Temple was built; upon Mt. Sinai the Torah was given. Intriguingly, however, only Mt. Moriah, site of Israel's worship, and not Mt. Sinai, site of God's revelation, remains enduringly sacred in Judaism.

The human response to God is celebrated in Judaism. A place where a human being expresses his sublime devotion to God -- as symbolized by the Akedah on Mt. Moriah, and by Israel's subsequent worship there -- is eternally sacred. The Temple is cherished as stage for our human quest of God, not as "shrine" for God (who transcends all). Thus, only the site of our response to God (Mt. Moriah), and not the site of God's call to us (Mt. Sinai), is forever holy.

## Thought of the Week

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By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

THE BINDING OF ISAAC (the *Akeda*) is based on God's appeal to Abraham, which opens (Gen. 22:2): "Please, take your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzhak . . ." According to Rav Nissim Gerondi (Sefardi talmudist of 14th century Spain), in his Sermons, the word please indicates an optional suggestion, not a compulsory obligation. Abraham could have refused God, protested against Him, argued with Him, and refrained from doing the *Akeda*, without being punished. In the binding of his son, in his readiness to slay him, Abraham acted fully on his own free will. God's alleged "wish" was for him as His (non-existent) command -- without (yet) realizing that God would have never asked for sacrificing a human being, in the crude sense of taking his life. Later Abraham and his descendants learned the lesson: Life -- not death -- is God's true wish.

## Thought of the Week

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

THE BINDING OF ISAAC (*Akeda*): When Abraham, about to slay his son, was divinely stopped (Gen. 22:12), he reached the moment of truth. God did not tell him to slaughter Isaac; nor to prepare an altar, or bring fire, wood, and a devouring knife. All these were initiated by Abraham (*Rashi*). Abraham was told (3), "Elevate him to be an '*olah*!'" When it refers to a human being, "*olah*" does not mean a "burnt-offering," but a spiritual "*aliyah*"-- a person's ascent and growth in serving God -- while he is alive!

The lesson from this agonizing ordeal is the sanctity of life. A human being is "offered" to God not by his death, but by his dedication to God, while he is alive. Hannah "gave" her son Samuel to God (I Samuel 1:11): He lived and grew in the Temple, and became a prominent prophet. A person's true elevation (becoming an "*olah*") is achieved not by giving up or denying life, but by cherishing and enriching life.

Friday, October 21, 1988

SEEK

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

"The Hebrews": Abraham is called "the Hebrew" (*ha-Ivri*; Gen. 14:13). His people are "Hebrews" (*Ivrim*, or *B'nei-Ever*; Gen. 10:21). This term is explained as follows:

(1) **Ethnically:** "Hebrews" (*Ivrim*), are "Eberites," or "Sons of Eber" (*Ever*), the first-born son of Shem, the first-born son of Noah (*Tarqum*).

(2) **Geographically:** "Hebrews" ("Eberites") are the "sons of all who live on the other side (*ever*) of the River (the Euphrates)" (*Rashi*).

(3) **Theologically:** Viewed as an exclusive term for the Jewish people -- for Abraham and his descendants -- the term "Hebrews" (derived from *ever*, meaning "on the other side") implies Jewish uniqueness in their faith and destiny: "The whole world stands on one side and Abraham (and his people) on the other side" ("*Midrash*").

S Friday, November 17, 1989

## THOUGH

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

HAKHNASAT ORHIM -- hospitality (literally, "bringing in, welcoming guests") -- is exemplified by Abraham. His heart and home were wide open for strangers and wayfarers; he personally attended to their needs. He neither expected nor requested of his guests any ritual payoff; he never asked them to praise God during, before or after the meal. His hospitality was unconditional. Untainted by missionary zeal, his hospitality reflected his genuine love and care for others.

True hospitality has no strings attached; not even strings woven with religious zeal. This is Jewish *hesed* (loving kindness): Attend to your fellow's immediate, material needs in this world; never mind his "fate" in the world to come. Don't try to "save" his soul. Save his life.

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## HE WEEK

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Friday, November 2, 1990

YEHUDA

DEMANDING JUSTICE FROM GOD is demonstrated by Abraham (Genesis 18:25): "*Will the Judge of the whole earth not do justice?*" Injustice by God is both unthinkable and deplorable. To overlook (or "forgive") human wickedness is no sign of compassion; to overlook (or "defend") God's injustice is no proof of piety; both common approaches to human misery evince cruelty and promote evil. We must neither forgive nor defend injustice, but demand justice from all, humans and God.

How do we respond to God in face of evil? Two ways of "vindicating" God are currently prevalent, but must be resisted: Do not accuse the victims, claiming they are "bad" and deserving of their misery! And do not exonerate God, claiming He is "good" but lacks the power or will to eradicate evil. The former way, protective of religion, discards morality; the latter, sensitive to morality, beclouds religion. We are unable to comprehend God's ways, but we must consistently protest injustice and insist on justice from God.

Friday, October 25, 1991

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## THE WEEK

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### מִתּוֹכֵי יְהוּדָא

MT. MORIAH AND MT. SINAI are both chosen sites in Jewish tradition: Upon Mt. Sinai the Torah was given; upon Mt. Moriah the Temple was built. Intriguingly, however, only Mt. Moriah, site of Israel's worship, and not Mt. Sinai, site of God's revelation, remains forever sacred in Judaism. Why so?

Judaism celebrates history, not mythology. Jewish tradition venerates sites which commemorate and facilitate human devotion to God, not non-functional sites of uncurrent revelatory events. The human responses to the Divine call are celebrated in Judaism, not the supernatural manifestations of the Divine call. Thus, a place where people express their devotion to God – as symbolized by the *Akeda* and Israel's subsequent worship on Mt. Moriah – is eternally sacred. The Temple is cherished as a stage for our human quest of God, and not as a "shrine" for God who transcends space, yet dwells within us. Therefore, only the site of our response to God (Mt. Moriah), and not the site of God's call to us (Mt. Sinai), is forever holy.

Friday, October 29, 1993

## OF THE WEEK

### RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

SODOM AND GOMORRA, now lying in ruins under the Dead Sea (in Hebrew "Sea of Salt"), are the proverbial models of utterly corrupt cities.

Of the Sodomites, Torah (Genesis 18:20) notes: "Their outcry is too much; their fault, exceedingly heavy." "Their outcry" refers to the pain and anguish of the oppressed; "Their fault" refers to the wickedness and misconduct of the oppressors. In Judaism, Sodom-like conduct means social oppression rather than sexual perversion: Sodomism is the outrage of indifference; apathy toward strangers and homeless; lack of compassion and hospitality; insistence on strict legality and rigid property rights.

The biblical example of Sodom and Gomorra, as understood in Judaism, teaches a lesson in social cohesiveness and human consideration. Sodomite behavior, even if within the strict definition of law and order, is utterly denounced. Any system of law and any social structure which is lacking the dimension of human kindness is corrupt and self-destructive. Social justice must be rooted in charity and compassion. In order to survive, a society must learn to care and have concern for its members. A society based on the philosophy of "each person for himself" or "mind your own business" is doomed, like Sodom. To survive, we must be our brothers' keepers. Sodom's slogan, "Mine is mine and yours is yours," stands in stark contrast to Abraham's legacy of hospitality and righteousness.

## **THOUGHT OF THE WEEK**

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CLEVELAND JEWISH NEWS / OCTOBER 29, 1999

### **RABBI ZVI YEHUDA**

#### **WHAT IS SO SPECIAL ABOUT MT. MORIAH – THE TEMPLE MOUNT?**

On Mount Moriah – its name being related to “seeing” (*ra’o*) and also to worshipping (*yaro*, revering God, *yirat Hashem*) – pilgrims to the Temple would acquire wisdom and understanding in the worship of God, and God who sees, would watch over them and be “seen” (*yera-eh*) – namely, visited by the people and be revealed to them.

Mt. Moriah, like Mt. Sinai, is related to the idea of Divine worship and revelation. Both mounts are chosen sites in Jewish tradition: Upon Mt. Sinai the Torah was given; upon Mt. Moriah the Temple was built. Intriguingly, however, only Mt. Moriah, site of Israel’s worship,

and not Mt. Sinai, site of God’s Torah revelation, remains forever sacred in Judaism. Why so?

Judaism celebrates history, not mythology. Jewish tradition venerates sites which commemorate and facilitate human devotion to God, not sites of past, non-recurrent, revelatory events. Human responses to the Divine call are celebrated in Judaism, not the supernatural manifestations of the Divine call. Thus, a place where people express their devotion to God – as symbolized by the *Akeda* (Binding of Isaac) and Israel’s subsequent worship on Mt. Moriah – is eternally sacred. The Temple is cherished as a stage for our human quest of God, and not as a “shrine” for God, who transcends space, yet dwells within us.

See Torah / 73

## THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

SARAH is the only woman in all biblical literature whose age is revealed. The Hebrew verse literally says (Genesis 23:1): "Sarah lived 100 years, and 20 years, and seven years – the years of Sarah's lifetime." The reiteration of "years" is a poetic device which underscores the significance of each and every year in Sarah's life.

According to Midrash, Sarah at the age of 100 was as attractive as at 20, and at 20 as innocent as at 7. She retained both her beauty and integrity during her lifetime. This is ideal living: to grow in years, but lose neither in aesthetic appearance nor in ethical demeanor – preserving in old age the loveliness of youth and the lawlessness of childhood. Thus was Sarah's life.

THE THREE PATRIARCHS, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, represent the three fundamental virtues upon which, according to rabbinic teaching, the world stands (*Avot* 1:2): Torah (studying and implementing Torah's teaching), *avodah* (acts of worship), and *gemilut-hasadim* (acts of loving kindness toward one's fellow creatures).

ABRAHAM, paving the way of righteousness for his descendants, excelled in the virtue of *gemilut-hasadim*: He was compassionate, hospitable, loyal and concerned with others' welfare.

ISAAC, the "passive," non-resistant, submissively obedient hero of the *Akeda*, emerged as a living symbol of *Avoda*.

JACOB, who in the biblical narrative is constantly struggling, is portrayed in Midrash as a diligent student of Torah.

Each patriarch, in his own way, lays the foundation of Jewish civilization.

A Thought on the Akeda

by Rabbi Dr. Zvi Yehuda

The Binding of Isaac

When Abraham, about to slay his son, is stopped (Gen. 22:12) -- "Lay not your hand upon the lad!" -- we reach the moment of truth. God did not tell him to slaughter Isaac; nor did He order him to prepare an altar and to bring with him fire, wood and a devouring knife. All these were initiated by Abraham.

Abraham was told by God (v3): "Elevate him to be an 'olah.'" "Olah" -- when it refers to a human being -- is not meant to be understood as a "burnt-offering," but rather as a spiritual "aliya:" man's ascent and growth in worshipping God -- while he is alive.

The lesson, for all generations to come, that Abraham learned through this agonizing ordeal, is the sanctity of life. Man's nearness to God is experienced through life. Man is "offered" to God, not by his death, but by being dedicated alive, to God's service; in the same way, Hannah "gave" her son Samuel to God: he lived and grew in the Temple. Man's true elevation -- being like an "olah" -- is not achieved by giving up and denying life, but by cherishing and enriching life.

From Rashi's Commentary

- (1) Ve-haalehu sham le'ola (2) (and bring him up there to be an ola), God did not say "shehatehu" (slay him) because He did not want that he should slay him but that he should bring him up to the mountain to make of him an "ola" (to elevate him spiritually, to dedicate him to the worship of God). So when he had taken him up, God said to him, "take him down."
- (2) Al tishlah (12) Lay not your hand upon the boy to slay him. Then Abraham said to God, "If this be so, I have come here for nothing; let me at least inflict a wound on him and draw some blood from him." God replied, neither do you anything (me'uma) to him" -- "inflict no blemish (mum) on him."

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## VAYERA

### Thought Two

HOSPITALITY AND THE INVOCATION OF GOD (Genesis 22:23): "Abraham planted an eshel in Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God." What is eshel? Plainly understood it is a certain tree, presumably the tamarisk. Planting, especially in the Promised Land, is a creative, religious deed. Abraham thus engaged in yishuvo shel-olam, settling and improving his natural environment, and binyan ha-aretz, the building of the Land, and thus he invoked, concurrently, the name of God.

Midrashically, however, the word has been understood as an abbreviation for the three basic elements of true hospitality: A-Sh-L: A -- akhila (eating); Sh -- shetiya (drinking); and L -- lina (lodging). The L can also stand for levaya, escorting and leading the guest safely on his way. Accordingly, Torah tells that Abraham engaged in two, interrelated, noble deeds: Hospitality to human strangers and invocation of God. By providing eshel, he invoked the Divine. The connection between these two acts has also been explained as cause and effect; the former leading to the latter: Providing hospitality led to the invocation of God's name. When Abraham's guests would rise to thank him, Abraham would react:

You owe thanks to the King of the universe whose bounty you have enjoyed. You think you have enjoyed what is mine! Truly you have enjoyed what is His -- He who spoke and the world came into being!

The midrashic interpretation of eshel as metaphor for hospitality, and its plain meaning as literally a plant, do not contradict but rather compliment each other. The ultimate value of planting is human hospitality: providing food and shelter for all, for the host and his guests, for the needy as well as for the owner. This kind of planting indeed leads to -- and is in itself -- the glory of God.

## VAYERA

### Thought Three

HOSPITALITY is the hallmark of Patriarch Abraham. His heart and home are wide open for guests and wayfarers. He himself personally caters and attends to them. His hospitality is unconditional. It is not used as a bait or instrument for seducing or converting his beneficiaries to his faith. Before the meal he does not ask his guests to recite any benediction to his God. And after the meal is over, he neither expects any ritual payoff nor requests any religious repayment.

Abraham's hospitality stems not from missionary zeal, but from his genuine love and care for his fellow human being. It is not contrivance but compassion. This is the true biblical hesed, loving-kindness, which in Judaism has always been modeled after Abraham's hospitality.

VAYERA

Thought Four

PROTEST AGAINST INJUSTICE is in the core of the classic petition of Abraham (Genesis 18:25):

Will the Judge of the whole earth  
not do justice?

Injustice, whether committed by humans or attributed to God, is always deplorable and never excusable. To tolerate or "forgive" evil is the root and epitome of evil. To justify human evil is no sign of compassion; to defend divine evil, no gesture of piety. Both betray disguised cruelty, deep-rooted cowardice, misplaced religiosity. True faith requires that we expect and demand justice from both humankind and God, and neither excuse the former nor "defend" the latter. In face of rampant evil, how difficult it is to maintain faith in God! Where is God's justice?

*Understand*  
Two easy answers are common: One vindicates God's injustice, the other denies His justice. We must firmly resist both. The first discards morality for the sake of religion; the second, religion for the sake of morality. But, one way or another, defending evil is always both irreligious and immoral.

We have neither the duty nor the right to "exonerate" God by explaining away evil. To do so is to condemn its victims and condon its perpetrators. On the altar of theology we must neither sacrifice our sensitivity to human sufferings nor our indignation against human brutality. In order to praise the perfection and goodness of God we must never ignore the agony and the iniquity of humanity. In order to put God in the right we must never put the sufferers in the wrong. In our devotion to God, we must never lose our concern for humanity. Similarly, in our concern for humanity, we must never disavow God's justice, lest we surrender to evil. In Abraham's ever powerful petition, we too continue to ask, to plea, to protest.

## VAYERA

### Thought Five

A SOCIETY WITHOUT FEAR OF GOD -- CAN IT BE TRUSTED? Abraham did not trust the people of Gerar, a Philistine town in the Negev. Arriving there, he introduced his wife, an extremely beautiful woman, as his sister. It is safer this way, he felt. His scheme, however, backfired. Explaining his irregular conduct to the local king, Abimelekh, Abraham claimed (Genesis 20:11): "I thought, since there is no fear of God in this place, they might kill me on account of my wife."

Abraham was overly protective and untrusting. Can there be no moral integrity without the fear of God? And, does fear of God always lead to a more ethical and safer society?

## VAYERA

### Thought Seven

THE AKEDA -- THE BINDING OF ISAAC: When Abraham, about to slay his son, is stopped (Genesis 22:12) -- "Lay not your hand upon the lad!" -- we reach the moment of truth. God did not tell him to slaughter Isaac; nor did he order him to prepare an altar, to bring with him fire, wood and a devouring knife ("ma'akhelet"). All these were initiated by Abraham.

Abraham was told by God (v. 3): "Elevate him to be an 'olah'" When it refers to a human being, "olah" is not meant to be understood as a ritual- sacrificial term, "a burnt-offering," but rather as a moral-spiritual term, as "aliyah" -- a person's ascent and growth in cleaving to God, while alive!

The lesson for Abraham and all generations to come after him -- obtained through this agonizing ordeal of the Akeda -- is the Jewish idea of the ultimate sanctity of life. A person's nearness to God is experienced through life. A human being is "offered" to God, not by his death, but by being dedicated, while alive, to God's service. In the same way, Hannah "gave" her newly born son Samuel to God (I Samuel 1:11): She let him live and grow in the Temple of Shiloh under Eli's spiritual guidance; and he became a prophet.

Rashi in his commentary brings the following midrash:

#### VE-HA'ALEHU

SHAM LE-OLAH -- ELEVATE HIM TO BE AN "OLAH" -- God did not say (to Abraham concerning Isaac) "shehatehu" (slay him) because He did not want that he should slay him but bring him up to the mountain to make of him an "olah" (to elevate him spiritually, to dedicate him to the service of God). So when he had taken him up (upon the altar), God said to him, "Take him down!"

A person's true elevation -- his becoming an "olah" -- is achieved not by giving up or denying his life, but by cherishing and enriching his life.