**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYERA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayera tells of the angels who were sent to the sinful city of Sedom in order to destroy the city and rescue Lot and his family. In informing Lot of the impending catastrophe, the angels urged Lot to take his entire family outside the city “because we are destroying this place” (19:13). The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 50:9) famously takes note of the fact that in this phrase, the angels appear to credit themselves with Sedom’s destruction. Whereas later in the same verse they clarify, “…the Lord sent us to destroy it,” they initially seem to refer to themselves as the ones who would be bringing down Sedom. The Midrash comments that the angels were punished for this expression of arrogance, and were “driven from their quarters [in their heavens] for 138 years.”

On one level, of course, the Midrash here warns against the tendency to arrogantly and foolishly take credit for achievements for which we actually deserve no credit. In our desperate quest for other people’s respect and for our own sense of self-worth, we are prone to deludingly convincing ourselves that we are far more accomplished than we are, and to taking pride in strength, influence, wisdom, talents or qualities that we do not actually possess. The Midrash admonishes us to be honest in our assessment of ourselves and our achievements, and to avoid delusional self-adulation.

There may, however, also be an additional element to the Midrash’s criticism of the angels’ words. Namely, destroying Sedom was a legitimate act only because “the Lord sent us to destroy it.” When a person of authority punishes, the punishment is valid and acceptable only to the extent to which the authority figure acts with the sincere, honest intention of serving as God’s “messenger,” doing what God expects and demands. The statement “we are destroying this place” gives the impression that the angels themselves made the decision to annihilate Sedom as a personal matter, of their own volition, because they chose to for their own purposes and to advance their own causes. They are criticized for this remark because punitive measures must be done solely in the capacity of an agent, without any sort of vested personal interest involved.

Extending this notion one step further, we might apply it also to any expression of anger or condemnation. Such words must be spoken strictly as a “messenger,” to discharge one’s duty, and not as part of a self-serving agenda or with the aim of asserting superiority. Too often, people express fierce opposition and condemnation with a sense of “*mashchitim anachnu*,” as a personal matter, to promote themselves, rather than out of a genuine sense of responsibility. *Chazal* here warn that whenever one sets out to “destroy Sedom” – to criticize, condemn, punish or oppose wrongdoing – he must ensure that he acts sincerely as an “angel,” as a messenger faithfully fulfilling a sacred mission, and not out of arrogant self-righteousness and self-aggrandizement.

Sunday

Parashat Vayera tells the story of *akeidat Yitzchak*, God’s command to Avraham that he sacrifice his son, Yitzchak – a command which God suddenly rescinded just as Avraham held up the knife prepared to slaughter his son. An angel called out to Avraham to inform him that he was being tested to determine the extent of his subservience to God, and he and his descendants would be blessed for his preparedness to obey this command. The Torah then tells that Avraham saw a ram caught by its horns in the thicket in the woods: “Avraham lifted his eyes and saw there was a ram, afterward, caught in the thicket by its thorns” (22:13). Avraham proceeded to take the ram and offer it as a sacrifice in place of Yitzchak on the altar he had built for the sacrifice of his son.

A number of commentators noted the seemingly difficult word “*achar*” (“afterward”) in this verse. Rashi, based on *Targum Onkelos*, explains it to mean simply that after the angel instructed Avraham to desist, and not to sacrifice his son, Avraham saw the ram. Others, including Ibn Ezra, interpret this phrase to mean that Avraham saw the ram after it had become caught in the branches. The precise opposite approach is taken by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch and Malbim, who explain “*achar*” to meanthat Avraham looked around for an animal to offer as a sacrifice, and right after he saw this ram, it became trapped in the thicket. Avraham understood that God performed a miracle for him to enable him to offer this ram as a sacrifice. (The miraculous nature of this ram is indicated by *Pirkei Avot* 5:6, which cites a view that this ram was created together with other miraculous phenomena at the end of the six days of creation.)

The Chozeh of Lublin is cited as explaining the word “*achar*” in this verse as an allusion to the fact that the test of *akeidat Yitzchak* was not a one-time event, but rather repeats itself even “afterward,” albeit in a different form. Of course, God never commands the sacrifice of a child. In place of this test, however, God tests us through our entanglement of the “thicket” of human frailty. We so often feel as though we, like that ram, are “trapped” in our vices and weaknesses, that while we seek to advance and move forward, we are held back and restrained by our negative habits and instincts. The “*akeida*” which God expects of us is to continually and determinedly struggle to release ourselves from this “thicket” and devote ourselves to God – just as Avraham succeeded in disentangling the ram and offering it as a sacrifice. God will never again demand the kind of sacrifice He demanded from Avraham, but instead, He demands that we struggle, that we work hard to release ourselves from the entanglement of our negative inclinations, and not ever feel content remaining in the “thicket” of our faults and weaknesses.

Monday

Parashat Vayera begins with the story of Avraham inviting three wayfarers he saw passing by his tent on a hot day, whom he graciously fed and cared for. It later became clear that these were, in fact, angels sent by God.

The Gemara in Masekhet Bava Metzia (86b) discusses several aspects of this story, including the parallels that exist between Avraham’s hospitality and God’s care for *Benei Yisrael* in the wilderness. Just as Avraham brought his guests bread and meat, the Gemara observes, God provided *Benei Yisrael* with manna and fowl; just as Avraham brought his guests water, God provided *Benei Yisrael* with a miraculous well; and just as Avraham escorted his guests as they left, God accompanied *Benei Yisrael* as they traveled, encircling them with the special “clouds of glory.”

Amidst its discussion, the Gemara notes a subtle difference between Avraham’s provision of water to his guests, and the other favors he performed for them. The Torah describes Avraham as personally bringing the food to his guests, but with regard to the water, Avraham said to the angels in extending his invitation, “*Yukach na me’at mayim*” – “Let, if you please, some water be brought” (18:4). The passive form “*yukach*” implies that Avraham did not personally bring the water for the visitors to use for washing, but rather had somebody else bring them water. The Gemara appears to criticize Avraham for this, stating that since he did not give his guests water directly, God provided his descendants with water in an indirect fashion. Whereas the other miracles of the wilderness happened directly, without any intermediary, the well was created by Moshe, whom God instructed to produce water from a rock. Since Avraham gave his guests water indirectly, by having somebody else bring it, God likewise gave *Benei Yisrael* water indirectly, having Moshe produce it for them.

How might we explain the significance of this point – that Avraham had somebody else bring water for his guests, and why does the Gemara find fault in this aspect of Avraham’s hospitality?

The Maggid of Kozhnitz, in *Avodat Yisrael*, suggests that the water brought for Avraham’s guests symbolically represents his efforts to “cleanse” them of their pagan beliefs and practices. The indirect manner of Avraham’s provision of water, the Maggid explains, represents the distance that Avraham sought to keep from his pagan guests as he worked to guide them away from paganism. Avraham was afraid of drawing too close to them, lest his own beliefs and character be affected by their beliefs and characters, and so he kept a degree of distance, symbolized by the indirect provision of water. The Gemara criticizes Avraham for this distance, the Maggid explains, because when one works to teach, guide and inspire others, no matter who they are, he must seek to fully connect and bond with them. While working to help “cleanse” other people of their wrongful conduct, it is important to build close, genuine bonds of friendship, and not keep a distance.

The precise practical application of the Maggid’s teaching is unclear – conceivably, there are circumstances when some degree of distance is appropriate, if not vital – but the broader message being conveyed is that there is more to hospitality than merely providing food and shelter. According to the Maggid’s understanding of the Gemara, *Chazal* detected in the words “*yukach na*” an ever so slight degree of emotional distance that Avraham kept between him and his guests, even as he enthusiastically welcomed and served them. And this distance, it seems, was a slight stain on what was otherwise an inspiring and exemplary display of hospitality and generosity. *Chazal* here seek to emphasize that beyond simply providing people with their material needs, we must also seek to provide them with emotional support, friendship, companionship and encouragement, that *chesed* entails not only practical assistance, but also a process of close bonding, helping people feel connected, respected and cared for.

Tuesday

Towards the end of Parashat Vayera, we read the famous story of *akeidat Yitzchak*, God’s command to Avraham to slaughter his beloved son, a command which God rescinded only once Avraham bound Yitzchak on an altar and lifted the knife to slaughter him. An angel appeared to Avraham and promised that God would grant great reward to his descendants “on account of the fact that you did this, that you did not withhold your son, your only son” (22:16).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 56:11) raises the question of why these rewards were promised strictly on account of *akeidat Yitzchak*. As tradition teaches, Avraham withstood ten different tests to his faith, and, according to the Midrash, *akeidat Yitzchak* marked the final of these ten trials. (Rabbenu Yona, in his commentary to *Pirkei Avot* 5:3, famously advances a different view, claiming that Avraham’s tenth trial was the need to purchase *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*, which happened after *akeidat Yitzchak*.) Why, then, was Avraham deemed worthy of these rewards only now, after passing the tenth and final test? Did he not deserve these great blessings – or at least most of them – for passing the first nine tests?

The Midrash answers that this final test was “equal to all” the others, and “if he had not accepted it upon himself, he would have lost everything.” Indeed, if Avraham had not withstood the unfathomable test of *akeidat Yitzchak*, he would have forfeited all the reward he had accrued for surmounting the first nine trials. The Midrash does not, however, explain why this was the case.

It appears that the Midrash seeks to teach that successfully struggling to pass one challenge – or even many challenges – does not absolve us of the need to then struggle to pass others that come our way. Avraham, the founder of God’s special nation, was given ten different tests which he needed to overcome to teach that religious life entails a wide array of different challenges, and not just one or two, and all are equally vital. Achieving in one area of Torah obligation does not exempt us from the others, because they are all indispensable components of a complete, integrated life of religious devotion. The Midrash’s comment thus likely speaks not of the unique test of *akeidat Yitzchak*, but rather of its being the final test, the test which demonstrated Avraham’s preparedness to overcome the full range of obstacles and challenges that can confront a person at the different stages and stations in life. We are thus reminded of our responsibility to work and exert effort to succeed in all the various different aspects of Torah life, and never excuse ourselves from one area on the basis of our success in another.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayera tells of the destruction of the wicked city of Sedom, a story preceded by an account of the experiences of the two angels who arrived in the city after visiting Avraham. These angels, who appeared as ordinary travelers, were welcomed by Lot, Avraham’s nephew who resided in Sedom. As word spread through Sedom the Lot had extended hospitality to visitors, the townspeople gathered around Lot’s house and demanded that the guests be handed over. Lot went outside to try advocating for his guests, and when his efforts failed, the angels pulled him back inside, and struck the Sedomites with blindness, whereupon, the Torah writes, “*va-yil’u li-mtzo ha-patach*” (19:11). The common explanation of this phrase is that the people of Sedom were unable to find the door, now that their vision was impaired. This is the interpretation given by the Rashbam, who, with uncharacteristic elaboration, cites several prooftexts showing that the word “*va-yil’u*” refers to a lack of ability.

Seforno, however, explains differently, claiming that the word “*va-yil’u*” refers to the Sedomites’ persistent, futile efforts to find the door so they could enter Lot’s home. Even after losing their sight, the people refused to give up, and continued trying to find Lot’s door. Citing the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Eiruvin (19a), “The wicked – even by the entrance of *Gehinnom* do not repent,” Seforno notes the extraordinary persistence of the people in Sedom, how despite being struck with impaired vision, they still endeavored to reach the guests welcomed by Lot. Commenting to the previous verse, Seforno writes that the angels specifically orchestrated this scene – of the townspeople of Sedom persisting in their efforts to banish Lot’s guests, even after losing their vision – to publicize the extent of their evil. As the angels were now preparing to destroy the city of Sedom, they sought to demonstrate just how cruel and ideologically evil the city was, to the point where they relentlessly persisted in their attempt to banish visitors, even when this objective seemed impossible. According to Seforno, it appears, this is the greatest demonstration of evil – persisting in one’s efforts to perpetrate evil despite the formidable practical obstacles that stand in the way.

Seforno’s comments are perhaps instructive with regard to the converse situation – persisting in our attempt to do the right thing, even when the odds are stacked against us. Just as the Sedomites’ determined attempts to break into Lot’s house demonstrated the extent of their sinfulness, we demonstrate the extent of our religious commitment by untiringly attempting to break through the barriers that stand in the way of proper religious observance. We show our love and devotion to God, and the priority we afford to Torah values, by struggling to follow them even when they seem too difficult for us. The scene of the blind people of Sedom trying hopelessly to find Lot’s door should perhaps serve for us as a model of persistence and resilience, of the kind of determination with which we are to pursue our religious goals, and to continue trying and struggling to maximize our potential despite the challenges we face and our previous unsuccessful attempts.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Vayera of the ram that Avraham offered as a sacrifice after he had prepared to sacrifice his son, Yitzchak, as God had commanded him until informing him that this command was intended only to test his obedience. The Torah tells (22:13) that Avraham saw a ram caught by its horns in the branches in the woods, and so he went and captured the ram so he could offer it as a sacrifice.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 56) tells that Avraham did not just see the ram caught by its horns; he saw the ram get caught by its horns on multiple occasions. Each time the ram managed to disentangle itself and move on, it got caught again. The Midrash explains that the ram’s travails which Avraham witnessed symbolized the travails that would be endured by his descendants, who would be “entangled” in one exile after another. The Jews were “disentangled” from the rule of the Babylonian Empire only to come under Persian rule, and after the fall of the Persians they came under the control of the Greeks. Not long after overthrowing the Greeks, they found themselves subservient to Rome.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*, finds it significant that the ram’s struggles, which the Midrash sees as a symbol of the Jewish People’s travails, were caused specifically by its horns. The ram’s horns, Rav Ginsburg suggests, represent its pride and stature. They stand proudly atop its head, as a crown, and are its source of strength. As such, Rav Ginsburg explains, the image of the ram’s repeated entanglement symbolizes the fact that *Am Yisrael* gets repeatedly entangled because of our “horns,” our religious beliefs, lifestyle, values and traditions. It is specifically because of our “crown,” our ambitious goals and ideals, that we so often find ourselves “entangled” in one crisis or another. If we would remove our “horns,” our “crown,” and surrender our commitment to Torah, we would not become “entangled” – but then we would not end up on the “altar”; we would not be God’s devoted servants.

More generally, this symbolism conveys the message that living a life of meaning, values, and religious commitment necessarily entails confronting numerous different challenges and complications. In order to reach the “altar,” to live as loyal servants of God, we must endure various kinds of “entanglements,” difficult, complex situations that demand hard work, effort and resilience. Rather than feel discouraged and dispirited by these struggles, we must accept and embrace them as part of the process of living as God’s servants, trusting that He will help us extricate ourselves from the “thicket,” enable us to surmount the various hurdles that stand in our way, and accompany us as we seek to devote our lives to His service.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Vayera tells the story of the destruction of Sedom, and relates that on that morning, Avraham returned to “the place where he had stood in the presence of the Lord” (19:27), and saw the smoke rising from the Jordan Valley region.  As the Radak notes, this refers to the place where Avraham had stood the previous day after the angels that had visited him left to Sedom, when God informed Avraham of His plan to annihilate Sedom, prompting Avraham to pray on the city’s behalf.  The Torah writes that after the angels left, “Avraham was still standing in the presence of the Lord” (18:22), and it is thus to this place that the Torah refers when it speaks of Avraham returning the next morning to the place “where he had stood in the presence of the Lord.”

The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (26b) famously explains that Avraham came to that location in the morning to pray, thus demonstrating that Avraham introduced the concept of *shacharit* – the morning prayer.  Earlier in Masekhet Berakhot (6b), the Gemara notes the significance of the fact that Avraham arose to pray in the precise same location where he had prayed the previous day.  The Gemara sees this as a precedent for the great value of setting a fixed place for prayer, commenting, “Whoever sets a fixed place for his prayer – the God of Avraham assists him, and when he dies, it is said of him, ‘O, humble one!  O, pious one!  Among the students of our patriarch, Avraham!’”  Such a person is a “student” of Avraham because he set a fixed place for his prayers, just as Avraham did.

Rav Yechezkel Landau (author of *Noda Bi-yehuda*), in his *Tzelach* commentary to the Talmud, offers a mystical explanation for the importance of setting a fixed place for prayer.  He suggests that each time a person prays at a certain location, his prayer somehow leaves an impact on that location.  A certain element of sanctity is “absorbed” by that place, which in turn affects the quality of the person’s next prayer.  By establishing a fixed place for prayer, then, one positively impacts upon the quality of his prayers, which are affected by the sanctity generated by all the previous prayers at that location.

On this basis, the *Tzelach* suggests a reason why such an individual is hailed as an “*anav*” – a humble person.  The practice of praying in a certain location, according to the *Tzelach*’s explanation, demonstrates one’s awareness of the need to enhance his prayers by drawing upon the effects of previous prayers.  If one prays in a different place each time, he appears to assume that his prayer is self-sufficient, intrinsically adequate, and does not require the sanctity generated by prayers recited on previous occasions.  It is therefore a sign of humility when one establishes a fixed place for his prayers, thereby showing a degree of insecurity in the inherent power of his prayer, and a desire to improve it.

The broader message conveyed by the *Tzelach* is that it is the height of arrogance to believe that we can achieve greatness instantaneously, without a long, extended process of hard work and effort.  We need to recognize that every bit of work we invest builds upon the work we’ve previously invested, and does not accomplish anything on its own.  It is a mistake, and a sign of arrogance, to think that we can set out to achieve a goal and succeed immediately.  We must humbly acknowledge that anything we seek to accomplish requires a lengthy, and, in most instances, grueling, process.  Once we acknowledge this, we will not be discouraged or deterred when our efforts do not bring us immediate success, and will instead realize that our struggles and setbacks are a natural part of the process of growth and achievement.

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