



ALIYA-BY-ALIYA SEDRA SUMMARY

RABBI REUVEN TRADBURKS
RCA ISRAEL REGION

In memory of **Evelyn Rivers a"h**
חנה פעסא בת אהרן זלמן הכהן ע"ה
Mother of Reuven Tradburks

PARSHAT VAYEIRA

Our parsha is the heart of the beloved stories of Avraham. These stories can be seen as expressing 2 main themes. First, Avraham as the father of ethical monotheism. And second, the distinct nature of the Jewish people.

The Torah will describe Avraham as a kind and generous soul, while at the same time a man of faith, of interaction with G-d and with His Name on his lips. These themes emerge from a very simple reading of the stories.

The second theme, the distinct nature of the Jewish people can be seen by the wonderful literary device of parallel stories. When similar stories are juxtaposed, it is valuable to note their similarities, but more valuable to note their contrasts. And what the similarities and contrasts teach. We will learn of the distinct nature of the Jewish people by noting

the contrasts of parallel stories.



1ST ALIYA (18:1-14)

G-d appears to Avraham. 3 men are warmly welcomed by Avraham with lavish hospitality. They announce to him that by this time next year Sarah will have a child. She overhears this from the tent and laughs, for her ability to bear a child is a thing of the past. G-d protests – is anything too much for G-d – by this time next year you will have a child.

A story of ethical monotheism in living color. Avraham and Sarah greet 3 strangers with a feast of fresh bread and meat after offering them just water and bread. They run and involve the whole family in their generosity. And after being told prophetically of the birth of Yitzchak, Sarah is engaged by G-d in dialogue.

This story serves as our paradigm of kindness, generosity and hospitality, an illustration of the interpersonal that accompanies monotheism, generosity with engagement with G-d.

But the story of the birth of Yitzchak is not the only baby story. We had the birth of Yishmael last week. And we will have the birth of Lot's daughter's children.

In the contrasts in these births lies profound meaning. Hagar was given by Sarah to Avraham and she bore Yishmael. Lot's daughters ply him with drink and bear children from their father.

But here, rather than Sarah merely giving birth, with everyone wondering how that

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could possibly occur at her age, G-d sends messengers to inform them of the impending birth. This is a miraculous birth, a Divine gift. A promise from the Master of the Universe.

In this a contrast has been painted. People doing people things; Hagar bearing a child. Normal, unremarkable. Other people, Lot's daughters bearing children in an exceedingly odious fashion.

Sarah bears through Divine involvement.

And such is the contrast of the nations and the Jewish people. The nations try to make their way in this natural world, devoid of the Divine, meandering, becoming nations, fumbling, mumbling and building their way, trying to make their way in this complicated world.

The Jewish people are entirely different. Covenant, Promises from G-d, miraculous birth. A nation walking, talking and being driven by the Divine.



2ND ALIYA (18:15-33)

The men leave for Sodom. G-d reasons that He may not withhold from Avraham, the champion of justice, of His plan to destroy Sodom. Avraham challenges Him: How can You destroy the righteous along with the wicked? And how can You destroy the place if there are righteous people present? Avraham presses his point.

Avraham is generous in spirit, arguing with G-d Himself to save Sodom. But we must pay attention to not only what Avraham is doing but who he is doing it for. We already know about Sodom from the first moment Lot chose to live there; the people are exceedingly wicked. That is how they are described. And Avraham himself knows it because he bargains all the way down to 10 righteous people. Because he himself knows there aren't 50 righteous. Or 40, or 20.

Avraham is pleading for a city of wicked people. That is his generosity, his kindness, his care and concern for others. Pleading with G-d for them. Another rich display and example of interpersonal ethics, ethical monotheism.



3RD ALIYA (10:1-20)

The men journey to Sodom. Lot prevails on them to stay with him. The men of the city object to the presence of these foreigners. It turns violent. The visitors tell Lot that Sodom is to be destroyed and he must leave quickly. His sons in law refuse. The morning dawns and Lot, his wife and daughters tarry but eventually, relent and leave Sodom, told not to look back.

Lot's generosity parallels the generosity of Avraham shown to these same strangers. He welcomes the strangers, gives them a place in his home, serves them food. A parallel story to Avraham's kindness to them.

But the lesson lies not in the similarities but in the differences. We see immediately from what ensues that Lot is trying to save these poor men from the inevitable abuse they will be subject to momentarily. While Avraham's generosity is pure, Lot's is to shelter them from the nasty people Lot has chosen to live with.

This story can also be seen as a foil, a contrast to the upcoming story of the Akeida. In both, a Divine command is given. Lot, say the angels, leave this city immediately. Avraham, take your son as a sacrifice.

The contrast is the response. Lot tarries, hesitates at the Divine Command. Avraham arises early in the morning.

And the bitter irony. Lot was commanded to save himself and his family; go quickly before the city is destroyed and you and your family will survive. And he hesitated.

Avraham was told the opposite, the horrible opposite: sacrifice your son, destroy your family. And he jumped to obey the Divine Command. What an irony, a contrast; the one commanded to save his family tarries, while the one commanded to destroy his family jumps quickly.



4TH ALIYA (19:21-21:4)

Lot is told to flee Sodom. The cities of Sodom and Gemora are destroyed. Lot's wife looks back and turns to a pillar of salt. Avraham looks out from the hills and sees the destruction. Lot flees to the hills. The 2 daughters of Lot ply him with wine and become pregnant from him, reasoning that they are the only ones left in the world. They name their children Moav and Amon. Avraham goes to Gerar. Avimelech is told by G-d not to touch Sarah. Avimelech confronts Avraham as to why he hid Sarah's identity from him. Avraham responds: I saw there is no fear of G-d here. G-d fulfills what he promised to Sarah. She gives birth to Yitzchak. Avraham circumcises him as G-d commanded.

When Avraham is confronted, fairly, by Avimelech as to why he didn't tell him that Sarah was his wife, Avraham responds that he saw there is no fear of G-d here. Avraham is here stating the foundational principle; fear or awe or deference to G-d compels you to follow His command.

Avraham is advocating ethical monotheism. He says to Avimelech: without deference to G-d, man acts capriciously, with self-interest, in an indulgent manner. Who knows what you would do to her, knowing she is my wife? We Jews, on the other hand, defer to the Divine command, complying with the Divine command.



5TH ALIYA (21:5-21)

Yitzchak grows and is weaned. Sarah sees Yishmael playing with Yitzchak. She tells Avraham to banish this boy, for he will not inherit on a par with Yitzchak. This troubles Avraham but G-d tells him to listen to Sarah. Avraham arises early, sends away Hagar and Yishmael. They go to the desert of Beersheva. The water runs out. Hagar cannot bear to see the death of her child and cries. An angel calls to her. Her eyes are opened, she sees a well and gives water to Yishmael.

Yishmael's banishment is another parallel story to the Akeida that we are about to read. Both stories feature: parent arising early, a child walking with a parent, the child's life in danger, an angel calls, the parent sees what they did not see before, the child is saved.

The parallel is apparent; but where is the contrast?

Avraham goes to the Akeida by Divine command. Hagar is banished by Sarah. Divine command versus human activity. This contrast informs the contrast of Yishmael and Yitzchak. Yishmael will be a great nation by the criteria of great nations. Yitzchak will be a great nation with a special covenant with the Creator. One will be of this world; one will be of an elevated world.



6TH ALIYA (21:22-34)

Avimelech initiates a pact with Avraham in Beersheva. They name the place Beersheva from the word to swear. Avraham calls out in G-d's name in Beersheva.

Another parallel story; a covenant. Avimelech makes a covenant with Avraham. G-d Made a covenant with Avraham. The nations work in the rough and tumble of this world and as such, with Avraham's obvious

success, Avimelech figures it is good to be with a winner. The Jewish people march to the covenant with the Creator, a covenant of an entirely different sort.



7TH ALIYA (22:1-24)

Akeidat Yitzchak, the binding of Isaac. Avraham is told to take Yitzchak and offer him as an offering. On the way, Yitzchak questions Avraham. They arrive at the mountain. At the last moment, the angel calls to Avraham. Avraham has proven his loyalty to G-d's command. He sees a ram caught in the bush and offers it in the place of Yitzchak. They return to Beersheva.

The most dramatic story in the Torah. A story of absolute loyalty to the Divine command but also one of pathos and irony. The man of generosity, who pleaded for the lives of the wicked of Sodom now prepared to take the life of his son. The one who challenged the injustice of the impending destruction of Sodom, now has no voice of objection. And the most obvious – the one who waited patiently for 25 years for the promise of a child – and a future – now prepared to destroy it all.

Why would Avraham have challenged the destruction of Sodom but here is so accepting?

Perhaps the difference lies in the Divine command. When G-d tells Avraham he intends to destroy Sodom there is no Divine command. They are talking. G-d is telling Avraham what He intends to do. Avraham challenges.

Here, at the Akeida, Avraham is commanded. Sacrifice Yitzchak. Not informed. Commanded. I can challenge the Divine intent. I can challenge His balancing of justice and generosity. Perhaps He will balance

things differently.

But when He commands, there is but one response. There is no challenging the command. There is only acquiescence, compliance, deference. We can challenge what He intends to do; we cannot challenge His Command.

2 KINGS , 4:1-37

This week's parsha famously tells us that although Avraham and Sarah were advanced in age they miraculously bear a child. Along these same lines the *haftorah* this Shabbat describes a similar incident in which the navi Elisha assures an elderly childless woman that she will bear a child.

Elisha would often pass through the city of Shunem. A couple who lived in the town offered a place for Elisha to stay. They even made a guest room that Elisha could use whenever he needed. Elisha became aware that the couple was childless. He blessed the woman that she would give birth. Indeed a year later a son was born to the couple.

The story does not end there. A few years later the son died suddenly. The woman called Elisha back to her home. Elisha quickly came and miraculously was able to bring the child back to life. ■

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parents/grandparents

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