
THE TANACH STUDY CENTER mail.tanach.org
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Questions for Self Study - by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT VA'YERA

PART I - QUESTIONS FOR THE 'SHABBOS TABLE'

AVIMELECH & AVRAHAM

1. In Parshat Va'yera, we find two encounters between Avimelech and Avraham Avinu (one in chapter 20, and the other in 21:22-34). As you review these two stories, attempt to identify their primary topics, while noting how they are similar, and how they differ.

Be sure to note the reason for Avraham's 'criticism' of Avimelech in each story. Attempt to relate these rebukes to the underlying purpose for WHY Avraham Avinu was chosen to become the forefather of God's special nation?

2. What is the meaning of the name "Avimelech" in Hebrew? In your opinion, do you think that was his name from birth, or could one suggest that the Torah calls him by that name as it representative of Avraham's relationship with other nations. Similarly, attempt to explain why the Torah finds it necessary to record as well that Avimelech was accompanied by his 'commander in chief' - Phichol - in each of these encounters.

Based on 21:22-23, what do you think causes Avimelech to initiate a covenant with Avraham Avinu? Based on 21:24-30, why does Avraham agree?

In your opinion, how could these encounters reflect future relationships that may develop between Am Yisrael and other nations?

3. Review once again the final psukim of this unit (i.e. 21:30-33). Note how this includes not only a covenant, but also tells how Avraham plants an "eshel" in Beer Sheva and '**calls out in God's Name**'. Can you explain the connection between this 'calling out' and the covenant?

Note the various translations of "eshel" as suggested by the commentators. Can you explain what leads them to their conclusions?

Relate your answer to the obvious parallel between these psukim and Breishit 12:8 and 13:4. [Relate once again to the Ramban on 12:8!]

YIRAT ELOKIM & the AKEYDA

[The following questions are for discussion.]

1. In your opinion, can man determine on his own (i.e. without Torah) what is right and what is wrong? [This concept is often referred to as 'natural morality'.]

For example, does man understand instinctively that it is wrong to kill and steal, or must this be taught?

In your answer, relate to why God punished "dor ha'Mabul" (the generation of the Flood). Did they know what they were doing was wrong? Were they aware that they acted in an evil way? If not, how were they supposed to know that their actions were wrong?

Would you say that there are certain actions (of social behavior) that 'everyone' would agree are wrong?

2. Review the last five of the Ten Commandments (see Shmot chapter 20). Had these commandments not been given at Har Sinai, would Am Yisrael have thought that they would have been permitted? If not, why are they included in the Ten Commandments? [Answer this question in relation to the first five commandments as well!]

The Rashbam on Breishit 26:5, explains that the phrase "chukotei v'torotei", refers to the "mitzvot ha'nikarot" - i.e. the laws that man would recognize on his own, even if God had not commanded them. Note his explanation that these "mitzvot

ha'nikarot" were kept by the Avot - even though they had not received a specific command from God about them. Review this Rashbam, noting as well his hints to why Am Yisrael entered a covenant to keep them at Har Sinai, and relate his commentary to the questions above.

3. After the Flood, we find several 'guidelines' that God commands Noah (see 9:1-7). How would you categorize these mitzvot? In other words, do they relate to man's relationship with his fellow man or with God (or both)?

In your opinion, should Noah have been able to understand these commandments on his own (i.e. even without God's specific instructions)?

4. Review the contrast between God's statements re: mankind both before and after the Flood, i.e. compare 6:5 with 8:21. Can you find any connection between these statements and the "mitzvot" that God instructs Noah after the Mabul in 9:1-7? In your opinion, in addition to these mitzvot, does God have any other expectations from mankind?

Would you say that these mitzvot are God's primary 'expectation' from mankind, or do they serve simply as a 'vehicle' to help mankind achieve a different goal?

[Relate to 11:1-9 and our shiur on Parshat Noah re:Migdal Bavel!]

[With this background, our discussion moves now to Parshat Va'yera:]

5. Note how Avraham explains to Avimelech why he 'lied' regarding Sarah: "for there is no YIRAT ELOKIM [fear of God] in this place, and they would kill me [in order] to take my wife" (see 20:9-11).

In your opinion, what does Avraham refer to when he mentions "YIRAT ELOKIM"? Does Avraham expect that Avimelech believes in God. Did God ever appear to Avimelech or his people beforehand and tell them what is right and what is wrong?

Furthermore, why is God's Name here Elokim and not shem Havayah?

6. The phrase "YIRAT ELOKIM" appears several other times in Chumash. Examine its meaning in the following sources, noting what type of behavior it relates to, and whether it relates to 'the fear of God' by Jews or by non-Jews.

Breishit 42:18 - re: Yosef, pretending to be an Egyptian.

Shmot 1:21 - re: the midwives killing the male babies

Shmot 18:21 - re: Yitro's advice re: the appt. of judges

Devarim 25:18 - re: the sin of the Amalek.

What type of general behavior do all of these sources relate to?

Based on these examples, what type of behavior would you say that "yirat Elokim" refers to in Breishit 20:9-11?

7. With this in mind, review the story of the AKEYDA (chapter 22), noting which Name of God the Torah uses (i.e. "shem Elokim" or "shem Havaya") when it describes God's various commandments to Avraham Avinu.

Can you find a pattern?

Could one say that the AKEYDA presents Avraham with a conflict between 'natural morality' and 'divine command'? If so, explain why.

In your opinion, what should Avraham do?

In your opinion, is it possible that God would command something that is not morally just?

How would this relate to the concept of "yirat elokim" discussed above?

8. Carefully review Breishit 22:12 (note how this pasuk is the climax of the story). How did you translate the word "ki" in this pasuk, as 'that' or 'because' or 'even though'? [As you are aware, the word "ki" can carry several different meanings in the Bible.]

What is the meaning of "yirat Elokim" in this pasuk! Again, how would this relate to the concept of "yirat elokim" discussed above?

9. Note that at the end of the AKEYDA, God makes yet another promise to Avraham Avinu concerning the future of his offspring (see 22:15-19).

To which earlier promise (or promises) or Avraham Avinu is this promise most similar?

Is this promise only a repeat, or is something new added? If so, what is that new addition, and how does it relate to the Akeyda? (Relate this to "brit bein ha'btarim".)

[See Ramban and Radak on 22:16.]

TOLDOT TERACH

1. Parshat Va'yera informs us not only of the birth of Yitzchak, but also of the birth of several other of TERACH's grandchildren and great grandchildren (see 19:30-38, 22:20-24.)

Why do you think these stories are an integral part of Sefer Breishit? [Relate to 11:26-32, the fact that we find a header "ayleah toldot Terach", and that later on in Sefer Breishit we never find "ayleah toldot Avraham". Relate also to our shiur on Parshat Noach.]

2. Which of Terach's descendants later 'weave' their way back into the family of Avraham Avinu? [Be sure that you can name descendants from both Haran's family as well as Nachor's. Is it usually a male or female who returns back to the family? Attempt to explain why this may be significant.

3. Review 22:20-24, noting how many wives (and/or concubines) that Nachor marries, and how many children he has from each! To which of the Avot are these 'statistics' similar to?

Does anyone else in Sefer Breishit have twelve children? [Relate to 17:20 and 35:23-26.]

PART II - QUESTIONS FOR PREPARATION (for weekly shiur)

1. Review chapters 18 and 19, noting that even though they appear to be two separate stories, the Torah includes both of them in the same "parshia". [As we explained earlier, "parshiot" are 'paragraph' type divisions & are part of the Sefer Torah.]

In your opinion, why does the Torah combine these stories into one "parshia", even though they appear to discuss different topics? Can you identify a thematic connection between them?

In your answer, relate to 18:17-21, noting especially to 18:19, noting how these psukim serve as a transition between two stories.

2. Study 18:17-19 carefully, and attempt to explain why these psukim are recorded at this point.

Note the obvious parallel between 18:18 and the Torah's description of God's original choice of Avraham in 12:1-3. Attempt to explain the thematic significance of this parallel, and how 18:18-19 can help us understand why (i.e. towards what purpose) God had originally chosen Avraham Avinu in chapter 12.

How will doing "tzedaka u'mishpat", and teaching that 'way of God' to his children, facilitate Avraham's offspring becoming a 'great nation' and a 'blessing for other nations'?

3. To better appreciate the meaning of the phrase "tzedaka u'mishpat", as it appears in 18:19, see the following sources, noting how it relates to a primary theme in the entire Tanach:

Shmuel Bet 8:15 [noting how this is a summary pasuk];

Tehillim 72:1-13

Melachim Aleph 3:7-11; 10:1-9

Yeshayahu 1:9-17,21-27, 5:1-7, 11:1-6;

Yirmiyahu 9:22-23, 21:11->22:4, 22:13-17, 23:5-6,13-14;

Yechezkel 16:48-50; 18:5-20

[That should keep you busy.]

4. In 18:19, what does the word "y'daativ" mean, and how does it relate to the word "I'maan" (which follows)?

Does this imply that God 'knows' what will happen, or does it explain why God has come 'to know' Avraham, i.e. why He had chosen him? [See Ramban on this pasuk!]

5. Review 18:23-32, i.e. the conversation between God and Avraham concerning the future of Sdom. Does Avraham request that God save only the righteous men in Sdom, or the entire city? If the latter, can you explain why, and how this relates to the 'reason' for why Avraham was chosen to become the forefather of God's special nation?

Note as well what God originally told Avraham Avinu in 18:20-21. Had God already decided to destroy Sedom, or is He telling Avraham Avinu that He is 'sending His messengers' to 'check it out' - i.e. to determine if the city is worthy of destruction. [If the latter, relate this to what takes place in 19:1-9.]

6. As you study the rest of this 'parshia', note how often this "shoresh" - "yud.daled.ayin" - is used. Pay careful attention in 18:19-21 and in 19:5-8. Based on these examples, what does the word "yadah" imply?

Note also the parallel to Yirmiyahu 22:13-17 re: the word "yadah" and "tzedek u'mishpat". Note also Yirmiyahu 9:23.

7. Based on 18:19 and its context (i.e. the fact that it explains why God must consult with Avraham before destroying Sdom (see 18:17), would you expect that the sin of Sdom to be in some manner related to a lack of "tzedaka u'mishpat"?

To the best of your recollection, what was the sin of Sdom? Is this based on psukim or on Midrashim?

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Now, let's take a closer look at the psukim that describe what happened with Lot in Sdom.

8. Based only on 19:1-3, how would you judge Lot's behavior? Does he act in manner similar to Avraham (i.e. inviting guests etc.)? Why does he go 'out of his way' to make sure that the guests have a place to stay? Would this make him deserving of redemption? Relate this to 18:20-22!

Similarly, relate 18:20-22 to the events that take place in 19:4-10, and God's decision to destroy the city.

9. Note that in 19:4 an entire group gathers around the house of Lot.

Does a simple reading of this pasuk give the impression that the ENTIRE city gathered there, or only some of the people?

Does it appear that this group includes people both young and old? If so, does it appear that only men were there, or that there were women and children as well? (See 19:11.)

In your opinion, why did this group of people gather outside Lot's house? Do they **all** want to 'sodomize' Lot's guests, or could you suggest a different reason for this gathering? [See Ramban.]

10. Review Yechezkel 16:48-50, noting how he provides an explicit definition of the sin of the people of Sdom. Note also how Chazal describe the sin of Sdom in Mishnayot Avot 5:10 (re: "midat Sdom" / if you have ample time, see also Sanhedrin 109a).

Based on Yeshayahu 1:9-27, and his comparison between Sdom and Am Yisrael, what seems to be his understanding of the sin of Sdom?

What does this suggest in regard to our understanding of the nature of the sin of the people in Sdom as described in Parshat Va'yera? [See once again Ramban on 19:4!]

11. In 19:9, what prompts the men of Sdom to say to Lot: "You have just come to live here, and now you 'judge' us [v'iyishpot shafot]..."

What 'judgment' are they referring to, and how does this relate to Lot's previous statement and the context of these events? Compare this to the use of shoresh "li'shpot" in Shmuel I 7:6 and 12:7. What type of 'judgment' do these psukim refer to?

Would you say that Lot has acted as a judge, or that his earlier statements were interpreted as 'judgmental'?

Compare Lot's offer of his daughters to Reuven's suggestion re: his own sons in Breishit 42:37. In what manner could Lot's offering of his daughters to the 'crowd' be considered a 'rebuke', and not necessarily a serious offer?

12. Based on the above questions, can you find significance in the fact that Avraham is told about the destruction of Sdom by the same messengers who tell him about the birth of his son Yitzchak?

In your answer, be sure to relate once again to 18:18-19!

What can the Torah's recording of these events teach us in regard the importance of doing "tzedek u'mishpat" as a Jewish way of life?

PART III - PARSHANUT

The Wicked Men of Sdom

1. See Rashi's comment to 19:5 concerning the group of men that gather around Lot's house. According to Rashi, why do they gather? If so does it make sense that so many people had gathered, young and old, outside his house? How does Rashi on 19:4 'solve' this problem - i.e. who are "anshei Sdom"?

2. Next, see Ramban on 19:5, and read his commentary carefully. In what manner is his approach totally different than Rashi's? Based on Ramban's explanation, can you explain WHY he argues with Rashi? [Can you explain how Ramban's interpretation solves the problem in 19:4 concerning WHO gathered around Lot's house?

Which approach would you consider more comprehensive?

3. Upon their sudden arrival, Lot bakes MATZOT for his guests (see 19:3). According to pshat, why do you think that Lot baked matzot instead of chametz?

Rashi claims that it was "pesach"! In your opinion, is this pirush "pshat" or "drash"?

What other thematic parallels exist between the story of the destruction of Sdom (& Lot being saved) and the story of Yetziat Mitzraim? Based on those parallels, can you find a deeper meaning to Rashi's commentary?

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THE AKEYDA - a punishment?

4. The opening psukim of the Akeyda - "vayhi achar ha'dvarim ha'eyleh..." (22:1) suggest a connection between this story and previous events.

See Rashi 22:1. How do each of his two interpretations explain this connection? What is the primary difference between them?

Next, see Rashbam 22:1. How does he explain the relationship between the Akeyda and the previous parshia? Can you explain why he considers this event as a punishment?

See also Radak. In what manner is his approach different than Rashbam's, and in what manner is it similar?

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5. See Seforno on 22:18, where he explains the meaning of "v'hitbarchu b'zaracha...".

Note not only his commentary, but also his choice of words, noting how they relate back to Tzania 3:9! [Relate this to our earlier discussion of "kriyah b'shem Hashem", and its connection to the primary theme of God choosing a nation in Sefer Breishit.]

Can you explain why Seforno chose that wording?

JUST A DREAM?

6. Re: whether the events in 18:1-16 actually happened or all took place in a prophetic dream, see Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Radak on 18:1 for a very interesting discussion.

How would this help explain why Sarah laughed when she first heard the news, even though Avraham had already 'laughed' when he heard the news back in 17:17!

Note also Rashbam on 18:16 and 18:20 re: who spoke to Avraham, i.e. God directly, or through of the "malachim".

b'hatzlacha,
menachem