



Parsha Perspectives

RABBI MOSHE GEWIRTZ

ויאמר אברהם... אמרתי רק אין יראת
אלקים במקום הזה והרגוני על דבר אשתי

"And Abraham said [to Abimelech, the king of Gerar], 'I said [to myself], there is but no fear of G-d in this place.'" (Genesis 20:11)

When Abraham moved to Egypt, he knew that if the immoral Egyptians found out that Sarah was his wife, they would have no qualms about killing him and taking her. Therefore, he referred to Sarah as his sister (Genesis 12:10-13).

When Abraham moved to Gerar, in southern Canaan (Israel), he did not at first suspect that Sarah would be abducted. Unlike Egypt, Gerar had a reputation as a law-abiding place. Upon arrival, however, Abraham had a change of heart and, fearing for his life, referred to Sarah as his sister. In fact, Sarah was taken from him by Abimelech (Genesis 20:2).

G-d appeared to Abimelech in a dream, warning that he and all his servants were about to die because he had taken a married woman. Abimelech demanded an explanation from Abraham for his "uncivilized" behavior (Genesis 20:4-10). Abraham responded by describing the treatment he received as a guest in their country; instead of asking him about his basic needs, their first question was whether Sarah was his wife or sister. Seeing this, Abraham understood, "There is only no fear of G-d in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife" (Rashi, Genesis 20:11).

If Abraham was genuinely concerned that he'd be killed so they could take his wife, why did he use the word "only" when describing their faults? Killing a man to take his wife is a lack of basic morality, not "only" a lack of fear of G-d!

Rabbi Meir Leibush (the Malbim) explains that Abraham acknowledged that Gerar was

a law-abiding country. However, there was no fear of heaven. That fact that the people of Gerar did not take married women forcibly and kill their husbands did not necessarily represent an unwavering moral code. Without subservience to G-d, their moral standards could change at any moment. It was "only" their lacking fear of G-d that caused Abraham to hide Sarah's identity.

Rabbi Hutner related a chilling story illustrating this point. As a young rabbinic student in pre-war Europe, one of Rabbi Hutner's fellow students spoke admiringly about the polite, refined manner with which the German people treated him during a recent visit. Whenever he asked for directions, the Germans would end their statements with a polite "Nisht vaar?" – "Is it not so?" A disagreement ensued among the students about whether it was proper to learn etiquette from the Germans, who had no connection to Divine law, but merely their own sense of propriety.

Fifty years later in America, an elderly gentleman approached Rabbi Hutner, reminding him that they'd been students together in Europe. Rabbi Hutner was stunned to find a hook in place of one hand. The man explained, "I was one of the boys in favor of learning etiquette from the Germans.

I realize just how wrong I was. When I was in the concentration camp, a German Nazi sawed off my hand. But as he did so, he said, ever so politely, 'It hurts, *nisht vaar?*'"

The moral code of society changes with astonishing speed. Even a cursory study of the cultural, academic, and moral standards that held sway less than a generation ago demonstrates how radically different things are today. Those who promote these changes are often convinced that their new opinions are correct, even sacrosanct — only to see them fall by the wayside in just a few years.

Abraham's message is as relevant today as it ever was. Society can only function correctly when people live according to a Divine, unwavering code of morality

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WORD of the WEEK

נפש

"If it is your נפשכם — nafshechem to bury my dead..." (Genesis 23:8). Rashi and Nachmanides translate נפשכם as "your will" or "your desire." Normally the root נפש — nefesh means soul, but we find later in Deuteronomy (12:15) that the word is associated with desire and will. It is interesting to note that nefesh is also used to mean prayer, which is an expression of one's innermost desires. This is how Rashi (Brachos 5b) understands the phrase "and I will pour out my nefesh before G-d (Samuel 1:1:15)." Similarly, Rabbi David Kimchi identifies the nefesh with one's innermost essence.

Table Talk FOR DISCUSSION AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

When G-d informed Abraham that he was going to destroy Sodom, Abraham engaged in a round of bargaining with G-d. First he asked that the cities be saved if fifty righteous people could be found within them, then if there were just forty-five, and finally bargaining that the cities should be spared if there were forty, or thirty, or twenty, or even as few as ten righteous people. At each point, Abraham's proposal was accepted. Ultimately, however, the cities lacked even ten righteous people and were eventually destroyed.

נ) Nachmanides explains that when Abraham asked if ten righteous people would suffice, he was asking whether this would be enough to spare all five cities, not ten per city. As Abraham surely knew there weren't fifty righteous people in these decadent cities, why did he start with higher numbers instead of asking about ten right away?

ב) At the end of the parshah, Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham immediately went to do as G-d asked. Instead of instantly acquiescing, why didn't Abraham similarly plead on behalf of his beloved son Isaac?

HEY, I NEVER KNEW THAT!

An important part of the traditional wedding is the *bedekin*, the veiling of the bride's face before the actual ceremony under the *chuppah* (canopy). The origin of this custom is in our *parshah*, when Rebecca covered her face before meeting her future husband, Isaac, for the first time (Genesis 24:65). Some explain that it is a gesture of modesty so that people will not be staring at the bride during the ceremony; others explain that it is a way of declaring that the bride's beauty is for her husband alone. Another explanation is that the groom veils the bride to indicate that he is not primarily interested in her physical beauty, which will fade with time, but in her spiritual and moral qualities (*Made in Heaven*, Aryeh Kaplan, p. 125).

A QUESTION FOR THE RABBIS

Leviticus (19:26) prohibits the use of omens; however, Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, relied on an omen to choose a wife for Isaac. Eliezer proclaimed that the first girl who offered him and his camels water was the one G-d has chosen for Isaac. How could he do this? And may we rely on similar omens? Tosafot (*Chullin* 95b) maintain that Eliezer did not really rely on the omen and did not give Rebecca jewelry until after he had discovered to which family she belonged and hence there was no prohibition. Rabeinu Nissim (*Chidushei Haran* ad loc.) explains that if there is logic to the omen then one may rely on it. Eliezer was choosing a wife for Isaac and basing that choice on the kindness that the girl would display. Since the omen was logically connected to the decision, it was permitted.



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