

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Vayeira

Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

15 Cheshvan, 5785

The Fax of Life

ד"סב

November 16, 2024

GOOD MORNING! One of the outcomes of the horrors of October 7th and the accompanying repercussions was the manifest antisemitism on public display in most major cities around the world. These despicable incidents, ranging from demonstrations and the threat of violence to actual acts of violence, were widely reported and splashed across the entire spectrum of print and electronic media.

(As I write this column, I see the heartbreaking news of new antisemitic violence taking place in the Netherlands. Following a soccer game there, Israeli fans were chased by a mob and beaten. There are unconfirmed reports of a possible hostage situation and Israel's foreign ministry reports that three Israelis are missing and unaccounted for – may the Almighty heal and protect them, and return ALL kidnapped Israelis home safely.)

Oddly enough, for some Jews, these disturbing stories and images have sparked a renewed interest in learning what Judaism is really all about. After all, if one is going to be subjected to abuse for being Jewish one should at least know 1) what it means to be a Jew and 2) what about being a Jew is worth enduring that abuse.

Over the last several months I have been giving classes to dozens of Millennials and Gen Zers in some newly "hip" neighborhoods here in South Florida. For me, the opportunity to reconnect Jews with their heritage has been a richly rewarding experience.

One of the highlights of the classes is the question-and-answer sessions in which these very smart and inquisitive students challenge the status quo. Last week a young woman, who had some semblance of a Jewish education as a child, asked me why the rabbis added so many interpretations to the Torah, many of which cannot be seen in the text. What gave them the right to add to the word of the Almighty?

I explained that the Almighty gave Moses thirteen different methods of analyzing the Torah so that the Jewish people could perceive and discover the true intent and meaning of the words of the Torah. Aside from that, the sages of Ancient Israel were trained to read the text particularly carefully. This expertise, coupled with their encyclopedic knowledge of the scriptures, resulted in a level of scholarship that is almost beyond our comprehension.

My brilliant father uses a story in this week's Torah portion to show how adept the sages were at analyzing the Torah and discerning what the text is really teaching us. This week's Torah portion opens with God appearing to Abraham.

"God appeared to him (Abraham) in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day" (Genesis 18:1).

The sages of the Talmud explain that this visit from the Almighty was on the third day following Abraham's circumcision – when he was in the most severe pain – and God paid him a visit to inquire after his welfare (*Talmud Bava Metzia* 86b). In Hebrew, visiting the sick is called *bikkur cholim* and is considered a very important *mitzvah*. The Almighty was making a house call to Abraham to model this behavior.

On the surface, ascribing the purpose to the Almighty's visit seems fairly presumptuous. After all, nowhere in the actual text of the Torah does it mention any reason whatsoever for the Almighty's visit. So how can the rabbis concoct a whole storyline that does not seem to exist in the actual text?

My father explains that the sages were absolute experts in reading the Torah and every nuance of the verses of the Torah were carefully examined and dissected. In this case, the sages were bothered by two very unusual constructs contained within the verses.

Firstly, the opening verse in this week's Torah portion is the beginning of a brand-new story, and yet the Torah does not mention Abraham by name. Instead, the Torah refers to Abraham with the pronoun "him." This is a very odd introduction; indeed, how can you not identify the main the protagonist in the story?

Secondly, if we pay careful attention to the construct of the verse in Hebrew, we notice there is a general departure from every other time that the Torah records God appearing to Abraham. In general, the Torah records God appearing to Abraham in a very straightforward manner – as in "*God appeared to Abram and said [...]*" (*Genesis 12:7*) or "*God appeared to Abram [...]*" (*Genesis 17:1*).

Yet in this week's Torah portion the Torah deviates from the usual manner of introducing the concept of God appearing to Abraham. The literal reading of the verse is, "*And to him, God appeared [...]*" Aside from the fact that it is a departure from the normative style, it is also quite awkward. In addition, the sages noticed that the other times God appeared to Abraham He delivered a message. Here, however, God appears to Abraham but does not say anything to him. This is strikingly odd.

Thus, through careful examination of the text of the Torah, and by comparing this instance to similar verses, the rabbis determined that this visit from the Almighty was different than the others. The sages were able to construct the true intent and purpose of God's visits was not to deliver a message, rather it was for the sake of Abraham personally: "*and to him, God appeared.*" Abraham seems to transition from the object to the subject. In other words, Abraham himself is the purpose of the visit.

Now the first question becomes critical to understanding what is really going on. We asked why the pronoun “him” was used in this instance instead of his actual name like everywhere else. A pronoun in a sentence usually refers and replaces the antecedent noun. In this case, the immediate previous story was about Abraham getting circumcised.

Thus, the sages’ method for understanding the verse is crystal clear. God was appearing to Abraham, not to deliver a message, but rather for his own sake. To understand the purpose, we must ask who was being visited? The “him” refers to the Abraham who had just undergone circumcision in the previous story. Thus, the Almighty was coming to see the Abraham who had just been circumcised, which means the Almighty was making a house call for *bikkur cholim*.

Celebrated detective Sherlock Holmes regularly complained to Dr. Watson that once he explained his methods the rather astonishing results of his deductive reasoning seem almost simple and commonplace. Similarly, if we spend the time and intently study the methods of our sages, we will often discover how they arrived at their interpretation of the text.

The rabbis of old never made anything up or ascribed meaning to verses in the Torah that were inconsistent with the text. The sages’ commentary is always based on a careful analysis of the words of the Torah and their context. When one studies their methods, it becomes quite “elementary” indeed.

This upcoming Tuesday, November 19th, is the 5th *Yahrzeit* (“time of year” in Yiddish – referring to the anniversary of a loved one’s death) of our beloved friend and teacher, Rabbi Kalman Packouz of blessed memory. Rabbi Packouz conceived of and founded the *Shabbat Shalom Weekly* some 34 years ago. He was an incredible visionary and a brilliant innovator who possessed a warm and gentle soul. Like his teacher, Rabbi Noah Weinberg of blessed memory, he used all his abilities to further the mission of returning the children of the Almighty back to His sheltering embrace.

He was one of the kindest and most generous people you could ever hope to meet. When he gently asked me if I would continue his life’s work of producing the *Shabbat Shalom*, I had no idea what a gift he was actually bestowing upon me, and I am eternally grateful for the opportunity. It is almost shocking to me that I am about to complete five years of the weekly column; the time has really flown by quickly.

To his credit, the *Shabbat Shalom* has continued to grow by leaps and bounds, reaching some 300,000 people all over the world each week. It is also now available in Portuguese, Spanish, and French as well as in a weekly podcast format. May it be the will of the Almighty that in the merit of the millions whom he inspired during his lifetime and through his legacy he will have an everlasting source of satisfaction for his pure and holy soul.

I enjoin all who benefit from the weekly *Shabbat Shalom Fax of Life* – to dedicate this upcoming 18th of *Cheshvan* (corresponding to Tuesday, November 19th) as a day of going out of your way to do something special for others. My beloved friend of blessed memory loved people in general and, in particular, his fellow Jews. Anything you do for others will act as a remembrance of his holy soul and be a credit to him. His Hebrew name is Rabbi Kalman Moshe ben Reuven Avigdor.

TORAH PORTION: Vayeira, Genesis 18:1 - 22:24

Abraham on the third day after his circumcision (*brit mila*), sits outside his tent looking for guests to extend his hospitality. While talking with the Almighty, he sees three visitors (actually angels of the Almighty). Abraham interrupts his conversation with the Almighty to invite them to a meal. One angel informs him that in a year’s time his wife, Sarah, will give birth to a son, Isaac (Yitzchak).

God tells Abraham that He is going to destroy Sodom because of its absolute evil (the city is the source of the word sodomy). Abraham argues with God to spare Sodom if there can be found ten righteous people in Sodom. Abraham loses for the lack of a quorum. Lot (Abraham’s nephew) escapes the destruction with his two daughters.

Other incidents: Avimelech, King of the Philistines, wants to marry Sarah (Abraham’s wife), the birth of Isaac, the eviction of Hagar (Abraham’s concubine) and Ishmael. Avimelech and Abraham make a treaty at Beersheva. Abraham is commanded to take up his son, Isaac, as an offering “on one of the mountains” (*Akeidat Yitzchak*). Lastly, the announcement of the birth of Rebecca (Rivka), the future wife of Isaac.

Do you want to know the reward for listening to the command of the Almighty? This is what the Almighty told Abraham: “[...] I shall surely bless you and greatly increase your descendants like the stars of the heavens and like the sand on the seashore; and your offspring shall inherit the gate of its enemy. And all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your offspring, because you have listened to My voice.”

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 4:04 Miami 5:13 Cape Town 7:10 Guatemala 5:12 Hong Kong 5:22 Honolulu 5:31

Jo'Burg 6:16 LA 4:30 London 3:55 Melbourne 7:52 Mexico 5:39 Moscow 4:04 New York 4:19 Singapore 6:32 Toronto 4:33

“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”: Do not cry because they are past – smile, because they once were! – Ludwig

Jacobowski

Dedication with Deep Appreciation to
David Suarez



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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