Rosh Hashanah Reader

Torah Readings and Psalm 81

with Laws and Commentaries

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Dedicated in Memory of

Joe Chira ע"ה

Who was one of the individuals

who influenced us with the idea

and inspiration to publish our

holiday reader series, publications

that will provide insights into

important aspects of Judaism.

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Halakhot of Rosh Hashanah

I. Selihot

Beginning the day after Rosh Hodesh Elul (the month before Rosh Hashanah), and concluding the day before Yom Kippur, selihot are recited early each weekday morning before *shahrit*. These are special prayers designed to facilitate teshubah (repentance). It is inappropriate to arrive at the annual Day of Judgment, as the first day of the new year is called, without having prepared beforehand.

II. General Laws and Customs

Since Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the year (and commemorates G-d's creation of the world), it also is the Day of Judgment of humans. One's thoughts should focus on the Creator, acknowledging His kingship and His desire that we strive to improve ourselves spiritually and endeavor to make the world a better place for all in accordance with His will. We must be serious about these matters and not engage in lightheaded behavior. It is necessary to dress modestly.

Although it is the Day of Judgment, we are to express our confidence that the Almighty will accept our prayers and repentance and inscribe us for a year of life. Thus, it is prohibited to fast on Rosh Hashanah and the mitzvah of *simhat yom tob* (happiness of the holiday) applies just as on the three festivals; there should be a festive meal both at night and in the day.

During the evening meal, after *qiddush* and *hamosi*, we eat special foods with an appropriate prayer for each that through their names or nature prompt optimistic thoughts

for the new year. Some communities have this custom only the first night, some both nights. It is customary to dip the *hamosi* in sugar (some use honey) instead of salt and not eat "sour" dishes throughout Rosh Hashanah.

The berakha of *sheheheyanu* is recited in *qiddush* both nights just as on both first nights of all yamim tobim. However, Shulhan Arukh states it is preferable to have a "new" fruit on the table the second night and direct the *sheheheyanu* toward it also. The reason is that there is a group of *posqim* who consider the two days of Rosh Hashanah as one long day halakhically and according to them *sheheheyanu* should not be recited the second night for the day itself. Having a new fruit removes any doubt concerning the *sheheheyanu*. (Reciting an unnecessary berakha is a violation of our responsibility to respect G-d's name.) In this particular case, however, in the final analysis, if one did not have a new fruit or another new item toward which the *sheheheyanu* could be directed, it is recited anyway, for it is not a true doubt.

In some respects, the two days of Rosh Hashanah <u>are</u> considered as a single halakhic day. Thus, the halakha that permits the use of medicines when there is no danger to life on the second day of yamim tobim does not apply to the second day of Rosh Hashanah. Even in Israel, Rosh Hashanah is celebrated two days, unlike other yamim tobim.

It is preferable not to sleep during the day of Rosh Hashanah, but rather to study Torah. If one finds himself in a situation where he cannot concentrate on studying Torah and is idling away his time in gossip, etc., it is preferable to sleep.

III. Prayers

It is traditional to sing the poetic works of great rabbis on the exalted themes of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with melodies special for the occasion. Rosh Hashanah is ushered in with the singing of *Ahot Qetana*.

The amida of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur emphasizes the kingship of the Almighty and includes additions reflecting the vision of a world in harmony and peace fulfilling His will.

It is customary to have assistants to the right and left of the hazzan during the prayers of these special days.

Additions to Prayers: Hashem Hu Ha'elokim is recited before Hashem Melekh, Shir Hama`alot Mima`amakim after Yishtabah, Abinu Malkenu after the amida of *shahrit* and minha. Hamelekh Haqadosh is said in place of Hakel Haqadosh in the amida. Several additional insertions are made in the amida as found in all mahzorim.

Torah and Haftarah Readings: On the first day the Torah reading begins with Hashem's 'remembering' Sarah (with childbirth). A portion about Rosh Hashanah is read from a second Sefer Torah. The haftarah is about Hashem's 'remembering' Hannah. The second day Torah reading is about G-d's test of Abraham with Aqedat Yishaq. The portion read from the second Sefer Torah is the same as the first day. The haftarah, from the prophet Jeremiah, is about Hashem's remembering, and love for, Israel.

Musaf: The musaf prayer of Rosh Hashanah includes three special sections reflecting the essence of the day. Each section comprises ten verses from Tanakh and concludes with a berakha. The first section focuses on G-d's kingship

מלכויות; the second on His remembrances for judgment זכרונות; the third on the significance of the shofar שופרות.

Tashlikh: In the afternoon of the first day the custom is to recite '*Tashlikh*', a symbolic 'casting away of sins'. It is preferable to recite it by the banks of a body of water but if a natural body of water is not available, it is acceptable to fill a pool. One who did not recite this prayer on Rosh Hashanah should do so during Asseret Yeme Teshubah.

IV. Shofar

It is a Torah commandment to hear the shofar blasts on the day of Rosh Hashanah. The shofar is associated with the coronation of a king and helps us focus on the importance of recognizing and accepting Hashem as our king. In addition, in the Books of the Prophets the shofar is associated with the signal of the city watchman who warns that the enemy is arriving. On the Day of Judgment the Shofar is the alarm that we are faced with an emergency; it awakens us from our slumber and calls us to repent. The shofar also recalls the ram substituted for the sacrifice of Yishaq. It is also associated with the Giving of the Torah and the Ingathering of the Exiles.

Women are not obligated to hear the shofar as it is a positive mitzvah governed by time. Nevertheless, they fulfill a mitzvah if they hear it.

Children who have reached the age of understanding should be brought to synagogue to hear the shofar but only if they do not disturb others.

The *toke`ah* (shofar blower) should stand. For the first series of blasts the congregation remains seated.

The *toke`ah* must have intentions that his blowing is for the mitzvah and that others may fulfill their obligation through hearing his blowing. The listener must also have intent to fulfill his obligation.

Two berakhot are recited before blowing the shofar the first time: *Lishmo`ah Qol Shofar* and *Sheheheyanu*. One who has fulfilled his obligation of shofar earlier in the day and is blowing only for others may still recite the berakhot.

The complete mitzvah comprises one hundred individual blasts. They are blown in eight series. The first series, before musaf, comprises thirty blasts. The other seven series comprise ten blasts each: three series in the quiet amida, three in the hazara and one in the *qaddish* after the amida. It is customary to blow a 101st blast, a *teru`ah gedola*, before Alenu.

When Rosh Hashanah occurs on Shabbat the shofar is not blown and it is *muqseh*. Although from Torah law the shofar should be blown even on Shabbat, the rabbis prohibited it, fearing it might lead to carrying on Shabbat.

V. Asseret Yeme Teshubah

The ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur are singularly designated and dedicated to Teshubah. Although Teshubah is accepted any time, it is accepted even more readily during these days.

For the above reason it has been traditional that Jewish people give more charity and do more good deeds during these days. It is the time when they express their religious identity.

Shulhan Arukh states that it is proper for those accustomed to eating bread baked by non-Jews all year long (known to be kosher, an item that is permitted to eat) to refrain from doing so these days. It is an example of a stringency accepted for these days.

Prayers: During Asseret Yeme Teshubah a person should pray more carefully than usual. Six insertions and substitutions are made in the amida as found in all siddurim.

VI. Teshubah - Repentance

Aspects of complete Teshubah:

1. Viduy - recognition of the sin and confession to Hashem. When done silently it is proper to specify the particular transgression.
2. Abandoning the sinful practice
3. Feeling of regret for having done the sin
4. Resolution for the future

In making a resolution for the future, it is proper, often necessary, to devise a strategy to cope with temptation. It is appropriate to build a 'fence' around the transgression, that will prevent one from crossing the line, each person as fits his/her situation.

Just as one must repent of sins involving actions, so must one repent of any evil dispositions that he may have, such as an angry temper, hatred, jealousy, greedy pursuit of money and honor, gluttony, etc.

Sins against one's fellow man are not forgiven by the Al-mighty until the sinner has received forgiveness from the injured party and repents.

Hatarat Nedarim (Annulment of Vows): As the sin of broken vows is very serious, it is customary to make Hatarat Nedarim before Rosh Hashanah, to clean the slate as much as possible. We also declare our intention not to vow in the future. Hatarat Nedarim is not a prayer but a declaration to the Bet Din requesting annulment of the vow, which is possible if the individual requesting is deeply regretful for having made the vow. If one did not make a vow Hatarat Nedarim is inapplicable.

On Repentance: The Power of Confession

The following are selected excerpts from the chapter "The Power of Confession" from "On Repentance" by Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik a"h.

"FOR THERE WAS HIS HOME"

What is the meaning of the word "*t'shuvah*"? What is the exact etymological significance of the term? In the Bible, the word bears a specific connotation: "at the return of the year" (II Samuel 2:1; I Kings 20:22, I Chronicles 20:1 and elsewhere), that is at the termination of the year's cycle. The word also appears in the following context (I Samuel 7:15-17): "And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went from year to year in circuit to Beth-el and Gilgal and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all those places. *And his return (u-t'shuvato) was to Ramah for there was his home* and there he judged Israel; and he built there an altar unto the Lord." Here too, the word "*t'shuvah"* bears the connotation of completing a circle; after Samuel would make a circuit throughout Israel he would return home to Ramah, for there was his home.

"T'shuvah," repentance, signifies circular motion. When one finds oneself on the circumference of a large circle, it sometimes seems that the starting point is becoming farther and farther removed, but actually it is getting closer and closer. "At the return of the year," on Rosh Hashanah, a new calendar year begins, and with every passing day one gets farther and farther away from the starting point, the New Year. But every passing day is also a return, a drawing near to the completion of the year's cycle, the Rosh Hashanah of the next year. "And his return was to

Ramah." Samuel went in circuit. The moment he left Ramah, for it was there that he made his home; there, in Ramatayim Zofim, lived his mother Hannah; there he had spent his childhood; there were his roots. Samuel was a leader and a judge of all Israel; he made a circuit of all Israel's scattered living places, but everywhere he went, he was heading for home. He belonged to all of Israel; for the land of Israel was his home, but his true home was only in one place, in Ramah, as it is written, "for there was his home." Only there could he construct the altar of his life to God. "And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life." Samuel served as leader and judge in many different places, but the force of his leadership and judgment stemmed from Ramah, from his home: "*there* he judged Israel." No matter how great a man he may be, he cannot leave his ancestral home. All of his judgments are derived from there.

This is the secret source of *t'shuvah*, repentance. An individual Jew cannot sever himself completely from the Holy One. The community of Israel cannot travel on a straight path away from God. It is always on the path to return and repentance—of going away from God and coming back to Him. "In your distress when all these things are come upon you… you will return to the Lord your God." The circle may be very large, it may have an immense radius, but those who follow its path always move in a circular direction. The community of Israel simply cannot escape from this circular route. God who is there after man sins bars them from doing so.

Man may wander about in circles and become entangled in all sorts of vain causes and pursue empty ideas. He may believe that he has found the true goal in his life's fight for socialism, for "civil rights," for communism, or any of the other "isms." He makes a circuit of Beth-el, Gilgal and Mizpah, he searches for gods, overturns worlds, and it may

appear to him that he can see ahead and is heralding a new and better future—but always and ever, "his return is to Ramah, for there is his home." God who is there after man sins gives him no peace. Soon his world will be overturned upon him, he will be banished from Beth-el, from Gilgal and Mizpah, and people will cry out after him: Dirty Jew! Traitor! Exploiter! Cosmopolitan! Then, willingly or not, he will return to Ramah, to his home, where his mother Hannah welcomed him with her longing and supplication, where he lay in his cradle and absorbed the affectionate dulcet melodies sung to him by him mother.

"And his return was to Ramah"—traveling a circuit, he had to find his way back to his starting point coming from afar he made his way back home.

CONFESSION, SACRIFICE, REMORSE AND SHAME

"What is repentance?" asks Maimonides in Chapter 2, Section 2 of the Laws of Repentance. And he answers: "It consists of this: that the sinner abandon his sin, remove it from his thoughts and resolve in his heart never to repeat it again… that he call Him who knows all hidden things to witness that he will never return to this sin again … And he must confess in words, with his lips, and give voice to these matters which he has resolved in his heart." In this chapter, Maimonides speaks of a process of remorse *(haratah)*, while in Chapter 1 he speaks of an additional element—shame: "How does one confess... I repent and am ashamed of my deeds and I will never do this again." These two elements—remorse and shame—give us the right perspective of the value of confession. For at first glance, confession would seem to be superfluous, if man is truly penitent and has undergone the long and tortuous process

of return. Yet, Maimonides ruled that even after man has truly repented spiritually, and even after he has brought a sacrifice of atonement, and even after he has died—his repentance remains incomplete if confession has not taken place.

Why is this so? It seems that there are two reasons why the Torah obligated the penitent to make confession. Feelings, emotions, thoughts and ideas become clear, and are grasped only after they are expressed in sentences bearing a logical and grammatical structure. As long as one's thoughts remain repressed, as long as one has not brought them out into the open, no matter how sublime or exalted they may be, they are not truly yours; they are foreign and elusive. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly weak—who can know it" (Jeremiah 17:9). Jeremiah did not mean that one cannot know what is in the heart of others and others cannot know what is in your heart, but that man does not know for sure what is in his own heart until his feelings and thoughts become crystallized and are given shape and form in the usual modes of expression. Repentance contemplated, and not verbalized, is valueless. In Chapter 2, Maimonides states that the sinner must "Confess in words *with his lips*, and give voice to those matters which he has resolved in his heart." And in the *Neilah* service, at the conclusion of the Day of Atonement, we say, "Thou extendest a hand to sinners… and hast taught us to confess all our iniquities before Thee." Confession completes the process of repentance. "So that we may desist from the violence of our hands"- and then: "Accept us [as we stand] fully repentant before Thee."

But confession has still another dimension, and not only as the ultimate act in the process of repentance. It also goes above and beyond repentance itself—for confession is the

act that brings man acquittal. In the Temple service, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would "make acquittal for himself and his household" (Leviticus 16:6). With regard to this, the Talmudic Sages asked: "Was this acquittal in words or acquittal in blood (by means of sacrifice)? Scripture says. 'And Aaron shall present the bullock of the sin-offering which is for himself and make acquittal …' [when he made acquittal] the bullock had not yet been sacrificed." The High Priest confessed for the sins of all Israel and his confession atoned for all their sins. Could he, then, do repentance for all of Israel? It seems to me that this confession of the High Priest was transformed, so to say, into sacrifice. Confession, which is not merely a perfunctory verbalization of a set formula, but is bound up with tribulations of the soul and pangs of conscience—shall be deemed a sacrifice.

There are many things a man knows and thinks about which he does not dare bring to his lips. Man is stubborn by nature and builds fences within himself, sometimes refusing to acknowledge facts and denying harsh reality. We instinctively reject facts that are unfavorable and unpleasant to us. The Talmud records that after Rabbi Judah Hanassi died, his disciples declared: "whosoever says that "Rabbi" ["Our Master"= Rabbi Judah] is dead, shall be pierced with a sword!" (Babylonian Talmud, Ktubot 104a). They knew that Rabbi Judah Hanassi was dead, but it was difficult for them to believe that anyone could actually give expression in words to the bitter fact that their master, symbol of life and the leadership of Torah and personal greatness, could actually be dead. To know, is one thing; but to confirm it through verbal expression was something else. They refused to listen to the bitter truth. God instilled in man a mechanism of self-defense which enables him to ignore facts, to flee from reality, to deny its existence and to avoid seeing things as they are.

A man may know, without a shadow of a doubt, that he has sinned and is diverted from his life's goal, having betrayed all his values. He even knows why—but is not ready to say so openly or to hear it from others. "Whosoever says… shall be pierced with a sword." He lied awake at night and thinks about it; his soul cries out in the darkness; but in the light of day, in the eyes of others, he seems happy and content. In order to hide the truth that is eating away inside of him, he continues to sin, picks up speed and rushes madly towards the brink of the abyss.

There is another idea that emerges from a careful reading of Maimonides' choice of words: "How does one confess? One says 'I beseech Thee, O Lord, I have sinned, I have acted perversely, I have transgressed before Thee, and have done thus and thus…" This formula is appropriate for the confession of the High Priest who confesses on behalf of all Israel and who therefore makes reference to both willful and unwillful sins and all types of transgressions. But when the individual comes to confess his sin, or specific sins, and itemizes them and says, "I have done thus and thus"—why should he also make a general declaration that he has "sinned, acted perversely and transgressed?" However, the principle that is operative here is the principle of "dissolving oaths"—when a man is required to take an oath for a specific purpose, the court uses the opportunity to devolve upon him other oaths as well. Here, too, even when man comes to confess specific sins, he must also say: "I have sinned, I have acted perversely, I have transgressed." These three phases refer to the three basic classes of sin, and when man comes to confess he must confess to all of them. For does man really know when he has sinned, whether intentionally or unwillfully? When a man confesses, he turns to God and says: "Master of the universe, I do not know the difference between "sin", "transgression", or "iniquity". I do know that I have gone

far away from You… how I came to be what I am, I know not. There were times that I thought I acted thoughtlessly—but in truth what I did was willful and intentional…" Take, for example, the case of a man who came and told me that he wanted to send his daughter to a prestigious college frequented by the children of the wealthy. She would board in the college dormitory he told me. I warned him of the risk that he would be taking, but he was "sure" that his daughter would not go astray. It was difficult for him to withstand the temptation of having his daughter attend such a prestigious institution, of which only the select few were found to be worthy. A year later he came back—in tears—to tell me that his daughter was about to marry a gentile whom she had met at the college. Was his initial act of sending her to the college an unwitting sin or was it willful? Had he known that this would be the outcome, he swore to me, he would have done all in his power to stop her from attending that college. What he did was a mistake, but was it really an unwitting mistake?

This is only one example of the many situations we face in life when we have to make crucial decisions. Do we really know when we err unwittingly and when willfully? Master of the Universe, we do not know. Only You know. That is why we also say "I have sinned, I have acted perversely, I have transgressed—You determine to which of these categories my sin belongs. It is like what the simple Jew did in the well-known Hassidic story; he called out the letters of the alphabet before God, and said: O Master of the Universe, take You these letters and join letter to letter to create acceptable prayers!" Confession compels man—in a state of terrible torment—to admit facts as they really are, to give clear expression to the truth. This, indeed, is a sacrifice, a breaking of the will; a tortuous negation of human nature. Both remorse and shame are involved in this process. "And teach us, O Lord, our God, *to confess before*

Thee all of our sins"—to look inward at the truth, to look ourselves straight in the eye, to overcome our mechanism of self-defense, to smash asunder the artificial barriers, to go against our natural inclination to run and hide, to tear down the screen, to put into words what our hearts have already determined—"so that we may desist from the violence of our hands." And then! "Accept us [as we come before thee] in full repentance, as burnt offerings and sweet-smelling incense."

Just as the sacrifice is burnt upon the altar so do we burn down, by our act of confession, our well-barricaded complacency, our overblown pride, our artificial existence. Then and only then: "Be you cleansed before the Lord." "Happy are you, Israel! Who is it before whom you become clean? And who is it that makes you clean? Your Father who is in heaven." Only then, after the purifying catharsis of confession, does one return, in circular motion, to God who is there before man sins, to our Father who is in heaven, who cleanses us whenever we approach Him for purification.

God will Provide the Lamb

by Nehama Leibowitz a”h

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The Miracle of a Child

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

There is a mystery at the heart of Jewish existence, engraved into the first syllables of our recorded time. The first words of G-d to Abraham were: "Go out from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house… And I will make you a great nation…"

In the next chapter there is another promise: "I will make your children like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust of the earth, so shall your offspring be counted."

Two chapters later comes a third: "G-d took him outside and said, 'Look at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them.' Then He said to him, 'So shall your children be.'"

Finally, the fourth: "Your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations."

Four escalating promises: Abraham would be the father of a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky. He would be the father not of one nation but of many.

What, though, was the reality? Early in the story, we read that Abraham was "very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold." He had everything except one thing - a child. Then G-d appeared to Abraham and said, "Your reward will be very great."

Until now, Abraham has been silent. Now, something within him breaks, and he asks: "O Lord G-d, what will you give me if I remain childless?" The first recorded

words of Abraham to G-d are a plea for there to be future generations. The first Jew feared he would be the last.

Then a child is born. Sarah gives Abraham her handmaid Hagar, hoping that she will give him a child. She gives birth to a son whose name is Ishmael, meaning "G-d has heard." Abraham's prayer has been answered, or so we think. But in the next chapter, that hope is destroyed. Yes, says G-d, Ishmael will be blessed. He will be the father of twelve princes and a great nation. But he is not the child of Jewish destiny, and one day Abraham will have to part from him.

This pains Abraham deeply. He pleads: "If only Ishmael might live under Your blessing." Later, when Sarah drives Ishmael away, we read that "This distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son." Nonetheless, the decree remains.

G-d insists that Abraham will have a son by Sarah. Both laugh. How can it be? They are old. Sarah is post-menopausal. Yet against possibility, the son is born. His name is Isaac, meaning "laughter".

Sarah said, "G-d has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Finally, the story seems to have a happy ending. After all the promises and prayers, Abraham and Sarah at last have a child. Then come the words, which, in all the intervening centuries, have not lost their power to shock.

After these things, G-d tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then G-d said, "Take

your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you."

Abraham takes his son, travels for three days, climbs the mountain, prepares the wood, ties his son, takes the knife and raises his hand. Then a voice is heard from heaven: "Do not lay a hand on the boy." The trial is over. Isaac lives.

Why all the promises and disappointments? Why the hope so often raised, so often unfulfilled? Why delay? Why Ishmael? Why the binding? Why put Abraham and Sarah through the agony of thinking that the son for whom they have waited for so long is about to die?

There are many answers in our tradition, but one transcends all others. We cherish what we wait for and what we most risk losing. Life is full of wonders. The birth of a child is a miracle. Yet, precisely because these things are natural, we take them for granted, forgetting that nature has an architect, a history, an author.

Judaism is a sustained discipline in not taking life for granted. We were the people born in slavery so that we would value freedom. We were the nation always small, so that we would know that strength does not lie in numbers but in the faith that begets courage. Our ancestors walked through the valley of the shadow of death, so that we could never forget the sanctity of life.

Throughout history, Jews were called on to value children. Our entire value system is built on it. Our citadels are schools, our passion, education, and our greatest heroes, teachers. The seder service on Pesach can only begin with questions asked by a child. On the first day of the New

Year, we read not about the creation of the universe but about the birth of a child - Isaac to Sarah, Samuel to Hannah. Ours is a supremely child-centered faith.

That is why, at the dawn of Jewish time, G-d put Abraham and Sarah through these trials - the long wait, the unmet hope, the binding itself - so that neither they nor their descendants would ever take children for granted. Every child is a miracle. Being a parent is the closest we get to G-d - bringing life into being through an act of love.

Today, when too many children live in poverty and illiteracy, dying for lack of medical attention because those who rule nations prefer weapons to welfare, hostage-taking to hospital-building, fighting the battles of the past rather than shaping a safe future, it is a lesson the world has not yet learned. For the sake of humanity it must, for the tragedy is vast and the hour is late.

Shabbat Shoobah

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Rosh Hashanah ushers in a ten day period known as the Days of Repentance. The major question we must ask ourselves is precisely how to repent. Many of us are aware of our weaknesses and character flaws. Is there a specific methodology; is there a deeper understanding of self, which can help us in the very human but very crucial task of self correction and self improvement?

Rosh Hashanah is also called, "the day of the *Teru'ah*", the word *Teru'ah* relating to the sounds of the Shofar. Perhaps a deeper understanding of the particular commandment of this festival, the commandment of sounding the Shofar, will shed important light on the road to repentance.

Perhaps the very first question, which presents itself concerning the shofar, is one very unique aspect to this particular commandment. Usually, our commandments demand an active performance on the part of the individual. We are enjoined to eat the matzah and to read the megillah. Strangely enough, we are not commanded to blow the shofar; we are rather commanded - and so the very words of the blessing express – "to hear the shofar, to listen to its sound." Why is this particular commandment expressed in passive rather than active terms?

My revered teacher, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his work entitled "Days of Remembrance", makes reference to what appears to be a rather obscure Talmudic discussion, but which in reality will help us immeasurably to understand the shofar and its meaning. The sages of the Talmud (BT Rosh Hashanah 29A) teach, "Everyone is obligated in the blowing of the shofar including Priests,

Levites and Israelites, proselytes and freed slaves…But one who is half slave and half free cannot perform the commandment for others, even for those who like him are half slave and half free. Rav Nahman insists that he cannot even blow the shofar for himself." Interestingly enough, Maimonides and all of the decisors I am familiar with agree with Rav Nahman's position – despite the fact that in the case of the reading of the megillah one who is half slave and half free is considered fit to read the megillah for himself. Why should the shofar be different from the megillah, both with respect to its blessing as well as with respect to the ability of one half slave and half free to perform the commandment for himself?

The answer can be found in a fascinating statement by Maimonides in which the great 12th century philosopher-legalist presents the significance of the sounding of the shofar: "Even though the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is commanded by the biblical text, this particular act expresses an important symbol, which is 'Awake, you sleepers from your sleep and you slumberers from your slumber'". Maimonides is saying that the shofar is an alarm clock; it is a town crier, a rabbinical chastiser. But when the individual blows for himself, which in ordinary circumstances he is certainly able to do, whom is he awakening? If there is no one else in the room with him, for whom is he blowing?

I would argue that the individual is blowing for himself; he is attempting to arouse an aspect of his very own personality that is part and parcel of every one of us. The bible teaches, "and the Lord said 'let us make the human being in our image and after our likeness'" The question plaguing all of the commentaries is, who is the "us" in that verse? To whom is G-d speaking? The Ramban gives what I believe is that best interpretation. After all, he says, the

Almighty has just created on this 6th day the animals and beasts. G-d is speaking to those very brute creatures, who are limited in time and strength and who require nutrition, rest, sexual reproduction and excretion of waste. “Let us make the human being in our joint image”, says G-d to these beasts. The human being will have 2 aspects, the animal as well as the divine. On the one hand the human being will be limited, unable to rise above himself, unable to change or perfect himself; on the other hand, he will contain a spark of the divine which will give him precisely that ability to sanctify and ennoble the physical aspects of his being and – in effect – to recreate himself as a partner of the Divine.

Sin emanates from the animal aspect of the human personality unrefined and undeveloped by the divine soul. If the human being is passive and left to his own resources, he will be guided by instinct alone and will of necessity fall prey to all of his weaker desires. Only if the human being activates his divine soul and works on repairing himself and the world around him will he succeed in expressing that unique divine image which makes him different from all other creations. Then he will succeed in the ultimate vision of Rosh Hashanah, “perfecting the world in the Kingship of the Divine”.

The commandment of the shofar is that we listen to the shofar, that our passive animal personality become activated and aroused by our creative image of G-d. The divine soul within each of us must serve as an alarm clock to the more animalistic drives which propel us if we are indeed to repent. Hence the blessing is directed towards the animal part of the human being which must listen; and only if this aspect is aroused does repentance become possible.

Hence an individual who is half free and half slave may be able to read the megillah for himself; after all, only his free half is obligated to read and hear the megillah anyway. With the shofar however it is a very different story. Unless the human being succeeds in freeing his animal self, who is enslaved to instinct, does he stand a chance of repentance. An individual who remains half free and half slave cannot even blow the shofar for himself.

A story for children, which is really a metaphor for adults, is the Lion King, which truly expresses the message I have just set down. Simba is a young lion prince who feels guilty for not having more actively saved his father from death. His uncle Skar is perfectly satisfied to watch Simba sink into passive despair, accepting the bad influences of a pig and a worm and entering into a state of 'koonematata' or apathetic inactivity. The female lioness Nala and the elder monkey-sage teach him that every individual has a destiny given by the Divine. Everyone must confront his feelings of guilt, find the road to the recreation of oneself and the development of one's destiny; only then can Simba emerge as the leader he is supposed to be. This is the message of the shofar and this is the message of repentance.

Testing Abraham: The `Aqeda

Rabbi Moshe Shamah

1. Backdrop

Abraham had strongly disagreed with Sarah's request to "send away this maid and her son," that is Yishma`el, Abraham's son by Hagar, "because the son of this maid should not inherit with my son, with Yisḥaq" (Gen. 21:10). Indeed, "the matter was exceedingly bad in Abraham's view," but G-d intervened, instructing him to comply with Sarah's request, "for through Yisḥaq shall seed be called to you" (v. 12). Undoubtedly with great pain, Abraham disinherits and sends away Yishma`el for the benefit of Yisḥaq. Though the text does not comment on it, the reader is aware that Abraham has withstood a great test. Subsequently, G-d tests him with the ultimate test, "take your son, your singular one, whom you love, Yisḥaq, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering" (22:2).

These two narratives concerning Abraham's sons are separated by one passage, introduced with "At that time" (21:22), a phrase that reflects the relevancy of the passage to its specific location in the text. The local king Abimelech, in the presence of his chief of the military, expresses to Abraham his concern for the welfare of his children and descendants, and for the future of the inhabitants of the region. He acknowledges that Abraham has been successful and has become an important factor in the region. Accordingly, he requests that Abraham take an oath that he, of course standing for his progeny, would deal kindly with the future generations of Abimelech and of the local populace. How ironic that right after disinheriting Yishma`el and just before G-d commands him to sacrifice Yisḥaq, Abraham is finally told that he and his children

were accepted as a permanent presence in the land and that the king desires assurance from him concerning the treatment his children will give them.

The text does not specify Yisḥaq's age at the `aqeda. Ibn Ezra compellingly argues that the Midrash that states he was then thirty-seven years of age cannot be peshat. Had Yisḥaq been an adult his own perspective would have had to be taken into account; the text would have noted his submission to G-d's command and he would have been directly included in the statements of prominent recognition and reward. Ibn Ezra also rejects the opinion that Yisḥaq was about five years of age for he then would not have been able to carry the firewood. He presumes he was a pre-teen. However, the previous considerations would also apply to a pre-teen. From the tenor of the narrative, especially as Yisḥaq did not ask about the lack of a sheep for the burnt-offering until the third day when alone with his father, he surely does not appear to be much more than five or six years of age.

The test is transmitted with the words קַח-נָא אֶת-בִּנְךָ, which may be translated, "take, please, your son," leading some commentators, trying to soften the harshness of G-d's order, to assume that it is not a standard command but an expression of G-d's desire, a preference He has. Some understand Rashi (based on BT San. 89b) in this manner. "Should he refuse, he would not incur any guilt" (Sarna, JPS Commentary, p. 151). Passing the test, presumably, is that much greater. However, it is not at all clear that even with such an understanding G-d's preference and request is not a command, since it nonetheless expresses G-d's desire, and that is what counts. Non-compliance would still stigmatize the individual as not possessing the highest level commitment.

In any event, the particle "*na*" is probably employed as a matter of courteous speech, suitable even when giving a command; it does not necessarily indicate an optional dimension. Indeed, the more difficult the demand one is making of another, especially when addressing a "friend," the more a gentle expression is appropriate; it informs the recipient that the order does not stem from personal ill-feeling. In addition, "*na*" is also used in other senses, taking the meaning of "now," or to call attention to the importance of what is being stated, such as when Moshe said to the people, "*shim`u na hamorim*" - "listen *now* you rebels" (Num. 20:10). Thus, it does not appear to complicate the dilemma presented to Abraham with the concept of an optional choice and open the issue of evaluation of his decision.

2. Formulation

The order to sacrifice Yiṣḥaq is formulated with use of the phrase "לֶךְ לְךָ" ("go you forth"), recalling G-d's opening instructions to Abraham that began with that phrase (Gen. 12:1). These are the only two "לֶךְ לְךָ" attestations in Tanakh. The linkage between the two is extensive with many artistic devices, including correspondences of both chiasmus and parallels.

In both cases "*lekh lekha*" is attached to a cluster of terms that progressively point to the magnitude of the challenge: "go you forth from your land, your kinfolk and your father's home" in the first case and "take your son, your singular one, that you love, Yiṣḥaq, and go you forth" in our case. In the first statement, the phrase "go you forth" precedes the multiple terms of progression, while in the later one the "go you forth" follows the multiple terms. In both cases with the "*lekh lekha,*" G-d directed Abraham to an unknown destination, either that He "will show him" (with the first *lekh lekha*) or that "He will tell him" (with

our *lekh lekha*). The concluding blessings in our passage reflect the blessings associated with the other *lekh lekha*.

The first "*lekh lekha*" passage follows the genealogy that traced Abraham's forbears while the second "*lekh lekha*" passage precedes that genealogy's continuation, tracing the progeny of Abraham's brother Naḥor. The latter, most significantly, culminates with the birth of Ribqah, who was destined for Yisḥaq, thereby preparing the transition to the second generation. With the first test Abraham was to sever himself from his past to build a glorious future while the last test required that he do away with any hope for that future.

Thus, an envelope is formed around the life saga of Abraham. After passing the climactic `aqeda test there are only concluding narratives: the death and burial of Sarah, finding a wife for Yisḥaq and brief statements summarizing details of Abraham's later life. Significantly, no further Divine communication to him is recorded.

3. Concerning the Test

In the passage's first verse, before the command is articulated, the reader is informed that what follows is a test; there is to be no misunderstanding even for an instant that the Deity may possibly have truly desired a human sacrifice.

The classical commentators have questioned the concept of G-d testing man; does He not know man's inner thoughts, making a test unnecessary? In our case some have suggested that the test was intended to provide proof to others of the extent of Abraham's commitment to G-d's command or to reveal to Abraham himself the depth of his faith.

The more straightforward explanation, however, appears to be connected to the principle that G-d granted man free will. To sustain that principle while acknowledging G-d's prescience many have posited an accompanying corollary. In His creation of man, G-d chose to limit His foreknowledge in areas governed by that free will and discover how man acts only when he actually exercises his choice. So although Abraham led an exemplary life up to the time of the test, G-d did not know how he would act in the most extreme of cases such as the `aqeda represents. As Satan said to G-d in the allegory at the beginning of the Book of Job regarding that exemplary individual whom G-d considered "My servant…blameless and upright.…": "Is it for no reason that Job fears G-d? Do You not protect him, his household and all that he has all about; the work of his hands You have blessed and his possessions have increased in the land!" (Job:1:9-11).

Not knowing that he was being tested, what could have been going through Abraham's mind? Beyond feelings stemming from his personal love for his son, the considerations of justice for an innocent child who did not deserve to die, who would have to submit to the cruel fate of being slaughtered at the hands of his father at the request of G-d, renders the situation impossible to comprehend. The single son from Sarah, for whom Abraham had faithfully waited so long, whose birth was miraculous and regarding whom G-d promised that he would carry on the Covenant and transmit it to his progeny, who was to be the vehicle to bring the repeated Divine assurances of blessing to the new nation and to the world, should now be turned into ashes? G-d cannot be reneging on His commitments!

But all such thoughts and questions had to be suppressed, for Abraham knew, absolutely knew without a doubt, that G-d was asking for the sacrifice of his son. To make the

test valid we must posit that G-d had made it absolutely clear to Abraham that He wanted Yisḥaq sacrificed.

The site of the sacrifice required a three-day trip. In this way Abraham had the opportunity to thoroughly review and mull over his situation and cannot be thought to be reacting without due consideration.

Is it possible that Abraham had an inkling that somehow, though without any idea how, after all, things might turn out all right, silently hoping, because he knows he is fulfilling the Deity's will and the Deity is compassionate and just? Abraham's instructions to the servants to remain with the donkey while he and the lad will worship, "and we will return to you," gives us some slight indication of this. Likewise, his answer to Yisḥaq's poignant question, "father…where is the sheep for the `olah?" with "G-d will see for Himself the sheep for the `olah, my son." Perhaps even his deportment, steadily moving forward without the slightest hesitation, suggest this. But it can be no more than an inkling, connected to recognition of the human incapacity to fathom G-d's ways.

Consistent with Biblical style, details of the agony of father and son, Abraham's inner thoughts as well as considerations of Sarah and her reaction, are all left to the reader's imagination. Through artistic use of such and many other literary devices this narrative is considered a leading instance of exquisitely portraying a man of faith remaining resolute in his commitment to G-d in the face of the most wrenching temptation to deviate.

When Abraham passed this test, G-d strengthens and expands His previous promises of blessing to him, for his progeny as well as to all the nations. For the first time, G-d explicitly made an oath to give him the blessings.

(Although the previous covenantal commitments implied an oath, an explicit declaration to that effect surely adds a dimension to it.) The blessing of progeny is made more comprehensive by formulating it for the first time with comparison to both the stars of heaven and the sand by the seashore. Abraham is now told that his progeny will possess the gates of its enemies, thus sharpening the focus of previous generalities. The foundation of the blessings is now broadened; whereas previously it was conceived as resulting only from the standpoint of a Divine purpose, now it was expressly linked to Abraham's having obeyed G-d's voice עֵקֶב אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקֹלִי (Gen. 22:17-18). The cluster of G-d's intensified blessings serves to increase His involvement in fulfillment of the vision than otherwise would have been, helping Abraham and his progeny overcome unpredictable happenings.

4. A Question

Why did Abraham not beg G-d to spare his son as he did on behalf of the people of Sodom when he heard of the impending decree upon them? (Gen. 18:23-32). Why did he not argue as he did then that, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?"

First, it must be stated that it is unacceptable to interpret the passage as implying that G-d considered Abraham's response to sacrifice his son as less than ideal, that the test was to see if Abraham would protest and resist. Clearly, the test was to see if he would be obedient and proceed. G-d's praise of Abraham upon stopping him at the last moment emphasizes that point and the immediately following expansion of the promises to him are consistent only with such a basic understanding.

Some assume that Abraham did pray that G-d should reconsider His command, but was rejected; it was not

mentioned in the text because it was something that should be taken for granted. When Moshe reveals that he had prayed to be allowed to enter the Promised Land, he quotes G-d having told him, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again!" (Deut. 3:23-26, NJPS). Evidently, he had previously been praying for rescission of the decree and was refused although the text had not mentioned it. Had he not seen fit to inform Israel of this matter shortly before his death for whatever reason he did it would not have been mentioned in the Torah!

However, the cases are different. The decree concerning Moshe was punishment for his sin, a matter he acknowledged and could resign himself to. Had Abraham prayed for G-d to spare Yiṣḥaq, an innocent child, and been rejected, it would have been a relevant detail that the narrative would reveal.

In Judaic Seminar (2:2), Alexander Pruss addresses our question and presents two possible answers.

1) Through his interaction with G-d in the Sodom case, "Abraham has come to a fuller understanding of divine justice. He now knows that G-d's punitive action is precise: it does not sweep the innocent with the wicked. He understands and believes more fully that G-d is just." G-d had never intended to kill the righteous with the wicked, it was only Abraham's lack of knowledge of G-d's justice that prompted him to intercede. When subsequently G-d asks him to sacrifice Yiṣḥaq he does not intercede, since he "by then knows that G-d's will is not contrary to justice..., he can trust that the command is good even if it does not seem to be so at first sight." Intercession "would have been a sign of doubt in G-d's justice," subject to criticism.

However, this approach does not appear to reflect the straightforward meaning of the text that narrates the episode of Abraham's intercession on behalf of Sodom, nor its context or implied meaning. As explained in our Vayera Part I study, it appears that G-d wanted Abraham to pray, and hinted as much, similar to the case with Moshe after the golden calf episode. And the significance of the lengthy dialogue of Abraham's intercession does not appear to be limited to an educative session but a real argument that Abraham proffers and that G-d accepts. G-d's introductory communication to Abraham regarding His plans could have included the statement that if there are ten righteous men I won't destroy the city, teaching a lesson about justice, but that was not G-d's plan. G-d's responses to Abraham on the progressively lower numbers of righteous that would be required to save the city seem to be concessions to the prayer. Abraham achieves a tempering of divine justice with his prayer.

As the narrative is presented, at the point of Abraham's prayer G-d is in the "investigative" mode, so it cannot be asked, "Does He not know if there are fifty righteous men in the city?" With their prayers, later prophets mitigate the severity of G-d's retributive intentions, as depicted throughout Scriptures, such as, "I threw myself down before Hashem as the first time… for … He was going to destroy you, and Hashem heeded me that time also" (Deut. 9:18-19). That is part of the mystery of how the world is governed. To allow prayer to have meaning and real impact G-d must not govern the world the same way with it as without it.

2) Dr. Pruss' second answer is that G-d's reason for commanding the sacrifice of Yiṣḥaq was not one of justice as it was in the case of Sodom. In the latter case Abraham could express his view that true justice would not be served

if certain conditions of wickedness would not be met and he asks G-d to reconsider to a certain degree. Regarding Yiṣḥaq, however, G-d mentions nothing about justice; He simply tells Abraham what to do. He has the right to His request, "He is the ruler of our life (Sirach 23:1); He gives life and He puts to death (Deut. 32:39). Abraham… knows that G-d, for one of His unsearchable reasons, calls for this."

But how does a human being know that any of G-d's actions are for "unsearchable reasons" and not out of a commitment to justice? And prayer is not limited to questioning G-d's justice – what about Divine compassion, cannot one pray for mercy? Even in the Sodom episode, Abraham's intercession was not solely focused on the matter of justice; it also had a component of requesting compassion. Moshe and the later prophets beseech G-d to have compassion; it is one of His revealed characteristics. So why did Abraham not so beseech Him? Furthermore, why can Abraham not claim that such a sacrifice is unjust, even if G-d's reason in calling for it is not from the standpoint of Divine justice? Can one not expect Him to abide by a standard of action that a human being with honesty and integrity, upon his deepest soul-searching, concludes is just? Is this not part of the lesson we learn from Abraham's prayer on behalf of Sodom?

The answer (adding to Dr. Pruss' second answer) appears to be as follows. As we pointed out earlier, to sustain the concept of a genuine test it must be assumed that G-d made absolutely clear to Abraham, beyond the realm of any possible reconsideration, that He desired this particular sacrifice. This includes having made clear that prayer to countermand His command, whether from the standpoint of justice or mercy, would be to no avail. (This would be similar to G-d informing Moshe that to further pray to be

allowed to enter the land would be a violation of His will.) All other considerations would obfuscate the matter and to be excluded. The test is simply whether or not Abraham would be obedient.

In addition, and perhaps alternatively, the following is relevant. In Abraham's days the understanding of a child sacrifice, when deemed to be requested by the Deity, was different from what it was after establishment of the legislation of the Torah. If it was thought that G-d definitely desired the sacrifice of a certain child and communicated that desire to man, it was incumbent on that man to provide it. A prayer or any attempt to spare that child would be selfish and a violation of pure service of the Deity; it would be attempting to provide Him with less than He wanted. He had an absolute right to whatever it was He wanted. And the more valuable, the better the gift!

The test of Abraham with a command to sacrifice his son could only have been conceived before the far-reaching dissemination of the principles of the Torah. Once the tenet of man being created in the image of G-d was established, with its implication of the infinite value of each human life and of life being beyond the reach of another human being, and the categorical imperative of לֹא תִרְצָח ("You shall not murder") was internalized by society, human sacrifice was understood as a violation of the most basic law. G-d could then no longer be conceived of as requesting it. Indeed, He explicitly declared human sacrifice as absolutely prohibited, an abomination, "that which He hates" (Deut. 12:31).

The Torah's principles set in motion a major modification in thought. But it did not happen overnight. Yiftaḥ had no recorded opposition when he sacrificed his daughter in fulfilling his vow to Hashem (Jud. 11:34-40), though there

was a lapse of months during which others may have had the opportunity to dissuade him, before he carried it out. Times were very different before the widespread promulgation and acceptance of the Torah.

Insights on Rosh Hashanah

Rabbi Ralph Tawil

This essay will explore the Jewish New Year and elements of the festival as they occur in the Bible.

The Command

The first thing to recognize is that the term "Rosh Hashanah" does not occur in both of the contexts in which the Torah mentions the festival of the first day of the seventh month. The festival is mentioned in the two complete festival calendars of the Torah, in Parashat Emor and in Parashat Pinehhas:

> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, saying: On the seventh New-Moon, on (day) one of the New-Moon, you are to have Sabbath-ceasing, a reminder by (horn) blasting, a proclamation of holiness. Any-kind of servile work you are not to do; you are to bring near a fire offering to the Lord. (Leviticus 23:23-25; SB)
>
> And in the seventh New-Moon, on (day) one of the New-Moon, a proclamation of holiness there is to be for you, any-kind of work you are not to do. A day of (horn-)blasts it is to be for you. You are to sacrifice an offering-up, as a soothing savor for the Lord: One bull, etc. (Numbers 29:1-6; SB)

What we know about the day from these descriptions is that it is a day of cessation of work, animal sacrifice and that there are blasts on this day. The Torah does not tell the reason for the blasts or how they are to be made.

In discussing this verse Abarbanel asked why the Torah omitted the reason for this day. His answer assumes that the day is just a day of preparation for the Day of Atonement on the tenth of the month. The Torah, which was given to

the whole people, did not want them all to know that it was a day of judgment. Instead the Torah focused on the antidote to the judgment, the preparation for the Day of Atonement that was the shofar blasts. This view is somewhat strained and does not take into account that the sections in question do not describe the reason for any of festivals or their commandments (except for the Day of Atonement[1]).

The Term

The term "Rosh Hashanah" (the head or beginning of the year) occurs only once in the Bible, in a context that does not connect it with the day presently celebrated as Rosh Hashanah in the Jewish calendar. As a preface to a detailed description of the measurement of a future temple Ezekiel 40:1 reads:

> "In the twenty fifth year of our exile, berosh hashanah, in the tenth day of the month, fourteen years after the city had fallen—on that very day—the hand of the Lord came upon me and he brought me there."

Clearly the words "rosh hashanah" in this verse cannot be referring to the first day of Tishri, as the tenth day of the month is explicitly mentioned. The words, which mean the "beginning of the year," are probably referring to the tenth day of the first month, Nisan (this is apparently the text that was before the Septuagint as it translated these words "in the first month"). The term itself occurs in the Akkadian as resh shatti, which means "the beginning of the year." [The rabbinic explanation of this verse, namely, that there is a year that begins on the tenth of Tishri—the jubilee year—is not the peshat of these verses, as it is does not appear from the context of that chapter. In addition it is unlikely that

[1] Leviticus 23:39-44 should be seen as a separate section as it comes after a concluding sentence, 23:37-38

Ezekiel, a prophet living in Babel after the destruction of the Temple, would have referred to the jubilee year, which was not practiced after the destruction of the temple.]

The Concept

The Bible preserves conflicting traditions as to the time of the beginning of the New Year (or the end of the old year). Exodus 12:2 determines that:

> This month (in the spring) shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.

The Torah refers to the fall, around the Feast of the Ingathering (Sukkot), as "the end of the year" (Ex. 23:16) or the "turn of the year" (Ex. 34:22). A year beginning in the fall is also seen in the Gezer calendar that begins with the two months of the ingathering ("yrhu asf"). These two traditions reflect the two seasons of climatic change that occur in the region of the Bible, and could have been recognized as the new year simultaneously for different segments of the society. The practice of having several "new years" was is in evidence in the 3rd millennium b.c.e. in Egypt, and is also reflected in the rabbinic tradition in the Mishnah that states that there are four new years. (The practice persists even in our times, where some contemporary countries begin their fiscal year on a date other than the new year of the country.)

In the various calendars preserved in the Bible, the first month is counted from the spring (Leviticus 23; Numbers 28-29). These calendars are primarily concerned with the temple service. (Regarding 2Samuel 11:1 "at the turn of the year, the season when the kings go out [to battle]," there is a scholarly disagreement if it is in the spring or the end of the summer.) In any event the Bible has preserved at least

two traditions for the concept of "rosh hashanah," an agricultural one and a national (and cultic) one.

The First Day of the Seventh Month

This day is not referred to as Rosh Hashanah and not treated as the New Year, conceptually, by the Bible. Nevertheless, it is the day that is celebrated as Rosh Hashanah in the rabbinic Jewish tradition. As noted above, this day is referred to as "zichron teru'ah" (a commemoration through loud blasts) or "yom teru'ah" (a day of sounding the horns) in Leviticus 23:24 and Numbers 29:1, respectively.

In other places throughout the Bible where the first day of the seventh month is mentioned it is not treated as Rosh Hashanah. For example, the death of Hananiah ben Azur the prophet is described in Jer. 28:17 as happening in the same year in the seventh month.

The assassination of Gedalyah, which also occurred on the first day of the seventh month (bahodesh hashebi'i), is not described as happening on a festival day.

The seventh month was also the date of the inauguration of the first Temple in the time of king Solomon and of the pre-second Temple altar in the time of Zerubabel. In the latter story (Ezra 3:1-6) the first day of the seventh month is mentioned specifically as the date that the nation came "as one man" to Yerushalayim, and as the day when they started the sacrifice of burnt offerings (olot). In this passage as well as the passage describing Ezra's public Torah reading (Neh. 8) the day is not considered "Rosh Hashanah," neither is there any mention of the shofar being blown. That particular occasion is worth looking at in more detail.

> When the seventh month arrived - the Israelites being [settled] in their towns - the entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the Scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the Lord had charged Israel. On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Teaching before the congregation, men and women and all who could listen with understanding. He read from it, facing the square before the Water Gate, from the first light until midday, to the men and the women and those who could understand; the ears of all the people were given to the scroll of the teaching. (Nehemiah 8:1-3; NJPS)

This first day of the seventh month was marked by a ceremony of public Torah reading that lasted for hours. It concluded with Ezra blessing the "Lord the Great God" and the people responding "Amen, Amen, with hands upraised" (Neh. 8:6).

As Ezra continued to read and to explain the Torah to the people, they started to weep. Ezra told them not to weep explaining that "this day is holy to the Lord your God" (Neh. 8:9).

> He further said to them, "Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the Lord is the source of your strength." The Levites were quieting the people saying, "Hush, for the day is holy; do not be sad." Then all the people went to eat and drink and send portions and make great merriment, for they understood the things they were told. (Neh. 8:10-12)

This passage is interesting in that the people reacted to the day in a way that is similar to the dual nature of today's celebration of Rosh Hashanah. It is simultaneously a solemn day of judgment and a day of joy.

The Shofar

The purpose of sounding the horn is not mentioned in the verses in the Torah, but it is possible to surmise its purpose from other verses in the Bible. The first occasion of the mentioning of the sound of the shofar was at the revelation at Mount Sinai. The shofar was later used in the temple service, along with other instruments. Blasts of trumpets were used to muster the troops and to signal the movement of the camp (see Numbers 10:1-10). Philo of Alexandria connects these two ideas to the explanation of "zichron teru'ah" saying that the first one applies to Bnei Yisrael (the receiving of the Torah) and the second one to mankind in general. According to Philo the shofar was also used in a war context to call the troops to retreat. Since the world is involved in two basic battles, that of peoples against one another and that of the forces in the world itself there is a festival in which we give thanks to God who makes and protects the peace.

The sound of the shofar was generally used as a signal, for example, announcing the "day of the Lord and calling the people to fast" (Joel 2:1,15). There is a definite connection of the shofar with war and therefore the natural reaction to the sound of the shofar would be fear. "When a ram's horn is sounded in the city, do the people not take alarm?" (Amos 3:6); "Hark the Day of the Lord it is bitter: There a warrior shrieks...a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress...A day of horn blasts and alarms" (Zephaniah 1:14-16). The shofar and trumpets were used to announce the presence of God and the symbol of his presence, the ark (1 Chronicles 15:28).

There are several verses in Psalms in which the sound of the shofar and the trumpets are used in connection with God's kingly dominion over the world.

> "God ascends amidst acclamation (teru'ah), the Lord, to the blasts of the horn. Sing, O sing to God; sing, O sing to our king; for God is king over all the earth;" "With the trumpets and the blast of a horn raise a shout (hari'u) before the Lord, the king." (Psalms 47:6-7; 98:6).

Psalm 98 also ends with the idea that God is coming to judge (rule) the earth.

> ...Let the sea and all within it thunder, the world and its inhabitants; let the rivers clap their hands the mountains sing joyously together at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge (rule) the earth; He will judge the world justly, and its peoples with equity (Psalms 98:7-9).

It is these verses that give the major character to the present celebration of Rosh Hashanah in rabbinic Judaism, as a day where God's kingly dominion and judgment over the Earth is reaffirmed with the sounding of the trumpet blasts. However, the idea of God being a king (as a noun, and not merely ruling as in Ex. 15:18), is absent from the Torah (Dt. 33:5 is not referring to God but to the equivalent of a human king that occurs upon the convocation of the heads of the tribes). The Torah does not have a positive attitude towards kings and it would be unlikely that the Torah itself would ascribe this kingly symbolism to the "zichron/yom teru'ah." The passages in the Psalms that use the image of God as king were written after the monarchy was a reality and was viewed positively.

The idea of sounding the shofar to signal a new period is found in the Torah as a "shofar teru'ah," mentioned as heralding the Jubilee year,

> "Then (after seven weeks of years) you shall sound the horn loud; in the seventh month on the tenth day of the month—the Day of Atonement—you shall have the horn sounded throughout the land." (Lev. 25:9)

The signal lies in the exceptional sounding of the shofar on the tenth of the month in addition to the usual sounding on the first day of the seventh month.

A verse that speaks specifically about blowing the shofar on the New Moon is Psalm 81:4 ("Blow the horn on the New Moon, on the full moon for our feast day.") The term "feast day" refers to the Feast of the Ingathering, thus from this verse it appears that the sounding of the shofar was a signal for people to prepare for the pilgrimage Festival of the Ingathering (Sukkot).

"Zichron Teru'ah"

The Bible commentators have interpreted this phrase in several ways. The first word of the phrase has to do with memory, but it is unclear who is remembering and what is being remembered. Rashi and Rashbam explained that God remembers various things through the sound of the shofar (Rashi: God remembers the binding of Isaac for the merit of Abraham's descendants; Rashbam: God remembers the people of Israel.)

Seforno explained that the sounding of the shofar is for the people to be aware that the blast of the king is within them, that this is the day in which God is reaffirmed as the king of the universe, and the shofar is to remind Bnei Yisrael of that point. The author of Sefer Hahinukh understood the

sound of the shofar as serving to wake up the man from his normal materialistic routine and to create a situation where man can focus on more sublime things.

Although many of the elements which typify the present-day celebration of Rosh Hashanah are not found directly in the Bible in relation to this specific day, nevertheless, the development of the holiday has incorporated into it ideas that are present in some form in the Bible. The idea of the year having a beginning, of God ruling as king and judging the earth, the idea that the shofar represents something to fear and arouse ones thoughts, are all hinted at in the Bible itself. A day that incorporates these ideas is religiously inspiring, even if the ideas and their association with this day developed over time.

The New Year and the Roots of Teshubah

Rabbi Francis Nataf

If one thinks about it, the concept of a *new* year is really quite surprising. After all, what is really new about the year that will begin this Monday night?

A new year is not like a new day. From a human perspective, it is easier to say that the day starts at a certain point – for most of us, that point being when we wake up to greet it. Not so, however with a year. True, there is a natural cycle of seasons that repeats itself every twelve months, but that cycle has no obvious beginning or end. And even if we were to decide that it starts in the fall or the spring, what does that have to do with human existence? Am I not to continue next week exactly where I left off this week? I will continue to work on projects left unfinished, pay bills that were not yet paid and continue with all the same relationships and responsibilities that were a part of my existence up until now.

So what's all the fuss about a new year and why do we work so hard to better ourselves as if we were starting our lives all over again?

In fact, the concept of a new year is not just pretense. Rosh Hashanah traditionally marks the anniversary of man's creation. In the same way as Shabbat allows us to meditate on G-d, Rosh Hashanah gives us the opportunity to reflect upon the nature of man.

One of the most important lessons in the first chapter of the Torah is that man is created – he is not just part of a process. This need not be in contradiction to evolution, but

rather that when man became man, something completely new occurred. The mechanics of this novelty are secondary – the fact of the novelty is what the Torah wants to get across. Man's beginnings lay in innovation and so he will forever yearn for this quality so basic to his original essence. (This is paralleled by man's being born man and woman in the same body, thereby creating an essential yearning to be reunited with the other half.) Thus, creativity and innovation are at the very core of human existence. Something new is another way of saying a possibility previously ignored. The realization of such a possibility touches man to his very core.

Rashi (Devarim 6:6), quoting the Sifri, points out that G-d commands us to always relate to the Torah as a new doctrine. He explains that people are constantly interested in the new, but as soon as a doctrine becomes old, our interest wanes. We are not told that there is something wrong in this attitude, but rather that we have to work within it, presumably because it is part of how G-d made man. Thus, the key to Torah study and the practice of mitzvot is that we always engage it with novelty. We have to come to it fresh each time. The same mitzvah, even if we perform it in the same way, has many possibilities within it. We can investigate those possibilities and reap the excitement that comes from them, or we can treat our previous experiences as if they were the only ones possible.

Sameness is a trap that men and women build for themselves. It is perfectly reasonable to build on our past experiences, but when we build routines and expectations overwhelmingly upon our past, it prevents us from seeing the rainbow of possibilities in any given situation.

In truth, Rosh Hashanah is the most miraculous of holidays - miraculous in the sense that it is a bit unreasonable. It tells

us to ignore the reality that next week is no different than this week and yet to pretend that it is. The secret is that when we look at it as if it is indeed different, what has been the same up until now actually does become different. We learn from Rashi that something does not need to be outwardly new to really be new. Rather - that which appears to be the same on the outside has the potential to be truly new on the inside.

It is for this reason that we experience the teshuvah process during these days. Teshuvah can only be accomplished if we open ourselves up to possibilities that defy our past routines and expectations. It is the time when we have a special opportunity to go beyond what we have been and would normally continue to be. It is a time to go back to our human roots and to seek the novelty that G-d implanted within us. May we all meet this wonderful challenge.

Wishing everyone a Happy *New* Year.

Haftarah of the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah – Jeremiah 31: 1-19

Rabbi Ralph Tawil

The haftarah of the second day of Rosh Hashanah represents one of the most beautiful chapters found in all of the prophets. It is noted for its pathos and for its vision of Israel's redemption. The exiled northern tribes represented were the prime example of exiled Israel, at the beginning of Jeremiah's prophetic career. Typical of Jeremiah's prophecies, this chapter interweaves various voices, God's, Jeremiah's, and other characters.

The haftarah begins:

> Thus said the LORD: The people escaped from the sword, found favor in the wilderness; Israel is walking to its rest.

The chapter opens with the comparison of Israel's exile to a wilderness. Such a comparison is made also in the book of Ezekiel where the exile is called the "wilderness of the nations" (Ezekiel 20:35).[1] This verse reminds one of the verse in Deuteronomy where Israel is found by God in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 32:10). Here, "the people escaped from the sword," i.e. those members of Israel who have survived the exile, find favor in God's eyes while in the wilderness of the nations. The word "Israel," is referring to the ten northern tribes of Israel that were exiled about a century before Jeremiah. "Israel walking to its rest" can imply the nature of the walking or its destination. Instead of being pursued Israel is walking calmly. Alternatively, Israel walks to its resting-place, as opposed

[1] In Ezekiel the analogy to the Egyptian wilderness is made explicitly, while over here it is implied.

to going to other places where they were not to find calmness and rest.

> "From afar God appeared to me-" "And an eternal love I have loved you, Therefore, I continue My grace to you."

Identifying the "me" in this verse is difficult. Abarbanel identifies the speaker as the prophet himself. It is more likely that the words are the words of the people of Israel. This would allow for God's words to be understood as a direct response to Israel.

The distance (i.e. "from afar") might be one of time. Namely, that Israel sees God as appearing only in the very distant past. To which God responds: "Yet (and), an eternal love I have loved you." God is assuring Israel: Even though you think that I only appeared in the distant past, My love for you is eternal and continues until this day.

God's expression of His love for Israel now gets more concretely defined:

> I will build you firmly again, O Maiden Israel! Again you shall take up your timbrels and go forth to the rhythm of the dancers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; Men shall plant and live to enjoy them. For the day is coming when watchmen shall proclaim on the heights of Ephraim: Come let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God. (Jer. 31: 4-6, NJPS)

The destroyed cities of Israel will be built again, and the pastoral life will continue as old. The curses of Deuteronomy (which stated that "You will plant a vineyard and not harvest it"- Deut. 28:30) will be overturned. The calm pastoral life in Israel will continue as it once was-with one crucial change. The Northern Kingdom will no longer have distinct places of worship as they did in the past. In the past Yarob'am (or his guards, according to the Talmud)

told the people not to bother to go all the way to Jerusalem to worship (1Kings 12:28). Now the cry, by the guards, will be to come up to Zion. The future redeemed of Israel will see their portion in the God of Zion.

The second and third sections of the haftarah (31:6-8; 31:9-12) describe the joyous announcement of the ingathering of the exiles from the north and the rejoicing upon enjoying the land. The ingathering that is not only of the strong, but even those that have difficulty walking, like the lame and the blind, the pregnant and the one just giving birth, will be able to come. The point is that the gathering will be complete ("from the ends of the earth").

The second section ends with:

> They shall come with weeping and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way in which they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Yisrael and Efrayim is my firstborn. (31:9)

The weeping and supplication in this verse is a difficult verse to explain in the midst of all the happiness. Rashi explained that it is the tearful supplication and prayer by Israel that that will lead God to redeem them. An understanding similar to this is very appropriate for the context of this section as a haftarah during the Rosh Hashanah service. This explanation might find further support from the end of the haftarah. Abarbanel explains the tears and the supplications as the response to the suffering that will occur as the "birth pangs of the Messiah" (the concept that the messianic period will be ushered in by cataclysm). Most probably the crying is from happiness. The word "supplication" could be understood as "compassion" – the result of supplication (see NJPS and Zechariah 12:10).

The contrast between the joyous end of the third section of the haftarah (31:12-14) and the beginning of the fourth section of the haftarah (31:15) is jarring.

> They shall come and shout on the heights of Zion, radiant over the bounty of the Lord-over the new grain and wine and oil, and over sheep and cattle. They shall fare like a watered garden, they shall never languish again. Then shall maidens dance gaily, young men and old alike. I will turn their mourning to joy; I will comfort them and cheer them in their grief. I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and My people shall enjoy My full bounty (31:12-14).
>
> Thus said the Lord: A cry is heard in Ramah—wailing, bitter weeping—Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone. (31:15).

The third section has the vision of the maidens dancing gaily and the fourth section is a return to the reality of the matriarch Rachel wailing bitterly. The redemption is not yet here and Rachel continues her crying – until God poignantly consoles her. He tells her that the preceding prophecy will come about as a reward for her crying. Her children, specifically the northern tribes (who were led by the tribe of Ephraim, whose ancestor was Rachel's grandson) will be returned from captivity and from the land of their enemies. God's compassion has been aroused by the wailing prayer of Rachel, our matriarch.

His forgiveness is even further aroused by the attitude of the returning tribes. The prophet now allows us to hear their voice (I can hear Ephraim lamenting):

> You have chastised me and I am chastised, like a calf that has not been broken. Receive me back, let me return, for You, O Lord, are my God. Now that I have turned back, I am filled with remorse; Now that I am

made aware I strike my thigh. I am ashamed and humiliated, for I bear the disgrace of my youth.

This could be the weeping and supplication that was described in verse 31:9 above. Their attitude towards their period of exile and suffering is one of acceptance and realization of their sin. This penitent statement by the returning Ephraim leads to God's compassionate response:

> Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me, a child that is dandled! Whenever I have turned against him, My thoughts would dwell on him still. That is why my heart yearns for him, I will receive him back in love. (31: 20)

This, the last verse of the haftarah is the reason why the haftarah was chosen (according to Rashi; Megillah 31a). It is one of the verses that is highlighted in the mussaf service of Rosh hashanah (it is the verse that culminates the "zichronot" section of the mussaf). It also is appropriate as it has God responding to the repentance of Ephraim by "yearning for him," "receiving him back in love" and bringing him back to the land of Israel. The rabbis chose this haftarah as that is the hoped for divine response to Israel's repentance in our times.

Learning Faith from the Text, or Text from Faith:

The Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Avraham Narratives and Commentary*

by Rabbi Hayyim Angel

I. INTRODUCTION

Avraham Avinu is one of the exemplars of faith in human history. His unswerving devotion through a lifetime of trials and tribulations demonstrates an eagerness to follow God even in the most difficult of circumstances. From early elementary instruction and beyond, educators rightly turn to our Patriarch in any discussion of faith.

But the Avraham narratives also present many trials and tribulations for teachers and students. While Avraham is tested repeatedly in the narratives, readers confront a maze of interpretation in determining what Avraham's reactions should teach us religiously. And the stakes are very high: commentators—our educators *par excellence*—know that the way they explicate the Avraham narratives will define our religious conceptions of having faith. Ideally, commentators are absolutely bound to drawing religious lessons from the biblical text; but religious preconceptions also are likely to enter the exegetical picture, especially when the implications are so significant.[1] Therefore, it is

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[1] For this note and all subsequent notes, please see page 86.

imperative for educators to elucidate which arguments in fact emerge from an analysis of the biblical text, and which are faith-related opinions stemming primarily from exegetes' religious inclination, rather than from textual considerations.

In this essay, we will consider three general responses of the commentators:

> 1. Accept the plainest sense of the text, and assume that what Avraham did was correct. Throughout the Avraham narratives, this option *always* appears to be the smoothest reading of the text, since God responds to Avraham's queries with assurances and covenants—and never overtly criticizes him.[2]

Exegetes who do not believe that a text teaches good faith may employ one of two alternatives.

> 2. Accept the plainest sense of the text, but criticize Avraham for what he did—either by searching for hints in the text which might indicate negativity, or simply by stating that Avraham did something wrong.
>
> 3. Provide an alternate reading of the text. In effect, this method eliminates the questions of faith that Avraham's actions may have raised.

By considering the passages in Avraham's ongoing dialogue with God, and how commentators have combined textual and religious motivations in their analysis, we will gain greater insight into the teaching of faith through the Avraham narratives.

Of course, educators must adapt material to the level of their classes. Much depends on age, level, homogeneity of students, and a host of other variables. Additionally, teachers have their own styles, and points of emphasis: are they focused primarily on teaching the Book of Genesis,

parshanut methodology, or the topic of faith in general? While there is much overlap between these areas, the class structure will depend substantially on the answers to that and related questions.

This essay is intended as a resource, so that educators, aware of their own student populations and individual teaching styles, will be able to adapt this material to the needs of their particular students. This will enable them to draw students, regardless of age and background, into an active learning process related to the all-encompassing religious issue of faith.

II. TEXT ANALYSIS

A. Genesis Chapter 12

God's first recorded encounter with Avraham sets the tone for the Patriarch's illustrious career: God instructs Avraham to abandon his family and begin a new life in a foreign land. Accompanying this command are promises of great blessing. Without so much as a word, Avraham embarks for Canaan, and constructs altars in gratitude when he arrives. Thus, Avraham's faith receives immediate affirmation in the Torah.

But before Avraham can settle in the Promised Land, a famine afflicts Canaan. God had led Avraham to Canaan with guarantees of blessing; but now Avraham and his family face starvation. At this critical juncture, God conspicuously does not provide Avraham with any further instructions, as if to test him.[3] Avraham opts to go to Egypt, forsaking the Promised Land out of physical necessity.

Avraham's descent to Egypt generates a frightful challenge: he fears that the Egyptians will murder him in order to take Sarah. Should Avraham expect divine intervention, or should he take personal responsibility to

preserve his own life? Avraham chooses the latter, asking Sarah to pose as his sister. Only at the last minute does God afflict Pharaoh, saving Sarah. Avraham and his family return to Canaan with great wealth.

In this chapter, commentators agree on what happened; they differ only in their assessment of Avraham's actions. Ramban sharply censures what he deems a deficiency in the Patriarch's faith.[4] According to Ramban, Avraham should have trusted God's original promise of blessing, waiting patiently in Canaan for God to bring rain. Moreover, he should not have given Sarah away once they did go to Egypt. Ramban suggests that Avraham was punished severely for his lack of faith in these instances: his descendants were enslaved in Egypt as a result.[5]

The overwhelming majority of exegetes, however, maintain that Avraham's responses were fully warranted in both of the above instances. These commentators follow the lead of *midrashim*, which state that God tested Avraham ten times and that Avraham succeeded in each of them.[6] He had to acquire food and do what he could to protect himself and Sarah from the immoral Egyptians.[7] According to the majority opinion, the Torah teaches that in the absence of explicit prophetic instructions, one may not depend on supernatural intervention in times of crisis.[8]

Educators should emphasize that this is a meta-textual debate, and utilize the opportunity to explore the religious positions of the commentators themselves.[9] When students reach the text ambiguities in the ensuing narratives, they will understand that at least some of the debates among exegetes emerge from a context broader than the local *peshat*.

B. Genesis Chapter 15

Genesis 15 introduces complexities not previously encountered in the Avraham narratives. Until this point, Avraham responded to divine commands, and to situations as they arose. Now, Avraham questions God for the first time—twice in the same dialogue. In interpreting Avraham's challenges, commentators debate whether questioning or doubting is acceptable in proper faith.

1. Avraham's first question

In chapters 13-14, God appears to Avraham once, and again promises the Land of Canaan to Avraham's progeny (Gen. 13:13-18). Though silent in the text, Avraham must have wondered who those descendants would be. After all, Sarah was approximately seventy years old and still barren. Lot, Avraham's presumed heir at the outset of the narrative, had distanced himself from the family both physically and spiritually by settling in the depraved city of Sodom.

When God promises reward to Avraham yet again, Avraham finally verbalizes his concerns. In fact, these are his first recorded words to God in the Torah:

> After these things the word of the Lord came to Avram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Avram; I am your shield, and your reward will be great. Avram said, Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Avram said, Behold, to me You have given no seed; and, lo, one born in my house is my heir. And, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, This shall not be your heir; but he who shall come forth from your own bowels shall be your heir. And He brought him outside, and said, Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them; and He said to him, So shall your seed be. And he believed in the

Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness (Gen. 15:1-6).[10]

It would appear that Avraham, despairing of having children of his own, already had taken steps to adopt his servant Eliezer. In response, God promises that Avraham himself will father children; Eliezer would not be Avraham's heir.

Was it appropriate for Avraham to question God? A few commentators, including Ralbag and R. David Zvi Hoffmann, maintain that it was. The Patriarch did not see any reasonable likelihood of fathering an heir. Hoffmann explains that Avraham essentially was saying, "Give me a child," but respectfully did so indirectly by pointing out that he had no heirs.

Netziv likewise understands Avraham's question as it stands in the text, but he criticizes the Patriarch for doubting God's explicit promises. He therefore interprets Avraham's second statement (in v. 3) as a corrective—Avraham inferred from God's lack of response that he had doubted too much (in v. 2).[11]

Several other exegetes share Netziv's uneasiness with Avraham's questioning an explicit promise from God. But they appear to find God's favorable response proof that Avraham's statement was religiously justified. Consequently, they offer alternative readings of the text, which support their own conceptions of faith, and which also vindicate Avraham's behavior.

Rashi, Radak, and Ramban suggest that Avraham was worried that perhaps he had sinned, thereby forfeiting God's promises (see further discussion below). In this view, Avraham did not doubt God; he doubted himself.

Alternatively, Hizkuni, Abarbanel, Seforno, and Malbim maintain that Avraham fully trusted God's promise of progeny but was concerned that his son would yet be too young to inherit by the time the elderly Avraham expected to die. As a result, Eliezer still would emerge as the guardian of Avraham's estate. God responded that this son would be old enough to inherit by the time Avraham would die. This reading does not appear to be the plain sense of the text; it emerges from these commentators' concerns about Avraham's faith.

To summarize, we have seen four interpretations of Avraham's first question:

1. Adopt the plain sense of the text: Avraham questioned God's promise, and God approved of this questioning (Ralbag, Hoffmann).

2. Find a textual hint at criticism of Avraham: Avraham questioned God's promise, but realized himself that he was mistaken in doing so (Netziv).

3a. Reinterpret the text: Avraham worried about the fulfillment of God's promise, but he did so out of self-doubt that perhaps he had sinned (Rashi, Radak, Ramban).

3b. Reinterpret the text: Avraham did not question God's promise at all; he simply worried that it would not be fulfilled soon enough (Hizkuni, Abarbanel, Seforno, Malbim).

In this instance, students should be shown that the text most likely supports the first view. But they also should appreciate how attitudes toward faith motivated a large number of commentators to seek alternate explanations. With a heightened sensitivity to this balance of text and interpretation, and now aware of this broader debate,

students may continue their own exploration of the nature of faith.

2. "He counted it to him for righteousness"

Gen. 15:6 concludes the dialogue, relating that Avraham trusted in God, and *he* counted it to *him* for righteousness. The latter half of the sentence is ambiguous: did Avraham consider God's promises an undeserved kindness, or did God consider Avraham's faith in trusting God's promise of progeny a model for future generations?

Onkelos and Rashi aver that God regarded Avraham's faith as a model for future generations.[12] True to his own religious outlook, Ramban asks: is it remarkable for a prophet to trust in God? Therefore, Ramban understands the second half of the verse as one of gratitude—Avraham considered it an undeserved righteousness of God to give him a child.[13] Of course, Onkelos, Rashi, and those who follow their interpretation would respond to Ramban's religious question: yes, it was admirable of Avraham to trust God's promises, given the lengthy delay in their fulfillment until that time.

In this instance, the text may be read either way. The context of Avraham's questioning and God's response in 15:1-5 supports Onkelos and Rashi.[14] But Avraham is the subject of the first half of 15:6, and the verse may be read according to Ramban's position, for there is no explicit transition of the verse's subject. As in chapter 12, much of the commentators' argument in this instance revolves around their own positions on the nature of perfect faith, rather than over the proper reading of the text.[15]

3. Avraham's second question

In the following vision, God again promises the land to Avraham's descendants:

> And He said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it. And he said, Lord God, how shall I know that I shall inherit it? (Gen. 15:7-8).

Avraham's response appears astonishing. Moments ago, he trusted God; what would prompt him to doubt God now?

Shemuel (in *Nedarim* 32a) and several other *midrashim* maintain that Avraham indeed was requesting further confirmation of God's promises. But he was wrong for doing so, and was punished: his descendants were enslaved in Egypt as a result.[16] It appears that Shemuel and the other Sages interpret the relationship between Avraham's question and the subsequent divine promise of slavery in v. 13 as one of cause and effect.

However, most commentators do not perceive divine criticism; on the contrary, God makes a solemn covenant with Avraham in the wake of his second question. Although God accepted Avraham's question, these exegetes cannot believe that Avraham would express doubt at this point. Therefore, they suggest no fewer than five alternate readings of "how shall I know that I will inherit it":

1. Perhaps later generations will sin. How can I be assured that this covenant really will be fulfilled? (Radak, Ralbag, Ramban, Seforno, Malbim).

2. By what merit will I inherit? (*Gen. Rabbah* 44:14, Rashi [second opinion, 15:6], R. Bahya, S. D. Luzzatto).

3. In which generation will my descendants inherit? (Bekhor Shor, Abarbanel, Hirsch, Kiel).

4. How will my descendants know that the promise has been fulfilled? (Hoffmann).

5. The *berit ben ha-betarim* (Gen. 15) occurred some five years *before* the beginning of this chapter; therefore, Avraham did not doubt God immediately after trusting Him; he asked this question considerably earlier (Hizkuni).[17]

These commentators assume that Avraham fully trusted God's promise, but they still must provide a fair reading of the text. Those who adopt the first reading impose a theology of sin onto the text (see excursus below); therefore, other commentators seek different options. But the alternatives are difficult to fit into Avraham's words.

The common assumption of these interpretations is that the very possibility of Avraham's questioning in this instance is unacceptable. Shemuel and other *midrashim* accept the plain sense of Avraham's statement, and sharply criticize the Patriarch. The later exegetes reinterpret Avraham's words so that he does not doubt God's promise so soon after having accepted another one.

Nevertheless, the plain sense of the text appears to vindicate a questioning Avraham. One could argue that Avraham already trusted God's promise that he would have a child; now, he wanted an absolute sign of confirmation that his descendants would in fact inherit the land. God responds favorably to Avraham's request, having His fire "pass in between the halves." This is how Rashi (on 15:6, first opinion) and Ibn Ezra (on 15:7) understand Avraham's question. Their reading upholds the plain sense of the text on both ends: Avraham questions (as maintained by Shemuel and the other *midrashim*), and God responds favorably (consistent with the majority of later exegetes).

Instead of viewing Avraham's question as a sign of little faith, it appears that Rashi and Ibn Ezra would find great

religious heroism in Avraham's dialogue. He did not question from doubt; he questioned precisely because of his faith and his truthful relationship with God.[18]

To summarize, there are three predominant approaches to Avraham's second question:

1. Adopt the plain sense of the text: Avraham requested a sign of confirmation from God, and God approvingly provided one (Rashi, Ibn Ezra).

2. Find a textual hint at criticism of Avraham: Avraham requested a sign of confirmation from God, and God disapproved, punishing Avraham's descendants with slavery (Shemuel and other *midrashim*).

3. Reinterpret the text: Avraham was requesting something else, or was worried about future sins annulling this promise. God approved of this lesser question and solemnly swore that all will occur as promised (majority opinion).

4. Excursus: The theology of sin annulling promises

Several commentators ascribe one or both of Avraham's questions in Genesis 15 to a fear that perhaps he (or later descendants) would sin, thereby forfeiting divine promises. This line of interpretation emerges from a talmudic examination of a related question of faith: Yaakov repeatedly appears to doubt explicit divine promises. When fleeing to Haran, he states:

> If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and garment to put on, So that I come back to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God; And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house; and

> of all that You shall give me I will surely give the tenth to You (Gen. 28:20-22).

But God had just promised protection in Yaakov's heavenly dream:

> Behold, I am with you, and will keep you in all places where you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you, until I have done that about which I have spoken to you (Gen. 28:15).

Moreover, Yaakov continued to fear his brother Esav years later, despite God's reassurances of protection:

> The Lord said to Yaakov, Return to the land of your fathers, and to your family; and I will be with you (Gen. 31:3).

> The messengers returned to Yaakov, saying, We came to your brother Esav, and also he comes to meet you, and four hundred men with him. Then Yaakov was greatly afraid and distressed… Yaakov said, O God of my father Avraham, and God of my father Yitzhak, the Lord who said to me, Return to your country, and to your family, and I will deal well with you; I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I have become two bands. Save me, I beseech You, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav; for I fear him, lest he will come and strike me, and the mother with the children. And You said, I will surely do you good, and make your seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted for multitude (Gen. 32:7-13).

Why would Yaakov doubt God's explicit assurances, and even remind God of earlier promises? Perplexed by these

stark incongruities, the Talmud suggests that Yaakov worried that perhaps he had sinned, thereby forfeiting God's promises:

> And, behold, I am with you, and will keep you in all places where you go, and the other verse reads: Then Yaakov was greatly afraid! [The answer is that] he thought that some sin might cause [God's promise not to be fulfilled] (*Berakhot* 4a).[19]

But this interpretation depends on preconceived assumptions. As in the case of the Avraham narratives, this interpretation is not universally accepted. Some exegetes criticize Yaakov for showing insufficient faith in God's promises.[20] Others reinterpret aspects of the narrative, thereby mitigating Yaakov's apparent distress.[21]

But perhaps Yaakov was concerned about the ultimate fulfillment of such long-term promises, and God deemed his questions to be reasonable. A related *midrash* (*Gen. Rabbah* 76:2) states that "the righteous have no assurance in this world." Indeed, Yaakov suffered considerably throughout his life, despite God's repeated assurances of protection. He was threatened and cheated by Esav and Lavan; his daughter Dinah was raped; his wife Rachel died in childbirth; his son Re'uven acted inappropriately towards Bilhah; and his sons sold Yosef to Egypt.

In any event, the fear of sin annulling divine promises appears nowhere explicitly in the Avraham or Yaakov narratives; therefore, this explication of their questions remains possible, but not compelling. It is more likely that both Patriarchs genuinely had cause for concern, and God approved of their worries—they were reasonable indeed.[22]

To conclude, the brief dialogue in Gen. 15:1-8 gives rise to three significant exegetical debates regarding the nature of faith. Students should be shown which arguments are text-

based, and which arise primarily from religious concerns. Avraham's first question appears straightforward, but some commentators remain uncomfortable with any degree of confrontation, and therefore either criticize Avraham or reinterpret his question. In 15:6 ("and *he* counted it to *him* for righteousness"), commentators rely partially on their own positions on having faith to interpret an otherwise ambiguous phrase in the text. Finally, most commentators reject the smoothest reading of Avraham's second question in 15:8, or criticize him for it, because it appears illogical or inappropriate to them that the Patriarch would express such clear doubt about a divine promise. The Torah appears to praise Avraham's tenacity in confronting God, and God responds by striking renewed covenants, considering Avraham's continued faith to him as righteousness—a model to all future generations. In short, Genesis 15 affords a singular educational opportunity to bring together textual and religious considerations, as interpreted by traditional exegetes.

C. Genesis Chapters 17-18

Following God's renewed covenant that Avraham will produce an heir, Sarah offers her maidservant Hagar to Avraham. Hagar gives birth to Yishmael. But after thirteen years of Avraham's raising Yishmael as his heir, God shatters Avraham's assumptions:

> God said to Avraham: As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give you a son also of her; and I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. Then Avraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born to him who is a hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear? And Avraham said to God, O that Yishmael might live in Your

> presence! And God said, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son indeed; and you shall call his name Yitzhak; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Yishmael, I have heard you; Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he father, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant will I establish with Yitzhak, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time in the next year (Gen. 17:15-21).

Commentators note that Avraham's laughter could represent two principal emotions: (1) exultation and joy, deriving from a wholehearted belief in this new promise; or (2) some degree of doubt and shock. Onkelos assumes that Avraham's laughter was exclusively one of confident joy. On the other hand, *Targum Yerushalmi* perceives some degree of doubt in the Patriarch's laughter. Later commentators are divided on this issue.[23]

There are two issues motivating the commentators. Once again, there is a broader debate on the nature of faith. Some allow the exemplar of faith some degree of doubt while others do not. In addition, on a purely textual level, everyone must account for the discrepancy between God's reassuring response to Avraham and His critical stance towards Sarah when she laughs at the same promise:

> Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am grown old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? The Lord said to Avraham, Why did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? Is any thing too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return to you, at this season, and Sarah shall have a son. Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed

not; for she was afraid. And he said, No; you did laugh (Gen. 18:12-15).

Based on this discrepancy, one may conclude that Avraham's laughter must have been out of joy, while Sarah's expressed doubt. Otherwise, Avraham should have been criticized as well. However, the unmistakable similarity in language between Avraham's response and Sarah's renders this position inconclusive. The aforementioned *targumim* already capture this debate: Onkelos renders Avraham's laughter "was happy," but translates Sarah's laughter as "laughed." On the other hand, *Targum Yerushalmi* offers the same translation for both ("with some degree of doubt").

Consistent with the reading of *Targum Yerushalmi*, *Midrash ha-Gadol* proposes a different resolution: God's reproach in Gen. 18:13-14 was directed against Avraham as well as against Sarah. God mentioned only Sarah's incredulity, leaving Avraham to become conscious of his own lack of faith himself. According to this view, God *does* rebuke Avraham for his doubting laughter in chapter 17—albeit in a subtle, indirect manner. R. Sa'adyah, Hizkuni, and Kiel (on 18:13) adopt this reading as well.[24]

We have seen four approaches to Avraham's laughter:

1a. Adopt the plain sense of the text locally: Avraham doubted the divine promise, and God approved (*Targum Yerushalmi*, Ibn Ezra, Ibn Kaspi, Hoffmann).

1b. Adopt the plain sense of the text locally: Avraham was shocked on a rational level, but did not doubt God's promise (Abarbanel, Hirsch, S. D. Luzzatto, Malbim).

2. Find a textual hint at criticism of Avraham: Avraham doubted the divine promise, and God

disapproved, albeit subtly (*Midrash ha-Gadol*, R. Sa'adyah, Hizkuni, Kiel).

3. Reinterpret the text, based on the parallel account with Sarah: Avraham laughed entirely out of joy, whereas Sarah laughed from doubt (Onkelos, Rashi, Radak, Bekhor Shor, Ramban, R. Bahya, Ralbag).

In this case, the textual difficulties do not lend themselves to clear resolution.[25] Students should be shown the different interpretations of the divine responses to Avraham and Sarah and apply what they know from previous narratives to this debate among the commentators regarding the nature of perfect faith.

D. Genesis Chapters 18-22

After God's promise that Sarah will have a son is reiterated, divine emissaries set out for Sodom in order to destroy it. God informs Avraham of this decision, and Avraham responds:

> Will You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are only fifty righteous inside the city; will You also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous who are in it? Be it far from You to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked; and that the righteous should be as the wicked, be it far from You; Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Gen. 18:23-25).

Viewed in isolation from the other Avraham narratives, the Patriarch's response seems shocking, since he boldly challenges the fairness of God's actions.[26] But after considering the previous texts, we have come to expect Avraham's willingness to confront and question God.[27] Several *midrashim* contrast Avraham's campaign on behalf

of Sodom with Noah's silence prior to the flood. Avraham's pleading represents the proper religious response, whereas Noah's ostensibly faithful silence is erroneous.[28]

In fact, precisely because the reader is accustomed to Avraham's active responses, he or she should be amazed at Avraham's *silence* when God commands the banishment of Yishmael (Gen. 21:12-14) and the sacrifice of Yitzhak (Gen. 22:1-3). How could Avraham stand idly by, and not challenge God?[29]

E. Commands vs. Promises: An Explanation of the Apparent Discrepancies in Avraham's Behavior

By considering the Avraham narratives as a whole, we may resolve this dilemma. Avraham's actions may be divided into three general categories: (1) responses to direct commands from God; (2) responses to promises or other information from God; and (3) responses to situations during which God does not communicate directly with Avraham.

1. Responses to direct commands from God

Whenever God commands an action, Avraham obeys without so much as a word of protest or questioning:

1. Avraham goes to Canaan (Gen. 12:1-4).

2. Avraham circumcises himself and his household when Avraham is ninety-nine years old (Gen. 17:23-27).

3. Avraham names and circumcises Yitzhak (Gen. 21:1-4).

4. Avraham banishes Yishmael (Gen. 21:12-14).

5. Avraham is willing to sacrifice Yitzhak (Gen. 22:1-3). Here, Avraham says *hinneni* before hearing God's instructions, signifying his perpetual readiness to follow God's commandments.

2. Responses to promises or other information from God

In these instances, Avraham praises God when gratitude is in order, and he questions or challenges God when he deems it appropriate:

1. Initially, when God makes promises, Avraham responds by bringing offerings in gratitude (Gen. 12:6-9; 13:18).
2. Avraham questions God when it appears unlikely to him that His promises will be fulfilled (Gen. 15:1-8).
3. Avraham laughs when God informs him that Sarah will have a son (Gen. 17:15-18).
4. Avraham challenges God's justice prior to the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 18:23-33).
5. After the angel blesses him at the *Akedah*, Avraham remains silent (Gen. 22:15-18).

3. Responses to situations during which God does not communicate directly to Avraham

On all of these occasions, Avraham must use his own best judgment and respond spontaneously, without direct guidance from God.

1. Avraham goes to Egypt during a famine, and offers Sarah to the Egyptians in order to save his life (Gen. 12:10-20).

2. Avraham resolves a conflict with Lot and his shepherds by offering his nephew first choice of lands (Gen. 13:7-13).
3. Avraham rescues Lot from four enemy kings (Gen. 14:12-16). He then offers one tenth of the spoils to Malkitzedek, and refuses to accept plunder from the king of Sodom (Gen. 14:17-24).
4. Avraham marries Hagar at Sarah's request, and then allows Sarah to persecute Hagar when the latter aggravates her (Gen. 16:1-6).
5. Avraham offers hospitality to his three guests (Gen. 18:1-8).
6. Avraham travels to Philistia, and again says that Sarah is his sister (Gen. 20).
7. Avraham celebrates the birth of Yitzhak with a party (Gen. 21:1-8).
8. Avraham refuses to banish Yishmael, until God intervenes (Gen. 21:9-11).
9. Avraham strikes a treaty with Avimelekh and the Philistines (Gen. 21:22-34).
10. After the angel stops the *Akedah*, Avraham sacrifices a ram he finds, and then names the mountain "*H' yir'eh*" (Gen. 22:14).
11. Avraham mourns Sarah and purchases the Cave at Makhpelah in Hevron (Gen. 23).
12. Avraham enjoins his servant to find a suitable wife for Yitzhak (Gen. 24:1-9).
13. Avraham marries Keturah and fathers more children. He then sends them away, establishing Yitzhak as his sole heir (Gen. 25:1-6). He dies at age 175.

To summarize: Avraham always followed God's commandments without questioning, but he reserved the right to challenge any information or promises. Therefore, Avraham's silence when following God's commandments to banish Yishmael and to sacrifice Yitzhak is to be expected. And so are Avraham's concerns about God's promises of progeny or information about the destruction of Sodom.

Avraham's last words recorded in the Torah support the foregoing distinction. When his servant expresses concern that he may not be able to find a suitable wife for Yitzhak, Avraham responds:

> The Lord God of heaven, who took me from my father's house, and from the land of my family, and who spoke to me, and who swore to me, saying, To your seed will I give this land; He shall send His angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there (Gen. 24:7).

Initially, Avraham voices resolute faith, proclaiming that God surely will assist the servant. But in the next verse, Avraham makes provisions in the event that the servant is *unsuccessful*:

> But if the woman will not be willing to follow you, then you shall be free from my oath; only bring not my son there again (Gen. 24:8).

Thus, Avraham's parting words capture the tensions in his faith. Avraham hoped and prayed for divine assistance. But without a prophetic revelation, he knew that he could not be sure that his servant's mission would be successful.[30]

After Avraham's death, God emphasizes the Patriarch's perfect record of observing God's commandments:

> The Lord appeared to him, and said, Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you; Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you, and to your seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Avraham your father; And I will make your seed multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these countries; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; Because Avraham obeyed My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws (Gen. 26:2-5).

It also is significant that in the decisive majority of cases, God leaves Avraham to act on his own.

III. EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

Traditional exegetes battle passionately over nearly every point in the Avraham narratives, precisely because he is the paradigm of faith. They must balance good *peshat* in the text with broader issues of belief. Many of these issues remain unresolved by our greatest thinkers; and this uncertainty is precisely what can open serious discussion with students, beginning a learning process that should encompass a lifetime.

Of course, elementary school educators cannot present the Avraham narratives in all their complexity. But as with any other topic, they must not distort the material or present the issues in a manner that later will need to be unlearned. Rather, educators of younger children should provide an uncomplicated picture that can be enhanced and deepened in later years. For example, they might build a portrait of Avraham as one who observed God's commandments, who resolved family conflicts amicably, who heroically rescued

his nephew, who offered hospitality to unfamiliar guests, and who prayed on behalf of Sodom and Avimelekh.

But once students reach an age when they can understand complexity, educators must teach the Avraham narratives in their entirety. Based on our discussion, the biblical evidence leads to an approach like this: "Avraham always observed God's commandments, and trusted in God's ultimate goodness and fairness. He thanked God when he experienced blessing. Sometimes, he faced difficulties and did not always comprehend the world in which he lived. On those occasions, Avraham used his concerns as impetus to pray to God. Most of the time, God did not give instructions to Avraham, so he followed his own religious principles to react in those situations."

This composite message offers a parallel religious worldview for students: They are expected to observe *halakhah* unquestioningly—as did Avraham. When their lives are going well, they must thank God—as did Avraham. But they also may express puzzlement and confusion with expectations that do not always appear to be fulfilled. Rather than being trained to shy away from their questions, students should learn to exploit their religious dilemmas as impetus to prayer and introspection—as did Avraham. Finally, students should be shown that even Avraham—a great prophetic figure—functioned most of the time without explicit divine guidance. He had to use his religious judgment to determine many of his most difficult decisions. How much more applicable is this message in an age lacking the supreme gift of prophecy.

Additionally, much can be learned from the ongoing debate among our commentators regarding the acceptability of Avraham's questions. If our greatest sages disagree over such basic understandings of what good faith is, then we must realize that we do not have a perfect understanding

ourselves. Rather, the two thousand year old dialogue with our commentators encourages a life-long search for new levels of understanding and religiosity.

As religious educators, we all are caught in the same paradox of trying to remain faithful to the biblical text, while also being driven by our own religious values and preferences. It is hoped that this essay can serve as a resource in terms of material, with an emphasis on how the diversity of opinions can be a wonderful educational tool to explore a fundamental religious matter. Ultimately, a strong text focus, and a subsequent consideration of the commentators once we appreciate the underlying text issues, can be invaluable for our students, and for ourselves.

It is the challenge of educators to utilize the tensions within the text and among the commentators to open all available dimensions of complexity. In this manner, Avraham serves as an ever-deepening model of faith to those who study his life through the eternal word of the Living God.

This article is based on a lecture given on August 20, 2000, at Congregation Shearith Israel of New York, commemorating the first anniversary of the untimely passing of Talia Nagar, z"l, a delightful eight-year-old girl in our Congregation whose life was cut short by a brain tumor. May her memory always inspire those she knew, as well as all those who pursue a religious relationship with God in times of crisis. I would like to thank my students Jonathan Duker, Ezra Fass, Daniel Frankel, Natan Kapustin, Yehuda Kraut, Joshua Weisberg, and Chananya Weissman for reading earlier drafts of this essay and for their helpful comments.

Notes:

[1] It is critical to note that traditional commentators enter the exegetical fray with two religious assumptions: (1) biblical heroes are outstanding figures, whose spiritual accomplishments far exceed anything we can envision; and (2) the biblical text was composed as an eternally relevant teaching (cf. *Megillah* 14a) and therefore must be understood as applicable to our own religious lives. For an analysis of the way traditional commentaries have balanced these two assumptions, see Yaakov Medan, "*David u-Bat Sheva: ha-Het, ha-Onesh, ve-ha-Tikkun*" (Hebrew), (Alon Shevut: Tevunot Press, 2002), pp. 7-24; Mosheh Lichtenstein, *Tzir va-Tzon* (Alon Shevut: Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2002), pp. 235-257.

[2] Educators should contrast God's favorable responses to Avraham throughout the narratives, with God's explicit criticism of Sarah when she laughs at a divine promise of children (Gen. 18:12-15; see discussion below), and of Moshe when he expresses frustration at the nation's inappropriate request for meat (Num. 11:21-23). This contrast will enable students to see how God appears to accept Avraham's questions as religiously valid—an assumption generally, but not always, adopted by the commentators.

[3] See *Tanhuma—Lekh Lekha* 5, Rashi, Radak (on 12:10). Nahum Sarna, in *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), p. 93, notes that famines were unusual in biblical Israel (see II Sam. 20:26; I Kings 17:1; II Kings 6:25, 7:1; Ruth 1:1). The fact that all three Patriarchs encounter a famine (cf. Gen. 26:1; 42:1) is therefore significant, possibly suggesting that God's promises of blessing are not always followed by repose. Sarna concludes, "all this continually impinged upon the religious consciousness of Israel. It generated a heightened sense of dependence on God's protection and a more intense awareness of His mysterious workings."

[4] See R. Samson Raphael Hirsch's penetrating evaluation of Ramban's opinion regarding the criticism of biblical heroes (on 12:10). For a more elaborate discussion of Hirsch's position and its implications, see Joel B. Wolowelsky, "'*Kibbud Av*' and '*Kibbud Avot*': Moral Education and Patriarchal Critiques," *Tradition* 33:4 (Summer 1999), pp. 35-44.

[5] Although the Torah never explicitly links the slavery to any sin, several *midrashim* and later commentators search for possible

explanations. See *Nedarim* 32a, which offers three opinions blaming Avraham himself for the slavery of his descendants. Abarbanel suggests that Yosef's brothers' jealousy and sale of Yosef, as well as Yosef's own role in provoking his brothers, are to blame. Seforno (on Gen. 15:13) avers that the Israelites in Egypt assimilated (see Ezek. 20:8-9) and therefore were punished for their own sins. Similarly, R. Yehudah Kiel (*Da'at Mikra: Bereshit*, vol. 1 [Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1997]) submits that the Israelites should have left Egypt after the famine in Yosef's time had ended; because they remained, they were enslaved (for a fuller survey of traditional opinions, see Kiel, pp. 426-8).

Abarbanel (Gen. 15, question #15) quotes Ran and R. Hasdai Crescas, who both assert that the Israelite slavery was not a punishment for any sins, but rather an educational investment. Ran suggests that the slavery was intended to humble Israel, so that they would be able to accept the Torah later on. Similarly, R. Crescas maintains that God wanted to perform miracles for the Israelites, so that they would learn that God, and not magic, controls the universe. Although Abarbanel initially prefers to believe that all calamities occur as the result of some sin, he eventually concedes that the slavery may have served to refine and purify Israel (similar to Ran; cf. references to Egypt as a "refining pot" in Deut. 4:20; I Kings 8:51; Jer. 4:11). In the end, the theological causes of the slavery remain a mystery to the reader.

[6] See, for example, *Avot* 5:2; *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 26. Rashi and Radak (on 12:10) consider Avraham's lack of protest the required response for passing this test. In *Tanhuma Lekh Lekha* 5, on the other hand, Avraham did protest Sarah's being taken to Pharaoh. He prayed, "Is this the reward for my confidence in You?" In this *midrash*, Sarah also prayed at that time, using a similar tone (cf. *Gen. Rabbah* 41:2).

[7] Ran (quoted in Abarbanel), Abarbanel, Seforno, S. D. Luzzatto, Hirsch, Malbim, and Hoffmann suggest that if Avraham were viewed as Sarah's brother, Egyptians wishing to marry Sarah would have to negotiate with Avraham directly, and he could refuse. Avraham's delaying tactic fell apart when Pharaoh himself became interested in Sarah. For a discussion of a possible ancient Near Eastern parallel relating to the unique legal status of a brother, see Barry Eichler, "On Reading Genesis 12:10-20," in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, Mordechai Cogan, Barry Eichler & Jeffrey Tigay, eds. (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1997), pp. 23-38.

[8] See, for example, *Pesahim* 8b; *Kiddushin* 39b; *Bava Kamma* 60b; *Hullin* 142a. Radak (on 12:12) emphatically adopts this position as well. For further sources, see *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, vol. 1, s.v. "*en somekhin al ha-nes*," pp. 679-681.

[9] For elaboration on Ramban's position, see David Berger, "Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides," in *Rabbi Moshe Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ., Center for Jewish Studies, 1983), pp. 107-128. Of the traditional exegetes, Ralbag probably adopted the view most diametrically opposed to that of Ramban. See David Horwitz, "'*Ha-Haritzut Emet*': Ralbag's View of a Central Pragmatic/Ethical Characteristic of Abraham," in *Hazon Nahum*: *Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1997), pp. 265-309.

[10] All translations of biblical and talmudic passages in this essay (with a few minor modifications) are taken from Soncino Press Judaica Classics CD-Rom.

[11] Several other commentators maintain that Avraham first thought his question in v. 2, and only verbalized it in v. 3. See, for example, Abarbanel; Kiel (p. 398).

[12] See also *Targum Yerushalmi* to Gen. 15:6; *Mekhilta Beshallah* 6; *Tanhuma Beshallah* 10; *Song Rabbah* 4:8; Rambam (*Guide* III:53), Radak, Ibn Kaspi, Seforno, Hoffmann.

[13] See also Bekhor Shor, Hizkuni, Ralbag, Arama, Abarbanel, Netziv, S. D. Luzzatto, Kiel (p. 403).

[14] Cf. the parallel usage in Psalms (106:28-31), cited by Ibn Kaspi and Hoffmann in support of the Onkelos-Rashi position:

> They joined themselves to Baal-Peor, and ate the sacrifices of the dead. Thus they provoked Him to anger with their wrong doings; and the plague broke out upon them. Then stood up Pinehas, and executed judgment; and so the plague was stayed. And that was counted to him for righteousness to all generations for evermore.

[15] It is noteworthy that Ramban never appeals to the lack of subject transition in the verse; he simply rails passionately against the underlying religious assumptions of Onkelos and Rashi. Nehama Leibowitz (*Perush Rashi la-Torah* [Tel-Aviv: Open University, 1990], vol. 1, p. 159), conjectures that Ramban may have taken such a strong stance as part of his involvement in anti-Christian polemics. For further discussion of Ramban's views, see Ruth Ben-Meir, "Avraham in Ramban's Philosophy" (Hebrew) in *Avraham Avi ha-Ma'aminim*, ed. Moshe Halamish, et al. (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), pp. 155-165.

[16] Cf. *Tanhuma Kedoshim* 13; *Song Rabbah* 5:22; 30:16; *Eccl. Rabbah* 4:3; *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 48; *Pesikta Rabbati* 47; Rashi on Isa. 43:27. See also discussion in n. 5.

[17] Hizkuni bases his opinion on the chronology of *Seder Olam Rabbah*, ch. 1, which dates the 430 years of the Israelites "stay in Egypt" (see Ex. 12:40) back to the *berit ben ha-betarim*; and the 400 years of "living in a land not theirs" (see Gen. 15:13) back to the birth of Yitzhak. This reckoning, however, implies that the *berit ben ha-betarim* occurred when Avraham was seventy years old, five years before God commanded him to leave Haran to go to Canaan. Consequently, Ibn Ezra and Ramban already challenged this chronology. For a fuller survey of rabbinic opinions regarding the years of the servitude, see Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Shemot*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1991), pp. 208-9, 233-4.

[18] Kiel (*Da'at Mikra: Bereshit*, vol. 2 [Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1999], p. 23) quotes the midrashic principle that the righteous approach God audaciously, since they are confident that their God is true. See *Berakhot* 17b; *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 7:4 (11c).

[19] See, for example, Ramban (on 28:20-22), Rashi (on 32:11), and Kiel (on 32:8), who explain away Yaakov's fears with this talmudic reasoning. Several commentators propose possible sins of Yaakov: The *Zohar* (*Bereshit* 168a) faults Yaakov for not honoring his parents sufficiently, for not studying enough Torah, and for marrying two sisters. Ramban and *Keli Yakar* blame Yaakov for striking a covenant with the wicked Lavan. *Hatam Sofer*, following the midrashic lead of *Gen. Rabbah* 75:2, considers the very act of sending messengers to Esav sinful. Kiel further suggests that Yaakov may have been fearful of his original sin—the deception of Yitzhak that had triggered Esav's

anger. For analysis of rabbinic perceptions of negativity in the deception, see Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, 7th ed. (1985), pp. 264-274; David Berger, "On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemic and Exegesis," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1996), pp. 131-146.

[20] Netziv (on 32:8) accuses Yaakov of being overly fearful of Esav, and attributes his suffering in this episode to that lack of faith. Rashbam believes that Yaakov's sending gifts to Esav was a ruse to enable him to flee. God sent an angel to wrestle with Yaakov to detain him so that there would be a confrontation with Esav; God wanted Yaakov to see that He would protect him. Similarly, Radak and Hizkuni (on 32:26) view Yaakov's wrestling injury as a punishment for his lack of faith in God's protection. (Radak: because he wavered [*poseho*] over God's promises, he was condemned to limp [*pose'ah*].)

[21] On 28:20, Kiel quotes Tosafot, who argue that the condition imposed by Yaakov ("*if* God will be with me") should be translated as a declaration of confidence ("*surely*, God will be with me"). Alternatively, the *Zohar* (*Toledot* 150b) suggests that Yaakov made a conditional statement, because he remained unsure if his majestic dream was prophetic. *Gen. Rabbah* 70:3 submits a third possibility: the chapter is out of chronological sequence. Yaakov in fact vowed *before* his dream, and God responded favorably in the dream.

[22] Yehudah Elitzur suggests that *all* divine promises in fact are a call to action—to inspire a person to behave religiously, and to hope that God will bless his actions. See: Y.M. Immanueli, ed., *Sefer Bereshit Hesberim ve-He'arot* (Tel-Aviv: ha-Hevrah le-Heker ha-Mikra, 1977), p. 427 (and cf. Tosafot on *Yevamot* 50a, s.v. *teda*). It appears that this approach most suitably fits both the Avraham and Yaakov narratives.

[23] Rashi, Radak, Bekhor Shor, Ramban, R. Bahya, and Ralbag adopt Onkelos' reading, while Ibn Ezra, Ibn Kaspi, Abarbanel, S. D. Luzzatto, Hirsch, Malbim, and Hoffmann prefer that of *Targum Yerushalmi*. Mitigating Avraham's doubt, Abarbanel, S. D. Luzzatto, Hirsch, and Malbim maintain that Avraham did not doubt God's promise, but was astonished on a rational level.

[24] *Midrash ha-Gadol* (ed. Margolit), p. 302. Cf. *Gen. Rabbah* 47:3: "Twice Avraham fell on his face, and his offspring were twice denied

circumcision, once in Egypt and the other in the desert." This *midrash* appears to support the more critical reading of Avraham's laughter.

[25] For two recent articles on the subject of Avraham's and Sarah's laughter, see Esther M. Shkop, "And Sarah Laughed," *Tradition* 31:3 (Spring 1997), pp. 42-51; Aaron Lichtenstein, "Isaac and Laughter," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 18 (1989), pp. 13-18.

[26] See R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha?" in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus, OH: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 62-88.

[27] Those who consistently reinterpret the earlier narratives would find Avraham's confrontation of God anomalous in this instance.

[28] See *Gen. Rabbah* 39:6; 49:9; *Tanhuma Noah* 9; *Aggadat Bereshit* 7:18; *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 23. See further discussion and sources in Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (1985, 7th ed.), pp. 59-66.

[29] Kiel (vol. 2, p. 100) suggests that Avraham did not pray on behalf of Yitzhak because Avraham had a vested interest in that case. But Avraham had a vested interest in the earlier instances discussed above, yet he still engaged God in dialogue. Therefore, Kiel's answer is unconvincing.

[30] Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel, and Seforno (on 24:7) note that v. 7 must be a prayer of Avraham (and not a prophecy), or else why express concern that his servant may not succeed? In contrast, Hoffmann suggests that Avraham personally believed that his servant would be successful; he concluded with v. 8 solely to placate his servant.