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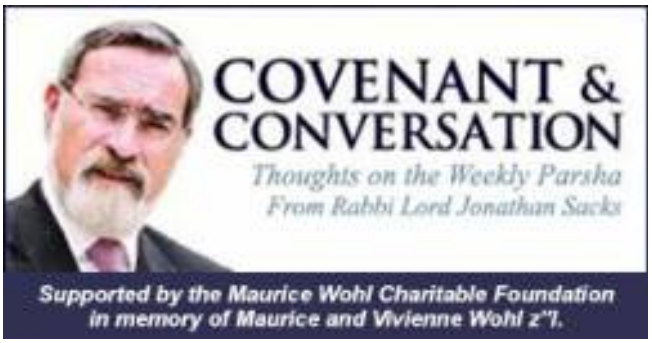

Even Higher Than Angels

It is one of the most famous scenes in the Bible. Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day when three strangers pass by. He urges them to rest and take some food. The text calls them men. They are in fact angels, coming to tell Sarah that she will have a child.

The chapter seems simple. It is, however, complex and ambiguous. It consists of three sections:

> Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.
> Verses 2-16: Abraham and the men/angels.
> Verses 17-33: The dialogue between God and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

How are these sections related to one another? Are they one scene, two or three? The most obvious answer is three. Each of the above sections is a separate event. First, God appears to Abraham, as Rashi explains, "to visit the sick" after Abraham's circumcision. Then the visitors arrive with the news about Sarah's child. Then takes place the great dialogue about justice.

Maimonides (Guide for the Perplexed II:42) suggests that there are two scenes (the visit of the angels, and the dialogue with God). The first verse does not describe an event at all. It is, rather, a chapter heading.

The third possibility is that we have a single continuous scene. God appears to Abraham, but before He can speak, Abraham sees the passers-by and asks God to wait while he serves them food. Only when they have departed - in verse 17 - does he turn to God, and the conversation begins.

How we interpret the chapter will affect the way we translate the word *Adonai* in the third verse. It could mean (1) God or (2) 'my lords' or 'sirs'. In the first case, Abraham would be addressing heaven. In the second, he would be speaking to the passers-by.

Several English translations take the second option. Here is one example:

> The Lord appeared to Abraham ... He looked up, and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing

> them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them. Bowing low, he said, "Sirs, if I have deserved your favour, do not go past your servant without a visit."

The same ambiguity appears in the next chapter (19:2), when two of Abraham's visitors (in this chapter they are described as angels) visit Lot in Sodom:

> The two angels came to Sodom in the evening while Lot was sitting by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low he said, "I pray you, sirs, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night there and bathe your feet."

Normally, differences of interpretation of biblical narrative have no halakhic implications. They are matters of legitimate disagreement. This case is unusual, because if we translate *Adonai* as 'God', it is a holy name, and both the writing of the word by a scribe, and the way we treat a parchment or document containing it, have special stringencies in Jewish law. If we translate it as 'my lords' or 'sirs', then it has no special sanctity.

The simplest reading of both texts - the one concerning Abraham, the other, Lot - would be to read the word in both cases as 'sirs'. Jewish law, however, ruled otherwise. In the second case - the scene with Lot - it is read as 'sirs', but in the first it is read as 'God'. This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that Abraham interrupted God as He was about to speak, and asked Him to wait while he attended to his guests. This is how tradition ruled that the passage should be read:

> The Lord appeared to Abraham ... He looked up and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them, and bowed down. [Turning to God] he said: "My God, if I have found favour in your eyes, do not leave your servant [i.e. Please wait until I have given hospitality to these men]." [He then turned to the men and said:] "Let me send for some water so that you may bathe your feet and rest under this tree..."

This daring interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: "Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine presence." Faced with a choice between listening to God, and offering hospitality to [what seemed to be] human beings, Abraham chose the latter. God acceded to his request, and waited while Abraham brought the visitors food and drink, before engaging him in dialogue about the fate of Sodom.

How can this be so? Is it not disrespectful at best, heretical at worst, to put the needs of human beings before attending on the presence of God?

What the passage is telling us, though, is something of immense profundity. The idolaters of Abraham's time worshipped the sun, the stars, and the forces of nature as gods. They worshipped power and the powerful. Abraham knew, however, that God is not in nature but beyond nature. There is only one thing in the universe on which He has set His image: the human person, every person, powerful and powerless alike.

The forces of nature are impersonal, which is why those who worship them eventually lose their humanity. As the Psalm puts it:

> Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils but cannot smell... Their makers become like them, and so do all who put their trust in them. (Psalm 115)

You cannot worship impersonal forces and remain a person: compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving. Precisely because we believe that God is personal, someone to whom we can say 'You', we honour human dignity as sacrosanct. Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the Divine presence when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the Divine presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

One of the most beautiful comments on this episode was given by R. Shalom of Belz who noted that in verse 2, the visitors are spoken of as standing above Abraham [*nitzavim alav*]. In verse 8, Abraham is described as standing above them [*omed alehem*]. He said: at first, the visitors were higher than Abraham because they were angels and he a mere human being. But when he gave them food and drink and shelter, he stood even higher than the angels. We honour God by honoring His image, humankind.

The Binding

This Torah portion contains God's tenth and last trial of Abraham: the binding of Isaac.

Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son, his beloved son Isaac. Abraham does not complain. He does not engage God in dialogue. He does not negotiate with God, as he had on other occasions. It seems that Abraham senses that this is something which he must do.

What was the purpose of the test? Numerous scholars over countless generations, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, have studied this text and attempted to penetrate the lesson of the passage. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, in his book *The Fear and Trembling*, labels the act a "leap of faith," a term which has entered the lexicon of virtually all contemporary religious thinkers. But it is interesting that in Jewish sources, Abraham is not described as one who excelled in faith per se, as much as he is described as the one who loved God.

The Zohar states:

> So it is written *'thou didst love righteousness and hate wickedness'* [Psalms 45:8] and it is further written *'Abraham who loves me.'* [Isaiah 41:8] Abraham is said to have loved God because he loved righteousness; this was Abraham's love of God in which he excelled over all of his contemporaries. [Zohar 1:76b]

Based on Jewish sources, then, we should label Abraham's action as a "leap of love" rather than a "leap of faith". His love of God allowed Abraham to respond willingly when called upon to sacrifice his own son, a "grotesque" task to any parent's mind.

If he could do it so willingly, what then was the test, what then was the challenge?

At first glance such a question seems absurd, as the very notion of child sacrifice is abhorrent to modern man. However, when seen conceptually, the act of an individual who is willing to sacrifice his child for his own ideals is really not alien to us. Even enlightened, modern Democratic societies are prepared to sacrifice their children for their ideals -- for example, to protect the country or ideology. Indeed, were this not so, there would be no war. As difficult as sacrificing one's child is, it would seem that most societies today deem it justifiable when done for the sake of one's beliefs.

Perhaps Abraham's challenge lay in the fact that he had previously been told that Isaac would be his spiritual heir. If Isaac would die, he could not inherit Abraham's legacy, he could not lead. More importantly, Isaac's death would indicate that the word of God could not be trusted.

Philo of Alexandria suggested that the sacrifice of Isaac, whose name meant "will laugh," would result in the eradication of all laughter from the world. Surely, for Abraham, the death of his beloved son would mark a spiritual death of a kind, the death of his relationship with his God, whose word would be proven as fickle.

Midrashic and Kabbalistic sources offer a deeper understanding of the dilemma: Abraham is described as the individual who excelled at the trait of kindness; he was a giving person. Abraham, in his understanding of monotheism, knew that God has no needs, that God is all-powerful, that there was nothing that he could give God and do for God. Abraham tried to impress upon his pagan neighbors that God does not need their sacrifices, does not need anything. All that man can do is to try to be like God. Therefore, just as God had created the world through incredible kindness and love, kindness was Abraham's credo. Now, God was calling upon Abraham to go against the very basis of his life's mission.

Viktor Frankel, in his classic work *Man's Search for Meaning*, describes the need for meaning as one of the most profound needs within the hierarchy of human existence.

What God was asking of Abraham was not merely to sacrifice his son Isaac, but to sacrifice his own life's meaning. We can clearly appreciate that had the test been to entertain 50, 100 or 200 guests for dinner, Abraham would have risen to the challenge heroically, with a smile on his face and

gladness in his heart. That would not have been a challenge. That would have fit within Abraham's world view as an act of kindness. Instead, God asked Abraham to perform the act which is the very antithesis of kindness, to kill his son. This may be the most difficult aspect of the story of the binding of Isaac. With one blow of the sword Abraham would be conceding to all his pagan neighbors that his mission had come to an end, and that instead of inspiring them to embrace his world-view, he was throwing in the towel and accepting their twisted rites and rituals. His life's meaning would perish along with Isaac.

Only when we understand that the greatness of Abraham was his kindness, are we able to appreciate the significance of this test. The first step toward religious development is taking one's capabilities, one's natural gifts, and utilizing them for a divine mission. What God wanted Abraham to gain from this challenge was the appreciation that man can go beyond his natural tendencies and skills. Therefore God calls upon Abraham to perform an act which is antithetical ' the complete opposite ' of his natural instinct.

What is considered the complete opposite of kindness? Justice. Justice means carrying out the sentence of the judge with exactitude.

This understanding is buttressed by an analysis of the name of God used in this text.

> *And it came to pass after these things, that God (Elohim) tested Abraham, and said to him, Abraham; and he said, 'Behold, here I am.' And He said, 'Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you.* [Genesis 22:1-2]

In Hebrew, the name of God used here is *Elohim* (*Elokim* in non-essential use), the name associated with judgment. (The name of God associated with kindness is the ineffable *YKVK* which we generally render as the *Adonai*, Lord.) It is fascinating that at the conclusion of the ordeal the text states:

> *And the angel of God (the Lord) called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham.' And he said, 'Here am I.' And he said, 'Lay not your hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God (Elohim), seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son, from me.'* [Genesis 22:11-12]

The angel of the Lord of kindness states that it is now known that Abraham has the ability to relate to *Elohim*, the God of judgment. [See Michtav Me'eliyahu, for a full discussion of this point]. When Abraham is prepared to sacrifice his son, he has passed the test, and the sacrifice itself becomes unnecessary.

Abraham's tenth test, therefore, is to relate to God in a manner in which he was unaccustomed, to excel in a type of worship which was contrary to his instinct. Greatness, then, is not merely using your skills in the service of God, but developing new skills for the service of God. This test was not for God's benefit -- the All-Knowing One

knew Abraham's potential. This test was for the benefit of Abraham, to elevate him to a level which he could not previously have imagined.

However, there is another player in the story -- Isaac. According to tradition, Isaac was 37 years old at the time of the event. [Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 56:3] According to the Midrashic and Kabbalistic sources, while Abraham represents kindness, Isaac represents justice. What do we learn about Isaac's role in his own binding?

> *Abraham awoke early in the morning, saddled his donkey and took his two helpers with him, and also his son Isaac. He split the wood of the burnt-offering, and went to the place that God had told him. On the third day, Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from afar ... Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and placed it on his son Isaac. And in his hand he took the fire and the knife, and they went both of them together.* [Genesis 22:3-6]

So father and son traveled together on this mission. It would seem that the togetherness denotes more than mere traveling companions. States the Midrash:

> *' ... and they went both of them together'* -- one to bind and the other to be bound; one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered. [Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 56:3]

In so many words, they were "in on this together." What follows is a unique dialogue. It is the only time in the entire Biblical literature that Abraham and Isaac speak to one another:

> *And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'My father.' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'Here is the fire and the wood. Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' And Abraham said, 'My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering,' and both of them walked on together.* [Genesis 22:7-8]

In this dialogue, Isaac questions his father about the sacrifice which will follow. We must recall that Isaac was an adult at this point, well aware of the pagan practices of his neighbors. Yet he walked together with his father, completely dedicated to his father's wishes. Isaac embodies justice and it is his nature to follow the law as set down by his father.

When the moment of execution comes, Isaac is tied down to the altar. The Hebrew for tying or binding is *akaida*, and the offering of Isaac has been called throughout the ages *Akaidat Itzhak*, "the binding of Isaac." Yet Abraham was never commanded to tie Isaac, so why did he do it?

Again, the Sages in the Midrash fill in the missing information. They tell us that Isaac is a willing, enthusiastic participant in this excursion. He lies down on the altar, stretches back his neck, and then says to his father: "Father, the soul is willing, but the flesh is weak. Tie me down in order to restrain me, to prevent me from flinching upon seeing the blade."

According to the Midrash, the idea of the binding was completely Isaac's. Therefore, throughout history, we refer to the act as "the binding of Isaac."

As the blade is about to descend, a voice calls from heaven, instructing Abraham to stop. Isaac will be saved; there will be no human sacrifice today nor on any other day, in the Jewish tradition. A ram is sacrificed in Isaac's stead. And then we are told:

> *So Abraham returned to his helpers and they rose up and went together to Beersheba.* [Genesis 22:19]

But what about Isaac? Why did the Torah not tell us about his descent? Did Isaac come down from the mountain? The next time we see him -- a full two chapters later -- Isaac, he is standing in a field, eyes gazing heavenward, praying to God.

Later in his life, Isaac will become blind. The Sages explain that the cause of his blindness was the tears of angels which fell into his eyes during those moments on the mountain, when it appeared his father's knife would end his life [Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 56:8]. Evidently, what the rabbis are trying to communicate is that in some way Isaac was affected by that experience on the mountain. In fact, his sight or perception was forever altered by the events there.

If the test for Abraham was to perform an act which was against his natural kindness, he surely passed with flying colors. But what about Isaac? If his personality is identified with justice, perhaps his test was in coming down the mountain, joining the rest of the world, and relating to God through the attribute of kindness. Did Isaac succeed in his test?

Our Sages relate the following scene which will take place in the future:

> R' Shmuel, the son of Nachmani, said in the name of Rav Yonatan: "What does the verse mean, *You are our father, for Abraham did not know us and Israel did not recognize us. You [G-d], our Father, Redeemer, forever is Your Name.* [Isaiah 63:16]. In the future, God will say to Abraham, 'Your children have sinned against me.' And Abraham will say in front of Him, 'Master of the Universe, wipe them out for of the sanctification of Your Name.' God will say, 'Perhaps Jacob, who had experienced difficulty raising his children, will ask for mercy for the Jewish people.' G-d will say to him, 'Your children have sinned against Me.' Jacob will say in front of Him, 'Master of the Universe, wipe them out for the sanctification of Your Name.' God will say, 'The old man has no reason, and the young one has no advice." God will then say to Isaac, 'Your children have sinned against me.' He will say in front of Him, 'Master of the Universe, *my* children? My children, and not *Your* children? When the Jews said, *We will do and we will listen*, You called them *my first-born son*, and now You call them my children, and not Your children? Besides, how much did they sin? How

> many years are the years of a man's life'seventy? Subtract [the first] 20, for which a person is not punished, you are left with 50. Subtract 25, which are evenings, and you are left with 25. Subtract 12-1/2 which a person uses to pray, to eat, and answer nature's call, and you are left with 12-1/2. If You can tolerate all of this, good; if not, then let us split it, half on You and half on me. If you will say that all of the years of their sins are on me, remember that I sacrificed my soul in front of you (for you).'" [Shabbat 89b]

In this amazing passage, we are told that in the future, neither Abraham nor Jacob will stand in defense of the Jews who have sinned. That will be Isaac's role. Isaac will engage God in negotiations reminiscent of Abraham's plea for the cities Sodom and Gomorrah. Isaac will not tolerate the Jews' being punished. He will argue, negotiate, and finally pull out his trump card: in the merit of his being willing to sacrifice himself, God must forgive the people. Why do the Sages expect Isaac to display more kindness than his father Abraham, whose very nature was kindness?

Apparently the trait of kindness which is acquired is stronger than the trait of kindness which comes naturally. So we discern that Isaac did descend the mountain. He did develop the trait of kindness and when he did he surpassed even Abraham himself. Such is the merit of a trait acquired. Isaac did not acquire this trait easily, but the Talmud tells us that the entire Jewish people will be saved on its merit.

Refinement Without Fear

The trouble began when Avraham introduced his wife Sarah to the people of Gerar as his sister. One thing led to another, and she was taken to the palace of Avimelech, king of Gerar, as a prospective new wife. Avimelech came very close to sinning with Sarah, but Hashem revealed her true identity to him.

Avimelech was upset. "You almost got me into terrible trouble," he said to Avraham. "You told me she was your sister when she was really your wife. Why didn't you tell me the truth? Why did you do this to me?"

"For I thought," said Avraham, "only there is no fear of the Lord in this place (Gen. 20:11)."

The word "only" in this verse seems to be out of place. What is it supposed to imply?

Rav Elchanan Wasserman raised this question when he addressed a group of rabbis in Germany during the 1930's. Then he shocked them with the Malbim's explanation.

"Your city is wonderful," Avraham was telling the people of Gerar, according to the Malbim's interpretation. "It is a place of culture and refinement, of exemplary citizens. There is only

one thing wrong with it. The Lord is not feared in your city. And if the Lord is not feared, then all your other refinements and accomplishments are meaningless. If you are not governed by fear of the Lord but by your own human standards, there is no hope for you. You cannot be trusted not to kill a man with a desirable wife. Your civilized ways mean nothing. They will not be allowed to get in the way of your passions and ambitions, because you do not fear the Lord."

The implications of what Rav Elchanan was saying were clear. Germany was a civilized country, but there was no fear of the Lord. Therefore, it was a dangerous place. Anything could happen there.

"Not so," some of the German rabbis objected. "Germany is a land of laws, culture, civilization, high moral standing, science, technology. We are not some backward backwater from the Middle Ages. Jews are not at risk here. We are protected by the law."

Germany was indeed a country of laws, but what were those laws? Rabbi Reuven Bulka of Ottawa, Canada, recalls attending *cheder* in Germany during Kristallnacht. One of the children ran into the classroom and informed the *rebbi* that his house was on fire. The *rebbi* immediately telephoned the fire department and reported the fire, but his pleas for assistance fell on deaf ears. He got through to the fire chief, but to no avail.

"We are sorry," said the fire chief, "but we cannot put out the fire. It is against the law."

It was now against the law to put out fires in Jewish homes. Germany was still a land of laws. That had not changed. Only the laws had changed. All the culture and the civilization meant nothing. When there is no fear of God in a place, the laws mean nothing.

When Rav Yitzchak Hutner was learning in Slobodka, Rav Avraham Elya Kaplan came back to the *yeshivah* after spending some time in Germany. The Alter of Slobodka invited Rav Avraham Elya to convey to the yeshivah his impressions of the German people. What were they like?

"It seems to me that the Germans are a kind and refined people," he replied. "When you ask directions from someone, he will give you very precise instructions for getting there, and then he will say to you, *'Nicht wahr*? Isn't that so?' Now, he knows that you have absolutely no idea about how to get there. In fact, that's why you're asking directions. He also knows perfectly well that he doesn't need nor can he expect any confirmation from you. And still he says in such a deferential tone, '*Nicht wahr*?' I see this as a sign of refinement. The Germans are a refined people."

At this point, an argument broke out among the students of the Slobodka Yeshivah. Some argued, Rav Hutner among them, that we should seek to learn good traits only from the holy Torah, the repository of all desirable ethics and values, and not from the Germans or any other gentile communities. Besides, if they were not rooted in the Torah, it was quite possible that refined manners were no more than a superficial cloak for a dark interior.

"I disagree," declared one student. "A wise person learns from everyone. If we see something

admirable among the gentiles, we should give credit where credit is due and adopt it for ourselves as well. I think the practice of saying *nicht wahr* is a sign of politeness, refinement and a very becoming modesty. We should learn from the virtues of the Germans."

Nearly 50 years later, Rav Hutner was saying a *shiur* (Torah class) in Yeshivah Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin when an old man walked in. He sat in the back and waited until the *shiur* was over. Then he approached Rav Hutner.

"You don't remember me, do you?" he said. "I am the student in Slobodka who argued with you about admiring the refined manners of the Germans."

"Ah, of course I remember you," said Rav Hutner. "Ah, it is good to see you again after all these years.

He reached out to take the old man's hand, but there was only a hook where the hand should have been. Rav Hutner's hand remained suspended in midair.

"I lost it in the concentration camps," the old man explained. "When the Nazi was sawing off my right hand, he kept saying, 'This is hurting you, *nicht wahr*? The pain is intense, *nicht wahr*? And even as I was screaming as if my lungs would burst, he was smiling all the time. Such a gentle, refined smile. Reb Yitzchak, you were right, and I was wrong."

When "there is no fear of the Lord in this place," when people live by their own rules, all the culture and refined manners mean nothing. It was true in Gerar. It was true in Germany. It is true everywhere.

Intended Deeds

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

Parshat Vayeira is an opportunity to learn from the extraordinary actions of our patriarch, Abraham.

The Noam Elimelech teaches that the primary aspect of a mitzvah is not its technicalities and details, but rather the love we put into its performance. This does not mean to say that we should disregard the technicalities; on the contrary, we must perform them accurately and to the best of our ability. Nevertheless, when God weighs the two components of a mitzvah, He considers the love we put into its performance to be greater than even the act itself.

The Slonimer Rebbe (in Netivot Shalom) cites a proof to this idea. The Talmud (Brachot 6a) wonders what the phrase in Malachi (3:16) means when it states, *"u'l'choshvei shemo"* - *"and to those who think about God's Name."* Rav Ashi explains that a person who intended to perform a mitzvah, yet was prevented from doing so for

reasons beyond his control, is nevertheless credited with having performed it. This is because *"choshvei shemo"* - the person was thinking about His Name.

If God is present in our thoughts, and we yearn and desire to fulfill His will, we are credited with performing mitzvot even when the acts themselves did not come to fruition. The desire to fulfill the Divine will is considered the primary element of the mitzvah.

It is interesting to note that this idea does not hold true in the reverse. The Tikkunei Zohar (Tikkun 10) teaches that a mitzvah performed with all its intricacies and technicalities, yet without love, does not fly upward. This is because the fundamental ingredient - love - is absent.

LOVE BREAKS ALL NORMS

Our tradition teaches that God tested Abraham 10 times (Avot 5:3). Although Abraham had many extraordinary character traits, it was his overwhelming love for God that enabled him to pass his tests. In Isaiah (41:8), God describes Abraham as *"Avraham ohavi"* - "Abraham, the one who loves Me." Abraham's tremendous love for God enabled him to carry out the Divine will time after time, even in exceptionally challenging situations.

We see this idea in the Talmud's statement that love breaks all norms (Sanhedrin 105b; see also Bereishit Rabba 55:8). When a person is truly in love, there is nothing he wouldn't do for his beloved.

Abraham demonstrates this quality in this week's parsha when God commands him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The Torah tells us that Abraham got up early in the morning to perform God's command, even performing menial tasks such as saddling his own donkey and chopping wood for the sacrifice (Genesis 22:3)! Abraham's zeal and willingness to perform such tasks himself, instead of appointing one of his many servants to do so, was a manifestation of his incredible love for God.

This idea helps us understand why Abraham chopped the wood for the sacrifice as soon as he awoke from his prophecy. A more sensible plan might have been to wait until he and Isaac arrived at Mount Moriah, thereby saving himself three days of schlepping! According to the Noam Elimelech, however, this was not a logistical oversight. Abraham prepared the wood immediately to demonstrate his love for God. When we love someone, we want to do their bidding immediately, with our own two hands, no matter how difficult the task may be. This was the type of relationship that Abraham had with God - a relationship of love that breaks all norms.

May we use the inspiration of Abraham to love God, in order to succeed in passing our tests in life. And may we merit to see the reciprocation of that love with the final redemption of our people.

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