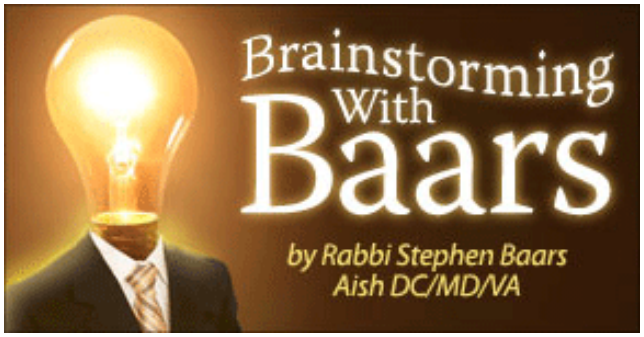
In this Issue

- **Brainstorming with Baars** by *Rabbi Stephen Baars*
- **Appel's Parsha Page** by *Rabbi Yehuda Appel*
- **Rabbi Noah Weinberg's Wisdom for Living** by *Rabbi Noah Weinberg*
- **Straight Talk** by *Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt*



Real Peace

Studies show that the average American teenager has seen hundreds of murders on TV.

As bad as this sounds, there's worse.

They've seen love stories, too.

By the time anyone with a TV gets married they have seen enough "happy endings" to make even the most cynical groom believe that all he has to do is kiss his bride in the morning and they will live happily ever after.

Action and romance movies train us to believe ridiculous things. Like murders only occur when gloomy music is playing in the background. I first learned how dangerous this "training" was when I was mugged in Los Angeles to the wrong background music.

People raised on this fodder believe dark music precedes bad things and that all marriages end in an argument. Happily married couples never argue, according to Hollywood, and couples that have even the slightest dispute are in big trouble. For some reason, even couples who have good marriages feel they need to protect their children from seeing their parents tackle thorny issues. "Not in front of the kids" is the parenting mantra for countless Westerners, in the vain hope that the children will never see an argument and therefore think they are happily married.

A careful reader of the Torah would have a hard time coming to that conclusion. I should add that no surveyor of married couples would believe that either. All people who are happily married argue. In fact, up to a point, there is a direct correlation between the amount of arguing and the amount of happiness in a marriage.

Rebbetzin Heller points out: "Anything meaningful is never finished." Anything that is meaningful will always need more work. You never get to the end.

This point is made frighteningly clear in this week's Torah portion. Abraham and Sarah, how should I say it, "go at it," but good.

The basic story is there for you to read but the outline is this: God informs Abraham that he is going to have a child. Sarah overhears and finds this rather amusing, being that she is "well advanced in years." Sarah remarks to herself how odd, after all these years and how "worn out" she is. On top of that, she notes, Abraham is pretty old too!

God finds Sarah's words a little, ummmm, let's say, out of line, and tells Abraham. For God, nothing is too difficult. How could Sarah doubt Him?

However, when God tells Abraham what Sarah said, He changes Sarah's words a little. Instead of what she really said, He tells him that she said, "Sarah was too old" (Genesis 18:13.)

Rashi, the pre-eminent Torah commentator, explains that, for peace, God changed Sarah's

words.

Well, you can just imagine what happens next. Abraham had just been told by God that Sarah was, to say politely, lacking. Picture if you will, God came and told you about some indiscretion your spouse had committed.

And thus is the lead up to Sarah and Abraham, a long-married couple, "going at it," and this was no discussion about the virtues of Plato's philosophy. No, the argument they had could be summed up like this:

> *"Yes, you did."*
> *"No, I didn't."*
> *"Yes, you did."*
> *"No, I didn't."*

I know I shouldn't say this, but this is not what I would call, deep.

Before I go on to the lesson, I want to mention how absolutely riveting and meaningful this is. Rabbi Nachum Braverman has a cute line about this. "You want to know which couples in a restaurant have been married the longest? See who is talking the least."

After a few years, we pretty much know who our spouses are. And we give up trying to sway them on issues we have tried before. That's not a healthy marriage. Abraham and Sarah were married for decades and they never gave up on trying to help each other see the truth.

"Nothing in life that is meaningful is ever finished" (ibid). Marriage is meaningful.

OK, back to the story. Those who have been reading the Torah all the way through will have some troubling questions right about now. For one, in last week's Torah portion (Genesis 17:15-17), God tells Abraham that he is going to have a child (very similar to this week's story) and Abraham finds it so funny he falls over!

Pretty funny, heh? Not as humorous as the reaction of Sarah, who laughed only to herself. So, Abraham found it pretty funny and hard to believe that he who was 100 years old could have a child. Yet, God doesn't go to Sarah and tell her about Abraham's apparent disbelief. **But He does tell Abraham when Sarah is the one who is lacking.**

Not only that, but God changed Sarah's words, we are told, for peace. What peace? Because of what God told Abraham, I wouldn't say a war broke out, but I wouldn't call it peace either.

Better still, if God wants Sarah to believe it's possible for her to have a baby, God need say nothing and within a few months, Sarah will pretty much figure it out on her own.

Not only that, but when has it been the way of God to tell a husband the failings of his wife? I doubt many of us could survive for long if God told our spouses what we were really thinking. Anyone who has been married for more than about 10 minutes knows what I mean.

To sum up: For peace, God changed Sarah's words, but wouldn't it have been better to have not said anything?

Real Peace

There is no peace between the United States of America and New Zealand. I hope this news doesn't mean that we start landing troops on their beaches.

There is no peace, but there is no war either. There is nothing. You don't have peace with your bank manager, nor with the plumber or maid.

Peace is not a lack of conflict. The fact that we don't argue doesn't mean we have peace. Peace is the coming together of minds.

"Peace now" is as absurd a statement as "agree now."

When Abraham and Sarah both believed it was not possible to have children, they had peace. And therefore God did not tell Sarah that Abraham did not believe (in Chapter 17).

Only when Abraham came to believe it was possible and Sarah did not, then they no longer had peace. At that point, therefore, God came and told Abraham, "You don't have peace. Talk to your wife."

If you want to have peace you have to work out your differences.

God not only changed Sarah's words **for peace**, He told Abraham **for peace**.

Lying and Peace

So, why then did God change Sarah's words?

Let me explain.

Rarely do spouses fall out because of an argument over paint.

"Let's paint the room blue?"

"No, I prefer pink."

"What's wrong with blue?"

"Blue reminds me of your mother, and you know how she's got awful taste. I think that's where you got it from."

This argument will last years, and whatever paint color is finally chosen it will not resolve the issues.

When we are arguing it is of vital importance to not add things like, "And, you're too old." It doesn't help resolve the core issue because it has nothing to do with the issue. It will take us away from peace because it doesn't help us resolve our differences.

Conclusion

I would like to finish with this one thought: Peace comes through the resolving of issues. This is usually a distressful process, whether with spouses, families, friends or even with countries and cultures.

I believe the world is engaged in its current conflict over real issues and that, maybe, this is very different than previous conflicts, which were primarily over money.

If this is so, our future is bright.

Please God, this will lead to peace, real peace.

Brainstorming Questions to Ponder

Question 1: Do you think the world is closer to real peace than 100 years ago?

Question 2: Are there things you don't like to talk about?

Question 3: When we say, "peace be upon you - *Shalom Aleichem*" what do we mean?



Actualizing potential through tests

The Russian Czar Nicholas I, in his efforts to

destroy Jewish life, demanded that each Jewish community provide soldiers for his forces. These young men, **called "Cantonists,"** were typically drafted at the age of 12 and served in the Russian army for 25 years. They did not serve in the regular army, however, but in separate units under the **most anti-Semitic officers.** The Russian hope was that they would eventually convert to the Russian church. Ultimately, many of these young men did lose their Jewish identity. Others were killed, and many took their own lives rather than be baptized.

It so happened during this period, that there was a meeting in St. Petersburg of many of the great rabbis of the time. The meeting took place around the High Holidays and there was some speculation as to which rabbi should be given the **honor of leading the Rosh Hashana services.** Right before the services were to begin, a group of Cantonists walked into the shul and announced that one of them would lead the prayers. Seeing the quizzical looks on the faces of the rabbis, one of the Cantonists lifted his shirt, exposing his back. The flesh was a mass of scarred tissue, testifying to the many beatings he'd endured to maintain his Jewish faith. With no further discussion, the Cantonist was given the honor of leading the services.

Sacrifice and a willingness to undergo hardships for the right cause has long been a hallmark of Jewish greatness. Loyalty to a just cause is a great source of meaning and fulfillment. As the Sages say: **"According to the difficulty, is the (divine) reward."**

Nowhere is the importance of sacrifice more evident than in this week's Torah portion, Vayera. In the parsha, Abraham is commanded by the Almighty to offer his only son Isaac on an altar. In perhaps the most moving of all Torah passages, Abraham is told to bring **"your son, your only one, the one you love"** and bind him on an altar at Mount Moriah.

The Midrash describes how Abraham's life was a series of spiritual tests. At a young age, he risked his life to fight against idolatry. Later on, hearkening to God's call, he left everything behind, following God's dictates to go to a strange, new land. Now he was being asked to make the greatest of all sacrifices: to offer up his son. This was the son for whom Abraham and his wife Sara - previously childless - had spent decades praying for! **All his dreams, all his teachings,** the legacy he had hoped to pass down to mankind had been riding on this son. And now he was to slaughter him.

It was the cruelest of ironies that Abraham, who had spent decades preaching against idolatry and human sacrifice, was now being asked to perform this pagan practice. The Bible reports, though, how Abraham, **with no sign of hesitation,** took Isaac for the 3-day trip to Mount Moriah, then bound him on the altar. Abraham was about to slaughter his son... when an angel intervened - stopping the sacrifice.

The obvious question is: Why did the Almighty put Abraham through this test **in the first place?** Of course the Omniscient One already knew how Abraham would face this test!

In the view of many commentaries, the purpose of this test was to help Abraham reach a greater level of loyalty to the Almighty. While it is true that Abraham must have had this potential all along, having the potential to do something is not the same as doing it. Through this trial, Abraham **actualized his potential and grew tremendously.**

The Abarbanel (15th century Spanish rabbi) has a different interpretation. He sees the purpose of the binding not so much as a lesson for Abraham, but more as **a message for the whole world.** The Abarbanel points out that the Hebrew word for test - "nisa" - has in its root the word "ness" which means "banner." The primary purpose of Abraham's actions were to show successive generations the

degree to which sacrifice is possible.

Whether it was the Cantonists or others, this lesson was learned quite well by Abraham's spiritual descendants who made great sacrifices to fulfill the Almighty's will.



Building the World Through Kindness

> *"Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw: And behold! Three men were standing over him. He perceived, so he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and bowed toward the ground." (Bereishis 18:1-2)*

Picture the scene. Avraham is having a prophetic experience, communicating directly with God Himself. He then sees three guests and says to God, "Pardon me, Almighty, I have to go take care of my guests. I'll be right back."

Why does Avraham take leave of the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence), in the midst of experiencing the transcendental, to entertain three nomadic strangers? Imagine that you are hosting the Queen of England and while having a private face-to-face talk with her, you see three strangers passing by. Would you tell the Queen, "I'll be back in 45 minutes, I need to go whip up dinner for these guests"?

Amazingly, the Talmud (*Shabbos* 127a) teaches us that Avraham was actually correct in what he did, for "*Hachnassas orchim* (welcoming guests) is greater than experiencing the Divine Presence."

Being Like God

How do we understand what the Talmud is saying? If the Creator of the universe, the infinite, all-powerful Source of existence, would appear to you, even an atheist would tell you not to budge! There can be no greater experience than communing with the Divine. So how can welcoming guests possibly trump that?

The answer is clear: Greater than talking to God is emulating Him. The most powerful way to understand and connect to God is by becoming like Him. "J*ust as Hashem is merciful and compassionate, so, too, you should be merciful and compassionate*" (*Shabbos* 133b). The Almighty is infinite and perfect, which means there is nothing He needs. He does not gain anything from our keeping the mitzvot. His creation is a perfect act of altruism; it is 100% *chessed*, kindness, aimed at giving us the deepest pleasure and meaning attainable simply because He loves us.

If you want to understand the Almighty's love for you, then you have to become like Him, and one of the essential ways to emulate Him is by doing acts of kindness and loving other human beings. Becoming a giver is really the only way to understand Who Hashem is and what life is all about.

If you want to really appreciate the Almighty, then undertake to be like Him and take care of as many people as you can. Even if you're sick, try to give another human being pleasure. Work at it, make it your priority – and by doing so you will understand just a little bit more what existence is all about.

If you do not change yourself by inculcating Hashem's attributes, you will never fully understand Hashem. He will remain an abstraction. By way of illustration, one of the criteria for appointing a judge to a Sanhedrin, a Jewish court that can judge capital offenses, is that the candidate must be a father of children. Rambam explains that this is necessary "in order to ensure that he will be merciful" (*Laws of Sanhedrin* 2:3). He may be the greatest Torah scholar in the world, but if he does not have children he cannot sit in judgment, because he cannot fully grasp the reality of Hashem's compassion for His children. He can be a prophet who communes with the Almighty, but he cannot judge a capital crime. To truly have compassion you must be a father; likewise, to fully understand Hashem you must become like Him.

Just Do It

The Torah goes into great detail when describing Avraham's *chessed:*

> *"Let some water be brought and wash your feet, and recline beneath the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may sustain yourselves... So Avraham hastened to the tent to Sarah, and said, "Hurry! Three se'ahs of meal, fine flour! Knead and make cakes!" Then Avraham ran to the cattle, took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the youth, who hurried to prepare it. He took cream and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and placed these before them; he stood over them beneath the tree, and they ate." (Bereishis 18:4-8)*

Every detail here teaches us an important insight about kindness. First, you need to run to do *chessed*. Don't procrastinate, don't kvetch about it. Run and joyfully embrace the opportunity to give to another human being.

Avraham offered the wayfarers bread and water, but when he sprang into action he prepared them a lavish meal. "*Emor me'at ve'aseh harbeh* – say little and do a lot" (Ethics of the Fathers 1:15). Talk is cheap. Momentarily it may create the appearance that you are doing something, but in the end you are just a bluffer, and everyone will know it. The sign that someone is serious about doing good is that he says little and does a lot. Don't grandstand. Don't promise a lot. Just get the job done.

The Power of Kindness

The Midrash asks, "Who was the person who did *chessed* to those who did not need it? It was Avraham Avinu, who gave to the ministering angels" (*Vayikra Rabbah* 34:8). Amazingly, the Torah's paradigm of *chessed* is an exchange that in the end did not even benefit the recipients. Angels don't eat bread! They don't even eat tongue with mustard. Avraham's kindness didn't do them a bit of good.

Yet the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 86b) describes the incredible reward Avraham received for doing this kindness:

> *Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: Whatever Avraham did for the ministering angels himself, the Holy One, blessed is He, likewise did for his children Himself. But whatever Avraham did through an agent, the Holy One, blessed is He, likewise did for his children through an agent. "Then Avraham ran to the cattle," corresponds to, "A wind went forth from Hashem and blew quail from the sea and spread them over the camp." "And [Avraham] took cream and milk," corresponds to, "Behold, I will rain down for you food from heaven." "And [Avraham] stood over them beneath the tree and they ate," corresponds to, "Behold, I shall stand before you by the*

> *rock." "And Avraham walked with them to escort them," corresponds to, "Hashem went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way."*
>
> *[The above are all examples of actions that were taken directly by Avraham or the Holy One, blessed is He. The following two verses describe actions taken through an agent:]*
>
> *"Let some water be brought," corresponds to, "And you [Moshe] shall strike the rock, and water will come from it and the people will drink."*

The Jewish people had water to drink for 40 years in the desert because Avraham gave the three guests some water. All of Avraham's descendants miraculously ate manna from heaven for 40 years in the desert because Avraham gave the three travelers milk. The Jewish people were surrounded by Clouds of Glory for 40 years in the desert because Avraham escorted his guests.

Look at the incredible impact of every act of *chessed* Avraham did. His actions affected the entire Jewish nation that descended from him, even though in reality he did not give the angels anything.

The Sages make the following *kal v'chomer* (*a fortiori* argument): "If the Holy One, blessed is He, rewards the children of a person who does *chessed* to someone who doesn't benefit from that *chessed*, then all the more will He reward the person who does *chessed* to someone who does benefit from his *chessed*" (*Vayikra Rabbah*, ibid.).

Avraham's *chessed* yielded no real benefit, yet look at its impact! Now imagine the reward Hashem will give to your children and grandchildren as a result of your doing something to tangibly help a fellow Jew. Chazal are teaching us that your reward will be even greater than Avraham's!

The Talmud makes an additional point. Avraham told a messenger to get the water; he delegated. So the Almighty also delegated, and instead of giving water to the Jewish people directly, He gave it through the rock that was hit by Moshe. But Hashem gave *Bnei Yisrael* the manna directly because Avraham fetched the milk himself.

Chazal are telling us that how you do a *chessed* makes a tremendous difference. In the desert, the Jewish people could have had water pouring down to them straight from the Almighty, and that would have made it a totally different experience. Water that comes directly from Hashem is very different from water that comes from a rock – just as the bread that came directly from Hashem was not just regular bread, but rather manna. And the shelter they enjoyed in the desert was not just protection from the sun, but rather an experience of being enveloped by the *Shechinah*, the presence of God.

It is an altogether different act of kindness when you do it yourself.

Whatever *chessed* you do, whether it is direct or through an intermediary, the impact and reward are mindboggling. "*Olam chessed yibaneh* – the world is built through kindness" (Psalms 89:2). And so are we.

Chessed is the Almighty's trademark. Seize the opportunities to do *chessed* for other. You will become like God Himself.



The Pleasure of Giving

You are traveling in the desert with two friends. It's a boiling hot day. You see some tents in the distance, seemingly a Bedouin camp. Suddenly, running crazily towards you, a 99-year-old man appears. He dives at your feet, face in the sand, and implores, "Please my masters, if I have found favor in your eyes, do not pass by the tent of your humble slave. Stay a while. I will personally wash your feet and provide food. Sit in the shade of my tree - and afterwards you may go."

Try to picture it for a minute: What would you think?

Most people would be concerned that this is some sort of psychopath who plans to chop them into little pieces and bury them under his floorboards. At the very least, there must be a catch, something in it for him. After all, nobody in this world does something for nothing. Does he?

I doubt that many would take Abraham up on his offer.

It says a great deal about the society in which we live, that when someone wants to do something for us, we are suspicious. Why would someone want to do something for me if there was no gain for him? And most of the time, we are correct. It's a terrible shame, though, that we need to be so wary. After all, which should be the anomaly: a person who cares about others and gives to them selflessly, or a society that is suspicious of such a person?

Abraham was the person in Jewish history who, above all else, exemplified *chesed* - kindness. It was not strange for Abraham to run to potential guests and beg them to partake of his generosity. He loved humanity and, above all else, his mission in life was to make people happy. There are few deeper pleasures than of giving to others, and Abraham knew that well. Every one of us enjoys giving much more than taking. Giving expands and satisfies us. Taking leaves us ultimately feeling empty. That's why parents usually get more pleasure from their children, than children do from their parents - even though the children 'receive' much more.

So why do we not give as much as we could?

We are misled into believing that by giving, we somehow lose out. If I give to someone else, there is surely less for me. It's true, but only in the short term. In the long term, giving gives us back so much more than we gave. Abraham understood this and his life was about giving. We, as his spiritual heirs, have the same trait within us. Giving does make us happy. If we would keep reminding ourselves of this, we could find a lot more happiness.

Most people, having won the lottery, would be in a hurry to bank the check. Abraham was in a hurry to bank his check also. But while a lottery win is finite, the pleasure to which Abraham ran was eternal and unlimited.