

Shiur L'Yom Chamishi¹

[Thursday's Study]

READINGS: ***Torah Vayera:*** **Genesis 20:1 - 21:34**
 Haftarah: **II Kings 4:18-30**
 B'rit Chadasha: **Hebrews 11:11-16**

God is with you in everything you do.

[Genesis 21:22]

Today's Meditation is Psalm 140:12-13;

This Week's Amidah prayer is Petition No. 1, *Da'at* - the Prayer for Intimate Knowledge

Vayisa misham Avraham artzah haNegev – Then Avraham arose from there and migrated to the land of the Negev ... *vayeshuv beyn-Kadesh uveyn Shur* – and he settled in between Kadesh and Shur. **Genesis 20:1.**

The great city states of the Jordan Rift Valley – *Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Tzevoyim* - are no more. The vast wealth that drew kings from the East with their armies to the lush tropical valley of the Jordan has disappeared into an ominous cloud of sulphur-scented smoke. The section of the valley that once seduced the world with dreams of riches, illicit pleasures, and sensual indulgences of every variety is now just a smoking wasteland of acrid salt. The nuclear-winter level fallout from the great storm of fire and brimstone has rendered all the land temporarily uninhabitable. There is no grain, no new wine, and no oil for human consumption. There is no grass growing in the fields for anyone's cattle. There is no marketplace. There are no homes. There are no people. The adverse effects have spread even to the area around Hebron, where the patriarchal family recently entertained angels. There is poison in the air. There is sickness in the surface water. There is famine and pestilence, fear and despair. So, at least for the foreseeable future, Avraham and Sarah, Hagar and Yish'mael, and the little band of God-fearers that had attached themselves to them had no choice but to hit the road. But where would they go? Everything to the east was still in the throes of sulfuric fallout. To the south was Egypt – from which they had been unceremoniously expelled. To the north were the most hostile tribes of the Kena'ani. So, it was 'westward the wagons'! Their next stop would be a remote part of the Western Negev, near modern-day Gaza. In the ancient world, the area was known as *Gerar*². Be on alert, Covenant Family! We are about to have yet another mind-numbing run-in with the toxic pagan worldview, the vain imaginations, the unclean

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² *Gerar* means *lodging place, or place of sojourning*. The noun is derived from an ancient verb root meaning to generate high levels of friction, esp. in a way that results in coarse sounds. Examples include scraping, sawing, gargling, regurgitating etc.

thought- and speech-patterns, the darkened understanding, the reprobate minds, and the lusty ways that characterized the people sacred writ calls ‘Philistines’³. *Al tirah* [KJV, Do not be afraid!] Beloved: the Holy One is our *magen lach* [KJV, shield] and our *shacharcha rabah meod* [KJV, exceedingly great reward]. See **Genesis 15:1**

Ah, but meanwhile, fallen human beings are going to do what fallen human beings are going to do. Our task as people of Covenant is to go in *shalom* to whatever people in whatever zones of impact our King assigns to us. We are to present ourselves to all people as calm, kind, and wise Diplomats of Heaven’s Great King no matter what folly, deception, perversion, superstition or other destructive influence common to fallen humanity we may encounter. We are never to complain – or even be surprised – if the places our King assigns us to influence are full of gross darkness upon our arrival. We are never to get discouraged if the people inhabiting the places we are sent are stressed, depressed, obsessed, oppressed, or *unclean spirit* possessed. We are never to be dismayed if we discover that those people are politically, ideologically, and/or theologically deceived. We are never to give into judgmentalism if they are hyper-sensual, hyper-sentimental, hyper-sexual, and/or narcissistically pseudo-intellectual. We are never to indulge – much less show – any hint of fear if they are bigoted and belligerent, malicious and malevolent, or vengeful, vindictive, and violent. The Holy One knew all that about their pathology before He led us onto their turf; indeed, the extent of their fallen condition is precisely why he sent us to be near them. We are not there to fit in; we are there to provide light and salt. We are not there to either promote or protest any political agenda, partisan-platform, policy, or program. We are there to model a well-lived life in real-time – carefully following Torah’s way of steadfast, unshakable *emunah* [KJV ‘faith’], *tikvah* [KJV ‘hope’], and *ahavah* [KJV ‘love’] no matter what provocation the locals may cast our way. How other people in our assigned spheres of influence choose to react to the demonstration is up to them; we just have to be sure we continue to serve all Creation - and all households and bloodlines of mankind - as the faithful ambassadors of Divine grace, wisdom, and goodness that we are called to be. We are there to offer anyone who is interested the dramatically more excellent way forward that our King has ordained – not to judge, assign blame, argue abstractions, debate doctrines, or engage in protests regarding the political, socio-economic, institutional and/or religious climate

³ Some scholars question whether the true ethnic Philistines [*those lineally descended from Cham’s son Mizrayim*] had arrived in the area from their original homeland in time to encounter Avraham or Yitzchak. These scholars note that Genesis 20 does not specifically call Avimelech or the people of Gerar Philistines, but merely refers to the place they lived as the ‘land of the Philistines’ [Genesis 21:32, 34] as that would indeed be known in Moshe’s day, when the Torah was reduced to writing. But see Genesis 26:1, 8, in which Torah calls Avimelech of Gerar [in the generation of Yitzchak], the *Melech P’lishtim* – i.e. King ‘of Philistines’.

presently in place. We are not there as agents of reform; much less as fomenters of revolution. We are there as agents of inspiration, redemption, and restoration.

Making the journey to Gerar with Avraham is a caravan chock full of dissimilar ethnicities. While both Avraham and Sarah were descendants of Shem, Sarah's handmaid Hagar was of Egyptian descent and a Chamite bloodline. Hagar's son Yish'mael was half-Chamite, half-Shemite; Avraham's trusted friend Eliezar from Aramaic Syria. In Covenant families, you see, ethnicity is not supposed to either define or separate people. It is only in the flesh-obsessed cultures of this world that people cannot see past differences in ethnicity and/or skin pigmentation, and instead consider such things as matters of either pride or disgrace, privilege or burden, celebration or shame.

Which Way Are You Goin', Grandfather?

What kind of people, with what kinds of problems, are the Philistines? What level of *yirat Adonai* [KJV 'fear of God'] will Avraham and his entourage encounter among common people and their warlord-kings in the wide-open spaces between Kadesh, Shur, and Gaza? What level of *tzedakah* [KJV 'righteousness'] and/or *ra'ot* [KJV 'wickedness'] will they face? What level of hospitality and/or hostility will the people where they next find themselves afford to strangers. How will the people there treat ethnic minorities in general, and a multi-cultural Hebrew-speaking family who worships only One God and orders their lives according to Torah [see **Genesis 26:5**] in particular? Will the people of the watershed that the Holy One has placed on Avraham's horizon set upon his little caravan violently with the intention of driving the people of the Covenant into the sea? If they are allowed to live and trade alongside the locals, will they be taken advantage of? Will they be stared at? Will they be stripped of their dignity – if not the very clothes on their back? Will they become the subject of gossip and coarse jokes? Will their presence – or their existence - be blamed for everything that goes wrong in the society in which they sojourn? Will they be hated? Mocked? Assaulted? Beaten? Persecuted? Robbed? Raped? Tortured? Oppressed? Enslaved? Will they be cursed - though we now know how that always turns out for the ones doing the cursing [See **Genesis 12:3**]? Will they be forced into the ancient equivalent of dhimmitude, or taxed into poverty? Will their children be subjected to seduction and brainwashing by the corrupt philosophies, ideologies, religions, and fleshly perversions of their new neighbors? Will they be forced to live on the point of the spear, in a danger zone? Or will they – *could* they – *can* they – finally find a city of refuge?

The Lech Lecha State of Mind:

Looking For – and Hoping Against Hope to Find - a City of Refuge

The lush, tropical valley where Avraham and his entourage had been trading was

no more. Fire and brimstone had rained down in a fury just a few kilometers away. Fires were still burning. Smoke and stench billowed. The air was toxic. The shuk was gone. The people were gone. The streets, shops, houses, and public squares were gone. Where these had stood was now just a deep hole in the earth's crust - a hole that will one day be called the 'Dead Sea'.

Avraham's nephew Lot, along with his entire family, are coping as best they can, in a cave in the hills of Moab. Avraham will never see these family members again – at least in his present season of mortality. But he carries on. He does not grieve as those who have no hope. He does not despair. He does not panic. He does not act out and throw a tantrum. He does not shout profanities at Heaven – or at men. He does not lose his *shalom*. He does not surrender his joy. He does not let trauma or drama dampen his hope – or cause him to cease looking for a city that has foundations – whose Builder and Maker is not man, but is instead the Holy One Himself. The old shepherd who has become a friend of the Creator of the Universe does not quit. He does not seek solace in a bottle; distraction from a game; or consolation from a woman. He does not even complain. Why? Because he knows the Holy One is working all things together for *tov*. He knows that His Covenant Partner will provide all he and his household – and, for that matter, the planet and the universe - need. The Covenant the Holy One cut with Avraham remains sure and viable. That Covenant alone was Avraham's truth – and that Covenant set Avraham free. It is the same for you and me. The only truth we can truly know – and the only truth that can set us free – is the Covenant. The continued viability of the Covenant is the only reason I am alive to write this study – and the only reason you are alive to read it. As the sons of Korach declared:

*Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed,
And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.*

*The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved;
He uttered His voice, the earth melted.
The Holy One of hosts is with us;
The God of Ya'akov is our refuge. Selah!*

[Psalm 46:2, 6-7]

***When the Wallpaper of our World Starts to Change Around Us –
We Stand in the Covenant ... and Carry On!***

To most who live in the 21st Century Western world, cities called Sodom and Gomorrah seem like nothing more than surreal metaphors. We have never seen those bustling cities glistening in the morning sun. We have never walked through their open markets. We have never heard the screams of the innocent women and children being sold into slavery of the worst kind imaginable. We have never smelled the stench of the decaying bodies of the victims of every form of

narcissistic manipulation, abuse, oppression, persecution, torture, and murder.

We cannot even conceive of what it was like to *live there*, or to *raise children there*. We cannot imagine what it must have been like to put your life in severe jeopardy every time you went to *trade in the marketplaces there* or even to *visit friends or relatives there*. But it was different for Avraham. For Avraham the cities of the Plain – and the people in them – were very, very real. He knew those cities – and those people – very, very well. And while he certainly did not walk in agreement with the lawless and flesh-obsessed worldview that prevailed there, or feel anything but revulsion and sadness over the debauchery, violence, and perversion that was commonplace in the streets, I am sure the suddenness, the terror, and the shocking scope of their sudden destruction must have stunned him.

For Avraham and Sarah the collapse of the Cities of the Plain must have been the equivalent of the mighty Babylon falling. After all, Sodom and Amorah were by far the largest, most populous, most prosperous economic and cultural centers in the region – if not the era - in which Avraham lived. The impact of the simultaneous total destruction of those cities on not only the economy but the sense of security of Kena'an was roughly equivalent to what the simultaneous total destruction of New York City and Los Angeles would be to the economy and the sense of security of America, or what the simultaneous total destruction of Johannesburg and Cape Town would be to the economy and sense of security of South Africa. If not in those cities, where would Avraham buy and sell? To whom would he market the products of his ever-expanding herds and flocks?

Within two days the destruction of Sodom and Amorah caused the land where Avraham had been living to be covered by “*dense smoke, like smoke from a furnace*”. **Genesis 19:27**. The fallout from the destruction of the cities of the plain was so violent, with its aftershocks and the raining down of salt and fire and sulphur, that just as Lot had been forced to leave Tzoar Avraham was forced to leave the area he had inhabited near Hebron and find pasture a safe distance away. Our patriarch chose to go to the South and West. He headed toward the coastal plain that rises from the shores of the Mediterranean. He stopped just short, in the Negev, between Kadesh and Shur – keeping his camp what he considered a safe distance from the bustling, but downright unfriendly, city of Gerar.

*Avraham journeyed from there to the Negev,
and made his dwelling between Kadesh and Shur, and traded in Gerar⁴.*
[Genesis 20:1]

⁴ Gerar is first mentioned in Genesis 10:19. where it is said: ‘... *the border of the Kena'ani was from Tzidon as you go toward Gerar, as far as Gaza; then as you go toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha*. Gerar was thus to the South of the area controlled by the Kena'ani.

At Age 99 Avraham Hits the Road Again

As today's aliyah begins, we find Avraham, Sarai, and young Yishmael taking up a *refugee's sojourn* near *Be'er LaChai Roi* [i.e. the *well/spring of life vision*] where the Angel of the Holy One had found and comforted Hagar during her pregnancy. See Genesis 16:6-14. This area, located between Kadesh and Shur - an area of the Negev then controlled by the *Ph'lishtim*. In those days, you see, Kena'an's coastland areas were occupied – and ruled with an iron fist - by a seafaring people from the line of Cham. Torah identifies these people as the *Ph'lish'tim* [i.e. the Philistines]. In Hebrew *Ph'lish'tim* means 'wanderers' or 'strangers'. They were not originally from this area; they were just an occupying force of opportunistic squatters who, like a Mongol horde, had come flooding in like a colony of ants or a swarm of locusts, overwhelmed the outnumbered local residents, and just taken over. And while the *Ph'lish'tim* took over several cities in the coastal plain, the main trading area – and the palace from which their warlord/king Avimelech ruled the area - was in a city known as *Gerar*.

In Hebrew *Gerar* simply means '*place of sojourners*'. To dwell in this land, amongst foreigners and wanderers, Avraham and Sarah had to make peace with the local *Ph'lish'tim* warlord/king. That meant they had to go visit, pay tribute to, and negotiate a 'tax and tariff trade plan' with the local tough guy *Avimelech*. The first thing they had to negotiate – and pay for - were rights of safe *passage*. But that would not be enough. They also had to work out a deal acceptable to Avimelech for rights of *pasturage* – yes, even with regard to the hills and oases lying many kilometers from Gerar, out in the barren reaches of the Negev.

These negotiations would not be easy – nor would the 'peace' Avraham sought for him and his household come cheap. The process was not without substantial risk – to Avraham, to Sarah, to Hagar, and to Yishmael. And in this cultural setting and time period, the presence of the women in Avraham's entourage complicated the negotiations significantly. In the pagan cultures of that era all women – of any age - were considered fair game for lusty men. Beautiful women of foreign descent? They were the most coveted of all by the warlords – an exotic delicacy to parade before guests to prove their power and increase their influence. If such a woman came to the territory of the *Ph'lish'tim* with a husband, the husband was *persona non grata* – and almost always wound up being the 'odd man out'. Avraham knew how it worked. He had seen it many times. He knew that, unless he cut a deal with Avimelech for letters of safe passage, of water rights and pasturage, and for protection, the lusty pagans of Gerar would kill him, take and abuse Sarah and Hagar to their hearts delight, and sell strong, young Yishmael into slavery. Such was the world into which Avraham was venturing. Just remember that the Holy One has promised you:

*I will make you a great nation;
I will bless you;
I will make your name/character/reputation great, so that you can be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you;
and those who qalal you I will arar.
And in/through you I will cause all families of the earth to be blessed.*
[Genesis 12:2-3]

May the Covenant be with you, Avinu! You just do your part; and the Holy One will do His!

Tough Times Make for Tough Choices

Avraham came up with a plan to deal with this sad state of reality. He would be proactive. As he had done in Egypt years previously, he and Sarah would resort to a *ruse*. He would pretend that his relationship with Sarah was that of brother and sister⁵ – not husband and wife. And so the deal Avraham cut with Avi-melech was that the latter would take Sarah into his harem – believing her to be Avraham’s sister instead of his wife. In exchange for Sarah, Avraham would be allowed to pasture his flocks in the area. Oh my. Does this sound familiar to anyone but me?

In Genesis 12:14 the Torah indicates that decades previously, when Avraham traveled to Egypt, the Egyptians – including Pharaoh - saw Sarah and praised her as a *beautiful woman*. That however was *a couple of decades ago*. By the time of today’s aliyah Sarah is – or approaching - *ninety years old*. Although Avraham certainly still considered Sarah the most beautiful woman on earth, the text of Torah does not indicate she was considered particularly beautiful or physically desirable by Avimelech. So why the *ruse*? Why did Avraham and Sarah conceal the truth about their relationship? Did they really think Avimelech or his people would kill Avraham to have his way with Avraham’s 90-year-old wife? Did they lack faith, after all the years they had walked in covenant with Him, in the Holy One’s protection? Was it a scheme to cause Avimelech to come under the Holy One’s judgment and obtain wealth from Avimelech as they had obtained wealth from Pharaoh?

We do not know all the reasons why our beloved ancestors sinned and swore falsely, because Torah does not tell us fully. All we are given is Avraham’s confession when the ruse was exposed:

“I said to myself, ‘There is surely eyn-yir’at Elohim [no fear of God] in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’”

⁵ The sages identify Sarai with Yischah, daughter of Avraham’s brother Charan, who is mentioned in Genesis 11:29. That would technically make Sarai Avraham’s niece rather than what Westerners think of as his ‘sister’. The Hebrew idea of ‘*achot*’ – i.e. close/dear kinswoman – is far more inclusive than the English idea of a ‘sister’.

[Genesis 20:11]

The point is that even after multiple God-encounters our ancestors Avraham and Sarah - the super-heroes of faith of Hebrews 11 – were still nowhere near perfect or sinless. They were fallible people just like us. Their relationship with the Holy One was not based upon sinless perfection - OR even upon total, unquestioning faith - but was instead founded upon the Holy One's *grace covenant* with them.

Likewise, our relationship with the Holy One is not based upon either sinless perfection or upon total, unquestioning faith, but upon the Holy One's *grace covenant* with us – the covenant that has been passed down to us by fallible men like Avraham, Moshe [Moses], David, Eliyahu [Elijah], Yeshayahu [Isaiah], Ezekiel, Daniel, and the *talmidim* of Yeshua.

Avraham's "Short Leash"

Note however that the Holy One loved Avraham and Sarah far too much to let the seeds of faithlessness the two of them sowed upon entering Gerar remain hidden long enough to yield their natural fruit. The Creator of Heaven and Earth actively intervened in a most embarrassing way, actually *appearing to Avimelech* - a pagan and idolatrous king - *in a dream to expose the deception* Avraham and Sarah had practiced. Tough love is *messy stuff*.

The Holy One does not demand perfection, but ***in His mercy He does not let His people long get away without suffering at least some carefully measured adverse consequences from behavior inconsistent with the Covenant and with Covenant destiny.*** The adverse consequences the Holy One allows His Covenant partners to suffer are always ***redemptive*** – but they are by no means *comfortable*. Keep in mind the admonition we received from the writer of Hebrews:

*The Holy One disciplines those he loves
and chastens everyone he accepts as a son.*

*Now, all discipline, while it is happening, does indeed seem painful, not enjoyable;
but for those who have been trained by it,
it later produces its peaceful fruit, which is righteousness.
So, strengthen your drooping arms, and steady your tottering knees;
and make a level path for your feet; so that what has been injured
will not get wrenched out of joint, but rather will be healed.*

[Hebrews 12:6, 11-13]

Can you imagine Avraham's stress level therefore when Avimelech *called him on the carpet and confronted him* about this incident? Look at Avimelech's words:

lo meh-asita lanu
What have you done to us?

umeh-chatati lach ki-heveita alay
How have I wronged you that you have brought upon me

v'al mamlachti chata'ah gedolah
and on my kingdom such great guilt?

ma'asim asher lo-ye'asu asita imadi
You have done things to me that should not be done.

mah ra'ita ki asita et-ha-davar hazeh
What was your reason for doing this?"
[Genesis 20:9-10]

So Avraham had to “come clean” and own up to his pattern of faithlessness and deception – not to mention his involvement of his wife in this dishonest and downright reckless course of conduct.

Please note that this is *the last time* Torah records Avraham resorting to this kind of behavior. Apparently the Holy One *arranged* this experience so that Avraham could be brought to *t'shuvah* [i.e. repentance and return to the Holy One's Torah pathway].

As Promised: A Child Is Born!

Once the repentance came Avraham and Sarah were enabled to receive the promise of a son. As soon as the sin pattern was removed Sarah's womb was miraculously refreshed and opened. Here is the record of this wondrous event as it is provided to us in Torah:

V'Adonai pakad et-Sarah
And the Holy One granted special providence to [and/or visited] Sarah

ka'asher amar vaya'as Adonai l'Sarah ka'asher diber
as He said He would, and the Holy One did what He promised for Sarah.

V'tahar v'teled Sarah l'Avraham ben liz'kunav
Sarah became pregnant, and she gave birth to Abraham's son in his old age

L'mo'ed asher-diber oto Elohim
It was at the appointed time according to what God had promised.

A 100-year-old man somehow sired a son! A 90-year-old woman's breasts somehow suckled him!

This baby has been a long time in coming. But there he was, right on time. There is no way to explain it other than as the Miraculous, Sovereign Act of the Holy One. He has poured out His creative power once again, and we are the beneficiaries. Let us indeed laugh with Sarah, Dear Reader! Let us coo and marvel at the precious baby in her arms - the one who will be called 'Laughter'. And let us then look into

this child's future - and our own - and say: 'Blessed be the Name of the Holy One!'
A Child is Born ... A Son is Given. Hence Torah tells us:

Vayikra Avraham et-shem-beno

Abraham gave a name to the son

Ha-nolad-lo asher-yaldah-lo Sarah Yitzchak

to whom Sarah had just given birth: Yitzchak – i.e. he will laugh.

v'Avraham ben-me'at shanah

Abraham was 100 years old

B'hivaled lo et Yitzchak beno

when his son Yitzchak was born.

V'tomer Sarah tzachok asah li Elohim

Sarah said, 'God has given me laughter.

Kol ha-sh'omea yitzachak-li

All who hear about it will laugh for me.'

[Genesis 21:1-2]

The birth of Yitzchak was *a Divinely scheduled event*. Torah tells us it took place *l'moed* – Hebrew for 'at the *appointed time*'. If the sages of Israel are correct this means in the Seventh Biblical month - either on *Yom T'ruah* [the Feast of Trumpets] or during *Chag Sukkot* [the Feast of Tabernacles]. And though the child's name was picked out for him by the Holy One long before his birth, the honor of actually bestowing that Divinely chosen name upon the child was accorded to Avraham, the father.

This baby has been *a long time in coming*. But here he is, *right on time*. There is no way to explain it other than as the Miraculous, Sovereign Act of the Holy One. He has poured out His creative power once again, and we are the beneficiaries. Let us indeed laugh with Sarah, Dear Reader! Blessed be the Name of the Holy One!

Yishmael and Yitzchak: Oil and Water

For 13 years Yishmael lived in Avraham's camp as his son. Hagar's submission to Sarah in response to the Angelic visitation and Divine Vision she received in Genesis 16 had resulted in Avraham and Sarah making a place for Yishmael. We know that after her return, however, Hagar was no longer Sarah's trusted '*handmaid*' [Hebrew, *shifchah*⁶, meaning *a* very personal confidante and representative, corresponding to Avraham's Elazar]. She was not accepted back not as a *shifchah*, but merely as a common slave woman [Hebrew *ha-amah*]. This latter term has made it into our English language as 'bondwoman'.

With the birth of Yitzchak however even that changed. Yishmael did not respond

⁶ Shifchah is *shin, peh, chet, hey*. Strong's Hebrew word #8198, it is pronounced *shif-khaw*.

well at all to the newcomer, thirteen years his junior. And while Yishmael could not harm his younger brother as long as Yitzchak was safely nestled between Sarah's breasts, upon Yitzchak's weaning the abuse started. Here is how Torah records it:

Vayigdal ha-yeled vayigamal

The child grew and was weaned.

vaya'as Avraham mish'teh gadol b'yom higamel et-Yitzchak

Abraham made a great feast on the day that Yitzchak was weaned.

V'tere Sarah et-ben-Hagar ha-Mitzrit asher-yaldah l'Avraham m'tzachek

But Sarah saw the son Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham scoffing.

[Genesis 21:8-9]

The Hebrew word used in Torah to describe what Sarah saw 'Hagar's son' doing to Yitzchak is ***m'tzachek***. This is the verb obtained by adding the prefix *mem* to the Hebrew verb meaning 'to laugh'. As we have discussed previously, the Hebrew letter *mem* is a pictograph of a flowing wave of water. Adding this pictograph to the beginning of a verb makes it into a continuous, ongoing, course of conduct. The verb ***m'tzachek*** describes a perverse kind of sporting, or scoffing, which becomes progressively more and more malevolent, escalating into acts of hatred and violence.

Sarah saw this unfolding, recognized where it was headed, and realized that too much was at stake to allow such malevolence to continue. So she said to Avraham:

Garesh ha-amah hazot v'et-benah

'Drive away this bondswoman together with her son.

ki lo yirash ben ha-amah hazot im-beni im-Yitzchak

The son of this bondswoman will not share the inheritance with my son Yitzchak!

[Genesis 21:10]

In the course of Yish'mael's interactions with the much younger Yitzchak Sarah saw something that *only a mother can see*. She saw that the compromising arrangement under which she and Avraham and Hagar and Yishmael and Yitzchak had lived up to that point was not going to work out any more than the compromising arrangements under which she and Avram had tried to live in Egypt and Gerar had worked out. She saw that the development and training and security of the chosen seed which the Holy One had implanted in her 90-year-old womb required that **drastic** action be taken, and soon.

Though it would not be considered 'politically correct' Sarah knew that a quick and permanent forced separation was what was best - *even for Hagar and for Yishmael*. If Yishmael stayed, you see, someone *was going to get hurt* – if not killed. Nobody – absolutely nobody – was going to be safe. Something had to give. Critical choices had to be made. Someone had to go. And Yitzchak was the

child of Divine promise – the flesh and blood and DNA of both Avraham and Sarah. Yishmael was a young man now –and his days in Avraham’s camp were drawing to a close.

Avraham’s Seventh God Encounter

As you might expect Avraham was very troubled by Sarah’s decree of banishment. After all Yishmael was not only ‘the son of the slave woman’ as Sarah now saw him – he was also born of Avraham’s own flesh! And so the Holy One paid Avraham yet another visit.

Avraham’s seventh God-Encounter was initiated by the Sweet Voice Avraham had grown to know so well saying:

Al yera b'eynecha al-ha-na'ar v'al-amateicha -

'Do not be troubled because of the boy and your slave

kol asher tomar eleicha Sarah sh'ma b'kolah

Sh'ma everything that Sarah tells you.

ki b'Yitzchak yikare lecha zara

It is through Yitzchak that you will gain posterity.

V'gam et-ben-ha-amah l'goy asimeinu

But still, I will also make the slave's son into a nation,

ki zar'acha hu

for he is of your seed.'

[Genesis 21:12-13]

“***Sh'ma*** everything Sarah tells you” was nowhere near what Avraham wanted to hear. If he *sh'ma*-ed everything Sarah told him he would have to ‘drive away’ Yishmael and Hagar. Just as he had to separate from his birthplace and his father’s household; just as he had to separate from his comfortable nest in Egypt; just as he had to separate from his nephew Lot; just as he had to separate from his home in Hebron; just as he had to separate from his place of convenient sojourn in Gerar; he would have to separate from his beloved firstborn son and the woman who had given herself to him and life to his son.

Avraham had however learned over the years to trust the Holy One, and to **sh'ma** the Holy One’s instructions without questioning them. He had learned to believe and trust, even without fully understanding, that whatever the Holy One says – however strange it sounds - will *always result in the best for those who love the Holy One*. And so it came to pass that Avraham packed bread and water for Hagar and Yishmael and sent them both off into the desert – knowing in his heart that the Holy One would watch over them faithfully, just as He had promised.

The Holy One Watches Over Hagar and Yish'mael as Well

The Holy One *cares* very, very, much for Hagar and Yishmael. They – and the bloodline they have spawned - have an important part to play in the Holy One's great redemptive plan for mankind. And even though the time has now come when they cannot be allowed to stay in Avraham's camp for even one moment longer, that does not mean that they are either *hated* or *accursed* or *abandoned* by Heaven. Angels have been assigned to watch over Hagar and Yishmael as they leave the patriarchal camp and walk down the *wadi* toward Egypt. Angels know the water is going to run out – and that fatigue and stress will eventually take their toll on the mother and her child. Angels watch carefully, patiently, as Yishmael crawls up under a bush to find shade. Angels know Hagar will be fearful that her son is about to die. Angels watch Hagar weep bitterly and scream angrily at Avraham's God. Angels smile as she finally wears out and falls silent, reluctantly surrendering the son of Avraham to whatever fate his father's God has decreed for him. That moment of surrender is exactly what the Angels had been told to wait for. The moment that surrender occurred the Angels *moved in*. That moment is when Heaven *invaded the desert-scape* and *changed everything*.

The Holy One could, of course, very easily, have let Hagar and Yishmael die. He could have sent a lion or a serpent their way to end Sarah's foolish little 'surrogate mother' debacle once and for all. But, He had *a covenant* with Avraham – and his seed. He had made a promise to Avraham - and based upon that, to Hagar - that this boy would live, not die, and that he would prosper, not waste away. The Holy One had made room in His Divine Plan even for a slave woman and her often-incorrigible son.

The Holy One is, after all, a ***good*** God. He is a ***faithful*** God. He is a Father to the fatherless. He is a Husband to the widow. He is a Friend to those in need. So Torah tells us:

Vayish'ma Elohim et-kol ha-na'ar vayikra

Elohim sh'ma-ed the boy calling

Malach Elohim el-Hagar min ha-shamayim v'yomer

The angel of Elohim called Hagar from the heavens and said,

lah mah-lach Hagar al-tire'i

'What is this, Hagar? Do not be afraid

ki-shama Elohim et-kol ha-na'ar ba'asher hu-sham

Elohim has heard the boy where/as he is.

The Holy One *listened*. The Holy One *heard*. The Holy One responded. The Holy One *gave heed to*, and was *moved to intervention by*, an incorrigible boy's

incoherent sobs and a broken-hearted mother's desperate prayers. The Holy One heard because He was right there all along. He is never distant or aloof. He is always *one step away*. He is always *one moment-of-surrender from intervention*. He will always hear – and respond to – a child's sobs. He will always hear – and be stirred by – a mother's prayers. And thanks be to Heaven the Holy One does not merely hear - He *springs into action*. He *steps out of eternity into time*. He *steps out of His Cloak of Invisibility and makes things happen in the physical, material world*. That is His *Nature*, and that is His *Promise*. And so, in response to Yish'mael's sobs and Hagar's prayers, the Holy One calls forth **mayim hayim** [living water]. And the earth opens up, and yields for Hagar and Yishmael a well. And then Torah says the Holy One *opened Hagar's eyes* to see what was not there before.

V'yifkach Elohim et-eyneyha v'tere be'er mayim

Elohim opened her [i.e. Hagar's] eyes, and she saw a well/spring of water.

v'telech v'temale et ha-chemet mayim vatashk et ha-na'ar

She went and filled the skin with water, giving the boy some to drink.

Drink deeply, Hagar. Drink deeply, Yishmael. Enjoy the sweetness of the water from that supernatural well of life and hope and peace. May the time come, and soon, when you taste the Living Water of the Holy One again.

Do not give up on the descendants of Yishmael, Dear Reader. However loud, however arrogant, however cruel, however argumentative, and however violent some of them may act; however badly they may hurt you or those you love; however loudly their leaders may mock everything that is good and noble, and however passionately they may exalt everything which is evil and base; however many innocents they put to the edge of the sword, do not give up on Yishmael.

Oh, *be wary of Yishmael*, for certain. Be very *wise*. Do not let yourself be taken in for one second by his lies. Do not ever give credence to his railing accusations against the Holy One's people. Do not ever for one second allow your deceptive heart to buy the propaganda and side with him against those the Holy One has called to be *a light to the nations*. Do not let yourself be *intimidated by his threats*. Do not by any means *appease* him. Do not give in to the temptation to *compromise with* him. But in all this watchfulness, never, never give up on Yishmael either. The Holy One hasn't – and He never will.

Pray that there will be another strategic season of incoherent sobs. Pray that there will be another moment-of-absolute surrender. And pray that Living Water will once again nourish the DNA Yishmael received from his father Avraham.

Questions Regarding Today's Study

1. What do you think motivated Avram/Avraham to misrepresent to Pharaoh [Genesis 12] and Avimelech [today's aliyah] his relationship with Sarai/Sarah?
2. How did the Holy One protect Avraham and Sarah in this incident - despite their bearing of false witness?
3. How did the Holy One arrange for Avraham to be a blessing to Avimelech and his people even though they had sinned and provided a rather bad example of the Holy One's covenant people? [Remember, in Genesis 12:3, the Holy One covenanted with Avram that through Avram would all the peoples on earth be blessed]
4. How was Avimelech's reaction to discovering Avraham's sin different from Pharaoh's reaction in a similar situation in Genesis 12?
5. The Torah indicates that, among other gifts, Avimelech gave Avraham 1,000 shekels of silver.

[A] Why did Avimelech give Avraham a thousand shekels [about 25 pounds - a veritable fortune] of silver?

[B] Look up "silver" in a reference book such as "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols" or whatever you have available. Why was silver an appropriate gift for the purpose Avimelech stated?

[C] What else did Avimelech give besides silver?

[D] Had Avimelech wronged Avraham or Sarah? If so, how?

[E] Can you explain why Avimelech showered Avraham and Sarah with gifts and kindnesses?

6. Immediately after the incident with Avimelech the Holy One fulfills His covenant promise to give Avraham and Sarah a son - **Yitzchak** [Isaac].

[A] What does the name **Yitzchak** mean?

[B] How was this name appropriate for this child?

[C] How old was Avraham when Yitzchak was born?

[D] How old was Sarah when Yitzchak was born?

7. At the feast given to celebrate the weaning of Yitzchak trouble develops in the Covenant household.

[A] What caused the trouble?

[B] What was Sarah's proposed solution?

[C] In the midst of the trouble, and the stress it caused, we are comforted to know that the Holy One did not "disappear" or "hide" Himself - He spoke to Avraham, and gave him counsel. What did He say?

[D] It must have been a very difficult and emotional, if not traumatic, event when Avraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away. Imagine you are Avraham, and

write a journal entry for the day you sent Hagar and Ishmael away, explaining what you did, why you did it, what you expected to happen to Hagar and Ishmael, and your feelings about the whole thing.

[E] The Holy One did not by any means *abandon* Hagar or her son. What did He do for them?

[F] Reread Genesis 16:7-16. To what place do you think Hagar fled?

[G] How old was Ishmael when he and his mother were sent away?

[H] What skill did Ishmael develop?

[I] From what nation did Ishmael take a wife?

8. After Yishmael and Hagar have departed Avimelech comes to visit Avraham.

[A] Why did Avimelech come to visit?

[B] What were the terms of the covenant made between Avraham and the Ph'lishtim [Palestinians/Philistines]?

[C] Were the Ph'lishtim among the peoples which the Holy One promised Moshe the children of Israel would dispossess of their land?

[D] What does the place name "*Beersheva*" mean?

[E] Why was that name given to the place where the covenant was made between Avraham and Avimelech?

9. In today's Haftarah the events surrounding the death of the only son of "the Shunamite" are related. As you read this aliyah keep in mind the parallel between this story and the life - and near death - of Yitzchak. Tomorrow's Torah aliyah will address the offering of Yitzchak by Avraham on Mount Moriyah. Keep in mind that whatever the Holy One entrusts to us is *His*, not ours – and that we are merely stewards. This holds true whether the thing entrusted is 1,000 shekels of silver or a child of promise. We must decide which we love more – is it *the Holy One*, or is it *the persons and things He places in our care*?

[A] In your Bible Atlas look for **Shunem** [it should be just south of Mount Tabor, in the tribal allotment of Yissakhar (Issachar) and for **Mount Carmel**. How far did the Shunamite travel on a donkey?

[B] Explain the Shunamite's answer to Gehazi in verse 26.

[C] Why do you think the Shunamite went to find Elisha - even though it wasn't Rosh Chodesh [New Moon] or Shabbat [Sabbath]?

[D] Why do you think the Shunamite refused to leave Elisha - even after he had sent Gehazi to Shunem to see to the boy?

10. In today's reading from the apostolic writings the author of the letter to the Messianic Hebrews [the Jews of that day who had accepted Yeshua as Messiah] discusses Avraham and Sarah.

[A] According to the writer of the letter to the Messianic Jews of the 1st

Century what was Avraham enabled to become a father in his old age?

[B] The writer indicates that Avraham and Sarah, as well as others mentioned in previous verses, “did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.” What promises of the Holy One did Avraham and Sarah not personally see fulfilled in their lifetime?

[C] Read Yeshua’s statements in John 8:39-40 and 8:52-58. How do those statements relate to the content of today’s apostolic writings?

[D] What admission/confession does the writer of Hebrews say all people of faith such as Avraham and Sarah must make?

[E] What, according to the writer of Hebrews, does such an admission/confession prove about the one making the admission/confession?

[F] Why, according to the writer of Hebrews, did Avraham and Sarah not return to Ur of the Chaldees [Babylon] or Charan?

[G] What, according to the writer of Hebrews, has the Holy One prepared for those who live as aliens and strangers on earth?

*May your sins be revealed that they may be forgiven and washed away.
May you never let this world become your home.
May you never let the things of this world, however beautiful or dear to you,
become more precious to you than the Holy One.
May you find the City of God prepared for you.*

The Rabbi's son

Meditation For Today's Study

Psalm 140:12-13

*I know that the Holy One will maintain the cause of the afflicted,
and justice for the poor.*

*Surely the righteous shall give thanks to Your name;
The upright shall dwell in Your presence.*