

*Shiur L'Yom Shenit*¹

[Monday's Study]

READINGS: ***Torah Vayera:*** **Genesis 18:1-33**
 Haftarah: **II Kings 4:1-7**
 B'rit Chadasha: **II Peter 2:1-5**

If I have found favor in Your eyes, my Lord, do not pass your servant by.
[Genesis 18:3]

Today's Meditation is Psalm 140:1-3;

This Week's Amidah Prayer Focus is Petition No. 1, *Da'at*, The Petition for Knowledge

Vayera elav Adonai b'Elonei Mamre – And the Holy One appeared/manifested/made Himself visible to human sight² in/at the Oaks of Mamre [Genesis 18:1a]

Has the Holy One ever ever reached into your life and 'touched' you? Has He taken on physical form and 'appeared' to you? Has He ever taken on the physical attributes of voice and vocabulary and 'spoken' to you? Has He ever 'walked' with you – or invited you to walk with Him? Such interactions provide serious challenge to the human intellect. They defy what men so arrogantly call 'reason' and 'logic'. They do not fit in any intellectual frame of reference man has invented for himself or his species to inhabit. After all, the Creator is thought by man to be some kind of *incorporeal Spirit* with no bodily form, and therefore no hands to touch, or eyes to see, or ears to hear, or olfactory organs to smell, nor vocal cords or a mouth with which to speak. The Creator is thought to be *infinite* and *ubiquitous*, while man can only be in one place at a time. The Creator is eternal, living outside of and unbound by time, while man is temporal – and trapped in a prison of milliseconds. The Creator is all-knowing, while man just tends to form opinions, pontificate, and behave as if he was. The Creator is the ultimate Artist, while men tend to prefer playing wanna-be scholars and scientists. But then, there is the Torah. Torah shatters all the human mind's pseudo-intellectual paradigms. Torah says the Creator of the Universe can take on voice and vocabulary any time He wants. And Torah says plainly that He can also take on form and shape any time, any way, for any reason, for any length of 'time', that He wants. Torah says that He can – and does – 'walk' with men. This is Torah's *theory of relativity*. It is all about relating. It is all about relationship. He does whatever it takes to keep a relationship with His Covenant Partners moving forward – and keep His Grand

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² This is by no means an isolated instance. For a few of other instances in Torah which describe the Holy One as 'appearing' to man, see Genesis 12:7, 15:17, 17:1, and 18:1 in relation to Avraham; see Genesis 26:2 and 26:24 in relation to Yitzchak; and see Genesis 35:1, 7, and 9 in relation to Ya'akov; and see Exodus 3:2, among many others, in relation to Moshe.

Plan for the Redemption of Mankind and for the Restoration of Creation to its intended state of Edenic beauty, fruitfulness, and harmony moving forward.

***Imagine That: A ‘Walking’, Talking, and ‘Appearing’ –
And Very Relational - God!***

Apparently in the first seventy-five years of his life Avraham was like most men, defining ‘God’ – if he thought of him at all – as a ‘concept’ – *i.e.* someone or something, or some group of someones or somethings, in which to ‘believe’ or ‘not believe’. Perhaps his father or grandfather told him some old stories about things like the Creation, the Garden, the Fall, the mysterious disappearance of Hanoch [Enoch], the Flood, the Tower of Babel incident etc. Perhaps some of his acquaintances in Ur and/or in Charan had been ‘religious’ – or at least philosophical. But for his first seven and a half decades of life he apparently had no physical evidence of even the existence, much less the involvement in human affairs, of a ‘God’. He had no sensory experience with such a Being. He had no history with One. Up to age 75, he apparently had never had an actual God-encounter. Oh, the Heavens were still declaring the glory of its Creator. Creation was still declaring the majesty of the Creator, sunrise by sunrise, new moon by new moon, season by season. Every single one of the ten Divine pronouncements of Creation Week [from **Light, BE!** to the blessing the Holy One spoke over the Sabbath] was still resounding over hill and dale and ocean, calling all men to reconnect with their Creator. And the Holy One was still calling men unto Himself not just for personal relationship and redemption, but also for enlistment in His Grand Plan for the Redemption of Mankind as a species and the Restoration of Creation to its intended state of beauty, fruitfulness, and harmony. It was just that until Avram’s **Lech Lecha** moment not a single human being alive was paying the least bit of attention. The entire species of mankind had become disconnected from its Benefactor in Heaven - and the result had been devastating. Ten generations after the Flood, spiritual darkness once again covered the earth. Uncleaness polluted everything and everyone. Sensuality ruled. Idolatry flourished. Violence raged. Fruitfulness waned. The unholy trinity of *ra*, *mish’chat* and *chamas*³ ran rampant.

³ *Ra* is not some nebulous form of ‘moral evil’ as men tend to think of it; it is, instead, merely the opposite of self-denial. It gives rise to every form of *narcissistic selfishness and egocentric self-promotion*. *Mish’chat* is the kind of heart-hardening, mind-preoccupying, joy-stealing, *shalom*-killing corruption that comes from overexposure to and/or ingestion of creatures, things, thoughts, emotions, and attitudes that belong in the bio-degrading realms of the unclean [Hebrew *tamei*], and/or the common/profane [Hebrew *chol*]. *Chamas*, though usually translated into English as ‘violence’ or ‘oppression’, includes every anti-social idea, ideology, indoctrination, and attitude that lead human beings to vain imaginations, to knee-jerk reactions, to the taking of offense, to the making of accusations and the insistence upon placing of blame, to hyper-emotionalism, to taking sides in other people’s drama, to the embracing of ‘moral’ outrage, to arrogant, divisive rhetoric, to manipulative behaviors, to alignment with mob mentality, to associations with vigilantism, to acts of vengeance, and to patterns of violent oppression.

But then, last week, unseen by most of the world, in a quiet Mesopotamian village called Charan, all that *began to change*. Last week we learned to our great relief that despite outward appearances the *Great Romance* between the Creator and man - though it had entered a stage of dormancy - was still very much alive. In the course of our reading of last week's parsha - *Part I of the Avraham Chronicles* - we witnessed the dormant seed of Divine Romance awaken suddenly, sprout new life, and burst into glorious bloom. It was one of many, many '**but then suddenly**' moments about which we will read in our study of Torah.

But then suddenly

It started when the Holy One appeared out of what seemed like nowhere one day and spoke into the life of a man named Avram - a descendant of Noach's son Shem - whose life seemed by all outward appearances to be going nowhere fast. Avram was 75 years old and still living in his father's household. He had married a beautiful woman whom he deeply loved, but alas their union had proven disappointingly barren. Avram and Sarai seemed destined to die childless, leaving all the fruit of their labor to be governed by Avram's fatherless nephew Lot and/or the couple's Syrian-born servant. *Vanity of vanities - all is vanity - or so it seemed*. Ah, but then **SUDDENLY**. **SUDDENLY** the Holy One stepped in. He took on voice and vocabulary; He spoke intelligible words. He touched Avram's heart; He turned Sarai's world upside down. **SUDDENLY** Avram's life was flooded with Divine Light. **SUDDENLY**, without so much as a greeting or introduction, the Creator of Heaven and Earth was calling Avram out of his father's household and sending him and Sarai out in search of *a greater destiny*.

The Sixth God-Encounter of Avraham's Life

The man the world previously knew as *Avram* - the man the Holy One first apprehended in Genesis 12 - hardly exists any longer. Though he still inhabits the same physical frame and is now ninety-nine years old, he no longer even uses the same name. He is no longer **Avram**, son of Terach, from Charan. He is now **Avraham**, the covenant partner of the Creator of the Universe. He is now our beloved patriarch - the *father of multitudes*.

As the curtain opens on this week's parsha therefore we find Avraham sojourning in the land of promise, near a village of Hittites called Chevron [Hebron]. He is no longer childless, for Sarah's Egyptian handmaid Hagar has borne him a son. And that son, Yish'mael, is now in his early teens. As we start our readings for the week we discover quickly that the next choreographed step in Avraham's version of the Divine Romance is another God-encounter. Wow - how many is that now⁴?

⁴ This will be the first God-encounter since Avram's name was changed to Avraham.

The God-encounter which is about to unfold before our eyes in Torah will not only take Avraham's relationship with the Holy One to *a* much deeper level, but will also result in him having another child – a supernatural child – the very special child through which the promises of the Holy One are to be carried forward into the next generation.

Behold, the curtain rises. Avraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the *heat of the day*. It is a peaceful, serene scene. Rest assured however that this is about to change. Here is how Torah puts it:

Vayera elav Adonai b'Elonei Mamre

And [The Holy One] appeared to [Avraham] in the Plains of Mamre

V'hu yoshev petach-ha-ohel

while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent

kechom ha-yom

in the hottest part of the day

[Genesis 18:1]

The Torah does not tell us what was going on with Avraham as he sat at the entrance to his tent that day. Hebrew legend offers three explanations. First, there is a legend that says Avraham was in the painful third day of recovery from the circumcision he had performed on himself near the end of *Lech Lecha* and was simply waiting for the '*sun of righteousness to rise, with healing in its wings*' as would later be spoken of in Malachi 3:20 [*i.e.* Malachi 4:2 in traditional English language Bibles]⁵. Second, there is a legend that Avraham, always given to hospitality, was scanning the horizon for any travelers who might be passing by to whom he could offer a meal and a blessing. Third, there is a legend that says that since it was Avraham's knowledge of the path of the sun that had taught him that there must be a Creator he was sitting there watching the sun traverse the sky and concentrating and meditating on the Holy One.

Whatever Avraham was doing however, his life was *about to change* again. The Holy One was about to inject Himself into Avraham's consciousness once again, in yet another form. Here is how Torah puts it:

Vayisa eynav vayar v'hineh sh'loshah anashim

[Avraham] lifted his eyes and he saw three strangers⁶

nitzavim alav

standing a short distance from him

⁵ According to this interpretation one of the reasons the Holy One came was to inquire regarding the status of Avraham's recovery, and thereby established, by example, the *mitzvah* of visiting the sick.

⁶ Rashi's commentary says these 'men' were angels in disguise.

vayar v'yarotz likratam mipetach ha-ohel

When he saw [them] from the entrance of his tent

vayishtachu ar'tzah

he ran to greet them, bowing down to the ground.

Vayomar Adonai im-na matzati chen b'eyneycha

He said, 'Sir, if I have found favor in your sight,

al-na ta'avor me'al av'decha

do not pass by your servant.

Yukach-na me'at-mayim v'rachatzu ragleichem

Let some water be brought, and wash your feet.

V'hisha'anu tachat ha-etz

Rest under the tree.

V'ekchah fat-lechem v'sa'adu libechem

I will get a morsel of bread for you to refresh yourselves.

achar ta'avoru

Then you can continue on your way.

[Genesis 18:2-5(a)]

Vayar vayarotz likratam ... vayishtachu artzah – *and he saw, and he ran ... to welcome them, and he prostrated himself on the earth.* **Genesis 18:2.**

It is almost as if Avraham was expecting – indeed watching and waiting for, and joyfully anticipating - a visitation. At first sight of the Divine Entourage he sprang into action. He was not going to play hard-to-get. He was ready to entertain Heavenly royalty, to embrace angels, to commune with the Holy One, and to serve in any way he was needed. Selah! May it always be so for us, Dear Reader!

Avraham, Sarah, and an unidentified ‘young man’ in Avraham’s employ hurriedly prepared for the strangers, and presented them with, a sumptuous feast.

V'hu omed aleihem tachat ha-etz vayocheilu

And he stood under the tree in service to them, while they ate.

[Genesis 18:8(b)]

So far this does not look like any God-encounter we have read about before in Torah. The only hint we have that something more than a shared meal between men is involved is the opening line of the parsha, where we are told ‘**the Holy One appeared to Avraham**’. Since then all Torah has talked about is a heartwarming display of *desert hospitality* by Avraham. Some Hebrew sages theorize that what happened is that, as Avraham was interacting with the Holy One [verse 1] three strangers appeared on the horizon and Avraham *excused himself from the interaction with the Holy One and rushed off to greet and provide hospitality to the three strangers.*

The Holy One doesn't seem to have any involvement at all in the events of the next seven verses [i.e. verses 2-8]. The sole focus of Avraham - and of the narrative of Torah - appears at that point to have shifted from the Holy One to *the three strangers*. But that is just how things appear on the surface – i.e. in the realm we know as *tachat shemesh* [under the sun]. Things are about to get a whole lot more *real*.

A Little After-Dinner Conversation

Everyone likes to relax and enjoy some good conversation after sharing a meal. The particular after-dinner conversation we read about in today's aliyah of Torah however takes a very strange turn. Torah describes the after-dinner conversation that occurred on that occasion as follows:

Vayomeru elav ayeh Sarah ishtecha

And they asked him, "Where is your wife Sarah?"

vayomer hineh va'ohel

And he said, "Behold, she is in the tent."

Who are these people – the 'they' of the foregoing verse - who are asking where Sarah is? Do they speak with one voice - or do they each ask individually? And why do 'they' want to know? And if Sarah is in the tent with them, as Avraham tells them, why on earth did 'they' ask where she was? Hmmmmn. Flash back to the Garden of Eden. Remember that after Adam and Chava ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and suddenly realized that they were naked, they tried to hide – as if that were possible - from the Holy One. Remember that the Holy One – though He knew exactly where Adam was all the time – asked the question '*Where are you, Adam?*'

Just as the Holy One was not making casual conversation with Adam at that time, so these 'men' were not making *casual conversation* with Avraham and Sarah now. The real question was not, you see, where the woman named Sarah was *physically* located at that moment. The real question was instead *where the person called to be Sarah was at that time spiritually*. Where, the questioner(s) inquired, was *the great person Sarah is called to be*? Where was the *princess – and future queen mother* - of the nation that Avraham had been prophetically called out to sire? *Sarai* the barren wife of Avram the men could see right in front of them. But *ayeh* – where – was *Sarah*, Mother of Israel?

When all Avraham could do in response to the question they posed was to sputter out '*Look, she's right here!*' the questioner decided to drive his point home.

Vayomer shov ashuv eleicha ka'et chayah

"I will return to you according to the time of life", said [he],

v'hineh-ven l'Sarah ishtecha

'and your wife Sarah will have a son.'

[Genesis 18:9-10(a)]

He will return! Now that is good news! There is an appointed *et chayah* – i.e. a ‘time of life’? That is fantastic news! And at the appointed time of life, Sarah will have *a son*! After all these years? How can this be, seeing as Well, who cares how! This is no time for questions or worrying about details. This is a time for *thanksgiving*. This is at time for *rejoicing*. This is a time for *dancing*! And this is a time for *laughter*, if there ever was one!

A Time to Laugh

Shlomo [Solomon] the writer of the Book that most English speakers know as Ecclesiastes said that *to everything there is an appointed season*, and that *there is an appointed time to every purpose under heaven*. Ecclesiastes 3:1. Among many other things, he taught, there is ‘*a time to weep, and a time to laugh.*’ Ecclesiastes 3:4.

Torah then tells us that when Sarah hears the wayfaring stranger who had just eaten her food declaring that, one year to the date thereafter, she [who had been barren all her life, and is now well past child-bearing age] will have a son, Sarah’s *time to laugh* had come⁷. Sarah’s brain simply could not process the words she heard the man say. She had no frame of reference in which to fit the man’s words. And so the elderly but still beautiful matron of Hebron, the distinguished veteran of many wars, and the well-worn bearer of many scars of life, found herself *giggling like a schoolgirl*⁸.

Vatitzchak Sarah b'kirbah l'emor

And Sarah laughed to herself, saying,

acharei veloti ha-yetah-li ednah v'adoni zaken

'Now that I am worn out, shall I have my desire? My husband is old!'

[Genesis 18:12]

Why? Why was laughter Sarah’s response? Because when confronted with an *unexpected sight, sound, situation*, or other stimuli that *startles our brain*, laughter

⁷ Of course, there are different kinds of laughter. Something akin to laughter – something which I consider a mere *imitation of laughter* - is often used sarcastically by people, as a means of making mockery, or expressing disbelief or disapproval of someone or something else. That kind of mocking, disapproving laughter is not something I believe the Torah is attributing to Sarah.

⁸ Left open in the Hebrew text is the issue of just how loudly and openly Sarah’s laughter rang out. The precise wording used has led some to conclude that she only laughed ‘inwardly’, and outwardly maintained her composure.

is what results. Laughter is to the human brain *what a hiccup is to the human diaphragm*. Something happens around us in our field of sensory perception that is outside our expectations and that our mind cannot immediately process in the usual course of its operation, but which is immediately perceived as non-threatening, and we *laugh*. A *chemical reaction* occurs in our surprised brain, a series of impulses are instantaneously released, resulting in an *involuntary release of air* from the lungs. This air hits our vocal cords and *unplanned, nonsensical sounds* flow out of our throats into the air. Sounds that cannot be compressed into language and written down. It comes out as a *giggle*, or a *chuckle*, or a *snort*, or a *guffaw*, or a *roar*. The process occurs all the time. It is the way the Holy One *designed and made us*, in order to provide our brains *a way to release the sudden stress brought about by unexpected though non-threatening stimuli*. Laughter is therefore very, very *tov* – i.e. *good* - for the creature called man. Laughing *releases endorphins into the brain* – which results in the lowering of one's blood pressure, the boosting of one's immune system, and releasing of one's pent-up stress. Laughter is thus a *precious gift of the Holy One* to the human beings He loves.

I have a feeling therefore that the Garden of Eden was *full of laughter*. I have a feeling the Messianic Kingdom and the World-to-Come will be full of laughter as well. I remember the following words from Psalm 126:

*When the Holy One brought back the captivity of Tzion,
We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations,
"The Holy One has done great things for them."
The Holy One has done great things for us, and we are glad."*
[Psalm 126:1-3]

Yes, for the redeemed of the Holy One it seems that laughter is destined to be *as natural as breathing*. But back to our aliyah. Sarah, it seems, is experiencing the first fruits of the laughter which is to become the heritage of all of the Holy One's redeemed in the ages to come. As she is giggling away another voice, one which is by now very, very familiar to Avraham, suddenly chimes in:

Lamah zeh tzachakah Sarah

'Why did Sarah laugh

l'emor ha-af umnam eled va'ani zakanti

and say, 'Can I really have a child when I am so old?'

Hayipalei me'Adonai davar

Is anything too difficult for God?

l'mo'ed ashuv eleicha ka'et chayah ul'Sarah ven

At the appointed time, I will return, and Sarah will have a son.'

[Genesis 18:13-14]

Of course the Holy One knew very well why Sarah had laughed. He didn't need Avraham to tell him. But the Holy One asked Avraham anyway - to cause Avraham and Sarah to do some soul-searching on the issue. And as if to reassure Avraham the Holy One then takes immediate steps to upgrade the prophetic message. The Holy One promises that it will not be merely the man/angelic messenger that is going to return to Avraham's camp next year at the appointed time to assure the miraculous event – instead, the Holy One Himself is going to make the trip and personally see to it that Sarah has a son.

Was the Holy One angry with – or disappointed in - Sarah because she laughed? I personally don't think so, Dear Reader⁹. I think the Holy One wanted Sarah to laugh. I think He intended all along for her to laugh. I think He set up the situation the way He did so that she would laugh.

Keep in mind that this series of events was the Holy One's 'ice-breaker' with Sarah. Heretofore all the Holy One's dealings had been exclusively with Avraham. Avraham had several God-encounters under his belt by now; Sarah, however, had none. She was justifiably nervous. Hence we read:

V'techadesh Sarah l'emor lo tzachakti ki yare'ah
Sarah was afraid and she denied it. 'I did not laugh,' she said.

vayomer lo ki tzachakt
And he said, 'Oh, but you did laugh.'
[Genesis 18:15]

I picture a *twinkle* in the Holy One's metaphorical 'eye' as this whole situation unfolds. He has *big plans* for Sarah – plans she cannot even begin to comprehend right now. He wants to *break the ice* with her in a way that she will never forget.

The innocent, involuntary laughter the Holy One evoked from Sarah in connection with this incident is, you see, going to establish the theme for the rest of Sarah's life. The Hebrew verb translated as *laugh* is *tzachaq*¹⁰. This is the verb root of the Hebrew name *Yitzhak* [KJV 'Isaac'], the name that the Holy One has chosen for the son Sarah will bear. Sarah's *appointed time to laugh* has, you see, just begun.

Eavesdropping On the Creator's Meditations

Later in the aliyah of Torah we, like Sarah, will get the opportunity to eavesdrop on the thoughts and meditations of the Creator of the Universe. We will get to examine and evaluate the Holy One's thought-processes and obtain a remarkable

⁹ Please note however that there is a suggestion in the Talmud that it was a mistake for Sarah to laugh. Rather, according to this line of thought, she should have answered "*Amen*" - "*so shall it be*" - because when somebody gives us a blessing, we should never treat it lightly.

¹⁰ *Tzachaq* is *tzade, chet, kuf*. Strong's Hebrew word #6701, it is pronounced *tzaw-khak'*.

insight into His logic and Divine “worldview”. We will actually get to overhear the Holy One *talking to Himself*, modeling His Divine instruction to speak of His words and ways “as we walk along the way”. Let us take full advantage of the opportunity the Holy One has afforded us.

The circumstances of this unusual opportunity are as follows. After the strange events described above in which Avraham plays host not only to angels but somehow to a *Divine manifestation of the Holy One Himself*, the Holy One and his entourage of angelic messengers get ready to leave. We are told that they are *en route* to a personal inspection of the Yardin [Jordan River] Valley in preparation for a day of dramatic visitation for the cities of the plain.

Avraham accompanies them all, escorting them down the road, serving them any way he can. And in this context the Holy One “thinks out loud” for all Torah readers of all generations to hear. Wow! What we about to read are the very meditations of the heart and mind of the Holy One – the essence of His Divine Plan for returning His Creation to the garden. Do not read these words as of historical significance only. The words are for **today** – for *our lifetimes* as well as the lifetimes of our *children*, and our *children’s children*. They tell us *where our hope lies*. Here are the meditations of the Holy One’s heart – then and now:

Hamechaseh ani me'Avraham asher ani oseh

"Will I hide from Avraham what I do,

V'Avraham hayoh yihyeh l'goy gadol

seeing that Avraham will surely become a great and mighty nation,

v'atzum v'nivereichu-vo kol goyei ha-aretz

and all the nations of the eretz will be blessed in him?

Kiyedativ l'ma'an asher yetzaveh et-banav

For I have known him in order that he may enjoin his children

v'et-beyto acharav v'shameru derech Adonai

and his household after him, and that they may keep the way of the Holy One,

sla'asot tzedakah umishpat

to do 'righteousness' and 'justice';

l'ma'an havi Adonai al-Avraham

to the end that the Holy One may bring on Avraham

et asher-diber alav

that which he has spoken of him."

[Genesis 18:18-20]

Avraham is not just a man who lived a long time ago. In the Holy One’s eyes Avraham is *every descendant of Avraham* – natural (his children) and engrafted (his

household) – who adopts and lives by Avraham’s *sh'ma* lifestyle. So it behooves us to ask: What is *the secret of Avraham – the secret of “friendship with God”*? Let’s meditate on that for a few moments, shall we Dear Reader.

Avraham’s Secret

According to the meditation of the Holy One, the secret is three-fold. Let us consider carefully what the Holy One says are the three foundational aspects of his relationship with Avraham.

1. Willingness to Be Intimate With God

First, Avraham’s secret involves a *hunger for* and a *willingness to receive intimate knowledge of* and *to lay our deepest, darkest secrets bare before* the Holy One. After all, the Holy One said of Avraham: *For I have known him* The Hebrew word translated as “known” is *yedativ*, a form of the Hebrew verb root *yada* [yod, resh, ayin]. This word involves intimacy – like the intimacy of a husband and wife. It is a *spiritual union* that comes through close interpersonal interaction over a period of time.

Intimacy requires *vulnerability* – *i.e.* to drop all pretenses of self-sufficiency, strength and piety and acknowledge one’s weaknesses, fears, perceived limitations, and failures.

Intimacy comes from *transparency*. Intimacy requires humility. Intimacy flows out of trust. Intimacy births childlikeness.

Intimacy with the Holy One involves voluntarily removing all the societal, cultural, familial and personal masks one usually wears and tossing aside all the glitzy fig leaf coverings and whitewashing behind which one usually hides his or her vulnerability and spiritual nakedness. Intimacy requires putting aside all self-righteous anger as well as all shame, all offenses and all worldly affections, all cynical attitudes and all sarcastic smoke screens and ... well, and *just being real*. And that is by no means all. The kind of intimacy the Hebrew verb *yada* and its derivatives describes involves far more than just allowing someone else to see one’s blemishes, scars, weaknesses, fears, foibles, follies and failures. *Yada* requires allowing – indeed *inviting* - someone to examine them, probe them, debride them, speak into them, and heal them. This is what the Psalmist David spoke about in Psalm 139 when he said:

*O Holy One, You have searched me and known me.
You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You understand my thought afar off.
You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.*

*For there is not a word on my tongue,
But behold, O Holy One, You know it altogether.
You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me.*

*Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties.
And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Such intimacy does not come easily for human beings. Avraham is a case in point. We have now been studying his interactions with the Holy One for a good while. We have seen Avraham have five (today makes six) direct “God-encounters”. We have seen the Holy One working in Avraham’s life behind-the-scenes, in his world [famine in Kena’an, plagues in Egypt, war in the Plain of the Yarden], and in every single one of his earthly relationships [*i.e.* the separation from his father’s household in Ur, then from his new acquaintances in Egypt, then from Lot, then his association with Elazar, Mamre and Aner of the Emori, Melki-Tzedek and the King of Sodom, etc.].

Yada is not something that happens overnight. It does not happen in a few minutes at an altar. It does not happen instantaneously in a *mikveh* [*i.e.* a baptism]. *Yada* requires a day-by-day growth process of fits and starts, successes and failures, laughter and tears. It involves tremendous pain, as well as wondrous, delirious pleasure – and just about everything in between. *Yada* involves a lifetime of constant learning, and growing intimacy.

May *yada* be your portion, and may it be the ever-increasing experience and legacy of everyone in your household and spheres of influence, Dear Reader! Please do not sell out the blissful, life-giving opportunity for *yada*-level intimacy with the Creator for anything in the world. Do not even think of surrendering your children’s future to the whims and perverse lusts of the culture around you.

2. Teach Your Children Well

The second aspect of Avraham’s *sh’ma* lifestyle is often translated as ***teaching one’s children and household the Ways of the Holy One***. The word often translated as ‘*he will teach*’ is the Hebrew word ***yetzaveh***. This is a future tense version of the Hebrew verb root ***tzavah*** [*tzade, vav, hey*]. Often, this word is translated into English as ‘*command*’. But is this the proper rendering?¹¹ Let’s look deeper. Like all Hebrew verb roots ***tzavah*** is a pictographic mural made up of three images (letters). The first image in this particular mural is the Hebrew letter *tzade* [which makes what we in English would think of as a *tz* sound]. This letter is a picture of *a man prostrating himself in submission to the Holy One, and receiving, in consequence,*

¹¹ According to some ancient sources, ***yetzaveh*** means “he will bring into union/communion”. These sources thus consider Avraham’s calling as not being so much as to ‘teach’ or ‘command’ people on ethics, morals, or spiritual truths, but *to bring people into union/communion with the Holy One, not so much through any type of formal verbalization/proclamation as through living a sh’ma lifestyle* before the world, even through trials.

the Holy One's Hand of blessing upon and empowerment of his life. It is a picture of imparted righteousness.

The right-standing this man enjoys and which allows him to receive blessing and empowerment from the Holy One is neither *inherent* in the man, nor is it *earned* by good deeds - it flows from the *attitude of submission* he exhibits as he prostrates himself, surrendering to the Holy One's will and ways.

The second image in the mural in question is that of the Hebrew letter *vav* [which, in this case, makes what we know in English as the *v* sound]. This letter is a picture of a connecting device – like a nail or a peg with which one connects one thing (a picture frame, for instance) to another (a wall, for instance).

The final image of this pictographic mural is that of the Hebrew letter *hey* [which makes what we know in English as the *h* sound]. This letter is a picture of a window in a tent – ***the portal that allows two-way vision*** (that is, it allows something outside of an individual to be seen from inside, and it allows something inside an individual to be seen from the outside) and lets fresh air into the tent.

The Hebrew word ***tzavah*** is thus the promise of the Holy One that He will impute a *righteous standing* – that which we know as *the righteousness of Messiah* – to a source of revelation and inspiration. The source of revelation and inspiration in question is, I believe, in this context, none other than Avraham. The Holy One says in the passage under study that He has known Avraham – and made Himself known to Avraham – for a specific purpose – ***l'ma'an asher yetzaveh et-banav v'et-beyto acharav*** [in order that he may ***tzavah*** his children and his household after him], ***v'shameru derech Adonai*** [and that they may keep the way of the Holy One].

Is it possible that what the Holy One is saying in our aliyah is that Avraham's destiny and purpose in life – the special function for which he has been prophetically empowered by the Words the Holy One has spoken over him – is to bring about in the lives of his children, and in the lives of all those who join themselves to his household, what the Hebrew verb ***tzavah*** pictures – an *imputation of tzadik standing*? Is it possible that the Holy One is saying that, as and to the extent Avraham responds to the prophetic empowerment of the Holy One, Avraham will so live his life, and will so interact with others in the course of his life, that his children and all members of his household *will be drawn to that which leads man to an imputation of tzedekah*?

If this is so what is to be the ***'medium' of imputation*** for Avraham's children and household members? What medium of imputation does the Covenant call for? It will be the same medium of imputation by which the Holy One imputed

righteousness to Avram, Dear Reader. We learned what that medium was back in Genesis 15. Our English Bibles told us there that Avraham ‘believed’ God and ‘the Holy One credited it to him as ‘righteousness’. We have also learned, when we studied that passage, that from a Hebraic perspective, ‘believing God’ [i.e. *aman*-ing the Holy One] has nothing to do with forming a ‘belief system’, a doctrinal thesis, or a systematic theology, but instead has to do with *adopting a bridal orientation toward the Holy One, letting Him lead in the dance of life, receiving whatever He gives you and nurturing it, and being a responder rather than an initiator*. That lifestyle – of *sh’ma*-ing the words of the Holy One – is what Avraham’s children and his household will be drawn to.

The *tzavah* aspect of the *sh’ma* lifestyle of Avraham, though sometimes called/translated as ‘teaching’ or ‘commanding’, has little, if anything, to do with any currently recognized form of public ministry. The teaching lifestyle of Avraham and all people called by the Holy One to intimacy with Him, and to the shared task of leading mankind back to the Garden, involves something totally different, and much more demanding, than public speaking. It involves, instead, the tough process of negotiating the places in life where the “*rubber meets the road*” in a God-honoring manner, all the while remaining responsive to the Holy One’s promptings. It involves dealing with *problems in marriage, in business, with finances, in interpersonal relationships, and with children* – all the while letting the Holy One refine one’s character, and correct and discipline one when he or she errs. Only a people who know the Holy One’s *discipline* as well as His *blessing* can be a true light to the nations. The Hebraic picture drawn for us by the word *tzavah*, of an imputation of righteous standing, occurs not because of what one *says*, but because, day in and day out, one’s children and household see the person submitting each area of his life to the Holy One, and see the *shalom* and *blessing* which result, and are themselves drawn toward the *sh’ma* lifestyle.

The second secret of Avraham’s relationship with the Holy One, then, the *tzavah* principle, is a principle of *contagion* and of *transference*. Avraham’s relationship with the Holy One was not a ‘personal thing’ – it was everything. His relationship with the Holy One molded and shaped all his most intimate interpersonal dealings. *It was infectious even with those who knew him best. And perhaps most importantly, it lost none of its power in the transference.*

3. ‘Keeping’ The Way of the Holy One

The third aspect of Avraham’s friendship with the Holy One is to “**keep** [Hebrew, *shamar*¹²] **the way of the Holy One, to do righteousness and justice.**” There are a

¹² The word our English Bibles translate as “**keep**” is *sh’mar, shin, mem, resh*, Strong’s Hebrew word #8104, pronounced *shaw-mar*’. This verb root means to diligently defend, to guard, to keep watch over, to protect, to cherish, to treasure, and to save. The first usage in Torah is found in Genesis 2:15, where we

number of "ways" a man or woman can 'keep'. A man or woman can, for instance, 'keep' [i.e. *treasure, cherish, safeguard, defend and cling to*] the way of his human nature – the way that merely responds to fleshly appetites and that which he/she thinks in his/her heart is right. This first 'way' that men can 'keep', and teach their children to 'keep', is the essence of **naturalism**.

Secondly, a man or woman who desires more than the way of human nature can 'keep' the way of a philosophy or creed or 'cause' – i.e. the way of approaching life which *employs human reasoning*, and projects *human effort*, to deal with every situation. This is the way of approaching life which *analyzes*, and *attempts to manipulate for the 'good'*, both the *hearts* [with emotional appeals] and the *minds* [with rhetoric and what is falsely called 'logic'] of those who 'keep' the way of human nature. This second 'way' which man can 'keep' and teach their children to 'keep' is the essence of **humanism**.

Thirdly, a man or woman who desires more than either the way of human nature or the way of philosophy, creed and cause can 'keep' the way of religion. This is a way of approaching life *much like humanism*, except that it [a] introduces a *spiritual component* [of one variety or another], and [b] restructures the basic philosophy, creed and cause the person to which the person subscribes according to *a systematic theology* passed down by the leaders of an established ecclesiastical hierarchy. This third way that men can 'keep', and teach their children to 'keep', is the essence of **spiritualism**.

Ah, but there *is another, much higher way* which men and women can 'keep' and teach their children to 'keep'. The much higher way is **derech Adonai** - the 'way of the Holy One'. This higher way involves *submitting everything in life* – one's fleshly desires [and for that matter his/her 'needs'], one's *intellect* and one's *emotions*, one's *political, social, and psychological opinions and ideologies*, and one's *spiritual condition*, to the Holy One.

Derech Adonai is not a *philosophy*, or a *creed*, or a *cause*, or a *religion*. It is, instead, a **total, all-out surrender to both the Will and the spoken Words of the Holy One**. To 'keep' [Hebrew *sh'mar*] the **derech Adonai** is to walk through life on the pathway in which the Holy One leads, *sh'ma*-ing the Holy One's voice - i.e. *waiting upon His instructions*, then *listening carefully to them*, then *willfully receiving with gladness and embracing them* – and the prophetic empowerment

are told: "*And the Holy One God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep [i.e. sh'mar] it*. Another illustrative usage is found a chapter later, in Genesis 3:24, when we are told that, after Adam and Chava ingested the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, The Holy One "*placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard [i.e. sh'mar] the way to the tree of life.*"

inherent in them - because they are, like the *yehi ohr* [Light Be!] pronouncement of Genesis 1:3, Words of the living God.

But even that is not all to ‘keep’ *derech Adonai* means. Keeping *derech Adonai* also involves *meditating on them*, and *trusting Him to teach you as you meditate and practice them, what they mean*, through a flowing course of *Divinely – orchestrated life experiences*, a series of God-man interactions on the Holy One’s terms, and repeated ‘*in-flight corrections*’. To ‘keep’ the *derech* of the Holy One is to follow the example of Yeshua of Natzret, who did *only what He saw His Father doing*, See John 5:19-20¹³.

***So ... Please Do NOT Give me that ‘Old Time Religion’ -
It Is Definitely NOT ‘Good Enough for Me’***

Please understand however that ‘keeping the way’ of the Holy One is not like participating in a *religion*. It is not following the doctrines and participating in the meetings of traditional forms of Christianity. Neither is it adopting the *halakah* or attending the synagogue services of traditional forms of Judaism. It is not starting a new ‘hybrid’ form of religion. Please also understand that ‘keeping the way’ of the Holy One has nothing to do with engaging in *legalism* - *i.e.* obeying a list of do’s and don’ts, *can’s and can’ts, shoulds and shouldn’ts* in order either to win *Divine favor* or to earn *Divine reward*. Please understand as well that neither is ‘keeping the way’ of the Holy One adopting a new lifestyle of *lawlessness*, under the theory that Torah is irrelevant or outdated because you are now ‘*walking in the spirit*’. Such a ‘walking in the spirit’ mentality generally winds up with a person doing whatever his or her *fleshly desires, human intellect, and momentary emotions* tells him or her that ‘the Spirit’ is directing.

Instead ‘*keeping the way of the Holy One*’ is simply *becoming gradually more and more like our Covenant Partner in Heaven* – simply because *He is the one with which we have the most intimate conversation and interaction*. ‘Keeping the way’ of the Holy One involves *walking out the instructions of the Torah the Holy One has given us*. The Torah constitutes His revealed *words of prophetic empowerment* – which we embrace and cherish not because we are trying to obtain favor with the Holy One, or in order to win “salvation” or “reward”, or earn or deserve blessings, but simply because *He is God, and has impregnated us with the Words of His mouth*.

¹³ These verses read as follows: Then Yeshua answered and said to them, ***Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does; and He will show Him greater works than these, that you may marvel.***

The words of Torah are, you see, *planted inside us* like **seeds**, which are constantly *germinating, sprouting, producing leaves, blossoms, and fruit in season*. Consider *the acorn*. The acorn does not produce a seedling tree in order to please anyone, including the Holy One. It does so simply because that is what it was *created to do*. So it is with those who *hide the words of the Holy One in their heart*. Such people ‘keep the way of the Holy One’, and do righteousness and justice, *because it is part of their nature as a new creation*.

Can You See What the ‘Father’ is Doing?

The Holy One allowed us to eavesdrop upon and overhear His thoughts and meditations relative to Avraham and his descendants *for a reason*. Consider that He may just have wanted us to see in the context of His interactions with Avraham *how to build a relationship with Him and with His Creation that would honor Him and reverse the effects of sin on the world*.

May we both take heed to and respond appropriately to His words and thoughts. Maybe then we will learn to put a little less priority on *outward forms of religion* and *ministry* and to instead *yield our hearts, our homes, and our lives* to His words. Maybe then we will come to acknowledge at last that neither individuals nor the world will be changed in any lasting manner by the public ministries of churches and synagogues, missions or crusades, conferences or worship services; the world will instead be changed by friends of God modeling the *sh’ma* lifestyle of Avraham in their houses, their neighborhoods, and their business dealings, over a lifetime of ups and downs.

The “glory” for such a group of people will not belong to them – but to the Holy One. The “kingdom” such a group of people will build will not be their kingdom, but His. May it come to pass *in our lives*, Dear Reader. May we *heed the meditations of the Holy One concerning His Covenant people*. All Creation really does *groan in eager expectation*

Questions For Today’s Study

1. According to the Jewish sages the events about which we read in the opening of parsha **Vayera** occurred just three days after Avraham’s circumcision (the last event of last week’s lesson).

[A] In what form did the Holy One appear to Avraham this time?

[B] What things did Avraham provide to the Holy One in verses 3-8?

[C] What was it about the fact that Sarah was in her tent during the meal that caused the Holy One to say that He would surely return in one year?

[D] What response did Sarah have when she overheard the promise the Holy One made to Avraham concerning her?

[E] Why do you think Sarah lied - and to whom did she lie - seeing she was in the tent and the conversation was outside under the trees)?

2. When the Holy One leaves Avraham's dwelling near the oaks of Mamre to go in the direction of Sodom, Avraham walked with Him a ways - and the two friends proceeded to engage in one of the most fascinating conversations in the Bible.

[A] The conversation starts with the Holy One seemingly talking to Himself. What question does He ask Himself?

[B] What factors does the Holy One list in favor of sharing with Avraham what he was about to do?

[C] What did the Holy One recognize that Avraham would direct his "children" (he only had one at the time - Ishmael) and his "household" to do?

[D] What did the Holy One say had caused Him to go to Sodom?

[E] To the Holy One, the conversation had a predictable outcome. He would destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But to Avraham the issue was not Sodom and Gomorrah, but *what* and *who*?

[F] What was the real effect of Avraham's intercession (since it did not affect or alter the judgment of the Holy One on Sodom and Gomorrah)?

3. In today's haftarah the prophet *Elisha* ministers to a widow which tradition says was the widow of *Ovadiyah* [Obadiah], the God-fearing minister of King *Ahav* [Ahab]. *Ovadiyah* had befriended *Eliyahu*. *Ovadiyah* had fed and sheltered the Holy One's prophets when *Ahav's* powerful queen *Yizavel* [Jezebel] had persecuted them. Here is the reading for today in the Hebrew Names Version of the TaNaKh:

*Now there cried a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets to Elisha, saying,
"Your servant my husband is dead;
and you know that your servant did fear the Holy One:
and the creditor is come to take to him my two children to be bondservants."*

*Elisha said to her, "What shall I do for you?
Tell me; what have you in the house?"
She said, "Your handmaid has nothing in the house, except a pot of oil."*

*Then he said, "Go, borrow vessels abroad of all your neighbors,
even empty vessels; borrow not a few.
You are to go in, and shut the door on you and on your sons,
and pour out into all those vessels; and you are to set aside that which is full."*

*So she went from him, and shut the door on her and on her sons;
they brought [the vessels] to her, and she poured out.*

*It happened, when the vessels were full, that she said to her son, "Bring me yet a vessel."
He said to her, "There isn't another vessel".*

*The oil stayed. Then she came and told the man of God.
He said, "Go, sell the oil, and pay your debt, and you and your sons [can] live on the rest."*

[A] What was the problem the widow was experiencing?

[B] In this widow's home were two 'classes' of people whom the Holy One favors greatly. What were these two 'classes'?

[C] What was Elisha's counsel about what to do first with the money made from selling the miraculous supply of oil?

[D] Is paying off debts a *mitzvah* [i.e. an act consistent with righteousness, in accordance with the Holy One's character]? Explain what "commandment(s)" of Torah [i.e. prophetic/creative empowering words spoken by the Holy One over new creation man] are involved. Cite the book of Torah, chapter, and verse.

4. In the selected reading from the apostolic writings Kefa [Peter] warns his readers that underneath the surface of their little faith community all is not as it seems, and evil is at work. No one wants to hear such things. No one wants to believe that their own little community is *a fertile seedbed of serpentine activity*. But Kefa does not want us to be deceived by appearances. Kefa reminds us of the angels who joined in the rebellion of ha-Satan, and the pre-flood world described in Genesis 6, and the Holy One's judgment on both. Kefa points out that the seeds of sin which brought on those two judgments are alive, well, and germinating and growing, just beneath the surface – *even in the midst of the Redeemed Community!*

Heed Kefa's words; for even in the midst of those who claim to know Messiah are those who, whether in ignorance or by design (the effect is the same), would lead the Holy One's people into *lawlessness*, divorcing them from Torah, *and/or* leading them into legalistic approaches of Scripture which rob Torah of its intended effect.

Before the week is up Kefa will exhort us to make the proper *response* to this frightening truth. We need not be controlled by fear – but we should be alert, and ready to act and react according to the Holy One's wisdom and knowledge, *sh'ma*-ing Torah instruction at every turn. For today however our assigned task is merely to allow the stunning truth to sink in that *some of those we trust, and feel closest to, and admire most, are agents (wittingly or unwittingly) of darkness*. Just as we have learned that radical elements of Islam have over a several year period introduced 'sleepers' into America who mixed with our society and appeared to become like us, as they wait for their master's appointed time to unleash their attacks, so we now learn from Kefa that *not all who claim to know Messiah and who "minister" in His Name are truly His*. Here is Kefa's warning:

*But there also arose false prophets among the people,
as among you also there will be false teachers,
who will secretly bring in destructive heresies,
denying even the Master who bought them, bringing on themselves swift destruction.*

*Many will follow their corrupted ways,
and as a result, the way of the truth will be maligned.
In covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words:*

*whose sentence now from of old doesn't linger, and their destruction will not slumber.
For if the Holy One didn't spare angels when they sinned, but cast them down to Tartarus,
and committed them to pits of darkness, to be reserved to judgment;
and didn't spare the ancient world,
but preserved Noah with seven others, a preacher of righteousness,
when he brought a flood on the world of the ungodly*

[A] What two kinds of ‘enemy agents’ does Kefa [KJV ‘Peter’] say are present and at work in the midst of the community of followers of Yeshua?

[B] How would you define a “false prophet”?

[C] What signs would you look for to discern if a person who speaks on behalf of the Holy One is a “false prophet”?

[D] How would you define a “false teacher”?

[E] What signs would you look for to discern if a person who speaks on behalf of the Holy One is a “false prophet”?

[F] According to verses 2-3 what will be the effect that false prophets and teachers will have on the community of followers of Yeshua?

[G] What is the difference between *discerning* false prophets and teachers [which we are *supposed* to do] and *judging* our fellow man [which we are *not* supposed to do]?

[H] What judgments does Kefa mention in verses 4-5 as being representative of the judgments that will be inflicted upon ‘false prophets’ and ‘false teachers’?

[I] According to verse 5 is it likely anyone will be spared when judgment is sent on false prophets and false teachers among the believers? If so, who?

*May you not let the Holy One pass you by this day.
May you run to approach His Majesty, find favor in His sight,
and commune with Him as did Avraham.*

The Rabbi's son

Meditation for Today's Study

Psalm 140:1-3

*Deliver me, O Holy One, from the evil man.
Preserve me from the violent man;
from those who devise mischief in their heart;
From those who continually gather themselves together for war;
from those who have sharpened their tongues like a serpent -
The viper's poison is under their lips.*

Selah.