

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT VAYERA

The Birth of Yitzchak

and the Banishment of Hagar and Yishmael

)Bereishit 21:1-21(

By Rav Elchanan Samet

Some seventeen years pass between Hagar's flight prior to Yishmael's birth - the narrative we discussed in last week's parasha - and their banishment from Avraham's household in this week's parasha. (Avraham was eighty-six years old at the time of Yishmael's birth [16:16], and one-hundred when Yitzchak was born [21:5]; about two or three years later Yitzchak was weaned [21:5].) There are several similarities between these two stories, forming a strong connection between them.

On the other hand, the circumstances have changed considerably since the narrative in last week's parasha: Yishmael, whose birth concluded that story, has become a youth in our parasha; Sarah, who was then childless, now embraces her newborn son. In fact, the contrasts between these parshiot are no less striking than the similarities, and both are quite clearly apparent.

Like the previous narrative, our parasha also arouses moral surprise and difficulty: Sarah's demand of Avraham to "Banish this maidservant and her son" seems quite harsh, and in fact brings Hagar and Yishmael to death's door when their water runs out in the desert. Indeed, in contrast with Avraham's agreement with Sarah's complaints in the previous narrative – "Behold, your maidservant is in your hand" - here it appears that he does not agree with her: "And the thing was very bad in Avraham's eyes because of his son." However, those commentators who interpret the previous story as presenting Sarah in a negative light (Radak, Ramban) see things differently in our parasha. The reason for this is clear: God explicitly tells Avraham, "Whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her".

Nevertheless, God's support of Sarah's demand does not mitigate our duty to explain the moral difficulty we sense in this story. On the contrary, we are faced here with not only the question of the morality of Sarah, but also with the very justice of God, "A God of truth and without injustice; just and right is He" (Devarim 32:4.)

The same four parameters that we used to explain the previous parasha may be useful again in clarifying this moral dilemma: a. socio-historical background, b. literal interpretation, c. literary analysis of the entire narrative, and d. the context of this narrative within the life-story of Avraham and Sarah.

SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When Sarah says, "For the son of this maidservant will not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak," it is clear that we must examine the laws of inheritance prevalent at the time. The Code of Hammurabi states:

Par. 170: If a man's chief wife bears him children and his maidservant [also] bears him children, and the father, while he still lives, tells the children whom the maidservant bore him, "[You are] my children," then he counts them among the children of his chief wife. After the father dies, the children of the chief wife and the children of the maidservant divide the property of the father's estate between them equally. The son of the chief wife is first to choose and take his portion of the inheritance.

Par. 171: If the father, while still alive, does not say to the children whom the maidservant bore him, "[You are] my children," then after the father dies, the children of the maidservant do not receive a portion of the father's estate with the children of the chief wife. The release of the maidservant and her children is assured; the children of the chief wife shall not demand servitude of the children of the maidservant".

Thus it appears that Sarah seeks to protect Yitzchak's rights as sole heir. Why is she in such a hurry to demand that something be done in order to ensure this already? Experience has shown, from times of yore until today, that after a person's death, differences of opinion as to the wishes of the deceased can often arise between people who consider themselves heirs. Therefore, Sarah wishes to make the legal situation clear while Avraham is alive. Avraham does something similar of his own initiative long after Sarah's death, with regard to the children of his concubines:

"And Avraham gave all that was his to Yitzchak. And to the children of the concubines that Avraham had, Avraham gave gifts and he sent them away from Yitzchak his son, while he was still alive, eastwards to the eastern land." (25:5-6)

LITERAL INTERPRETATION: "BANISHING" AND "SENDING"

"Banishing" is a harsh action, all the more so when the subjects of this treatment are a woman and a boy, and where their destination is the desert. Hence, we are troubled: why does Sarah demand this? Why is it necessary to banish Hagar and her son Yishmael in order to secure an uncontested inheritance for Yitzchak?

Indeed, Avraham does not "banish" them. After God tells him, "Everything that Sarah tells you, listen to her," we are told that Avraham "sent her away" (21:14). It seems that the Torah is deliberately softening the harsh verb "banish" (g-r-sh), using instead a softer verb (sh-l-ch), reflecting Avraham's feelings and the character of his actions.

The root sh-l-ch, in the pi'el (intensive) case, does sometimes have a meaning similar to that of the root g-r-sh (e.g. Devarim 22:7, 22:29). But in general, the word means release (shichrur), letting someone go, removing a restraint which prevents flight, etc. For example, release of slaves is generally termed "shiluach" in the Torah. Is it possible that this is the Torah's intention in describing Avraham's action as "vayeshalcheha" (and he sent her?)

Par. 171 of the Code of Hammurabi stipulates that if the children of the maidservant are not included among the inheritors of the father, "The release of the maidservant and her children is assured." This is precisely the situation we have before us: with Avraham's decision that Yishmael is not to inherit him, Hagar and Yishmael are going to be released. (Although Hammurabi's law stipulates that release follows the death of the master, in the case described there the master did not clarify anything concerning the inheritance until he died. It is possible that if he stated during his lifetime that the son of the maidservant was not going to inherit, then the son and his mother would earn their freedom even during the master's lifetime. Even if this was not so, it was perhaps in the interests of Avraham and Sarah to advance their release while Avraham was still alive, for the reason mentioned above: in order to prevent arguments and misunderstandings following Avraham's death.)

Hence, perhaps this was what Sarah had in mind, and this logically links the two parts of her statement: "Banish... for this maidservant's son will not inherit..." But where do we find the word "gerush" (banishing) used in the context of releasing slaves? "For with a strong hand he shall send them out (yeshalchem) and with a strong hand shall he banish them (yegarshem)" (Shemot 6:1); and also, "When he lets you go (ke-shalcho), he will surely banish you (garesh yegaresh) from here." We can explain this by keeping in mind that the slave did not always leave his master's house willingly.

It seems that Hagar did not wish to be released from her servitude in Avraham's house, inter alia because the circumstances of her release were a demonstrative declaration that her son had no part in Avraham's inheritance. This is why Sarah uses the harsh verb "g-r-sh;" i.e., even if Hagar does not wish to be released from servitude, the law does not allow for her to continue to be a servant once it has been decided that her son will not be counted among Avraham's heirs. Therefore she should be released, even if it is against her will. But in describing Avraham's actions, the text goes back to the original legal essence of the action: "sending away" or "freeing".

Sarah's demand is thus an action with firm legal and moral underpinnings: she insists on a clarification of the exclusive inheritance by her son Yitzchak, with the accompanying legal obligation – the release of Hagar and her son from servitude in Avraham's house. And God's support of Sarah's demand represents confirmation of the legality and morality of what Sarah demands.

The stories of the forefathers in Sefer Bereishit are strewn throughout with threads of a double consciousness: one level of the actions of the biblical personalities is the earthly-mortal level, while the other is consciousness of the Divine destiny. This consciousness brings its bearers to the realization that they are not simply private individuals, regular people, but rather God's chosen, set apart to establish His nation and to inherit His gift – the land of Canaan, in order to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. This higher consciousness of the forefathers in Sefer Bereishit turns their actions into events filled with historical import. Each significant event has fateful consequences for the future of the nation destined to descend from them.

In our discussion of the previous parasha we explained how the conflict surrounding the identity of the mistress of Avraham's house was of deep significance: who would be Avraham's partner in realizing the Divine destiny of establishing the nation of God's covenant? In our parasha, too, the identity of Avraham's heir goes much further than a regular question of inheritance. The more significant issue at stake here is which of the two sons will be the bearer of the covenant with God, upon whose foundation God will establish His nation in the distant future. (For example, when God promises Avraham an heir in 15:3-4, this concerns the establishment of a nation as numerous as the stars, destined to inherit the land.)

This is hinted to in God's words in verse 12: "All that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for in Yitzchak will your seed be called." This means that Yitzchak will be the father of the descendants promised to Avraham – the great nation destined to inherit the land and to be God's nation (see Rashbam and Radak.)

Furthermore, God tells Avraham: "Let it not be bad in your eyes for the boy and for your handmaid... And also the son of the maidservant will I make into a nation, for he is your seed" (21:12-13). In other words, fulfilling Sarah's demand is also for the good of Yishmael himself, for he is also destined to be a great nation by virtue of being from Avraham's seed.

Faced with these numerous and multi-faceted justifications by God, it seems that Avraham could have sent away the maidservant and her son for their own good, without this act seeming in any way wrong to him any longer. But the continued development of the story is not compatible with this optimistic view...

c-d. LITERARY ANALYSIS AND CONTEXT: STRUCTURE OF THE STORY AND ITS PLACE AMONG THE STORIES OF AVRAHAM

There is open tension between God's calming words to Avraham concerning Yishmael's future and the unexpected development that takes place: "And she went and she wandered in the desert to Be'er Sheva. And the water was finished in the bottle... And she said: Let me not see the death of the child... And she lifted her voice and wept." Was Avraham made to send away Hagar and Yishmael under false pretences? True, eventually God saves the child and tells his mother of his great future. But what, then, is the point of the desert scene that intervenes between the promise to Avraham and the beginning of its fulfillment at the end of the story?

In order to answer this question we need first to examine the structure of the story. Exposing the structure helps us to reveal hidden connections between the various parts and to clarify the place of each. In order to determine the story's structure, we need first to define its boundaries. I maintain that the story spans verses 1-21. What encompasses the entire story into a single literary unit is, first and foremost, the story line: the birth of Yitzchak and his weaning and the event which takes place at his weaning cause Sarah to be concerned for her son's future and to demand of Avraham that Yishmael be expelled. From that point onwards the story continues until its conclusion.

The twenty-one verses of the story can be divided, like most biblical narratives (in my opinion), into two halves of equal length, each of ten verses, with verse 11 – "And the thing was very bad in Avraham's eyes because of his son..." – serving as a sort of central axis for the story, as will be explained below.

The first half, verses 1-10, deals exclusively with Yitzchak. Even Sarah's demand that the maidservant and her son be banished is substantiated with the good of Yitzchak in mind. This half opens with a tone of celebration and joy (verse 1 is structured in parallel clauses, a feature characterizing biblical songs of praise). This atmosphere prevails even in Sarah's words in verse 6-7 (which also have the character of a song of praise), and it reaches its climax in the great celebration held when Yitzchak is weaned. But it is precisely at that point, on that joyous occasion, that Sarah sees Yishmael mocking, and she immediately demands of Avraham to banish him. This half of the story, which was so full of joy, ends in crisis.

Avraham's reaction, described in verse 11, is the climax of the conflict in the story, and it is the outcome of the first half: it is the birth of Yitzchak and his growth that have inevitably brought about this situation.

The second half, verses 12-21, deals exclusively with Yishmael and his fate (except for the words "for in Yitzchak shall your seed be called," the only mention made of Yitzchak in this half). This second half comes to resolve the conflict that culminated in verse 11, but the resolution is a winding, complicated one. Its path creates a "mirror image" of what took place in the first half: here we start with the expulsion of Hagar and Yishmael to the desert, we continue with their wandering and their great distress, and only towards the end does their fortune turn around with the appearance of the angel: Yishmael's life is saved, he grows up, and the story concludes with his marriage.

These two halves of the story, each dealing with one of Avraham's sons, have a common theme, and this is perhaps the subject of the entire story: both describe the fulfillment of God's promises with regard to these two sons. Each son receives an independent promise – Yishmael in the form of an angel's words to Hagar (16:10-12), and Yitzchak in an angel's message to Avraham and Sarah (18:10-15). In chapter 17 (verses 19-20), the two sons receive a promise together:

"But Sarah your wife will bear you a son ... and I will establish My covenant with him for an eternal covenant, and to his seed after him. And as to Yishmael, I have heard you; behold I shall bless him and make him fruitful and make him very greatly numerous, he will bear twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. And My covenant I will establish with Yitzchak whom Sarah will bear you at this time next year".

Our parasha is therefore the story of the beginning of the fulfillment of the double promise. The realization of the promise as it pertains to Yitzchak is his very birth at the appointed time, and this is highlighted at the opening of the story quite clearly ("as He had said... as He had spoken... at the time of which He spoke"). Even the name of the son who is born, Yitzchak, was already stated in 17:19, but here it is explained anew: not the doubtful laughter of a promise that has no apparent chance of becoming real, but rather the joyous laughter of its fulfillment. Furthermore, God's promise to establish His covenant with Yitzchak also begins to be realized in our parasha, when Sarah demands that Yishmael be distanced from Avraham's house ("Whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice, for in Yitzchak shall your seed be called.")

On what does the fulfillment of the promise regarding Yishmael depend? It is precisely the sending away of Yishmael that is the precondition for the fulfillment of God's promise in his regard. Why? The juxtaposition of our story with that of Hagar's flight provides a solution. Yishmael was able to develop in accordance with his inner personality traits – "And he shall be a wild man (pere adam)" – specifically in the desert of Paran (the Rashbam on 21:21 comments that Paran hints at "pere adam"), far from Avraham's tent and his land of destiny. God hears Yishmael's voice "from where he was" – in the desert. There God hears him and will help him to find the secret of human existence in the desert – the well of water. It is there that God will accompany and watch over the boy's development (verse 20) into a hunter with bow and arrow. It is there that Yishmael will find his mate (verse 21) and will begin to multiply and establish the great nation that will have twelve princes. These tribes will excel in pursuing freedom and guarding it amongst all the nations, like the wild hind of the desert. (Avraham's seed descending from Yitzchak have a very different destiny, quite incompatible with the qualities of Yishmael's descendants: "Know that your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will enslave them and oppress them for four hundred years").

It appears therefore that the cutting off of Yishmael from Avraham's household and his wandering to the desert are a precondition for his becoming the father of a great and free nation, as promised by God. But this cutting off occurs only when he is already seventeen years old, with his formative years having been spent in the house of Avraham. His independent life, compatible with his qualities and historical destiny, are built on the foundations of the education he received from Avraham. (It should be noted here that Yosef, at the time that he was cut off from Yaakov's house and went to Egypt for the fulfillment of his unique destiny, was also seventeen years old).

Let us now return to the question with which we began: Why is Yishmael's departure to fulfill his destiny in the desert sown with such suffering, tears and mortal danger? To understand the answer to this question, let us return to the structure of the story. We have already mentioned the general opposition of the two halves, hinting at its symmetrical structure around the central axis. This symmetrical structure finds expression in an explicit parallel of the fragments forming each half (three fragments each). Graphically this appears as follows:

Fulfillment of God's Promise:

a. Miracle of Yitzchak's birth (1-5) birth and mila of

Yitzchak

Nursing and Growth:

b. Mirth and Celebration (6-8) Sarah's joy in

nursing him,

weaning party

c. Sarah's demand (9-10) Sarah sees

Yishmael mocking and demands banishment

This demand leads to: (" (11)The thing was very bad... because of his son"

God's confirmation of the demand cancels this

c1. God Backs Sarah (12-13)God tells

Avraham: Listen to Sarah

Thirst and Mortal Danger:

b1. Crying (14-16)Hagar banished,

wanders until no

water, she cries

Fulfillment of God's Promise:

a1. Miracle of Yishmael's "Rebirth" (17-21)Angel appears

and saves Yishmael; Y's maturity and marriage

The parallel between the two innermost events stands out: Sarah's demand in c. is what leads to Avraham's reaction – the central axis, "And the thing was very bad in Avraham's eyes..." - while God's words to Avraham in c1., confirming Sarah's demand for various reasons, is meant to allay the negativity of the central axis: "Let it not be bad in your eyes...". A clear thematic and linguistic parallel exists between these two fragments.

The two middle fragments of each half, b. and b1., also constitute a parallel of contrasts: laughter and happiness in b., as opposed to distress and tears in b1. What brings about the contrast between joy and tears is another juxtaposition of opposites: the abundance of liquids in b. ("That Sarah should nurse children," "a great feast") as opposed to the parched thirst of b1. ("And she wandered in the desert of Be'er Sheva, and the water was finished from the bottle"). The abundance of liquid in b. is connected with birth – new life that has entered the world, and the continued survival of the newborn –while the lack of water in the parched desert leads to a real fear of death: "Let me not see the death of the child".

The fragment which concludes our story, a1., brings relief for Hagar and Yishmael's distress. The parallel with the corresponding fragment a. is of utmost importance: Yitzchak's birth is paralleled by Yishmael's miraculous return from the brink of death - his "rebirth".

Yishmael is not the only child who needs to be "reborn" after he comes close to death. Yitzchak, too, is "reborn" after he is bound on the altar and is nearly sacrificed. Moshe, too, is "reborn" after he is placed as a baby in a basket in the river, as a last-ditch act of desperation by his mother. In all these cases, the "rebirth" signifies the beginning of an existence on a different plane for the child concerned, a new destiny that attaches itself to his existence. The purpose of this new existence is in all instances connected with the nature of the child's victory over death. In order to be reborn, the child has to reach death's door and thereafter he is miraculously saved. This miracle brings about a change in his personality and shows him, his parents and all those around him that a new and different chapter of his life is now commencing, leading to the realization of his destiny.

The parallel between these two fragments contains the crux of its import: in both, God begins to fulfill His promises with regard to the two sons. The miracle of Yitzchak's birth to his elderly parents is the realization of God's promise to them in chapters 17 and 18. The miracle of the angel's revelation to Hagar and the opening of her eyes in order to save Yishmael from death represents the realization of God's promise to her, and thereafter to Avraham, that Yishmael will be the founder of a great nation in the desert.

Thus, the answer to our question as to the purpose of the desert wandering scene (b1) is that it is specifically in the dangers of the desert that Yishmael must be reborn as a "wild man." His rebirth is bound up with the gift God gives him and his mother: the opening of their eyes to the presence of a well of water – the precondition for human existence in the desert. It is not sufficient that Yishmael be sent away from Avraham's house to the desert; he has to undergo a further symbolic process of total separation from the house in which he has grown up. And there can be no more sharp and dramatic separation than that expressed in the contrast between b. and b1. - the great party in Avraham's house accompanying Yitzchak's weaning vs. the sending of Yishmael to the thirst and sterility of the desert. When his mother sprinkles onto his lips the water that will save him from death, Yishmael knows that there can be no return to his previous existence: a new and different life awaits him.

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY:

- 1a. What are the similarities between our narrative and the story of Hagar's flight in chapter 16?
- 1b. Is there any conclusion that may be drawn from our story with regard to last week's subject – whether Sarah sinned in some way in her treatment of Hagar?

.2What are the fundamental differences between the two stories? Explain what each difference arises from.

.3At the end of the second section above, we mentioned the interpretations of Rashbam and Radak on verse 12, "For in Yitzchak shall your seed be called." Substantiate this interpretation from the wording of verse 13.

.4Verse 9 reads: "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian whom she had borne to Avraham, mocking." Ibn Ezra explains: "For this is the way of any youth (i.e., to laugh and make fun), and she was jealous of him that he was of large build." Ramban explains: "It seems to me that this was on the day of Yitzchak's weaning, and she saw him making fun of Yitzchak or of the great celebration".

How does each commentator interpret the word "mocking" (metzachek, the root "tz-ch-k" in the pi'el form)? Look at each of the following verses in which the same root in the same form appears, and try to group it with one of the two meanings: B:14, 26:8, 39:14, Shemot32:6.

The root tz-ch-k in the 'kal' form appears a number of times in verses 1-10 in connection with Yitzchak, and once in the pi'el form in connection with Yishmael. What is the significance of this, and with which of the interpretations is this phenomenon consistent?

Tosefta Sota 6:6 reads (according to the editio princeps): "When Yitzchak was born to Avraham everyone was happy... and Yishmael was scornful in his heart and said: Do not be simpletons... I am the firstborn and I take two portions." Which of the two interpretations is compatible with this Tosefta?

What are the ramifications of the controversy between the commentators with regard to the presentation of Sarah's demand?

What are the ramifications of the controversy between the commentators with regard to the connection between verse 9 and that which precedes it?

.5Surprisingly, Yishmael's name does not appear at all in this story; he is referred to only indirectly.

Try to guess the reason for this.

Where is Yishmael's name hinted at in the story?

Yishmael's name is explained in 16:11, in 17:20 and in our story. What is the connection between these three sources?

In verses 6-7 we read, "And Sarah said... and she said..." without any break in her speech (see question 3 of last week's parasha). Try to find a reason for this.