

PARASHAT VAYERA

"But My Covenant I Shall Establish with Yitzchak"

)Bereishit 17:21(

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

I.

Great joy, happiness and mirth: these are the central motifs of the first part of Bereishit Chapter Twenty-One, the story of the birth of Yitzchak. For example, shortly after reporting Yitzchak's birth and naming (Bereishit 21:1-4), the Torah describes Sarah's reaction:

And God has made laughter (tzechok) for me, so that all who hear will laugh (yitzchak) with me. And she said, Who would have said to Avraham, that Sarah should give children suck? For I have borne Avraham a son in his old age. (21:6-7)

Sarah celebrates God's miracle. It is an occasion for wondrous astonishment and joy, for herself, Avraham, and all who hear. In fact, Yitzchak's very name means "laughter" and symbolizes the joy and celebration. In line with this theme, the stem Tz-Ch-K, meaning laughter, appears repeatedly throughout the chapter (21:3,4,5,6,8,9,10,12.)

Nevertheless, all is not just merriment and mirth in this story. Sarah's happiness is not yet complete. Without even a pause after the post-birth celebration (21:6-7), the Torah moves to describing the events of the day of Yitzchak's weaning. Upon seeing "the son of Hagar the Egyptian" engaged in "laughter," Sarah demands that the "slave" and her "son" be sent away (21:10). In Sarah's own words "for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, with Yitzchak" (ibid.). There is yet a fly in the ointment, a reminder of Sarah's long years of childlessness, degradation, and humiliation (see 12:12-16, 16:1-5). Sarah insists that the maidservant and her son be expelled and all be conferred upon Yitzchak, the only authentic heir (Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Ramban). Despite Avraham's hesitation and worry regarding his son (21:11), God sides with Sarah (21:12-13). Hagar and Yishmael are cast out (21:14-21.)

The structure of the chapter and the sinister turn outlined above are of course understandable. The chapter is really about the "Triumph of Sarah." The first section (21:1-5) describes God's "remembering" of Sarah and the birth of Yitzchak, the first component in Sarah's vindication. The third section (21:14-21) depicts the expulsion of Yishmael, the second component in Sarah's victory. The middle section (21:5-13), analyzed above, provides the cause of Yishmael's expulsion, provides insight into the attitudes of the crucial characters, and acts as a transition between the two components of Sarah's triumph.

But herein lies the nub of the matter. While we can easily parse Avraham's hesitation, and at least part of Sarah's motivation, we cannot so easily fathom God's confirmation of Sarah's demand. Why does He agree? What has Yishmael done besides laugh? Does God simply wish to grant Sarah her wish? Are Hagar and Yishmael unsuitable in some way? Are we to chalk this up to the ever-mysterious divine wisdom? In sum, what in fact is the real cause of the expulsion of Yishmael?

II.

Let us turn to the third part of Chapter Twenty-One (21:14-21), the actual expulsion of Yishmael, treated above as no more than the second component of the vindication of Sarah, part and parcel of the "Triumph of Sarah".

The action unfolds as follows. Avraham gets up early in the morning, provides Hagar and Yishmael with provisions, and sends them away. They leave, wandering aimlessly in the desert (21:15). At this point, a crisis ensues: they run out of water. Hagar, convinced that Yishmael faces death, abandons him, and breaks down crying (21:15-16). But all is not lost. An angel of God calls to Hagar from heaven, reassures her, reunites her with Yishmael, provides water and promises great nationhood (21:17-20). Finally, we are told of Yishmael's marriage (21:21.)

On some plane, it is difficult to maintain our previous interpretation of the section as no more than the second stage of Sarah's vindication. For such a purpose, the Torah need only teach us the bare fact of the expulsion, the very first verse of the story. As a story of the triumph of Sarah, no more need be said. If we imagine ourselves as typical pro-Sarah readers eager to enjoy our foremother's triumph, we might ask: Why do we need to know the details? Who really cares about Hagar and Yishmael's crisis in the desert, the near death experience, the divine rescue, the promises and the marriage? Quite clearly, and counter to our first reading of the chapter, the story is in some real sense about Hagar and Yishmael. But once again, why do we need to know? In more analytic terminology, why does the Torah provide a detailed version of the "Ordeal of Hagar and Yishmael"?

Let us complicate the issue a little further. Upon close analysis, the ordeal of Hagar and Yishmael bears a striking resemblance to another story in Parashat Vayera. The narrative opens with the phrase, "And Avraham got up early in the morning," and depicts him as "taking" (21:14). No reader of the Bible can miss the echo. This is Avraham's first action in the "Akeida," the story of the binding of Isaac. In the Akeida, the Torah utilizes the exact same phrase: "And Avraham got up early in the morning," and likewise depicts him as "taking" (22:3). This parallel is not just linguistic. In both cases Avraham rises early to accomplish a divine command. In both cases, the divine command involves a final parting from a son, the expulsion of Yishmael and the sacrifice of Yitzchak (21:11-12, 22:1-2.)

All of this is just the tip of the iceberg. In both cases a young lad, referred to by the term "ha-na'ar" (21:17-20, 22:5,12), is endangered in the course of a journey. The respective journeys are described by a term comprising a variation on the verb stem H-L-Kh, meaning "go" (21:14, 22:2-3). Furthermore, in both cases the danger threatens the lad as a result of the action of a parent. Hagar wanders aimlessly in the desert, and when dehydration consequently threatens, casts her son away, leaving him to die under one of the shrubs (21:15-17). The

danger to Yitzchak also stems from a parent. It is the hand and knife of Avraham that threaten Yitzchak's life (22:10.)

More strikingly, in the respective climaxes of the stories the endangered lad is saved by the call of an angel of God, sounding from heaven (21:17, 22:11). In each case, the heavenly intervention is followed by "seeing," a vision that provides the solution to the problem of imminent death: water in the case of Yishmael (21:19), and the ram (as an alternate sacrifice) in the case of Yitzchak (22:13). Furthermore, in both cases the angel reiterates the promise of future nationhood before departing (21:18, 22:17-18.)

Finally, after depicting the young man as having survived his life-threatening ordeal, both narratives turn towards marriage. Chapter Twenty-One, the story of Yishmael, informs us of Yishmael's marriage (21:21). On a similar note, Chapter Twenty Two, the story of Yitzchak, closes with the genealogy of Nachor, focusing on the birth of Rivka, the future wife of our once endangered and now saved youth.

How are we to evaluate this parallel to the "Binding of Isaac?" What does this mean for interpreting the latter part of Chapter Twenty-One and its inclusion in the Torah?

III.

Recently, some interpreters have begun to refer to the latter half of Chapter Twenty-One as "Akeidat Yishmael." According to this line of thinking, the significance of the parallels sketched above lies in the revelation that there is in fact more than one story in the Torah detailing Avraham's submission to the divine will and subsequent "sacrifice" of a son: not just "Akeidat Yitzchak," but also "Akeidat Yishmael," the "binding" (or rather expulsion) of Yishmael. Like many events in Avraham's life, the Akeida happens twice. Moreover, in a certain sense, the first Akeida is a necessary pre-condition for the second. After all, part of the test of "Akeidat Yitzchak" is the fact that all of A's hopes now reside in Yitzchak. This psychology results not just from the decree that "in Yitzchak shall your seed be called" (21:12), but also from the brute fact that Yitzchak is now effectively the only child.

While this is undoubtedly correct, it is only a partial understanding. Interpreting the latter half of Chapter Twenty-One as a precursor Akeida renders the story a narrative about Avraham, his challenge, his test and his success. But once again, we are no further along than before. The details of the "Expulsion of Yishmael" seem to be about Hagar and Yishmael, not about the triumph of Sarah, nor about the trial of Avraham.

A review of the parallel between the two stories outlined above should help reinforce this point. Let us try to reduce the joint paradigm to its bare logical bones. In stage one, God orders Avraham to part from a son. In stage two, the lad and a parent (Yishmael-Hagar or Yitzchak- Avraham) go on a journey. Next, in stage three, during the course of the journey and through the action of the parent, the lad faces life-threatening danger. In stage four, the lad is saved by divine intervention and promised future nationhood. Finally, in stage five, we are given a glimpse of that promised future through a reference to marriage.

This is not just the paradigm of Akeida, the test of Avraham's faith. It is also a paradigm of "Journey, Danger and Rescue." The paradigm describes the "maturation journey," the "rite of passage" of the future progenitor of a nation who undergoes a near-death experience before being saved by God. As such, these stories are not just about Avraham and God, they are also

about Yitzchak and Yishmael. As "Akeida," the stories are about sacrifice and theological truths. As "Journey, Danger and Rescue," they are not just about theological truths. They are also about the parent-child pair and their journey into the crucible of crisis and impending death.

IV.

Defining the common denominator of the "Expulsion of Yishmael" and "Akeidat Yitzchak" as a Yitzchak-Yishmael and parent-child focused paradigm should make us realize that perhaps the differences between the two stories are even more significant than the similarities. Let us turn our attention to some of the more obvious disparities.

In the Akeida, Avraham faces a frightening test. Despite all of God's previous promises, he is now required to give up his son -- an apparently inexplicable and final reversal. Part of the dramatic tension of the narrative is how Avraham will react to the command, how he will hold up during the ordeal. The Torah relates to these questions in a clear fashion. Avraham is depicted as determined, purposeful and courageous. He gets up early in the morning, prepares the wood, takes Yitzchak and sets out (22:3). The strange nature of the journey, in which Avraham and Yitzchak set out for and arrive at "the place," the divinely chosen place, despite the lack of specific directions, further reinforces this point (22:2-4). Of course, it is Avraham's near performance of the act that most greatly emphasizes the themes of purpose, determination and courage.

To a great extent, these themes also characterize Yitzchak's actions in his own ordeal. Undoubtedly, as pointed out by Rashi (22:8), Yitzchak knows what is going on. Yitzchak's dramatic question, "Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for offering?" (22:7), already hints at Yitzchak's realization. Leaving behind the servants and failing to bring an animal can only mean one thing. Avraham's tantalizing reply, "God will show the lamb for sacrifice, my son," containing the clear conjunction of "sacrifice" and "son" (22:8), merely confirms Yitzchak's nascent knowledge. No further dialogue ensues. Yitzchak soldiers on carrying the wood for his own sacrifice (22:6,8). He neither cries nor begs for mercy. He is purposeful, determined and courageous. He too, in the famous phrase, is a "knight of faith".

The text not only emphasizes the parallel qualities of purpose and courage in Avraham and Yitzchak, but also their unity and togetherness. The Torah utilizes the phrase, "And the two of them went together (yachdav)," or a variation, three times throughout the narrative -- not just before Yitzchak's full realization of the plan (22:6), but also after Avraham has all but told him outright (22:8, Rashi); not just before Avraham put the knife to Yitzchak's throat, but also after, on the journey home (22:19). There is no breakdown, no collapse, and no division in the ordeal of Avraham and Yitzchak, in their story of "Journey, Danger and Rescue".

This picture mutates radically if we shift back to the first "Journey, Danger and Rescue" story. Unlike Avraham, Hagar possesses no reason to think that the previously granted divine promises have been revoked. After all, the previous promise of future nationhood for her children included "suffering under her mistress's hand" (16:9-12). If anything, her expulsion from Sarah's house should appear as an opportunity to put the stage of suffering behind her and move on to a new and promising future. Yet Hagar's behavior in her journey is neither purposeful, determined nor courageous. In despair, she wanders (21:14), turning her journey into a movement to anywhere or nowhere, the opposite of Avraham's mysterious arrival at

"the place." In her purposeless wandering, she endangers her son. In her despair, she casts him away and breaks down crying.

The attitude of despair and breakdown that animates Hagar also spills over to Yishmael. During the preface to the divine rescue, the Torah states that "God heard the voice of the lad" (21:17), a clear echo of the crying "voice" of Hagar just four words previously. Just as Hagar breaks down and cries, so too Yishmael. Furthermore, let us not forget Yishmael's age. He is at least sixteen years old. His passivity in the story is not the restraint of determination and sacrifice, but of disintegration and tears. Finally, let us not forget verse sixteen:

And she went, and sat down over and against him at the distance of a bowshot, for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat away from him and lifted up her voice and cried.

In pointed contrast to the "yachdav," the togetherness of Avraham and Yitzchak, Hagar and Yishmael are divided, physically and existentially separate. This is their story of "Journey, Danger and Rescue," a story not of purpose, unity and togetherness in the face of justified cause for despair, but of despair, wandering, breakdown and division.

V.

We began our analysis of Chapter Twenty-One with a question. What is the reason for Yishmael's expulsion? Why did God agree to Sarah's demand? As alluded previously, numerous responses have been proposed, ranging from sinful behavior on the part of Yishmael (Rashi 21:9), to the currently popular metaphysical doctrine that the chosen nation can be formed only through the process of "choosing," the pushing aside or purging of one of two possible heirs.

In analyzing the details of the third part of the chapter, the "Expulsion of Yishmael," treating it as a "Journey, Danger and Rescue" story and contrasting it with another such story of that type, "Akeidat Yitzchak," I have implicitly argued for a new explanation of God's acquiescence. Unlike us, the readers of the Bible, or even Avraham and Sarah, God knows the future. God knows the character and capabilities of Avraham and Hagar, of Yitzchak and Yishmael. God knows how Avraham and Yitzchak will react to the Akeida, to the ordeal of "Journey, Danger and Rescue." He already apprehends their capacities for faith, courage, purposefulness and togetherness. He knows they are cut from a certain cloth.

Likewise, he knows the essence of Hagar and her son Yishmael. He knows how they will respond to their comparatively mild trial of faith, their journey and danger. He knows that despair, division and breakdown are not the best materials from which to mold the nation of Avraham. Consequently, just as God first chose the long-suffering Sarah and her child Yitzchak in the covenant of ciru(17:15,19,21), so too God chooses Sarah and her child Yitzchak here in Chapter Twenty-One.

To close the circle, the details of the "Expulsion of Yishmael" and thimplied contrast to Akeidat Yitzchak are about letting us, the readers, in on these insights. By reading on, grasping what the character of faith is about and grasping what it is not about, we may also have begun to grasp the rationale for God's decision.

VI.

Before closing, I would like to explore another contrast between our two "Journey, Danger and Rescue" stories, specifically regarding the "Rescue" sections.

The rescue of Yishmael results from God's "hearing." This phrase appears as a preface to the angelic interference: "God heard the voice of the lad" (21:17), and in the angel's reassurance of Hagar: "Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad" (ibid.). This "explanation" of the rescue is not the least bit surprising. It is the very model enshrined and implicitly predicted in the naming of Yishmael (16:11). God hears the suffering of the downtrodden and oppressed, the expelled and the outcast. As pointed out last week, it is a key component in the paradigm of "Oppression and Redemption," what I termed last week God's standard way of running the world.

In fact, we may identify at least four distinct ways in which the rescue of Yishmael is unsurprising. First, as mentioned earlier, God has never contradicted His earlier promise of nationhood for Yishmael. Second, as argued here, the mode of rescue involves "hearing" the pain and cries of the oppressed, a mode of rescue already identified explicitly with Yishmael. Third, as I argued last week and reiterated here, it is part of an almost universal standard paradigm. Fourth, and finally, on a visceral and emotional level we identify and empathize with the rescue. It is only fair to save the suffering outcast.

In contrast, the rescue of Yitzchak is not easily explicable. In an shocking reversal, God has already seemingly reversed His statement: "But My covenant I will establish with Yitzchak" (17:21), and His declaration that "In Yitzchak shall your seed be called" (21:12). God has now demanded Yitzchak as a sacrifice. The rescue constitutes a second, and in the context of the God-Avraham relationship, shocking and radical reversal. For Avraham, and for the reader who allows himself to forget his prior education regarding the notion of "nisayon," trial and test, the rescue is wholly unexpected. It comes as another surprise, a reversal of the reversal. Not for naught does the Midrash emphasize Avraham's inclination to somehow continue with the sacrifice (Rashi 22:12,13.)

This theme of reversal is also hinted at in the time frame in which the reversal-rescue takes place. We are taught that "Avraham stretched out his hand, and he took the knife to slaughter his son" (22:10). In the very nick of time the angel called. It is almost too late. Or is it perhaps already too late? In fact, we would expect that no one can react that fast, can be diverted when so focused. The reversal comes at the last minute, or in a certain sense, after the last minute, when it should have been too late.

Finally, the rescue is surprising in an emotional and visceral sense. Just as Avraham has submitted to the divine will and readied himself for sacrificing his son, so too we the readers of the Akeida have already succumbed to the terrifying logic of the events about to unfold. We have become numb and frightened by the power of God's will, bereft of any moral intuition about what should happen. Each time we are left relieved, gasping at the mysteries of the divine will.

In sum, the story of Chapter Twenty-One, the rescue of Yishmael, is marked by the expected, the normal, the comprehensible -- the universal pattern of "Oppression and Redemption." But the story of Chapter Twenty-Two, the rescue of Yitzchak, is marked by something altogether different: the concept of reversals, the unexpected, the inaccessible, and the forever-mysterious divine will. It constitutes a new pattern of redemption, defining a model of

"Contradiction and Reversals," inexplicable reversal-difficulty followed by inexplicable reversal-redemption.

In fact, this distinction between the rescue of Yishmael and the rescue of Yitzchak, the redemption model of Yishmael's life and the redemption model of Yitzchak's life, is not a new difference between them. It is an old story.

Chapter Sixteen opens with the story of the conception of Yishmael. Sarah is barren. In accord with standard practice, Sarah grants Avraham her maidservant and a child is conceived. Nothing strange. The story is familiar, understandable, natural, part of the regular way the world works. But not so the conception and birth of Yitzchak. Sarah is barren, and in the natural scheme barren women cannot conceive. The very promise seems bizarre even to Avraham and Sarah. Whether joyously, skeptically, or cynically, they laugh (17:17, 18:12). In Avraham's own words: "Shall a child be born to him that is a hundred years old? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, give birth?" (17:17). It is absurd. But this is exactly the point. It is "absurd," unnatural, surprising and unexpected -- a certain kind of miracle. It is the revivification of a barren woman at the age of ninety, the paradigm of "Contradiction and Reversal".

Let us turn our attention one last time to the expulsion of Yishmael, this time with a rich sense of the Yitzchak-Yishmael contrast. This expulsion in fact constitutes another "reversal," part of the Yitzchak-Yishmael contrast pattern. Yishmael is the firstborn. According to what might be termed the "iron law of primogeniture" prevalent in the ancient Near East, Yishmael cannot be expelled, exiled, replaced or contradicted as heir. But such is not God's will; God contradicts and reverses the natural, the normal way the world works, replacing Yishmael with Yitzchak. He reverses the natural and normal via one who in his birth and near-death, as a child of a barren woman and as the rescued in the Akeida, embodies and represents by virtue of his sheer existence the concept of redemption through "Reversal and Contradiction".

If so, we have perhaps arrived at a further explanation of God's agreement with Sarah's demand. It is not just about the character of Yitzchak. Rather, it is also about broadcasting a message, the message of "Contradiction and Reversal," the special and mysterious means by which God runs the history of His chosen people, Yitzchak and his descendants.

To conclude, the end of Chapter Twenty-One, the story of Hagar and Yishmael, is not just extraneous detail. Nor, for that matter, is God's affirmation of Yishmael's expulsion completely inexplicable. Rather, both the expulsion and the details of the subsequent ordeal in the desert are part of a sustained comparison of Yitzchak and Yishmael, part of an ongoing lesson in both the character of faith and the nature of God's providence.