

## **Va'yera – 5783**

I have always been a word for word in my head kind of reader most of the time, which makes me a slow reader. Hebrew slows me down even more because, of course, firstly it is not my native tongue. But secondly because I always struggled with reading Hebrew even from my earliest Hebrew school days. It has taken me years of practice to even approach some level of fluency which makes me not the best Shaliach Tzibbur. That's the Hebrew designation for the person who acts as leader of the prayers of the congregation. To be an effective Shaliach Tzibbur one has to be a good davener, a fast davener, and someone who can read everything easily and fluently. I was always in awe of our friend and my bima partner Leon Donsky, Zichrono Le'Bracha. I always knew Leon was reading every word. I saw his lips move and always knew when he was finished, always long before me. But he waited patiently until I was done knowing that I was attempting to read like him. That led me to, earlier this week, I do some research to verify that there are a variety of different approaches to printed text and the way we read. My style of reading is quite common, but there are other ways for sure.

I thought of that this Thursday morning as I was attempting to follow the oral reading by Shamai Caspi who reads every Thursday from the Chumash text. Shamai reads beautifully and quickly too, but I wasn't focussed on that last Thursday morning. I was actually able to follow better because I understood what was happening in the text thanks to my many different times in Israel and my two years of actually living there and studying the language assiduously. But being able to follow the text is not the same as being able to follow the story and this week, I was pondering the story itself.

In brief, this week's parsha begins with Avraham recovering in his tent following his self-inflicted circumcision at the behest of HaShem along with all the men in the encampment. You don't need to be a male to imagine how much pain that must have entailed in an age without antibiotics or anesthetics. Avraham looks up and sees three men approaching his tents and he hurries to tell Sara to prepare food and bring water to bathe the feet of the weary travellers. He actually physically participates in the welcome process. The sages use this as an indication of the mitzvah of welcoming guests. But before the story ends, the visitors who presumably are representatives of HaShem tell Avraham that Sarah will bear him a son at her advanced age. Sarah laughs and Avraham is disbelieving. But what does this little episode tell us about Avraham and why is it so important to the story?

While thinking about the answer to this, during my walk on another beautiful, indeed, extraordinary November morning, I started to wonder why we read the exact same few verses from the Parsha three times during the week. We read the first few verses of the following week's parsha on Shabbat afternoon but also on Mondays and Thursdays. Why did the rabbis who never did anything without a purpose, make it necessary to read the same verses four times each week? Then I returned to my long-standing amazement at how the Torah is divided up into parshiot and how much thought went into the divisions of the text. I am betting that there is additional meaning to the openings of each parsha. Nothing about Torah can be taken for granted.

The Psalmist King David wrote "I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains: Whence shall my help come". He also wrote "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want." These two excerpts encapsulate the essence

of faith. Avraham has to have been in extreme pain and yet he jumped up to welcome his guests. Two things come to mind reflecting upon this action. First of all, Avraham had generosity of spirit and secondly, self-mutilating himself like he did was an act of faith, and that faith would be tested yet again before the end of Parshat Va'yera which is where we read about the Akedah or the binding of Isaac. So, we are reminded not once, nor twice, nor three times, but four times in one week of Abraham's generosity of Spirit and his uncommon faith.

Surely Abraham's generosity of spirit which plays itself out in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as well as at the beginning of Va'yera and the visit of the messengers from HaShem is in stark contrast on the surface to what happens to Hagar and Ishmael because of Sarah's jealousy. It seems to me, and I hope you see it too that what the Torah is teaching us here is that each of us is human, therefore we err. But that doesn't mean we can't be capable of acts of selflessness. Without acts of selflessness there can be no Gemilut Chasadim or acts of loving kindness. By hearing it four times in one week, we have to be getting that message loudly and clearly. It is why the sages teach that gemilut chasadim is one of the three pillars upon which the earth rests. As well, our patriarch Avraham is being presented as the kind of person who is attempting in this deliberate deed to choose good over evil, yetzer haTov over yetzer HaRah, to leTaken HaOlam and thereby set an example for others to follow.

But this takes place against the backdrop of his excruciating pain and that is because he has looked up at HaShem and knows that he is finding shelter in the house of the Lord. That faith is tested more powerfully soon enough when he is called upon to take his long-desired son fathered with his beloved Sarah and prepare to sacrifice him for what? To show us the power

of faith, so that when we read the psalms, we are reminded that others have come before us and found solace from pain and suffering through their faith. Avraham has followed the dictates of HaShem just as King David wrote.....the Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. In times of pain and suffering and concern, faith means we can turn to HaShem and find sustenance and comfort, knowing that he will lead us beside the still waters and restore our souls, even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Shabbat Shalom.