

## PARASHAT VAYERA

### News of the Birth of Yitzchak

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At the beginning of this week's parasha we read of the angels' visit to Avraham's tent. There they take a break, eat and rest in the shade, and finally inform Avraham and Sara that a son will be born to them - "at the appointed time, at this season." We can imagine the joy of Avraham and Sara at this announcement, and we - the readers of the parasha - rejoice together with them.

However, if we refresh our memory as to the conclusion of last week's parasha, the news which the angels bring is surprising and confusing: The episode immediately preceding the angels' visit describes the brit mila, where we read how God and Avraham sealed a covenant between them. Part of the content of this covenant includes the birth of a son and heir to Avraham - Yitzchak: "And My covenant I shall establish with Yitzchak, whom Sara shall bear to you at this time next year". In other words, Avraham and Sara have already been told that they are to have a son; they know that God is going to perform a special miracle and that Sara will give birth.

Against the backdrop of this covenant of brit mila the angels come to visit Avraham (according to Rashi, one of the angels has the specific mission of "bikur cholim" - visiting the ill - in light of Avraham's circumcision!), and strangely enough they once again convey the same news about the birth of an heir to Avraham and Sara.

The problem becomes even more perplexing in light of the very clear connection which exists between these two parshiot of brit mila and the angels' visit: The opening of the story of the angels - "And God appeared to him in Elonei Mamrei" (18:1) doesn't even mention Avraham, the hero of the story, by name! Who is the "him" referred to? Clearly, this story is a continuation of the last one, where we read in a similar style "And God appeared TO AVRAM" (17:1). If our whole parasha rests on the mention of the hero of the previous story then clearly the Torah means to indicate a clear connection between them, and we are to read the latter story in light of and as a continuation to the former.

It is not only the actual news about the birth of the son which is repeated (during the parasha of the brit mila we read: "And God said, but Sara your wife will bear you a son and you shall call his name Yitzchak" [17:19], while during the angels' visit we read: "I shall surely return to you at this season, and behold, Sara your wife shall have a son" [18:10]). Other motifs are also repeated: 1. In both cases an exact timeframe is mentioned: the birth is to take place in a year's time. In brit mila: "And My covenant shall

I establish with Yitzchak, whom Sara shall bear to you at this time next year" (verse 21); the angels: "I shall surely return to you at this season, and behold, Sara your wife shall have a son." (verse 10) 2. In both cases the reaction of the receiver of the news is similar. Brit mila: "And Avraham fell upon his face and laughed, and he said in his heart, shall a son be born to someone a hundred years old? And shall Sara, who is ninety years old, give birth?" (17:17). Avraham laughs at the news, for both he and his wife are old, and people generally do not have children at such an advanced age. We find a very similar reaction to the announcement by the angels: "And Sara laughed in her heart saying, After having been worn shall I be rejuvenated? And my lord is old!"(18:12). Sara laughs at the news, for the same reason as Avraham did previously - i.e., because of their advanced age. 3. Not only the opening of the story and the news draw a parallel between the two episodes; the conclusion, too, is similar. The news of the birth in the context of the covenant of brit mila concludes with God's withdrawal upward: "And He ceased to speak with him, and God rose up above Avraham" (17:22). To find the conclusion of the story of the angels, we need to first define the framework of the story. The full story may be considered to continue until after the fall of Sedom, but where does this specific event - the encounter between Avraham and the angels - conclude?

It appears to me that Avraham's argument with God concerning the destruction of Sedom is conducted not as a direct encounter with God but rather as a conversation with one of the angels who was visiting him. This suggestion arises from the discrepancy in the number of angels mentioned during the course of the story. At first we read, "And he lifted his eyes and saw THREE MEN standing before him" (18:2). Suddenly, upon reaching Sedom, one of them disappears: "And THE TWO ANGELS came to Sedom in the evening." This discrepancy can be explained in light of an additional piece of information - at the conclusion of Avraham's discussion with God concerning the destruction of Sedom we read, "And God departed, when He finished speaking to Avraham, and Avraham returned to his place" (18:33). Immediately thereafter we read, "And the two angels came...". This, then, explains the whereabouts of the third angel; it appears that he stayed on to talk to Avraham, while the remaining two continued towards Sedom. [For more on this subject see the Rashbam on 18:16.] Thus the conclusion of the first part of the story - the encounter between Avraham and the angels - concludes right here, at the end of the legalistic dispute over Sedom and its destruction. The conclusion here, "And God departed when He finished speaking to Avraham" (18:33), is similar to the conclusion of the parasha of the brit mila - "And He finished speaking to him and God rose up above Avraham". In brit mila God rose above Avraham when He had finished speaking to him, while here God departs from him.

It is the striking similarity of the two reports of the news about the son to be born which emphasizes and deepens the question: Why is this repetition necessary?

Let us examine the differences between these two instances and thereby attempt to understand the significance of the repetition. 1. Receiver of the news: In the case of brit mila God appears to Avraham and informs him of the son to be born. This is emphasized by the pronouns used in the parasha. Despite the fact that the subject of the sentence is Sara, God says as follows: "And I shall bless her and shall give from her TO YOU a son"

(verse 16). Sara is the person who is to give birth, but the boy is defined as Avraham's son; Sara bears a son to Avraham. We find further emphasis later on: "And God said, But Sara your wife shall bear YOU a son and you shall call his name Yitzchak" (19). Again, Sara bears a son to Avraham. Once again this point is emphasized: "And My covenant shall I establish with Yitzchak whom Sara shall bear to you at this time next year." (21). In contrast, when the angels bring news of the son to be born, the emphasis is specifically on Sara. Even before conveying the news, the angels ask about her: "And they said to him, Where is Sara your wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent." (9) The angels do not ask to speak with her (perhaps for reasons of modesty), but they do ask after her, and their inquiry serves to focus the blessing and the tidings which they are about to convey in Sara's direction. The Torah's emphasis that the news is meant for Sara is to be found in the actual words uttered by the angels: "I shall surely return... and behold, SARA YOUR WIFE shall have a son" (10) In complete contrast to God's words in the previous parasha, indicating that Sara will bear Avraham a son, here the content of the blessing indicates that it is Sara who will have a son. Likewise, later on: "Is anything too wondrous for God? At the set time I shall return to you at this season, and SARA WILL HAVE A SON" (14).

2. God's reaction to the laughter: In the case of brit mila it is Avraham who laughs at the news, while in the case of the angels it is Sara who laughs. This difference obviously arises from the above distinction concerning the recipient of the news. But there is also another difference: After Avraham hears the news during the brit mila encounter and falls on his face laughing, we find no sign of explicit disapproval - or any other reaction from God to this laughter. In response to Sara's laughter, on the other hand, God becomes angry: "And God said to Avraham, Why then does Sara laugh, saying, Shall I really give birth, although I am old? Is anything too wondrous for God..." (13-14)

3. Content of the news: In both cases the elderly couple is informed that they are to have a son who will be their natural and spiritual heir. But there is a significant difference between the two stories with regard to the definition of this son's destiny. In the case of the angels, the emphasis is on the actual birth of the son. No mention is made of his task or of any special significance concealed in him. In contrast, the entire context of the brit mila suggests continuation of the covenant. The son who is destined to be born will be "Avraham's seed" not only in the biological sense, but also from the spiritual, national and historical points of view: "And I will bless her and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her... But Sara your wife shall bear you a son and you shall call his name Yitzchak, and I shall establish My covenant with him as an eternal covenant, with his seed after him. .. And My covenant shall I establish with Yitzchak, whom Sara shall bear to you at this time next year." (17:16-21) This theme of the covenant which is destined to continue through Yitzchak is entirely absent from the episode of the angels.

4. God's names: In brit mila the name "Elohim" is dominant, while the Tetragrammaton is used in the story of the angels.

In light of these differences, let us analyze two accounts of the tidings to Avraham and Sara, and their respective significance.

It would seem that the news of the son to be born, as conveyed within the context of brit mila, is connected to the process of universal Providence, according to which a son is destined to be born to Avraham; someone who will continue his historical mission and

will establish a nation distinguished by certain values and Divine ideals ("God's way in performing charity and justice"). It is for this purpose that Yitzchak is born, and with him God will establish the covenant which He made previously with Avraham.

The news as conveyed in the story of the angels, on the other hand, relates on a personal level to Avraham and Sara - an elderly couple who never had children; whose greatest joy would be a son and heir to assist them in their old age and to survive them in their death.

The angels inform them that their wish is indeed to be fulfilled, and they are going to have a son. This is stated without connection to any historical process, without connection to Avraham's status as the "father of many nations" - simply in their own merit they are deserving of a son from God, Who sees their sorrow and chooses to perform a kindness towards them.

For what reason do Avraham and Sara deserve a son? For what reason does God see fit to perform a miracle on their behalf?

It would seem that the answer to this question is to be found in our very parasha. The beginning of the parasha describes the hospitality of Avraham and Sara. Avraham RUNS to greet his guests - an action indicating particular eagerness - and then entreats them to rest in his tent and eat of his food. Even after the angels' agreement to enter his tent, Avraham continues with great energy to perform what he has promised: "And AVRAHAM HURRIED to the tent, to Sara, and said, Hurry, prepare three se'im of flour... and Avraham RAN to the cattle... and he gave it to the boy and he HURRIED to do so... and he stood over them under the tree, and they ate (6-8). (As mentioned, Sara also participates in this hospitality by fulfilling Avraham's request that she prepare food for the guests.) Although in his pleading before the guests Avraham says, "And I shall take some bread...", in order to reassure them that his offer will involve no great effort on his part, in practice Avraham exceeds his promises and prepares them cakes.

(The Torah provides a contrasting example of someone who welcomes his guests - even with a smile - but prepares only matza for them to eat [Lot - 19:3], despite the fact that they arrive at a pleasant hour of the evening (19:1). Avraham and Sara do their utmost to honor their guests, even though the scene takes place "in the heat of the day".)

After the guests have eaten and rested, it is appropriate that they thank and bless their hosts. And indeed, after Avraham and Sara have labored so much on their behalf, the angels wish to thank and bless them, obviously with a focus on the most significant issue for this elderly couple.

In this regard we are reminded of the story of the prophet Elisha and the woman from Shunem (Melakhim II 4). After the woman has labored on behalf of Elisha and has made him a "small upstairs chamber" with a "bed, a table, a chair and a lamp," Elisha asks in what way he can repay her kindness: "What is to be done for you? Would you have us speak on your behalf to the king or to the captain of the army?" But it becomes

immediately apparent what the most significant blessing is that this woman could receive: "But Gehazi said, But she has no son, and her husband is old." Elisha now knows that only one blessing is appropriate, and he conveys it in language remarkably similar to the wording in our parasha, when the angels convey news of the son to be born: "And he said, At this time in the next year you shall embrace a son." And just as Sara felt that this was impossible and scorned in her heart, likewise the Shunamite woman felt the same way: "And she said, No my lord, O man of God, do not lie to your maidservant."

I believe that the story of Elisha and the Shunamite woman sheds light on the nature of the events in our parasha, too, where good news and a blessing come as repayment for the hospitality shown by an elderly couple longing for a son, and who deserve this reward by virtue of their actions.

The Torah itself hints at a connection between the news of the son and the hospitality shown, at the beginning of the episode when Avraham answers the angels' question as to Sara's whereabouts - "And he said, Behold, she is in the tent." We have already encountered Sara in the tent previously, when Avraham and Sara make every effort to welcome their guests: "And Avraham hurried back to the tent, to Sara." As reward for her labor in the tent, Sara receives the promise of a son while she is in the tent.

Thus the difference between the news as conveyed in the context of brit mila and the same news as conveyed later by the angels is that while the former relates to the continuity of the covenant with Avraham, the continuation of the process of Divine Providence which will lead to the rise of a special and chosen nation, the latter relates to God as a moral Power who rewards those who perform kindness and grants these hospitable people with a longed-for son.

Let us now explain the differences between the two episodes:

In the case of brit mila the news is conveyed to and focuses on Avraham, for he is the person who has been chosen by God to establish a unique nation. Avraham represents the all-encompassing, national aspect, the Divine-historical blueprint. Thus in this context the news of the son to be born, focusing on the continuity of God's covenant, is logically focused on Avraham. The son to which Sara will give birth is the son which she shall bear to him.

In the story of the angels the news is conveyed to Sara, for it is she who represents the couple on the human and natural level. It is not she but her husband who was chosen to bear God's standard in the world. Thus in this context the news of the son to be born as reward to this hospitable old couple, without connection to historical processes or Divine plans, it is appropriate that Sara is the focus of the story.

It is owing to this fundamental difference between the two episodes that God reacts with anger to the laughter of Sara, but not to that of Avraham. In the context of the spblessing which Avraham and Sara now merit, God (with specific use of the Name connoting Divine intervention) promises to perform a special miracle and to grant them a son.

Under these circumstances it is not appropriate to laugh at this promise - "Is anything too wondrous for God?!" As a special reward God can make Sara fertile, and as a believing, "religious" woman she should know and accept this.

However, in the context of the original process as planned, with no expectation of any special miraculous intervention on God's part (with use of the Name connoting the natural system of laws and order), it is indeed surprising to hear that an elderly couple are suddenly going to be blessed with a son. After all, the covenant could continue through a different branch of Avraham's family, as Avraham himself suggests (immediately after his laughter): "And Avraham said to God, May Yishmael live before You!" (17:18)

The most important difference, providing the basis for our entire thesis, is of course the content of the news. In the context of brit mila the emphasis throughout is on the covenant which God will establish in the future with Yitzchak, while in the story of the angels there is no mention of the fact that the son in question bears such a lofty mission. Yitzchak, in this story, comes as a reward to his parents, without any connection to any Divine plan.

If we analyze the birth of Yitzchak we find that both aspects are indeed fulfilled; both reasons for his birth are realized: "And Hashem visited Sara as He had said, and Hashem did for Sara as He had spoken. And she conceived, and Sara bore Avraham a son in his old age, at the time which God (Elokim) had spoken of to him. And Avraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sara bore to him, Yitzchak." (21:1-3)

At first we read that God (using the Name connoting Divine intervention) visited Sara and did for her as He had promised. This represents the realization of the promises made by the angels in the tent, as conveyed to Sara, using the same Divine Name.

In close juxtaposition we find evidence of the other aspect of Yitzchak's birth: Sara bears a son to Avraham. Here the Torah uses the Name "Elohim," as it does in the story of the brit mila, when this son was promised to Avraham.

Thus Yitzchak is really a son to two sets of parents: He is the son of Sara and Avraham, and also the son of Avraham and Sara. When the focus is on Sara he is the son born to an elderly couple who have been childless for a very long time, and his task is now to comfort them in the difficulties of old age and to assist them. When it is Avraham who stands in the spotlight, Yitzchak is the son of the first forefather of a new nation about to appear, and his mission is to convey the spiritual message bound up in the covenant of his father with God.

In fact, the division of the news into two distinct episodes, as a characteristic of two types of Divine guidance (that which exists on the personal-moral level, and that which exists on the national-historical level) is a thread which weaves its way throughout Sefer Bereishit. God is revealed to us through both aspects throughout the Sefer and, in fact, in all religious experience in general.

For further study:

1. The Netziv explains that the difference between God's announcement in Lekh Lekha and the angel's announcement in Vayera is that God said "at this time in the other year (ba-shana ha-acheret)," which does not necessarily imply the very next year; the angel said "at this time next year (ka'eit chaya)." How else can we explain the difference between the two phrases?
2. Avraham "laughed" (17:17). Sara "laughed within herself" (18:12). Why the difference?