

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Vayera
October 31, 2015

פרשת וירא
י"ח בחשוון תשע"ו

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 18:1-22:24

This week's *parasha* continues with Avraham's journey through life. It begins with the news that Avraham and Sarah will together have a child; takes us through Avraham's unsuccessful discussion with God, trying to get Hashem to spare the people of S'dom and Amorrhah; follows Avraham and Sarah on their sojourn in Gerar; witnesses the birth of Yitzchak and the expulsion of Hagar and Yishmael; and culminates in the story of the binding of Yitzchak.

In the opening story, Avraham and Sarah are told that at the same time the following year, Sarah will give birth to a son. The text in Genesis 18:11-13 reads:

וַאֲבֹרָהִם וְשָׂרָה זְקֵנִים, בָּאִים בַּיָּמִים; חָדַל לְהִיּוֹת לְשָׂרָה, אֲרַח
כְּנָשִׁים. וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה, בְּקִרְבָּהּ לְאָמֹר: אַחֲרַי בְּלֹתִי הֲיִתֶּה-לִּי עֵדֻנָּה, וְאֲדַנִּי
זָקֵן. וַיֹּאמֶר ה', אֶל-אֲבֹרָהִם: לָמָּה זֶה צִחֲקָה שָׂרָה לְאָמֹר, הֲאֵף אֲמַנָּם
אֵלֶּד--וְאֲנִי זְקֵנָתִי.

Now Avraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; the way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. Sarah laughed within herself saying, "After I am worn out, should I have pleasure, and my husband is old?" And God said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Will I indeed give birth, and I am old?'"

Rashi (11th century Franco-Germany) picks up on the fact that Sarah commented on Avraham's being old, but God reported to Avraham that she had said that it was she who was old. Rashi makes the following comment, based on the Talmud in Tractate *Bava Metzia* 87a: "Peace is a precious thing, so God made a variation (in what he reported to Avraham) for its sake." In other words, to keep *Shalom Bayit* – domestic tranquility – God spared Avraham's feelings by softening what Sarah had actually said.

Not all of the medieval commentators interpret God's spinning of the truth as being quite as solicitous as Rashi does. Abraham Ibn Ezra (13th century Spain) argues that, when God reports to Avraham that Sarah said, "I am old," God is simply repeating the idea and explaining the concept of "I am worn out." God is, in no way, playing with the truth at all.

A well-known quote, oft-repeated and rephrased, suggests that "the first casualty when war comes is truth." Hiram W. Johnson, a staunchly isolationist senator from California, is purported to have said this to the US Senate in 1917. But here we might say that the first casualty of *peace* is truth.

Chapter 8 of the Book of Zechariah speaks at length of both peace and truth: "Yerushalayim shall be called the city of truth;" "They (the Jews) will be My people and I will be their God in truth and in righteousness;" "For there shall be the seed of peace;" "Speak every man the truth to his neighbor, execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates;" and finally, "Therefore, love the truth and the peace." Zechariah seems to indicate that the two go hand-in-hand.

The Talmud picks up on the theme of truth and peace and describes in Tractate *Yevamot* 14b that despite the many disagreements between the schools of Shammai and Hillel – disagreements to the end of seeking Truth – the two communities lived together in peace and "showed love and friendship towards each other."

It is a difficult task to maintain the equilibrium between truth and peace. In our weekly portion, we have an example of God perhaps spinning the truth to maintain peace and perhaps telling the truth while keeping in mind the possibility that it would disrupt the peace.

Many wise rabbis have commented that sometimes posing the question is more important than receiving an answer. Should truth be sacrificed to maintain peace, or should peace be put on the line to maintain truth? The answers are out there for each person to seek.

Shabbat Shalom.

For discussion:

- Why is it important to tell the truth?
- Should one ever lie to spare someone else's feelings? If not, why not? If yes, under what circumstances?