

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Vayera
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פרשת וירא
י"ח במרחשון תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* [Genesis] 18:1-22:24

***Editor's note: In the interest of full disclosure—complete truth, if you will—this is a reprint from last year's Torah Talk on Parashat Vayera. In light of the recent Presidential election, the question of the dialectic between truth and peace seemed to be more relevant than ever.*

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 climaxes with 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. Says the text in Genesis 18:11-13:

וַאֲבִרְהֶם וְשָׂרָה זְקֵנִים, בָּאִים בְּיָמִים; חֹדֵל לְהֵיוֹת לְשָׂרָה, אֲרַח כְּנָשִׁים.
וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה, בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר: אַחֲרַי בְּלֹתִי הִיְתָה-לִּי עֵדָנָה, וְאֲדַנִּי
זְקֵן. וַיֹּאמֶר ה', אֶל-אַבְרָהָם: לָמָּה זֶה צָחַקָה שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר, הֲאֵף אֲמַנָּם
אֶלֶד--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 Babylonian

Talmud in *Masechet* [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 attenuating what Sarah had actually said.

Not all of the medieval commentators are quite as sanguine about God’s spinning of the truth as Rashi is. 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 has been oft-repeated and rephrased: "The first casualty when war comes is truth." Hiram W Johnson, staunchly isolationist senator for 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. How can we reconcile this? Chapter 8 of the Book of Zechariah speaks at length of both. “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 *Masechet 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 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?
- Are there other reasons that justify lying to someone? If so, what?