

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in memory of Mina bas Yitzchak Isaac.

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"May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

17 CHESHVAN

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS VAYEIRA

Cutting Them Loose

Avraham made a great feast on the day that Yitzchak was weaned (21:8).

This week's *parsha* retells the stories surrounding the prophecy to Avraham and Sarah that they will have a child, and the subsequent birth of Yitzchak the following year.

Rashi (ad loc) quotes the Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 53:10) and explains that the word ויגמל means "weaned" and this is referring to the end of the twenty-fourth month (i.e. age 2) when a child is weaned of his mother's milk. There is another opinion in the Midrash that it is referring to the age when he is weaned off of the evil inclination, which is the age of thirteen (*bar mitzvah*) as we see in Chazal (*Avos D'rebbe Nosson* 16:2). What is the relationship between being weaned off milk and that of being weaned off the *yetzer hara* that the same word – ויגמל – can refer to a *bar mitzvah* or being weaned off milk?

In order to properly understand this concept, we must delve further into the meaning of the word ויגמל and its most common iteration – to be *gomel chessed* or *gemillus chessed*. Why are acts of kindness called *gemillus chessed*?

The answer is that at its very essence doing *chessed* for someone can actually be a source of pain for them. Rashi (*Vayikra* 20:17) explains that the word *chessed* in Aramaic means shame. As explained in prior editions of INSIGHTS, Aramaic is the language of understanding another's perspective. In other words, as you are doing someone a kindness they feel shame for not being self-sufficient and having to rely on the

largesse of others.

The expression *gemillus chessed* is very precise; it tells us how we have to perform acts of kindness. We have to give the recipient the ability to be weaned off of the *chessed*. In this way, they can become self-sufficient and restore their sense of self. Just as importantly, we must also wean ourselves from the feeling of being benefactors. We must focus on the ultimate way to perform acts of kindness and realize that they aren't about us. This is why Maimonides rules that the highest level of *tzedakah* is when neither party is aware of the other's identity.

This is also the connection between *bar mitzvah* and a weaned child. One might wonder why for a boy we use the word *bar mitzvah* and for a girl *bas mitzvah* – it's incongruous: The word *bar* is of Aramaic origin and *bas* is of Hebrew origin. Why isn't a thirteen-year-old male called a *ben mitzvah*, which would be the Hebrew equivalent?

The word *bar* in Aramaic doesn't just mean "son of" – it originates from another meaning for *bar* in Aramaic: "outside of." The true meaning of *bar mitzvah* is that he is now weaned and independent. Essentially, he is now ready to go out and leave his parental family unit and begin his own, thus he is "outside" the family. Conversely, women are always associated as daughters of the family they grew up in – thus she remains a *bas mitzvah*.



Did You Know...

In this week's *parsha* the Torah describes the destruction of Sodom and the story of Lot and the *melachim*. The story ends with them fleeing Sodom and Lot's wife ignoring the angels' explicit orders and turning around to gaze at Sodom getting destroyed. She immediately turns into a pillar of salt because, as Rashi (19:26) recounts, she sinned with salt by refusing to serve it to guests in her home. What has become of this pillar of salt?

Josephus states that he saw the pillar himself (*Antiquities* 1:11:4). Additionally, the Gemara (*Berachos* 54b) tells us of the *bracha* (*Baruch Dayan HaEmes*) that one should say upon seeing that pillar. Clearly, the Gemara wouldn't be giving us a *bracha* to say if there was zero chance of ever seeing this pillar of salt – so we know that it existed in the time of the Gemara and there's a chance that it still exists today. So, where might it be?

Fascinatingly, there's actually a mountain along the southwestern part of the dead sea in Israel, part of the Judean Desert Nature Reserve, that's called Mount Sodom. →

Rooting Out the Problem

And he settled in the desert of Paran and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt (21:21).

In this week's *parsha*, the Torah relates the events surrounding the birth of Yitzchak and the subsequent conflict with his older (half) brother Yishmael. At this point, Sarah demands that Avraham expel both Yishmael and his mother Hagar from their home.

The Torah goes on to tell us the details of what happens to Yishmael and Hagar in the desert and how Yishmael was miraculously saved from an illness after his mother despaired for his life. The Torah ends the narrative with the statement that Yishmael settled there in the desert and that his mother Hagar took a wife for him from Egypt.

Rashi (ad loc) comments, "[Hagar obtained a wife] from the place where she grew up [...] This is what people say, 'Throw a stick in the air and it will land on its root.'" However, the Torah doesn't mention random facts and Rashi isn't given to repeating trite colloquialisms; so what is the Torah trying to teach us about Hagar and Yishmael and how is Rashi defining what Hagar did?

The Talmud (*Yoma* 38b) on the verse "and the name of the wicked shall rot" (*Mishlei* 10:7) explains that this means we do not use the names of the wicked. Rashi (ad loc) explains this further to mean that we do not give the names of the wicked to our children. The commentators (Ritva and Tosfos Yeshanim ad loc) ask on this assertion: Seeing as Yishmael is considered such a wicked person, why were righteous *Kohanim Gedolim* and *Tana'im* given this name?

They answer is that since Hashem said that this name should be given to Yishmael we are not concerned.

Alternatively, R' Elazar holds the opinion that Yishmael did *teshuvah* (*Bava Basra* 16b). Yet these answers require a deeper understanding. How do these answers address the fact that Yishmael behaved so wickedly for much of his life? In other words, even if someone repents at the end of his life, how do we reconcile the fact that the vast majority of his life was rife with evil acts and that those acts were committed by someone named Yishmael? It seems odd to name someone after him.

It is fascinating to note that the Torah only calls Yishmael by name in a few places: when he is born, when he is circumcised, and when Avraham Avinu dies and Yishmael defers to Yitzchak by the burial (see 25:9 and Rashi ad loc). In this week's *parsha* – the only place in the Torah that has a story of any length about Yishmael – he is never referred to by his name (Yishmael), rather he is always called "נער – lad." This is very odd, Yishmael had already been introduced a few times, why does the Torah refrain from using his name?

The Torah is telling us something remarkable. The word נער means to shake and be unstable. The reason a youth is called a נער is because a person in his youth does not yet have an identity and he is in a constant state of flux. The key event in this week's *parsha* is the prophecy and birth of Yitzchak Avinu to the true wife of Avraham Avinu. This displacement served to destabilize Yishmael and caused his identity to be in a state of flux; that is why he is now called a נער. These evil acts weren't done under the identity of the name Yishmael. Therefore, the name can be used in the future.

It was the instability in his self-definition that caused him to act out and misbehave. Hagar, in her motherly wisdom, recognized that her son needed to find his identity. She therefore arranged a wife for him from the land of Egypt – a place where he is of royal lineage. Hagar was trying to take him back to his family origins and root him to stabilize him. This is what Rashi means when he says, "throw a stick in the air and it will land on its root."

Did You Know Cont.

Mount Sedom, or *Jabel Usdum* in Arabic, is, according to the Living Torah (by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan), the most likely location where Lot's wife died, based upon the contention that Lot was heading south to escape. Furthermore, even nowadays, there's a pillar on that mountain called Lot's Wife, which seems to resemble a human form. See picture below. Interestingly, while the Torah doesn't mention her name, we learn in *Sefer HaYashar* 19:52 that her name is Ado.



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