

Abraham, Circumcision, and Servant-hood

This week's reading is from **Parashat Vayera** (*Shemot / Genesis 18:1-22:24*). Parashat Vayera opens saying, וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה בְּאֵלֵי מְרָא מִמְרֵא *"the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre."* This week's reading is packed full of history, the Lord God almighty visits Abraham along with two men who are believed to be angels from the Lord (*18:1-3*). Abraham learns that his wife Sarah is going to bear a son (*18:9-15*), the Lord speaks to Abraham about the destruction of Sodom and Gemorah and Abraham intercedes seeking mercy for these evil cities for the sake of the righteous (*18:17-33*). The Lord has mercy on Lot and Lot recognizes the mercy and grace of God (*19:19*), Lot's daughters commit sexual sin with their father (*19:31-38*), Abraham encounters Abimelech and Abimelech takes Sarah for his wife and God's subsequent curse and then the forgiveness of Abimelech and all his household (*20:1-18*), and the Lord tests Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac (*22:1-18*). As we read the Hebrew text we have the understanding (based upon the Scriptures) that the Lord has great plans for Abraham saying *"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do"?* The Lord repeats His blessing to Abraham following his faith to obey the Lord to offer his son on the altar in *Bereshit / Genesis 22*. (*22:18 'In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.'* NASB) Based on the opening verses to this week's reading, Abraham was quick to serve and to speak on behalf of others.

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א וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה בְּאֵלֵי מְרָא וְהוּא יָשָׁב פֶּתַח-הָאֹהֶל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם: ב וַיִּשְׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיֵּרָא וַיֵּרָץ לִקְרֹאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אַרְצָה: ג וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אֱמֹנָא מִצְּאִתִּי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֵל-נָא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ: ד יִקַּח-נָא מְעֹט-מִים וְרָחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם וְהִשְׁעֵנוּ תַּחַת הָעֵץ: ה וְאֶקְחָה כֶּתֶם-לֶחֶם וְסַעְדוּ לְבַכְּם אַחַר תַּעֲבֹרוּ כִּי-עַל-כֵּן עֲבַרְתֶּם עַל-עַבְדְּכֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֵּן תַעֲשֶׂה כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ:

Bereshit / Genesis 18:1-5

18:1 Now the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. 18:2 When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, 18:3 and said, 'My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by. 18:4 'Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; 18:5 and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant.' And they said, 'So do, as you have said.' (NASB)

This weeks portion opens with Abraham sitting at the entrance to his tent. Reading through the rabbinic literature (the midrash) and the Aramaic translations, the rabbis have a specific interpretation on the reason why Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent. The opening verses of Parashat Vayera according to the Aramaic Targum Pseudo Jonathan states the following:

Targum Pseudo Jonathan, Bereshit / Genesis 18:1-5

AND the glory of the Lord was revealed to him in the valley of Mamre; and he, being ill from the pain of circumcision, sat at the door of the tabernacle in the fervour (or strength) of the day. And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, three angels in the resemblance of men were standing before him; (angels) who had been sent from the necessity of three things;--because it is not possible for a ministering angel to be sent for more than one purpose at a time;--one, then, had come to make known to him that Sarah should bear a man-child; one had come to deliver Lot; and one to overthrow Sedom and Amorah. And when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the door of the tent, and bowed himself on the earth.

[JERUSALEM. Three angels were sent to our father Abraham; and the three were sent for three things;--because it is not possible that one of the high angels should be sent for more things than one. The first angel was sent to announce to our father Abraham, that, behold, Sarah would bear Izhak; the second angel was sent to deliver Lot from the midst of the overthrow; the third angel was sent to overthrow Sedom and Amorah, Admah and Zeboim. Therefore was there a word of prophecy from before the Lord unto Abraham the Just, and the Word of the Lord was revealed to him in the valley of vision; and he sat in the door of the tabernacle, comforting himself from his circumcision in the fervour (or strength) of the day.]

And he said, I beseech, by the mercies (that are) before Thee, O Lord, if now I have found favour before Thee, that the glory of Thy shekina may not now ascend from Thy servant, until I have set forth provisions under the tree. And I will bring food of bread, that you may strengthen your hearts, and give thanks in the Name of the Word of the Lord, and afterwards pass on. For therefore at the time of repast are you come, and have turned aside to your servant to take food. And they said, Thou hast spoken well; do according to thy word. And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said to her, Hasten three measures of flour-meal, mix and make cakes. And unto the flock ran Abraham, and took a calf, tender and fat, and gave to a young man, and hastened to make prepared meats; and he took rich cream and milk and the calf which the young man had made into prepared meats, and set them before them, according to the way and conduct (hilkath) of the creatures of the world; and he served before them, and they sat under the tree; and he quieted himself (to see) whether they would eat.

The Aramaic Targum appears to have a lot to say regarding the first few verses of the Parashah. The Aramaic Targum translates א וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה בְּאַלְמֵי מְמַרָּא “*Now the Lord*

(YHVH) appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre” to say that the “glory” of God appeared to Abraham. Having a closer look at the Aramaic, *ממרא דיי בחיזוי יקרא עלוהי* ואתגלי עלוהי יקרא דיי בחיזוי ממרא, והוא מרע מכיבא דמהולתא יתיב תרע משכנא לתוקפא דיומא, the Targum says Abraham saw the “glory” *יקרא* of the God of Israel. The Targum adds the word *יקרא* meaning “glory, honor, or majesty.” The Hebrew text on the other hand states that Abraham saw God (*יְהוָה*) but according to the Aramaic translation he saw His glory. This suggests that the Targum translation has had some influence in later rabbinic thought that the Almighty is unapproachable and cannot be seen by man. Therefore, according to the rabbis, Abraham saw “*the glory of God*” rather than actually seeing God (*יְהוָה*) face to face as Parashat Vayera seems to suggest.

Another observation regarding the Aramaic Targum is the rabbis interpret Abraham sitting at the entrance of his tent as recovering from the pain of circumcision. Why do you think they see his sitting as recovering from the pain of circumcision? Could this be related to the interpretation that Abraham was a prophet and was actively proselytizing (adding to his numbers) the truth of the One True God as a guide to the nations as we learned in Parashat Lech Lecha? Targum Onkelos states in *Bereshit / Genesis 18:19* “*And Abraham shall be indeed a people many and strong, and in him shall all the peoples of the earth be blessed; because it is manifest before me that he will instruct his children, and the men of his house after him, to keep the ways which are right before the Lord, to do righteousness and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken concerning him.*” and the Targum Pseudo Jonathan states “*And the Lord said, with His Word, I cannot hide from Abraham that which I am about to do; and it is right that before I do it, I should make it known to him. For Abraham is to be a great and mighty people, and through him shall all the peoples of the earth be blessed. [JERUSALEM. And the Lord with His Word said, Shall I hide from Abraham, My friend, that which I am about to do? Forasmuch as the town of Sedom is among the gifts that I have given to him, it is just that I should not overthrow it, till I have made it known to him.] Because his holiness (piety, chasidutha) is manifest before Me, (and) that he will instruct his sons, and the men of his house after him, to keep the ways that are right before the Lord, to do justice and judgment, that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken concerning him.*” These Targum translations say that Abraham instructed not only his children, but also the men of his house to keep the ways which are right before the Lord. The idea may be that Abraham was known as one who was actively putting forth God’s truth, His ways, justice, and righteousness, and to remain sitting at the entrance to his tent seems counter intuitive to his actively serving the Lord. The rabbinic conclusion to sitting is that he was recovering from the pain of circumcision. The rabbis in Midrash Rabbah Bereshit pick up on this, circumcision, and sitting at the entrance to his tent in Parashat 48, Parts 1,2, and 4.

Midrash Rabbah Bereshit, Parashat 48, Part 1

And the Lord appeared unto Him (Bereshit / Genesis 18:1). It is written, You have also given Your shield of salvation and Your right hand holds me up, and Your condescension has made me great (Tehillim

/ Psalms 18:36). You have also given me Your shield of salvation, alludes to Abraham; and Your right hand has held me up, in the fiery furnace, in famine, and in my battle with kings; and Your condescension has made me great. With what condescension did the Lord make Abraham great? In that he sat while the Shechina stood; thus it is written, And the Lord appeared unto Him...as he sat.

Midrash Rabbah Bereshit, Parashat 48, Part 2

And when after my skin this is destroyed (nikkefu), then through my flesh will I see God (Job 19:26). Abraham said, After I circumcised myself, many proselytes came to attach themselves to this sign of the covenant. Then through my flesh will I see God, had it not done so, why should God have revealed Himself to me? Therefore, And the Lord appeared unto Him.

Midrash Rabbah Bereshit, Parashat 48, Part 4

R. Isaac commenced thus, An altar of earth you shall make unto me... Then, I will come unto you and bless you (Shemot / Exodus 20:21. Said R. Isaac, If i reveal myself to bless him who built the altar in My name, how much the more to Abraham who circumcised himself for MY sake. Consequently, And the Lord Appeared unto him, etc.

Midrash Rabbah Bereshit, Parashat 48, Part 1 opens with the Lord appearing to Abraham and states that He gave His shield of Salvation and his right hand holds him up. The midrash continues and alludes to Abraham being the shield of Salvation. The hand that holds up is the glory (Shechina) of God that was revealed to Abraham. Why is Abraham considered a shield of salvation? How does the glory of God act as the right hand of God that holds up or sustains us? Midrash Rabbah Bereshit, Parashat 48, Part 2 makes a comment regarding the flesh being destroyed but yet seeing God in the flesh. The rabbis say that Abraham, after circumcising himself, many proselytes came to attached themselves to this sign of the covenant. The connection is found here to the opening verses of the Targum, Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent recovering from the pain of his circumcision, the glory of God was shown to Abraham, so the correlation that is drawn here is to circumcision, the covenant, and seeing God. The strange thing about the midrash is how the rabbis say that men were drawn to the sign of the covenant and attached themselves to this sign. Circumcision of the flesh is not a pleasant thing. Why would men choose or be drawn to become proselytes to the “*sign*” of the covenant? Finally, in Midrash Rabbah Bereshit, Parashat 48, Part 4, the rabbis speak of an altar (sacrifice) and of Abraham circumcising himself for the Lord’s sake. What does it mean that Abraham circumcised himself for the Lord’s sake? As a result of the circumcision, the Lord appeared unto him. What exactly can we conclude from these rabbinic sources, the Targum translation, the Midrashim, etc? It is important to note the emphasis that is placed upon circumcision, being a covenant member, and seeing God and His glory. The emphasis on circumcision and being a covenant member, seeking God and his glory, is

it surprising to read in the apostolic writings on the rabbis teaching of the necessity of conversion to Judaism (through circumcision) in order to be saved or to even see God and His glory? Based upon a straightforward reading of the Targum and the Midrash, this would seem to be the conclusion one could draw. However, based on our previous studies in the Torah and the Psalms, there is a lot more to the Targum and Midrashic interpretation than meets the eye.

Judaism teaches with regard to each proselyte that when one becomes a proselyte, one takes upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of God. When one takes on the yoke of the Kingdom of God, such a person will begin a life of walking in a new way and in a new direction, to seek the Lord God our Father in heaven because he is now becoming Torah observant and walking in God's ways. We also find a very similar concept in the Apostolic Writings regarding the yoke of the kingdom. Taking on the yoke of the kingdom by faith in the Messiah, our lives change. The parallel to taking on the yoke of the Torah is synonymous to that of taking on the Kingdom of God. Taking on the yoke of Yeshua we are changed from the inside out, and begin living transformed lives, walking and living in righteousness and justice, truth and innocence, love and mercy, the very things the Torah instructs us to do. This is why we are told that the kingdom of God is within us (*Luke 17:20-21*) because these are the characteristics of the child of God. Considering the midrash on Abraham and circumcision, Yeshua said in *Matthew 5:8* "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*" (*NASB*) This verse is important because Scripture tells us that Abraham circumcised himself in the flesh. In addition to this, in Parashat Vayera, we see the servant attitude Abraham has towards the angels. This could be paralleled to Abraham having also circumcised himself in his heart. He behaved as a humble servant, he bowed himself down, he got water for their feet and bread to eat so they could rest and refresh themselves. Abraham had a pure heart, and the Lord showed Himself to him. This interpretation on the opening verses of the Parashah could be possible, and would be consistent with both the rabbis and Yeshua's words in the Gospel of Matthew. Those men who attached themselves to the sign of the covenant, the power of God to transform the heart, to live in righteousness, truth, justice, love, and mercy, these are the signs of a circumcised heart that is humble before the Lord God Almighty.

The comments on Abraham building an altar and to circumcise is very significant since we know according to the Rabbis in the Aramaic Targum on *Tehillim / Psalms 50:14-15*, that a sacrifice of thanks giving is to subdue the evil impulse. Notice that the rabbinic translation from the Hebrew text that says "*Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving*" is synonymous to "*subduing the evil impulse.*" This is similar to the Apostle Paul saying we are to put our bodies to death (*Galatians 5:24*) what he calls "*crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires.*" (see also *Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23, Romans 6:6, Ephesians 4:22, Colossians 3:5*) The act of offering a sacrifice of praise is lived out in our lives as a pleasant aroma before God. King David recognized that sin effects his relationship with God. David in the psalm was estranged because of his sin and asks the Lord to not cast him away from His presence and do not take away His Holy Spirit (אל-תִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי מִלְּפָנֶיךָ יְיָ וְרִיחַ קֹדְשְׁךָ אֶל-תִּקַּח מִמֶּנִּי). According to *Tehillim / Psalms 51:12-13*, sin causes separation from the Lord which is another way to say that as we sin we are acting in opposition to the leading of God's Spirit. In the final verses of

the psalm David recognizes that the Lord is looking for repentance, justice (מִשְׁפָּט) and righteousness (צְדָקָה) over sacrifice in his statements in *Tehillim / Psalms 51:18-19* “*For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering.*” The sacrifices the Lord God is looking for is a broken spirit, and a broken and a contrite heart. It is interesting to note that in *Tehillim / Psalms 51:15* David says, טו: אֶלְמָדָה פִּנְשָׁעִים דְּרַכֶּיךָ וְתִטְּאִים אֵלַיךָ יְשׁוּבוּ: “*Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners will be converted and turn to You*” just before verse *51:18-19* saying that the Lord does not delight in sacrifices but in a broken spirit. The Psalm is verifying God’s way that our relationship with the Lord begins within our hearts. This again draws us back to the context of Abraham sitting at the entrance to his tent, being circumcised of heart, the midrash on the altar of God and circumcising one’s self. The sacrifice of praise is to remove the dead parts from our bodies on the inside, to turn from sin (*removing the dead parts on the outside*), and to walk in righteousness and truth, love and mercy, etc. Abraham’s service to the Lord and the angels can be understood as his having circumcised his heart. This may also be the reason the rabbis, according to the midrash, equate Abraham as the shield of Salvation. Abraham is to be taken as our example, to live by faith, to walk in truth, justice, righteousness, and having love and mercy for both the righteous and the unrighteous (e.g. his speaking to the Lord on behalf of the wicked Sodom and Gemorah). Can we ignore these things and expect the Lord in Heaven to save our souls?

The prophet Isaiah said the following:

Isaiah 9:23-26

9:23 Thus says the Lord, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; 9:24 but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,’ declares the Lord. 9:25 ‘Behold, the days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised 9:26 Egypt and Judah, and Edom and the sons of Ammon, and Moab and all those inhabiting the desert who clip the hair on their temples; for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart.’ (NASB)

Isaiah says that if we are to boast, we are to boast in the Lord who is just, merciful, and righteous. Isaiah says *9:25 ‘Behold, the days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised (NASB)* Note Isaiah’s comments on circumcision; he speaks of the circumcised and yet uncircumcised. Isaiah is speaking of the duality of circumcision and the necessity of “*circumcision our hearts before God.*” Have you circumcised your heart before the Lord to obey His commands to live by faith, to walk in truth, justice, righteousness, and having love and mercy towards others? The Lord can help by the power of the Spirit and in His Son Yeshua the Messiah!