

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny

## (Portion of Vayera)

She was sitting not more than twenty feet away, but I never met her. She was fifteen, and full of life; I must have seen her, but was not paying attention; I was busy with other things.

It had been a very challenging year, with almost eighty days of extremely difficult reserve duty, par for the course of being a Company Commander in the reserves at the height of the second Intifada. So I was feeling particularly blessed that afternoon that I was healthy, and safe with a loving family and much to look forward to. For me it seemed, life was so full of *chesed*, Hashem's loving-kindness. But as I was standing on line waiting for my baked ziti, a man with a guitar case full of explosives was walking towards the same S'barro's Pizzeria; everything was about to change, forever.

I imagine she was probably doing what any healthy fifteen year old girl would be doing on a beautiful summer afternoon: laughing with her friends, dreaming of the future and appreciating being on school vacation... life must have been full of *chesed*; it was all good.

But at 2pm on August 9<sup>th</sup> 2001 (20<sup>th</sup> Menachem Av, 5761) *din*, unremitting incomprehensible judgment, visited the Roth family as Malki Roth, along with fourteen other innocent Jews were murdered by an Arab terrorist for reasons we will never fully understand.

Malki Roth and that terrible day in S'barro's has been haunting my thoughts these past weeks, as Jewish blood is cheap again in Israel, as it has so often been in Jewish history.

She was fifteen in 2001 which would have made her almost thirty now. She would probably have met a special boy and married, and probably would have had at least a couple of children if not more.... So who would those children have been? Who were the Roth grandchildren that were never born? How much beauty and brilliance was lost from the world when Malki a"h was killed? And most challenging, how do we contemplate, much less engage, a world where Hashem (G-d) allows such horrendous things to happen? How do we confront the world of *din*, of incomprehensible and often painful Divine judgment?

This week's portion of *Vayera* actually introduces the concept of judgment, or *din*.

Fascinatingly, the portion begins with pure *chesed*, as Avraham, recovering from his circumcision, is visited by no less than G-d Himself. Jewish tradition sees this as G-d modeling *chesed* or loving-kindness for us. And then Avraham runs to welcome and feed three total strangers. But the portion ends with pure *din* or judgment as Avraham stands over his beloved son prepared to kill him in the name of G-d.

Indeed, as much as Avraham represents lovingkindness (*chesed*), Yitzchak who is born this week, represents *din*. Avraham is giving, doing, arguing, striving binding; Yitzchak is receiving, accepting, and bound. Because in the end, all we can do when confronted by Hashem's inscrutable *din*, is to surrender.

Indeed, our rabbis teach that the first blessing of the silent Amidah prayer, represents *chesed* and Avraham, whereas the second blessing represents *din* and Yitzchak. Hence the second blessing represents all those aspects of life before which we can only do so much before we surrender: death, rain and drought, illness and healing.

The portion begins with the birth of Yitzchak and concludes with his almost being killed on the altar. *Vayera* introduces Yitzchak who represents *din*. Which leaves us wondering how a father who epitomizes *chesed*, produces a son who is living *din*? One could not imagine two personalities more different than Avraham and Yitzchak; so what are we meant to learn from this, and how are we meant to understand it?

How does the same personality who, when presented by G-d with the imminent destruction of Sodom (the archetype of evil), argues for its salvation, then become the same person who will willingly murder his own son in the name of G-d?

In the midst of the story of the binding of Isaac, the Torah tells us (22:6,8) “*And they both walked together*”.

How can *chesed* and *din* truly be together? They seem to be polar opposites?!

It seems Avraham, the paragon of *chesed*, actually needs to experience and become *din*, and Yitzchak the paragon of *din*, needs to be born of *chesed*.

There is also another interesting detail worth noting in the introduction of Yitzchak, and that is his name.

Yitzchak is actually named by no less than G-d Himself! When Avraham is told of the forthcoming birth of a son, he laughs and G-d says “...*you will name him Yitzchak*”. (17:17-19). But why would a son be named ‘laughter’?

Indeed, laughter seems to play a significant role in Yitzchak’s life. His mother Sarah will be held accountable for laughing upon hearing she will have a son (18:12-15), and later she will laugh when she has actually given birth at such an advanced age ; (21:6: “*G-d has made laughter for me, whoever will hear of it will laugh for me ...*”)

Yishmael, Avraham’s older son from Hagar the handmaiden, will be expelled from the home (with his mother Hagar) because he is ‘*metzachek*’, laughing ... ( 21:9).

And Yitzchak will be the only one of the forefathers who actually laughs with his wife Rivka ( 26:8)....

What does laughter have to do with Yitzchak who is the primary progenitor of *din*?

How could the character who comes of age being bound on an altar as his father prepares to kill him , represent laughter? It makes sense that *chesed* is represented by Avraham, whose name *Av* means father; when we think of a loving G-d, we think of Hashem as a father. But why is Yitzchak who introduces us to *din*, named laughter?

Obviously , we need to understand laughter. Laughter is all about the unexpected. When the dignified man in a suit slips on a banana peel it is funny because it is so unexpected. And there are different types of laughter; laughter can be cynical, and crushing, or it can be joyous and supportive; it all depends on how we see the unexpected.

If there was an unexpected event in the Torah it was the birth of Yitzchak. His mother was ninety years old! In fact, Jewish tradition posits (Tractate *Yevamot* 64b) that Sarah was not only barren; she did not even have a uterus! So her having a son was impossible!

*Din*, judgment, is all about rectifying the imbalances of life. Something has occurred which cause an imbalance, and the judge needs to mete out judgment and retribution to ensure that the inappropriate is rectified. But the nature of judgment is that it is final; the judge does not have to explain himself, he is the judge. And given that

we are speaking of the ultimate judge, Hashem who executes judgment, it means that we can expect life to be impossible for us to fully comprehend.

And who is Yitzchak? The beloved son of the master of loving-kindness who finds himself bound on the altar as his beloved father holds the knife ready to kill him. Could anything be more unexpected? More impossible? Avraham brings to the world the idea that life is precious and Yitzchak introduces the fact that life is not ours; we cannot assume or presume that it is a given we will live. In fact there are no givens in life because all of life is given. Life is a surprise, in every moment. And it is Yitzchak who teaches the power of surrender; of being able to receive, with a smile and a laugh, whatever life has to offer, because it all comes from Hashem.

Life is not really ours, and we don't really have it; ours is to live it as best we can, knowing that in any moment we might be called upon to let it go. And that is actually true freedom; the challenge of exploring not what I have been given, but what I am meant to do with it.

Perhaps this is why Avraham, who represents *chesed*, needs to walk with Yitzchak who represents *din*. Because *chesed* needs *din* and *din* needs *chesed*.

*Chesed* is Malki Roth full of life and dreams laughing on a beautiful Jerusalem afternoon.

*Din* is Malki's at the hands of a terrorist, her dreams left unfulfilled....

*Din* is a thirteen year old boy being stabbed while riding his bicycle

*Chesed* is his waking up and regaining consciousness and discovering he will eventually fully recover.

We do not and will never fully understand *din* but if Hashem created the world and is the ultimate judge, then obviously we should not expect to.

*Chesed* leaves no questions; *din* must let go of them.

It is not accidental that the ram's horn or shofar has its origins in the story of the binding of Isaac, because Rosh Hashanah is Yom Ha*Din*, the Day of Judgment when we contemplate life's unexpected surprises and painful incongruities.

We need to receive *din*, judgment which we cannot change, much as Yitzchak accepted in surrender his position on the altar. But we need to fill the world of *din*, with *chesed*, as Avraham did. And sometimes, we need to step outside our boxes, just as Avraham, paradigm of chesed, was willing to surrender to Hashem's impossible and incomprehensible will by binding his son, his only son whom he loved so much, on the altar of life.

It is worth noting that Yitzchak's name does not actually mean laughter; Yitzchak means he will laugh. Because as we struggle to accept life's difficult judgements we must always believe that the unexpected, even incomprehensible is just around the corner.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

Binny Freedman