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SOURCES & RESOURCES

NO NEWS IS BAD NEWS: BENEATH THE SURFACE OF GENESIS 18

Genesis 18 presents the cherished, apparently simple story of Abraham and Sarah's model greeting of guests. They welcome strangers into their home, feed them lavishly, and then the story ends happily, as the strangers turn out to be angels bearing the sweet prophecy that Abraham and Sarah will finally have a child together. It is as if the couple's reward for their generous hospitality is this news. To say it slightly differently, perhaps the appearance of the strangers was a test. Having passed, Abraham and Sarah are found worthy of a child.

Astute readers of Genesis, however, may be puzzled. Why are angels dispatched to deliver to Abraham and Sarah "news" which is not news at all, and which was in fact a (or *the*) central focus of the previous chapter?

God said to Abraham, "Sarai, your wife, do not call her 'Sarai,' for 'Sarah' is now her name. I bless her and I grant you a son through her; I shall bless her, she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall issue from her. Abraham fell on his face and laughed... God said, "Indeed, Sarah, your wife, will bear you a child, and you shall call him 'Isaac,' and I shall uphold My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him... My covenant I shall uphold with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this time next year" (Genesis 17:15–21).

God opens the chapter by telling Abraham—at that point still "Abram"—that He comes to establish a covenant with him; that this covenant will transform "Abram" into "Abraham" by making him "father of a throng of nations" ("*av hamon goyim*" contracted to "Avraham"); that this nation will receive the gift of the Land of Canaan; and that this nation will enjoy a special relationship with God. The sign of the covenant will be circumcision.

As the chapter continues, God explains that Abraham's partner in this covenant will be Sarah, who herself is renamed and who will bear the child, the foundation stone of this nation, to be called "Yitzhak" because of Abraham's laughter upon hearing the news.

In short, anyone who has read chapter 17 knows well that Isaac is on the way. So why do the angels of the following chapter bring news which is no news at all? And if this is indeed old news, the appearance of the angels as strangers could hardly be a test. After all, God had already promised the child. If so, why does God sneak into Abraham's home incognito?

As long as we're asking questions, let us examine the odd dialogue between the angels and Abraham, with Sarah eavesdropping and adding her own comments:

They said to him, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" He said, "Here in the tent." He said, "I shall surely return to you at this time next year, and there will be a son to Sarah, your wife." Sarah was listening by the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were old, well into their days; Sarah no longer had the way of women. Sarah laughed inside, saying, "After I am worn out shall I be rejuvenated? And my master is old!" God said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear, since I am old?' Is anything beyond God? At the appointed time, I shall return to you next year, and Sarah shall have a child." Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, you did laugh" (Genesis 18:9–15).

Putting ourselves in Abraham's shoes, the strangers' initial question could seem both rude and jarring. Women in the ancient world probably did not socialize with strange men who came to the door; for strangers to boldly inquire after the woman of the house might well have been a violation of manners and modesty. But for these strangers to also somehow know the name of his wife must seem ominous to Abraham—these strangers are strange to him, but apparently he and Sarah are not unknown to them.

When does Abraham realize that these travelers are not travelers at all but are, in fact, angels? It cannot be the mere fact of their predicting that he and Sarah will have a child; perhaps any well-meaning strangers, grateful for the lavish hospitality they had received, might extend such a blessing.

Perhaps their use of the newly-minted name "Sarah" serves as the hint that they are more than they appear to be. The moment the strangers ask after his wife using this name, Abraham may first wonder at their forwardness, followed quickly by a feeling of vague fear (these visitors seem to have Googled us!), followed by the dawning realization that the

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only one who knows his wife is now called “Sarah” is he himself.. and God.

Sitting facing who he now understands are angels, Abraham must wonder why they are asking Sarah’s whereabouts, since they must surely already know.¹ Why is God asking questions? As readers, we wonder the same thing, though we also have the benefit of similar previous episodes in Genesis: God’s asking the hiding, guilty Adam, “Where are you?”; the guilty Eve, “What have you done?”; the guilty Cain, “Where is Abel, your brother?”; and so on, all throughout *Tanakh*. God asks questions only to hint to His interlocutor that there is a misdeed to be confessed and repented. In each case the only correct answer to God’s question is, “I have sinned.”²

And yet, throughout *Tanakh* the interlocutor, desperate to brazen it out, or perhaps hoping God doesn’t really know what he’s done, or just unready to come clean, never says, “I have sinned.” The interlocutor always takes the question literally, and therefore answers it straightforwardly. Adam: “I heard You coming through the garden and I was afraid, because I am naked”; Eve: “The snake tricked me and I ate”; Cain: “I don’t know! Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Abraham, too, simply answers: Where is Sarah? “Here, in the tent.” Knowing it is God Whose question he is answering, he also understands that he has committed an infraction and that God is here to redress it. But what infraction?

“I will surely return to you in a year’s time, and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.” The non-news, ostensibly; but then a surprise—for Sarah

¹ In theory, based on the evidence before him at this point of the narrative, Abraham might have thought them merely prophets rather than angels. That Abraham does not is apparent from the ensuing part of the chapter, in the course of his attempt to save Sodom, in which he explicitly addresses the visitors as if speaking to God Himself. Perhaps what clarified the prophet/angel ambiguity in his mind was the visitor’s language: “I will surely return to you in a year’s time, and there shall be a child to Sarah, your wife.” Since there would be no need for a prophet to return in order to trigger this miracle, perhaps Abraham understands “I” as “God” and “will surely return” as “will cause it to happen.” Indeed, when Sarah conceives and then bears Isaac, there is no visitation by a prophet; instead, the Torah notes, “God remembered Sarah as He had said He would” (21:1).

² The following are further examples of God’s rhetorical, prompting questions to the guilty, some of which may leave readers wondering how they fit the template I have presented here (providing me with an opportunity to explain in a future discussion): Genesis 16:7–8 (Hagar); Genesis 32:27–30 (Jacob); Genesis 37:15–18 (Joseph); Exodus 4:1–6 (Moses); Numbers 22:9–13 and 28–35 (Balaam); I Kings 19:9–17 (Elijah); Jonah 4:1–10 (Jonah).

laughs in disbelief, wondering how such a thing could possibly happen for post-menopausal her. Apparently, the news *is* news for Sarah, such *new* news that she refuses to believe it. She did not know it until the angels said it, and having heard it, she cannot accept it.

Now we understand everything: Abraham never shared this news with Sarah, so God has come to speak it aloud through the angels after ascertaining not that Sarah is in earshot (for God knows this without asking), but after *Abraham* realizes that the angels know Sarah is listening. “Before we say what we came to say, we want to make clear that as we share the news you suppressed, we know your wife is listening. In fact, that is why we are here.” On the surface, the message the angels bear is the hope of decades: “You will have a son!” Beneath the surface of the repetition of joyful news (of chapter 17), the true message the angels bear is a stern rebuke to Abraham, who kept that news to himself. God gains Sarah’s ear by maneuvering Abraham into inviting His emissaries into his tent.

But why would Abraham hide good news? Let us return to Genesis 17. How did he react upon initially receiving the tidings that Sarah, his long-childless wife, will finally bear a child, taking her place by his side as co-founder of the covenantal nation?

Abraham fell on his face and laughed; he said in his heart, “To a man of a hundred years shall a child be born? As for Sarah, shall a woman of ninety bear a child?” Abraham said to God, “Would that Ishmael could live before You!” God said, “Indeed, Sarah, your wife, shall bear you a son, and you shall call him ‘Isaac’; I will uphold My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his seed after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I now bless him, and make him fruitful, and increase him very greatly; twelve princes shall he bear, and I shall make him into a great nation. But my covenant, I shall uphold with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year (Genesis 17:17–21).

Abraham resists! Rather than celebrating Sarah’s inclusion, he says to God, “I already *have* a son, one whom I love, one in whom all my hopes are already invested! Can’t Ishmael serve as the child of Your covenant?”³ God reacts with conciliation, promising a great (but lesser) destiny for Ishmael, as He insists that Isaac will be bearer of the covenant, the one

³ Following Rashi (as interpreted by Shadal and R. D.Tz. Hoffman), Radak, Ralbag, and Netziv; as opposed to Ramban and Bekhor Shor, who interpret Abraham’s plea as one for Ishmael’s very survival, necessitating explanation of why Abraham suddenly feared Ishmael was in mortal danger.

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to produce the promised nation, receive *Eretz Canaan*, and maintain a unique connection with God.

Remarkably, though the conversation is ended by God's departure from the scene, Abraham continues the dialogue by other means. His very next act: circumcising himself *and* Ishmael, engraving the seal of the covenant on the child God had explicitly excluded from it!⁴ This is no misunderstanding on Abraham's part. It is a plea. Once again, this time in an act rather than in words, he says to God, "Would that Ishmael could live before You!"

No wonder, then, that as we arrive at Genesis 18, Abraham, who is still hoping God will relent and accept Ishmael, continues to conceal the news from Sarah—for as long as she never hears of her intended majestic role, she will not be hurt. God's plan can still be changed. Knowing Abraham is desperate to keep His plan from Sarah, God plays on Abraham's "weakness"—his compassion, his hospitality, even for strangers—and angelically sneaks into Abraham's home and hearth to guarantee that Sarah now receives the news and end Abraham's campaign for Ishmael.

When Sarah laughs in disbelief, God appears to take offense, demanding of Abraham: "Why is Sarah laughing? Is anything beyond God?" But we are puzzled: Why is God asking *Abraham* to explain Sarah's laughter instead of asking Sarah herself? And why would God be more offended by Sarah's laughter than He was by the laughter of Abraham upon hearing the same news one chapter earlier?

Sarah, frightened, denies having laughed, whereupon we hear, "No, you did laugh." Is that the voice of God, irritated at Sarah for laughing and now for denying it? Again, why be angrier at Sarah than He was at Abraham's own laughter? Perhaps it is Abraham asserting that Sarah did indeed laugh. But why would he do so? Does God need his aid in rebuking Sarah?

If the speaker is in fact Abraham: "No, you did laugh," he is hardly pointing a finger at her. Finally, this is his own *mea culpa*. God is indeed not angrier with Sarah for laughing than He was with Abraham. When He asks, "Why is Sarah laughing," He is rebuking Abraham, not

⁴ One might think that Abraham circumcised Ishmael as a slave, just as he was commanded to circumcise all the household slaves. However, careful examination indicates that Ishmael fell precisely between the cracks of God's command, which included only (a) Isaac and (b) slaves who are *not* Abraham's children: "Eight days old shall all males be circumcised for all generations, both slaves born in your home as well as those purchased from others, *who are not of your seed*" (Genesis 17:12). The phrase "who are not of your seed" appears to modify "slaves born in your home," since "those purchased from others" could hardly be of Abraham's seed.

Sarah: “Tell me, Abraham, why is your wife so surprised at this news that she is gripped by disbelief? We all know: It is because you, hoping to see *your* plan realized, never reported My news!” Sarah, frightened but not clued in to the subtext, issues a denial, but Abraham, chastened, denies her denial: “No, you did laugh.” He is blaming himself, admitting that God is right: “My wife is laughing, as I did, because I never told her the news I should have.”

On the surface, it appears the angels came bearing tidings for Abraham and Sarah both. On second thought, though, they came bearing news for Sarah alone. Upon deeper examination, it becomes clear that their message was truly for Abraham alone: “Many are the plans of man, but God’s plan shall come to pass” (Proverbs 19:21).

It is true that in order to embrace his covenantal destiny, Abraham will need to be a man of surpassing compassion. Fortunately, Abraham needs no lessons in that department—kindness is of his essence. But aside from his renowned quality of loving-kindness, he will need other tools, including some he must struggle to develop: The covenantal destiny can be his only if he also learns to submit completely to the will of God, to sacrifice his own hopes and plans to those of the Almighty.⁵

How does Abraham find his way to the *Akeda*, the moment of ultimate sacrifice, the final test in which he submits utterly and unquestioningly to the plan of God? The road to the *Akeda* runs through Genesis 18.

A Methodological Comment

When comparing the strength of competing interpretations of a biblical text or story, it would be intuitive to compare the merit of each set of interpretations “locally”—considering, for example, which interpretation better explains the specific phrase or verse at hand. Sometimes, however, despite its intuitive appeal, this approach can prove less fruitful. What if we are studying an entire chapter, engaging in a process of considering many sets of competing interpretations on a series of dozens of intimately connected phrases and verses?

⁵ Perhaps this also sheds light on why the Torah presents (in one very long paragraph in the biblical text) the visit of the angels to Abraham and Sarah’s home together with the following conversation, in which Abraham pleads for Sodom. The thread that pulls together these ostensibly unrelated conversations: Abraham’s struggle to accept God’s plan (for his own family and for Sodom), to develop a trust in God so deep that, when confronted with a divine plan that diverges from his own, he will willingly submit, even at incalculable personal cost, as at the *Akeda*.

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Here, I suggest that another strategy be considered. Rather than proceeding piecemeal, comparing each interpretation independent of the previous and following sets (considering Rashi vs. Ramban on one verse, and then separately considering Ibn Ezra vs. Rashbam on the next), it will often be more revealing to keep in mind the momentum, the cumulative force of lines of thought which recur from phrase to phrase and verse to verse.

Considered in isolation, for example, one might lean toward the strength of Ramban in one place and that of Rashbam in the next, or one might consider the interpretations equally strong. But if a particular approach provides a strong unified explanation across swaths of text, and the same approach proves compelling for many other ensuing verses, that approach has greater merit. As Moshe Greenberg wrote in another context, “A key that opens so many doors can hardly be the wrong one.”⁶

For better or for worse, in day school I learned verse by verse, each verse accompanied by its commentaries, verse-Rashi-Ramban, verse-Rashi-Ibn Ezra, verse-Rashbam-Bekhor Shor. In a sense, the questions raised by each verse never “survived” to the next verse. The questions had been vanquished, mollified, or at least had their teeth blunted by the various interpretations offered, whether those of the commentators or those of my teachers. In some cases, the price we paid for this methodical approach was losing sight of the patterns for the *pesukim*. We quickly forgot our questions because their pressure had been relieved by the interpretations we studied. Our questions had already been answered, so we forgot that they had ever bothered us. We never quite noticed the threads running from verse to verse which were woven into larger themes informing and often transforming the entire chapter.

If we had not been quite so quick to solve our problems, if we had allowed our questions to accumulate and percolate, we would have seen that the questions were interconnected. Dismiss your questions verse by verse, and they will not likely survive to join hands and change your entire sense of the larger text. Allow them to linger temporarily unsolved, and we may hear these formerly isolated riddles conversing with one another and building into a pattern.

Understanding Abraham’s “would that Ishmael live before You” as a plea to accept Ishmael, the beloved living child, over Isaac, the as-yet mere promised son, is one of those sweeping ideas, recommended, in my

⁶ Moshe Greenberg, “Another Look at Rachel’s Theft of the Teraphim,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81:3 (September 1962), 241.

view, not only on its local merits, but also because it answers so many individual questions:

- why Abraham circumcises Ishmael, marking him with the sign of the covenant from which God had excluded him but which Abraham desperately wished could be his destiny;
- why Abraham withholds the ostensibly blessed news from Sarah;
- why God enters Abraham's home incognito;
- why the angels inquire after Sarah's whereabouts;
- why the angels come to deliver news which was not news at all;
- why Sarah seems so clearly unaware that she is to bear a child, despite chapter 17;
- why God seems offended at Sarah's laughter but not at Abraham's;
- why God asks Abraham why Sarah is laughing instead of asking her directly;
- why God asks any questions at all, given that He is God;
- why Abraham insists (in response to Sarah's fearful denial) that she did indeed laugh;
- why this story and that of Abraham's plea for Sodom are in the very same paragraph.

Considering any one of these questions in isolation, looking at any one verse in a vacuum, other answers might appear stronger. Considering them all together, perhaps we are better served by a key that unlocks so many doors.