

Vayera, Lo Alman Yisrael

- Based on thoughts expressed by Harav Yoseph Dov Soloveitchik zt"l, and Avi Mori, Rav Moshe Yitzchok Shulman zt"l.

Family letter to Avraham after Akeda? Rywka's birth to compensate for Sara's death. The importance of Sarah to Avraham and his mission. Throughout history when a sun sets on a Jewish great leader, another is sent by Hashem in his place. Lo Alman Yisrael. We see it in our time, too.

VAYERA: LO ALMAN YISRAEL
ISRAEL IS NOT BEREAVED

(A sermon based on thoughts expressed by Rav J. B. Soloveitchik zt"l, and Avi Mori Rav Moshe Yitzchok Shulman, zt"l)

After telling of great events, the sidrah closes on a banal note. Right after the Akeda we read that Avraham receives a letter about genealogy. It contains - family news! "It came to pass after these events that it was told Avraham: 'Behold, Milcah, too, has born children to your brother Nahor; Utz, his first-born, and his brother Buz, and Kemuel, the father of Aram; also Kessed, Hazo and Pildash and Yidlaph and Bethuel.'" And Bethuel begot Rivka. These eight did Milcah bear to Nahor, Avraham's sister. And his concubine Reuma, had also given birth; [she bore] Tebah, Gaham, Tahash and Maakah'" (Genesis, 22:20-24). What has a family letter got to do with Jewish history? How does it affect our destiny? Why record it in the Torah?

The connection of the parshiyot Vayera and Chaye Sarah, teaches that the death of Sarah is linked to the Akeda. For the Midrash says that Sarah died from the shock of hearing a false report that Yitzchak had actually been sacrificed.

In the same way this report of family news is also connected with Sarah's death. The purpose was to give hope in a trying time! To teach, lo alman Yisrael, that Israel is never altogether bereaved.

Consider: who was greater, Avraham or Sarah? Our sages teach that Sarah was greater. Why? One reason is that Avraham had his vision always before him, sustaining him, while Sarah did not have God's revelation directly to her, but only through her loyalty to Avraham. So hers was the greater heroism. She showed more mesirat nefesh.

The Rav pointed out that Avraham lived in the land 60 years with Sarah. After her death he lived 40 years more, without her. Yet nothing is heard of Avraham's life after Sarah died except his search - with Eliezer's help - for a wife for Yitzchak, and then, that he married a woman called Ketura and she bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah (25:1-2). In the Rav's words, "Six healthy, strong - idolaters. Avraham with Sarah is everything; Without Sarah he is nothing". And now, she had died. Yitzchok was left with Avraham. Whence the second Sarah? Where could be found another woman with that spiritual heroism?

So the Midrash points to the genealogy message, which teaches that before Sarah died her successor was born. Lo alman Yisrael. Israel is never completely abandoned. "And [Yitzchok] brought her to the tent of Sarah his mother. And he took Rivka, and she became his wife, and he loved her, and Yitzchok was comforted for the loss of his mother" (Genesis 24:67).

The Midrash therefore cites the verse in Kohelet, *Veazarach hashemesh uba hashemesh* (5:1), "The sun sets and the sun rises", as a proof text, that "Before the Holy One blessed be He allows the sun of one righteous person to set, He causes the sun of another to rise." Therefore the Torah teaches that Rebecca was born before Sarah died. The Midrash cites other examples from history. For instance, "On the day Rabbi Akiva died, Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi was born".

The selection of this example says much more than appears on the surface. To understand the real meaning, consider the times of Akiva's life, especially the period of his death! For the day Rabbi Akiva died was one of the blackest in Jewish history. The Temple had been destroyed 65 years earlier. Bar Kochba's revolt had failed. Disaster engulfed us... Exile now began in earnest. Torah study was prohibited, mitzvot forbidden. It was a ruthless attempt to snap the chain of tradition. Rabbi Akiva perished, one of the "Ten Martyrs" we read about on Yom Kippur.

The observer might think that with his death came the end of Jewish history! Gone the Temple, gone the people's autonomy, gone its government, gone the people themselves, gone the opportunity and the right to study the Torah and observe its mitzvot! Gone their leaders, executed by cruelty so fiendish in was only exceeded in our time with the Nazi death camps. Jews at that time might be pardoned if they had supposed that God had forsaken them!

Enemies of our people thought its end had come. Survival afterwards was so illogical that respected historians such as Arnold Toynbee, claimed that from then onward Jews who continued to survive were fossils, left over from olden times.

There were Jews who believed this! And at that very time! There were those who were so crushed that they despaired of any hope and counseled national suicide, declaring, "Let us not eat meat, let us stop drinking wine, let us forbid marriage and refuse to bring children into the world, so that the seed of Avraham our father shall perish from the earth, [and by their perishing, shall perish all their tzarot]". Such was the feeling of many, even leaders and respected elders of our people! That was how they felt on the day Rabbi Akiva died. For it looked like the day Judaism died! And they said, *meayin yavo ezri?*

Fortunately, the majority of sages, led by Rabbi Joshua, did not succumb to the fatalists' prophecies of doom. They required that we live, and strive, and come to a better time. And their lesson was taken from Sarah's death, where Rivka was already born to take her place, the sun rising even before it set. The very next generation saw the truth of this approach. They began to see the brilliance of the period following which climaxed with Yehuda Hanasi and the creation of the Mishnah, and they perceived that the dawn of this new age took place on the very darkest day of Jewish history. "God prepared the cure before the wound," said our sages. Just as Rebecca's birth ensured the survival of Judaism at its outset, so later on the birth of Judah the Prince ensured its survival when it had seemed doomed.

This has taken place often in our history, and certainly in our own time. We who live now, almost two generations after the holocaust, can see it clearly. There are many miracles that we can point to, miracles for our time. What is the greatest? Perhaps that Political Zionism started almost 100 years ago, so that by the time of the holocaust it was a movement with impetus and strength; so that after World War One, when new nations were carved out of the Turkish Empire - Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan - amongst them was Palestine, with the Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations' promise that it would one day become a Jewish State! For if Zionism would only have begun its political life in 1945, what power would it have had, and what chance would we have had? Lo alman Yisrael, "No matter how bleak the time, Israel was not entirely forsaken".

It is so easy, today, to be discouraged by the news. As Americans, we have an obligation to keep faith and hope that victory over terror will come. And as Jews, we must be ready to read hope and promise in the future of Israel, despite Intefada, despite harsh words even from friends, because Lo alman Yisrael. For however great the darkness, so also great is the light! Sometimes the light comes from the very darkness!

There are so many points of promise and hope in our history of the last 55 years, which have advanced Israel, not only in its victories, not only in aliya from countries like Russia, Yemenite Jews, the Falasha immigration, but also in the amazing resurgence of Jewish learning all over the world!

When the promise of the Land of Israel was given to Avraham, the Lord took him out to count the stars, saying, "Thus shall be your children". Stars have this characteristic. They only shine in the dark. So will it come to pass, that in spite of dark times, and perhaps in some respects even because of it, stars will shine for the people of Israel.

Learning will grow. Loyalty will develop. Our people shall grow to learn and work and live together. Our people will be blessed with strength for the sake of peace, and peace, God's strongest blessing, shall surely come upon us. Lo alman Yisrael. "Let Israel not despair. God will not forsake us."

We may not yet be able to tell from whence deliverance shall come, but come it shall, surely and gloriously. Uva letziyon goen, venomar amen.

(Submitted in 5763 by Nisson Shulman)