

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Vayeira

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of

Tzippa *bas* Ya'akov *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The Incredible Life of Yitzchak Avinu

The very familiar episode of *Akeidas Yitzchak* (Binding of Yitzchak) takes place in this week's *parshah*. What may be less well-known, however, is Yitzchak's fate in the wake of this event.

All's Well that Ends Well...

Most people, perhaps, can supply a basic rundown of the story, which would likely read something like this: Hashem presents Avraham with the ultimate trial, bidding him to offer his beloved son as a sacrifice. Avraham endeavors to fulfill the command, taking Yitzchak to Mt. Moriah and binding him on the altar (to prevent movement). As Avraham lifts the knife to perform the slaughter, Yitzchak is granted a last-minute reprieve. An angel of Hashem calls out to Avraham, stops the act and informs the patriarch that he has proven his devotion. A ram is discovered and sacrificed in Yitzchak's stead, and father and son return happily home.

With one possible exception, the details above are pretty accurate. As we shall see, the ending may not have occurred in the exact fashion just mentioned.

The same observation can be applied to a Mishnah in Ta'anis, which discusses the elongated prayers offered on certain fast days. The Mishnah (2:4) discusses the first of these elaborations:

עַל הַרְאִשׁוֹנָה הוּא אוֹמֵר, מִי שֶׁעָנָה אֶת אַבְרָהָם בְּהַר הַמּוֹרְיָה, הוּא יַעֲנֶה אֶתְכֶם וְיִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל צַעֲקוֹתְכֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה, בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' גּוֹאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

“For the first (expanded blessing of the *Shemoneh Esrei*), he recites the following: ‘The One Who answered Avraham at Mt. Moriah – may He answer you today and hearken to the voice of your cry. Blessed are You, Hashem, the Redeemer of Yisrael.’”

This Mishnah alludes to the fact that Avraham was “answered” at the time and place of the *Akeidah*, referring presumably to the fact that his son Yitzchak was spared. While the Maharsha (*Ta'anis 15a*) may have had a bit of a different take on this point, it certainly does appear that this was the Yerushalmi's understanding of the Mishnah. We see this from its questioning of the the blessing's conclusion, asking why the blessing ends with “Redeemer of Yisrael” instead of “Redeemer of Yitzchak.” (The Yerushalmi proceeds to answer that Yitzchak's deliverance constituted salvation for all of Yisrael, his progeny.) Yet here again, as we shall see, the matter may be up for discussion: Was Yitzchak in fact “saved”?

The first apparent deviation from the “conventional” version of events comes from a statement in the Medrash. In *Pirkei D'R'Eliezer* (*ch. 31*), R' Yehudah asserts that Yitzchak actually expired during the proceedings: “As soon as the blade was about to make contact with Yitzchak's neck, his soul exited his body.” (The same phrase is used in reference to the experience of Klal Yisrael at Har Sinai, when their souls left their bodies from fright. They were subsequently resurrected).

However, this statement alone does not present a real conflict with our understanding of the *Akeidah* and its aftermath. For as the Medrash continues, the issue was immediately rectified: “When the call emanated from the Heavens, ‘Do not send your hand against the lad’ (*Bereishis 22:12*), his soul re-entered his body, he was untied and stood on his feet... and recited the blessing, ‘Blessed are You, Hashem, Who resurrects the dead.’”

But then we come to the amazing comments of the Megaleh Amukos, venerated Kabbalistic sage of the seventeenth century.

The Missing Years

In next week’s *parshah*, which begins with the sad tidings of the passing of Sarah Imeinu, the *passuk* relates how “Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and cry over her” (*ibid.* 23:2). Where was Yitzchak during this whole episode? He doesn’t appear in the entire narrative relating to the mourning practices for Sarah. Seemingly, it would have been appropriate for Yitzchak to take part in the ceremonies for his own mother!

The Megaleh Amukos (*parshas Chayei Sarah*) answers with a stark revelation that he bases upon Chazal: Yitzchak was not present for Sarah’s eulogy because, at the time, *he also was no longer among the living*. He was residing in Gan Eden, where he remained for a few years.

With this, the Megaleh Amukos resolves a fascinating mathematical issue that arises in the teachings of Chazal. The Gemara tells us (*Pesachim 94b*) that a (theoretical) journey from earth to the “*rakiya*” (firmament) would take 500 years. The Medrash finds an allusion to this phenomenon in the *passuk* from *Kriyas Shema*: “So that your days be numerous... on the land that Hashem swore to your forefathers... like the days of the heavens on the earth” (*Devarim 11:21*). The Medrash renders: The days of the forefathers are equal to the span of the heavens above the earth. That is, the travel distance (in years) to reach the heavens from earth is equal to the sum total of the lifespans of the three *Avos* (patriarchs) – namely, 500 years.

However, asserts the Megaleh Amukos, something doesn’t “add up” here. Avraham lived 175 years; Yitzchak, 180; and Ya’akov, 147. The total comes to 502, not 500!

Based on the above regarding *Akeidas Yitzchak*, however, the equation is indeed sound. The Megaleh Amukos explains that, post-*Akeidah*, Yitzchak remained in Gan Eden for two years. These two years during which he literally resided “over” and outside of the astronomical stratosphere are not to be included in the count of “earth years.” Thus, minus these two “extra-terrestrial” years, the *Avos* did, in fact, live a combined total of exactly 500 years, in line with the calculation of the Medrash.

In any event, the eye-opening information supplied by the Megaleh Amukos does not necessarily contradict the Yerushalmi’s understanding that Yitzchak was in fact “redeemed.” For even according to the Megaleh Amukos, Yitzchak did return to earth, whereupon he married Rivkah. This is also the meaning of Rashi’s comment to the enigmatic description of Rivkah falling from her camel upon first laying eyes on her prospective husband (*Bereishis 24:44*). What caused her to swoon? Rashi there states: “She saw that he was ‘*mehudar*’ (glorious). What does that mean, exactly? The Megaleh Amukos attributes the awesome radiance of his appearance to the fact that he had just returned from the ethereal realm of Gan Eden.