SIDRA OF THE WEEK : וירא

1. Avrohom has performed the Bris Mi'loh according to the command of HaShem and is recuperating when he is visited by three angels. Thinking that they are ordinary mortals, he extends to them generous hospitality, despite his obvious indisposition.

2. When one of the visitors, within her hearing, foretells that in one year's time, Soroh, Avrohom's wife, will have a son, she thinks that this is nothing more than a well-intentioned pleasantry, and she laughs inwardly at the very thought. But HaShem rebukes Avrohom for Soroh's incredulity, for Avrohom's belief should have been so strong that it should have communicated itself to his wife, too. Soroh herself, when questioned about her laughter, denied that this meant that she didn't believe that HaShem can do anything, but she was upset by Avrohom's rebuke. She feared that her reaction did indeed imply a lack of utmost trust in HaShem, and she accepted that she was at fault.

3. Avrohom is told of HaShem's intention to destroy the cities of S'dom, Amoroh, Admoh, Tzevo'im and Be'la (later called Tzo'ar) because of their horrific wickedness and bestiality. Although these cities and their corrupt lifestyle was a copy of that evil society which HaShem had destroyed in the Great Flood [*See* **SIDRA OF THE WEEK : נח**] and although the Confederation of S'dom and its cruel society was in direct contradiction to all the good and noble ideas that Avrohom taught, Avrohom nevertheless begs HaShem to spare these cities and their inhabitants, if only for the sake of the righteous people, however few, who are there. For with time, reasoned Avrohom, these righteous people would be able to exert some influence upon their society and make them better. But HaShem tells Avrohom that the people of S'dom and its sister-cities are so wicked and corrupt that they do not even tolerate any righteous people to live in their midst, and thus there is no hope that these evil people should ever repent from their cruel ways. They must be destroyed, says HaShem, so that their wickedness shall not spread further and contaminate the rest of mankind.

4. However, Lot, the nephew of Avrohom, who has taken up residence in S'dom, is saved by one of the angels (they had gone on to him from Avrohom) firstly from the people of S'dom, who were infuriated by Lot's hospitality to these visitors, and then from the actual destruction of the whole plateau upon which the cities were built. The fearsome and cataclysmic overturning of this plateau by HaShem resulted in a great depression in the surface of the earth many miles square in area. With the passage of time, the rains which fell upon the resulting highlands round this

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depression flowed into it and, combining with the brimstone (which is sulphur) and salt that HaShem threw down upon the area, later became the Dead Sea.

5. The two daughters of Lot who, together with their father, were the sole survivors (Lot's wife was changed into a pillar of salt when she ignored the angel's warning and turned round to watch the destruction of S'dom) think that the world has come to an end. The memory of the Great Flood was not distant: it had occurred less than 400 years previously, in the year 1656 after Creation; the overturning of S'dom and its confederate cities was in the year 2047 after Creation. The daughters of Lot, although they had some recollection of their saintly great-uncle Avrohom, knew him to be advanced in age and without any children, and the last time they had heard of him was that almost thirty years before (in the year 2021) he had rescued their father Lot from his captivity by the kings of the north. But since then, nothing. Their father never spoke much about him to them and they assumed that Avrohom was no longer alive. (Lot never discouraged this assumption: he himself had always eagerly anticipated inheriting Avrohom's vast fortune.) Consequently, the daughters of Lot, now seeing almost total and utter destruction as far as the horizon in every direction, thought that HaShem was again bringing an end to the wicked world, as He had done before. They only knew of S'dom and its society, never having lived anywhere else, and they knew full well that this, their world, was corrupt and evil. (Their younger sister had been horribly killed by the people of S'dom because she had shown compassion to a starving beggar.) Although the newer town of Be'la, to which they had fled from S'dom, had not been destroyed, they were convinced that it too was bound to share the same fate as the other cities, as it was part of the Confederation of S'dom. And so they removed themselves with their father to live in a cave far away from the town of Be'la, lest they be destroyed when, before long, Be'la too will be overturned. Now, they thought, they and their father were being saved in much the same way as No'ach and his family had been saved from the Great Flood (and they were indeed led into thinking along these lines by things in that cave that appeared to them as if they were Divinely ordained) and there are born to them Ammon and Mo'av.

6. As time went on, rumours began to spread about this wild man who lived in a cave with two women and their children. It was not long before people realized that this was Lot and his daughters, seemingly gone quite mad and depraved by what they had witnessed, and, as this becomes known to more people, Lot's relationship to Avrohom becomes an embarrassment to him. Avrohom therefore moves away from that region and goes down to the land of the Philistines. Soroh is taken by force by the king, Avimelech, but after a warning from HaShem, he returns her to Avrohom. Avrohom rebukes Avimelech for the lack of fear of G-d in his kingdom which this abduction demonstrated, and Avimelech, by way of compensation for his wrongdoing, bestows great riches upon Avrohom and Soroh. (Much the same thing had happened also with Par'o, the king of Egypt, in a similar incident: see last week's **SIDRA OF THE WEEK : לך לך**.)

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7. Avrohom is invited by Avimelech to live in the land of the Philistines, with his safety assured by Avimelech personally. Thus, in this land, too, Avrohom is greatly respected, with his teachings spreading far and wide.

8. Exactly as promised by HaShem (and as predicted by the angel) Soroh gives birth to Yitzchok. She is ninety years old at the time and Avrohom is one hundred years old. When Yitzchok is eight days old, Avrohom performs the Bris Mi'loh, just as HaShem commanded him. The happiness and rejoicing in the house of Avrohom and Soroh is not confined only to them, however, for HaShem granted that many other childless couples should be blessed with children together with Avrohom and Soroh. Thus there was much joy and celebration at that time. (In this way, HaShem ensured that the birth of Yitzchok was known to all as having truly happened, however unbelievable it seemed to be.)

9. *In the same way that the world looked, at first with some amusement but later with admiration, upon the lonely Avrohom and Soroh when they had ventured out to teach about HaShem, the G-d of all Mankind, and on their own thus sought to elevate the whole world that it should conform to the Will of HaShem, so too did that same world look upon this aged couple with almost pitying amusement when they dreamed of having a child from whom would emerge a Nation which would continue their message forever. Even when the dream becomes a reality, the image of this old, old couple bending over their new-born child is so incongruous and almost absurd as to bring a smile (**צְחוֹק**) to the lips. But just as the very beginnings of the Jewish People are such as to evoke a smile because of their "impossibility" in the normal, rational world, no less is the very existence of the Jewish People an "impossibility." And as this People of HaShem marches amid the Nations of the World and down the centuries of history despite every kind of obstacle and opposition, marches on despite all the jealousies and hatreds that tyrants and dictators can throw against it, despite even the suffocating friendship of those who would swallow it up and assimilate the Jewish People out of existence, the very fact that despite all this the indestructible Jew survives and thrives is an incongruity that is almost ridiculous in its "impossibility." In the very way that the Jewish People was born, is summed up its existence throughout the march of Man till the end of time.*

10. Some time later, when Soroh sees how her young son Yitzchok is in danger of Yishmo'el exerting a bad influence over him, she demands that he be sent away, together with his mother, Hoggor. Avrohom is greatly saddened by the need for this step but HaShem tells Avrohom to obey the wishes of his righteous wife. He gives Hoggor enough food and water for herself and Yishmo'el and he sends them on their way. But the water gives out, and, rather than see her son die of thirst, Hoggor casts Yishmo'el under one of the desert bushes while she herself sits at a distance and cries. HaShem hears the cries of Yishmo'el and sends an angel to save the boy. Hoggor is told that the descendants of Yishmo'el will become a great nation, for

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Yishmo'el has within him some of the greatness of Avrohom, too. (Later, Yishmo'el was readmitted to the House of Avrohom but eventually he left and he took to living in the wilderness. His mother subsequently found a wife for him from her own people, the Egyptians.)

11. Avimelech, the king of the Philistines, comes to Avrohom and makes with him a Treaty of Friendship and Avrohom sojourns in Be'er She'va, in the land of the Philistines, for many years.

12. HaShem tests Avrohom and tells him to take his beloved son Yitzchok and offer him up to HaShem. Avrohom obeys, unaware that HaShem has told him to do this so as to demonstrate to all his unquestioning obedience to HaShem, and that He does not in fact want him to actually kill Yitzchok. Avrohom, who has given his whole life to teaching everyone that HaShem is the compassionate G-d and Father of all Mankind, Who abhors all cruelty and especially the barbaric rite of human sacrifice (which had been practised amongst those savage clans before they were changed by Avrohom's teachings) sets out at once to do HaShem's Will. He is well aware that what he is about to do is the most direct contradiction to everything to which he has dedicated his life and will make him the veritable laughing-stock of the whole world — not to speak of the heartbreak that he will experience at the loss of his most beloved son, Yitzchok. But if HaShem has commanded this, then this is what must be done. For three days, enough time to compose his thoughts and decide how best to comply with the Will of HaShem, Avrohom and Yitzchok (together with the two attendants who ministered to Avrohom's needs) travel to the stipulated place. When they arrive near Mount Moriah, Avrohom tells his attendants to stay behind, while he and Yitzchok go on alone. On the way, he explains to Yitzchok the purpose of their journey and they proceed, father and son together, to do the Will of HaShem. Avrohom builds an altar and arranges the wood and, at the request of Yitzchok himself, Avrohom binds his son ready for sacrifice. Then, just as Avrohom is about to slaughter his son, HaShem's angel stays his hand and tells Avrohom that HaShem was only testing his obedience. As a reward for his proven unquestioning obedience — to be held up for all time as an example to his descendants that they will follow throughout the ages — Avrohom is promised by HaShem that his People will become exceedingly mighty and numerous and will be the source of blessing for all the Nations of the World.

For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra וירא please go to HAFTORAHS.

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