



Self-Assessment in Times of Extreme Jewish Calamity

Sarah Imeinu Prophetically Implored Avraham to Send Hagar and Yishmael Away for the Safety of Yitzchak and His Offspring

The parsha we will read this Shabbas Kodesh, parshas Lech Lecha, is intimately related to the devastating, barbaric, nightmarish events that our Israeli brothers in Eretz Yisrael are currently experiencing. Sarah Imeinu implores Avraham Avinu to cast Hagar and her son Yishmael out of their home. The vile, blood-thirsty, wild animals of the terrorist organizations that perpetrated these inhumane atrocities against the offspring of Yitzchak are none other than descendants of Yishmael. To add insult to injury, they carried out their attack on the morning of Shemini Atzeres, while hundreds of thousands of Jews in Eretz Yisrael were dancing and celebrating Simchas Torah. In the poetic words of "tefilas geshem" recited on that normally joyous occasion, we prayed to Hashem: זָכוֹר שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר שְׁבָטִים "זָכוֹר שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר שְׁבָטִים—remember the twelve tribes whom You took through the split waters, that You sweetened for them the bitterness of the water. Their offspring—their blood has spilled for You like water. Turn to us, for our souls are engulfed by water."

On that ill-fated morning, the despicable descendants of Yishmael, inhabitants of Gaza, attacked our Israeli brothers like vicious, crazed, wild animals. They brutally murdered over 1400 Israelis, including men, women, and children, committing horrors the like of which have not been seen since the horrors committed by the godless, accursed Nazis—may their names and memories be eradicated—during the holocaust of World War II. Entire families were burned alive. Their cries for salvation ascended to G-d: "שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד". The entire Jewish population of the world is overwhelmed with sorrow and is grieving the Jewish blood that has been spilled like water!

In truth, I do not consider myself worthy to express my opinion as to why this tragedy befell us. That demands a great Jewish leader with true "ruach hakodesh." Therefore, woe to us if we say that which should not be said, and woe to us if we neglect to say that which must be said. Due to this quandary, I wish to fulfill the words of the navi (Avos 5, 13): לֵבִי "לֵבִי—therefore, the prudent man keeps silent at that time, because it is a time of evil. Rashi explains that a wise, prudent person will remain silent when evil occurs, and he will not question "midas hadin."

On the other hand, what am I to do?! My brothers and colleagues, who regularly follow and study our weekly essays, are bewildered by my silence. Like the ship's captain complained to Yonah, they argue: **"How can you sleep so soundly?"** How can you continue to write "divrei Torah", elucidating sacred texts, and presenting the wisdom of our blessed sages, when the descendants of Yaakov are in trouble and under attack worldwide, without addressing the precarious situation? You must provide us with words of moral support and comfort our broken hearts!

This reminded me of a valuable lesson from the Gemara (Shabbas 118b): ואמר רבי יוסי, בימי לא עברתי על דברי חברי, יודע אני בעצמי "ואמר רבי יוסי, בימי לא עברתי על דברי חברי, יודע אני בעצמי—**and Rabbi Yossi said: In all my days, I have never disobeyed the words of my colleagues. For example, I know that I myself am not a kohen; yet, if my colleagues would tell me to go up to the platform** (to recite the Birkas Kohanim), **I would go up.** The message is clear: it is imperative to heed the requests of one's colleagues even if one feels unworthy. Therefore, I have decided to rise to the occasion, to provide words of encouragement and support—"chizuk"—for myself and my dear friends. How should we act and respond in these difficult times to subdue and overcome the powerful klipah of Yishmael? I pray that Hashem will guide me on a path of "emes," to say things that are appropriate—that will honor HKB"H, the Torah, and the people of Yisrael!

Advice from the Rambam concerning Perilous Times

We will begin our discussion with illuminating words from the Rambam. He provides us with explicit instructions how a Jew is supposed to think and act during times of crisis and peril. Here are his sacred words (Hilchos Ta'anis 1, 2-3):

This practice is one of the paths of teshuvah. When trouble arises, and the people cry out and sound the trumpets, everyone will realize that the calamity befell them because of their evil deeds, as it states (Yirmiyahu 5, 25): "Your sins have turned away (the rains and the harvest climate)." This awareness will cause the removal of the trouble. However, should the people fail to cry out (to Hashem) and sound the trumpets, and instead say, "What has happened to us is merely a natural phenomenon and this trouble is merely a chance occurrence," this is a catastrophic perception of things, which causes them to remain committed to their evil deeds. Consequently, this trouble will lead to further troubles. This is implied by that which is written in the Torah (Vayikra 26, 27): "If you remain indifferent to Me, I will be indifferent to you with a vengeance." In other words: When I subject you to troubles, so that you will perform teshuvah, and you say it is a chance occurrence, I will compound your troubles as an expression of vengeance for that indifference.

During these difficult times, we are desperately seeking to blame someone for what has happened. For some reason, unfortunately, it is easier for us to assign the blame to others. In reality, what we should be doing is pounding our own chests and confessing our own sins attributable to the yetzers in our hearts. To quote the Rambam: **"Everyone will (should) realize that the calamity befell them because of their evil deeds."** After all, Chazal teach us an important principle in the Gemara (Shevuos 39a) derived from a passuk in the "tochachah" (Vayikra 26, 37): **"וכשלו איש — באחיו, איש בעון אחיו, מלמד שכל ישראל ערבים זה בזה" and a man will stumble over his brother": Man will stumble because of his brother's iniquity; this teaches us that all Jews are responsible for one another.** If we take this to heart and heed this lesson, the Rambam

assures us that **"this awareness will cause the removal of the trouble."**

Thus, it is incumbent upon each and every one of us to perform a personal self-appraisal. Although we should always be vigilant with regards to transgressing serious aveiros, we must be especially vigilant not to fall prey to the yetzer hara during these challenging times. For example, it is crucial to refrain from speaking "lashon hara." It is so easy to transgress this serious aveirah; yet, it is tantamount to the three cardinal sins, such as murder. As we have learned in the Gemara (Arachin 15b): **"תנא דבי רבי ישמעאל, כל המספר לשון הרע, מגדיל עוונות כנגד שלו עבירות, עבודת כוכבים וגילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים... במערבא אמרי, לשון תליתאי, קטיל תליתאי, הורג למספרו ולמקבלו. ולאומרו."** **A Baraisa was taught in the Academy of Rabbi Yishmael: Whoever speaks "lashon hara" proliferates iniquities equivalent to the three (cardinal) aveiros—idol worship, immorality, and murder . . . In the west (Eretz Yisrael), they said: The third tongue kills three. It kills the one who speaks it ("lashon-hara"), the one who receives it and the one about whom it is spoken.** In other words, the act of "lashon-hara" involves three parties. As a consequence, three parties are affected and ultimately killed—physically and spiritually.

G-d help us! How often do we fail in this matter?! Even if we are not guilty of speaking and disseminating "lashon hara," without even noticing or trying, we might hear some particular "lashon hara." Out of courtesy, we are too polite to advise the speaker to stop and desist. We should warn him that he is transgressing several prohibitions from the Torah, as we are taught by the Chafetz Chaim; and furthermore, he is killing several people with his "lashon hara."

In fact, the Torah of someone who is not careful and mindful in this matter is worthless. Let us refer to what they expounded in the Midrash (V.R. 16, 4) apropos the passuk (Vayikra 14, 2): **"זאת תהיה תורת המצורע, הדא הוא דכתיב (תהלים נ-טז) ולרשע אמר אלקים מה לך לספר חוקי ותשא בריתי עלי פיך."** Regarding the status of the "metzora," who is guilty of speaking "lashon hara," the Midrash cites the passuk (Tehillim 50, 16): **"But to the wicked, G-d said, 'What benefit is it to you to recount My decrees and to bear My covenant upon your lips?'"** Until he is cured of his "tzara'as," which was his punishment

for speaking "lashon hara," he is considered a rasha, and HKB"H is not interested in his Torah. Only after he has performed teshuvah and has been healed does it say: "זאת תהיה תורת המצורע ביום טהרתו"—**this is the Torah of the "metzora" on the day of his purification.**

During these difficult times, it behooves us to also feel and consider the distress of HKB"H; He undoubtedly grieves over the murder of Yisrael, His children. As we have learned in the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 46a), HKB"H grieves even over someone who is sentenced to death by Beis Din. For, the passuk states (Devarim 21, 22): "וכי יהיה באיש חטא משפט מות והומות ותלית אותו על עץ, לא תלין נבלתו על העץ—**if a man is guilty of a capital offense and is executed; you shall hang him from a tree. Do not leave his corpse overnight on the tree, rather you are surely to bury him on that day, for a hanging corpse is an affront to G-d.**

Rabbi Meir explains the reason that he must be buried on the same day: "אמר רבי מאיר, בשעה שאדם מצטער, שכינה מזה לשון אומרת, קלני מראשי, קלני מזרועי, אם כן המקום מצטער על דמו." **Rabbi Meir said: When a person suffers, what expression does the Shechinah utter? "I am burdened by My head; I am burdened by My arm."** So, if the Omnipresent is distressed over the blood of reshaim that is spilled, how much more so for the blood of tzaddikim! Rashi explains that it is analogous to a person who is exhausted saying, "My head is heavy; my arm is heavy."

It stands to reason that if HKB"H suffers and is distressed even by the death of someone sentenced to death by Beis Din, all the more so is He distressed by the cold-blooded murder of hundreds of Yisrael sanctifying His name. As they expounded in the Gemara (ibid. 47a) the passuk (ibid. 79, 1-2): "מזמור לאסף אלהים באו גוים בנחלתך: טמאו את היכל קדשך... נתנו את נבלת עבדיך מאכל לעוף השמים בשך חסידך לחיתו"—**a psalm of Assaf: O G-d! The nations have entered into Your inheritance, they have defiled the Sanctuary of Your holiness . . . They have given the corpse of Your servants as food for the birds of the sky, the flesh of Your devout ones to the beasts of the earth.**" Since they were killed for sanctifying His name, they are categorized as His "servants" and His "devout ones."

Sarah Imeinu Foresaw in Her Prophecy that which Avraham Avinu Did Not See

Thus, when we witness the extreme cruelty and barbarity of the descendants of Yishmael—may their names be blotted out—we can take solace in the episode described in next week's Torah-reading. HKB"H renders a decision in the matter of the emotional dispute between Sarah Imeinu and Avraham Avinu concerning the banishment of Hagar and her son Yishmael. It is written (Bereishis 21, 9):

"ותרא שרה את בן הגר המצרית אשר ילדה לאברהם מצחק, ותאמר לאברהם גרש האמה הזאת ואת בנה, כי לא יירש בן האמה הזאת עם בני עם יצחק."

Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Avraham, mocking. So, she said to Avraham, "Drive out this slave-woman and her son; for the son of this slave-woman will not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak!" Citing the Midrash, Rashi comments: **Since he (Yitzchak) is my son, Yishmael should not inherit with him; even if he were not as upright as Yitzchak, or if he were only as upright as Yitzchak—even if he were not my son—this one (Yishmael) would not be worthy to inherit with him. All the more so that Yishmael should not inherit "with my son, with Yitzchak," who possesses both qualities; he is my son, and he is upright.**

Despite her protests, Avraham Avinu did not initially give in to Sarah's wishes. As the passuk says (ibid. 11): "וירע הדבר מאד בעיני אברהם על אודת בנו"—**the matter greatly distressed Avraham regarding his son.** Ultimately, HKB"H decided the matter for them; He told Avraham in no uncertain terms (ibid. 12): "אל ירע בעיניך על הנער ועל"—**be not distressed over the youth or over your slave-woman; whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice.** Here Rashi teaches us that **Avraham was inferior to Sarah in matters of nevuah.** We will endeavor to explain what nevuah Sarah saw that justified the banishment of Hagar and Yishmael.

Thus, we learn that Sarah Imeinu, our first matriarch—the original "yidishe mame"—foresaw the intense hatred of the murderous descendants of Yishmael toward the descendants of Yitzchak in the distant future. Their sole goal and desire is to brutally slaughter every single Jew inside and outside of Eretz

Yisrael. This prompted her to implore Avraham Avinu, our first patriarch, to separate them permanently, for all times: **"Drive out this slave-woman and her son; for the son of this slave-woman will not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak!"** HKB"H concurred with Sarah and advised Avraham: **"Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice,"** because she is able to foresee what you cannot—that the descendants of Yishmael are going to brutally slaughter the descendants of Yitzchak in the future.

Let us endeavor to explain why HKB"H did not reveal this troubling nevuah to Avraham Avinu. HKB"H intended to fulfill his promise to Avraham in this week's parsha (ibid. 15, 15): **"אתה תבוא אל אבותיך בשלום תקבר: —and you will come to your ancestors in peace; you will be buried in a good old age.** According to Rashi, this implies that: **G-d informed Avram that Yishmael would repent during his lifetime, and that Eisav would not fall into bad ways in his lifetime. This is why he (Avraham) died five years prematurely; and on that day, Eisav rebelled.**

This illustrates for us that our merciful Father in Heaven concurred centuries ago to uphold the decision of Sarah Imeinu to drive the slave-woman, Hagar, and her son, Yishmael, away from Yitzchak. In similar fashion, he will keep His word and will always stand guard to keep the descendants of Yishmael at a distance and to protect the offspring of Yitzchak. Clearly, however, we must be worthy of this divine protection; we must be motivated to perform sincere, complete teshuvah for all of our wrongdoings; we must study Torah and be dedicated to the performance of mitzvos. In return, HKB"H will keep these wild animals, these savage murderers, the descendants of Yishmael away from us. He will rain upon them and all of Yisrael's enemies that join them harsh, awful plagues, in keeping with the passuk in parshas Ha'azinu (Devarim 32, 41): **"אם שנותי בברק חרבי ותאחז במשפט ידי אשיב נקם לצרי ולמשנאי אשלם, אשכיר חצי מדם וחרבי תאכל בשר מדם חלל ושביה מראש פרעות אויב, הרגינני גוים עמו כי דם עבדיו יקום ונקם ישיב לצרי וקפר אדמתו עמו."** **If I whet the shine of My sword, and My hand shall grasp judgment, I shall return vengeance upon My enemies and upon those that hate Me shall I bring retribution. I shall make My arrows drunk with blood and My**

sword shall devour flesh, because of the blood of corpse and captivity, because of the earliest incursions of the enemy. Sing, nations, the praises of His people, for He will avenge the blood of His servants: he will bring retribution upon His enemies, and He will appease His land and His people.

Sarah Imeinu Did Not Want Yisrael to Require the Kal Va'Chomer to Be Vindicated

Let us expand on Sarah Imeinu's profound rationale for instructing Avraham Avinu to drive away the slave-woman and her son by referring to another passuk in this week's parsha (Bereishis 17, 19): **"ויאמר אלקים אבל שרה אשתך יולדת לך בן וקראת את שמו יצחק, והקימותי את בריתי אתו לברית עולם לזרעו אחרי, ולישמעאל שמעתיך הנה ברכתי אותו והפריתי אותו והרביתי אותו במאד מאד, שנים עשר נשיאם יוליד ונתתיו לגוי גדול, ואת בריתי אקים את יצחק אשר תלד לך. שרה למועד הזה בשנה האחרת."** **G-d said, "Indeed, your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you shall name him Yitzchak; and I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. But regarding Yishmael, I have heard you: Behold, I have blessed him, and I will make him fruitful and will increase him most exceedingly; he will beget twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish My covenant through Yitzchak, whom Sarah will bear to you at this appointed time next year."**

In his commentary, Rashi asks the following question: **Why does it say: "But I will establish (uphold) My covenant with Yitzchak"?** Earlier in the narrative, Hashem had already promised: **"I will establish My covenant with him."** So, why does He repeat this promise again at the end of the narrative? Rashi presents an answer in the name of the Midrash (B.R. 47, 5): **Rabbi Abba said: From here we learn a "kal va'chomer" regarding the son of the mistress of the house from the son of the maidservant. It is written, "See that I have blessed him, and I will make him fruitful, and I will increase him." This relates to Yishmael. How much more so "will I uphold My covenant through Yitzchak!"**

In truth, this answer also requires further explanation, as noted by the Bnei Yissaschar (Tishrei 12, 4). After

all, HKB"H already promised Avraham previously that He would uphold the covenant with Yitzchak and his offspring forevermore: **והקימותי את בריתי אתו לברית עולם לזרעו** "אחריו". So, why was the "kal va'chomer" necessary? What did it add? To which the Bnei Yissaschar answers that it is necessary in the event that Yisrael are not worthy. Even then, they will be exonerated and blessed on account of the "kal va'chomer."

The Name Yishmael Alludes to the Principle of Kal Va'Chomer

The Bnei Yissaschar then addresses the words the malach says to Hagar (ibid. 16, 11): **הנך ויאמר לה מלאך ה' הנך** **Behold, you will conceive and give birth to a son; you shall name him Yishmael, since Hashem has heard your prayer.** Since Hashem had already heard her desperate plea, the malach should have instructed her to name the child **"שמוע-אל"**, in the past tense. Why did he instruct her to name him **"ישמע-אל"**, in the future tense?

The matter can be explained based on a wonderful principle gleaned from the incredible teachings of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritch, zy"a. When Moshe prays to cure Miriam of "tzara'as," it says (Bamidbar 12, 13): **ויצעק משה אל ה' לאמר אל נא רפא נא לה, ויאמר ה' אל משה, ואביה ירוק ירק בפניה הלא תכלם שבעת ימים, תיסגר שבעת ימים מחוץ למחנה ואחר תאסף.** **Moshe cried out to Hashem, saying, "Please G-d (א"ל), heal her now." Hashem said to Moshe, "And were her father to spit in her face, would she not be humiliated for seven days? Let her be quarantined outside the camp for seven days, and then she may be brought in."** Rashi comments: **And if her father were to show her an angry face, would she not be humiliated for seven days? All the more so if it is done by the Shechinah!**

He explains in his unique, sacred way why HKB"H employed a "kal va'chomer." He explains that the "Thirteen Midos HaRachamim" align with the "Thirteen Hermeneutical Principles." Thus, when one of these principles is employed, it elicits the corresponding "attribute of mercy." Now, according to the determination of the Arizal, the first two names—**ה'**—mentioned at the beginning of the "Thirteen Midos HaRachamim," are the source of the midos but are not

counted among the thirteen midos. The actual "midos harachamim" are: **"אל, רחום, וחנון, ארך, אפים, ורב חסד, ואמת..."**

According to this format, the first midah is **"אל"**; it corresponds to the first hermeneutic principle, **"kal va'chomer."** This explains the formula Moshe employed to pray on behalf of Miriam: **"אל נא רפא נא לה"**. He intended to invoke the power of the name **א"ל** to heal Miriam. Hence, HKB"H hinted to him that this name can be invoked by expounding a "kal va'chomer": **"And were her father to spit in her face, would she not be humiliated for seven days?"** All the more so if this was done by the Shechinah! By means of this "kal va'chomer," the name **א"ל** was summoned to heal Miriam.

With this understanding, the Bnei Yissaschar explains why the malach instructed Hagar to name her son **"ישמע-אל"** in the future tense rather than **"שמוע-אל"** in the past tense. Thus, whenever Yisrael would require Hashem's salvation in the future, even if they would prove unworthy and undeserving, HKB"H would still listen to their prayers and pleas in the merit of this "kal va'chomer." This is especially true, since a "kal va'chomer" invokes the name **א"ל**, the first of the "Thirteen Midos HaRachamim."

In this light, let us now explain the dispute between Avraham Avinu and Sarah Imeinu. Avraham Avinu wanted Yisrael to be found meritorious based on his personal midah—"chesed"—even if they were not deserving based on "midas hadin." Hence, he thought it would be advantageous to have Yishmael remain with Yitzchak. Compared to the "son of the maidservant," the "son of the mistress" would be considered meritorious. This kal va'chomer would elicit the name **א"ל** reflecting the midah of "chesed," as it is written (Tehillim 52, 3): **"א"ל (א"ל) —the kindness ("chesed") of G-d (א"ל) is all day long.**

The midah associated with Sarah Imeinu, on the other hand, is "gevurah." This is taught by our mentor, the Arizal, in Likutei Torah (beginning of parshas Lech Lecha). She did not want Yisrael to need the kal va'chomer to be found meritorious. For, that would necessitate first performing a "chesed" on behalf of the descendants of Yishmael. Furthermore, that would mean that they deserve some credit for the merit of Yisrael.

Therefore, she instructed Avraham: **“Drive out this slave-woman and her son,”** so that Yitzchak and his offspring would not have any connection with the klipah of Yishmael—not even for the sake of being found meritorious based on the kal va’chomer of the “son of the mistress” compared to the “son of the maidservant.” Nevertheless, she cleverly introduced a kal va’chomer of her own by saying: **“For the son of this slave-woman will not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak!”** Rashi comments: **Since he (Yitzchak) is my son,** Yishmael should not inherit with him; **even if he were not as upright as Yitzchak, or if he were only as upright as Yitzchak—even if he were not my son—this one (Yishmael) would not be worthy to inherit with him. Kal va’chomer—all the more so—that Yishmael should not inherit “with my son, with Yitzchak,” who possesses both qualities; he is my son, and he is upright.**

Based on this notion, we can add a nice little tidbit regarding a verse we say in the song HaMavdil on Motza’ei Shabbas: **“נחנו בידיך כחומר, סלח נא על קל וחומר”**—**in Your hands, we are like clay, please forgive our sins small and big (kal va’chomer).** We can interpret this as follows: Please forgive us for not being worthy to receive Your abundant good based on our own good deeds. Rather, we had to receive it on account of the kal va’chomer of the “son of the maidservant.” Because in the latter situation, HKB”H, so to speak, is distressed that He has to first provide for the “son of the maidservant” in order to apply the kal va’chomer to provide for Yisrael.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon us at this time to fulfill the request of Sarah Imeinu. We must continue to serve Hashem with added vigor. We must study Torah and perform mitzvos to the extent that we ourselves will be legitimately worthy and will not be dependent on the kal va’chomer comparing us to the “son of the maidservant,” the despicable descendants of Yishmael. Then, HKB”H will pour out His wrath on them and all of those who hate Yisrael. In that merit, we will warrant the complete geulah with the coming of our righteous Mashiach.

Lastly, in this week’s parsha, parshas Lech Lecha, Hashem’s Malach informs Hagar, Yishmael’s mother: (Bereishis 16, 11): **“הנך הרה וילדת בן וקראת שמו ישמעאל כי שמע ה’ אל עניך, והוא יהיה פרא אדם ידו בכל ויד כל בו ועל פני כל אחיו ישכון”**—**“Behold, you will conceive, and give birth to a son; you shall name him Yishmael, for Hashem has heard your prayer. And he will be a wild, uncivilized man; his hand will be in everything, and everyone’s hand will be against him; and in the presence of all his brothers, he will dwell.”** According to the commentaries of the Even Ezra and the Ramban, this means that he will be such **“a wild, uncivilized man”** that **“his hand will be in everything”**—waging war against all of the other nations. In the end, however, **“everyone’s hand will be against him”**—all of the other nations will unite to combat him and defeat him. We pray for this reality swiftly, in our times. Amen.

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