

**Parshat Vayera
Promises Fulfilled?**
Simon Wolf

Avraham is informed three times that his wife Sara will bear him a child. Once at the end of last week's Parsha, immediately after God renames Avraham and enters into the covenant of the circumcision with him, He also changes Sara's name and conveys to Avraham that he and Sara will have a son. In the beginning of this week's Parsha, both the visiting Mal'achim and God advise Avraham that Sara will give birth to a son.

When contrasted with the story of Elisha and the Shunamit woman found in the HafTorah, it highlights the complexity and inconsistency of the same information that is being conveyed to Avraham. In the case of the Shunamit woman, it is clear that Elisha is conveying to her the information. In the first verse, he informs her that

she will be blessed with a child "at this time, when you are still alive (למועד הַזֶּה כְּעֵת חַיָּה)" and in subsequent Pasuk, the reader is informed that "at that time, when she was still alive (למועד הַזֶּה כְּעֵת חַיָּה)" she gives birth to a son as Elisha had communicated.

On the other hand, in each of the three times that Avraham receives the information it is conveyed by a "different" subject (אַלְקִים, מַלְאכִים, יְקֹנֵק). In addition, each time the good news is delivered, the text utilizes slightly different language, none of which match the wording found by Elisha. Lastly, the fulfillment of the promise does not employ the same wording that is found in the pledge made to Avraham that Sara will bear him a child. These inconsistencies, as well as comparing it to the story of the Isha HaShunamit, give rise to a plethora of Midrashim and innovative interpretations of the commentators in an attempt to resolve these discrepancies.

מלכים ב ד, ז	מלכים ב ד, טז	בראשית כא, א-ב	בראשית יח, ג-ד	בראשית יח, ט-י	בראשית יז, יט-כא
וַתֵּהָרֵם אִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן	וַיֹּאמֶר לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה כְּעֵת חַיָּה אֵת חֲבֻקַת בֵּן	וַיִּקְוֶן פְּקֹד אֶת שָׂרָה כְּאִשֶּׁר אָמַר וַיַּעַשׂ יְקֹנֵק לְשָׂרָה כְּאִשֶּׁר דִּבֶּר: וַתֵּהָרֵם וַתֵּלֶד שָׂרָה לְאַבְרָהָם בֵּן לְזִקְנָיו לְמוֹעֵד	וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹנֵק... הַיִּפְלֵא מִיְקֹנֵק דָּבָר	וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו... וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וְהִנֵּה בֵן לְשָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ	וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים... וְאֵת בְּרִיתִי אֲקִים אֵת יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד לְךָ שָׂרָה לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה בְּשָׁנָה הָאַחֲרֹת:
אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֵלַיהָ אֱלֹשֶׁע:	וַתֹּאמֶר אֵל אֲדֹנָי אִישׁ הָאֱלֹקִים אֵל תַּכְזִּב בְּשִׁפְחָתְךָ:	אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֵתוֹ אֱלֹקִים:	לְמוֹעֵד אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וּלְשָׂרָה בֵּן:	וְשָׂרָה שָׁמְעַת פֶּתַח הָהָאֵל וְהוּא אַחֲרָיו:	

The first time that God informs Avraham he will have a child together with Sara, God (אַלְקִים) tells him that their offspring will be born "this time, in another year." In the other two instances, the Mal'ach and God use the term Ka'et Chaya (כְּעֵת חַיָּה) instead of BaShana Acheret (בְּשָׁנָה הָאַחֲרֹת). The Pesikta resolves this issue by equating Ka'et Chaya (כְּעֵת חַיָּה) to BaShana Acheret (בְּשָׁנָה הָאַחֲרֹת) and claiming that they are synonymous and Rashi makes a similar claim that Ka'et Chaya (כְּעֵת חַיָּה) means at this time next year. The Rashbam, on the other hand, claims that it is a reference to the usage of the word Chaya (חַיָּה) in the Gemara to mean a birthing woman. Therefore, Ka'et Chaya (כְּעֵת חַיָּה) means at the time you give birth. The Rosh rejects the view of the Rashbam because if he was correct the Ka'et (כְּעֵת) would have a Shva (:) under the Kaf and not a Kamatz. He and the Radak (with support from Targum Onkelos) both explain Ka'et Chaya (כְּעֵת

חַיָּה) to mean "at this time when Sara is living" she will have a child. The Ktav V'HaKabala enhances that explanation by adding that living can also be a description of the person's state of mind. Therefore, in this instance, it means when Sara is alive both physically and emotionally since it will be a time of great happiness for her. The Ibn Ezra combines the Radak and Rashi to explain "at this time next year, when Sara is living."

One of the main issues raised by the commentaries is when does the Malach ever return to Avraham with regards to the birth of Yitzchak? Rashi resolves the issue by stipulating that the angel was only speaking to Avraham in his capacity as an agent of God and therefore the commitment was for God to return and not the

Mal'ach.¹ The Ibn Ezra and the Radak are so bothered by this issue that they both claim that the Malach returned to Avraham even though it is not explicitly found in the text.² The Ramban quotes Rashi's solution, but then points out that Rashi trades one problem for another. He combines the statement of the Mal'ach with God's communication with Avraham because they utilize the same language and therefore the Mal'ach must have been acting as a proxy for God. Rashi's suggestion that God returned is equally problematic because neither the Mal'ach nor God returns to Avraham at the birth of Yitzchak. The Ramban, on behalf of Rashi, tries to suggest that maybe the Pasuk that mentions God taking note of Sara prior to her conceiving (**וַיִּקְנֶה פְקֹד אֶת שָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר וַיַּעַשׂ יְקֹנֶה לְשָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר**) (**דְּבַר**) represents God's promised return. He also quotes the Ibn Ezra, but then makes his own suggestion that the meaning of Shov Ashuv Elecha (**שׁוּב אָשׁוּב אֵלַיךְ**) is not that "I will return to you," but rather that "I will bring back to you a time like this where you are alive and you will have a child..."³ The Rabbeinu Bachaye makes a similar suggestion that the Shov Ashuv Elecha (**שׁוּב אָשׁוּב אֵלַיךְ**) does not mean the he personally will return, but that his "word" will come back, meaning that his prediction would come to fruition.⁴

Given the simple reading of the text, the difficulty that remains with all these explanations is that the Malach, and maybe even God (**וַיִּקְנֶה**), never explicitly return to fulfill their stated commitment (**שׁוּב אָשׁוּב אֵלַיךְ, אָשׁוּב אֵלַיךְ**). This issue is only accentuated by the fact that the Midrash contrasts this pledge with Elisha, who could not make such a commitment because he is a human being with an uncertain life span. Whereas, the Malach, who is eternal, could make such an assurance. In addition, if all the instances are conveying the same information, why then does the Torah communicate those facts in a slightly different format each time. Lastly, while it is common for the Torah to switch between names of God (**אֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְנֶה**) and it is not unusual for it to relate a similar story, incident, promise or command with each of those names, there is usually a

significance to those nuances.⁵ The same would be true here that Avraham is promised a son through Sara with both names. In this instance, however, no one seems to address or highlight the significance of that change as well as the textual differences that accompany the two names of God. Is it possible that there are actually two different promises here that could account for all the differences and could resolve some of the questions raised above?

It is important to note that in the verse that tells of God's fulfillment of His commitment to Avraham that Sara would bear a son to him, the Pasuk ends with "as God had said to him (**אֲנִי אֶשְׁרֶה דְבַר אֶתְּוֹ אֱלֹהִים**)." If one reads that very literally then the Torah is saying that the birth of Yitzchak was only the realization of the promise God made in Parshat Lech-Lecha with the name of Elokim (**אֱלֹהִים**). As has been noted in the past, the name of God, Elokim (**אֱלֹהִים**), represents God's interaction with the world through nature. That might help explain why God informs Avraham that Sara will give birth on a very precise timetable "at this time, in another year" using a description that follows the natural calendar. There is no mention or need for God to return because the mere fact that Yitzchak is born on that particular date would be an obvious indication of the consummation of God's pledge to Avraham.

It, on the other hand, was not a realization of the Mal'ach's promise to return and ensure that Sara had a son from Avraham. Moreover, the absence of the returning Mal'ach, while still presenting a problem as to his whereabouts, only serves to corroborate this understanding. This is also reinforced by the fact that the Mal'ach uses completely different language to inform Avraham (and Sara) about the impending birth of their child. He, firstly, commits to return and ensure that Sara has a child from Avraham (**שׁוּב אָשׁוּב אֵלַיךְ**) which implies the need for intercession in order for this promise to be fulfilled. It is not just simply a matter of time or natural course. Secondly, the use of an amorphous time designation, Ka'et Chaya (**כַּעֲתַי חַיָּה**), could be synonymous with BaShana

¹ שׁוּב אָשׁוּב - לא בשרו המלאך שישׁוּב אליו אלא בשליחותו של מקום אמר לו, כמו (טז י) ויאמר לה מלאך ה' הרבה ארבה, והוא אין בידו להרבות, אלא בשליחותו של מקום, אף כאן בשליחותו של מקום אמר לו כן... (רש"י בראשית יח, י')

² למועד אשר דבר אתו המלאך, ששאל איה שרה אשתך (ברא' יח, ט), גם שב אליו, כי כן אמר לו, ולא הוסיף השם על שם יצחק ולא החליפו, כי הוא צוה לקרוא כן: (אבן עזרא בראשית כא, ב) \ \ ...התשובה שאשוב אליך שתהיה לזמן הזה בשנה האחרת כמו שאמר לו הקל למועד הזה בשנה האחרת ולא נכתב בתורה תשובת המלאך אל אברהם לזמן שנולד יצחק: (רד"ק בראשית יח, י')

³ שׁוּב אָשׁוּב אֵלַיךְ כעת חיה - לשון רש"י לא בשרו המלאך שישׁוּב אליו, אלא בשליחותו של מקום אמר לו, כמו ויאמר לה מלאך ה' הרבה ארבה את זרעך (לעיל טז, י), והוא אין בידו להרבות, אלא בשליחותו של מקום אמר לו, אף כאן בשליחותו של מקום אמר לו. והוצרך הרב לאמר כן, מפני שהקב"ה אמר לו בכאן למועד אשוב אליך. ובין במלאך או בהקב"ה לא מציון ששב אליו למועדו. אולי נכלל בלשון וה' פקד את שרה כאשר אמר ויעש ה' לשרה כאשר דבר (להלן כא א). ורבי אברהם אמר (להלן כא ב) כי "ויאמר

ה' אל אברהם" הוא דבר המלאך בשם שולחו, ושׁב אליו למועד אשר דבר אתו, ואם לא נכתב: והנכון בעיני שהוא מן "לתשובת השנה" (ש"ב יא א). יאמר, כי שׁוּב אָשׁוּב אֵלַיךְ כעת הזאת שתהיו בו חיים ויהיה בן לשרה אשתך. וזהו כאשר נאמר לאברהם (לעיל יז כא) למועד הזה בשנה האחרת, ויהיה "אשוב" כמו ושׁב ה' אליהך, ושׁב וקבצך (דברים ל ג): (רמב"ן בראשית יח, י')

⁴ ויאמר שׁוּב אָשׁוּב אֵלַיךְ. זה המלאך שבא לבשר את שרה. ואמר כן ונתקיים דבורו בבשרות הבן לשנה הבאה, אבל לא מציון שחזר, כמו שאמר לו שתי פעמים: שׁוּב אָשׁוּב, למועד אשוב אליך. ואולי לא היתה כוונת המלאך שישׁוּב אליו הוא בעצמו, אלא שיתקיים ויבא דבורו "כעת חיה", וכנה הכתוב קיום דבורו של מלאך לשׁוּב, כי מה יעשה לו שׁוּב אם לא יתבשר בבן. או נאמר שהוא מלשון: (ישעיה ל, טו) "בשׁוּבָה ונחת", שענינו הנחת הרוח, כלומר אינך את דעתך וארצם עליך בבן לשנה הבאה, כי מלאך ממונה על הרחמים היה: (רבינו בחיי בראשית יח, י')

⁵ לדוגמה עיין בראשית א, א-ב, ג, מול בראשית ב, ד-ג, כד וגם בראשית ו, א-ח מול בראשית ו, ט, כ-ב

Acheret (בְּשָׁנָה הָאַחֶרֶת) or it could equally indicate some other time. That means that just because Sara gives birth in a year's time, it is not perforce a fulfillment of the Mal'ach's commitment without the presence of the Mal'ach. The language used by the angel can be contrasted with Elisha's case where he cannot make a commitment to return nor can he be resolute about an exact time. As a human being, both of those issues are out of his control and in the hands of God. The only thing he can do is beseech God to fulfill his will which he has a stellar track record of accomplishing. He therefore commits that his word would come to fruition some time in the future (כְּעֵת חַיָּה) where he would not necessarily be present (לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה). Sure enough, the Navi relates that the Isha HaShunamit conceives and gives birth at the appointed time in the future just as Elisha had predicted.

Interestingly, the third time God (יְקֹוֹק) conveys this information to Avraham, He utilizes language that is gleaned from the previous two instances. It captures the Mo'ed (לְמוֹעֵד) that is found in Parshat Lech-Lecha as well as the commitment to return at some unspecified time (אֲשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה) similar to the language employed by the Mal'ach. This could either point to a third and distinct promise or it could mean that God (יְקֹוֹק) would be a party to the other two in a way that manifests that particular name of God. Once again here, it has been noted that this name of God (יְקֹוֹק) represents His supernatural intervention in the natural world or the engaging of His attribute of mercy (רחמים) which by definition defies the laws of nature because it interferes with the inherent principle of nature that every action has an immediate and necessary reaction or repercussion that follows a fixed set of laws. In the verse that immediately precedes the Torah's relating that Sara give birth, it says that this "natural" birth that took place "as God had said to him (אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים)" was the result of God's taking note of Sara (יְקֹוֹק פָּקַד אֶת שָׂרָה כְּאִשֶּׁר אָמַר) and interceding to ensure that she was capable of giving birth to a child to Avraham. God's (יְקֹוֹק) intervention was a prerequisite to the fulfillment of God's (אֱלֹהִים) promise to set in motion the natural course of Sara bearing a child to Avraham. This is evidenced by the fact that when Mal'ach informs Avraham and Sara that they will have a child and Sara responds by laughing, the Torah narrates that Sara's reaction was not outrageous because she has already reached menopause (חֲדַל לְהִיוֹת)

(לְשָׂרָה אִרְח כְּנָשִׁים). Nevertheless, God retorts, "Is there anything beyond God's capacity (הִיפֹלֵא) (מִיִּקְוֶה דְבַר יְקֹוֹק)?" God (יְקֹוֹק) can alter nature. The birth of Yitzchak was a fulfillment of God's promise to Avraham in Lech Lecha (לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה... יֵאמֵר אֱלֹהִים... לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה) and a partial realization of God's commitment to Avraham in Vayera (יְקֹוֹק... הִיפֹלֵא מִיִּקְוֶה דְבַר לְמוֹעֵד - יְקֹוֹק) (פָּקַד אֶת שָׂרָה כְּאִשֶּׁר אָמַר וַיַּעַשׂ יְקֹוֹק לְשָׂרָה כְּאִשֶּׁר דִּבֶּר).

The conundrum that still remains is where does the Mal'ach fulfill his word to return and ensure that Sara has a child and where is the remainder of God's pledge which mirrors the Mal'ach's commitment accomplished? While the answer is somewhat surprising because it is not what one expects, it is not very far-fetched since there is only one Mal'ach that interacts with Avraham and Yitzchak after this promise is made to Avraham. That is found many years later at the tail end of this week's Parsha.⁶ God commands Avraham to sacrifice his one and only beloved son Yitzchak to God. Avraham unquestioningly complies with God's request. After three days of journey, upon reaching the place dedicated by God for this sacrifice, Avraham and Yitzchak ascend the mountain. Avraham builds an altar, lays out the logs on the Mizbeach, binds his son Yitzchak and places him upon the wood that is arranged upon the altar. Avraham then grabs the knife and in the instant before he slaughters his son Yitzchak, a heavenly voice rings out. A Mal'ach of God (מִלְאַךְ) calls out, "Avraham, Avraham" and Avraham compliantly responds, "Hineni (I am here)." The Mal'ach then continues by instructing Avraham "not to touch the lad, do not injure him in any way... (יֵאמֵר אֵל תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל הַנֶּעַר וְאַל תַּעַשׂ לוֹ) (מְאוּמָה...)." At that moment, Yitzchak is spared from death and "returned" to Avraham and Sara. The Mal'ach, not just any Mal'ach, but a Mal'ach of God (מִלְאַךְ יְקֹוֹק), kept his promise to return and ensure that Avraham had a child from Sara. In the beginning of the Parsha, the Mal'ach informs Avraham, Ka'et Chaya (כְּעֵת חַיָּה), some time in the future, Shov Ashuv Elecha (שׁוּב אֲשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ), I will return to you and (וְהִנֵּה בֶן לְשָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ) and behold Sara your wife will have a child. It was not a given, it required the Mal'ach's reappearance and intervention in order for Sara to have a child and that was only facilitated by the name of God that represents the attribute of mercy (יְקֹוֹק) that could save Yitzchak from his destiny (וְהֵאֱלִימֵם נֶטָה אֶת-) (אֲבָרְהָם) of being dedicated and sacrificed to God.⁷

⁶ עיין או"ח בראשית יח, י \ \ פני דוד (חיד"א) בראשית יח, י \ \ של"ה פרשת וירא תורה אור ובהגה"ה שם

⁷ עיין רמב"ן ויקרא א, ט

In the case of Elisha, it would seem that the Ka'et Chaya (כַּעַת חַיָּה), as opposed to its usage with regards to Yitchak's birth, is synonymous with and defined by the LaMo'ed HaZeh (לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה) that appears both in Elisha's prediction of and the actual birth of a son to the Isha HaShunamit. There too, it turns out that the Ka'Et Chaya (כַּעַת חַיָּה) maybe has another or an alternate meaning as well. That is because while Elisha is not present for the birth of the child, he is compelled to come back and reclaim the child at a later date. After the child passes away, He is forced to make good on his prediction that the Isha HaShunamit will have a child by bringing the child back to life. And although Elisha is known throughout the story as Ish HaElokim (אִישׁ הָאֱלֹקִים), at the moment he needs to revive the child, he turns to God to pray (וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל יְקֻוֹק) and invokes God's attribute of mercy in order to spare the child. Elisha falls prey to the same short sightedness that sometimes blinds us to the way of God. Similar to the way we thought that the promise of God and the Mal'ach was fulfilled with the birth of Yitchak, Elisha sees the birth of the child to the Isha Shunamit as a realization of his commitment that she would have a child. The mistake in both instances is that that in essence makes a miraculous event seem mundane and relegates God's intervention to be indiscernible from nature. Therefore, in both cases God has a longer term plan that will make it clear that these were no ordinary events. In the case of Avraham, it is the return of the Mal'ach to save Yitzchak after thinking that God's promise had long been kept and with regards to Elisha, God requires him to return personally to revive the child and demonstrate how miraculous it was that God granted the Isha HaShunamit a child at Elisha's behest.

Our natural proclivity is to associate the different promises made to Avraham about Yitzchak's birth

and frame them all as being accomplished in a similar span of time. That is because as mortal human beings we see a year as being a long time and a couple of years as being an eternity. We would not necessarily associate the appearance of the angel at the end of the Parsha with the promise to return found in the beginning of Vayera. It is outside our natural perspective and frame of time, but as the Navi Yishayahu points out, God works differently. This week's Parsha is a stark reminder that we are but small cogs in God's greater plan and much of our misperceptions and lack of clarity about God's ways stem from our inability to comprehend and understand the bigger picture – to have the eternal perspective that God has. "For My plans are not your plans, nor are My ways your ways declares God; but as the heavens are high above the earth, so too are My ways high above your ways, and My plans above your plans (כִּי לֹא מַחְשְׁבוֹתַי מַחְשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם וְלֹא דַרְכֵיכֶם דַּרְכֵי נְאֻם יְקֻוֹק: כִּי גְבוּהוּ שָׁמַיִם מֵאָרֶץ כֵּן גְבוּהוּ דַרְכֵי מַדְרָגְתְּכֶם וּמַחְשְׁבוֹתַי מִמַּחְשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם)." ⁸

We live in a world where the two names of God seemingly operate independently and therefore our being enmeshed in the natural world (אֱלֹקִים) blurs our ability to discern, grasp and realize God's hand in directing the world and our lives (יְקֻוֹק). Our job is to hasten and pray for the day when God's names will be one (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִהְיֶה יְקֻוֹק) (אֶחָד וְשֵׁמוֹ אֶחָד).⁹ A time when we will have the capacity to view the world and our lives through a prism in which we will be able to naturally and equally see the birth of Yitzchak and his salvation from the Akeida as being the fulfillment of God's commitment to Avraham that he will have a child together with Sara, who will inherit his mantle.

Shabbat Shalom