



# Shabbat Shalom

## Vayerah

Genesis 18:1 – 22:24

God wanted one people to inherit His covenant with Abraham, one people to inherit the Land of Israel, one people to be His people, for eternity.

This week's portion opens with God's appearance to Abraham and the appearance of the three angels. There follows a series of conversations and activities that culminate in the announcement to Abraham that Sarah will bear a son and that his name will be Isaac. It is interesting to note, however, that everything about the announcement of this birth and the birth itself is miraculous and unusual.

Abraham is actually first told of the birth of a son to Sarah in the previous chapter. Just as Abraham is entering into a very special covenant with God, the covenant of circumcision that the Children of Israel will continue for eternity, God promises Abraham that Sarah will have a son, and that God will bless her with nations and kings descending from her (Genesis 17:16). Abraham has trouble believing this promise, as he would be 100 and Sarah 90 when she would give birth. In fact, Abraham argues with God and tells him that Ishmael is his son and he is satisfied with him as an heir. God replies:

*No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac.  
I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. (Genesis 17:19)*

And while God promises Abraham that Ishmael will also be a great nation, He makes it very clear that it is Isaac and only Isaac who will inherit God's covenant with Abraham and the special relationship that began in Genesis 12.

In the following chapter, the three angels repeat the promise, but this time Sarah hears it for the first time, overhearing the conversation between Abraham and the angels while she is preparing the meal in the tent. Like Abraham, she has trouble believing it and even laughs. Scripture, once again, makes sure to mention that both Abraham and Sarah are very old and that Sarah no longer has her menses, so that the very idea of her giving birth seems ludicrous. Isaac's name is a derivative of laughter in Hebrew and his name is a reminder of the laughter and disbelief that accompanied both Sarah and Abraham's initial reaction to the idea of his birth.

In fact, as we know, one year later, Isaac is born to Sarah and Abraham and he, indeed, becomes Abraham's one and only heir. We don't know that much about his life, but one incident, of course, stands out – the binding of Isaac. It seems that Isaac's life, including the foretelling of his birth, is a series of unusual occurrences that indicate God's special appointment of him as Abraham's heir. He is born to elderly parents, when it would have been so much simpler for him to have been born years earlier. His birth is announced twice, first by God Himself to Abraham and later by the three angels. And Sarah finds out about the upcoming birth by eavesdropping – not even a direct announcement. The binding of Isaac, of course, is a truly mysterious event, as God commands Abraham to perform the unimaginable only to cancel his order at the last minute. The actual import of that event is beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is one more unusual God directed event in the life of Isaac.

I believe that Isaac's birth was meant to be unusual, to draw attention, to invite questions and to imply the miraculous. Isaac is the appointed heir of Abraham, the second of three forefathers of the Jewish people. In the natural order of circumstances, Ishmael would have indeed inherited the covenant, for he was the first-born son. But God wanted otherwise. He wanted to appoint the heir and have that heir arrive in this world under miraculous circumstances so that no one would question that this heir was not naturally appointed, but God appointed. And God did not want the inheritance split between two sons – only Isaac would inherit the promise.

God wanted one people to inherit His covenant with Abraham, one people to inherit the Land of Israel, one people to be His people, for eternity. And I thank God, daily, that I have been born to this people. It is a profound responsibility, but it is an honor.