

Yad Avraham Institute
WEEKLY TORAH COMMENTARY SERIES

Parshas Vayeira

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Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*

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Parshas Vayeira

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Dean

1. The Joy Component of Every Mitzvah

The Torah tells us that G'd had sent three angels to visit Avraham in the guise of wayfarers. They had inquired about his wife, Sarah, saying, **"Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "Behold! - in the tent."** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that a guest should ask the host about the well-being of his wife and the wife about her husband. The value of inquiring about the welfare of Sarah was so that Avraham should respond "Behold – (she is) in the tent." This was for him to recognize her special quality of modesty. By realizing her special level of modesty, Avraham's feelings towards her would become more intensified.

The mission of the angel was to inform Avraham and Sarah that, although she was 89 years old, she would conceive and give birth to a son. If G'd was going to perform a miracle - allowing Sarah to conceive - why was it necessary for the angel to inform them prior conception? It would have been obvious to both of them that she had conceived when they realize that she is pregnant. What was the value of communicating this information prior to conception?

Sforno explains, "The intent of informing Sarah of her imminent pregnancy before the child was conceived was to cause her to rejoice and give thanks to G'd for the upcoming miracle. As a result of Sarah being in a more joyous and thankful state, her pregnancy (with Yitzchak our Patriarch) would be more perfect/complete." Since Sarah was to be the mother of the future Patriarch of the Jewish people, this joyous state was essential to his spiritual potential.

When one performs a mitzvah it must be predicated with a blessing. The Gemara tells us that the blessing must be recited immediately prior to the performance of the mitzvah. Ramchal writes in his work *Derech Hashem* that the reason Chazal legislated the recitation of a blessing before the performance of a mitzvah is to enable one to do it in a more perfect manner. In addition, the mitzvah that is performed after a blessing

is recited will have a greater impact on one's spirituality and existence. This is because the recitation of the blessing is meant to give one a sense of value and good fortune that G'd has bestowed His mitzvos upon him.

It is interesting to note that there are many allusions throughout the Torah regarding how one must feel when engaging in Torah study. For example, the Torah states (in the Shema), **"You shall love Hashem, your G'd with all your heart, with all your soul...as I command you today..."** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that although the Torah was given at Sinai and not "today," one must approach his Torah study with the same vibrancy and freshness as if it were given today. It is essential that one experiences this level of enthusiasm when engaging in Torah study and mitzvos because it will have a greater impact upon his own spirituality and all of existence.

The Torah tells us in the portion of the *"Tochacha – curses"* that the Jewish people will experience tragedy, not because they did not fulfill the Torah; but rather because they did not serve G'd with goodness of heart and joy. They may have performed the mitzvos meticulously, but because the sense of privilege was lacking, the mitzvos were thus deficient. If one is given a great opportunity and does not appreciate the privilege – despite its preciousness – it is then a claim against him.

There are two blessings that one recites prior to the study of the Torah. The text of the second blessing reads, "Blessed are you Hashem, our G'd...Who selected us from all the nations and gave us His Torah..." The Talmud tells us that the second blessing is the one that is primary. The reason for this is that this blessing causes one to have a sense of being privileged and special – that G'd the Omnipotent Being has chosen him to be the recipient of His most precious commodity. As the Mishna tells us, Torah study is a mitzvah that is the equivalent of all the mitzvos combined. Thus, one must experience the joy and sense of privilege when engaged in Torah study in order to have the maximum effect.

2. *The Power which Lies in Tefillah*

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos cites two opinions as to why there are three prayer services every day – Shachris (morning service), Mincha (afternoon service), and Arvis (evening service). One opinion states that the basis for the three services is linked to the holy Patriarchs. They had enacted the three services – “Avraham established Shachris, Yitzchak, Mincha, and Yaakov, Arvis.” Thus, the three services correspond to the Patriarchs who had established them. Another position cited by the Gemara is that the three prayer services correspond to communal daily offerings (brought in the Temple). Shachris corresponds to the “Tamid shel Shachar – morning communal offering,” Mincha corresponds to the “Tamid shel bein ha’arbaayim – closing afternoon communal offering,” and Arvis corresponds to the, “Eivarim and pedarim – the burning of the limbs and the fats during the nighttime period.” The Gemara concludes that in fact there is no argument. The basis for the services is, the communal offerings brought in the Temple which are linked to the Patriarchs. Since the Patriarchs understood the importance of prayer, each had established a service at a particular time of the day. Thus, we as their descendants, pray three times a day.

However, we see from Chazal that there is a more profound understanding of the relationship between the holy Patriarchs and the prayer service. The reason we pray three times a day is more than simply because the Patriarchs had prayed during these three time periods.

The first blessing of the Amidah reads, “... (G’d) Who recalls the kindness of the Patriarchs...” Meaning, the reason we exist and are able to succeed (despite our spiritual shortcomings) is because G’d continuously recalls the merits of the Patriarchs. We are continuously drawing upon the spiritual accomplishments of the Patriarchs. Thus, the Patriarchs are essential to our being able to beseech G’d to fulfill our many needs and requests.

The Midrash states, “The reason the Men of the Great Assembly structured the Amidah to contain 18 blessings was to correspond to the 18 times the Patriarchs are mentioned as a group in the Torah.” The reason we pray three times a day is not only because the Patriarchs did so, but even more importantly – when we pray these services they reflect our linkage to our holy antecedents. The Men of the Great Assembly understood that the worthiness of the Jewish people is solely based on the merit of the Patriarchs. Therefore, in order to maximize and to be seen by G’d as deserving, it is crucial that every

aspect of the format of prayer should reflect and identify with the Patriarchs.

Every time one recites the Amidah, one presents himself as a descendant of the Patriarchs. It is only because of their accomplishments that we have any worthiness to approach G’d. The Mishna tells us that when one recites the Amidah, one must assume a supplicating posture. One cannot feel deserving and thus demand that G’d respond to his request. The Amidah itself is a testament that the only reason we are able to approach G’d is not because of our own accomplishments but rather that of the Patriarchs. Therefore, the structure of the Amidah itself is an expression of humility. The recitation of the Amidah is predicated with the words of King David, “My L’rd, open my lips that my mouth may declare Your praise.” This is again is an acknowledgment that we do not even have the ability to utter G’d’s praises without His assistance. Thus, when the Men of the Great Assembly authored the text of the Amidah, they structured it in a manner that clearly communicates that we only stand before G’d because of the merits of the Patriarchs.

3. *The Mindset of the Jew During the Amidah*

The Midrash tells us that the basis for the 18 blessings in the Amidah (silent prayer) is to correspond to the 18 times that the Patriarchs (Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov) are mentioned as a group in the Torah. The Midrash cites another opinion, “Reb Yochanan says, ‘It is to correspond to the 18 times that Moshe is mentioned regarding the building of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). The Torah mentions Moshe in the context - **‘Moshe did all that G’d had commanded him’.**” Since the Torah mentions Moshe 18 times regarding his following G’d’s Dictate concerning the Mishkan, the Men of the Great Assembly chose the number 18 to be the number of blessings in the Amidah. What is the correlation between Moshe following the Dictate of G’d regarding the Mishkan and the numerical structure of the Amidah?

The Mishna states, “The world stands on three principles – Torah, Avodah (offerings), and Acts of Loving Kindness.” The Commentators on the Mishna explain that although we do not presently have a Temple in which to bring offerings, tefillah (prayer) is the equivalent of that principle. The Amidah/prayer is referred to as “*Avodah sh’be’leiv* – service of the heart.” The prayer service is classified as “Avodah.” It is an acknowledgement of G’d as the Omnipotent Being Who provides and maintains every aspect of existence. Thus, by beseeching G’d for even the most elementary functions

such as intellect, good health, etc., one acknowledges his total dependence on G'd. It is a negation of oneself in His Presence. The Jew through tefillah accomplishes the equivalent result that is brought about through the offerings of the Mishkan.

The Torah states regarding the mitzvah of building the Mishkan, **“Build for Me a Mishkan so that I may dwell in your midst.”** Chazal explain that the Torah specifically states, “in your midst” and not in “His midst.” Meaning, the Mishkan was the medium through which G'd dwelt among the Jewish people. Chazal tell us that the Jew himself is classified as an *“olam katan – a small world.”* The Jew embodies every aspect of existence within himself. Similarly, the Mishkan was a microcosm of existence. Therefore, the Jew, the Mishkan, and all existence are interrelated. This is signified by the 18 blessings of the Amidah, which correspond to the 18 times Moshe is mentioned regarding the building of the Mishkan.

The verse, **‘Moshe did all that G'd had commanded him’** implies that Moshe carried out the Will of G'd meticulously and without the slightest deviation. Moshe did exactly what G'd had commanded him to do because he negated and subordinated himself to G'd's Will. If one assumes a similar mindset as Moshe when standing before G'd (when reciting the Amidah), then one's tefillah has greater value because it is linked to Moshe's unequalled dedication to G'd. G'd's response will be greater to the tefillah of one who assumes a subjugated posture.

The Mishna offers another opinion regarding the significance of the 18 blessings of the Amidah, “Reb Simaee says, ‘The 18 blessings correspond to the 18 vertebrae of the spinal column. Because when one recites the Amidah one must bow at the waist until the 18 vertebrae of the spine separate.’” Bowing is an expression of subjugation and subordination. The fact that one must bow to the point of separating the bones in the spinal column is an indication to what degree one must humble himself before G'd. The Midrash continues regarding the significance and symbolism of bowing to this degree, “As the verse in Psalms states, ‘All my bones will say ‘Who is as great as You.’” The Remah in his glosses on the Code of Jewish Law explains that basis for swaying during tefillah is the verse from Psalms cited by the Midrash. When one sways, it is an expression that every fiber of his being is totally dedicated and involved in expressing his reverence for G'd. When one bows at the waist to the point of separating the vertebrae of his spinal column, it is a demonstration of his subordination to G'd.

If one assumes a humble posture when he stands before G'd in the Amidah and dedicates himself totally to His service, then he will be worthy to be the recipient of G'd's blessing. It is because he had assumed a semblance of Moshe's humility in building the Mishkan as G'd commanded him – without deviating an iota from His Will.

4. Why was Sodom Destroyed?

The Torah tells us that before G'd destroyed Sodom He said, **“Shall I conceal from Avraham what I do, now that Avraham is surely to become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him?...”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain, “G'd had said, ‘It is not appropriate that I should destroy Sodom without informing Avraham. I have given him this land with its five metropolises. He has been declared the ‘father of all nations.’ Should I destroy the children without informing the father? Therefore I will inform him.” What was the value of G'd informing Avraham of His actions prior to destroying Sodom?

One could say that G'd told Avraham of the impending destruction of Sodom because there was a possibility that he could intercede and annul the decree. However, in actuality, there was no chance that Avraham could have prevented the destruction of Sodom. As we see, Avraham had pleaded on their behalf and did not succeed. What then was the importance of informing Avraham? One may say G'd wanted to give Avraham the opportunity to pray on their behalf, although his intervention would be futile, because He did not want Avraham to feel guilty that he did not do everything within his power to save Sodom. This could not be so.

The Gemara in Tractate Nidarim cites an opinion that states that the reason the Jewish people were exiled to Egypt was because Avraham had not taken the opportunity to convert the people of Sodom to monotheism. After Avraham was victorious over the four mighty kings, the king of Sodom, who was initially taken captive with his people, had said to Avraham, **“Give me the people and take the possessions for yourself.”** Avraham the victor should have said to the king of Sodom, “Because you are the equivalent of my spoils, I will take the people.” The Gemara states, “If Avraham had taken the members of the Sodom community under his jurisdiction he would have brought them under the wings of the Divine Presence (converted them to monotheism).” Avraham passed on this opportunity. He had said to the king of Sodom, **“I will not benefit from you as much as a thread or a bootstrap...”**

5. *The Precariousness of Environment* (from Lech Lecha)

The consequence of Avraham not taking the people of Sodom, was that they had not only remained pagans, but they had descended to the depths of evil -as the verse states, **“The men of Sodom were evil and sinned against G’d defiantly....”** There was no other choice but to destroy this evil entity. It was because Avraham’s inaction, regarding Sodom, that the Jewish people were exiled to Egypt. Avraham had lived his entire life for Kiddush Hashem (Sanctification of G’d’s Name) in order to purge the world of paganism. However because of Avraham’s decision not to take the people of Sodom under his influence, the most extreme level of Chilul Hashem (Desecration of G’d’s Name) was brought about. This was the claim against Avraham.

Avraham was pained that because of his inaction the people of Sodom would never be spiritually rehabilitated. If through his supplication he would be able to bring about a reprieve, which would allow them to live, there was a chance they would do teshuvah (repent). Thus, Avraham would be released from this very serious claim. G’d therefore gave Avraham the opportunity to pray on their behalf so that they should live in order to do teshuvah.

Despite the fact that ultimately Avraham’s supplications were in vain regarding the people of Sodom, the fact that he took the initiative to the point of jeopardizing his own relationship with G’d, caused a level of correction within himself. When Avraham had spoken to G’d in defense of Sodom, he had spoken in a very direct manner which could have been interpreted as a disrespect. Thus, informing Avraham of the imminent destruction of Sodom was for the benefit of Avraham - to secure and advance his own spirituality.

There are certain sins when transgressed that cannot be corrected. For example, if one does not recite the Shema in its proper time, that particular Positive Commandment that was violated cannot be compensated for. However, G’d provides one with many opportunities to correct the consequences of those failings. The only way one is able to be sufficiently sensitive to notice the opportunity, when it presents itself, is if he is conscious of the need for correction. This consciousness can only be maintained if one is continuously pained by his initial failing. From the moment that Avraham did not take advantage of converting the community of Sodom to monotheism, he was greatly pained – firstly for missing the opportunity to convert them and secondly for allowing the Desecration of G’d’s Name to intensify to a point of no return.

The Torah states, **“Avraham consorted with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress (Sarah) was lowered in her esteem.”** After Hagar had conceived, she did not show proper respect to her mistress, Sarah. Chazal explain that since Hagar conceived immediately, she believed that if Sarah was truly righteous, then why did G’d withhold from her a child? Her conclusion was that Sarah must not be as devout and righteous as she appeared to be. Therefore, although Sarah was her mistress, Hagar did not treat her with proper respect.

The Torah continues, **“So Sarah said to Avraham, ‘The outrage against me is due to you! It was I who gave my maidservant into your bosom, and now that she sees that she has conceived, I became lowered in her esteem!’ ...Avraham said to Sarah ‘...Do to her as you see fit.’ And Sarah dealt harshly with her, so she fled from her (into the desert).”** An angel appeared to Hagar in the desert and said to her, **“Hagar, maidservant of Sarah...Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her domination.”** It is interesting to note that although Hagar saw herself as being more special than Sarah because she had conceived, the angel addressed her as “maidservant of Sarah.” She is not identified as the wife of Avraham, although she was given to him in that capacity. In addition the angel reveals to her that the son that she will conceive will be a **“perah adam – a wild man.”**

Malbim explains that in the Hebrew language the adjective always follows the noun. If the angel was communicating to Hagar that her son was going to be a person with a wild (uncontrolled nature), the term should have been “adam perah (man who is wild).” However from the syntax of the term “perah adam” the word “perah (wild)” is functioning as the noun and the word “adam (man)” is the adjective. From this, we can understand that the essence of Yishmael, the son of Hagar, was going to be no less than an animal with a semblance of a human being. He appears to have the characteristics and inclinations of an ordinary human being, however, the angel indicated to Hagar differently. After being identified as “the maidservant of Sarah” and being told that her son would be no less than an animal (in nature), Hagar could no longer pride herself on the ability of conception. She could not delude herself for a moment that her child, the son of Avraham, would be the future Patriarch of the Jewish people.

What was the basis for Sarah's outrage towards Avraham, regarding Hagar? Sarah in fact was the equivalent of a living angel. Her life was fully invested in her spirituality/serving G'd. Chazal tell us that her level of prophecy was greater than that of Avraham. Her outrage towards Avraham emanated from something that was beyond the jealousy and ego of an ordinary person. It was clear to Sarah that Hagar was a woman who did not possess a sufficient capacity or sensitivity to spirituality. If she did, then she would have behaved differently towards her mistress Sarah.

The reason Sarah had initially suggested that Avraham take her maidservant as a wife so that **“she would build through her.”** Sarah had believed that ultimately, she would merit conceiving and being the mother of the future Patriarch – it was only a matter of time. Sarah understood that since Hagar did not have sufficient sensitivity towards spirituality, she posed a threat and danger to the future Patriarch of the Jewish people. If Avraham did not reprimand Hagar, her lack of sensitivity would jeopardize the future of the Jewish people. Sarah was outraged at Avraham because he did not recognize Hagar's shortcoming and reprimand her. Ultimately, after Yitzchak was born, Sarah demanded that Avraham send away Yishmael and his mother. It was not enough to send away Yishmael who posed a threat to Yitzchak's spiritual development. In addition, Hagar, his mother, had to be removed from Yitzchak's developmental setting. Even the minutest level of negative influence would determine the future of the Jewish people.

The Torah tells us that if a male child of thirteen years steals a small amount of money from his parents and purchases wine and meat to consume, and then becomes a repeat offender, he is classified as the “rebellious child (*ben sorer umoreh*)” and he is put to death. The Mishna in Tractate Sanhedrin states regarding the incident of the “rebellious child,” “It never was and it will never be.” The Gemara cites Reb Yonasan who states, “I saw him (the rebellious child) and I sat on his grave.” Evidently, there was a case of the “rebellious child.” Rabbi Y.Y. Ruderman z'tl (Baltimore Rosh HaYeshiva) cites the Kovna Rav z'tl who explains that initially when the rebellious child steals from his parents to purchase the wine and meat, they do not regard his behavior as egregious with far reaching ramifications. Because of their conflict of interest, they dismiss it as immaturity. They are not concerned that this behavior will lead to anything that is consequential. Unfortunately, these parents only realize the seriousness of their child's behavior when it is too late - after he has been put to death and they can no longer make a difference.

One must establish and maintain a standard and an environment in the home that will ensure that one's family will have a sense of right and wrong. One cannot take anything for granted - that things will somehow resolve themselves for the best. One must take every precaution to safeguard and insulate the home from negative influences especially when the children are still under the influence of the parents.