

Parsha Vayeira

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1. *Making Mitzvos Count*

We read in the beginning of this week's Parsha that Avraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent waiting for guests in order to offer them hospitality. The Torah points out that he was waiting "in the heat of the day". Rashi sights Chazal explaining that Hashem made the day exceptionally hot by taking the sun out of its sheath in order that guests should not disturb Avraham. However, Hashem saw that Avraham was pained by the fact that there were no guests to host so he sent three angels in human form to fulfill Avraham's desire to provide hospitality.

The Gemara in Bava Metzia as well as the Midrash explain that every detail of the hospitality provided by Avraham was evaluated by Hashem. Every aspect of this act had a serious impact on the future of the Jewish people. For example, Avraham ran to greet his guests and invited them to sit in the shade of his tree. As a consequence of this action, the Jewish people merited the clouds of glory that protected us in the desert for forty years. In the merit of Avraham's act of offering bread to the angels, we received the *mun* (heavenly food) that sustained us in the desert. And in the merit of the meat being provided to the guests the Jews received the *sluv* (quail). The Jews also merited the *be'er shal Miriam* (well spring) as a direct result of Avraham's offer of water to wash the feet of the angels. All of these miracles were directly attributable to Avraham's acts of hospitality towards the three angels.

Two questions arise from this: Firstly, Avraham had a long history of providing hospitality to guests preceding this act, yet it is this particular incident that has far reaching implications. Why this incident and not others? Additionally, how could the Jewish people have merited the magnificent miracle of the clouds of glory in the desert that protected millions of people for over forty years from the simple act of Avraham's offering the shade of his tree to the guests? We find that the miracles resulting from all of Avraham's other actions also appear to be disproportionately great when compared to the value of his acts. One may simply answer this question by saying that we do not fathom the tremendous reward for our mitzvos. However, the answer actually goes much deeper than this.

Rashi explains that Avraham was "pained" that no guests were available for his hospitality. What was the source of the "pain?" Chesed for Avraham was the vehicle that he used to espouse the existence of Hashem. Paganism, to Avraham, was an ongoing *chilul Hashem*. While Avraham was preoccupied with guests he knew that he was reducing this *chilul Hashem*. When Avraham observed that there were no guests he believed that it was a lost opportunity since with every passing second another soul would remain detached from Hashem. Every lost moment meant that Avraham was not able to expose another person to monotheism. Chazal explain that all guests who participated in Avraham's hospitality converted to monotheism without fail!

When Avraham observed the three guests approaching he experienced a tremendous level of joy and enthusiasm stemming from his desire to bring these guests closer to Hashem and by doing so he would minimize the level of *chilul Hashem* in the world. Avraham's high degree of intent behind every action was purely for Kiddush Hashem.

When he was able to receive these guests Avraham was transformed from being "pained" to a feeling of extreme "simcha" that he had not experienced before since he had not been previously deprived of receiving guests.

There was such a phenomenal degree of pure intent behind the performance of these acts of hospitality that as a result we merited incredible miracles. The Gemara explains in Sanhedrin that Hashem wants actions, which stem from the heart and not from perfunctory behavior. Two people may perform the identical mitzvah however each may have a completely different value. These two people may in fact be very far apart based on the level of intent and dedication. While the physical acts may appear similar, the essence of these actions is divergent. Avraham was consumed with every detail of performing these acts of hospitality to the highest level of spiritual perfection. Avraham's hospitality may be likened to the level of intent in the Holy of Holies. It is because of this level of dedication that we merited seemingly disproportionate and fantastic miracles.

2. Making Belief a Beality

We read in Lech Lecha that when Avraham was told that he was going to have a child he rejoiced/laughed "va'yitzak". Rashi sights the Targum to explain that when the Torah says "va'yitzak" it means that Avraham was "happy/rejoiced". In this week's parsha, Sarah overhears the angels telling Avraham that she was going to bear a child and the Torah says "va tizak". Even though the same expression is used to describe Avraham's reaction in Lech Lecha, the Targum tells us here that Sarah was not "rejoicing" but rather she "laughed" in a skeptical manner. Hashem reacts immediately by inquiring, "why did Sarah laugh?"

The Ohr Ha'Chaim explains that expression "va tizak Sarah" has the same meaning as that used in Lech Lecha with Avraham. Therefore "va tizak Sarah" should be understood as "Sarah rejoiced." If this is the case then why does Sarah continue by saying "After I have withered shall I again have delicate skin?" The Ohr Ha'Chaim explains that she did in fact rejoice. However, this feeling of joy did not materialize until after she physically experienced the promised metamorphosis to a youthful state. Sarah did not believe the facts until they materialized. However, we find that Avraham instantly rejoiced when Hashem informed him that he would have a son. Avraham's reaction was greatly valued by Hashem because it proved that Avraham was at a level that he perceived G-d's word as physical reality even before its actual manifestation in the world. Sarah most certainly believed Hashem. However, her realization was based on the actual physical manifestation of G-d's promise. The fact that Sarah did not internalize Hashem's word as actual reality is considered as a deficiency.

When Sarah proclaimed that she did not laugh it is not to say G-d forbid that she in some way did not say the truth, but rather, she did not internalize Hashem's word as reality at the same level as Avraham. Sarah was expected to have the same level of internalization as Avraham.

We read the stories about the Chofetz Chaim's level of belief in the imminent coming of Moshiach. As Jews, we continuously declare our belief in the coming of Moshiach; however, the Chofetz Chaim had his luggage packed in preparation for his coming. To the Chofetz Chaim, the coming of Moshiach was a physical reality. Every day was a preparation for Moshiach. We learn that when Moshiach is revealed in the

world that all power of choice will cease to exist because of the level of revealed G-dliness. Therefore, at that point our ability to grow and improve will no longer exist. We will basically be frozen at the point of growth prior to the revelation of Moshiach. So the obvious question is why are we not in constant preparation for Moshiach? The answer is that his coming is not a reality for us. Moshiach is an abstract concept. If one were to receive a letter announcing an impending tax audit, instant and vigorous preparation would commence because this is considered a reality.

The Gemara states that at the end of our days we will stand before the Heavenly Court and we will be asked for the amount of time we devoted to Torah study. Hashem, like an auditor, will want to know how the precious time on this earth was spent. When the Heavenly Court inquires if we studied Chumash, Mishna, Gemara, Halacha etc. we will not be able to give the excuse that we were too preoccupied with our lives to devote the proper time. Hashem is the employer and we are the employees, yet we are distracted. It is not to say that we do not believe in reward and punishment or the world to come, but rather that it is not a reality for us. We need to be more like Avraham and internalize all of these issues as physical reality and not mere abstractions. We need to continuously prepare for Moshiach, appearing before the Heavenly Court, and Hashem's audit.

The Gemara teaches us the Hillel was extremely poor yet he diligently studied Torah, thus obligating the poor people to study Torah. Rabbi Lazar ben Charsom was tremendously wealthy and he diligently studied Torah, thus obligating all of the rich people. While Hashem does not expect that every individual be at the level of these examples from the Gemara, He does expect us to meet our individual potentials.

3. Appreciation is the Heart of Judaism

We read in this week's parsha that prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah an angel was sent to save Lot and his family. The angel escorted Lot, his two daughters and his wife out of Sodom; however, Lot's wife was turned to a pillar of salt because she turned back to gaze at the city as they left. Lot and his two daughters fled to a cave where they hid in fear that the world was coming to an end. Lot's older daughter urged the younger daughter that since the end of the world was at hand; they needed to perpetuate the human race by having relations with their father. As planned, they gave wine to Lot and had relations with him and subsequently each gave birth to Moab and Ammon. These incestuous relationships brought forth two nations, namely, the Moabites and the Ammonites.

The Torah teaches us the even if a Moabite or an Ammonite converts to Judaism they are considered illegitimate because they did not come out and offer the Jewish people bread and water as they left Egypt. If these nations could behave in such a cruel and insensitive manner towards the Jews then they are not to be accepted as Jews. Is this reason enough to negate and shun these nations? Or is there a deeper meaning that goes beyond the lack of hospitality?

The story of Lot's daughters having relations with their father raises some obvious questions. Lot's daughters legitimately believed that the world had come to an end and that they needed to perpetuate existence by having relations with their father. Just as Cain and Abel were permitted to cohabit with their sisters so too could Lot's daughters cohabit with their father under the circumstances. The Chazal teach us, regarding Cain and Abel, that existence could not have been perpetuated if they had not had relations with their sisters. This was the basis for justifying the actions of Lot's daughters. However there is

a major difference between the two incidents. In the case with Lot's daughters they had a very special uncle – Avraham. When Lot's father was killed, Avraham adopted Lot as his own child. When Avraham left Ur Kasdim he brought Lot along with him. When Avraham traveled to Egypt he again brought his nephew with him. Unfortunately, a disagreement arose between Avraham and Lot and they separated. When Lot was taken captive, Avraham turned the world upside down in order to save him. If it were not for Avraham, Lot would have been killed.

Given this degree of devotion demonstrated by Avraham towards Lot, one would think that Lot should have been completely beholden to Avraham. While Lot did not believe he had this level of obligation to Avraham, at a minimum he should have related Avraham's good deeds to his family. Lot should have valued Avraham by telling his daughters about his special status. Lot could attest to the fact that Avraham was the most spiritual person alive and that he could activate miracles from Hashem, yet he never shared this information with his children. We can deduce that Lot did not teach his children about Avraham from the fact that had they known of Avraham's existence, they would have never believed that they were the only humans left alive. How could G-d destroy Avraham and the world and save Lot? This would have been impossible to justify. Thus they believed it was the end of the world.

Lot never taught his children about Avraham because he was a consummate ingrate. He never appreciated all the acts that Avraham performed for him. His life, his wealth, and his status were all attributable to Avraham's deeds; however, Lot did not wish to acknowledge this nor did he teach it to his children. This was the source of the dispute between Avraham and Lot. When Lot resorted to stealing land in defiance of Avraham's wishes, their relationship ended. Lot did not wish to be scolded even though all of his wealth came to him through Avraham. Lot exemplifies a complete ingrate without the capacity to appreciate goodness.

The Moabites and Ammonites were direct descendents from Lot as he fathered Moab and Ammon. They too had no sense of gratitude towards the Jews who descended from Avraham. Despite the fact that their entire existence is attributable to Avraham and the Jewish people, they did not wish to acknowledge this debt. They did not wish to reciprocate. How could these people not even extend bread and water to the Jews when they left Egypt? The Moabites and the Ammonites had no capacity to appreciate goodness. Just as Lot lacked this capacity so too did his descendents. The basic principle underlying the service of Hashem is having the capacity to be beholden and appreciative. Yet they did not have this quality. This is the antithesis of the Jewish people who descend from Avraham and personify appreciation and thankfulness. Hashem therefore cannot allow these nations to be integrated into the Jewish people. The Jewish people are the nation of Hashem and our very existence is a testimony to our thankfulness to Hashem. We are the descendents of Avraham and we need to carefully study and understand the actions of our Forefathers. Through this understanding we will realize our tremendous capacity to achieve spiritual greatness.

4. The Importance of Fear

After Sodom was destroyed, Avraham traveled with Sarah to Gerar, the land of the Philistines. Because he was concerned for their safety, Avraham suggested to Sarah that they present themselves as brother and sister and not as husband and wife. When they arrived in the community, Avimelech, king of Gerar took Sarah. Immediately, Hashem appeared to him in a dream and commanded him to release Sarah or he and his community would die. The physical consequences that Avimelech and his kingdom

would face as a result of his taking of Sarah were unprecedented.

The following day, Avimelech releases Sarah to Avraham and exclaims, "What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you that you brought upon me and my kingdom such great sin?" Avraham responds to him, "There is but no fear of G-d in this place and they will slay me because of my wife". We can understand this incident perhaps through a story about Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman zt'l. Rabbi Wasserman was in Germany in the 1930's where society was considered to be refined, sophisticated, and educated. During a lecture to the Orthodox Jewish community at this time, Rabbi Wasserman stated that soon there would be a major catastrophe against the Jews led by the Germans. The alleged "sophisticated and educated" Germans would in a matter of time reveal themselves to be savage animals with no semblance of humanity or morality. Of course the German Jews were offended. They could not believe that Reb Elchanan would speak in this manner about the German community of which they felt a part. Reb Elchanan replied to them with an explicit passage in the Torah to prove his point. Reb Elchanan pointed to Avraham's statement – "There is but no fear of G-d..."

Avraham's statement expresses the fact that while Avimelech and his kingdom had education, sophistication, and seemingly all the refinements of civilization *rak*/ except/ only for the fear of Hashem. G-d was not part of the equation. This is why Avraham believed that they would kill him and take Sarah. Reb Elchanan explained that he could see clearly that the German's had no fear of Hashem. And, just as Avraham was concerned that Avimelech and his community would easily turn to savages, so too did Reb Elchanan fear that the Germans were only moments away of revealing their true nature. If there is no fear of G-d, there is no limit what can be justified. Therefore the Germans could easily justify genocide.

We learn in *Perkei Avos* that one should pray for the welfare of the government because if there were no fear of government people would devour each other alive. Note that the people would eat each other "alive" without even killing them first. This highlights the degree of savagery that people could exhibit if there was no fear of government. While the fear of government exists people will remain within the bounds of humanity. The fear of government dictates how people will behave in areas that are governed by the laws of the land. This does not include those aspects of life which government does not control. For example, one's private actions in the home and one's thoughts are not controlled by the government; therefore, fear of government does not affect these actions. If one does not fear the government then what will be feared? How is one's behavior controlled outside of the areas affected by secular law? The answer is the fear of Hashem.

As the *pasuk* states, "The prerequisite for wisdom is the fear of G-d" because without such fear any action can be justified regardless of the intelligence of the person. If the fear of G-d is within us then we will be able to have wisdom. This fear of G-d guides our intelligence so that it cannot become warped and twisted in a manner that would lead us to perform despicable acts, G-d forbid. This is why Avraham states that since there is no fear of G-d in Avimelech's kingdom he could not trust the king or his community because despite their outwardly manifested intelligence they would be able to rationalize the most immoral behavior.