

PUTTING G-D ON HOLD

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Avrohom said, "My Master, if I have found favor in Your eyes do not pass from before Your servant."¹

Be'er Yosef: The gemara² derives from here that tending to guests is more important than receiving the Shechinah. Avrohom here implored Hashem not to leave while he, Avrohom, excused himself to receive his guests. The simple intent of the gemara would seem to be that the mitzvah of tending to guests is more important than the mitzvah of receiving the Shechinah. Yet this cannot be the gemara's point. It is a well-established halachic principle that one should not pass over a mitzvah - even for the purpose of fulfilling a different mitzvah. Once a person begins a mitzvah, he ought to continue with it. He should not interrupt the performance of a mitzvah even for the purpose of acting on a different one. The poskim emphasize that this holds true even if the second mitzvah is recognized as more important than the first. Halacha would have told Avraham to stay put and continue with the first mitzvah he began - that of receiving the Shechinah.

It is possible that receiving the Shechinah here was not a mitzvah at all, but rather part of the heavenly reward granted to Avrohom for having fulfilled the mitzvah of bris milah. The encounter with the Shechinah was not a mitzvah, but a heavenly gift of appreciation to Avrohom for passing another one of the ten tests to which Hashem had subjected him. Because it was not a mitzvah, deciding to forego the experience was entirely his option. Avraham decided he would rather perform the mitzvah of hachnosas orchim than enjoy a prophetic episode.

Avrohom could conceive of no greater pleasure in life than a close dialogue with Hashem. Yet, his passion for chesed prompted him to give up this pleasure in favor of the active performance of a mitzvah. This is consistent with the Mishnah's³ finding that a moment of mitzvos in this world is superior to all the eternity of the next world. Avrohom's choice was therefore consistent with the standard hierarchy we are taught by Chazal.

It is so consistent, that we must now ask what the gemara meant to tell us. Avrohom's choice was predictable! Why is it even worthy of note?

Here is a possible reason. While forgoing a Divine reward in order to perform a mitzvah is appropriate, we might have argued that this would not apply to the mitzvah of tending to guests. Leaving the presence of HKBH in order to care for some mortal humans seems like a slight to G-d. Extending hospitality to guests is a mitzvah only because every human is created in the image of the

Divine. Serving the image should not be more urgent than directly serving the One Who confers that image!

Despite this argument, Avrohom did indeed opt to put Hashem "on hold" while he tended to the passers-by. Avrohom's love for the mitzvah of hachnosas orchim was so overwhelming that it pushed his decision in that direction. And, by "waiting" for Avrohom to finish, Hashem gave His approval!

Do-It-Yourself Miracles

*Let some water be brought and wash your feet...I will fetch a bit of bread...Avraham ran to the cattle, took a calf...*⁴

Be'er Yosef: Each of Avraham's actions in ministering to the angels was rewarded in the form of some payoff to his descendants, according to the gemara.⁵ The way in which the reward came paralleled the degree of Avraham's personal involvement. What Avraham did entirely on his own was rewarded through something that came directly from Hashem. Where Avraham did not act directly, but instructed others to act, the reward came through some agent of G-d. Thus, Hashem directly caused the wind that swept in the quail for the Jews of the wilderness to eat. This was in consideration of Avraham running to himself choose a calf to be slaughtered. Providing water for the three guests resulted in that same group of Jews receiving water to slake their thirst in the harsh, arid landscape that separated Egypt from Israel. But since Avraham did not offer the water directly, but simply ordered it brought by someone else, the water in the wilderness also came through an intermediary - Moshe, who had to strike the rock.

This is surprising. Was this the only occasion at which water was served to guests in Avraham's home? Avraham lived a life of chesed! Surely there were many occasions at which Avraham brought out water himself, rather than through a servant or family member. Why weren't those acts of chesed rewarded by Hashem directly providing Avraham's offspring with water?

The point seems to be that all of the wonderful acts of chesed performed by Avraham were within the limits of Man's natural capacity. They would be richly rewarded - but only within the limits of Nature. During the sojourn through the wilderness, no natural course of survival was available to the Bnei Yisrael. Assistance could come only in the form of overt miracles. Merit for such miracles would come only from mitzvos performed beyond the usual, natural limits of Man's capacity.

This is why the miracles mentioned above (and a few more that the gemara mentions) were all dependant upon this single episode of caring for the three angels. Avraham's role pushed and broke the limits of human output. Weak from a painful procedure at an advanced age, Avraham will simply

not take "no" for an answer. He persists in looking for guests, despite the brutal heat. Their lowly appearance does not deter him; he lavishes upon them food usually reserved for royalty.

Such out of the ordinary behavior merited out of the ordinary response by Hashem. It merited overt miracles. These miracles, however, matched the meritorious deeds that allowed them. Deeds performed directly by Avraham were repaid, measure for measure, by miracles carried on by Hashem Himself. Deeds performed through the assistance of intermediaries were repaid through miracles that also required intermediaries.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bereishis 18:3 2. Shabbos 127A 3. Avos 4:22 4. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bereishis 18:4,5,7 5. Bava Metzia 86B
