

HACHNASSAT ORCHIM

by Shlomo Katz

Hamaayan / The Torah Spring Edited by Shlomo Katz

Vayera

**Volume XVI, No. 4
17 Marcheshvan 5762
November 3, 2001**

Today's Learning:

Bava Metzia 5:5-6

Orach Chaim 533:4-534:1

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Kamma 92

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Demai 20

The beginning of our parashah finds Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent recuperating from his brit milah and being visited by Hashem Himself. Suddenly, Avraham sees three "men" - they actually were angels - approaching, and he takes leave of Hashem and goes off to welcome and care for his guests. We learn from here, say our Sages, that hachnassat orchim / taking care of guests takes precedence over seeing the "face" of the Shechinah / the Divine Presence.

R' Yaakov Yosef z"l (1843-1902; Chief Rabbi of New York) writes: We also learn from here that there is a mitzvah of doing kindness even toward someone who is not in need. This stands in contrast to the mitzvah of tzedakah, which is fulfilled only if the recipient is in need. Avraham's guests were angels, and angels have no needs. Yet, Avraham left the presence of the Shechinah to care for them. Will you argue that Avraham did this only because he thought the guests were human? This cannot be, for Hashem would not have caused Avraham to err and to do unknowingly what he would not have

done willingly had he known that his guests were angels. (Avraham would not have stopped speaking to Hashem to do something which was not a mitzvah, for example, giving tzedakah to those who are not needy.) Rather, the mitzvah of hachnassat orchim applies even if the guests do not need hospitality. Why? Also, we are taught that Avraham excelled in the mitzvah of hachnassat orchim. Why was he attached to this mitzvah in particular?

Chazal teach that Avraham was the first person to call Hashem, "Adon" / "Master." Avraham recognized that Hashem is our Master and we are his servants. This is the reason for Chazal's teaching that no reward for mitzvot is given in this World. We are all servants, and we serve without pay. [We will, nevertheless, be paid in Olam Haba / the World-to-Come.] This means that Hashem cares for us whether we are "rich" (in mitzvot) or "poor" (in mitzvot). Avraham's hachnassat orchim emulated that of Hashem, who cares for all of His "guests" without regard to their need for charity.

The midrash observes that the angels appeared to Avraham as men - indeed, as idolators - but they appeared to Lot in their true form. Lot would not have taken ordinary idolators into his home, but Avraham's hachnassat orchim, like Hashem's, did not discriminate. (L'vait Yaakov, Drush 27)

"Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day." (18:1)

Rashi comments: The word "sitting" is written without the letter vav, and therefore may be translated "he sat down." This teaches that he wished to rise, but the Holy One, Blessed is He, said to him, "Sit, and I will stand. You shall be an example to your descendants that I, in the future, will stand in the assembly of the judges while they will sit, as it is written (Tehilim: 82:1): 'G-d stands in the assembly of the judges'."

Surely this is more than a play on words! What is the connection between Avraham's sitting at the entrance of his tent and a bet din sitting in judgment? R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l (1903-1993) explains:

The gemara (Yoma 35b) teaches that there is no excuse for failing to study Torah and perform mitzvot. In the words of the gemara, "The sage Hillel / will convict the poor, the sage R' Eliezer ben Charsom will convict the wealthy, and [the Biblical] Yosef will convict those who are faced with moral challenges. If a person says, 'My poverty prevented me from studying,' Hashem will respond, 'Were you poorer than Hillel?' If he says, 'My wealth prevented me from studying,' Hashem will ask, 'Were you wealthier than R' Eliezer ben Charsom?' And, if he says, 'I was faced with moral challenges,' Hashem will retort, 'Were your challenges more difficult than the challenge faced by Yosef [with Potiphar's wife]?'"

Says R' Soloveitchik: The gemara's language - Hillel, R' Eliezer ben Charsom, and Yosef "convict" their fellow Jews - suggests sitting in judgment. Of course, these tzaddikim do not literally judge

their fellow Jews, but, because others fail to follow their example, a form of judgment does take place. In this sense, Avraham "judged" and "convicted" the people of Sdom. They could not excuse their wickedness by saying that the time or the place were not conducive to righteousness or kindness; Avraham lived nearby and was both righteous and kind, not only on a regular basis, but even when he was suffering from the pain of his circumcision. Thus, the reference to sitting in judgment is apt. (Quoted in Nefesh Ha'rav p. 275)

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) expresses a similar idea. He observes: The Torah does not tell us what sin led to the destruction of Sdom, but the prophet Yechezkel does. He writes (Yechezkel 16:49), "Behold, this was the sin of Sdom, your sister. She and her daughters had pride, an overabundance of bread and peaceful serenity, but she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy." Asks R' Kook: What was her sin? Are Noachides commanded to give charity?

He explains: Giving charity is not one of the Seven Noachide Laws, but how could the Sdomites live near Avraham and not be influenced? Indeed, the Sdomites themselves benefitted from Avraham's kindness and righteousness when he saved them from the Four Kings and refused to take any spoils (as described in last week's parashah). Under these circumstances, the failure of the Sdomites to give charity was not just a sin, it was a sign of their complete devotion to wickedness.

In this light we can understand a midrash regarding the verse (18:21), "I will descend and see; if they act in accordance with her outcry, then destruction!" Rashi quotes the midrash as explaining, "Our Sages explain 'her outcry' to refer to the cry of a certain girl whom they put to death in an unnatural manner because she had given food to a poor man." Why, asks R' Kook, was this a reason to destroy Sdom? Perhaps this was an isolated incident! The answer is that even if such a murder did happen only once, it is a sign of a society's depravity that it happened at all. (Quoted in Likutei Ha'reiyah II p. 29)

"Al na / please, do not pass away from Your servant." (18:3)

With these words, Avraham greeted the angels who came to his home after his circumcision. R' Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev z"l (1740-1809; early chassidic rebbe) writes that our verse alludes to Eliyahu Hanavi's attendance at every brit milah. How so?

We are taught that "Eliyahu was Pinchas" (either literally or because they shared a soul). And, Kabbalists teach that when Pinchas killed Zimri, as described in Parashat Balak, the souls of his deceased uncles Nadav and Avihu entered his body. The initials of Avihu and Nadav are the same as the initials of "Al na" in our verse. Thus, Avraham's words may be interpreted (in the mode of drush / allegory and remez / allusion), "Eliyahu Hanavi, who carries the souls of Nadav and Avihu, do not pass away from the place of a circumcision." (Kedushat Levi)

"It would be sacrilege to You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the righteous along with the wicked; so the righteous will be like the wicked. It would be sacrilege to You! Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" (18:25)

Why, asks R' Ahron Soloveichik (see page 4), did Avraham appeal to Hashem's attribute of Justice? Should he not have appealed to Hashem's attribute of Mercy to save Sdom? He answers:

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Makkot 2:6) teaches:

Wisdom was asked, "What is the punishment of a sinner." Wisdom responded with the words of Mishlei 13:21, "Evil pursues sinners." Prophecy was asked, "What is the punishment of a sinner." Prophecy answered with the words of Yechezkel 18:20, "The sinful soul, it shall die." The Holy One, Blessed is He, was asked, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" He responded, "He shall repent and he shall be atoned for."

What is the meaning of this? Do not wisdom and prophecy come from G-d? How, then, can their responses differ from His?

The Torah relates that the way to Gan Eden is guarded by a "revolving, flaming sword." The Zohar comments that this represents the nature of man. Every person is, to some extent, a spiritual schizophrenic, says R' Soloveichik. Every person has within himself a righteous personality and a sinful personality. Wisdom and prophecy are correct; the sinful person should be pursued by evil until he dies. However, Hashem recognizes that the sinful person also has a righteous personality, a virtuous soul, which deserves a chance for repentance.

When Avraham argued that there may be ten tzaddikim in Sdom, he was appealing to Hashem's attribute of Justice because he was arguing that there is a spark of righteousness behind almost every evil facade. Perhaps, he maintained, there are enough righteous people in Sdom to ignite that spark and bring about general repentance. In that case, Justice, not only Mercy, demanded that the city be spared.

Hashem answered Avraham that this was not the case. At times, a person can become so cruel that he extinguishes even the last spark of humanity within himself. This, G-d implied, was what happened in Sdom. (The Warmth and the Light p. 33)

R' Ahron Soloveichik z"l

This week marks thirty days since the passing of R' Ahron Soloveichik, the founder and rosh yeshiva of Yeshivas Brisk in Chicago. R' Soloveichik was born in Poland in 1918, and he came to the United States at a young age, when his father, R' Moshe, was appointed rosh yeshiva of Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan ("RIETS"). (R' Moshe was a son of the famed R' Chaim "Brisker" Soloveitchik.)

The younger R' Soloveichik attended Yeshiva College (now Yeshiva University) and received semichah from RIETS. He also attended New York University, where he earned a degree in law.

R' Soloveichik spent most of his adult life in Chicago, where, in 1974, he founded Yeshivas Brisk. When the health of his older brother, R' Joseph Ber, no longer permitted him to deliver shiurim / lectures at RIETS, R' Ahron began to commute to New York weekly to lecture there.

In 1983, R' Soloveichik suffered a debilitating stroke, but he refused to let this hamper his activities (including his trips to New York). Many who eulogized him noted that besides his Torah scholarship, he was a symbol of strength for those suffering from difficult physical handicaps.

R' Soloveichik left behind several published works in Hebrew and in English including: Perach Mateh Aharon (on the first two books of Rambam's Code), The Warmth and the Light (essays on the parashot in the books of Bereishit and Shmot), Logic of the Heart / Logic of the Mind (essays on various topics), and many articles published in scholarly journals. He often wrote or spoke out on the pressing issues of the day. He was a committed Zionist and, despite his failing health, was an outspoken opponent of the Oslo Accords.

R' Soloveichik passed away on Friday of this past Chol Ha'moed Sukkot, and was buried in Yerushalyim on Hoshanah Rabbah. His wife, Ella, passed away last July and also is buried in Yerushalayim.

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