

# THE BEAUTY WITHIN THE SHADOWS

*by Shlomo Katz*

## Parshas Vayera

### The Beauty Within the Shadows

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Today's Learning:  
Berachot 8:3-4  
O.C. 301:16-18  
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Kreitot 14  
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Kiddushin 6

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The Midrash relates that as Avraham, Yitzchak and two servants traveled to the as yet unspecified site of the akeidah / the binding of Yitzchak, Avraham saw a cloud hovering over a distant mountain.

Avraham recognized that this cloud was a sign from Hashem as to where Avraham should take his son to offer him as a sacrifice. Avraham then asked Yitzchak, "What do you see?"

Yitzchak answered, "I see a beautiful mountain with a cloud hovering over it."

Next Avraham asked the two servants what they saw. They answered, "We see a barren wasteland."

To this Avraham responded (Bereishit 22:5), "Stay here by yourselves with the chamor / donkey while I and the lad go until koh / there." The Midrash elaborates, "Stay here by yourselves for you are like a chamor / donkey, whereas I and the lad will go on in fulfilment of the verse, "Koh / thus [like stars] will your offspring be."

R' Yitzchak Yaakov Reines z"l (1841-1915; Rosh Yeshiva in Lida and founder of the Mizrachi) explains: Avraham wanted to know whether his son Yitzchak could see the light that shines through the darkness of exile and martyrdom. Yitzchak could see; he told his father, "I see a beautiful mountain. True, there is a cloud hovering over it, but the dark shadow of that cloud does not detract from the beauty that I see."

In contrast, Avraham's servants couldn't share Yitzchak's world view. All that they could see was a dark, barren wasteland. Avraham therefore consigned them to the world of the chamor, symbolic of the chomer / materialism which obscures from some people's view a proper understanding of the world.

Avraham and Yitzchak, both of whom could see the beauty within the shadows, left behind the materialistic servants and went "until koh" - to the fulfilment of the verse, "Koh / thus will your offspring be." Those who can see the beauty within the shadows even as they go to their martyrdom are the true stars that shine, as Hashem had promised Avraham. (Ohr Chadash Al Zion, Part VI, Ch. 2, p. 107b)

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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, of course, be paid in Olam Haba / the World-to-Come.] 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'vair Yaakov, Drush 27)

*"Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre . . ." (18:1)*

Rashi asks: Why did Hashem appear to Avraham on Mamre's property? [Mamre was one of Avraham's three allies, as mentioned in last week's parashah.] Because, says Rashi, it was Mamre who advised Avraham al ha'milah -- literally, "regarding the circumcision."

Many commentaries ask: Since Hashem had already told Avraham to circumcise himself, why did Avraham ask anyone's advice? R' Shem Klingberg z"l (chassidic rebbe in Krakow; killed in the Holocaust in 1943) answers: Many mitzvot are preceded by berachot, some of which take the form "al . . ." (for example, "al netilat yadayim") and other which take the form "le . . ." (for example, "le-hadlik ner shel Chanukah"). The Gemara (Pesachim 7b) discusses at length why some berachot take one form and some take the other. One of the blessings which the Gemara analyzes is the blessing on circumcision-- i.e., whether the blessing should be "al ha'milah" / "regarding the circumcision" or "la'mul" / "to circumcise."

This is what Avraham asked advice about, says R' Klingberg, and Mamre told him, "Al ha'milah."

(Ohalei Shem)

*"I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may sustain yourselves . . ." (18:5)*

We learn in Pirkei Avot (Ch. 1): "Let your home be wide open, and let the poor be members of your household." What does it mean to make the poor members of your household? R' Moshe Avigdor Amiel z"l (early 20th century Chief Rabbi of Antwerp and Tel Aviv) explains:

Some people invite the poor into their homes and feed them gourmet meals. Others invite the poor and feed them the same "everyday" food that the members of the household are eating. Which is preferable? The quoted Mishnah is teaching us: Feed the poor the same food you feed members of your household. Why? Because one who goes "all out" for the poor will be unable to sustain his level of giving. Pretty soon, he will begin to cut back and his giving will gradually dwindle down to nothing. Then he will resent the poor and expel them from his home.

Not so one who feeds the poor the same food that his family is eating. He will no more cease feeding the poor than he will cease feeding his own household.

(Hegyonot El Ami)

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*"So Hashem said, 'Because the outcry of Sdom and Amorrhah has become great, and because their sin has been very grave.'" (18:20)*

Our Sages state that although the people of Sdom committed many sins, their fate was sealed because they were cruel to the poor. Why? R' Simcha Mordechai Ziskind Broide z"l (rosh yeshiva of the Chevron Yeshiva in Yerushalayim; died 2000) explains: We see from here that failing to observe a mitzvah that common sense requires is far worse than even a grave sin such as adultery or murder. A person's failure to follow the dictates of common sense shows that his very core is rotten. Kohelet says (7:29), "G-d has made man yashar / straightforward, but they sought many intrigues." Such rottenness cannot be tolerated.

(Ha'yashar Ve'ha'tov p. 11)

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*"Avraham arose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before Hashem." (19:27)*

The Gemara (Berachot 6b) states that if a person establishes a makom kavua / fixed place for praying, then it is said about him, "What a chassid! What a humble person! He is a disciple of Avraham our father." What does having a makom kavua for prayer have to do with humility?

R' Aharon Lopiansky shlita (rosh yeshiva at the Yeshiva of Greater Washington) explains: Many of the items found in the Bet Hamikdash did not have fixed places. For example, the menorah had a position relative to the Holy Ark, specifically, southeast of the Ark, but it did not have an absolute place in the Temple. In contrast, the mizbeach / altar had an absolute place, and if it was not in that place, the obligation of performing the Temple service was not fulfilled. Why? Because, says Rambam, the place of the altar is the place from which man himself was created.

Why do we pray? We are used to thinking that if we need something, we pray for it. One day a person concentrates best on the blessing in Shemoneh Esrei that addresses health, and another day on the blessing that addresses sustenance, all depending on what he needs that day. But this is not the ideal prayer, R' Lopiansky writes (citing both Maharal and R' Chaim of Volozhin). Rather, one who stands in prayer should feel that he has nothing, that he is praying for his very existence. One who prays thus is connected to the makom kavua of the altar, the place from which man was created. And one who prays thus humbles himself, for he places himself completely in Hashem's hands. That is the connection between having a makom kavua for prayer, and humility.

(Yeshurun Vol. III, p. 507)

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*"She [Sarah] said, 'Who is the One Who said to Abraham, "Sarah would nurse children?" For I have borne a son in his old age!" (21:7)*

Our Sages relate that the 90-year old Sarah miraculously returned to a youthful condition and nursed many children. Why was this miracle necessary? Indeed, would not the miracle have been even greater if Sarah had given birth while still appearing to be an elderly woman?

R' Ben Zion Rabinowitz shlita (the Biala Rebbe) explains: The Torah demands that we always serve Hashem with the enthusiasm of youth. From where do we obtain such a trait? This trait is passed down by mothers. Hashem returned Sarah to youthfulness to allude to the importance of this aspect of motherhood. This is what is meant by the fact that Rosh Chodesh / the New Moon is a special holiday for women. Rosh Chodesh represents renewal, a characteristic of women. (This also, says R' Rabinowitz, is the reason why women are so often concerned with retaining their youthful looks. Subconsciously, this trait comes from a woman's knowledge that the spirit of youthfulness is part of her unique contribution to her family's Divine service.)

(Mevaser Tov: B'zchut Nashim Tzidkaniyot p. 239)

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