

# HASHEM'S HUMILITY

by Shlomo Katz

## Parshas Vayera

### Hashem's Humility

Midrash Rabbah on this week's parashah opens: "It is written (Tehilim 18:36), 'You have given me the shield of Your salvation; and Your right hand has sustained me, and Your humility made me great.' 'You have given me the shield of Your salvation'--this refers to Avraham. 'Your right hand has sustained me'--in the furnace, during the famine, and in Egypt. 'Your humility made me great'--when did Hashem show humility to Avraham? When Avraham was sitting and the Shechinah was 'standing,' as it is written (in the first verse of our parashah), 'Hashem appeared to him [Avraham] in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent . . .'"

R' Yitzchak Ze'ev Yadler z"l (1843-1917; Yerushalayim) explains: If the only reason that Avraham was sitting was because he had recently undergone an operation (the berit milah), it would not have been worth the Torah's while to report this fact. Rather, the midrash reasons, there must be a message in the verse. That message is alluded to in the cited verse from Tehilim, which teaches us three things about Hashem's relationship with Avraham and the Jewish People.

(1) Just as Hashem was Avraham's shield (see Bereishit 15:1), so He is a shield for Avraham's descendants.

(2) Hashem acted toward Avraham, and acts toward Avraham's descendants, with His "right hand"--a term usually interpreted by our Sages as an allusion to supernatural action.

(3) Even when a person is not capable of lifting himself to spiritual heights--as Avraham was not at this moment because of his physically weakened state--Hashem acts with humility and brings Himself closer to man. (Tiferet Zion)

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"For I have loved him [Avraham], because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of Hashem, doing charity and justice . . ." (18:19)

R' Klonimus Kalman Shapiro z"l (chassidic rebbe of Piaseczno, Poland; killed in the Holocaust) addresses parents and teachers in strong language in the introduction to his classic work on chinuch / Jewish education:

"We are accustomed to looking at today's youth who have thrown off the yoke of Torah as if they alone are responsible for their sorry spiritual state. However, the above verse teaches that it is not so. Every generation is a link in a chain that began with Avraham Avinu. Each generation derives its emunah / faith, Torah, and yir'ah / fear of G-d from the preceding generation. Are our youth not descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov? Do they not possess holy souls? Let us not fool ourselves about who is responsible for the failures of our youth! Picture today's rebellious youth in a prior generation; would they not have been tzaddikim, or at least G-d-fearing men and women? And why? Because their parents would have been more G-d-fearing than we are. Those generations would not have accepted the situation that we accept. They would never have shrugged their shoulders and neglected their duties. What excuses will we offer on the day of judgment?" R' Shapiro asks.

He continues: What causes youth to reject the ways of their parents? The \*primary\* cause is that they see themselves as mature adults when, in fact, they are still children. A young person who has such feelings cannot be taught to live a Torah life by being lectured about mitzvah observance. Habit, also, will not keep such a young person on the path of mitzvah-observance. Rather, it is necessary to appeal to the youth's feeling of self-importance. He must be convinced that he is a sapling that G-d Himself planted in the orchard that we call "the Jewish People." Only if the youth is made to feel that G-d truly cares about his success can there be hope.

Some teachers see their job as lecturing children about their mitzvah-obligations. Some parents see their task as helping children develop good habits. Neither of these practices is "chinuch," declares R' Shapiro. Yes, they are tools of chinuch, but they are not the essence of chinuch.

A related mistake that many teachers and parents make, writes R' Shapiro, is focusing their efforts on raising good \*children.\* The true goal of parents and teachers should be to raise good \*adults.\* The job of teachers and parents is to help the flower within each child blossom, i.e., to give each child the tools he or she will need so that the child's holy neshamah will reach its full potential when the child does become an adult. This requires discovering the unique potential within each soul and facilitating its development. That is the essence of chinuch, and that is the true meaning of King Shlomo's famous dictum (Mishlei 22:6), "Train the youth according to his way; even when he grows old, he will not swerve from it." (Chovat Ha'talmidim)

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R' Yisrael Meir Kagan z"l (the Chafetz Chaim; died 1933) asks: Seemingly, charity and justice are opposites. How could Avraham command his household to do charity and justice? He explains:

When another person's honor or property is involved, one must adhere to the way of "justice," i.e., the letter of the law. One may not impinge even one iota on another person's honor or property. One must know all of the laws of theft, lest one inadvertently use his friend's property and be considered a thief. One must not speak hurtful words to another person nor embarrass him.

On the other hand, when one's own honor and property are involved, the proper way is the way of "charity." If someone harms you or your property, don't demand adherence to the letter of the law. The Gemara (Bava Metzia 30b) teaches, "Yerushalayim was destroyed only because people demanded adherence to the letter of the law." On the other hand, the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 17a) teaches, "If one overlooks his rights, Hashem will overlook his sins."

This is what Avraham taught when he taught his descendants about charity and justice. (Ahavat Chessed: Introduction)

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"Avraham said to his lads, 'Stay here by yourselves with the donkey, while I and the lad will go a short distance; we will worship and we will return to you'." (22:5)

Rashi z"l writes that the lads were Eliezer and Yishmael.

The Gemara (Kiddushin 68a) teaches that when Avraham said, "Stay here with the donkey," he meant: "You, members of a nation that resembles a donkey."

R' Yitzchak Blazer z"l (1837-1907; also known as "Reb Itzele Peterburger") asks: Why would Avraham insult the lads, seemingly gratuitously? He explains:

Midrashim record how, for three days, the yetzer hara attempted to persuade Avraham not to fulfil G-d's command that he offer his son Yitzchak as a sacrifice. When the yetzer hara saw that it had failed, it tried something different. It said to Avraham, "You know, you will not really be overcoming a particularly difficult challenge if you offer Yitzchak as a sacrifice. You still will have two other spiritual heirs: Eliezer and Yishmael. Even if you offer Yitzchak, your life's work will not be finished." It was in order to defeat this argument by the yetzer hara that Avraham had to demean Eliezer and Yishmael.

Why was that important to do? R' Blazer explains: When a person overcomes a great challenge or experiences a moment of great inspiration, he is expected to grow from it. The yetzer hara does not want this to happen, so the yetzer hara tells a person, "That accomplishment that you think is so great is really nothing special." False modesty is a tool that the yetzer hara uses to discourage spiritual growth. In reality, though, a person is called upon to recognize when he has had a life experience that has left him a greater person than he was before, for only then can he build on it and

become greater still. (Quoted in Rabbi Itzele Mi'Peterburg p.620)

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## Shemittah

We continue our historical overview of the controversy surrounding the "hetter mechirah," the sale of the Land of Israel to a non-Jew for the shemittah year. Previously, we presented the rulings of R' Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor z"l of Kovno and twenty leading Ashkenazic rabbis of Yerushalayim prior to the shemittah of 5649 / 1888-89 for and against the hetter mechirah, respectively.

One of the staunchest defenders of the hetter mechirah in later years was R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l. Prior to and during the shemittah of 5670 / 1909-10, when R' Kook was rabbi of Yafo and the surrounding settlements, he wrote extensively on this subject. However, R' Kook's attitude toward the hetter mechirah was misunderstood in his own time, and is often misunderstood today. This week, we present R' Kook's own clarification of his views (printed in She'eilot U'teshuvot Mishpat Kohen No.63):

I have already said a number of times that there is no doubt whatsoever regarding the validity of the hetter mechirah. Nevertheless, this neither prevents us nor exempts us from seeking all possible means that Hashem puts at our disposal to allow our brethren who live in our Holy Land to observe the mitzvah of shemittah according to the letter of the law, without seeking any exemptions or leniencies. We must rejoice as if we have found a great treasure over every minute parcel of Jewish-held land in our Holy Land on which shemittah is observed. But, G-d forbid that someone should criticize Jews who rely on the "permission" ("hetter") that results from selling the land, even if it is not "mishnat chassidim" / the ruling for the pious who go beyond the letter of the law. Our spirit within us is subdued by the lowliness of the crown of Yisrael and by the depressed state of G-d's people who reside on the Holy Land, so much so that they are forced by their poverty to rely on the hetter that nullifies this holy and beloved mitzvah. In any event, that which is done out of necessity [i.e., the sale of the land] is nevertheless a "complete Torah" [i.e., it has a solid basis in halachah]. All the great rabbis of Yisrael should be consoling the broken-hearted who must resort to this so that they will not be sinners in their own eyes, G-d forbid. G-d forbid that one think that, when the holy descendants [of the Patriarchs] are acting in accordance with the ruling of sages, G-d will be angry at them. Such is not my view. We should be promoting the proper performance of the mitzvah [of shemittah] by promoting love of G-d and of His commandments, which are sweeter than honey, not by promoting fear of G-d's wrath.

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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