

# PROMOTING THE COMMUNAL GOOD

*by Rabbi Aaron Gross*

Last week's Torah portion concluded with the commandment of bris milah, the covenant of circumcision, charged to our Patriarch Avraham and his progeny for all generations to come. At the age of ninety-nine Avraham is true to form, as with his other nine trials, and, following Hashem's calling, undergoes the bris with all of the other members of his household. As we begin this week's reading, we find Avraham convalescing and sitting in front of his tent. On his third post-operative day the Almighty himself performs the first recorded act of formal visitation of the sick. (Incidentally, our Sages tell us that this is considered yet another act of loving kindness on the part of G-d Himself that serves as a paradigm that we, as Jews, strive to emulate in actual practice.)

This Divine "visit" takes place in the form of a virtual prophetic experience, "And Hashem appeared to him (Avraham) in the plains of Mamre..." (Beraishis/Genesis 18:1). Rashi cites a Medrash noting on the relevance of the location of this encounter, explaining that it was Mamre who advised Avraham regarding the latter's bris milah, encouraging him to follow through. Therefore, Hashem honored Mamre by appearing to Avraham on his land. The Medrash points out that to have the Divine presence appear in a given locale is not without G-d's specific intent and is to be considered a most honorable reward.

The Sfas Emes (discourses on the Pentateuch and other subjects, by Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter; 1847-1905; second Rebbe of Ger and leader of Polish Jewry) questions the virtue by which Mamre is to be praised and honored in this way. What did Mamre have to lose by counseling Avraham about performing the circumcision? How is this distribution of great reward consistent with Mamre's mere offering of some friendly advice and encouragement? Rabbi Alter explains that Mamre knew and understood very clearly that through the bris milah a covenant would be formed between Hashem and Avraham and his children after him. This covenant would both physically and spiritually distinguish and elevate Avraham and his descendants from the nations of the world, including Mamre himself. The brothers of Mamre, whose counsel was sought earlier (see Rashi, 14:13), could not accept this reality and were anything but encouraging to Avraham (see Rashi, 17:23). Mamre, on the other hand, did accept that Avraham would now be different from him because he appreciated that this covenant would lead to greater honor for the name of Heaven. Mamre could compromise his own position - by not being part of this covenant - for the sake of the greater good.

Mamre's courage is truly laudable in light of the comments of Nachmanides (R' Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270, of Gerona, Spain, one of the leading Torah scholars of the Middle Ages;

successfully defended Judaism at the dramatic debate in Barcelona in 1263) on the mitzvah of loving one's fellow Jew (Vayikra/Leviticus 19:18), focusing on the natural resistance to truly loving another Jew. Some have a love that allows them to wish the best for others, but only in a limited way or specific area of life; "Let him be wealthy or wise, but not both!" Others are more gracious, those who do truly wish the best for another in all areas of life, "as long as he's not as wealthy or wise as I am!" The Torah responds to both of these attitudes with the instruction to open our hearts and put our egocentricity aside, to wish all the best things in life for all of our associates to the very same degree we would wish them for ourselves. We are enjoined not to let an iota of jealousy interfere with this love. For his selflessness, Mamre was rewarded with this revelation take place on his land. In the words of the Sfas Emes "... and he (Mamre) attained a connection resulting from the distance itself."

The Torah's lessons are timeless, elucidates the Rebbe of Ger. There may be times when the agenda of the individual may not concur with that of the community. At these times, if a greater degree of honor for Hashem's name will be achieved through the community, the individual should feel encouraged to support the community and its decision. Indeed, for the very act of setting aside personal goals in deference to the greater good he will surely find himself in greater positions of honor as a result of his efforts and support.

Have a good Shabbos!

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