

NOT ONLY AS IT APPEARS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

And G-d appeared to him in the Plains of Mamre ... (Bereishis 18:1)

This first posuk of this week's parshah is one of those possukim that, by saying less actually says much more, as the following midrash discusses:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, visits the sick, as it says, "And G-d appeared to him," and He [G-d] didn't say anything to him (i.e., prophecy did not follow the revelation); so, He [G-d] obviously came just to visit him [Avraham]. Rav Havah said to him: One who comes to visit the sick usually says something comforting, and The Holy One, Blessed is He, said nothing? What kind of visit was that?!

Furthermore, the rabbis teach that one who visits the sick removes one-sixtieth of the illness; can not G-d "carry" all of it (i.e., not just one-sixtieth), and remove the sickness and pain entirely from Avraham? And if yes, then what need was there to send [the angel] Raphael to heal Avraham?

Therefore, know that after Avraham was circumcized, The Holy One, Blessed is He, actually came to bless him, as it says, "And G-d appeared to him ..." and it doesn't say, "And G-d appeared to Avraham ..." Because, when someone is suffering greatly, one should not mention his name ... and, though it is true that one who visits the sick removes one-sixtieth of the illness, that is only the case until he takes his leave, after which time the illness returns. (Sodi Razah)

First of all, did you ever wonder what happened in the end to those "one-sixtieths" of illness that were lifted from the sick person by those who visited him? According to the above midrash, they were only removed temporarily, having returned to the infirmed at the end of the visits. THAT certainly makes it more difficult to cut a sick-visit short with a clear conscience. That's why the angel Raphael still had to come and heal Avraham, even had G-d removed sixty-sixtieths of the suffering.

However, what makes the above midrash problematic is that it goes against others that use the above verse as a source for the concept of visiting the ill (If G-d did it, why shouldn't we?).

Furthermore, even if G-d did come specifically to bless Avraham, then where's the blessing? Rav Havah's answer still wouldn't explain why this revelation didn't result in prophecy, as they usually do.

The answer may be that Rav Havah doesn't mean that G-d did not come with the intention of visiting Avraham as one visits the unwell (and hence, this verse is still a valid source for the mitzvah). On the

contrary, that is exactly what G-d intended to do, and did. However, perhaps, what Rav Havah wants to come and add is that the main intention in visiting the sick is not just to lift their spirits, but to be a source of blessing for them--of merit for them.

After all, sickness is a time of judgment, the more severe the illness, the more severe the Heavenly judgment. Every moment, we all live by the mercy of G-d, but sometimes, mercy is not enough to maintain one's health (though others seem even less worthy to remain healthy). In such situations, extra mercy is necessary, and that means extra "attention" from the Heavenly Court, extra scrutinization of one's spiritual quality of life, and extra judgment.

The one who visits the sick is like a witness taking the stand on behalf of the "Defense," that is, the ill individual. Testimony comes in the form of spiritual positiveness created because of the visit, and on behalf of the visited. The more meritorious the visit is in the eyes of Heaven, the greater the merit will be towards the recovery of the individual visited.

Therefore, the next time you visit someone who is not well, or, even when you think about them away from their presence, do something spiritually inspiring. Give a d'var Torah, learn some Torah, do an extra mitzvah, give some tzeddakah--whatever! Physically, the environment may seem "peaceful" and lacking any sense of urgency, or, if it is an urgent situation, it may seem to lack any possibility of your affecting its outcome.

It is not true!

Remember: the Heavenly Court has convened. The Shechinah Itself is hovering over the head of the unwell individual, and all eyes may be on you, to see what you have to think about, say, or do for the infirmed individual. Make it a good testimony.

Shabbos Day:

Avraham lifted up his eyes, and saw--and behold, three men standing over him; and he saw and ran and called to them from the opening of the tent, and bowed down to the ground. (Bereishis 18:2)

From the posuk itself, you can feel the sense of urgency that Avraham must have felt, which expressed the sublime delight he had in "discovering" three guests on so hot a day. Avraham lived to do chesed, and, as the rabbis teach, the pain of having no one to take care of, for Avraham, was far greater than the pain of Bris Milah on the third day.

But still--was it only the chance to do chesed that made Avraham move so quickly? It would not be difficult to say yes, for that was Avraham Avinu--a zealot to serve G-d and others on His behalf. The greater the act of self-sacrifice, the greater the testimony of love for G-d and His creation.

Nevertheless, there did happen to be another pressing matter in this somewhat unusual episode, as indicated by the following:

Three men standing over him ... What does "over him" mean? It means looking into his judgment. So, he [Avraham] said, "Quick! Three measures of wheat flour ... And Avraham ran to the herd." These are items for sacrificing, which were pleasing to them, in order that they should not harm him. (Zohar, Tzav 260a)

In other words, according to the Zohar, on one level, Avraham may have been doing chesed for the three strangers who happened to "chance" by his tent. However, on another level, Avraham was doing that which might prompt chesed for himself--to spare him the consequences of a negative judgment, as is the role of most sacrifices brought before G-d.

This, however, seems to reduce Avraham's tremendous example of chesed and concern for others to a somewhat self-serving act. Not that one should not try to cause a favorable judgment upon oneself, especially at a time that one is being judged. It is just that this particular episode is meant to teach such an important fundamental, and in the end, it really doesn't.

Or does it?

In fact, this question might lead to the answer of another: Why does it say "and he saw" twice in the same verse, as if Avraham did a "double-take"?

Because, in effect, he did. The first time Avraham "looked," he did so only to notice three travelers in need of chesed, and at that precise moment, his will was to take care of their needs, in spite of his own personal pain. That was Avraham's first impression, and it was enough of a reaction to show G-d to what extent Avraham's chesed went (as if G-d didn't already know!).

However, upon "second look," when Avraham saw how these "strangers" were looking at him, standing over him, so-to-speak, he realized that more was going on over here than at first met his eye, and determined at that time that he should bring a sacrifice to ward off any negative judgment from Above (always a risk at a time of illness or danger).

This, then, would provide us with a deeper understanding of the first posuk:

G-d appeared to him in the Plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. (Bereishis 18:1)

Says the Talmud:

There is no Gehinnom in the World-to-Come. Rather, The Holy One, Blessed is He, takes out the sun from its pouch, which heals the righteous and judges the evil. (Nedarim 8b)

--and:

... Immediately each one goes and make a succah on his roof, and The Holy One, Blessed is He,

causes the sun of Tammuz to bear down upon them, and each one [is forced to leave his succah and] kicks his succah and goes out ... (Avodah Zarah 3a)

In each case, the sun is being used as an instrument of Divine judgment. Perhaps, then, the "entrance of the tent" is also an allusion to something else, in the case, the entrance of another tent--the "Tent of Meeting," hundreds of years in the future (Shemos 27:9). It was there that one entered the world of the altar and the Mishkan, where sacrifices, such as the Sin-Offering were offered to earn Divine favor.

Therefore, in the end, Avraham's mesiros nefesh to do chesed remains unmarred; he is rewarded accordingly, and we have an eternal source from which to learn this central trait. And, in the end, the Zohar's explanation also remains intact, for, at a time of illness, Heaven reviews one's "file" to see what his outcome should be; it is especially at such times that we must endeavor to draw down as much merit as we can on behalf of the one who is unwell and in danger.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

After all these events, G-d tested Avraham and said to him, "Avraham," and he answered, "I am here." He said, "Please, take your son, your only one whom you love, Yitzchak, and go to the Land of Moriah. Offer him up as a burnt-offering there on one of the hills that I will show you." (Bereishis 22:1-2)

The entire episode of the Akeidah, as presented in the Torah, is quite short and lacking in detail. In typical Written Law fashion, the details are relegated to the Oral Law. However, does this mean only those interested in "fine-tuning" the story of the Akeidah should investigate and fill in the narrative gaps? No--that is for all of us to do, because like all things in life, there is beauty and often key information in the finer points of the story.

Of course, in typical Oral Law fashion, there are reams of material on what must be one of the most significant of all cosmic events that have directly included man. One such source is Seder HaDoros (to which I have referred in the past), compiled by Rabbi Yechiel Halpern (1660-1747; annotated by the Chidah). He writes:

"In the year 2075 from creation (1686 BCE), the Akeidah occurred in the 27th year of Yitzchak's life ... Erev Shabbos at twilight Yitzchak was bound (Zohar) [R' Bachaye in Parashas Pinchas says 2 hours before, and Ma'amados in Parashas Akeidah, in the name of R' Bachaye says 4 hours before]. In Nissan Yitzchak was born and in Nissan he was bound [another opinion says it was on Yom Kippur; see the Rashal ... Megillah Rabbah says ... in Cheshvan]. The place of the Akeidah was where Adam HaRishon was created, and there he sacrificed. Noach also built an altar there, Kayin and Hevel sacrificed there. Dovid and Shlomo built the altar in the Arona threshing floor there. Some say Iyov was born at the time of the Akeidah." (Seder HaDoros, Year 2075)

Where, of course, is "there"? "There" is none other than Har HaBayis--the place of the Bais HaMikdosh--the Jewish Temple, past and future--a place presently occupied by another, non-Jewish building. And amazingly, it is a place that remains to be the focal point of man's world to this very day.

There have been many "important" places in the world, and their importance has varied based upon the period of history. For example, at this time in history, the world seems to revolve around Wall Street, and Pennsylvania Avenue in the District of Columbia. However, such importance is fleeting, because the values they represent come and go with time. They seem permanent to us, now, but they too will pass with time, just like Rome and all other previous empires.

However, as the prophets foretold, history will come full circle on its way to the Final Tikun (rectification). The shift of man's focus will move away from the political and financial capitals of the world, and once again shift towards Jerusalem, and within Jerusalem, to the Temple Mount. It's happening already--slowly perhaps, but it's happening.

Thus, as the midrashim point out: much more than Yitzchak was bound up that day to the place where the Akeidah occurred. All of history was bound up that day and tied to the place from which the very first man was created--a fitting place for history to come to its cosmic end. A place that symbolizes the essence of self-sacrifice for G-d and the truth His Torah was given to teach.

MELAVE MALKAH:

The fourth tehillah, according to the Radak, Dovid HaMelech also wrote while on the run from Avshalom, his son who usurped the throne. Within it, there is the following posuk, which those who say the entire "Kriah Shema al HaMittah" (Shema at bedtime) will recognize:

Tremble and do not sin, say in your hearts on your beds. And be completely silent, Selah. (Tehillim 4:5)

Writes the Talmud:

Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Even though a man has said Shema in shul, there is a mitzvah to say it at bedtime as well, as it says, "Tremble and do not sin, say in your hearts on your beds. And be completely silent, Selah. (Tehillim 4:5) ... (Brochos 4b)

As the rabbis teach, "sleep is one-sixtieth of dead" (Brochos 57b); people talk about being "dead tired," or, "dead to the world while asleep. (Personally, waking up each morning is AT LEAST one-sixtieth "resurrection of the dead.") And, as most have already heard or experienced, death has a way of cutting through all the falsehoods in life and getting right to the point of what matters the most, and bedtime has a similar effect as well, when used properly.

For too many, only on occasion, when they can't fall asleep in the late hours of night, do they take advantage of the philosophical edge gained at nighttime. Though, it is true that in our day and age, nighttime can also be very distracting, still, it is not like the day when everyone is up and doing something, and life makes demands upon your schedule. Nighttime is "quiet-time," when the body is exhausted from its daily activities, and is only too willing to hand the "controls" over to your soul while it prepares to go to sleep.

This is why nighttime Torah learning can often be more insightful, and why, just before bed, is a great time to do a "cheshbon hanefesh," an accounting of one's spiritual status and daily routine. Bedtime is a time to sober up, and face reality head on--in preparation for a better day tomorrow.

This is why the verse ends with the words,

And be completely silent, Selah.

If you think about it, this verse should have come first, as a preparation for the awareness that is meant to follow. However, what Dovid HaMelech is teaching is that a little bit of distraction can go a long way to keep you from focusing on the awesomeness of life, and more importantly, of G-d and Torah.

And that is exactly what everyday life with its activities and concerns does. People run around each day making a lot of "noise," overly focused on "that issue," and overly talkative about "this one." There are not enough quiet, contemplative moments in daily life for many people involved in the world "out there." Hence, another interpretation of the same verse is:

A person should stir up his yetzer tov against his yetzer hara, as it says, "Tremble and do not sin..." (Brochos 5a)

--that is, get focused and keep on top of your spiritual self.

However, re-focusing, at least once a day at bedtime, can be enough to set matters straight, and return one's sense of awe for G-d and mitzvos. Then, a person can achieve true peace of mind before entering the state of sleep, knowing that when he wakes up, he'll be better prepared to serve G-d and the purpose of creation.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston
