

THE SMALL CHOF

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Avraham came to eulogize Sarah, and to cry for her. (Bereishis 23:2)

Everything has meaning, especially when it comes to the lives of the Avos, and even more so when it come to the parts of their lives that the Torah took care to record. Each story about them has a message about life in this world, as does each paragraph from each story. In fact, even each letter from each word of every sentence in each paragraph from every story about the lives of our Forefathers reveals to us something about living a meaningful life.

Most of the time one has to be a Kabbalist to be able to look at the letters of the Torah that way and learn something accurate and meaningful. Sometimes, though, the Torah does it for all of us by calling a specific letter to our attention, like the small Aleph at the end of Vayikra, or as is the case in this week's parshah, with the raised Chof in the word livchosah—Lamed-Bais-CHOF-Vav-Tav-Heh—in the following verse:

The life of Sarah was 100 years, 20 years, and seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. Sarah died in Kiryat Arbah, which is Chevron in the Land of Canaan, and Avraham came to eulogize Sarah, and to cry for her—v'livchosah. (Bereishis 23:2)

The rabbis use this anomaly to teach an important lesson about our acceptance of Divine judgment. The death of such a beloved partner in life, especially the way it occurred, tragically and suddenly, and as a result of a mitzvah Avraham himself had been performing (the Akeidah), could easily have broken even the strongest of men. Yet, Avraham fully accepted the Divine Providence, and even made a point of not mourning for her excessively. The raised Chof alludes to all of this.

However, there is another Midrash that indicates that the Chof alludes to something else that was happening at the time that Avraham was bargaining for the cave in which to bury his beloved Sarah. It is a message with even broader meaning, as Moshe Rabbeinu himself found out in response to his complaint to God at the end of Parashas Shemos about the increased suffering of the Jewish people.

According to the Talmud, this is how the conversation went:

"What a shame about the ones who are lost and are not to be found. Many times I revealed Myself to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov as E'l Shadd"ai, and they never questioned Me, nor did they ask, 'What is Your Name?' I told Avraham, 'Arise, and walk the length and width of the land that I am giving to you'

(Bereishis 13:17). Yet, when he wanted a place to bury Sarah, he couldn't find anything until he purchased land for 400 shekels!" (Sanhedrin 111a)

Though Moshe's complaint about the increased slavery as a result of his request to Pharaoh to free the Jewish people had come from a good place, apparently, it was unfounded. Moshe had thought he was championing the cause of Jewish freedom, when in fact, He was questioning God's judgment.

Thus, God's response to Moshe was, "It's a shame!" Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov had to confront situations all the time that could easily have been misconstrued as My abandonment of them and as the default of promises made. However, they never doubted that all was for the good, and that all I did for them would end up fulfilling promises, not breaking them.

An example of this? When Avraham had to buy a piece of land, destined to be his in the future to bury his righteous wife! And not just buy it, but buy it at top dollar, making it easy to question the ways of God. It was one thing to give Avraham the land in the future, but to make him pay for it in the present could easily have seemed counterproductive.

But it didn't, at least not to Avraham, and the small Chof in the verse indicates this. It tells us how Avraham overcame the intellectual doubt and blindness that can result when the hand of God works in a hidden way. The smaller Chof is there in our Torah to remind us, the descendants of Avraham, that we ought to live the same way.

Admittedly, it is no small task, as Moshe Rabbeinu found out, especially when you think you are totally justified, according to Torah, to complain and question the events of your life. It is not easy to take things in stride and to accept your situation when you think that what you want to do, but are being blocked from doing, is what God wants you to do as well.

However, the greater truth is that it is God Who is doing the blocking. Sure, He is using your enemy to stand in your way, who will have to answer to God for his part in the obstruction. True, your intentions for wanting to do what you can't are pure, and seemingly, the better way to go according to Torah in an ideal world. But does our perspective take into account all that we can't see as well? When we analyze a situation and our role within it, can we accurately figure in the future as God can? When we compare our situations to others with whom we think we are similar, people who do not have our obstructions, do we really know how similar our paths are in life?

God is in control, always. Justice, seeming injustice, it's all from Him. What about the fact that we are told that His is always just? He is. It's just that His justice is ultimate justice, taking it account a lot more than the immediate past and the present. It also takes into account the distant past, including previous reincarnations, and the future, including what is destined to occur that we don't even know about yet, something we may not appreciate until much later on in time, or maybe even much, much later on in time, as in the World-to-Come.

The small Chof represents all of that. Little Chof, big message. It is interesting how this Chof, combined with the Heh of Avraham's name, forms Chof-Heh, the number that represents the Ohr HaGanuz, the Hidden Light of Creation, and the Shechinah, as learned from the Akeidah. It is also the amount of letters of the Shema, the daily mission statement of every Jew to be a light unto nations.

This is especially interesting since the Midrash, on the third verse of the Torah which refers to the Ohr HaGanuz, comments by saying:

And God said, "Let there be light!" (Bereishis 1:13), and there was Avraham! (Bereishis Rabbah 2:3)

as if Avraham was equal to the Primordial Light of Creation. How can one person be equal to such an awesome and spiritual light?

Not, perhaps, in brilliance, but certainly in purpose, as the Talmud states:

With the light that The Holy One, Blessed is He, created on the first day, Adam looked and was able to see from one end of the world until the other. (Chagigah 12a)

What would be the point of such a far-reaching vision? What kind of vision is it, especially if the light that permitted it was itself completely spiritual? Why is it represented by the letter Chof, and why is that the number (Chof equals 20) of amos (an amah is between 18" and 24") at which the Chanukah cannot be placed for the sake of the mitzvah?

Rav Kahana said: Rav Nachman bar Munyumi elucidated in the name of Rebi Tanchum: A Chanukah light placed higher than 20 amos is unfit . . . (Shabbos 22a)

The eye does not see higher than 20 amos and therefore there is no pirsumei nissa (proclamation of the miracle). (Rashi)

And, what is this supposed to mean:

For 36 hours the Light served . . . and Adam HaRishon saw with it from one end of the world to the other. (Yerushalmi, Brochos 8:5)

The Original Light of Creation was hidden in the 36 candles of Chanukah. (B'nei Yissachar, Kislev)

Oops, ran out of space. The answers will have to wait until next week, b"H.

Text

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