

AND AVRAHAM RAN...

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Y. Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape #71, The Last Will & Testament of Rabbeinu Yehuda Hachasid Good Shabbos!

By Virtue of the Running of Avraham, Israel Received the Torah

The pasuk [verse] says "And G-d appeared to him in Elonei Mamre." This is a strange construction. Rather than saying "G-d appeared to Avraham," the Torah uses the pronoun and says "G-d appeared to him." If that is the case, it seems that this parsha is directly linked to the parsha that immediately precedes it. Who is 'him?' 'Him' refers to Avraham, who just underwent the act of circumcision (at the end of Lech Lecha).

There are a number of interesting Medrashim on the topic of this 'Hachnasas Orchim' that Avraham provided for the Angels.

The Medrash Rabbah says, "In the merit of the 'three runnings' that you ran to serve the Angels, I will 'run' three times at the time of the Giving of the Torah that I will give to your children." This is the first indication that there is a strong connection between the chapter of hosting the Angels and the fact that we merited to receive the Torah.

We see an even stronger connection in the Gemara in Shabbos [88b], which says that when Moshe Rabbeinu came up to receive the Torah, the Angels protested, "What is one born to a woman doing amongst us?" The Medrash in Parshas Yisro says that G-d caused the facial appearance of Moshe look like that of Avraham. G-d then asked the Angels, "Aren't you embarrassed by this person? Is this not the very person who you visited and ate with in his home? Now you are claiming that human beings shouldn't get the Torah?" The Medrash continues by saying that G-d told Moshe Rabbeinu, "You are only receiving the Torah in the merit of Avraham and this incident of 'Hachnosas Orchim.'"

If we were not convinced by the first Medrash, this second Medrash is certainly more explicit: Because of the incident of Hosting the Angels, we merit receiving the Torah. What does this mean? Why was this incident so significant?

We see another interesting thing. Something very important happened to the Angels when they came to visit Avraham. The Medrash points out that when the Angels first came, the pasuk states, "They were standing over him" [Bereishis 18:2], they -- so to speak -- towered over him. Later it says, "And he stood over them" [18:8]. Avraham towered over the Angels.

Which is it? Who was towering over whom?

The Medrash reconciles the verses: When the Angels first came in, the Angels dwarfed Avraham. They felt that "We are Angels and he is a mere human being." However, after his acts of hospitality, the tables were turned -- he towered over them. The Medrash says "The Fear of Avraham was placed upon the Angels -- (the Angel) Michael trembled; (the Angel) Gavriel trembled."

What happened that caused the Angels to come in towering and go out trembling?

There is also an additional difficulty: At the beginning of the parsha the pasuk says, "He lifted his eyes and he saw the Angels standing upon him" [18:2]. The connotation of "He lifted his eyes" is that they were at a great distance. The connotation of "they stood upon him" is that they were right beside him.

Which is it? Were they distant or were they close?

Rav Shlomo Breur answers these questions by saying that all of these Medrashim tell us what a unique person Avraham Avinu was.

The Torah uses the same language at the Akeidah: "He looked from afar and saw the place at a distance" [22:4]. There is a certain trait about human beings. They see what they want to see and they hear what they want to hear. If we had to sacrifice our only son and the mountain was at a distance, would we be able to see it from afar? Certainly not. That is a mountain that I don't want to see. It is a situation that I don't want to face. People have the ability to not see what they don't want to see.

However, the Medrash is telling us that even though this meant sacrificing his only son, this meant conquering the most basic of human emotions -- the love of a father to a child - nevertheless, Avraham Avinu was able to see the place from a distance. Why? Because he was the type of person that could put G-d's needs before his own. Avraham Avinu was very human, but he was able to control his humanness and use it for the service of G-d. He put G-d's 'needs' before his own needs.

This is the same 'lifting of the eyes' that we have here. Avraham Avinu was 99 years old. He was sick and frail from an operation. How would most human beings act? They are not really in any mood of having guests and certainly will not sit and await their arrival. On the contrary, they will try to avoid, at all costs, coming into contact with any potential guests.

One comes into a shul. There is a poor person sitting there; there is a meshullach sitting there. Don't we all have our way of getting on the 'blindness' and passing by, stiff-necked, less we Chas v'sholom [G-d forbid], make eye-contact with the meshullach!

But Avraham 'lifted his eyes' and even when they were at a distance he had the ability to make his own needs secondary to the needs of the mitzvah and greet the Angels as if they were upon him. Avraham was able to overcome the human frailties, the human desires, the human passions, for the sake of the Ribono shel Olam.

"And G-d appeared to him". This Avraham Avinu -- that had just undergone the mitzvah of milah -- to him the Ribono shel Olam appeared. What is milah? Milah is making a commitment. It marks the place in our body that represents passions, sensuality, and desire and says it is committed. I am committing my drives, my desires, and my passions to G-d. That was the commitment of Parshas Lech Lecha.

Now, at the beginning of Parshas Vayera, the question becomes, "Are you, Avraham Avinu, going to live up to these commitments?" Avraham responds, "Yes, I am."

In Parshas Lech Lecha, Avraham made a theoretical commitment. Now, in Parshas Vayera, this commitment comes into play. Avraham is sick and frail. The inclination is to not want to do the mitzvah. One would, under those circumstances, have no interest in greeting guests. Nevertheless, Avraham Avinu can overcome his humanness. This is the strength of a human being. He can have wants, he can have desires, he can have needs but he can commit them and make them secondary to a higher cause.

This is what amazed the Angels. They came in towering over Avraham, a mere mortal. But departed with the recognition that Avraham towers over them. They were trembling in awe of him.

When the time came for the Jews to receive the Torah, and the Angels forgot for a moment and protested the Granting of the Torah to mere mortals, G-d made Moshe Rabbeinu look like Avraham to remind the Angels: "You forgot the way you felt when you came to Avraham, when you departed in awe of him; you forgot the awesome potential of 'mere mortals' who can take their desires and can make them secondary to the 'needs' of the Ribono shel Olam." Upon hearing that, the Angels ceased to complain.

This is what the Medrash means that in the merit of these three runnings that Avraham ran, the Jewish people merited to receive the Torah. These runnings showed what human beings are capable of. Namely, the aspiring to greatness which transcends their personal wants and needs. The Angels recognized that if human beings can, in fact, accomplish this, they are, indeed, worthy of a Torah.

The Best Education for Children: Do As I Do

The Gemara says in Bava Metziah [86b], that everything that Avraham prepared for the Angels by himself, G-d prepared for Klal Yisroel in the Wilderness by Himself and everything that Avraham

prepared for the Angels through an agent (shaliach), G-d prepared for Klal Yisroel through an agent.

I once heard a comment from Rav Chatzkel Sarna: It says in the pasuk that Avraham asked Yishmael to help out in the preparations for the Angels. According to the principle of the above-mentioned Gemara, this was an inferior way of doing the mitzvah. Rather than doing it himself, he delegated it to an agent -- Yishmael.

Rav Chatzkel Sarna asks, how can this be a complaint against Avraham? Why did he delegate the mitzvah to Yishmael? He wanted to educate him in the practice of extending hospitality to guests! How can we find basis for criticizing such a motive? Avraham wasn't being lazy by delegating the tasks to Yishmael. Avraham wanted to educate Yishmael. This is explicit in the Medrash.

Rav Sarna answers with a basic principle: The best way to educate your children -- is to do it yourself! This is even better than to instruct them that they should do acts of kindness. Theoretical teaching is far surpassed by setting an example of what to do.

A Jew once came into the Chofetz Chaim and complained that his son was not learning. He said he could not understand why his son was not learning. "He certainly sees in me the importance of learning. I appreciate Rabbis, I give honor to Talmidei Chachomim, I give to Yeshivas, I support Torah. Why doesn't my son have a desire to learn?"

The Chofetz Chaim asked, "Do you learn?"

The man explained, "You know how it is, I'm busy..."

The Chofetz Chaim said, "You're going to raise a fine child. He's going to appreciate Rabbis, he's going to give honor to Talmidei Chachomim, he's going to support Torah and Yeshivas. Why? Because that's what you taught him. You want to teach him to learn? You have to learn!"

The best education is to do it yourself. If one learns himself -- that is the best education for his children - that they should learn. If you do acts of chesed by yourself, that's the best education for your children - that they should do acts of chesed.

Chinuch can't be done on a theoretical basis. The best chinuch is to do it by yourself!

Glossary

hachnosas orchim -- extending hospitality to guests

meshullach -- charity collector

chas v'sholom -- Heaven forbid

Ribono shel Olam -- Master of the World

milah - circumcision

Klal Yisroel -- the Jewish people

Talmidei Chachomim -- Torah scholars
chinuch -- education
chesed -- kindness towards others

Personalities & Sources:

Rav Shlomo Breur (1850-1936) Studied in the Pressburg Yeshiva; married the youngest daughter of S.R. Hirsch and in 1888 succeeded his father-in-law as the Rav in Frankfurt.

Rav Yechezkel Sarna (1889-1969) -- born in Lithuania, student of Slobodka Yeshiva; son-in-law of Rav Moshe Mordechai Epstein; made aliyah in 1924 and assumed leadership of the Hebron Yeshiva in 1927 upon the death of his father-in-law.

Rav Yisroel Meir HaCohen Kagan of Radin [Chofetz Chaim] (1838-1933).

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (#71). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: The Last Will & Testament of Rabbeinu Yehuda Hachasid. The other halachic portions for Vayeira from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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