

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE AWAY FROM HOME...

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 390 Geirus - Mitzvah, Reshus, or Issur? Good Shabbos!

There's No Place Like Away From Home to Learn How to be a Good Host

The very first Rashi in our parsha [Bereishis 12:1] interprets the words "Go for yourself" (Lech-Lecha) to mean "for your own benefit and welfare". The Imrei Shammai cites an incident involving Reb Nachum of Chernobyl (1730-1787) which elucidates this Rashi.

Reb Nachum was once imprisoned. It did not take much in the Ukraine for a Jew -- a Rabbi especially -- to wind up in jail. An old Jew came to visit Reb Nachum and told him that he could explain a particular reason why Reb Nachum was sitting in jail.

Reb Nachum used to devote much effort to the mitzvah of redeeming Jews from captivity (pidyon shevuyim). At a time when Jews were arbitrarily and capriciously thrown into jail, he felt obligated to do whatever he could to work for their release. The old Jew told him that G-d put Reb Nachum himself in jail so that he would be able to appreciate what a great mitzvah he was doing when working for the release of Jewish prisoners. Now that he was sitting in jail, he would be better at empathizing with the prisoners who he helped. The next time he would go out to raise money for pidyon shevuyim, it would be a different experience. He would have more appreciation for the wonderful mitzvah that he was doing.

Here too, Avraham was destined to be the prototype of kindness toward his fellow man. He was destined to be the prototype of welcoming in wayfarers. G-d wanted to show him what a great mitzvah it is to be a host to guests who need a place to stay. The best way to learn how to be a host is to first be a traveler.

Anyone who needs to go away for a Shabbos experiences what it is like to be away from his family, away from his own bed, and away from his surroundings. Especially when a person is a wandering traveler for an extended period of time -- he really learns to appreciate the great kindness provided by those who warmly extend hospitality. This experience is the best training course for becoming a

better host.

Therefore, Avraham was directed "Lech Lecha". Be a traveler. It will be for your own benefit and welfare because knowing what it means to be a traveler will help you so much more when you want to become a host.

I know someone who is an excellent teacher. He had been an excellent student all his life and had always found learning easy. He was always stimulated by his classes and enjoyed learning. When he went to college, Physical Education was a required course. Physical Education for this person was like calculus for people who aren't good in mathematics. It was a disaster. He got a C in the course -- the lowest grade of his entire college career.

But he confided to me that this experience taught him how to be a better teacher. Had he coasted through his entire educational career without experiencing difficulty and frustration in a class, he would not have known the meaning of a student struggling and having difficulties with his studies. P.E. gave him the experience of being behind his classmates and feeling frustrated that it was so much easier for them and that they were so much better than he. That made him into a better teacher.

G-d was doing the same thing for Avraham. Go out -- for your own benefit. You will see how hard it is to be a traveler and you will be a much better host as a result.

Hesitant About Circumcision for the Best of Reasons

Avraham was 99 years old when he was instructed to circumcise himself. Many commentaries are bothered by the fact that Avraham waited until this point in his life before performing the Bris Milah. Our Sages teach that Avraham fulfilled the entire Torah (even Rabbinic enactments), even though he was not commanded to do so. If he fulfilled the entire Torah, why had he not yet performed this basic mitzvah of circumcision? Why did he wait for the specific command from G-d to do the Milah. A variety of answers are given to this question.

There is a related question that ties in with next week's parsha, which begins with G-d appearing to Avraham by the plains of Mamre. What was Avraham doing there? Our Sages teach us that Avraham had gone to seek counsel from Mamre regarding G-d's command that he should circumcise himself.

This is very strange. G-d gave Avraham a command to circumcise himself. What is there to discuss with Mamre? He did not consult with anyone when he was commanded to sacrifice his son. Regarding no other command do we find that Avraham sought counsel from his neighbors. Why was Milah different? This reinforces the evidence that for some reason Avraham was hesitant about going ahead with the circumcision. Why?

The Medrash seems to say that Avraham was hesitant about fulfilling the command of circumcision for the best of reasons.

Avraham was in the 'Kiruv [outreach] business'. He brought people under the wings of the Divine Presence. He felt -- and rightly so -- that to influence people spiritually, one has to be able to relate to them. People have to look at a person who is trying to influence them spiritually and think "I can relate to this person. He is a person like me. He is not crazy. He is not weird. I can become like that person."

As long as Avraham was uncircumcised he was like everybody else. Once he made that indelible mark on his body, however, he would be forever different. If he was going to be forever different, he knew that he would inevitably lose a certain amount of his ability to affect other people. He would no longer be the same as them. He would be looked at as strange and different. His whole mission in life would be adversely affected by the command of circumcision.

This is the meaning of the Medrash that Avraham went to Mamre. He did not inquire from Mamre whether he should or should not fulfill G-d's command. He just wanted to check Mamre's reaction to gauge whether he should do the Milah publicly or privately. Should he fulfill this Mitzvah in an open and public fashion or would he be better off doing it clandestinely?

Why Jeopardize Avraham's Career As A Kiruv Worker?

This explains Avraham's hesitancy to perform the circumcision. Avraham was concerned that it would jeopardize his efficacy in converting heathens. The question then becomes, given this correct concern by Avraham, what all of a sudden changed at age 99? Why did G-d suddenly demand circumcision at this point in Avraham's life? Avraham still had a long life ahead of him. Why did G-d jeopardize Avraham's career in 'kiruv' by requiring milah at this point in his life? Why didn't He wait until Avraham was 150, so that he would have another 51 years of being a better outreach worker? Avraham did not die until he was 175. Let him have milah at 170. Why 99? Why all of a sudden now?

Rav Nissan Alpert suggests that what happened at age 99 was that Avraham was now going to have a son who was supposed to become the future Jewish nation. As such, Avraham now has an even more important job than being an outreach worker for the nations. His job now became being the best educator possible for the future Jewish nation. He must become the most effective teacher possible not for the whole world, but for his own son.

As parents, we must try to be as perfect Jews and as perfect human beings as we can. We are the ultimate role models for our children. Therefore, we need to get our act together as parents. Even if until we became parents we fooled around or have not been serious about life, parenthood brings new responsibilities. This is true for every parent. It was certainly true for Avraham Avinu, who was the father of Yitzchak and the father of the future Jewish nation.

Avraham now had to become as perfect as possible. Since Milah was a step toward that paradigm of perfection, there was no putting it off any longer. Even if the outreach would suffer somewhat, he now had a more important job.

If I Were Rothschild, I Would Be Richer Than Rothschild

There was once a Mohel who was given the opportunity to be the Mohel of one of the grandchildren of the Brisker Rav [R. Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, 1886-1959]. After the Mohel performed the circumcision, he went to the Brisker Rav and expressed satisfaction at how thrilled he was that he had the merit to circumcise the grandson of such a great person.

The Brisker Rav told him he was making a silly mistake. The Brisker Rav pointed out that when fulfilling the commandment of circumcision, upon which 13 Covenants were made with G-d, it is such a great mitzvah that it does not make the slightest difference whether the baby being circumcised is the grandson of the Brisker Rav or the son of a simple Jew. The simple act of Milah is so great that it just cannot become any better than that.

The Brisker Rav gave the Mohel an example. There was once a poor man who earned his living by teaching small children (a melamed). In those days, teachers of small children were terribly poor. This melamed said, "If I were to suddenly receive all of Rothschild's money, I would be richer than Rothschild. Why is that, you may ask? Because I would have all of Rothschild's money and I would still do a little teaching on the side. I would be wealthier than Rothschild!"

The Brisker Rav told the Mohel that taking pride in circumcising his grandson is just as foolish. The wealth of the merit of doing any circumcision equates to the wealth of Rothschild. The added merit of circumcising my grandchildren is like the incremental few rubles of a melamed's salary. It is like adding \$7.95 to a billion dollars!

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Lech Lecha are provided below:

- Tape # 028 - Conversion (Geirus)
- Tape # 070 - Bris Milah: The Metzizah Controversy
- Tape # 119 - Conversion for Ulterior Motives
- Tape # 166 - The Childless Couple in Halacha
- Tape # 212 - Non-Jews and the Mitzvah of Kibbud Av
- Tape # 256 - Mohel and Baby: Who Goes to Whom
- Tape # 302 - The Mitzvah of Yishuv Eretz Yisroel
- Tape # 346 - Trading Terrorists for Hostages

- Tape # 390 - Geirus -- Mitzvah, Reshus, or Issur?
- Tape # 434 - Anesthesia During Milah
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