

WHY DID AVRAHAM CONSULT WITH MAMREI CONCERNING THE MITZVAH OF MILAH?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayera

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 479, Mitzvah of Inviting Guests. Good Shabbos!

Why Did Avraham Consult With Mamrei Concerning The Mitzvah of Milah?

The pasuk at the beginning of the parsha describes Avraham as sitting in Elonei Mamrei (the plains of Mamrei) when Hashem appeared to him. Rashi explains the significance of the Torah pinpointing his location on this occasion: It was Mamrei who advised him concerning the Milah (telling him that circumcision was a good idea). Therefore, G-d appeared to Avraham in Mamrei's territory.

Apparently, Avraham's other allies -- Aner and Eshkol - advised him against circumcision at this advanced age. Only Mamrei advised him to follow G-d's command and encouraged him to go ahead with the operation. By Hashem appearing to Avraham in Elonei Mamrei, Mamrei was eternally memorialized for his "participation" in Avraham's milah.

The commentaries are bothered by the idea that Mamrei advised Avraham to go ahead and listen to G-d's command to circumcise himself. It is impossible to contemplate that Avraham was in doubt as to whether to listen to the Divine command? If we take this teaching at face value, it would appear that Avraham was seeking out a "second opinion" as to whether to undergo this operation, despite the fact that G-d had commanded him to do it. This cannot be.

The Daas Zekeinim suggests that Avraham never had any doubt that he would fulfill G-d's command. His only doubt was whether he should circumcise himself publicly or privately. In other words, he consulted with Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei in order to gauge the surrounding neighbor's reaction to such an action. Mamrei advised Avraham to do it publicly.

The Imrei Shammai quotes from the work Toras Aharon al HaTorah, which provides a very interesting insight and alternate answer to this question. Avraham Avinu had no doubt in his mind

that he was going to perform the mitzvah of milah. So why did he need to go to the non-Jewish world to solicit advice? The answer is that Avraham wanted to place on the record the fact that even the non-Jew believes milah is a good idea. This would impress the "sinners of Israel" in every generation who always seek out the opinion of the non-Jews on all matters and respect their opinions (more than those of the rabbis).

Today, even Jews who have very little relationship with Judaism, who are extremely secular, do circumcise their sons. They call other mitzvos "old-fashioned", "archaic", or "anachronistic". Among many circles of our Jewish brethren, the concern over "what will they say?" is an excuse for the non-performance of so many of our mitzvos. However, milah is nevertheless widely observed even in "non-observant" circles.

Why is this so? The Toras Aharon suggests that Avraham Avinu achieved this lasting impact by consulting with Mamrei. Even the non-Jew believes milah is a good idea! As a result, the argument "what will the umos ha'olam say?" has never applied to this mitzvah.

Respect Begins At Home

Toward the beginning of the parsha, the visiting Angel delivered the message from G-d to Avraham: "I will surely return to you at this time next year, and behold Sarah your wife will have a son. Avraham and Sarah were elderly and that the manner of women had ceased to be with Sarah." Then in the next pasuk, Sarah asks: "After I have withered I shall again have delicate skin? And my husband is an old man."

In other words, Sarah wonders how is it possible for her to conceive, when she is already past her years of childbearing. In addition, her husband was an old man as well.

However, when Hashem went back to Avraham and chastised him for the laughing disbelief of his wife, Hashem only mentioned her argument that she was old to Avraham. The Almighty does not reveal to Avraham that Sarah had also doubted the news because "her husband was an old man." Rashi infers from this discrepancy - based on Chazal - that there is justification for changing (the truth) to preserve peace (between husband and wife).

Rav Pam asks the following question: Avraham Avinu was in fact 99 years old. Everyone knew that he was an old man. Everyone, no doubt, treated him like an old man. It was obvious to him that he was an old man. It would have not at all been news to Avraham that Sarah was surprised that she would conceive, because - among other reasons - her husband was old. Would Avraham really have been upset if he had heard the "full truth" from the Almighty?

Rav Pam explains that we see from here, that the whole world can recognize and tell a person that he is old, but he cannot hear that piece of news from his wife! The reverse is true as well. A woman can have gray hair. She can be a grandmother and even a great grandmother many times over. But G-d forbid, if her husband should tell her, "You know, you are getting up there in years."

A person may be able to hear that "news" from everybody, but one cannot hear it from his or her spouse. In spite of the intimacy between husband and wife, there is a certain degree of respect and manners that each must maintain with the other for the good of their marriage. Husbands cannot insult wives and wives cannot insult husbands even if the "insult" is nothing more than revealing a true and obvious fact.

A person must feel and see a certain amount of respect from their spouse. Other people may take liberties in certain comments that a spouse cannot take.

I recently heard a tape from Rabbi Mordechai Finkleman who lectures widely on the lack of Derech Eretz (proper, respectful conduct) we unfortunately find in many of our schools today. Of course this is a problem in the public schools and in non-Jewish circles. But it has become a problem even in our circles (anshei shlomeinu) as well. Derech Eretz is not what it used to be.

One observation that Rabbi Finkleman makes is that the children learn from what they see in their own houses -- how their parents treat each other. If they observe husband and wife manifesting Derech Eretz toward each other, the children will intuitively learn how they must treat their elders and their teachers. If the parents themselves are disrespectful and rude toward each other, what can be expected from the children?

He cited a historical rabbinical "kinus" (meeting) that took place in Europe 70 or 80 years ago to address the issue of lack of Derech Eretz in the European cheder of that day. Different Rabbis spoke about the problem of lack of respect and what should be done about it. The final speaker on the agenda was the Telzer Rav. After a whole series of proposals and ideas were presented by all the earlier speakers, the Telzer Rav's presentation consisted of one sentence: "If a person acts respectfully, he will be respected." In other words a dignified person commands respect. If we do not properly respect people, it is sometimes because they are not worthy of respect, based on the way they act.

If we want our children to show respect to their spouses, to their parents, and to their teachers, the first way to accomplish that is for we ourselves to demonstrate proper respect to our own spouses, our own parents, and our own teachers and rabbis.

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 Vayeira are provided below:

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