

AVRAHAM PROVIDES A LITTLE WATER WITH A LOT OF BREAD AND MEAT. WHY?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayera

Avraham Provides A Little Water With A Lot of Bread and Meat. Why?

A famous story is told regarding Rav Yisrael Salanter that is connected with this week's parsha. The founder of the Mussar movement was once invited to the home of a distinguished community leader for a meal. The host noticed that when his guest washed netilas yadayim before eating bread, he only washed up to the point where the fingers meet the palm. He was surprised that Rav Yisrael did not adhere to the preferred practice of pouring water on his hands up to his wrists (ad ha'perek). During the course of their meal, he asked the great rabbi why he sufficed with the minimal standard of washing. Rav Yisrael explained that it is very nice to be stringent (machmir) and wash until one's wrists. However, that is all fine and good if one does not have to worry about someone having to transport the water for him.

In those days, before the development of running tap water, there was a whole industry in Europe of manual labor to bring barrels of water from the source to private homes. Rav Yisrael was not willing to make someone else need to bring extra water to the house just because of his own piety or desire to fulfill mitzvos in the most optimal way. The principle he practiced was "Don't be a tzadik (righteous person) on someone else's calculation."

The Shemen HaTov notes that the source of this anecdote is in our Parsha. Parshas Vayeira is the parsha of hospitality (hachnasas orchim). Avram sees 3 passing wayfarers and can not do enough for them. He prepares a tremendous amount of food - meat and bread - for their comfort. Everything he does for them is in great quantity. The one exception is when he provides them with water. He requests: "Let a bit of water be taken and wash your feet, and recline beneath the tree." [Bereishis 18:4]

Why is Avram suddenly stingy with water, when he was expansive with meat and bread? The answer is that the Talmud relates [Bava Metziah 86b] that Avram had the water brought for the

guests via messenger (shliach). When he was preparing the food himself, he spared no effort or quantity. However, because the mitzvah of providing the water was done through a shliach, Avram did not want to trouble the shliach more than necessary and sufficed with providing "a bit of water". Who says the comfort of the guests is any more important than the comfort of the person who has to transport the water?

What this points out to us is that the Chessed (kindness) of Avraham Avinu was based on the fact that he perceived G-d's Image in every human being. He had the capacity to treat people in such a gracious fashion, because he saw a portion of Divinity in everyone. This is not always an easy thing to accomplish, to put it mildly. Since his Chessed was based on this appreciation and awareness, it dictated that his manifestation of kindness not be blindly dispensed. He had the greatness and sensitivity of spirit to realize that it is sometimes necessary to balance our display of kindness to one party so that it does not impinge on the honor or respect due someone else.

This contrasts with the dispensation of kindness demonstrated by another "Baal Chessed" elsewhere in this parsha. Lot travels to Sodom, a city noted for its lack of chessed. Yet, when these same angels come to Sodom, at the risk of his reputation, if not his life, Lot too offers them hospitality. He takes them in and treats them royally. After all, he learned how to dispense Chessed in the house of Avraham Avinu.

What is difficult to understand, however, is how this very same "Baal Chessed" was willing to give over his own daughters for violation when the masses of Sodom came pounding on his door demanding that he throw his guests out to them. Lot's response to the demand of the rabble to "Sodomize his guests" is "take my daughters, instead."

What happened to his Chessed? How does anyone do that?

The answer is that if a person's chessed is based on the Divine Image of mankind, he would never say such a thing. One would never sacrifice his own family member in order to do a chessed for someone else. However, Chessed that is an ego trip, chessed which is demonstrated to prove "what a nice guy I am" may indeed result in incongruous action. Chessed that is not based on the concept of "Dear is man who was created in His image" [Avos 3:14] could lead a person to do the craziest things in the world."

Wasted Chessed?

The pasuk [verse] in Micha says, "Give Truth (Emes) to Yakov, Kindness (Chessed) to Avraham..." [7:20]. That pasuk teaches us that the fundamental attribute of our first patriarch was his attribute of Chessed. Of the three parshiyos that deal with Avraham Avinu, Lech Lecha, Vayeira, Chayei Sarah, it is in Vayiera that the Torah chooses to highlight examples of this primary characteristic of his.

One example is providing hospitality on a hot day, 3 days after surgery as an old man, to three strangers. Another example is praying for the welfare of the people of Sodom, despite the fact that

those people stand at the polar opposite of what he represents. These are the two primary examples from throughout the Torah's narration of Avraham's life where we see his dedication to the attribute of kindness.

Is it not ironic that in both these incidents, the effort exerted by Avraham went virtually for naught? The angels did not need the food Avraham labored to prepare for him. Angels don't need food. They are not physical creatures! Again, all his prayers for Sodom were apparently wasted. Ten righteous people were NOT found in the city and so the city was destroyed. So, is it not strange that the two representative incidents of Chesed from the life of Avraham which the Torah highlights are incidents where the recipient did not really benefit from the kindness? Why then did the Torah choose these acts of Chesed as "classic" depictions of Avraham's primary attribute?

The answer is that the Torah is instructing us what Chesed is all about. Chesed is not about what it does for the "other person". Chesed is what it does for the person doing the act of kindness. Chesed is about being self-less. It is not about making someone feel good. Chesed is one of the acts through which a person can emulate the Almighty who "built the world with Chesed" [Tehillim 89:3].

When the Almighty does Chesed for us, it is totally selfless. Therefore, the Torah specifically picked these two incidents, where the act was totally selfless and not at all beneficial to the recipients, to demonstrate Avraham's emulation of this Divine attribute.

A person must realize that "chesed is not for the other guy, it is for me!" That is how we become G-d like. That is how we become self-less, rather than self-ish.

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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