

THE TRUE PROOF THAT AVRAHAM WAS A TRUE BAAL CHESSED

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayera

The True Proof That Avraham Was A True Baal Chessed

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape/CD # 743, Chazoras HaShatz -- More Important Than You Think. Good Shabbos!

Parsha Vayera is known as the parsha portraying the great hospitality and acts of Gemillas Chesed [kindness] of Avraham Avinu. It is in this parsha that, even though he was ill and suffering, Avraham went out of his way to seek guests to host in his tent. Avraham was the archetypical "benefactor of kindness" (gomel chessed).

Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, in his Emes L'Yakov, makes the following observation. The Medrashim are replete with the various types of hospitality that Avraham demonstrated. "He planted an Eishel in Beer Sheva" [Bereishis 21:33]. Chazal tell us that the word Eishel [Aleph-shin-lamed] (which superficially refers to a tree planted for shade) is an acronym for Achilah [food], Shtiyah [drink], and Levaya [accompaniment]. Avraham's tent was open to all four sides, to make sure he would catch the guests from whichever direction they approached. Throughout the words of our Sages, Avraham is associated with the Divine Attribute of Chessed.

Yet it seems that this is the only parsha where we see explicitly that Avraham engaged in acts of kindness. This incident at the start of Vayera is the paradigm of Avraham Avinu's chessed. We find no mention of it in Lech Lecha or in Chayei Sarah.

Rav Yaakov also wonders about the juxtaposition of this act of kindness to the story of the destruction of Sodom. Rav Yaakov suggests that the Biblical proof that Avraham Avinu was such a master of kindness is not from the brief incident with the Angels at the start of the parsha. Rather, the proof emerges from the juxtaposition of the two stories -- that of hosting the guests and that of the destruction of Sodom.

Sodom was noteworthy for their lack of hospitality. They had mandated local legislation prohibiting hospitality. Any person caught practicing acts of chessed in Sodom was severely punished. This

society did not only have laws forbidding loitering and all kinds of other things -- they actually had anti-chedsed laws!

The nature of human beings is that if one has a proclivity to act in a certain way and someone else has a proclivity to act in a diametrically opposite fashion then the people by nature has negative feelings towards each other. The people of Sodom represented the very antithesis of Avraham's personality. All that he preached and practiced throughout his lifetime -- regarding kindness towards one's fellow man -- was mocked and rejected in its entirety by the Sodomite society. They negated and undermined all the influence Avraham was trying to exert in the world by acting in the way they did.

Therefore, it would be only natural and understandable for Avraham's reaction to be one of joy and jubilation upon hearing the news from the Almighty that "I am going to destroy Sodom". At the very least, we would have expected an attitude of "Good riddance! Go for it!"

Rashi (on the words Vayigash Avraham) states that the word Vayigash connotes three different things. It can mean drawing near for the sake of war, for the sake of prayer, or for the sake of seeking to appease. Rashi cites Biblical citations for each usage of the word. We can understand how Avraham's approach before the Almighty might be for prayer or might be to seek to mollify Him. However, how shall we understand the third connotation of the word -- drawing near to do battle? I saw once a comment that this was a personal battle that Avraham had to fight within himself. He was torn. On the one hand, he felt "Get rid of these people. They deserve to be wiped out for their meanness and selfishness." On the other hand, Avraham overcame this emotion and countered it with his plea on behalf of the Sodomites which was the other (victorious) side of his personal battle regarding the matter.

This is the paradigm of Avraham's great attribute of Chessed according to Rav Yakov Kamentsky. It is not merely that as an ill and elderly man, he rushed to serve three travelers on a hot day when he was suffering from recent surgery. The paradigm is the juxtaposition of the two incidents. Immediately after being introduced to Avraham's propensity for hospitality, which might lead us to assume Avraham would be satisfied with the demise of an anti-hospitality society, we see that Avraham wrestles with that natural inclination and prays for the welfare even of the Sodomites. He does this not in a perfunctory fashion, but in a long and eloquent dialog with the Almighty, pleading for the welfare of the Sodomites. He begs for them!

This is the quintessential Baal Chessed -- one whose love of people is so great that it overrides every other intellectual or emotional consideration that he might have. This is why Parshas Vayera is known as the parsha which personifies the great attributed of Chessed manifested by Avraham Avinu.

"To The Place Where He Had Stood Before Hashem"

The Torah teaches: "Avraham arose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before Hashem..." [Bereishis 19:27]

Avrohom pleads for Sodom. It does not help. The city of Sodom is destroyed. Avraham realizes that his prayers were not successful when he sees the smoke rising from the city of Sodom. The Gemara expounds on this pasuk's emphasis that Avraham returned "to the spot where he had prayed originally": "Whoever establishes a fixed place for his prayers, the G-d of Avraham will help him." Likewise, "Whoever establishes a fixed place for his prayers is amongst the disciples of Avraham Avinu." When such a person dies, the Talmud says he is eulogized "What a pious person, what a humble person, he is a disciple of the patriarch Avraham." [Berachos 6b]

This seems to be a bit of hyperbole. It may be a very nice practice to not move around from place to place in shul, but is it not overstating the matter a bit by saying "What a chasid! What an Anav! What a disciple of Avraham Avinu!"? What is the big deal?

Half in jest, a witty answer is given to this question: If a person spends his whole life in one shul without ever getting upset and quitting over some run-in with the president or the Gabbai or the Rabbi or some Board member then indeed he must be extremely pious, extremely humble, a disciple of Avraham Avinu.

In truth, however, I would like to suggest another interpretation that I saw in the latest volume of Shemen HaTov. The pasuk in Tehillim says, "Who will ascend the Mountain of Hashem and who will arise to his Holy Place?" [Tehillim 24:3]. The pasuk alludes to two levels of greatness. The first level is "Who will ascend the Mountain of G-d?" to reach levels of spiritual elevation. The second level is a much greater challenge -- "And who will be able to remain in that Holy Place?" -- Who can maintain that level of spiritual elevation once he has attained it?

Invariably in life, we have periods of spiritual waxing and waning. Many times, things happen to us in life that are disappointments and because of that, we become discouraged and fall down a level in our spiritual attainment. This is intent of the pasuk in Tehillim. "Mi ya'aleh beHar Hashem" is a beautiful level to achieve. However, "uMi yakum bimkom Kodsho?" -- remaining on that level is an even greater challenge.

It would only be natural for Avrahm Avinu -- after he davened for Sodom and pleaded on their behalf -- that when he looks out and sees the city going up in smoke that there should be discouragement and disappointment: "My prayers were in vain. G-d ignored my pleas." For most people, at least temporarily, there would be somewhat of a spiritual throwing in of the towel. The tendency would be to give up hope, to slacken off in one's faith, and so forth.

The greatness of the Patriarch Avraham was that he established a fixed place for his prayer (koveah makom l'tfiloso). He davened for Sodom. He was rejected. However, the next day he went back to the same place and davened the same way with the same faith, the same enthusiasm and the same concentration. There was no spiritual descent.

This is the true intent of the statement "one who establishes a fixed place for his prayer, the G-d of Avraham will help him." It does not mean merely davening in the same seat. It means despite setbacks and disappointments that one invariably faces in life, he still is able to be steadfast and constant in his service and devotion to the Almighty. Such a person is a true disciple of Avraham. Such a person has achieved true piety and humility.

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 Vayera are provided below:

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