

PARSHAS VAYERA - SPECIAL ENOUGH TO CARE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Special Enough To Care¹

Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day.

One of the many excuses they have come up with to hate us is circumcision. Anti-semites point to bris milah as a reason to reject us because, they say, it teaches us to reject them. The purpose and function of the bris, they insist, is to place a firewall between our community and the rest of the world. Because of the bris, Jews hold themselves to be a nation apart, living separate and aloof from the concerns of the rest of humanity.

Our parshah makes a very different statement.

Hashem's appearance to Avraham does not mark the first time that Hashem spoke to him directly. It is, nonetheless, a first for him. Only now does Avraham assume the role of the public navi - the kind of person about whom it is written, "For Hashem Elokim will not do anything unless he has revealed His secret to His servants the nevi'im." Therefore, right after the departure of Avraham's guests, Hashem fills him in on coming events. It is significant that the Torah offers us a picture of Avraham at work in his new role only after he passes the test of performing the mitzvah of bris milah. (The Torah here suggests that while the universe is full of Hashem's presence, only certain people get to experience that presence directly - and only after an act of extraordinary devotion, such as the one that Avraham performed.)

What message does Avraham receive? We have to wait for it, until the three visitors finish their "meal" and leave. Only then do we learn of the crucial information that Hashem urged upon Avraham: the planned destruction of Sodom. We cannot discern anything in the message that Avraham needed to know for his own purposes. Avraham did not need to ponder the sordid past of the city in order to reject it. Avraham already conducted his life in a manner diametrically opposed to the value system and behavior of that den of iniquity.

Rather, the beneficiary of the nevuah was the Jewish people. Avraham's descendants would one day in the distant future find themselves faced with the same challenges as the residents of Sodom. A land of plenty would shower them with luxury - and leave them vulnerable to the decadence that results from losing oneself to the blandishments of material comfort. Those descendants, "the great and mighty nation" that Hashem points to as the reason for His revelation to Avraham, would need to

draw on the lessons of Sodom to avoid the pitfalls of misusing G-d's abundant gifts.

What Jews would retain, generations later, was not simply the story of the overthrowing of Sodom. They would need something more than to remember the horrible failure of an icon of prosperity. Rather, they would remember two contrasting images that are intertwined by the circumstances of Avraham's nevuah. On the one hand is the picture of a dissolute city that banned acts of kindness to strangers; on the other, is a snapshot of an aged Avraham, wracked with the pain of a circumcision days earlier, and nonetheless scurrying about in the service of his fellow human beings! The Torah places the two images in stark relief against each other, by interrupting the narrative of Hashem's foretelling of the destruction of Sodom. After beginning that story, the Torah abruptly puts it on hold, and switches to coverage of Avraham's chesed! And all this is linked to, and happens as a consequence of, the practice of circumcision!

Did bris milah turn Avraham into an insular, jingoistic loner, prepared to abandon the world and go it alone? Quite the opposite.

Avraham is described elsewhere as "ha-lvri" - the one who would stand on one side of an issue against the catcalls of the entire world. Yet the immediate aftermath of the bris depicts him as a friend of humanity.

Where do we find Avraham immediately after the bris? Still living with the very non-Jewish Aner, Eshkol and Mamrei. The circumcision did not cause Avraham to change his relationship with the three people with whom he had previously forged an alliance. When commanded regarding the bris, Avraham had harbored only one concern, according to Chazal: perhaps people would now draw away from him! This fear drove him out of his recuperation into the blazing sun, to pursue opportunities of hachnasas orchim.

What kind of orchim did he seek to welcome into his home, and lavish with meticulous attention to detail? Uncircumcised wanderers! After convincing them to join him, he involves his entire household in serving them, freshly preparing all the food items. These three guests had a special place in his heart. They removed the fear from his heart that the circumcision would create unwanted distance between himself and the rest of the world.

The upshot of Avraham's bris milah is that he continues to flourish as a paragon of humane concern for all people.

This vignette of Avraham's passion for chesed is well preserved in the legacy he left his children. Even those who hate us often begrudgingly concede that when those circumcised Jews are given an opportunity to interact with general society, they shower the world with charity and benevolence.

The narrative of Avraham and the three malachim also bursts a second, unrelated stereotype. The popular mind associates prophecy with imagination and visions born of states of ecstasy. Alternatively, people think prophecy to be a by-product of deep, meditative self-absorption and

abstract contemplation. Both of these conceptions are false. Avraham's finest moment as a full prophet comes in the midst of very normal life activities, albeit all performed in the context of mitzvah observance. Prophecy is not linked to any self-induced altered state of consciousness, so much as to the steadfast performance of activities that bring a person closer to Hashem. As Chazal tell us, the Shechinah descends upon a person not through moroseness nor through levity; not through sloth and idleness. It descends only through the joy of mitzvah performance.

The Jewish servant of G-d does not become some sort of monster. Circumcision does not create distance; prophecy does not take hold of warped minds. The true human exemplar of Hashem's goodness continues his life as a humanitarian.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 18:1
 2. Amos 3:7
 3. Bereishis 18:18
 4. Shabbos 30B
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