

# PARSHAS VAYERA

*by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff*

*Vayera, 5632/33*

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar with a quotation from the second paragraph of Medrash Rabba on this parsha. That Medrash Rabba, in turn, cites a pasuk in Iyov (19:26): "Ve'achar ori nikfu zohs; umibisari echezeh Eloka." (ArtScroll: "After my skin was stricken, they pierced me; and I see the judgment of God from my flesh.")

The Medrash -- which, by definition, is not the plain/simple/literal interpretation -- feels that these words might just as well also have been spoken by Avraham Avinu after he had performed bris mila on himself. Viewing the pasuk in that context, the Medrash presents its reading of this pasuk: "After I performed the bris mila, many people circled around me to follow my path; and once I made this change in my flesh, I was able to see HaShem much more clearly."

The Sfas Emes's reaction to this text signals his whole approach to this parsha. Kedarko bakodesh, the Sfas Emes presents what is, in effect, a Medrash on the Medrash. Thus, he tells us that all Creation is connected with HaShem. How? Via a contact point--a nekuda-- through which life-giving chiyus from HaShem can flow to us... This nekuda gives all Creation access to the chiyus emanating from HaShem...

Thus, the entire cosmos has its existence only from its constant contact--via the nekuda--with HaShem.. But note a potential problem... Our awareness that we exist only thanks to the chiyus from HaShem may be blocked by a klipa--a husk--of evil... How can we handle this potential problem? Drawing on the Sfas Emes's conceptualization of Bris Mila, we see a solution to our potential problem. Remove the husk blocking awareness of our constant contact with HaShem. HaShem's Presence will then be revealed..Note the parallel with Bris Mila. When the outer covering--the foreskin--is removed, our special relationship with HaShem--the covenant--is evident...

Continuing with this line of thought, the Sfas Emes points out that the name of this parsha -- "Vayeira" ("And He appeared") -- tells the same story.. That is, by performing the mitzva of bris mila, Avraham pierced the outer covering that was hiding HaShem's Presence, and then (presto!) "And HaShem appeared." (see footnote below [1]).

The Sfas Emes deepend his discussion of this subject in his ma'amar of 5633. A basic question that puzzles many thinking people is: Why did HaShem create the world? Apparently, the Sfas Emes asked himself that question, for he provided an answer to it. He tells us that HaShem created the

world so that people would be aware of His Presence and bring testimony (by their manner of living) that HaShem gives life to all creation. (A person may or may not find this answer persuasive. But the mere fact that the Sfas Emes felt that he had to confront the question is noteworthy.)

Proceeding further, the Sfas Emes notes that the letters of the word "Vayeira" ("And He appeared") can be rewritten to form the word "Vayahr" ("And He saw").

Mention of the word "Vayahr," in turn, immediately brings to mind (that is, to the mind of the Sfas Emes, and thence, to our minds) a pasuk which echoes the word "Vayahr". Which pasuk? The pasuk (Bereishis, 1:31): which concludes the Torah's account of Creation. That is: "Vayahr HaShem es kohl asher asah, vehinei tov me'od." (ArtScroll: "And God saw all that He had made; and behold, it was very good.") The Sfas Emes adds that the gaze of HaShem continues forever, giving life and vibrancy to the whole world.

The Sfas Emes now returns to his central theme. That is, we can -- indeed, we must -- remove the external shell which conceals HaShem's Presence, and thus bring testimony concerning the real real world. In fact, the Sfas Emes tells us, Bnei Yisroel can be better witnesses to HaShem's Presence and to His constant sustaining force of all creation (i.e., that He is mechayeh hakohl) than are the malachim (the agents that HaShem uses to manage the world).

Why so? Because the malachim have ready access to the truth and hence are totally aware of HaShem. By contrast, for Bnei Yisroel, HaShem is hidden -- indeed, this world is called "alma deshikra" (the world of falsehood). Nevertheless, Bnei Yisroel fight on to be witnesses of HaShem's reality. And at substantial cost to themselves, Bnai Yisroel accept His Kingship!

Perhaps as a bonus for sticking with him in hard times when things are difficult, the Sfas Emes offers us his comment on another pasuk (Bereishis 18 :1). That pasuk says: "vehu yosheiv pesach ha'ohel..." (ArtScroll: "And he (Avraham) was sitting at the entrance of the tent..." Says the Sfas Emes: We give joy to HaShem when we conduct ourselves properly. In fact, the way HaShem structured the world, the entire cosmos gets its direction from our behavior. (For, if we live our lives properly, HaShem's Presence in the world is revealed.)

Nevertheless, we should not exaggerate our importance. Thus, we should be aware that we are only "at the entrance of the tent." Even if we serve HaShem passionately ("... kechom hayom ...;" "in the heat of the day"), we are enjoined to see ourselves in proper perspective. I suggest that what the Sfas Emes has in mind here is that we conduct ourselves with due humility as well as with gratitude to HaShem for giving us Torah and mitzvos. These gifts help us fulfill our awesome responsibility of revealing HaShem's Presence behind the klipa.

To conclude for today, I cannot resist lifting a thought of the Sfas Emes on this parsha in the next year, 5634. On the phrase (Bereishis, 18:1) "HaShem appeared to him " Rashi -- echoing Chazal -- tells us that HaShem came "levakeir es hacholeh" ("to visit the sick person.").

Who was the sick person whom HaShem came to visit ? Presumably, Avraham Avinu, who had not yet recovered from surgery-- his bris mila. The Sfas Emes reacts negatively to this suggestion -- that Avraham was sick because he was still recovering from the surgery of bris mila. He offers in its stead a mind-stretching non-pshat. Thus he quotes a pasuk in Shir HaShirim (2:5) : "Ki cholas ahava ahni" ("For I am sick with love."). You might feel that this expression is merely a guzma (hyperbole) and/or chassidisch emotionalism. But look at what is happening here. A man who is 99 years old, without anesthesia, sharp instruments, or germ-free conditions, performs bris mila on himself ! To undergo this painful and dangerous experience solely because HaShem had asked to do so, the person truly must have been " lovesick"!

[1] A question comes to mind at this point. Women cannot have Bris Mila. Hence, the question: How do women fit into this picture? The Gemara (Avoda Zara, 27,a) provides an answer: namely, that women are considered as already circumcised! Moreover, this view is not rhetorical; it is applied lehalacha. Thus the Gemara gives us the rule that only a person who is circumcised may perform Bris Mila. And the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Dei'ah, 264) paskins (rules) that a woman may in fact circumcise.

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