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To: Parsha@YahooGroups.com  
From: crshulman@aol.com

## INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON VAYERA - 5765

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Surf A Little Torah Yeshivat Har Etzion

Parashat Vayera

BY RAV DAVID SILVERBERG

Many years after Parashat Vayera, Benei Yisrael constructed a mishkan (Tabernacle) in the wilderness. One specific feature of this edifice was the "bri'ach hatikhon" - the central beam that ran across the entire structure, from one end to the other. Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel (Shemot 36:33) writes that Benei Yisrael made this central beam from the tree that Avraham Avinu planted in Be'er Sheva, where he "called out in the Name of G-d." Targum Yonatan undoubtedly referred to the mysterious "eshel" spoke of in Parashat Vayera (Bereishit 21:33): "He planted an 'eshel' in Be'er Sheva, and he called there in the Name of G-d, the Lord of the universe." Rashi cites a dispute from the Midrash whether "eshel" means an orchard from which he fed guests fruits or a motel to offer hospitality to wayfarers; Targum Yonatan seems to understand the word to mean a single tree.

In any event, the question of course arises, wherein lies the relationship between the tree planted by Avraham in Be'er Sheva and the mishkan in the wilderness? Why is it significant that they specifically used wood from this tree to fashion the central beam?

The answer would seem to lie in Rashi's comments to the second half of the aforementioned verse: "He called there in the Name of G-d." Rashi explains that through his hospitality, Avraham glorified the Name of G-d. He would take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the arrival of guests to spread the truth of monotheism. He would explain to his visitors that the single G-d takes the credit for the delicacies they enjoyed in Avraham's tent, thus prompting them to thank and acknowledge the source of all blessing in the universe.

The connection between the "eshel" and the mishkan, then, may relate to the universal aspect of the Temple. In his famous prayer at the dedication ceremony of the Bet Hamikdash, King Shelomo (Melakhim I 8:41-43) speaks of the gentiles coming to the Temple to worship the Almighty. Likewise, the prophets Yeshayahu (2:1-3) and Mikha (4:1-2) foretell of the many nations who will descend upon the Temple in Jerusalem to study the word of G-d. Although in one sense G-d's representative presence among Benei Yisrael marked an intense personal relationship between Him and His people, ultimately the concept of a "mikdash" means universalizing the awareness of G-d, the dissemination of the moral and ethical standards that Benei Yisrael have taken upon themselves to represent.

This function constitutes the "central beam" that holds the mishkan together. The different accessories in the Temple symbolize different aspects of religious service. But the single theme that runs throughout

the ideal of the Mikdash is Avraham Avinu's "eshel," his successful campaign to teach the world the ways of G-d.

Not always will people gladly enter Benei Yisrael's "eshel." Avraham Avinu was a wealthy, prominent and influential personality in Eretz Canaan; the same could be said many years later about King Shelomo. Commoners and dignitaries alike naturally visited their houses of worship and came under their sphere influence. Unfortunately, however, throughout our exile and most notably during recent weeks, the world looks to criticize the Jewish people rather than learn therefrom. Am Yisrael has often earned the scorn and contempt of the surrounding nations, rather than their respect. The question of whom to blame is of far less importance than the reinforcement of our commitment to this "central beam" of our spiritual mission. At such times we must galvanize our efforts to ensure that our communities more firmly ground themselves on the ideals of "tzedaka u'mishpat," such that we can properly represent G-d's wisdom to all mankind.

The Gemara in Masekhet Nidda (69b) relates that the people of Alexandria posed twelve questions to Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Chanania, including several "foolish" questions. Among them, records the Gemara on the next page (70b), was an issue related to Parashat Vayera. This parasha tells of the destruction of the city of Sedom, which featured the bizarre incident of Lot's wife. The angel who came to save Lot and his family from the destruction gave them strict orders not to turn around and watch as they flee. Lot's wife ignored the command, turned around, and suddenly transformed into a pillar of salt (19:26). [See the commentary of Rabbeinu Yosef Bekhor Shor, who offers a surprising interpretation of the verse.] The people of Alexandria asked Rabbi Yehoshua whether or not physical contact with this pillar of salt renders one ritually impure, just as contact with a dead body does. Rabbi Yehoshua responded with what the Gemara considered the offensively obvious answer: "A dead body transmits ritual impurity, but a pillar of salt does not transmit ritual impurity."

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Iggerot Moshe, Y.D. vol. 1, 230), however, wonders why the Gemara felt the answer to be so obvious. After all, Rabbi Eliezer maintains that a certain measurement of ashes from a cremated body does, in fact, transmit ritual impurity. Why should the salt of Lot's wife be any different than these ashes? And although the halakha does not follow this opinion of Rabbi Eliezer (see Masekhet Ohalot 2:2), why does the Gemara ridicule the questioners for inquiring as to whom the halakha follows? Additionally, claims Rav Moshe, all authorities agree that if a body that had been burnt still retains the form of a human body, it can transmit ritual impurity (Nidda 28). Perhaps, then, the people of Alexandria wondered whether or not the pillar of salt retained the form and shape of Lot's wife! Why, then, did the Gemara consider their question foolish?

Rav Moshe concludes that the Gemara must have assumed that Lot's wife never died. Meaning, she turned from a human being into a pillar of salt without the occurrence of death. Therefore, the Gemara could not take this question seriously. This pillar of salt had no trace of human life or of ever having possessed human life; it was a purely inanimate object. There is thus no reason in the world why it should transmit impurity. One cannot compare Lot's wife to a cremated body, in which case the individual died and his remains then turned into ashes. Since death occurred, ritual impurity is possible. Lot's wife, by contrast, never died; she at once became an inanimate object, which does not generate ritual impurity.

Sedom, the city that meets its destruction in Parashat Vayera, has earned its place in religious Jewish history as the paradigm of social injustice (see, for example, Yeshayahu 1:10), its destruction the quintessential example of mass annihilation (see Devarim 29:22). The story of Sedom

is one of the clearest instances in Chumash of direct retribution for collective sin, of a wicked society that receives its due punishment in full measure.

We must therefore try to understand one view in the mishna in Masekhet Avot 5:10: "One who says, 'What's mine is mine and what's your is yours' - this is the average attitude. Some say, this is the attitude of Sedom." What's so terrible about someone keeping what rightfully belongs to him and refusing to take that which belongs to others? Granted, we must aspire to a higher level of sensitivity towards the needs of others and seek to nurture our attribute of "chesed." But why does such an approach deserve the very derogatory association with Sedom?

One answer suggested explains that the mishna refers to an attitude that sets the ideal at the level of "what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours." This axiom became the governing social philosophy in Sedom. When this ideology marks the level beyond which no one aspires, the result is Sedom. As the Midrash relates, the city's constitution banned hospitality, as inferred from the Chumash itself. When a society's ideals negate at their core the value of assisting others and lending a hand to the need, an ethical vacuum emerges. One who has yet to inculcate Avraham's Avinu's message of kindness and selflessness has not necessarily rendered himself worthy of association with Sedom. However, once an individual or society sets their goals no further than avoiding taking from others, they have embarked on a dangerous journey on the road to Sedom.

Parashat Vayera opens with G-d's appearance to Avraham. Strangely, no conversation takes place between the two, at least none that the Torah records. Chazal explain that G-d came to fulfill the mitzva of "bikkur cholim" - visiting the sick, as Avraham, a man of ninety-nine years of age, was in the process of recovering from his circumcision. The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (14a) bids us to follow the Almighty's lead: "Just as the Almighty visits the sick, so must you visit the sick."

The invention of the telephone a century or so ago raises the possibility of a convenient way to fulfill the mitzva. Rather than actually leaving one's house to visit an ill patient, perhaps one can simply pick up the phone and give his sick friend a call. Can one fulfill the mitzva of visiting the sick by making a phone call? (The same question may apply to letters and e-mails, as well.)

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Iggerot Moshe Y.D. vol. 1, 123) answers that although one can fulfill one aspect of this mitzva by phone, personal visitation is necessary for the complete fulfillment of the obligation. He explains that the obligation of visiting the sick entails three different elements: to encourage the patient, to pray on his behalf, and to offer basic assistance. Rav Moshe argues that the final two components require a personal visit. In terms of praying on behalf of the patient, Rav Moshe suggests that personal visitation is indispensable for two reasons. First, a visual encounter will arouse the visitor's compassion and prompt him to pray with more emotion and vigor. Secondly, whereas Chazal teach us that the Shekhina resides at the bed of an ill patient, prayers are more beneficial at his bedside. Regarding the second element, the obligation of assisting the patient in practical matters generally requires personal attendance. Even the first component of the mitzva, the encouragement afforded to the patient through the visit of a caring friend, can be achieved in full only through a personal visit. Rav Moshe claims that this obligation may be fulfilled only partially through the telephone; a personal visit means much more to a sick patient than a mere phone call.

Parashat Vayera includes Avraham's valiant effort to annul the divine decree of annihilation against the wicked city of Sedom. The Torah describes Avraham's intervention with the word, "vayigash," literally, "he approached" (18:23). Rashi there notes the various connotations of

this word. One usage of the word appears in the parasha that opens with, and derives its name from, this word - Parashat Vayigash. There, as Rashi observes, "vayigash" implies an attempt at appeasement, as it depicts Yehuda's attempt to save Binyamin from Egyptian captivity. Interestingly, however, in his commentary to that portion in Parashat Vayigash, Rashi describes Yehuda as fiercely threatening the Egyptian viceroy; the "appeasement" in this instance took the form of bitter confrontation. This image relates, appropriately enough, to a second usage of the word, in Shemuel II 10, where the word refers to warfare. This apparent association of the term "vayigash" with aggressiveness calls upon us to take a closer look at its usage in our context. How may we uphold this understanding of the word in the context of Avraham's appeal on behalf of Sedom? Additionally, Rashi notes yet a third meaning of "vayigash": prayer. Rashi concludes that Avraham here engages in all three definitions of the word "vayigash": appeasement, war, and prayer. How does this word accommodate both "prayer" and an aggressive, militant operation?

One explanation given focuses upon the delicate balance Avraham must find in his effort to spare Sedom. On the one hand, he works now as their defender, trying to find some basis for an acquittal, or at least a pardon. On the other hand, as the leading champion of the ideals of loving kindness and compassion, he can only look upon the corrupt society of Sedom with utter contempt and disdain. The values of Sedom directly oppose Avraham's entire campaign in Canaan, which sought to steer the population in the direction of proper conduct among people. As he attempts to invoke divine mercy on behalf of the sinners, Avraham does two things: he sincerely begs for a pardon, seeking a presence of righteous residents in the city on whose account G-d may spare the city, and, secondly, he "wages war" against the corrupt society. In other words, even as Avraham pleads on Sedom's behalf, he retains his relentless commitment to fight against everything the city represents. His petition to G-d did not undermine for a moment Avraham's fierce campaign to destroy the culture that Sedom had introduced and come to embody.

This explanation may help us find the proper approach towards those who seek to undermine Torah values. Like Avraham, we must genuinely concern ourselves with their welfare and pray on their behalf. However, this benevolent attitude towards the perpetrators of evil must never translate into benevolence towards evil itself. Although we must extend good-will towards our ideological opponents, we must also continue to fight on behalf of the ideology they seek to destroy.

Earlier this week we mentioned Chazal's explanation of G-d's appearance to Avraham in the beginning of Parashat Vayera, that He came to visit Avraham who was still recovering from his circumcision (Sota 14a). Today we will focus on an interesting halakhic issue regarding visiting the sick.

The Gemara in Shabbat (12a) cites a dispute between Bet Hillel and Bet Shamai as to whether or not one may visit the sick on Shabbat. Bet Shamai forbids such a visit since it will cause the visitor distress, which is not allowed on Shabbat (Rashi). Bet Hillel argues. Given our general tendency to follow the rulings of Bet Hillel when disputed by Bet Shamai, it would appear that no room for stringency exists in this regard. However, the Gemara on the very next page (12b) cites an intriguing comment of Rabbi Chanina: "With great difficulty they [Chazal] allowed consoling the mourners and visiting the sick on Shabbat." According to Rabbi Chanina, Chazal look down upon visiting the sick (and consoling mourners, though this is not our topic for now) on Shabbat, and they allowed it only in response to extenuating considerations. If so, then one should preferably not visit the sick on Shabbat.

The question arises, however, does Rabbi Chanina state this view independently, or does he intend to clarify the lenient position of Bet Hillel? In other words, does Rabbi Chanina come to present a third view, different from both Bet Shammai - who forbade Shabbat visitations altogether - and Bet Hillel - who allowed visiting the sick without reservation, or does he argue that even the lenient position of Bet Hillel prefers refraining from visiting patients on Shabbat?

This question is critical for our arrival at a final ruling. If Rabbi Chanina represents a third opinion, we would presumably rule in accordance with Bet Hillel, and thus allow without hesitation visiting the sick on Shabbat. If, however, Rabbi Chanina clarifies Bet Hillel's otherwise ambiguous view, then we, who follow Bet Hillel, would prefer that people not visit the sick on Shabbat.

The Magen Avraham (O.C. 287) adopts Rabbi Chanina's halakha as normative. He therefore rules that people should not specifically plan to visit an ill patient on Shabbat; they may pay such a visit only if they could not do so during the week.

Rav Eliezer Waldenberg (Shut Tzitz Eliezer, vol. 13, 36) disagrees. He observes that both the Rambam (Hilkhos Shabbat 24:5) and the Shulchan Arukh (O.C. 287) rule unconditionally that one may visit the sick on Shabbat. He also notes that the Levush allows visiting the sick on Shabbat without hesitating, arguing that the mitzva of performing kindness overrides the prohibition of experiencing distress on Shabbat. Accordingly, rules Rav Waldenberg, under all circumstances one may visit a sick patient on Shabbat.

Before destroying Sodom, G-d "consults," as it were, with Avraham. The Torah lets us in on G-d's "thought process" when deciding to divulge this information to Avraham: "For I know him, that he will instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of G-d by doing what is just and right..." (18:19). Rashi explains the expression "yedativ" ("I know him") in this context as affection. Meaning, G-d professes His special love for Avraham specifically on account of his commitment to teaching the ways of G-d to his offspring.

One explanation for this basis of G-d's love for Avraham likens his instruction to his children to that of a skilled worker. A practitioner who works only for his wages will not necessarily encourage his children to pursue the same occupation. He will rather advise them to seek other professions that make a better profit for less work. One who truly loves what he does and views it as bearing paramount significance will strongly urge his children to follow his example in career selection.

G-d's love for Avraham thus resulted from Avraham's love for G-d, as reflected by his commitment to disseminating the ideals of G-dliness throughout the world. As the Chatam Sofer notes, others before Avraham - most notably, Chanokh - had also achieved exalted spiritual heights. However, true devotion to the word of G-d entails more; it results in a relentless effort to share it with others, to teach, assist, guide, and inspire. Avraham was chosen to father G-d's nation, then, because he possessed the spark necessary to ignite the eternal transmission of the "mesora" (tradition). Only one with such an inflamed devotion to the way of G-d can implant these ideals within the hearts of his progeny.

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Covenant & Conversation

Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha from

RABBI DR. JONATHAN SACKS

Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth

[from 2 years ago]

Vayera On seeing G-d in the face of the Stranger

The eighteenth chapter of Bereishith is structurally difficult to understand. It can be divided into three parts:

1. G-d appears to Abraham as he is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day (verse 1).

2. Abraham looks up, sees three men and invites them to rest and have a meal. They are reluctant, but Abraham prevails on them and they eat. During the course of the meal, they tell Abraham that within a year Sarah will have a child. Sarah, overhearing, laughs, but G-d assures Abraham that it will be so (verses 2-15).

3. The men depart to go to Sodom, and the dialogue between G-d and Abraham on the fate of the city takes place (verses 16-33).

In scenes 1 and 3 the participants are G-d and Abraham, in scene 2 they are Abraham and the three visitors. The structural question is therefore: what is the connection between the three scenes? Are they three distinct episodes, or two, or one? What is the narrative logic of the passage as a whole? In particular, how are we to understand the first verse? It is unusual, even unique. G-d "appears" to Abraham but there is no apparent content to this appearance: no words, no speech, no substance. What is the connection between it and the verses that follow?

Rashi offers one interpretation. G-d's appearance in the first verse is "to visit the sick." Although Rashi is citing a midrash, his reason for doing so - for believing that it represents the plain sense of the verse - is twofold. The first is contextual. The previous chapter has told of Abraham's circumcision at the age of 99. Painful at any age, this was an operation that made Abraham frail and weak (in Bereishith 34 we read of how Shimon and Levi persuaded the men of Shechem to be circumcised; they were so weak three days later that the two brothers were able to conquer the entire town). Following the midrashic assumption that G-d's conduct is a model for ours, Rashi infers that the first verse teaches us, by Divine example, the mitzvah of visiting the sick. The second reason is substantive. It explains why G-d "appeared" without saying anything. Normally, a Divine appearance is a prelude to an act of communication, but there are times - visiting the sick - when mere presence is enough. Rashi thus brilliantly solves the problem of verse 1. The structure of the chapter, according to this reading, is that verse 1 is a scene on its own. G-d visits, and thereby brings comfort to, Abraham ailing after his brit milah.

Rambam offers a radically different explanation (Guide for the Perplexed II: 42). "The general statement that the Lord appeared to Abraham is followed by the description of the way in which that appearance of the Lord took place, namely that Abraham first saw three men; he ran and spoke to them." According to Maimonides, the first verse of our chapter is not the description of an episode at all: it is a chapter heading, a summary, in advance, of the rest of the chapter. First the Torah states, in general terms, that G-d appeared to Abraham, then it describes how, namely in a vision of three men. (It was this latter point - that the entire sequence of events narrated in chapter 18 occurred in a prophetic vision - that evoked a passionate objection from Ramban, who held that it was absurd. If the three men of chapter 18 were a mere vision, what of chapter 19, where two of them leave Abraham and visit Lot? Were they also a vision? Was Lot a prophet? Were the people of Sodom prophets when they surrounded Lot's house and demanded that the men be brought out? Was the entire destruction of the cities of the plain also a vision? "Such words" says Ramban of Maimonides, "contradict Scripture. It is forbidden to listen to them, all the more so to believe them!"). Whatever view we take of Maimonides' interpretation of the concept of Divine "appearance", the structural point remains. Verse 1 is a superscription to the chapter as a whole, not a separate incident.

There is, however, a third interpretation, by far the most radical. According to this, there were two events: G-d's appearance to Abraham and the visit of the three men. However, the second interrupts the first. G-d appeared to Abraham, but before He could say what He intended to

say, three men passed by. Abraham interrupted G-d, asking Him to wait while he attends to the needs of his visitors. He then runs to meet them, persuades them to rest awhile, prepares food, serves them while they eat, then accompanies them on their way. Only then does the encounter between G-d and Abraham resume.

The point of difference between this reading and the others turns on the interpretation of verse 3:

He [Abraham] said, "If I have found favour in your eyes, my lords/O Lord, do not pass your servant by."

There are two possibilities:

1. Abraham is talking to the three visitors ("my lords"). He is asking them not to pass by but to stay, rest and eat. The sentence shifts between singular and plural (plural "my lords", singular "do not pass by") because Abraham is addressing the men collectively, but specifically directing his words to the one he takes to be their leader or senior.

2. Abraham is speaking, not to the men but to G-d, saying: "Please G-d, do not leave. Stay while I serve the visitors."

The difference between the two turns on a single vowel. If we follow the first interpretation, the nun of the word A-D-N-Y carries a patach; if the second, a kametz. This is halakhically significant. In the first case, the word simply means "my lords," but according to the second it represents the name of G-d and must therefore be treated with special sanctity. Tradition chose the second route. The word A-D-N-Y in 18:3 was deemed to be holy and to refer to G-d (unlike its occurrence in 19:2 when Lot is speaking to the angels, where it was judged to mean "my lords" and is therefore vowelled with a patach).

This is an extraordinary fact. Halakhic tradition ruled in accordance with the most radical reading, according to which Abraham interrupted his encounter with G-d in order to welcome passers-by. This is the basis of the rule - no mere figure of speech but meant categorically - that *gedolah hachassat orchim mi-kabbalat pnei ha-Shekinah*, "Greater is hospitality than welcoming the Divine presence." One of the Hassidic masters put it beautifully. When Abraham first saw his visitors they were "standing above him" (*nitzavim alav*). They were angels; he was a human being. When he served them with food and drink, however, he "stood above them" (*omed alehem*). Kindness to strangers lifts us higher even than the angels (*Degel Machaneh Ephraim*).

With this interpretation of the narrative structure of Genesis 18, Jewish tradition expressed one of its most majestic ideas. There is G-d as we meet Him in a vision, an epiphany, a mystical encounter in the depths of the soul. But there is also G-d as we see His trace in another person, even a stranger, a passer-by; in Abraham's case, three Arab travellers in the heat of the day. Someone else might have given them no further thought, but Abraham ran to meet them and bring them rest, shelter, food and drink. Greater is the person who sees G-d in the face of a stranger than one who sees G-d as G-d in a vision of transcendence, for the Jewish task since the days of Abraham is not to ascend to heaven but to bring heaven down to earth in simple deeds of kindness and hospitality.

What empowered the sages to reach so daring a conclusion? Quite simply, the continuation of the narrative. When told of the impending destruction of the cities of the plain, Abraham, calling himself mere "dust and ashes," rises to challenge G-d Himself:

Then Abraham came forward and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will You really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing - to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from You! Will not the judge of all the earth do right?"

There is no precedent, nothing in the history of civilization, to prepare us for this remarkable confrontation whose echoes reverberate through Jewish history: the argument with Heaven, against Heaven, for the sake

of Heaven, the covenantal dialogue between G-d and man, the protest against suffering in the name of justice.

What understanding of the human condition, what religious sensibility, empowers an Abraham to challenge G-d? One that sees the Divine presence in human lives more powerfully even than in a prophetic vision. Abraham looked at three strangers and treated them as if they were angels, to the point of breaking off a conversation with G-d Himself to attend to their needs. Only such a man can challenge the verdict of Heaven. Only such a faith can bring the Divine presence into the finite world of humanity.

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From: DR. SAM FRIEDMAN <NFSF613@aol.com>

The Formula For A Successful Marriage

The Gemora in Shabbos 55a and Sanhedrin 64a teaches, "Rabbi Chanina said, 'The signature of the Holy One, blessed be He, is [the word] Truth.'" Even though Hashem's signature is "Truth", Hashem altered the truth so that Avraham would not get upset with his wife, Sarah. When Sarah heard the angel predict that she would have a son, she laughed in disbelief and said to herself, "...And my husband is old" (*Bereishis 18:12*). In the next sentence, Hashem asked Avraham, "Why is it that Sarah laughed, saying 'Can I really give birth when I am old?'" Hashem told Avraham that Sarah laughed in disbelief because she was old, even though the truth is that she said that Avraham was old. Hashem altered the truth to maintain "Shalom Bayis" "domestic tranquility" between Avraham and his wife, Sarah. Rashi (1040-1105, probably the greatest Torah commentator) teaches, based on the Gemora and the Midrash *Bereishis Rabbah*, that "The Torah altered [its report of Sarah's words] for the sake of peace because she said 'and my husband is old.'"

Even though Hashem's seal is "Truth", Hashem teaches that the truth can be altered to maintain peace. What an incredibly important lesson this must be, since Hashem Himself teaches by His own example, towards the beginning of the Torah, that the truth should be altered to maintain "Shalom Bayis" "domestic tranquility"!

The Gemora teaches that we are commanded to emulate Hashem. In Shabbos 133b, the Gemora tells us that the Jews are responsible to "be like Him. Just as [Hashem] is gracious and compassionate, you also should be gracious and compassionate." This is also emphasized in the Gemora *Sotah 14a*, that just as it is written in the Torah, that Hashem provides clothes for the needy, visits the sick, comforts mourners and buries the dead, we are commanded to emulate these attributes of Hashem. Therefore, it follows that just as Hashem altered the truth to maintain "Shalom Bayis" "domestic tranquility" between Avraham and Sarah, we should emulate Hashem's example and make every effort to maintain "Shalom Bayis" "domestic tranquility".

Perhaps, because Hashem Himself, towards the beginning of the Torah, teaches the importance of "Shalom Bayis" "domestic tranquility", our sages have emphasized the importance of mutual respect between husband and wife. Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger is a Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University and the Rabbi of the Shul in which I pray. Rabbi Neuburger pointed out several of the examples detailed below, in the writings of our sages, relating to "Shalom Bayis" "domestic tranquility". The Gemora in *Bava Metzia 59a* teaches that "Rabbi Chelbo said, 'A person must always be careful about his wife's honor, because blessing is found in a person's house only on account of his wife.'" The Gemora in *Bava Metzia 59a* also teaches that "Rav said, 'A person must always be wary of verbally wronging his wife....'" Rav Chisda teaches in the Gemora *Gittin 6b*, "A person should [be careful] never to instill excessive fear in his household...." The Gemora in *Yevamos 62b* teaches that a husband should love his wife like his own self and honor her more than his own self.

In the Ketubah, that every groom must give his bride at their wedding ceremony, the groom promises "And I will cherish, honor, support and maintain..." Every groom must promise not only to support his wife, but also to cherish and honor her. The obligation of the husband to cherish and honor his wife is so important that it is mentioned first, before the husband's promise to support her.

The Rambam lived from 1135-1204, and is one of the greatest post-Talmudic Rabbis. He was a great Talmudist, codifier of Jewish law, philosopher and royal physician. The Rambam was born in Spain, but when he was thirteen years old, his family was forced to flee because of religious persecution. The Rambam writes at the completion of his Commentary on the Mishna, that he started it at the age of 23, and completed it when he was 30 years old; and that these years can be described as a period "while my mind was troubled, and amid divinely ordained exiles, on journeys by land and tossed by the tempests at sea" (translation by the Encyclopedia Judaica). It is incredible that the Rambam became one of the greatest Jewish scholars of all time, even though he spent most of his youth wandering from place to place, which surely made it more difficult to study.

Based at least in part, on the Talmudic sources outlined above, the Rambam teaches the formula for a successful marriage in his monumental Code of Jewish Law, The Mishna Torah, Laws of Marriage, 15:19-20. The Rambam writes, "Similarly, our sages have commanded that a man honor his wife more than his own person, and love her as he loves his own person...He should not cast an extra measure of fear over her. He should talk with her gently, being neither sad nor angry. And similarly, they commanded a woman to honor her husband exceedingly...She should follow the desires of his heart and distance herself from everything that he disdains." The Rambam writes that these measures of mutual respect between husband and wife that are commanded by our sages are the formula for a successful marriage. The Rambam concludes, "This is the custom of holy and pure Jewish women and men in their marriages. And these ways will make their marriage pleasant and praiseworthy."

Just as Hashem altered the truth to maintain "Shalom Bayis" "domestic tranquility" between Avraham and Sarah, we must emulate Hashem's example and make every effort to maintain "Shalom Bayis" "domestic tranquility". Our sages emphasize the tremendous importance of mutual respect between husband and wife, because as the Rambam teaches, it is of the essence to "make their marriage pleasant and praiseworthy."

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From: office@etzion.org.il To: yhe-sichot@etzion.org.il Subject: SICHOT65 -04: Parashat vayera yeshivat har etzion israel koschitzky virtual beit midrash (vbm) student summaries of sichot delivered by the roshei yeshiva <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/sichot65/04vayera65.htm>  
parashat vayera

SICHA OF HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL SHLIT"A

This shiur is dedicated in memory of Barry (Baruch) Saltzman z"l.

THE JOINING OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

Summarized by Rav Eliyahu Blumenzweig

The beginning of this week's parasha - perhaps more than any other parasha - teaches us about the uniqueness of Avraham, of the Patriarchs and of the Jewish nation.

"And G-d appeared to him in Elonei Mamreh and he was sitting at the entrance to the tent in the heat of the day." Avraham was sitting at the entrance to the tent, and at the same time was receiving prophetic visions. He combined daily life with Divine visions, with no apparent logical bridge between them. In his experience, two worlds, heaven and earth, meet and are unified. Three angels reveal themselves to him as three men "from the marketplace."

"And he said, My Lord(s)..." Whether he meant this to refer to the Divine, or merely to be polite to these three men, "these and those are the words of the living G-d;" the two worlds - the holy and the mundane - meet, and the reality thus created seems altogether natural. The patriarchs of our nation demonstrate how heaven and earth can be brought close to each other and unified.

One of the central issues upon which atheism and paganism are based is the assumption that earthly creatures cannot participate in a higher, heavenly world. If there is to be any meeting at all of the two worlds, then it can only be between the earth and the most lowly manifestations of the higher powers. This is what is signified by the midrash's portrayal of the angels' appearing like pagans who "bow down to the dust of their feet."

Avraham welcomes into his home people whom he suspects of being pagans who worship the dust under their feet, who believe that no convergence of the higher and lower worlds is possible - and Avraham proves to them that this is not so. A person may live a day-to-day practical life - sitting at the entrance to the tent, preparing and serving a great feast - and at the same time experience prophetic visions.

However, this lifestyle, the daily combination of heaven and earth, involves some measure of difficulty. The person who concentrates his spiritual energies on a few individual and isolated occasions is at times capable of attaining very high levels of spirituality. But the person who spreads his energies throughout his entire life often finds it difficult to reach any kind of spiritual climax. The prayer of a person who prays once a day is different from that of a person who prays three times each day.

Avraham demonstrated at the 'akeida' that although his entire life was one long expenditure of spiritual energy, it lost none of its power along the way, and he continually succeeded in attaining tremendous enthusiasm and self-sacrifice.

According to the Rambam in Moreh Nevukhim (3:51), only four people achieved this level of combination of spirituality with daily life: the three patriarchs, and Moshe Rabbeinu. In the same chapter, the

Rambam describes the path to achieving prophecy, i.e. how to bring the heavenly realm closer to the earthly one. This path, he maintains, is divided into levels, the highest of which is "when a person reaches real achievements and is pleased with what he has achieved, in that he communicates with people and takes care of his physical needs, but all the while his thoughts are with G-d, and He is before him always in his heart, even though physically he is in the midst of other people."

The Rambam says of this level, "I do not say that this was the level of all the prophets; I say only that it was the level of Moshe Rabbeinu, may he rest in peace ... and this was also the level of the Avot."

As to the reason why these four people managed to attain this elevated level, the Rambam writes: "Because their ultimate aim in all their actions was to achieve a great closeness to G-d; because their principle intention throughout their lives was to create a nation that would know G-d and serve Him, 'for I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him...' It is clear that the purpose of their strivings was to bring monotheism to the world and to direct people to love G-d, and hence they merited to reach this level."

This example and message of monotheism cannot be transmitted by individuals, no matter how impressive their spiritual achievements. It can only be carried by an entire nation, with all its sectors and institutions, with its political, social and economic arrangements, which carries out complex and varied activities while living according to its Divine mandate. This is the only way in which heaven and earth can be bridged. Those who strive towards this aim are rewarded by having their material lives inspired and accompanied by a spiritual and G-dly world, in which men and angels serve together.

(Originally delivered on Leil Shabbat, Parashat Vayera 5732. Translated by Kaeren Fish).

yeshivat har etzion israel koschitzky virtual beit midrash alon shevut, gush etzion 90433 e-mail: yhe@etzion.org.il or office@etzion.org.il

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From: shemalist@shemaisrael.com Sent: October 28, 2004 To: peninim@shemaisrael.com

RABBI A. LEIB SCHEINBAUM -  
Hebrew Academy of Cleveland -  
Parshas Vayeira

PARSHAS VAYEIRA While he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. (18:1)

Avraham Avinu was selected to be the spiritual father of all of mankind due to his profound belief in the Almighty. The exemplary behavior he exhibited in caring for all people, which earned him the descriptor Amud ha'chesed, Pillar of kindness, demonstrates his incredible sense of mission to reach out in order to help others. He set the tone for his descendants. Unquestionably, Klal Yisrael have taken up the banner of chesed, a mission that encompasses all segments of Jewish belief. Indeed, one of the three character traits by which a Jew is defined is gomlei chasadim, one who carries out acts of loving-kindness. I recently came across two stories relating to the middah, character trait, of chesed which I feel shed a perspective on the profound meaning of chesed, defining our obligation towards others.

In Touched By a Story 2, Rabbi Yechiel Spero relates two episodes of chesed which teach us a number of powerful lessons. The first story is about an elderly, lonely Jew, a Holocaust survivor who had lost everything. Through various machinations, he ended up making Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, New Jersey, his home. The yeshivah provided him with a bed and meals, and the venerable Rosh Hayeshivah, Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, provided him with friendship. Rav Aharon was a world leader with the pulse of world Jewry constantly on his mind; yet, he found the time to give encouragement and solace to a lonely Jew. His sympathetic ear was always listening for an opportunity to help this elderly Jew, as well as many others.

It was Yom Kippur, and the man, whose name was Leibel, approached the Rosh Hayeshivah and said that he did not feel well. Rav Aharon placed his arm around Reb Leibel and told him to lie down. Rav Aharon continued with his intense davening, and Reb Leibel went to the dormitory. The rest of the day was uneventful. The yeshivah davened with its usual fervor, Rav Aharon setting the tone for the intensity and devotion. Indeed, to gaze upon the Rosh Hayeshivah was to see a spectacle of spirituality and devotion unlike anything experienced on this earthly world. Rav Aharon's angelic presence seemed to infuse the entire assemblage.

The sun was setting, and the Minchah service was coming to an end. Everybody was mentally preparing for the concluding Tefillah of the day - Neilah. This was the prayer in which everybody raised their hearts and souls to the Almighty in a last appeal for a positive conclusion to the day. Suddenly, Rav Aharon left his seat and went over to an older student, saying, "I want you to go to the dormitory and daven Neilah in Reb Leibel's room. If he is up to it, daven with him. If not, just stay at his side and daven on your own."

"But, Rebbe," the student said, "we are about to daven Neilah. How can I miss the most important Tefillah of the year? No Minyan, no olam, group of worshippers. I will be all alone. What kind of davening could that be?"

The Rosh Hayeshivah just stared back at the young man with his piercing eyes and said, "I am referring to a chesed for an eltere Yid, elderly Jew, and you are bringing up the issue of Neilah!" The student did not need any more encouragement. He understood what the Rosh

Yeshivah was demanding of him, as he quickly acceded to Rav Aharon's directive.

I think the lesson is clear: all too often, we are so wrapped up in ourselves and our own personal spiritual development that we forget that there are people out there who need us. A smile, an embrace, a good word: all these and more can make a world of difference for another Jew. It takes so little, and it can accomplish so much.

At times, our act of kindness can not only help another person, but it can earn for us lasting merit and exceptional reward, as evidenced in the following narrative. It is about a woman who was rapidly approaching middle-age and had not yet been blessed with a child. The doctors, Tefillos, prayers and berachos did not seem to help - yet. To keep herself busy, she would go to the hospital and volunteer her services. One day, as she was leaving Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn, she walked by a room and she heard an elderly woman moaning. She entered the room and attempted to initiate a conversation with the patient. The woman was despondent. Alone in the world, she was used to spending all day staring at the walls. She tried to give the impression that she was not interested in company. She did not succeed.

Slowly, over a period of a few months, the volunteer was able to scale the wall that the elderly woman had placed around herself. She penetrated her heart, as the two became friends. She would visit everyday. After awhile, she was even able to elicit a smile from the patient. It was clear that the high point of the elderly woman's day was her visit from the volunteer. Regrettably, as her happiness increased, the disease that was ravaging her body was progressing. It was clear that her days on this world were numbered. The last day of her life came quickly, but she was prepared and above all - no longer alone. She looked at the woman who had befriended her and with tear-filled eyes, she said, "I can never repay you for what you have done for me these last few months. Your daily visits have made life worth living for me. I have nothing to give you as a token of my appreciation. There is one thing, however, that I will do for you. I know how much you want to have a child. I promise you that when I come before the Heavenly Throne, I will pray for you. Believe me when I say that I will not let go until Hashem grants my request." With those last words, she closed her eyes and breathed her last breath. One year later, a little boy was born to the couple. The mitzvah of chesed, helping to make the last days on this earth for an elderly, lonely woman a little less lonely, a little less depressing, made the difference. What prayers and berachos did not achieve, a selfless act of chesed accomplished.

Although I am but dust and ash. (18:27)

In the Talmud Chullin 58b, Chazal say that in the merit of Avraham Avinu's saying, "I am but dust and ashes," his descendants merited to receive two mitzvos that involve dust and ashes: (the ashes of the) Parah Adumah, Red Heifer; and (the dust of the) Sotah, wayward wife. We must endeavor to understand the relationship vis-?-vis the rule of middah k'neged middah, measure for measure, between these two mitzvos and Avraham's exceptional humility.

The Maggid, zl, m'Dubno gives the following analogy. A wealthy man made a wedding for his son. It was to be a lavish affair - as befits a man of his financial straits. He invited many distinguished people, among whom was a great Torah scholar. This talmid chacham not only possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of Torah, but his middos, character traits, were also impeccable. Furthermore, he was a man of remarkable humility. The wealthy man wanted to honor the scholar in a matter consistent with his outstanding scholarship, but due to the man's unpretentious nature, the host was challenged to find an avenue for honoring him. When the scholar arrived at the wedding, the host wanted to place him at the head table in front of all the guests. Here he would sit with other distinguished guests. The scholar, however, would not hear of

it. He opted for a seat among the "common" members of society. What did the host do? He immediately switched the tables around, placing the individuals who were to sit at the head table in the back of the room. The entire seating arrangement was transformed, as the rear of the hall became the place for the higher echelon of society. It is not the position or the place that lends dignity to the person. On the contrary, it is the person that defines the position.

When Avraham Avinu referred to himself as lowly, as dust and ashes, Hashem sought to change this by elevating the level of dust and ashes to becoming primary components of two very significant mitzvos. As an aside, we derive another important lesson from here. One who truly deserves honor will ultimately receive it. This is what the Tanna express in Pirkei Avos!

Thus, Lot's two daughters conceived from their father...and she called his name Moav...and she called his name Ben-Ami. (19:36,37,38)

In the preface to Igros Moshe vol 8 from Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, the following story is recorded. It was the beginning of the winter of 1922. One of the members of Rav Moshe's community became ill with a strange sickness: his tongue swelled up within his mouth. When Rav Moshe came to visit him, the man asked that everyone leave the room. He had something private of great importance to discuss with the rav. What he told him was incredible.

"Rebbe, I must tell you the reason for my strange illness. This will hopefully expiate whatever sin that I have brought upon myself. A week ago, on Parashas Vayeira, I asked a question regarding the parsha. The Torah informs us that Lot's older daughter was the progenitor of the Moabite People - which means that she is the ancestress of Rus, who was the great-grandmother of Melech HaMoshiach. How could it be that this woman, who had no shame, and therefore publicized her illicit and immoral behavior by naming her son to eternalize her shameful act was granted such honor. I spared no words in denigrating her behavior.

"That night, two elderly women appeared to me in a dream. Their heads and faces were covered, and they said they were Lot's daughters. They had heard my complaint about their behavior and came from the World of Truth to convey to me a justification for their actions. Since it was well-known that Avraham Avinu, their uncle, was an individual for whom miracles were commonplace, they feared that people might say that their sons were conceived by an immaculate conception. There were no men around, so how else could they have been conceived? In order to prevent another religion such as Christianity from being established, they decided to publicize the source of their conception. Their motives were pure and lofty. Since he had spoken ill against them and defamed their character, he was to be punished as the Meraglim, spies in the wilderness, were punished. Their tongues swelled, and they died an unusual death."

When the man concluded his story, he looked straight at the wall, closed his eyes and died. Rav Moshe recorded this incident, because he felt that there was much truth to it.

We must learn from here to judge everyone in a favorable light, not to make judgments based upon how an individual is dressed, the color of his Yarmulke or his hat - if he wears one. Appearances are just that - external manifestations. The real person is beneath the veneer of what he wears. Actions should speak louder than clothes.

He planted an "eishal" in Be'er Sheva, and there he proclaimed the Name of Hashem. (21:33)

There is a dispute among Chazal regarding the meaning of eishal. Some say that it was an orchard whose fruit was served to wayfarers. Others contend that it was an inn used for lodging. In any event, this is the source from where we derive Avraham's exceptional sense of chesed to others. His lifelong work was reaching out to others through his acts of

loving-kindness, thereby sanctifying Hashem's Name in the world. The commentators distinguish between Avraham's chesed and that of Noach, who, for an entire year, saw to the welfare and sustenance of all the animals onboard the Ark. A very interesting concept is expressed by Horav Gedalya Shorr, zl. There are two forms of chesed. One type of chesed is performed when the benefactor senses a need and feels the pain of the beneficiary. He understands his hurt and reaches out to alleviate the discomfort. He does whatever he can to help. When we analyze this form of kindness, however, we observe that he is acting because he cares about the other person. There is a need within the benefactor that stimulates him to help another person in need. In essence, he is also helping himself.

There is another form of chesed, one that is more sublime and G-dly: Acting simply to help another person. There is no sense of pity or compassion to be the motivating factor, the individual just recognizes that there is a need to be filled. This is the type of chesed that Hashem performs. Surely, he does not "feel" the pain of the beneficiary. He performs chesed because he wants to act kindly. In other words, there is a chesed which originates in the mekabel, beneficiary. He is in pain; and this stimulates the benefactor's response. The other form of chesed originates from the benefactor who seeks to do good, who actually seeks the opportunity to help others.

Avraham sat in his tent and was disconcerted that he had no one for whom to perform chesed. Why should he be upset? If no one was in need, then he had no reason to perform chesed. No, not Avraham; he sought any opportunity that would allow him to help others. His chesed was like that of Hashem. Thus, Avraham was called the Amud ha'chesed, Pillar of kindness.

Horav Avraham Schorr, Shlita, supplements this exegesis by noting that Avraham's chesed to the three angels was unique in that, because of their spiritual entity, they were really not in need of any form of chesed. Nonetheless, the Torah singles out this form of chesed to teach us that chesed should be motivated by the benefactor's desire to perform kindness.

Sponsored by Harvey and Ahuva Schabes in honor of the Bar Mitzvah of our bacher Yitzchak Shimshon HaKohen n'y May he continue to be a source of nachas to our family and Klal Yisroel Peninim on the Torah is in its 14th year of publication. The first nine years have been published in book form. The Ninth volume is available at your local book seller or directly from Rabbi Scheinbaum. He can be contacted at 216-321-5838 ext. 165 or by fax at 216-321-0588. Discounts are available for bulk orders or Chinuch/Kiruv organizations. This article is provided as part of Shema Yisrael Torah Network Permission is granted to redistribute electronically or on paper, provided that this notice is included intact. For information on subscriptions, archives, and other Shema Yisrael Classes, send mail to parsha@shemayisrael.co.il <http://www.shemayisrael.co.il> Jerusalem, Israel 732-370-3344

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From: RABBI BEREL WEIN [rbwein@torah.org] Sent: October 28, 2004 To: rabbiwein@torah.org Subject: Rabbi Wein - Vayera [www.RabbiWein.com](http://www.RabbiWein.com)

Parsha October 29, 2004 <http://www.rabbiwein.com/parsha-index.html> VAYERA <http://rabbiwein.com/column-835.html>

The destruction of Sodom as described in this week's Torah reading teaches us that the fate of a society really lies in its own hands. The rabbis taught us that even though the angels told Lot that they are going to destroy the cities of Sodom and its satellites, the angels "sinned" in so doing. They should not have stated that it was certain that Sodom would be destroyed, since even at the last moment the people of Sodom had the option of repenting and saving themselves and their cities. This was especially true after Avraham had successfully lowered the bar to only ten righteous people. Thus even if a few people would have realized the sinful wrongness of their behavior and repented, all would have been saved. I have often remarked that Sodom was destroyed not necessarily because it contained millions of evil people. It was destroyed because it did not possess ten good people. We see in the Book of Yonah that Ninveh was saved and Yonah's prophecy of its destruction was reinterpreted to be one of deliverance because of the willingness of the population to rethink their ways, repent from evil and embark on a more positive direction in

their lives. Sodom and its inhabitants had the same opportunity but refused to avail themselves of it. Thus Sodom destroyed itself. This holds true for all evil societies. They all eventually self-destruct.

The Torah tells us that when Lot attempted to convince his family, especially his sons-in-law, to flee with him from Sodom, he was greeted with derision and laughter. They thought that Lot was playing some great and hilarious prank on them. It is typical of the mentality of evil people to mock any sense of impending doom or punishment for their deeds. Hitler said that the world would do nothing to stop him. He envisioned a thousand-year Reich. Stalin and his brutish successors thought that they could maintain the facade of "progressive" Communism forever, while the true totalitarian, inefficient and murderous nature of the state would remain hidden for centuries. Dressing terror and murder in religious clothing does not change its inherent evil nature and consequences. Evil always mocks good. But evil always eventually consumes itself. Lot's sons-in-law had a good laugh at the expense of their old father-in-law, who even in Sodom could not completely shake off his past training in good behavior learned in the house of Avraham. But it certainly was not the last laugh. The story of Sodom and of its destruction thus remains as a paradigm for all of the other Sodoms that unfortunately followed it in human history. In our present world of terror and evil we should not forget this story and its outcome. Evil always eventually destroys itself.

Rabbi Berel Wein

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From: TorahWeb.org [mailto:[torahweb@torahweb.org](mailto:torahweb@torahweb.org)]

Sent: October 28, 2004 9:54 PM

Subject: Praying for the Right Thing - Rabbi Mayer Twersky

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RABBI MAYER TWERSKY

PRA YING FOR THE RIGHT THING

Parshas Vaeira describes Avraham Avinu's persistent, impassioned plea on behalf of the inhabitants of S'dom. "The people of S'dom were exceedingly evil and sinful to Hashem" (Braishis 13:13), and, accordingly, Avraham Avinu hated them as deeply and intensely as possible. Nonetheless, Avraham Avinu was concerned with their welfare, as a father concerns himself with the welfare of a wayward son. Hence his plea to Hakadosh Baruch Hu to spare them. This trait of yashrus, notes the Netziv in his introduction to Sefer Braishis, was the hallmark of the avos.

In a similar vein, the Gemara (Berachos 10a) recounts that some evil people were making Rebbe Meir's life miserable. He prayed for their demise. His wife, Bruriah, remonstrated that the pasuk says "Yitamu chato'im min ha'aretz ureshaim od einam" - may sin be eradicated and thus there will be no more evildoers (because all will have repented). Rebbe Meir accepts his wife's rebuke, prays that the sinners repent and that is exactly what happens.

Recently, there have been reports in the press of individuals wishing for the death of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. By no means am I assuming the veracity of such reports. (Moreover, even these reports attribute such malevolent wishes to an isolated few.) Thus I am commenting on the issue, not on any specific persons or alleged remarks. Harboring such violent wishes is absolutely antithetical to Torah. Avraham Avinu had no sympathy for the perversions practiced by the people of S'dom. He abhorred the torture to which the young girl who had extended hospitality to a guest was subjected. Nonetheless, Avraham Avinu attempted to intercede to save the people of S'dom. He wished for their rehabilitation, not their destruction.

In a similar vein, one may be opposed to Sharon's disengagement plan. (Needless to say, I am not equating Prime Minister Sharon with the people of S'dom. The issue is how and for what do we pray when we oppose the beliefs, practices or policies of others.) In the realm of prayer, we may certainly pray that this plan be foiled. We need not tell Hakadosh Baruch Hu how to foil the plan. He does not need our advice on political strategy, and He does not lack the means to bring about the desired result! And if we are to specify a scenario, we should pray that Sharon reverse his position, and not, rachmana litslan, that he die.

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From: ICJI at Bar-Ilan University [parasha@MAIL.BIU.AC.IL] Sent: October 25, 2004 To: EPORTION-L@LISTSERV.OS.BIU.AC.IL Subject: English article for P. VaYera from BIU's Parashat Hashavua Center

Bar-Ilan University's Parashat Hashavua Study Center Parashat Vayera 5765/ October 30, 2004 Lectures on the weekly Torah reading by the faculty of Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel. A project of the Faculty of Jewish Studies, Paul and Helene Shulman Basic Jewish Studies Center, and the Office of the Campus Rabbi. Published on the Internet under the sponsorship of Bar-Ilan University's International Center for Jewish Identity. Prepared for Internet Publication by the Computer Center Staff at Bar-Ilan University. Inquiries and comments to: Dr. Isaac Gottlieb, Department of Bible, [gottlii@mail.biu.ac.il](mailto:gottlii@mail.biu.ac.il) Receiving GUESTS IN HOMILY AND HALAKHAH\* PROF. JOSEPH RIVLIN

Department of Talmud

\* This article is adapted from a lecture given in memory of my father and teacher, Rabbi Shmuel S. Rivlin, who passed away on the 26th of Heshvan, 5755.

The saying made famous by Rashi in this week's reading, "Receiving guests is of greater [importance] than greeting the Divine Presence," is used in a talmudic discussion (Shabbat 127a) as the foundation for a halakhic ruling. In the Mishnah (Shabbat 18.1) it says: "One may even clear away four or five baskets of straw or of grain for the sake of guests," referring to carrying which involves great trouble and therefore is forbidden in principle on the Sabbath. However, if this carrying is necessary in order to perform a commandment, as in clearing away baskets of grain so that one has room to seat guests at dinner, it is permitted.

The gemara cited above contains several passages attesting that welcoming guests is a commandment, including the one mentioned above.[1] Maimonides cites this passage to instruct us in the commandment of escorting one's guests, which is considered even more important than welcoming them (Hilkhot Evel, 14.2). Various authors of responsa have used the passage mentioned in order to resolve other questions, as well, including Rabbi Hayyim Palaaggi (1788-1869, Chief Rabbi of Izmir), in discussing priorities for using money given for charity, ruled in accordance with this passage;[2] Rabbi Ovadiah Hadayah, who permitted feeding guests within the synagogue;[3] and Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, who established that to perform the commandment of welcoming guests one may make up the guests' beds with freshly laundered linens even during the week of the Ninth of Ab.[4]

How is this principle deduced from this week's reading? The discussion in Tractate Shabbat cites the verse from this week's reading in which Abraham says: "If it please you, do not go on past your servant,"[5] but does not explain how this verse teaches us that receiving guests is more important than greeting the Divine Presence. Tractate Shevuot (35b) presents a disagreement among tannaim on the interpretation of this verse. The question is, to whom did Abraham address his words, "My lords [Heb. adonai], if it please you"? Tanna kama, the anonymous first tannaitic authority said that Abraham was addressing the angels, and therefore adonai was not being used to indicate the sacred Name; whereas two other tannaim – Rabbi Hananiah, the nephew of Rabbi Joshua, and Rabbi Eleazar son of Azariah, citing Rabbi Eleazar ha-Moda'I – held that Abraham was addressing the Holy One, blessed be He, and hence ADNY referred to the sacred Name. From the continuation of the discussion in the gemara it follows that the saying, "receiving guests is more important..." only follows from the position taken by the pair of tannaim, that ADNY was being used to refer to G-d. Rashi's commentary on this week's reading presents both possibilities: "He addressed the chief of them, ... and in this context adonai is used in the 'profane' sense. Another explanation, is that it is used in a 'holy' sense [addressing G-d], asking the Holy One, blessed be He, to wait for him while he ran and invited the guests to enter."

Maimonides' interpretation follows the gemara's contention that the Name was used in the holy sense: "All the uses of the Name with Abraham are in the holy sense. Even the one where it was said, 'My Lord, if it please you,' referred to G-d." [6] However, one should note Maimonides' further remarks:

The reward for seeing off is greatest of all. This is a rule established by our patriarch Abraham, in the gracious behavior that he showed, giving food and drink to travelers and seeing them on their way. Receiving guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence, as it is said, "Looking up, he saw three men." And seeing them off is greater than receiving them; our Sages said that whoever does not see off is as if he were shedding blood. (Hilkhot Avel, loc. cit.)

Maimonides did not deduce this from the verse, "If it please you, etc.," but from the verse, "Looking up, he saw three men ..." (Gen. 18:2). In other words, he

deduced it from the story itself, that Abraham left the Holy One, blessed be He, waiting while he ran to tend to his guests.

Maharsha deduced this principle in the same way as Maimonides and even proved from the discussion in the gemara that this is the preferable way of learning it. It follows from the discussion in Tractate Bava Metzia (86a) that Abraham requested of the Holy One, blessed be He, "pray do not go on past Your servant," but this had no connection to his guests. Indeed, the tosafists (loc. cit.) point out a contradiction between the discussion in Tractate Shabbat and the discussion in Tractate Bava Metzia. In order to resolve this contradiction, Maharsha said that Abraham had indeed asked G-d to stay in the verse mentioned, with no connection to his guests (according to the discussion in Bava Metzia), while the lesson that receiving guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence is learned from the subject matter itself (Maharsha loc. cit., s.v. ve-hayinu).

We raise three related points:

1. From the discussion in Tractate Shevuot it follows that the saying, "Receiving guests is greater than greeting the Divine Presence," is deduced from the specific biblical verse, not from the events of the story as they unfolded.

2. Now if it is not learned from the specific verse, why was it necessary in the talmudic discussion to make the point that the word ADNY was being used to refer to G-d?

3. Finally, can we really learn the maxim from the story itself? For if one does not base the argument on Abraham telling the Lord to "wait a minute" while he greeted his guests, perhaps Abraham ran to receive his guests after G-d had finished visiting him, and then there would be no proof that receiving guests is greater than greeting the Divine Presence?[7]

As for the first point, one could answer that the texts which we have presented are not the only versions of Tractate Shabbat. According to other variants, the principle is not deduced from the single verse mentioned, rather from a group of verses that describe Abraham's devotion to his guests.[8]

To resolve the second point, Rabbi Rothe precedes this subject with a preliminary discussion of another, related issue. The gemara says: "Uriah the Hittite ... rebelled against the ruling authorities, for he said to him, 'and my lord Joab...' (II Sam. 11:11)." Rashi explains: "and my lord Joab – this was rebellion, calling him lord in the presence of the king." In other words, in front of the king one should not address someone else as "lord," for this term of address is reserved for the king himself, and someone who violates this rule is a rebel.[9] Accepting this interpretation of Rashi's, we can suggest an additional way of explaining the disagreement between the tannaim in Tractate Shevuot, and relate it to further study of this week's reading.

Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi presents a disagreement regarding whether the visit paid by the Holy One, blessed be He and the conversation about Sodom, further on in this week's reading, both occurred in a single revelation, or whether they were two separate ones (see the beginning of Vayera). Those who hold that it was a single revelation, and that the Holy One, blessed be He, continued to remain with Abraham, are obliged to hold that the word ADNY was used in its sacred sense, for one could not possibly address anyone else as adonai, "my lord," in the presence of the Lord. But those who hold that there were two revelations, and that the first one had drawn to a close, could view ADNY as being used in the profane sense.

This, according to Rabbi Rothe, provides a good resolution for the remarks of Maharsha on Bava Metzia. Abraham indeed addressed G-d, asking Him not to leave, but not because of his guests. Since G-d remained while Abraham turned to care for his guests, from the story itself we learn that welcoming guests is greater. Maimonides' interpretation that ADNY was surely used in its sacred sense also fits in well. Accordingly it is clear that learning the moral from the story itself necessitates an approach that maintains ADNY was used in the sacred sense. Thus, we resolve the third point as well.[10]

The Vilna Gaon Rabbi Eliyahu (18th century) also apparently had a variant form of the discussion in Tractate Shevuot, according to which the lesson that receiving guests is greater is not deduced from the verse mentioned, but from the entire story.

Regarding the question mentioned above, whether the encounter with the Holy One, blessed be He, might have already drawn to a close, the Gaon responds quite simply on the basis of close analysis of the language used in the verse. His argument runs as follows:

In the laws regarding the sanctity of the Temple and synagogues, there are various supplementary rules, which go into effect even after the basic commandment has been performed. For example, Maimonides states (Hilkhot Beit Ha-Behira 7.4): "Whoever has finished worshipping and is departing should not leave with his back side to the Sanctuary, but should walk backwards little by little." This is learned from the gemara (Tractate Yoma 53a).[11]

There is another such halakhah which says that after performing a commandment, one should not run. As Maimonides ruled (Hilkhot Tefillah u-Nesi'at Kapayim 8.2): "It is a commandment hurry to the synagogue, as it is said, 'Let us pursue obedience to the Lord' (Hos. 6:3), but when leaving the synagogue one should not take large strides, rather go little by little." The Shulhan Arukh rules similarly (Orah Hayyim, 90.12). An explanation for this is provided in the Mishnah Berurah (loc. cit., par. 43): "It is forbidden to run or take large strides, since that would make it appear that delaying in the synagogue was burdensome to him, slowing him on his way to his own affairs."

According to the halakhah, the rule is different when one is on the way from performing one commandment to performing another commandment. Specifically, if the next commandment is of equal weight to the one just performed, one should take the middle-of-the-road, going at a leisurely pace for some distance and beginning to run only as one approaches the place for performing the next commandment. If, however, the second commandment is of greater weight, one can run to perform it from the outset. As the Mishnah Berurah explains further on (loc. cit.): "If one is leaving in order to return, it is a commandment to run in order to return quickly; likewise, if one is leaving the synagogue to go to the house of study, in order to study Torah [he may run]." This, too, is learned from the gemara (Berakhot 6b).

In light of these laws which show respect for a mitzvah, the Vilna Gaon interprets our subject, on the basis of a precise reading of the text: "As soon as he saw them he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them" (Gen. 18:2). From this verse we may deduce that Abraham turned the other way, and immediately ran from the entrance of the tent. This means, says the Vilna Gaon in the light of the halakhic rulings mentioned, that the new commandment was greater than the preceding one; from this one can deduce that receiving guests is a greater commandment than meeting the Divine Presence.[12]

Thus, the Midrash Aggadah and the halakhah go hand in hand. On one hand, we see that the homiletic interpretation is based on rules of halakhah, and on the other, once a homiletic interpretation takes shape, it has an impact on halakhic rulings.

[1] The discussion in Tractate Shabbat became a rule of halakhah in the Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 333.1. The Mishnah Berurah cites additional rules of halakhah having to do with receiving guests; see Orah Hayyim 53, sect. 55; 515, sect. 12.

[2] Resp. Hayyim Be-Yad, par. 64. Also see loc. cit., par. 67.

[3] Resp. Yaskil Avdi, part 1, Orah Hayyim, par. 7.

[4] Resp. Tzitz Eliezer, part 13, par. 61. Also see Resp. Ateret Paz of Rabbi Pinhas Zavihi (Israel), part 1, vol. 2, Yoreh De'ah, par. 2, note 3, on feeding guests from fruits which are of doubtful tithing (demai).

[5] Gen. 18:3. Some of these sources are discussed by Rabbi Meshulam Rothe (Israel), Resp. Kol Mevaser 1.44.

[6] Maimonides, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah 6.9. Also see the Jerusalem Talmud, Megillah 1.9, 71a, where the position stated is that ADNY is used in the sacred sense. Cf. Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 1.61; 2.43. Also see Malbim, Eretz Hemdah (Parashat Vayera).

[7] See Rif's remarks on Ein Ya'akov, Tractate Shabbat 127a.

[8] Cf. Dikdukei Soferim, loc. cit.

[9] Kiddushin 43a. Note that the tosafists (s.v. mored) take issue with Rashi's explanation.

[10] For further reading, see Kol Mevaser, loc. cit.

[11] See Beit Yosef (Tur, Orah Hayyim 123.3) regarding the three steps taken when concluding one's prayers.

[12] D. ?????, Peninim mi-Shulhan ha-Gra, Jerusalem 1994, p. 43; S. S. Rivlin, Or Shemuel, Ramat-Gan 1984, p. 15.