

**Vayera**

**Rabbi Berel Wein**

Sacrificing one's own son was undoubtedly the supreme test of Avraham's life and faith. When Avraham and Yitzchak come down from the mountain of Moriah, their lives and the destiny of the Jewish people were changed forever. The akeidah remains the central story of Jewish history and destiny. Its grim reminder of Jewish vulnerability has never departed from the people of Israel. Though we have survived the myriad periods of akeidah in our history, it has always been with great cost and almost always some sort of permanent trauma.

Why God demanded that test from Avraham and why it is continuously still demanded of the Jewish people is a question that has no real answer. It is however a situation that remains a stark fact of life and an ever-present reality, its inscrutability notwithstanding. We will see in later parshiyot of the Torah how strongly Yitzchak remains affected by his near-death experience. It governs his personality and makes him to us the most inscrutable of all the avot of the Jewish people. Surviving the akeidah takes an enormous toll on one's soul and psyche. And as the rabbis teach us, the occurrences in the lives of the avot are harbingers of the future of their descendants, as the akeidah has certainly become an oft repeated theme in Jewish history. We should not be pessimistic about our present situation and our future. But we should certainly be realistic and wary as to what difficulties certainly face us now and later.

There are two witnesses to part of the akeidah drama – Yishmael and Eliezer. Their impressions of the event are not related to us by the Torah itself. Yishmael will remain the antagonist of Yitzchak and his descendants until our very own time. The descendants of Yishmael will even attempt to substitute their ancestor Yishmael for Yitzchak as the central character of the drama of the akeidah. However, the history of the descendants of Yishmael does not conform to the pattern of historical akeidot. Yishmael remains the aggressor in history and his character, as delineated in the Torah as being warlike and constantly dissatisfied, has been amply justified in human history. It is not the character of someone who has experienced an akeidah.

Yishmael is willing to be the hero of the akeidah but not to suffer its experience and trauma. Eliezer will play an important role in the life of Yitzchak. He is the person entrusted by Avraham to find the proper mate for Yitzchak and he performs his task flawlessly. But then he somehow disappears from the scene of biblical history and the story of the Jewish people. There is a lack of continuity in Eliezer and his descendants that does not allow him or them to remain any longer an integral part of the Jewish story. Thus, the two other participants in the akeidah story depart from the mountain of Moriah unchanged by the event. Apparently, immortality and eternity in Jewish history is gained only by experiencing the akeidah itself. Not necessarily a pleasant thought, but it is a proven reality. May the Lord test us with akeidot no longer.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

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**Even Higher than Angels**

**Vayera**

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

It is one of the most famous scenes in the Bible. Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day when three strangers pass by. He urges them to rest and take some food. The text calls them 'anashim' – 'men'. They are in fact angels, coming to tell Sarah that she will have a child (Genesis 18).

The chapter seems simple. It is, however, complex and ambiguous. It consists of three sections:

Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.

Verses 2-16: Abraham and the men/angels.

Verses 17-33: The dialogue between God and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

How are these sections related to one another? Are they one scene, two, or three? The most obvious answer is three. Each of the above sections is a separate event. First, God appears to Abraham, as Rashi explains, "to visit the sick" after Abraham's circumcision. Then the visitors arrive with the news about Sarah's child. Then takes place the great dialogue about justice.

Maimonides suggests (in Guide for the Perplexed II:42) that there are two scenes (the visit of the angels, and the dialogue with God). The first verse does not describe an event at all. It is, rather, a chapter heading.

The third possibility is that we have a single continuous scene. God appears to Abraham, but before He can speak, Abraham sees the passers-by and asks God to wait while he serves them food. Only when they have departed – in verse 17 – does he turn back to God, and the conversation begins.

How we interpret the chapter will affect the way we translate the word Adonai in the third verse. It could either mean (1) God or (2) 'my lords' or 'sirs'. In the first case, Abraham would be addressing Heaven. In the second, he would be speaking to the passers-by.

Several English translations take the second option. Here is one example:

The Lord appeared to Abraham . . . He looked up, and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them. Bowing low, he said, "Sirs, if I have deserved your favour, do not go past your servant without a visit."

The same ambiguity appears in the next chapter, when two of Abraham's visitors (in this chapter they are described as angels) visit Lot in Sodom:

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening while Lot was sitting by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low he said, "I pray you, sirs, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night there and bathe your feet."

Gen. 19:2

Normally, differences of interpretation of biblical narrative have no halachic implications. They are matters of legitimate disagreement. This case is unusual, because if we translate Adonai as 'God', it is a holy name, and both the writing of the word by a scribe, and the way we treat a parchment or document containing it, have special stringencies in Jewish law. If we translate it as 'my lords' or 'sirs', then it has no special sanctity.

The simplest reading of both texts – the one concerning Abraham, the other, Lot – would be to read the word in both cases as 'sirs'. Jewish law, however, ruled otherwise. In the second case – the scene with Lot – it is read as 'sirs', but in the first it is read as 'God'. This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that Abraham interrupted God as He was about to speak, and asked Him to wait while he attended to his guests. This is how tradition ruled that the passage should be read:

The Lord appeared to him . . . Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. The moment he saw them, he ran from the opening of his tent to greet them, and bowed down low to the ground. [Turning to God] he said: "My Lord, if I have found favour in your sight, please do not pass by your servant [i.e. Please wait for me until I have given hospitality to these men]." [He then turned to the men and said:] "Let a little water be brought so that you may wash your feet and rest under the tree..."

Genesis 18:1-5

This daring interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: "Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine Presence." Faced with a choice between listening to God, and offering hospitality to [what seemed to be] human beings, Abraham chose the latter. God acceded to his request, and waited while Abraham brought the visitors food and drink, before engaging him in dialogue about the fate of Sodom.

How can this be so? Is it not disrespectful at best, heretical at worst, to put the needs of human beings before attending on the presence of God?

What the passage is telling us, though, is something of immense profundity. The idolaters of Abraham's time worshipped the sun, the

stars, and the forces of nature as gods. They worshipped power and the powerful. Abraham knew, however, that God is not in nature but beyond nature. There is only one thing in the universe on which He has set His image: the human person, every person, powerful and powerless alike. The forces of nature are impersonal, which is why those who worship them eventually lose their humanity. As the Psalm puts it: Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils but cannot smell... Their makers become like them, and so do all who put their trust in them.

Psalm 115

You cannot worship impersonal forces and remain a person: compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving. Precisely because we believe that God is personal, someone to whom we can say 'You', we honour human dignity as sacrosanct. Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the Divine Presence when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the Divine Presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

One of the most beautiful comments on this episode was given by Rabbi Shalom of Belz who noted that in verse 2, the visitors are spoken of as standing above Abraham [nitzavim alav]. In verse 8, Abraham is described as standing above them [omed alehem]. He said: at first, the visitors were higher than Abraham because they were angels and he a mere human being. But when he gave them food and drink and shelter, he stood even higher than the angels. We honour God by honouring His image, humankind.

#### Parshat Vayera: Whose Sacrifice is it Anyway?

**Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone**

"And they walked, the two of them, together." (Genesis 22:8)

Whose sacrifice at the Akeda was greater, Abraham's or Isaac's? Instinctively, the first answer that comes to mind is Abraham. After all, the Torah portion is introduced with the words 'And God tested Abraham.' Indeed, Isaac was the very son Abraham had waited for all his life, the affirmation of his faith, the promise of his future.

Any father, let alone Abraham, would rather die than see his child die. Had God said, 'Sir, you have a choice, either your son or yourself,' Abraham would have done what thousands of others have done – push the child toward safety and climb Moriah himself, ever grateful that Isaac would live. Nevertheless, how can we overlook the depth of Isaac's suffering?

Whose life is it anyhow, whose flesh is bound to the altar, transformed into a whole-burnt offering? Father's or son's? And no matter how hard it may be to witness tragedy, can we deny that the real sacrifice belongs to the one going up in flames? Isaac is certainly no less a hero than Abraham. And it is clear that Isaac understands what is about to occur. According to Rashi he was thirty-seven years old, certainly old enough to fight his father's will or flee outright. And even if Ibn Ezra, who claims that Isaac was twelve, is more in consonance with the outline of the biblical story, Isaac still could have wept, protested, appealed to Abraham's mercy. No remonstrance on Isaac's part is mentioned in the biblical account; much the opposite, even after Isaac presumably is aware of what is about to occur, the text testifies, 'And they walked, the two of them, together.'

Despite the fact that the father in all of us identifies with Abraham's sacrifice, nevertheless there does exist one essential difference between father and son, which was told to me by Rabbi Moshe Besdin.

It was the voice of God which Abraham heard commanding him to take his son, his only son, his beloved son, and to bring him as an all-burnt offering. When Maimonides wants to prove the truth of prophecy, he turns to the Binding of Isaac. Had Abraham not believed in the absolute truth of his prophecy, could he have possibly lifted his hand to slaughter his son? Would he have sacrificed his entire future as well as the future

of humanity unless he was absolutely sure of the divine source of the command?

But can we say the same about Isaac? After all, Isaac heard the command not from God, but from his father.

A close look at the text between the lines and words of the Bible will provide a glimpse into the nature of the relationship between this unique father and son. There is a frightening suspicion in the mind of Isaac, a growing awareness of what is about to happen, a desire to confront his father (albeit with great delicacy), and then a profound, acquiescence, even a unity of purpose and mission. Abraham rises in the morning to take his son on the fateful journey. What they talk about, if they talk at all, is not mentioned; but on the third day, after Abraham sends away the young servants, Isaac begins to speak. And what he says, or doesn't say, is of exquisitely sensitive significance.

Professor Nehama Leibowitz has taught us that when the Torah records a dialogue and wishes to inform us of a change in the speaker, it does so by using the word 'Vayomer' – 'And he said'; after all, the Torah script is devoid of quotation marks. On the third day of their journey, Isaac notices his father preparing the knife and wood for the offering. For the first time since the journey began the Torah records Isaac's words. 'Vayomer,' the text begins; 'and he said to Abraham his father...'

Now we should expect to find the content of his words. But the biblical text records no such content. Instead, we get another 'Vayomer,' but this time with a word: 'Vayomer Avi' – 'And he said, "My father..."'

But why have one 'Vayomer' after another when both are referring to the same speaker, and Isaac actually said nothing at all after the first Vayomer? It's like having quotation marks with no quote in between them! At this point in the narrative Abraham acknowledges Isaac by saying 'Here I am, my son.' Now comes Isaac's third Vayomer in this context, 'And he said, "behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?"'

What is the meaning of the Vayomers?

Apparently, Isaac suspects the true purpose of the journey from the moment his father woke him and told him they were setting out. He tremblingly waits in silence for the first three days to either hopefully hear another explanation or to get a tragic confirmation of his worst nightmare. Abraham, understandably, cannot speak. Isaac yearns to ask the question, even if it means that he will hear the worst. Anything, he thinks, would be better than this gnawing uncertainty. But how can a son ask a father, 'Are you planning to slaughter me?' Given the closeness Isaac always felt as the beloved son of a father who waited until he was one hundred years old to have a son with Sarah, how could he even begin to formulate such an unthinkable act?

On the third day, Isaac tries: 'Vayomer...' But all that came out of his mouth was 'Aaah' – he could only stutter and stammer, he was incapable of formulating such a horrific idea. At length he tries again: 'Vayomer,' and this time he added, 'My father....' Once again, he falters in mid-sentence, to which Abraham gently responds, 'Here I am, my son.' This finally gave Isaac the wherewithal to delicately suggest: 'Vayomer,' – 'and he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the whole burnt offering?"'

Abraham's response really leaves no room for further question: 'The Almighty will provide for Himself the lamb for the whole burnt offering, my son.' If Abraham's words are devoid of a comma, he is clearly suggesting: 'for the whole burnt offering is my son.'

What is truly marvelous is the very next biblical phrase: '...so they walked both of them, together (yachdav).' We must be struck by the ominous use of 'together' to describe a journey to which both are traveling with equal dedication despite their common knowledge that only one of them will return alive.

We must likewise be struck by the willingness of both of them to adhere to this most inexplicable command of God – despite the fact that the father heard it from God Himself and the son only heard it from his father.

And with these indisputable facts, Isaac emerges as a true patriarch, a model and paradigm for all future generations. After all, our penitential dirges (slichot and kinot) testify to the fact that Isaac is indeed the model

of Kiddush Hashem (sanctifying of God's name, dying for one's faith and nation) throughout our blood-soaked and tear-stained history. Did those who allowed themselves to be slaughtered, impaled on the Crusaders' swords rather than accept conversion, hear the voice of God directly? Is it not more correct to say that they were heeding their parents and teachers, the traditional texts and lessons transmitted through the generations which defined and delimited the command to give up one's life in sanctification of God's name?

Abraham may be the first Jew, but Isaac is the first Jewish son, the first Jewish student, the first representative of the mesora (tradition handed from parent to child, from master to disciple), whose dedication unto death emanates not from his having heard God's word directly, but from his adherence to the Oral Tradition.

The essence of Judaism is not a religion based on beatific visions along the road to Damascus, or even Jerusalem. Ours is a religion whose truth is passed down from generation to generation, parent to child, master to disciple, teacher to student. And the paradigm for this begins right at the Akeida. Who is the first Jew? Abraham. But who is the first historic Jew, the first representative of the historic chain of being Jewish whose links are forged by the frames of commitment and sacrifice? Abraham's son, Isaac.

Shabbat Shalom

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[CS - Late-breaking post:

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**Parshas Vayera**

**Passions Corrupt Good Judgement**

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1355 – Doing Mitzvos First Time – Bar Mitzva & Tephillin; Women & Candles: Shehechiyanu? Good Shabbos!

Passions Corrupt Good Judgement

The malachim (angels) who came to visit Avraham went on to their next mission, which was to destroy the cities of Sodom and Amora. We know the story. They entered Sodom and encountered Lot. Breaking the normal protocol in Sodom, Lot hospitably invited them in for a meal. Before the malachim went to sleep, the people of Sodom – from youth to elders – surrounded the dwelling and demanded that Lot throw out his guests, so that they may commit depraved aveiros (sins) with them. (This was part of the evil practices of Sodom.)

Lot offered his daughters to the mob in lieu of his guests. The Sodomites were upset with him. The malachim pulled Lot back into the house and miraculously smote the mob surrounding the dwelling with blindness. As a result, the mob could not see, and they therefore could not find the door.

The narration should have ended with the words that the malachim smote the people with blindness. That should have marked the end of their attempt to enter the dwelling. However, it is interesting that the pasuk continues, saying that "they were unable to find the door." This means that even in their blindness, rather than giving up, they were groping around attempting to find the door. This itself is amazing. An entire crowd of people are suddenly miraculously blinded. Should this not have given them pause to perhaps not start up with these malachim? No! They still wanted to find the door, and they still wanted to do what they intended to do.

The Seforno comments tellingly: Even though they were blinded, they struggled to find the door and break it down, as it is said about the wicked: They do not repent even at the gates of Gehinom (Hell). They were not deterred at all.

Rav Elya Svei said in one of his shmuzin that the Sodomites were not deterred at all because such is the power of lust within human beings. They are so obsessed with fulfilling their base animal needs that something that would deter normal human beings does not phase them. As Chazal say, "The drive of kinah (jealousy), tayvah (lust), and kavod (pursuit of honor) draw a person out of this world" (Pirkei Avos 4:21). If a person is not in control of his desires and passions, nothing can deter him.

Bilaam is the same story. Bilaam is going to curse Klal Yisrael. What is his motive? Money. He runs into trouble. His donkey gives him a hard time. He hits the donkey. Suddenly, the donkey opens up its mouth and starts questioning Bilaam. Such an occurrence would give a normal person pause. However, Bilaam gets into a dialogue with his donkey! The reason is that he is so consumed with getting that money (which is one of the great lusts of this world) that no amount of logic or common sense is going to deter him from that pursuit.

A third example of this can be found in both this week's parsha and last week's parsha. Lot's original separation from Avraham Avinu was based on seeing the lushness of the Jordan Valley in which Sodom was located (Bereshis 13:10), even though at that time Sodom and its surroundings already had a reputation for being Sin Cities. Lot leaves Avraham, goes to Sodom, and his life falls apart. He gets caught up in the war of the five kings against the four kings. He is captured and he doesn't know whether he will live or die.

Miraculously, Avraham Avinu comes and defeats the four kings and saves Lot – again. How would a normal man react? "I separated from Avraham and my life went south!" Lot should have returned to Avraham Avinu. But he doesn't. He stays in Sodom. Rashi points out that Lot stayed in Sodom because he liked the life there.

Thus, we have three examples of how passions and tayvohs affect human beings. When they gain control of us, we lose all perspective.

Divine Benefit of the Doubt

I would like to share an observation from the Meshech Chochmah on this week's parsha. The Gemara says that "a good thought is attached to deed" (Kiddushin 40a). The Gemara explains that when Klal Yisrael intends to do good, they are credited with that good deed even if they do not succeed in accomplishing that good deed. If someone intends to do a mitzvah and then, due to circumstances beyond his control, he is unable to do it, the Ribono shel Olam counts it as if he accomplished it and he is thusly rewarded (Brachos 6a). However, it is troubling that the Gemara says that this principle only applies to Jews. It does not apply to umos haolam. On the face of it, this is terribly unfair. Why should He not provide this same "benefit of the doubt accounting" for everyone? We know that the Gemara says (Avodah Zarah 3a) that the Ribono shel Olam does not stack the deck with his creations. He plays fairly. Therefore, when the umos haolam said, "You gave Klal Yisrael the navi (prophet) Moshe. If we had such a navi, we too would have had a fighting chance." The Ribono shel Olam gave them Bilaam to level the playing field, so to speak. "I gave Klal Yisrael a Moshe. I gave the nations a Bilaam." So here the Ribono shel Olam gives Klal Yisrael this tremendous "benefit of doubt accounting," such that the mere intention of doing a mitzvah is somehow credited as if the mitzvah was actually accomplished. But this was not granted to the umos haolam. How does that work?

Rav Meir Simcha says that this works because of what happened at the Akeida in Parsahs Vayera. It is well known that the motif of Sefer Bereshis is Ma'aseh avos siman l'banim. The accomplishments of the avos are a precursor of their children's accomplishments. Their actions remain, so to speak, part of our DNA.

Moving to Eretz Yisrael is not simple even in our day and age, but people do it. It sometimes takes mesiras nefesh (self-sacrifice). What is the source of this mesiras nefesh? The source is Avram's willingness to follow the Divine command of Lech lecha m'artzecha u'mi'moladetecha u'mi'beis avicha (Go forth from your land, from your birth place and from the house of your father). Avram instilled in us this power that allows us to be drawn by the desire to live in Eretz Yisrael.

Over the millennia, there have been hundreds of thousands of Jews who have been moser nefesh to die al kiddush Hashem (via martyrdom), rather than convert. That attribute of mesiras nefesh to do the will of the Ribono shel Olam came about as a result of the mesiras nefesh of Yitzchak Avinu at the time of the Akeida. That "will" (i.e. – "intent") of the forefather was implanted in his descendants, and that is why Hakadosh Baruch Hu joins our intent with action.

As the Rambam writes (Gerushin 2:20), every Jew wants to do the right thing. It is only our yetzer harah (evil inclination) that sometimes gets in

the way of our positive intentions. The Rambam paskens that when Beis Din decides that a person is obligated to give a get (divorce document) to his wife and he refuses to do so, they can whip him "until he says 'I agree to do so.'" Under normal circumstances, a "coerced get" is invalid. The Rambam explains why this is a valid get. He explains that deep down, the Jew wants to be part of the Jewish people and fulfill all the mitzvos and distance himself from aveiros. However, he is overcome by his yetzer harah. When he is beaten by Beis Din, that weakens the hold of the yetzer harah over him, causing his true will, to follow the will of Hashem, to come to the fore.

This deep desire within every Jew to follow the will of Hashem originated on Har HaMoriah. Yitzchak planted into us this deep-down desire to do the will of Hashem. Therefore, Hakadosh Baruch Hu joins even unrealized action with our proper intent. That proper intent was implanted into us by our ancestor Yitzchak. The umos haolam have no such ancestor and no such presumption of an inner motivation to follow the will of Hashem.

Thus, Rav Meir Simcha says a beautiful p'shat: What did Avraham Avinu call the mountain (the future location of the Beis HaMikdash)? Hashem yireh (The L-rd will see) (Bereshis 22:14). The Gemara says that the name Yeru-shalayim is a contraction of what Avraham Avinu called the mountain (Yireh) and what Shem (son of Noach) called it (Shalem) (Bereshis 14:18). The combination of the two is Yeru-Shalayim.

Avraham's naming of the mountain invoked a prayer: Hashem – Look here. These are the types of children You have! You have children who wish to do the will of Hashem, except that sometimes too many things get in their way – whether it is the yetzer harah or whether it is shibud malchiyus or whether it is other types of temporary setbacks. But this is what Yitzchak gave us – the foundational desire deep down to do the ratzon Hashem.

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[CS Late-breaking post  
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## **My Heart Is on Lockdown: The Widow, the Prophet and a Flask of Oil**

### **The Alter Rebbe's Step By Step Program to Emotional Rehabilitation**

Essay by Rabbi YY Jacobson

Dedicated to the Abrams family

Ignorance & Apathy

What is the difference between ignorance and apathy? A man asked his friend.

— I don't know and I don't care, was his response.

Midnight Lecture

A Jewish man is speeding along the highway at 1 a.m. A policeman stops him and asks, "Where are you racing at this hour?"

"To a lecture," the man responds.

"Who will give you a lecture at this hour?" the policeman wonders.

"My wife," he replies.

The Cruse of Oil

This week, Jews the world over will read a biblical tale about an impoverished widow, a kind prophet, and a cruse of oil, described in the Book of Kings[1]. Here is the story:

"A woman, the wife of one of the prophets, called out to Elisha: 'My husband, your servant, has died, and you know that your servant was G-d fearing — now the creditor has come to take my two sons as slaves'[2].

"Said Elisha to her, 'What can I do for you? Tell me, what have you in your home?'

"She answered: 'Your maidservant has nothing in the house but a cruse of oil.'

"He said, 'Go borrow vessels for yourself from the outside, from all your neighbors; empty vessels; only that they not be few.

"Then go in and shut the door behind you and behind your children; pour into all these vessels and remove each full one."

The woman obeyed. "They brought her and she poured. When all the vessels were full, she said to her son, 'Bring me another vessel.' He said to her, 'There are no more vessels.' And the oil stopped.

"She came and told the man of G-d (Elisha), and he said, 'Go sell the oil and pay your creditors, and you and your sons will live on the remainder.'"

What's the Relevance?

On the surface, this is a story about a compassionate prophet willing to lend a hand to help a lone, destitute widow who lost her husband and is about to lose her children. The prophet performs a miracle of an endless oil flow that saves the woman's family and economy.

Yet, a basic axiom of Jewish tradition is that the true significance of the Torah lies not in the historical tales it records or the ancient figures it depicts, but in the messages these tales and figureheads hold for our lives today. The Torah — including every episode, event, and law transcribed therein — as its name indicates (Torah means teachings) was meant to constitute a blueprint for living, a spiritual road map for the complicated, painful, and stressful voyage of each human being on our small but very hectic planet[3].

But how can we personally relate to this story? Most of us do not profess to be prophets or miracle workers. Though it would actually be nice to have an Elisha who could secure our oil flow, and spare us from dependency on the Middle East, that is not the case at the moment. So how can this tale of a widow, a prophet and a cruse of oil serve as a source for inspiration and guidance in our contemporary lives?

A Young Man's Cry

Two hundred years ago, in the first decade of the 19th century, a young man entered the chambers of one of the great Jewish thinkers and personalities of the time, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812). The young man's question was simple: "I feel numb, frozen, and apathetic; my insides are dead. What should I do?"

Rabbi Schneur Zalman, a person of profound love, extraordinary wisdom, and intense spirituality shared with his distressed young pupil the tale of the widow and the prophet, and proceeded to demonstrate how this ancient biblical story contained a response to the young man's loneliness.

I wish to present to you—in my own words—this insight of Rabbi Schneur Zalman[4].

A Dead Soul

The soul of a human being has been compared to a woman—a wife of G-d, as it were[5].

Why? Because the soul represents that part of our identity that is in a perpetual relationship with G-d, described as "the husband." A husband and a wife, even when they have issues with each other, are still in a relationship. They can love each other or hate each other, but they can't be indifferent to each other. The soul is that part of our self that cannot ignore G-d[6].

But then comes the day when the woman cries out about her husband's death—the death of her divine spark. She turns to the prophet, representing G-d,[7] and says, "My husband, your servant—the divine energy-field within me—has died and you know that your servant was G-d fearing." The Hebrew term for "my husband" (eishi) may also be translated as "my fire." This is the cry of many a human being: My soul used to have a flame, but today it is completely extinguished. I have

become apathetic to any deeper, spiritual reality of life. I am numb, detached, and lifeless. G-d has become meaningless to me.

If Boredom is the desire for desires (as Tolstoy put it in *Anna Karenina*), this soul can be described as genuinely bored. Gone is the sense of mystery, the quest to embrace.

"I'd rather die of exhaustion than of boredom," a wise man once remarked. Indeed, the death that comes from boredom and apathy could be extremely painful.

#### An Enslaved Heart

Even worse, cries the soul, "the creditor has come to take my two sons as slaves."

Love and awe, closeness and distance, affection and discipline, these two polar forces have been dubbed in Kabbalah as the two "children" of their intellectual progenitors. Emotions are born and molded by awareness and cognition; the mind is the parent and the heart is the child. The two primary emotions, or children, are attraction and rejection, since every existing emotion is either a form of attraction or a form of rejection[8].

Everybody experiences attraction and rejection in his or her life. Everybody loves and everybody despises. We gravitate and we recoil; we love and we fear. The question is, toward whom and toward what?

Do you love people, or do you love gossip? Do you love truth, or do you love addiction? Do you love depth, or do you love superficiality? Do you love justice and righteousness, or do you love instant gratification and crave the transient? Are you attracted to your soul or are you drawn to externality or even promiscuity? We all have fear, but from what? From losing our human dignity or from exposing our true selves? From people or from G-d?

This is the cry of the numb human being: My soul is dead, and my emotions have been manipulated and enslaved. I do not own my love or my awe anymore. I have been robbed of them; they are owned by forces outside of me. "The creditor has come to take my two sons as slaves."

#### Whence the Romance?

A similar outcry is often heard from a couple struggling in a relationship.

Perhaps over the years, you shared magical moments with each other; there were times when heaven bestowed its grace on your union, and romance flowed from your lips like milk and honey. You were madly in love.

But now, the relationship is suffocating. The love is gone and the magic dead. Your heart is devoid of any feelings and your spouse drains you. At such a dreadful moment, you turn to G-d, or to a friend, or a marriage counselor and you cry out: Whence the romance? Whence the electricity? What happened to that part of me that could explode in love toward my partner?

#### An Artificial Heart

A similar cry may often be heard from an emotionally crippled adult.

You grew up in a dysfunctional environment. Your father or your mother (or both) never uttered the words every child craves to hear and feel, "I love you." You have never been taught to feel your emotions and express them in an appropriate fashion. Now, when it is your turn to build relationships with your children, you find yourself incapable of experiencing and expressing real emotions. You're locked. You feel that you possess an artificial heart and you hate it.

#### The Human Story

"Said Elisha to her: 'What can I do for you?—Tell me, what have you in your home?'"

She answered: 'Your maidservant has nothing in the house but a cruse of oil.'

The first and most moving divine response to an impoverished soul is, "What can I do for you?" In effect, the response seems to mean that I can't really be of help to you!

Why? Because the drama of human life lay precisely in the fact that it is the only story not written by G-d. G-d can inspire it, create all of the revolving circumstances and even predict it, but never write it[9].

The real question, G-d is saying, is not "What can I do for you?" but rather "What do you have in your home?" You must search within

yourself for the answer to your crisis. The answer to human pain must ultimately come from the human being himself or herself.

"I have nothing," the woman cries. "There is nothing left of my soul. I am spiritually and emotionally dead."

Really? If you were truly dead, why are you in pain? If you don't care, why do you care about the fact that you're don't care?

The woman thus qualifies her previous statement. "Yes, I do have something left in my home that was not taken away: A cruse of oil[10]."

#### Who Are You?

What is the uniqueness of oil? When you mix pure oil with any other liquid the oil remains aloof, never forfeiting its identity in the conglomeration of many other liquids[11].

Oil, therefore, represents the core of cores of human identity — a dimension of self that remains unsoiled and untouched by all of life's experiences[12].

Can you close your eyes, take a deep breath, meditate for a few moments, and then describe your core? When all the layers, including the subconscious layers, are stripped, what will emerge?

Jewish mysticism gives us four cardinal laws to characterize the human core (or any core), termed "etzem" in Hebrew: It is undefined, unchangeable, indivisible, and non-experiential. The most innate dimension of a human life is not defined by anything or anybody outside of itself. It is not a composite of distinct forces that combine to make up the final product called man. Rather, it is a self-contained reality that is defined exclusively within and by itself.

If you attempt to describe your essence, to capture it in words, feelings, or awareness — it is not the core anymore. The only thing that can capture essence is the essence itself. The moment you attempt to "capture" it, to put it in a "box" and transport it to another domain, you have lost the pristine core.

This unshakable core—the essence of human dignity—is the "cruse of oil" that could never be taken from you. It is what makes you — you; it can't be understood, mimicked or manipulated by anybody else. It can't be manipulated even by you yourself.

#### Why Are We In Therapy?

It may be that the primary cause for the deep insecurity and lack of confidence that plague countless women and men today is their lack of identification with this inner "cruse of oil."

Many of us have come to believe that we are merely a conglomeration of various genes, chemicals, and DNA. But does my "self" own a core that is uniquely mine? Judaism teaches that at the core of all the forces governing our lives lays a tiny but untouchable "cruse of oil" bestowing upon us an inexhaustible source of selfhood.

Your emotions may be faint, and your soul may be dead, but your "cruse of oil" is always present. That part of your life that stands face to face with G-d's essence — essence to essence — never dies. It may be buried for decades, but it is never dead.

#### Hollow Vessels

Now, the prophet Elisha turns to the widow and says, "Go borrow vessels for yourself from the outside, from all your neighbors; empty vessels; only that they not be few. Then go in and shut the door behind you and behind your children; pour into all these vessels and remove each full one."

Empty and borrowed vessels serve as a metaphor for uninspired robot-like actions that are empty of passion and enthusiasm, actions which we could never call "our own" since our heart and soul are not present in these actions.

"Go borrow vessels from all your neighbors; empty vessels; only that they not be few," says the prophet of G-d.

Act, act more, and act even more.

Continue to perform G-dly, moral, and sacred deeds, many good and G-dly deeds, even if they seem borrowed and empty to you.

As for an empty marriage — make sure to act lovingly, though you may feel that your spouse is a burden. Fill your life with thousands of empty vessels, with numerous acts of "borrowed love" in which your own heart is not present. Husbands: Go out and buy roses, wash the dishes, put the kids to sleep, pick up the groceries, write cards. Wives: Say loving

words, do kind things, and build up your husbands. Each and every day perform acts of love and kindness toward your spouse.

As for a closed-heart parent attempting to educate his or her children — approach your children, embrace them, and tell them how much you love them. Your heart may be locked, and your emotions stifled — it does not matter. We want empty vessels. As many empty vessels as we can get.

But two other things need to happen: You need to close the door, and you must ensure the vessels are empty.

The Alter Rebbe explains that empty vessels represent the emotional experience of empathy and compassion for the emptiness of my vessels. Can you truly make space for the pain of the fact that your system was hijacked by the parts that will not allow you to experience your love and awe of the Divine and the internal energy beating inside of you and the cosmos?

You should even cry out at the feeling of distance and alienation; ask Hashem and the Divine inside of you to help you realign.

At this moment, I must also "shut the door," plug the leaks in my inner system, to reclaim my love and awe from the hijackers, to emancipate myself from the cobwebs that are hijacking and abducting my energy. The love and awe are there; they have not been obliterated, but they have been hijacked. I need to be able to identify the parts and forces, the thoughts and emotions, that have captured them and manipulated them, and redirect them to my innermost Divine core.

What's the Point?

You know what happens next?

"Go in and shut the door behind you and behind your children," says Elisha. "Pour into all these vessels and remove each full one."

"They brought her and she poured. When all the vessels were full, she said to her son, 'Bring me another vessel.' He said to her, 'There are no more vessels. And the oil stopped.'"

Now, I will find my oil and allow it to flow and fill all my empty vessels, saturating them with love, awe, and the full depth of a vibrant, living relationship.

Every so often in life (it may be once a month, once in three months, or once a year), our "cruse of oil" emerges, if only for a few fleeting moments. If it has no "vessels" to fill, it emerges but then "returns" to its hiding place in the core of cores of the human identity. We remain hungry for our core, but we have no way of accessing it again till the next time it emerges.

But if, when the essence of your soul emerges, it finds "waiting" for it hundreds or thousands of empty vessels, it will begin to flow and flow until every empty vessel is filled with the dignity, depth, and meaning of the divine essence of the human spirit.

Praying When You're Not in the Mood

This, then, was Rabbi Schnuer Zalman's response to a young man, attempting to live a Jewish life based on the principles and guidelines of the Torah and its mitzvos, and yet feeling indifferent and uninspired.

Who among us can't relate to this man's quandary? How many of us could claim that each morning as we awake, we are in the mood of wrapping tefilin (phylacteries), meditating on the soul, and praying to G-d for an hour? How many mitzvos in our daily lives become an exercise in boredom and sluggishness?

At some point, many a person asks himself, "What's the point? If I were to feel G-d, living a life of Torah and mitzvos would be an awesome experience. But most of the time I don't feel G-d; my mitzvos are hollow, empty acts!"

Yet, when we do this work of borrowing empty vessels, of reclaiming our love and awe, of experiencing compassion for the emptiness and blarney of those scared parts of inside of us, we can allow our inner oil to flow freely.

A day not too far away will come when your "cruse of oil" will indeed emerge. Those who with sweat and toil constructed "empty vessels" in their lives, when their matching moment arrives, their days and nights shall become filled with the endless profundity and dignity of their Divine core.

For many of us, it is impossible to live a life of perpetual inner vitality and inspiration, but we are capable of filling our lives with empty vessels, with a schedule saturated with meaningful acts and experiences. As you do the inner work, you can be assured, the moment comes, when your soul will peek out from its inner core, and its life force and inspiration will fill all your empty vessels with life[13].

[1] Kings 2 chapter 4.[2] According to our sages, the widow was the wife of the late prophet Obadiah who spent all his money on oil for the lamps that lit the two caves that hid the last 100 Jewish authentic prophets from the wicked king Ahab and his, even more, evil wife Jezebel. This story takes us back about 2720 years, in the Jewish year 3040 since creation, or 720 BCE (around 300 years before the first temple was destroyed).[3] This fundamental axiom concerning the Bible is beautifully explained in Zohar vol. 3 53b.[4] Published in Maamarei Admur Hazalan Haktzarim pp. 136-138. Quoted and explained in Likkutei Sichos vol. 5 pp. 332-335; Sefer Hammamrum Melukat vol. 4 pp. 43-50.[5] See Maamarei Admur Hazakan ibid. Cf. Song of Songs and many of the commentaries to the book. Rambam Hilchos Teshuvah chapter 10. Many ideas in the Talmud, Midrash and Kabbalah are based on this metaphor.[6] The Tanach uses the expression, "eisha achas," one woman, which symbolizes the idea that the soul is one and always connected to the Divine. She is also the wife of the prophet, symbolizing the fact that the soul is a conduit and a channel for the Divine vibrations within the cosmos.[7] The name of the prophet is Elisha, which means "my G-d turns (and responds to me)."[8] Tanya chapter 3.[9] See Rambam Hilchos Teshuvah chapter 5.[10] This explains why the widow first stated that she has nothing, and then proceeded to say that she possesses a cruse of oil. In the soul's mind, she has nothing left to call her own. Yet her very pain about it demonstrates that the situation is far from hopeless. (This idea, a beautiful addition to the discourse of Rabbi Schnuer Zalman, was presented by the Lubavitcher Rebbe during a 1964 talk. Likkutei Sichos vol. 5 ibid.)[11] See Mishnah Tevul Yom 2:5.[12] See Sefer Hamaamarim Melukat vol. 6 p. 72 and references noted there.[13] The significance of closing the door is also that if you wish that your cruse of oil fill your life with inner meaning and fulfillment, you must put a stop to your addictive habits and your immoral actions. You must shut the door and not allow your urges and impulses to become enslaved to foreign forces.]

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Avraham Avinu served his guests butter and milk...

### **The Great Cottage Cheese Controversy**

**By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff**

Question #1: The whey it was.

Rav Schwartz tells me that his Rosh Yeshiva, a world-renowned European-born gadol, told him that one may eat cottage cheese that is not chalav Yisrael, even though one should otherwise always be careful to keep chalav Yisrael. He also held that there is no gevinas akum problem. What is the rationale for this?

Question #2: Is this the whey to go?

If gevinas Yisrael requires either that a Jew supervise the entire production, or that he own the milk or cheese, how can hechsherim certify cottage cheese produced by a non-Jewish company without a mashgiach temidi?

Question #3: No whey!

My friend Yaakov often travels in places where there are no kosher products available, and he has amassed a list of items that he may eat without a hechsher. Someone told him that when traveling he may eat cottage cheese without any hechsher. Is there a rationale for this psak?

In other articles (that can be read on RabbiKaganoff.com), I explained the basic halachic issues involved in the rabbinic prohibitions called chalav akum and gevinas akum. Chazal prohibited consuming milk that a Jew did not supervise because of concern that it might be adulterated with milk of a non-kosher species, a prohibition called chalav akum. (Henceforth, I will use the term "non-kosher milk" in this article to mean milk from non-kosher species, and "kosher milk" to mean milk from a kosher animal.) In an article, available on the website RabbiKaganoff.com under the title, The Milky Way, I explained the

dispute among halachic authorities whether this prohibition exists when there is strong basis to assume that no adulteration took place, milk that is colloquially often called "chalav stam," and that Rav Moshe Feinstein calls "chalav hacompanies."

There is also a prohibition called *gevinas akum*, cheese from gentiles. When a Jew does not supervise the cheesemaking and does not own or participate in the manufacture of the cheese, it is prohibited. According to some authorities (Rema, Yoreh Deah 115:2), the prohibition of *gevinas akum* is obviated by having a Jew supervise the cheesemaking. According to others (Shach ad loc.), *gevinas akum* is avoided only when a Jew adds the enzyme or acid that curdles or "sets" the cheese, or when a Jew owns the milk or the cheese. "Curdling" means that some of the solid particles naturally dissolved in the milk, predominantly the casein (cheese protein), precipitate out of the milk and clump together.

*Gevinas akum* is prohibited even if all the ingredients are kosher – as I noted above, a Jew must be involved either in the ownership or the production of the cheese, or, according to some, it is sufficient if he supervised the entire production.

Can kosher cheese be made from non-supervised milk (*chalav akum*)?

Many authorities contend that if the cheese contains only kosher ingredients, we are not concerned that it was made from unsupervised milk because of a principle *chalav tamei ein omeid* -- non-kosher milk does not curd into cheese. This law applies not only to the cheese produced, but also to whey, which is the byproduct of cheese production (Shu"t Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah 79).

This is the whey we make our cottage cheese

How is cottage cheese made? When cheese is made, the part of the milk that remains liquid and does not become part of the cheese is the "whey." In earlier days, a forerunner of cottage cheese was made simply by allowing milk to curdle naturally, which created a product called "curds and whey" (remember Little Miss Muffet?). Contemporary commercial cottage cheese is produced by adding an enzyme (also called rennet) to warm milk, allowing it to curdle into its separate components, the curd and the whey. The curd is then removed from the whey and rinsed thoroughly to remove every trace of whey; after which a "cheese dressing" consisting of milk, usually some cream and salt (unless it is sodium-free cottage cheese) and other minor ingredients (such as a preservative, and a stabilizer so that the cream and the milk in the dressing do not separate) is added to the curd. If the cottage cheese is seasoned with fruit, chives or other garnish, these ingredients are also added to the dressing. The percentage of fat in the cottage cheese is determined by whether the milk in the dressing is made from pure skim milk, which means no fat, or has cream added, as is usually the case.

There are three potential *kashrus* issues that can be involved.

1. Is commercially produced cottage cheese prohibited because of *gevinas akum* in cases where a Jew did not add the rennet and/or supervise the entire production?

2. Must cottage cheese be made from *chalav Yisrael* milk?

3. Are the rennet and all other ingredients kosher? Although rennet is used in minuscule quantities, and a food containing less than one part in sixty of a non-kosher ingredient is usually kosher *bedei'evid* (after the fact), non-kosher rennet still poses a serious *kashrus* problem since this is what causes the cheese to form. This gives the rennet a halachic status called *davar hamaamid*, an ingredient that creates a physical change in the processed food, which is not nullified even in small percentages.

When there is a will, there is whey -- a *gevinas akum* review

Is cottage cheese prohibited because of *gevinas akum*?

The Gemara mentions seven different potential concerns why Chazal instituted the prohibition of *gevinas akum*:

1. The enzyme used to curdle the cheese may be from the stomach of a calf that was slaughtered not according to halacha.

2. The enzyme may be from the stomach of a calf that had been offered for idol worship (Avodah Zarah 29b).

3. The milk used for the cheese may have been left in a place where snakes could poison it.

4. The milk may have been adulterated with milk of a non-kosher species. Although milk from non-kosher species contains very little casein and thus cannot be made into cheese, some fluid that could contain non-kosher milk remains in the cheese.

5. The surface of the cheese may be coated with lard.

6. Non-kosher vinegar may have been used to set the cheese.

7. Sap of an *arlah* fruit may have been used to set the cheese (Avodah Zarah 35).

As I mentioned in the other article, the Rishonim dispute which of the above reasons we follow and what are the resultant halachic conclusions. For example, a minority opinion, referred to as that of the *chachmei Narvona*, permitted eating gentile cheese in places where they commonly used vegetable rennet. However, the *Shulchan Aruch* rules like the majority opinion and prohibits this "vegetable rennet" cheese.

This is the whey we make our butter

Before analyzing whether cottage cheese is prohibited because of *gevinas akum*, we should research whether butter produced and owned by non-Jews is permitted for the kosher palate.

Let us first understand how butter is made:

Milk is composed of many components: water, cream, proteins, natural sugars (lactose), and various other nutrients. Butter is made by first separating the cream from the rest of the milk, which happens on its own if the milk is not homogenized, and then churning the cream, which causes its fat globules to combine and solidify. The liquid left behind is called buttermilk (not to be confused with cultured buttermilk, a different product sold in the dairy case of your local supermarket, called by an almost identical name to confuse the innocent).

Is butter included in the prohibitions of *gevinas akum* or *chalav akum*?

A thousand years ago, Jewish communities grappled with the following question: "May one purchase butter from a gentile?" After all, both cheese and milk of a gentile are prohibited. Why should butter be any different?

Indeed many authorities and communities held this way. However, there were also authorities and communities who permitted *chem'as akum* – "gentile butter" (Rambam, *Hilchos Maachalos Asuros* 3:15). According to the Vilna Gaon (Yoreh Deah 115:17), these authorities conclude that *gevinas akum* is prohibited because of concern of the use of non-kosher rennets, a reason that does not apply to butter. After all, although butter is a processed dairy product, rennet is not used to separate the butter.

Those who prohibit butter as *gevinas akum* rule like the other reasons mentioned above to prohibit *gevinas akum*, which do apply to butter. For example, if *gevinas akum* was prohibited because of concern that some milk residue may be left (reason #4 above), this reason applies equally to butter, because some milk residue does remain in the butter even after the buttermilk is removed.

But why is butter not prohibited because of *chalav akum*?

Those who permit gentile butter contend that just as non-kosher milk does not make cheese, it also does not make butter. Although the processes of making cheese and butter are completely dissimilar, and different components of milk are used for each, it is still true that it is difficult to make butter from non-kosher milk because of its low cream content. (See Shu"t Melamed LeHo'eil, Yoreh Deah #34, who provides a chart for the amount of dairy fat and casein found in the milk of various common farm animals, both kosher and non-kosher.) Thus, there were early authorities who permitted purchasing butter from gentiles, contending that it was exempt from both the prohibitions of *gevinas akum* and of *chalav akum*. The common practice was to follow the lenient approach.

Beware of "whey cream"!

Please note: In the contemporary world, butter should not be used without a reliable kosher certification. This is because of a host of potential *kashrus* concerns in today's butter manufacture, the most common of which is the use of "whey cream," the cream salvaged from cheese production, which is often prohibited because of *gevinas akum* absorption. Also note that a *hechsher* on butter does not mean that it is made from *chalav Yisrael* milk, unless this is specified.

A wheyward flock?

In a landmark teshuvah on the subject, Rav Moshe Feinstein discusses the kashrus issues involved in cottage cheese (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 2:48). It is important to understand the details and context of the responsum. In 1960, Rav Shimon Schwab, the late Rav of Khal Adath Jeshurun in Washington Heights, was aware that people were using cottage cheese without any hechsher whatsoever. He asked Rav Moshe a shaylah whether one should publicly announce that cottage cheese that has no hechsher is not kosher.

In answering the question, Rav Moshe discusses all three issues raised above:

- (1) Is cottage cheese prohibited because of gevinas akum?
- (2) Is cottage cheese prohibited because of chalav akum?
- (3) Do we need to be concerned that the rennet used may not be kosher?

Rav Moshe first analyzes whether cottage cheese is prohibited as gevinas akum, and presents a line of reasoning that might permit it. He notes that although accepted halacha rules unlike the chachmei Narvona, and that gevinas akum applies even when the cheese is set with kosher enzymes, it is possible that the prohibition does not apply to varieties of cheese that can be produced without any rennet at all. If one leaves the milk at the proper temperature, it will naturally curd to create the cheese part of cottage cheese. This would draw a distinction between cottage cheese (and similar products such as farmer's cheese, cream cheese, and baker's cheese) and so-called "hard cheeses" that require rennet to produce them.

Rav Moshe concludes that although one should not rely on this analysis to permit cottage cheese, one is also not required to rebuke those who consume this product.

But maybe the rennet isn't kosher?

Subsequently, Rav Moshe discusses that the cheese should be prohibited because the rennet used may not be kosher. Although rennet is used in very small quantities, it should not be nullified in the finished product because it qualifies as a *davar hamaamid*. Rav Moshe notes, however, that, since cottage cheese can be made without any supplementary enzyme, the rennet is added only to speed up the process. The issue of *davar hamaamid* is only when that agent is the exclusive cause of the forming of the product; when the product can form by natural means, or when a kosher enzyme is used and is only assisted by non-kosher rennet, the non-kosher rennet can become *bateil* in the finished product. Therefore, even if the gentile company used non-kosher rennet, the resultant cheese is not prohibited.

Rav Moshe also discusses whether one may eat cottage cheese that is not made from *chalav Yisrael*, which he permits based on his analysis that *chalav hacompanies* (his own term) is permitted. I refer the reader to my previous article for a further analysis of this dispute.

I would like at this point to quote the conclusion of Rav Moshe's teshuvah:

As a final decision, I do not say that this is permitted, but I also do not rebuke those who are lenient since there is a reason to permit it and the prohibition is rabbinic... as a result, I see no requirement... to prohibit those who are not asking, and even more so since there is the possibility that they will not listen... which allows for the additional reason that it is better to violate negligently than intentionally. However, one certainly should not publicize that there is a basis to be lenient."

Thus, Rav Moshe concludes that his reasoning excluding cottage cheese from the prohibition of *gevinas akum* is not clearcut and should not be relied upon. This allows us to make an interesting comparison between Rav Moshe's psak and that of the other gadol I referred to in our original question:

Rav Schwartz tells me that his Rosh Yeshiva told him that one may eat cottage cheese that is not *chalav Yisrael*, even though one should otherwise always be careful to keep *chalav Yisrael*. He also held that there is no *gevinas akum* problem.

I have two observations based on this anecdote quoting this esteemed gadol, whom I knew personally. The first is that this gadol disputed with Rav Moshe on a halachic issue. Whereas Rav Moshe contended that one should not rely *lechatchilah* that cottage cheese and other "soft" cheeses

are not prohibited as *gevinas akum*, this other gadol apparently held that one may *lechatchilah* rely on this heter.

You are going the wrong whey

My second observation is that I believe this gadol was unaware of a technical fact. It appears that he assumed that the liquid part of cottage cheese is the whey byproduct of the cheese manufacture, precisely what Little Miss Muffet ate. It may be that where this gadol grew up this was a commonly produced or purchased food, and indeed this food would have no problem of *chalav akum*. However, contemporary cottage cheese is made by adding milk to the cheese curd. Although the heter of "*chalav hacompanies*" that Rav Moshe accepts, again not *lechatchilah*, applies here, this particular gadol did not rely on this heter. Presumably, he followed the opinion of the Chasam Sofer that one may not use milk that a Jew did not supervise; however, whey of unsupervised milk that was a byproduct of kosher cheese production is permitted.

By the whey

Many years ago, a prominent rav, living in a community where *chalav Yisrael* milk was available but just making inroads, was faced by a dilemma. People in his community were using non-*chalav Yisrael*, non-*gevinas Yisrael* cottage cheese, which Rav Moshe rules that *lechatchilah* one should not use, yet the market for fully *chalav Yisrael/gevinas Yisrael* cottage cheese did not yet exist. He arranged that a *mashgiach* should add the rennet to non-*chalav Yisrael* milk to produce a batch of cheese curd from supervised kosher ingredients. The curd produced this way is *gevinas Yisrael*. The rav also arranged that the milk added as "cheese dressing" to the *gevinas Yisrael* curd should be *chalav Yisrael*, so that the resultant product was certainly kosher, was *gevinas Yisrael* and contained *chalav Yisrael*, although its *gevinas Yisrael* was not made from *chalav Yisrael*.

At this point, I would like to address the second question I asked above:

"If *gevinas Yisrael* requires either that a Jew supervise the entire production, or that he own the milk or cheese, how can *hechsherim* certify cottage cheese produced by a non-Jewish company without a *mashgiach temidi*?"

According to Rav Moshe's teshuvah, the above-mentioned product should not be used *lechatchilah*, so how can someone provide it with a *hechsher*? The answer is that they feel that there was an old *minhag*, going back to Europe, that permitted soft cheeses that were not *gevinas Yisrael*. Although Rav Moshe clearly was unaware of such a *minhag* (otherwise he certainly would have mentioned it), it seems that the other gadol I mentioned above, who was raised in Poland, was familiar with such a *minhag*. It appears that this *minhag* was prevalent in some parts of Europe and not in others.

At this point, we can address the last question raised above:

Yaakov often travels in places where there are no kosher products available, and he has amassed a list of items that he can use anywhere. Someone once told him that when traveling he may eat cottage cheese without any *hechsher*. What is the rationale for this psak?

The answer is that the rabbi who permitted him felt that when traveling he could rely on the *minhag* that "soft" cheese is not considered *gevinas akum*. We should realize that Rav Moshe rules that this product should not be used, and, furthermore, even those who do permit this cottage cheese do so only in a place where the leniency to use "*chalav hacompanies*" applies.

Conclusion

Specifically in the context of *gevinas akum*, the Gemara teaches that the rabbinic laws are dearer to Hashem than the Torah laws. We see how a vast halachic literature developed devoted to understanding the prohibitions of *gevinas akum* and *chalav akum*, created by Chazal to protect the Jewish people from major sins.

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## Rav Kook Torah

### Vayeira: Abraham's Return from the Akeidah

The Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, was over. Abraham had passed this extraordinary test. He descended from the heights of Mount Moriah — physically and spiritually. The Torah concludes the narrative with a description of Abraham's return to the world:



“Abraham returned to his young men; and they rose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived in Beersheba.” (Gen. 22:19)

Why does the Torah mention that Abraham rejoined the young men he had left behind with the donkey? And why the emphasis on his return to Beersheba and his settling there?

Rejoining the World

The powerful experience of the Akeidah could have caused Abraham to disengage from the world and its mundane ways. The extraordinary spiritual encounter on Mount Moriah might have led him to forgo the battle against ignorance and idolatry in the world and withdraw to live a secluded life dedicated to his private service of God.

However, this did not happen. Every word in the text emphasizes the extent of Abraham’s return to society after the Akeidah.

“Abraham returned to his young men.” Abraham did not relinquish his mission of influencing and educating others. Before ascending Mount Moriah, Abraham had instructed the young men to stay behind. They were not ready for this supreme spiritual ascent. They needed to stay with the donkey- in Hebrew, the chamor – for they were not ready to sever all ties with their chomer, their materialistic life.

But now Abraham returned to them. He descended to their level in order to enlighten and elevate them.

“They rose and went together to Beersheba.” They rose — with elevated spirits, in an atmosphere of purity and holiness. And the most remarkable aspect of Abraham’s return was that, despite everything that had taken place at the heights of Mount Moriah, Abraham and the young men were able to proceed together — united in purpose and plan of action — to Beersheba.

Beersheba

What is the significance of their journey to Beersheba?

The name “Beersheba” has two meanings. It means “Well of Oath” and “Well of Seven.” An oath is a pledge to take action. When we take an oath, we vow that our vision will not remain just a theoretical ideal; we promise to translate our beliefs into action.

The number “seven” signifies completion of the natural world. It took seven days to finish creating the universe. Beersheba is thus not just a location. It is a metaphor for Abraham’s commitment to apply his convictions and ideals in practice.

“Abraham lived in Beersheba.” Abraham stayed in Beersheba, continuing his outreach activities there. His name Abraham — meaning “father of many nations” — was particularly appropriate in Beersheba. There he set up his eshel, an inn that brought wayfarers to recognize God’s providence and to “call in the name of God, the Eternal Lord” (Gen. 21:33).

Where was Isaac?

While the Torah describes Abraham’s return, it is mysteriously silent about Isaac. What happened to Isaac after the Akeidah?

Concealed behind Abraham’s public works was a hidden ray of light. This light was Isaac’s unique trait of mesirut nefesh, the quality of total devotion and self-sacrifice that he had demonstrated at the Akeidah.

While Abraham’s activities were directed towards all peoples, Isaac passed on this legacy of mesirut nefesh to his descendants, a spiritual gift to the Jewish people for all generations.

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## **Rabbi Eliezer Melamed**

### **Build — And Quickly**

#### **Revivim**

Of course, it is preferable not to employ those who oppose our existence in this Land • However, as long as there is no practical alternative, it is forbidden to halt the building of our land • Our goal is to reach two million Jewish residents in Judea and Samaria; delaying construction could cause us to fail through the Sin of the Spies • In the future, the nations will come to learn from us how the tzitzit (ritual fringes) express the ability to bring holiness into ordinary daily life \*• It is an act of piety to check the tzitzit before reciting the blessing, but in our day, there is no need to delay because of it, if there is no reasonable concern that they have torn

A Question Regarding Building in the Settlements

Q: Rabbi, I understand that your opinion is that it is necessary to build in Judea and Samaria, even when employing Arab workers. But it is well known that they hate us and fight us, and when we build with them, we strengthen their hold on the Land. Therefore, the settlements that oppose employing Arabs are correct!

Furthermore, the only argument of those who support employing Arabs is financial—to make construction cheaper. If so, the rabbis should educate the public to overcome the desire for money and be willing to pay more, rather than employ Arabs! Not only that, but if Arabs were completely prevented from working, innovative solutions would be found to lower construction costs, and thus Israel would be doubly blessed.

A: Those who wish to build in Judea and Samaria with Arab laborers aim to settle the Land, and expand Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria as quickly as possible. The higher housing prices rise, the fewer buyers there are, and the settlement process slows down. In addition, there are currently not enough workers to build at the required pace. Although employing hostile Arabs strengthens our enemies, we ourselves gain much more strength from it.

Naturally, everyone would prefer to give work to his own people, and certainly not to workers who are not supportive of our existence in this Land. However, the challenge of changing construction methods, and the identity of the labor force, is a national challenge that only the government of Israel can handle. Around the world there are hundreds of thousands of construction workers who would gladly receive work visas from Israel to work in the construction industry. If various barriers—such as laws and regulations about minimum wage—were removed, construction could progress much faster, and at lower prices.

However, the position of successive Israeli governments, based on the view of the security services, is that it is important to provide work for Arab construction workers from Judea and Samaria. Many believe this position is mistaken and reflects the same conception that led to war and its failures. Therefore, those who oppose this approach should work to change the stance of the security establishment and government—but this must be done politically, not by delaying construction.

Another possible way forward is to improve construction methods based on international experience, adding Israeli innovation. May we find entrepreneurs who will do this. In the meantime, however, we must build as quickly and as cheaply as possible, in order to settle the Land, and prevent the terrible danger of a hostile state in the heart of our country.

Beware of the ‘Sin of the Spies’

Those who call to delay construction must be careful, to avoid falling even into the slightest trace of the ‘Sin of the Spies’. The Spies did not intend to be wicked, to violate the commandment of Yishuv Ha’Aretz (settling the Land of Israel), or to harm Am Yisrael. They had what seemed a strong argument: that conquering the Land would endanger the nation. Since they were sent with God’s approval, they thought it their duty to dissuade the people from undertaking a mission beyond their ability.

Similarly, those who did not immigrate to the Land of Israel when the major waves of immigration began about 120 years ago also had arguments: that one must not cooperate with secular Jews, that the Jewish community was forced to employ Arabs, or that it depended entirely on foreign rule and the Baron’s money.

So too today, regarding building with Arabs — there are arguments with some justification, but in the larger picture, they miss the great goal of Yishuv Ha’Aretz and repelling the enemy. Heavy pressures are still being exerted on the State of Israel, and if we do not reach two million Jews or more in Judea and Samaria as quickly as possible, we will fail to fulfill the commandment and the duty imposed upon us.

Incidentally, it is worth noting another point: often those who call to halt construction have already bought cheap homes built by Arab workers, and now they demand that Arab labor stop, thereby raising housing prices by tens of percent for new settlers—without feeling the slightest pang of conscience. It is unfair to take a position that demands others

pay a higher price, while not volunteering to share that burden themselves.

#### The Tzitzit Reminds of All the Commandments

As we learned in the previous column, the commandment of tzitzit represents all the commandments. The purpose of all mitzvot is to guide a person in expressing his inner powers in the proper and blessed way. The tallit with its four corners symbolizes all the latent powers within a person, and the many threads emerging from it symbolize bringing those powers into action. Thus, the mitzvah of tzitzit reminds us of all the commandments, as it is written:

“And you shall see it and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them” (Numbers 15:39).

As our Sages taught: “Seeing leads to remembering, and remembering leads to doing” (Menachot 43b). Seeing the tzitzit therefore reminds one of all the mitzvot, whose purpose is to bring the inner powers of a person to fruition.

From Noah and Abraham

Our Sages asked: from where did Israel merit the honorable garment of tzitzit? They answered: from Shem, the son of Noah. When Noah became drunk and was disgraced, Shem and his brother Japheth covered their father so that he would not be shamed. God rewarded Shem’s descendants by giving them the commandment of tzitzit, which brings beauty and splendor in this world and the next (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 14).

Japheth, who participated to a lesser extent, merited that his descendants would have proper burial and their bodies would not be disgraced (Genesis Rabbah 36:6).

Others say that Israel merited tzitzit because of Abraham our father, who rescued the people of Sodom from the four kings and could have taken their possessions but chose not to benefit “from a thread to a shoe strap” (Genesis 14:23). In that merit, his descendants received the great honor of the threads of tzitzit (ibid., Sotah 17a).

Noah was the pioneer in developing the powers of the seventy nations, while Abraham pioneered the development of the powers of Israel. Therefore, Israel merited the mitzvah of tzitzit through them.

#### A Message to the Nations

The idea expressed in tzitzit—that through practical commandments, Israel learns to express its inner good—will one day become a message for all humanity. This is the meaning of our Sages’ words:

“Whoever is careful with tzitzit will merit that 2,800 servants attend him, as it is said: ‘In those days, ten men from all the languages of the nations shall take hold of the corner of a Jew’s garment, saying, We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (Zechariah 8:23, Shabbat 32b).

Ten men from each of the seventy nations grasp each corner—700 per corner, 2,800 total.

The term “servants” here does not mean in a degrading sense, but rather people who understand that without the guidance of the Torah, man becomes enslaved to the material world, unable to actualize his spiritual potential. They recognize the greatness of Israel, who are careful with tzitzit, and devoted to redeeming the latent powers within humanity and the world. They wish to attach themselves to Israel to learn how to realize their own gifts, and bring blessing to themselves and their nations (based on Maharal, Chiddushei Aggadot, Menachot 43b; Ein Ayah, Shabbat 2:221).

We may add that the nations’ admiration for tzitzit—a garment everyone wears, yet which Israel has made sacred—conveys a profound message: that all aspects of ordinary life can be elevated to holiness.

#### Must the Tzitzit Threads Be Separated?

Our Sages (Menachot 42a) said the tzitzit threads should be separated. The Tur (Orach Chayim 8:7) explains that tzitzit derives its name from the word meaning “separate threads.” However, separation is not essential to the mitzvah, and one should not miss communal prayer because of it (Magen Avraham 8:10; Eliyah Rabbah 8; Shulchan Aruch HaRav 12; Mishnah Berurah 18).

When the threads are good quality, as they are today and do not tend to tangle, there is no need to spend time separating them (Aruch

HaShulchan 13). But if they have become entangled, for example after washing, one should separate them.

#### Checking the Tzitzit Before the Blessing

Q: Must one check the tzitzit before saying the blessing?

A: In the past, tzitzit threads were less durable and often tore without the wearer noticing. Therefore, the Rosh wrote: “One who is fearful of God should check the tzitzit before wrapping himself, lest he recite a blessing in vain” (Hilchot Tzitzit 20). Likewise, the Shulchan Aruch rules: “Before blessing, he should inspect the tzitzit threads to ensure they are valid, so as not to bless in vain” (Orach Chayim 8:9). Some say this inspection is also for the sake of fulfilling the mitzvah properly (Mishnah Berurah 22).

However, this is an act of piety, not obligation, since we assume the tzitzit remain intact unless proven otherwise (Responsa Zera Emet III:142; Aruch HaShulchan 8:14–15). Many great Torah scholars did not follow this pious practice (Yechaveh Da’at VI:1). Therefore, one who is in a hurry to join communal prayer, or to be called to the Torah, need not delay to check his tzitzit (Magen Avraham 8:11; Taz 13:3; Ben Ish Chai, Bereishit 3; Mishnah Berurah 8:22).

The pious custom of checking applies only when threads often tear unnoticed (Turei Zahav 8:8; Magen Avraham 8:19). Nowadays, since most people’s tzitzit threads do not tear easily, there is generally no need to check them before the blessing.

Nevertheless, one who suspects that his tzitzit may have torn—for example, after heavy activity, such as labor or military training—should check them before blessing.

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#### This Anonymous Email Left Me Shaken

##### By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Just before Rosh Hashana an email arrived without a name: just a cry, an anonymous letter addressed not to me, but to God. “You have hurt me. You have abused and tortured me. You have taunted and judged me... You left me. And so I leave you, too.” Line after line bled with anguish, betrayal, and the raw honesty of a broken heart.

This email didn’t just arrive in my inbox; it punched me in the gut. I didn’t just read it with my eyes; I felt with my entire being the pain it conveyed. At first glance, it smacks of heresy, sacrilege, and blasphemy. “I leave you, too.” But when you read between the lines, you see something else altogether. With permission, here is the email, followed by what I sent back as a response:

I write this to you, God, because the time for apologetics has come to an end.

I will express this in no uncertain terms. You have hurt me. You have abused and tortured me. You have taunted and judged me. In my hour of need, you abandoned me. You have condemned me to loneliness and envy. You elect at every moment to continue to subject me to pain which drains the little hope I still have for things in my life to improve. I have been aware of all of this for awhile, but the time has come for me to say it.

You dare call yourself a merciful father. A father who treats his children like you do deserves nothing but the staunchest condemnation. You willingly subject humanity to horrors unimaginable and claim to be a God of kindness and compassion. If you are as they say you are – omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent – then it is within your power to reverse the sadistic creation that you have fashioned. Yet you continuously choose to prop it up. Here is what I have to say to you.

Nearly a decade of dedication to you. Your laws. What I thought was your will. Go on. I’d like you to think about the thousands of times I’ve prayed. Put on tefillin. Kept Shabbos. Pushed normal thoughts of girls out of my developing brain and castigated me when I strayed. I slaved away over a Gemara for years, bored to tears and pressured to meet toxic social standards, because I thought it would make you love me. Well, so be it. You have hurt me, and this time, I’m going to remember it.

Of course, what I’d like to say is that I’m going to hurt you, too. But, if you are as they say you are, that’s not quite something I or anyone else can do. Fine. I accept that hurting you is beyond my control. Fortunately

for me, you decided to grant me free will, and oh, I'm itching to use it. This mouth will never utter another word of praise or thanks to you, the source of my pain and misfortune. I will dedicate my arms and legs and ears to helping those in need because you have abandoned them, too. I will forever rue the day your cruel masochism decided to plant me in this traumatic world to suffer and scream. How many times – how many times?! – have I prayed to you to heal me? To comfort and console me? To show me the purpose in my pain? You have left me unanswered. You have stood me up. You left me.

And so I leave you, too.

May you know the pain of a parent witnessing their child turn his back and walk away. May you feel the seething grief that darkens my days and slashes at my guts. May your eyes flood with tears shed over losing your son forever.

I don't want you to explain anything anymore. I don't want to hear from you at all. I'm done asking questions, and I'm done reaching out. I suppose the next time I see you will be whenever you decide to pluck me from this world and stand me up before your kangaroo court to judge me as a wicked man for defending myself from an abuser. Until then, please don't talk to me. Don't communicate with me. I will never forget what you have done to me, and I know you won't, either. This Rosh Hashanah, I will be doing some remembering of my own.

I hope it was worth it.

My response:

I have read and re-read your email so many times and each time it breaks my heart and brings tears to my eyes. I am beyond sorry for your pain and experiences. I found your words so real, raw, authentic, and profound. While they are written to "write off" Hashem, I see them as one of the greatest expressions of emunah I have ever read. If you didn't believe He is real you wouldn't bother being angry or disappointed with Him or walking away from Him. Your walking away is in fact an enormous demonstration of walking towards. Maybe on Rosh Hashana, if you don't want to open a machzor, print out your letter and read it to Him. Scream it to Him.

If you want to communicate further and if I can help you in any way, please let me know. I am honored, humbled, and grateful that you shared your letter with me.

The author ended up revealing himself to me and despite his letter of rejection to God, he not only attended Shul on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, he never stopped davening for a day.

Although his letter rejected Hashem, the fact that he continued to seek Him reminded me of an image shared by Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel.

Elie Wiesel said that he was present when a group of inmates, suffering beyond comprehension in Auschwitz, put God on trial. He described that the Almighty was found guilty for the evils of the Holocaust. Wiesel later wrote a play on this topic called, "The Trial of God." What Wiesel said happened next is truly remarkable. After the trial of God was over with a guilty verdict, noticing the sun was setting, the very same people who acted as the prosecutors organized a minyan and davened Mincha, the afternoon service.

I share this with you not as a model or standard for us to aspire to. Anger at Hashem is not an ideal goal or objective, but it is also not a failure of faith or an expression of heresy. There are some who go through all the motions of mitzvot and Torah, they daven diligently, they would say they talk to Hashem three times a day, but have they ever had a real and honest conversation with Him?

Associating what is happening in our lives as coming from our Creator is not heresy, it is faith. Disappointment and malcontent are not necessarily indications of faithlessness, they are often evidence of genuine belief in God. One is not angry at someone that isn't real. One doesn't feel disappointed with a figment of their imagination.

Indeed, while our greatest teachers and leaders were not ordinary people, and their words need to be studied, analyzed and appreciated for their deeper meaning, we do have precedent for directing dissatisfaction and challenges toward Hashem, beginning in our parsha with our founding father, Avraham.

When informed that Sodom is going to be destroyed, Avraham doesn't passively accept the will of Hashem. He brazenly challenges: "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ... Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?"

Generations later, feeling overwhelmed and upset, even somewhat abandoned, Moshe challenges: "Why have You dealt ill with Your servant? ... Did I conceive all this people? ... I am not able to carry all this people alone... if You will deal thus with me, kill me, I pray You, at once."

This theme continues with our Neviim. After Hashem spares the people of Nineveh, Yonah, feeling his mission is undermined, is explicitly angry: "But it displeased Yonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed and said, 'Hashem, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? ... Therefore now, Hashem, please take my life from me.'" Experiencing misery, pain and grief, Iyov expresses his anger after what he feels is unjust suffering: "I will say to Hashem, Do not condemn me; show me why You contend with me." Feeling betrayed, Yirmiyahu challenges: "You deceived me, Hashem and I was deceived; You overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me."

To be clear, our great leaders used these moments to draw close, not to push away. They believed in and were devoted to Hashem beyond anything we can understand. Their words deserve to be studied closely. But it is undeniable that the Torah communicates their words in a way that gives us license to confront and protest to Hashem. After all, that is the basis of all tefillah, an invitation to challenge the status quo and to appeal to the Almighty to do things differently.

Don't aspire to be upset at Hashem. But if that is how you are feeling, don't deny it, don't beat yourself up, knock yourself down, or feel guilt and shame. It's okay to feel anger, disappointment, or betrayal toward Hashem. These emotions don't have to distance us, they can draw us closer, deepen our prayers, and reveal the raw honesty of our faith. Like the letter-writer, we can confront God and yet continue to daven, knowing that our questions and our tears are themselves an expression of Emunah

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### **Parshas Vayeira**

#### **Rav Yochanan Zweig**

##### **That Healing Feeling**

To him Hashem appeared, in the plains of Mamre, while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw three men standing before him [...] (18:1-2).

This week's parsha begins with Hashem coming to visit Avraham. Rashi (ad loc) explains the reason for the visit: "It was the third day since the circumcision, and Hakodosh Baruch Hu inquired as to his welfare." Chazal (see Sotah 14a) clearly state that Hashem came to visit Avraham for the mitzvah of bikur cholim, and we are thus instructed to visit the sick just as Hashem visited Avraham.

Hashem noticed that Avraham was pained by the fact that he couldn't fulfill the mitzvah of hachnasass orchim (inviting guests into one's home), so He summoned three "men" to come and visit with Avraham. Rashi (18:2) informs us that these "men" were actually angels sent to Avraham, each with a specific task to accomplish. According to the Talmud (Bava Metziah 86b), the angel Michael came to inform Sarah that she would give birth; Gavriel came to overturn Sodom; Rephael came to heal Avraham from his circumcision.

This seems a little odd. After all, Hashem Himself came to visit Avraham to do bikur cholim. Ostensibly, this would seem to be the highest level of "medical care" that one could hope to achieve. What possible reason would there have been to also send the angel Rephael to heal him?

One of the most under appreciated aspects of recovering from a trauma is considering the emotional state of the patient. There have been countless studies that show that recovery is aided greatly by a person's attitude. Science has tried to explain how the emotional state directly affects the healing process (perhaps the brain releases healing endorphins, etc.) but the link is undeniable.

In other words, there are two aspects to healing: 1) recovering from the actual physical trauma to the body and managing the pain and 2) restoring the patient's proper emotional state, which has been negatively affected by a diminished sense of self. The latter is obviously very much exacerbated by the medical environment where most patients are treated like an object, or worse, a science project. The significant indignities (hospital gowns – need we say more?) suffered in that environment have a strong and deleterious effect on a patient's emotional state as it has a terribly negative impact to one's sense of self.

Hashem visited Avraham not to heal his physical body or to help manage his pain. This is, after all, the domain in which Hashem placed Rephael to administer. Rather, Hashem come to visit Avraham in order to restore Avraham's sense of self. After all, if the Almighty comes to visit you, you're a pretty "big deal," and an important part of His plan. This too is a form of medical treatment as understanding that you matter is the basis for wanting to recover, which therefore speeds up the healing process.

This is the point of bikur cholim (unfortunately, often overlooked). All too frequently, bikur cholim is performed perfunctorily; that is, the person visiting makes some "small talk" for a few moments and promptly begins to ignore the patient; either watching television, talking to other visitors, or answering phone calls and emails.

We are instructed to follow Hashem's lead in bikur cholim by making sure the person understands that our visit is all about them, conveying that we care about them, and ensuring that they know that they are important. In other words, your job in bikur cholim is to restore the patients sense of self. In this way, you are following Hashem's example and actually participating in the healing process.

People in Glass Houses...

Let a little water be fetched, please, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread, that you may nourish your hearts. After that you shall pass on; seeing that you have already come to your servant. And they said, So do, as you have said (18:3-5).

Rashi (ad loc) quoting the Gemara (Bava Metzia 86b) explains that Avraham was under the impression that these "visitors" were Arabs, whom were known to worship the dust that was on their feet. This was a type of idol worship; as they were a nomadic people who traveled frequently – thus they worshipped the "god" of the roads. They viewed the dust of the road as something sacred; something that should be bowed down to (Maharal).

The Gemara goes on to say that the angels didn't appreciate Avraham suspecting them of such a thing and actually criticized Avraham in their

response: "Did you actually suspect us to be Arabs that bow to the dust of their feet? First look at your very own son Yishmael (who regularly does that)?"

In other words, the angels are telling Avraham – before accusing others of misdeeds get your own house in order. How does the Talmud know that this is what the angels replied to Avraham? Our sages don't invent conversations out of thin air. Where in the verses can our sages deduce that this is what actually took place?

If one examines the verses carefully, it can readily be seen what caused the sages to come to this conclusion. Consider, for a moment, three people who are traveling in the blistering heat on a parched and dusty road, desperate for some sort of shelter. They come across a welcoming tent with a benevolent host offering them not only respite from the sun, but plenty of water and food as well. The host only has one stipulation; "please wash your feet, I will then fetch you water and food while you're comfortably resting in the shade of my tree."

What should be the appropriate response to this kind and generous offer? One would imagine that you don't have to have the manners and etiquette of Emily Post to respond, "Thank you kind sir! Of course we will do as you wish!" Yet the angels respond in a very odd manner; they basically command him, "So shall you do, just as you have said." Clearly Chazal are bothered that this is an inappropriate response to a kindness that is offered with a generous heart.

Chazal therefore conclude that the angels aren't responding to his generous offer, they are responding to his accusation or assumption that they are idol worshippers. Now their comments begins to resonate – before trying to fix other people's shortcomings, first take care of the very same issues that you have in your own home.

Perhaps most remarkable is how Avraham responds to their chastising of the manner in which he runs his household. After all, it's never easy to open oneself to honest criticism. One would imagine that accepting severe criticism from someone you are going out of your way to be kind and generous toward would give one serious pause. Yet Avraham takes their criticism in stride and literally "runs" to make preparations for them and otherwise oversees that all their needs aren't just minimally met; they are offered expensive delicacies and attentive service.

Undoubtedly, this is why Avraham is the paragon of the attribute of chessed. True kindness shouldn't be delivered based on your feelings toward the recipient; true kindness is based on the needs of the recipient and doing whatever you can to show them how much you appreciate the opportunity to be of service.

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לע"נ

יוחנן בן יקותיאל יודא ע"ה  
 שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה  
 ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה  
 אנה מלכה בת ישראל