



To: parsha@groups.io
From: Chaim Shulman <cshulman@gmail.com>

INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON VAYEIRA - 5787

parsha@groups.io / www.parsha.net - in our 32nd year! To receive this parsha sheet, go to <http://www.parsha.net> and click Subscribe or send a blank e-mail to parsha+subscribe@groups.io Please also copy me at cshulman@gmail.com We also have a WhatsApp group: email me to be added. A complete archive of previous issues is now available at <http://www.parsha.net> It is also fully searchable.

Sponsored by Maureen & Dr. Zach Lockerman

To make a dedication or sponsor a weekly parsha sheet, contact me at cshulman@gmail.com (write sponsor or dedication in subject line); if I don't respond right away, email cshulman@ebeclaw.com

Table of Contents:

- R' Nachshoni & N Leibowitz: Hashem Appearing to Avraham
- R' Asher Weiss on Bikur Cholim: The Mitzvah
- Chiena Kossowsky on the Akeidah: Emunah with a Clear Mind
- R' Elya Svei on Blinded, Yet Still Searching for the Door
- R' Hershel Schachter on Bikur Cholim & True Love
- R' Medan on Chesed, Mishpat and the Test of Avraham
- R' Eliezer Melamed on Women Learning Torah
- פרשת דרכים What was the Status of the Avos Before Matan Torah

Adapted and summarized by CS based primarily on
עיונים חדשים by R' Yehudah Nachshoni and
בספר בראשית by Prof. Nechama Leibowitz

Why Did Hashem Appear to Avraham?

The parsha begins ממרא - *Hashem appeared to him at Eilonei Mamre* (Vayeira 18:1). But the Torah does not tell us why Hashem appeared. There is no command, no words and no message. The next thing that happens is that Avraham sees three visitors and runs to greet them.

That is unusual. Elsewhere in the Torah, when Hashem appears to one of His servants, there is a purpose: a command, a promise, a blessing, a warning or some other message. The revelation leads to something. Here the Torah simply says וירא אליו ה'. What was the purpose of Hashem's appearance if He apparently said nothing to Avraham?

1. Hashem Came to Visit the Sick

Rashi, following the Gemara in Sotah 14a and Bava Metzia 86b, gives Chazal's answer: לבקר את החולה - *to visit the sick*. Avraham was on the third day after his *bris milah*, and Hashem came to visit him. The Gemara in Sotah derives the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim* from this very pasuk: הקב"ה ביקר חולים דכתיב וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא אף אתה בקר - *Hashem visited the sick, as it says, "Hashem appeared to him at Eilonei Mamre"; so too, you should visit the sick*. **Rabbeinu Bachya** sees this connection in the wording itself. The Torah does not say וירא ה' אל אברהם - Hashem appeared to Avraham. It says וירא אליו ה' - *He appeared to him*. וירא אליו refers us back to the end of Lech Lecha, where Avraham had just circumcised himself and his household. The opening of Vayeira is therefore a continuation of the previous parsha. Avraham performed the *milah*, and Hashem came to visit him.

This point becomes especially important in understanding the approaches that follow. וירא אליו ה' may not be beginning an entirely new story. It may be telling us what happened because of what Avraham had just done.

2. The Milah Raised Avraham to a New Level

The **Malbim** points out something different in the unusual circumstances of the revelation. Avraham was not secluded and preparing himself for *nevuah*. He was sitting פתח האהל - *at the entrance of the tent*, among other people. It was כהם היום - *in the heat of the day*, and he was still weak from the *milah*. Yet Hashem appeared to him there. The Malbim understands these details as showing the level Avraham had reached. The *milah* had raised him to a point where he could experience the Shechinah even without the conditions normally associated with *nevuah*. He did not have to withdraw from the world and prepare himself in solitude. Hashem appeared to him while he was sitting at the entrance of his home. Contrast this with Bilam, who describes himself as נפל וגלוי עינים - *fallen, with uncovered eyes* (Balak 24:4). Hashem appeared to Bilam only at night and while he was fallen on his face. Avraham, after entering the *bris*, merited וירא אליו ה' while sitting at the entrance of his tent in broad daylight.

3. The Revelation Itself Was the Reward and Honor

Rabbeinu Chananel also connects the revelation to the *milah*, but adds that Hashem's appearance was not only *bikkur cholim*. It was also a reward for the mitzvah Avraham had performed.

The **Ramban** develops this idea much further and gives an answer that goes directly to our original question. Hashem did not need to appear in order to tell Avraham something. The appearance itself was the purpose.

Avraham had just performed the mitzvah of *milah* with mesirus nefesh. Hashem appeared to him למעלה ולכבוד לו - *to elevate and honor him*. Ramban describes the revelation as גמול במצוה הנעשית כבר - *a reward for a mitzvah that had already been performed*. Hashem's appearance showed that Avraham's act had been accepted. Ramban compares this to the dedication of the Mishkan, where ויצאו - *they went out and blessed the people, and the glory of Hashem appeared to the entire people* (Shemini 9:23). The Shechinah did not appear there to give another command. Its appearance showed that Hashem had accepted what they had done.

The **Midrash Rabbah** (48:4) cited by Ramban makes the same point. מזה אדמה תעשה לי וגו'... מה אם זה שבנה מזבח לשמי הריני גולה עליו - *If - and I have blessed Avraham, I will not let my name be profaned by you*

one who built an altar for My name merits that I reveal Myself to him and bless him, Avraham, who circumcised himself for My sake, all the more so.

Nechama Leibowitz explains that this gives a deeper meaning to Chazal's *לדבר את החולה*. A visit does not always need some practical purpose. Sometimes the visit itself says what needs to be said: I am here with you.

According to Ramban, then, the fact that Hashem says nothing is not a difficulty. It is the answer. Hashem came not because He had something more to ask of Avraham, but because He wanted to honor him for what he had already done.

4. A New Bris

Sforno connects the appearance even more directly to the meaning of *milah*. Avraham had not simply performed another mitzvah. *Milah* was the sign of the *bris* between Avraham and Hashem. Avraham and his household had now entered that *bris*, and Hashem appeared to him as part of completing that relationship.

The Torah describes other covenants in similar terms: *אתם נצבים היום - כלכם לפני ה' אלקיכם לעברך בברית ה' אלקיך* - *You are standing today before Hashem your God to enter the covenant of Hashem your God* (Nitzavim 29:9-11). Entering a *bris* means standing before Hashem. That may be what is happening here as well. Avraham performed the physical act of *milah* at the end of Lech Lecha. Vayeira begins with the other side of the *bris*: *וירא אליו ה'*. Avraham entered the covenant, and Hashem drew closer to him.

This also adds another dimension to Rashi's *bikkur cholim*. Hashem did not merely visit someone who was sick. He visited Avraham immediately after Avraham had entered the *bris* with Him. The visit itself expressed that new closeness.

5. From Receiving the Shechinah to Receiving Guests

This understanding of *וירא אליו ה'* gives special meaning to what happens next. Avraham is experiencing *kabbalas pnei haShechinah*. Hashem has appeared to him, according to Ramban, simply to honor him and show that his actions had found favor before Hashem. Then Avraham raises his eyes and sees three strangers.

Chazal in Shabbos 127a derive from what follows: *גדולה הכנסת אורחים - welcoming guests is greater than receiving the Shechinah*.

That statement is remarkable. Avraham is in the midst of an extraordinary experience of closeness to Hashem. Yet when he sees people who may need food, water and a place to rest, he does not remain absorbed in that experience. He runs toward them.

The Torah emphasizes this with repeated words of haste: *וירץ לקראתם - וימהר אברהם האהלה אל שרה - he ran toward them*. *וימהר אברהם האהלה אל שרה - hurrying, prepare three measures of fine flour*.

וירץ לקראתם - וימהר לעשות אתו - Avraham ran to the cattle - he hurried to prepare it.

The Torah could have told us simply that Avraham served his guests. Instead, it repeatedly tells us that he ran and hurried. The Torah presents his *hachnasas orchim* as something done with extraordinary energy and urgency. He did not merely interrupt his encounter with the *Shechinah* because the guests needed him; he threw himself into caring for them.

This also gives the sequence of the *pesukim* a special meaning. Hashem's appearance had brought Avraham to a new level of closeness, but that closeness did not turn him inward. The moment he

saw three people who needed him, his response was *וירץ לקראתם - he ran toward them*. Perhaps that is part of what Chazal mean when they say that *hachnasas orchim* is greater than *kabbalas pnei haShechinah*. The highest spiritual experience is not meant to remove a person from the needs of other people. In Avraham, closeness to Hashem expressed itself in how quickly he turned toward another person.

6. A Different Approach: Moreh Nevuchim

Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* II:42 understands *וירא אליו ה'* differently. It is not a separate appearance of Hashem before the angels arrive. Rather, it introduces the prophetic vision that the Torah then describes: Avraham looks up and sees the three angels. On this reading, the question of why Hashem appeared without saying anything does not arise in the same way. *וירא אליו ה'* introduces the vision, and the Torah then tells us what Avraham saw.

Conclusion

The main approaches above connect the opening of Vayeira to the *milah* at the end of Lech Lecha. Hashem came to visit Avraham in his illness. His appearance was a reward and an honor. The *milah* had raised Avraham to a new level and had established a new *bris* between him and Hashem.

Ramban gives particular meaning to the silence of *וירא אליו ה'*. Hashem did not need to say anything. The revelation itself was the honor. And at that moment of extraordinary closeness, Avraham saw three strangers and ran toward them. His closeness to Hashem did not draw him away from other people. It made him run toward them.

Adapted from

Minchas Asher, Vayeira

Bikur Cholim: The Mitzvah of the Visit Itself

The parsha begins *וירא אליו ה' באלני ממרא - Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre* (Vayeira 18:1). Rashi explains *לבקר את החולה* - אמר רבי חמא בר חנינא יום שלישי למיתו היה ובא הקדוש ברוך הוא ושאל בשלומו - Hashem came to visit Avraham when he was ill; it was the third day after his *milah*, and Hashem came to ask how he was doing.

Why the Third Day?

The *Gur Aryeh* asks why Hashem waited until the third day after the *milah*. Avraham was certainly in pain before then. He explains that only on the third day was Avraham considered a *גופו כל גופו* - *a person whose whole body is affected*. This would suggest a major *chiddush*: perhaps the formal mitzvah of *bikur cholim* applies only when a person is a *גופו כל גופו*, and not when he is suffering only from one particular part of the body.

But this is difficult. Such a limitation is not stated by the *poskim*, and it is not obvious why there should be no mitzvah to visit someone who is suffering from a serious problem simply because it affects only one part of the body. The *Yerushalmi* does say about the third day after *milah* *בהיותו כואב לא נאמר אלא בהיותם כואבים מלמד שכל איבריהם - the Torah does not say "when he was in pain," but "when they were in pain," teaching that all their limbs were hurting*. That supports the idea that by the third day Avraham's whole body was affected, but whether *bikur cholim* is limited to such a case remains a *chiddush*.

The Gemara in Sotah 14a learns from Avraham the mitzvah of *bikur cholim*. On the *pasuk* *תלכו אחריו ה' אלקיכם* - *You shall follow Hashem your God*, the Gemara asks how it is possible for a person to follow Hashem. It answers that we are commanded to follow His *middos*: *מה*

הקדוש ברוך הוא ביקר חולים דכתיב וירא אליו ה' באלני ממרא אף אתה בקר חולים - just as Hashem visited the sick, as it says, "Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre," so too you should visit the sick.

We find other sources as well. The Gemara in Bava Metzia 30b says "You shall make known to them" refers to their livelihood, "the way" refers to gemilus chasadim, and "they shall walk" refers to bikur cholim. Nedarim 39b also speaks of a התורה מן התורה - a basis in the Torah for bikur cholim.

There is a dispute, however, whether the specific mitzvah of bikur cholim is itself התורה מן התורה. The Behag and Ramban understand bikur cholim to be a Torah obligation. The Rambam (Hilchos Aveil 14:1), on the other hand, writes מצות עשה של דבריהם לבקר חולים ולנחם אבליהם - visiting the sick and comforting mourners are positive mitzvos instituted by Chazal. He then adds that מדבריהם - although these particular mitzvos are ואהבת לרעך כמוך - מדבריהם, they are included in ואהבת לרעך כמוך.

According to the Rambam, there is no contradiction between these sources. The basic obligation is the Torah mitzvah of ואהבת לרעך כמוך and gemilus chasadim. Chazal then gave that general obligation particular forms, including bikur cholim and nichum aveilim. The specific mitzvah of bikur cholim is therefore מדבריהם, while its basic foundation is התורה מן התורה.

What is the purpose of bikur cholim?

The Ramban, as quoted by the Beis Yosef (Yoreh Deah 335), describes several parts of the mitzvah. He writes that bikur cholim is כדי שיכבדו וירבצו לפניו ויעשו לו צרכים הצריכים לחליו וימצא נחת רוח עם - so that the visitor will see that the choleh is properly cared for, attend to what he needs, give him comfort through the presence of his friends, and daven for him. The Tur similarly writes ומצוה גדולה היא לבקר שמתוך כך יבקש עליו רחמים ונמצא כאילו מחיה אותו וגם מתוך שרואהו מעיין בענינו אם יצטרך לשום דבר - it is a great mitzvah to visit, because by seeing the choleh the visitor will daven for mercy for him, as though he has helped give him life, and he will also see whether the choleh needs anything and try to provide it.

We therefore find several parts to bikur cholim. One is to take care of the choleh's needs. Another is to give him comfort. A third is to daven for him.

The Beis Yosef even writes המבקר את החולה ולא ביקש עליו רחמים לא קיים - one who visits the choleh but does not daven for him has not fulfilled this mitzvah.

But this requires explanation. If tefillah is an absolute requirement, what about someone who visits and davens but does nothing to help with the practical needs of the choleh? The Ramban himself first says that the visitor should see what the choleh needs and help him. Would we say that he also has not fulfilled the mitzvah?

It seems that the Ramban and Tur are describing the full nature of bikur cholim, not saying that every one of these elements is essential to the basic mitzvah. The visitor should help the choleh, give him comfort and daven for him. That is the proper fulfillment of bikur cholim. But there is also a mitzvah in the visit itself.

There is support for this in the Chafetz Chaim, who writes that if one does not fulfill these different parts of the mitzvah כדין המצוה - he has not fulfilled the mitzvah properly. He does not say that no mitzvah was fulfilled at all. The visit itself is a kiyum mitzvah, even

though the mitzvah is not complete unless the visitor also tries to accomplish its different purposes.

Visiting someone who does not want to see you

This question also comes up in an unusual case. The Beis Yosef quotes the Maharil that even a person who is an enemy of the choleh should visit him. The Darkei Moshe disagrees. If the choleh will be upset to see him, the visit may cause pain instead of giving comfort. One might have thought that their disagreement depends on the main purpose of bikur cholim. If the main point is to daven for the choleh, even someone he dislikes can visit and daven for him. But if the purpose is to strengthen the choleh and give him comfort, the visit may do the opposite.

But the issue is more basic. Bikur cholim has several purposes, and the visit itself is also a mitzvah. Still, if it is known that the choleh will be upset by seeing a particular person, there is no mitzvah to cause him distress during his illness. The mitzvah is for the benefit of the choleh, not the visitor.

Even a גדול must visit a קטן

The Gemara in Nedarim 39b says that bikur cholim applies אפילו גדול - even a great person must visit someone of lesser stature. The question is what the chiddush is. Why should the stature of the visitor make any difference?

The Chafetz Chaim explains that we might have compared bikur cholim to hashavas aveidah, where there is a rule of זקן ואינו לפי כבודו - an older or distinguished person for whom the act is beneath his dignity. Perhaps a גדול would similarly be exempt from visiting a קטן. The Gemara therefore teaches that there is no such exemption from bikur cholim.

The Shitah Mekubetzes and the Perishah explain that this can be learned from our parsha, because Hashem Himself came to visit Avraham. If the mitzvah is modeled on Hashem's own conduct, a person cannot say that visiting another Jew is beneath his dignity. There is another point as well. When an act is clearly a mitzvah, there is no lack of kavod in performing it. The mitzvah itself is his kavod. And if the purpose of bikur cholim were only to take care of what the choleh needs, the גדול could often send someone else. But part of the mitzvah is that he himself comes. The fact that a person makes the effort to come can itself give the choleh chizuk.

What if the choleh is sleeping?

This may also explain a striking statement of the Rosh. He writes יש לו לאדם לבקר החולה ואפילו לא ידבר עמו דבר כגון שמצאו ישן וניהא לו כאשר - a person should visit the sick even if he does not speak to him, such as when he finds him sleeping, because when the choleh is later told that so-and-so came to see him, it gives him comfort.

At first glance, what did the visitor accomplish? He did not speak to the choleh. He may not have found out what he needed. He did not give him chizuk at the time because the choleh was sleeping. Nevertheless, when the choleh later hears פלוני בא לראותו - so-and-so came to see me, that itself gives him נחת רוח.

We see from here that there is a separate value in the visit itself. A sick person can feel cut off from everyone around him. Everyone else continues with his regular schedule, while the choleh is confined to his home or hospital room. When he hears that someone made the effort to come see him, he knows that he has not been forgotten. There is, however, another view. The Maggid Meisharim writes ולא אפשר ביקור חולה בלא מילולא - bikur cholim cannot be performed

without speaking. According to that view, merely coming while the choleh sleeps would not be enough. The Rosh, however, clearly holds that the knowledge that someone came to see him can itself give the choleh נחת רוח.

Can bikur cholim be fulfilled by telephone?

This brings us to a practical question discussed by Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 1:223): can one fulfill bikur cholim by telephone?

Several parts of the mitzvah can certainly be accomplished by telephone. One can give the choleh chizuk. One can find out what he needs. Most importantly, after hearing his condition one can daven for him.

Nevertheless, the main mitzvah of bikur cholim cannot be fulfilled by telephone. Even שיחת טלפון על ידי - *if it is possible to strengthen the choleh through a telephone call*, Chazal still said that a person should בקר את החולה - *visit the sick*. The mitzvah has a particular form, and that form is an actual visit.

The word ביקור itself does not necessarily mean “visit” in the modern sense. It can mean to examine or check, as in ביקור קרבן. But once Chazal established that one goes to the choleh, that became the form of the mitzvah.

Therefore, even if the different purposes of bikur cholim can sometimes be accomplished by telephone, אין בזה עיקר מצות ביקור חולים - *this is not the main mitzvah of bikur cholim*. Of course, when a person cannot visit, he should certainly call. It is an act of chesed to strengthen the choleh, find out what he needs and daven for him. But it does not fully replace the visit itself.

This also fits very well with the Rosh. If there is value in coming even when the choleh is sleeping and the visitor never speaks to him, then the mitzvah cannot depend only on the conversation. There is a separate value in the fact that the visitor came.

When there is a danger of infection

There is, however, an important limitation. The Rema discusses visiting a person with a contagious illness. A person is not required to place himself in serious danger in order to fulfill bikur cholim. A distinction must be made between an ordinary concern and a real danger. Where there is only a remote possibility that the visitor may become ill, that does not necessarily exempt him from the mitzvah. But במקום חשש גמור - *where there is a real concern of danger*, he is exempt. A person is not required to risk his health, and he should not simply rely on the merit of the mitzvah to protect him.

When an actual visit cannot safely be made, the other forms of chesed remain. He can call the choleh, arrange what he needs and daven for him.

The lesson of Hashem's visit

The mitzvah of bikur cholim begins in our parsha not with a command to bring food or provide medical help, but with וירא אליו ה' - *Hashem appeared to Avraham in the plains of Mamre*. Chazal tell us that Hashem Himself came לבקר את החולה - *to visit the sick*.

The Ramban and Tur teach us what the visit should accomplish. A visitor should look at the needs of the choleh, try to help him, give him comfort and daven for him. He should not simply come in, exchange a few words and leave without thinking about what the choleh actually needs.

But there is another lesson as well. Even when there is little that the visitor can do, the visit itself matters. The Rosh tells us that even if

the choleh is sleeping, he will later have נחת רוח from knowing that someone came to see him.

Sometimes we can help a choleh in a practical way. Sometimes we can give him chizuk. We should always daven for him. But sometimes the main thing we can give him is simply the knowledge that we cared enough to come.

Adapted from

לויית חן by **Rebbetzin Chiena Kossowsky**

The Akeidah: Emunah with a Clear Mind

Rebbetzin Chiena Kossowsky (1913 - 1995) served as a Rebbetzin and leader of women's organizations for many years in Poland and South Africa. She also taught Chumash and Tefillah in Bais Yaakovs in Poland and the Lower East Side and Toras Emes in Los Angeles. The sefer לויית חן was published posthumously from some of her notes and is also available at <https://hebrewbooks.org/42890>

The test before the Akeidah. The strength of the Akeidah was not in the Akeidah itself, but in the preparation for it. The Torah emphasizes בנך את היחיד אשר אהבת - *your son, your only son, whom you love*. Before Avraham could place Yitzchak upon the *mizbeach*, he first had to overcome all the natural feelings of a father toward his beloved son. In that sense, by the time Avraham raised the knife, the deepest part of the *nisayon* had already taken place within him. Avraham had passed nine earlier *nisyonos*, and Chazal describe how on the road to the Akeidah the Satan confronted him repeatedly, presenting one argument after another in an effort to stop him. Avraham had to overcome his natural mercy, his questions, and every obstacle that might cause him to turn back.

There was another difficulty as well. Avraham had spent his life opposing those who sacrificed their children to Molech, and now he was setting out to offer his own son. My husband, Rav Michel Kossowsky zt”l, once observed that one of the hardest things a person can be asked to do is the very thing he has opposed throughout his life. Avraham could not understand how this command fit with what he knew and had taught. But the question did not weaken his obedience. He knew that this was Hashem’s command.

The Satan, the ram, and my father's question. There is a particularly striking background to what happened when Avraham saw the ram. The Gemara in Sanhedrin 89b describes how the Satan repeatedly tried to stop Avraham on the road to the Akeidah. When his earlier arguments failed, he claimed to have heard the truth from behind the heavenly curtain: השה לעולה ואין יצחק לעולה - *the sheep is for the olah, and Yitzchak is not for the olah*. Avraham refused to listen, answering that such is the punishment of a liar, שאפילו אמר אמת - *even when he tells the truth he is not believed*. That makes what happened afterward especially puzzling. The malach stopped Avraham, and the Torah then tells us וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא והנה איל אחר נאחז בסבך בקרניו - *Avraham lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, a ram was caught in the thicket by its horns*. But how did Avraham know that the ram was genuine? The Satan had specifically told him that a sheep, rather than Yitzchak, was intended as the korban. Perhaps this ram was simply his final and most convincing attempt.

My father, Rav Eliyahu Benzion Garber HYD, asked me this question when I was young, and I answered him as follows. The ram was נאחז בסבך בקרניו - *caught in the thicket by its horns*. Avraham had

to make an effort to free it. The very fact that it was entangled and difficult to reach was evidence that it was genuine. Had the ram been a device of the Satan, the Satan would have made the alternative easy and placed it directly before Avraham. Instead, Avraham had to struggle to reach it.

This answer reflects something fundamental about Avraham Avinu. He did not accept an apparent sign merely because it gave him the result he desperately wanted. Even after the malach had told him not to harm Yitzchak, he still had to determine what Hashem wanted from him next.

Emunah was not blindness. Avraham's *emunah* was firm and thoughtful, not blind faith without understanding. His greatness was not that he ceased to think. It was through his clear mind that he had come to recognize Hashem. Even before the Torah was given, Avraham understood much of what Hashem wanted from man and lived accordingly.

But clear thought does not mean that a person expects to understand everything. There comes a point at which human understanding reaches its limit. Once Hashem commanded Avraham, he fulfilled the command because it was Hashem's command, whether or not he could explain it. Avraham thought and sought to understand as far as a human being could. When his understanding could go no further, his *emunah* did not weaken. He understood that the limitation was in human understanding, not in the command of Hashem.

That was the greatness of the *Akeidah*. Avraham's love for Yitzchak and his natural compassion remained real, as did the questions raised by the command. Yet none displaced the command itself. He continued with complete *mesirus nefesh*, until the Torah tells us וישלח - *Avraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son*. As far as Avraham was concerned, nothing more remained to be done.

Only then did the malach call out אל תשלח ידך אל הנער ואל תעש לו - *Do not stretch out your hand against the lad and do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear Hashem, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me*. The *nisayon* was complete.

After the malach called. One might imagine that after three days of unimaginable strain, after binding Yitzchak upon the *mizbeach* and raising the knife, Avraham would simply embrace his son and hurry home. But even then, Avraham remained composed. Rashi describes him asking ואת האנשים אשר פתח הבית הכו בסנורים מקטן ועד גדול וילאו למצא - *If so, did I come here for nothing?* Hashem explains that He had commanded Avraham to bring Yitzchak up, not to slaughter him. Avraham had fulfilled what had been commanded.

Yet he still did not simply leave. וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא והנה איל אחר - *Avraham lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, another ram*. He understood that although Yitzchak was not to be sacrificed, there was still a korban to be brought.

The Torah then says וילך אברהם ויקח את האיל ויטח - *Avraham went and took the ram*. Avraham certainly knew how to run. Earlier in the parsha, when guests appeared, ואל הבקר רץ אברהם - *Avraham ran to the cattle*. When another person is hungry or in need, there are times when one must run. But here the Torah says וילך אברהם - *Avraham went*.

Even now, Avraham proceeded deliberately, not in confusion. He had been prepared to offer Yitzchak because that was how he understood Hashem's command; when the malach told him not to touch Yitzchak, he stopped; and when he saw the ram, he understood

that this was now the korban before him. His purpose throughout was the same: to do precisely what Hashem wanted.

He therefore approached the ram not merely with relief, but באותה - *with the same devotion and the same seriousness with which he had brought his son to the Akeidah*.

In Place of His Son. The Torah then says ויקח את האיל ויעלהו - *He took the ram and offered it as an olah in place of his son*. Rashi asks what is added by the words תחת בנו - *in place of his son*. We already know that Avraham offered the ram. Why emphasize that it was in place of Yitzchak?

Rashi explains כל עבודה שעשה ממנו היה מתפלל ואומר יהי רצון שתהא זו - *With every act that he performed with the ram, Avraham prayed: May it be Your will that this be regarded as though it were being performed with my son*.

Avraham did not allow the ram to become merely an easier substitute. Hashem had commanded him not to sacrifice Yitzchak, and therefore he would not sacrifice him. But the inner sacrifice that had brought him to Har HaMoriah remained intact. תחת בנו meant more than one korban physically taking the place of another. Avraham placed into the ram the readiness and *mesirus nefesh* with which he had brought Yitzchak.

The lesson of the Akeidah. This is perhaps the central lesson of the entire *Akeidah*. Avraham's *emunah* did not require him to surrender his mind. It required him to know the limits of his mind. He could think deeply, ask questions, and seek to understand. But once he knew what Hashem required, his inability to understand did not become a reason not to obey.

And this is what Avraham Avinu taught his children: להביא את - *to bring our korbanos and to feel as though we are offering ourselves*. A korban is not measured only by what is placed upon the *mizbeach*. Its true measure is how much of ourselves we place into it.

Adapted from

Ruach Eliyahu by Rav Elya Svei (1924-2009)

Blinded, Yet Still Searching for the Door

Still Searching for the Door. The Torah describes what took place outside Lot's house after the *malachim* arrived in Sodom. The people of Sodom surrounded the house and demanded that Lot hand over his guests. When they tried to break down the door, the *malachim* pulled Lot inside, ואת האנשים אשר פתח הבית הכו בסנורים מקטן ועד גדול וילאו למצא - *they struck the men at the entrance of the house with blindness, from small to great, and they wearied themselves trying to find the entrance* (Vayeira 19:11).

The last words are astonishing. Every one of them had suddenly become blind. Ordinarily, if a person suddenly loses his sight, whatever he had been thinking about a moment earlier disappears. He is frightened. He wants to understand what happened. Yet here, even after they were struck blind, וילאו למצא הפתח - *they continued struggling to find the entrance*. They still wanted to get inside. The Sforno points this out. ואף על פי שהיו מוכים בסנורים טרוח למצא הפתח - *although they had been struck with blindness, they continued struggling to find the entrance in order to break down the door*. He connects this with the statement of Chazal רשעים אפילו - *even when the wicked stand at the entrance to Gehinnom, they do not repent* (Eruvin 19a).

But there is something more here. Even if they did not understand the blindness as a punishment from Shamayim, the blindness itself should have stopped them. Yet it did not. A *taavah* can become so powerful that even when a person's entire world changes before his eyes, the desire remains exactly where it was.

Bilam's Donkey Speaks. We find the same thing with Bilam.

Imagine that an animal suddenly began speaking to a person and rebuking him. Surely he would stop. He would understand that something extraordinary was happening and that Hashem was trying to tell him something.

Yet Bilam did not stop. ויפתח ה' את פי האתון - *Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey* (Balak 22:28). The Sforno explains that Hashem caused the donkey to speak בלעם לשוב בתשובה - *so that Bilam would awaken and do teshuvah*. Hashem was showing Bilam that the power of speech itself comes from Him. If Hashem could give speech to a donkey, He could also take speech away from Bilam.

Chazal tell us that פי האתון - *the mouth of the donkey* was one of the extraordinary creations prepared at the beginning of Creation (Avos 5:6). Something prepared from the six days of Creation was now placed directly in Bilam's path to stop him. Yet his desire for the wealth and honor offered by Balak was so strong that he continued. There are forces within a person that can prevent him from seeing even what Hashem places directly before him.

Lot Goes Back to Sodom. We see the same thing with Lot. Lot looked at the Jordan plain and saw כלה משקה - *that it was entirely well watered*. ויבחר לו לוט את כל כנרת הירדן - *Lot chose for himself the entire Jordan plain*, and ויאהל עד סדום - *he pitched his tents as far as Sodom* (Lech Lecha 13:10-12). The richness of the land drew him away from Avraham Avinu and toward Sodom.

Not long afterward, Lot was captured in the war of the kings. The Torah says ויקחו את לוט ואת רכושו בן אחי אברם וילכו והוא יושב בסדום - *they took Lot and his possessions, the nephew of Avram, and departed, and he was living in Sodom* (Lech Lecha 14:12). Rashi asks why the Torah adds והוא יושב בסדום. מי גרם לו זאת ישיבתו בסדום - *What caused this to happen to him? His dwelling in Sodom*.

Lot had now been shown very clearly what his choice had cost him. He had left Avraham and gone to Sodom, and that brought him into danger. Avraham then came and rescued him. What should Lot have done next? Surely he should have gone back with Avraham. The attraction of כנרת הירדן שכלה משקה - *the Jordan plain that was entirely well watered* should no longer have looked quite the same. Yet Lot went back to Sodom.

That is remarkable. Lot had lived with Avraham Avinu. He had seen where his choice had led him, and he had seen who saved him. Yet the same force that had drawn him to Sodom in the first place was still strong enough to bring him back.

The King of Sodom's Self-Deception. Perhaps the sharpest example is the king of Sodom. During the war of the kings, the king of Sodom fled and fell into one of the pits in the Valley of Siddim. ועמק השדים - *the Valley of Siddim* - בארת בארת חמר וינסו מלך סדם ועמרה ויפלו שמה - *full of pits of clay, and the kings of Sodom and Amorah fled and fell there* (Lech Lecha 14:10).

Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains that the king of Sodom miraculously escaped. Until then, some people had doubted that Avraham had really been saved from the furnace of Ur Kasdim.

When they saw the king of Sodom emerge from the clay, they now believed that Avraham too had been miraculously saved.

The Ramban asks an obvious question. Why should a miracle performed for the wicked king of Sodom make anyone believe in the miracle performed for Avraham? The Ramban suggests that the king of Sodom emerged when Avraham approached. Everyone could see that his rescue had occurred in Avraham's *zechus*. Everyone, apparently, except the king of Sodom.

The Midrash says that when he came out to meet Avraham, התחיל - *he began wagging his tail before him*. He told Avraham מה אתה ירדת לכבשן האש וניצלת אף אני ירדתי לחמר וניצלתי - *You went down into the fiery furnace and were saved, I too went down into the clay and was saved* (Bereishis Rabbah 43:5).

Instead of recognizing that he had been saved in Avraham's *zechus*, he compared himself to Avraham. Avraham had his miracle, and he had his.

The Ohr HaChaim explains the remarkable expression מכשכש בזנבו - *wagging his tail*. The king of Sodom had already been defeated. His kingdom had been shattered, he had fled into a pit, and Avraham had accomplished what he could not. שאחר שרואה עצמו שניטל ראשו עדיין הוא - *even after he sees that his head has been taken away, his tail still wags*. The head was gone, but the tail could still move. A person can lose everything that should support his sense of importance and still find some way to preserve it.

When the Torah Is Talking About Us

It is easy to learn these stories and understand what was wrong with the people of Sodom, Bilam, Lot or the king of Sodom. The harder question is what the Torah is teaching us about ourselves.

Each of us has forces within us that can distort what we see. A *taavah*, a desire for honor, or an attachment to something we have already chosen can become so strong that even when events show us that we are wrong, we find a way to explain them away and continue as before.

This is one of the lessons the Torah repeatedly teaches us in Sefer Bereishis. The Torah does not merely tell us what happened to people thousands of years ago. It shows us the forces hidden within the human *nefesh*, how easily a person can become attached to a course of action and how difficult it can be to recognize what is really driving him.

The challenge is therefore not only to see where the people of Sodom, Bilam, Lot and the king of Sodom went wrong. It is to stop from time to time and ask whether something similar, even in a far smaller form, may be happening within ourselves. Are we seeing what is actually before us, or only what we want to see?

Otherwise, a person can be certain that he sees clearly while, like the people of Sodom, he is still searching for the door while blind.

from: TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>

Rav Hershel Schachter - Bikur Cholim & True Love

Many years ago, I attended Shabbos sheva brochos on Shabbos Parshas Vayera. The chosson and the kallah were talking to each other all the time even when rabbonim were speaking. At the beginning of the parsha (Bereshis 18:1), the Torah tells us that Hashem came to Avraham Avinu to be *mevaker choleh* after he had his *bris milah* (Rashi *ibid.*), but we are not told that He carried on any conversation with him at all. When one is together with a dear friend, even if no words are spoken at all, the presence of the friend gives

one chizuk and puts him in a cheerful mood.

The Gemarah (Nedarim 39b) tells us that reason for the mitzvah of bikur cholim is to heal the patient. Rabbi Akiva had thousands of students, and he noticed that one of the students was absent for a few days in a row. He went to his dormitory room, gave him a clean pair of pajamas, cleaned the floor, opened the window to get fresh air, and gave him medication (ibid. 40a). The Rema (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:4), the comment of the Ramban on that Gemarah is quoted which says that if one visits a choleh and does not offer a tefillah that he should get better, he has not completely fulfilled his mitzvah of bikur cholim. One is obligated to do the maximum he can do in order help the patient recover. Today if someone is sick in the hospital, the medications, the cleaning of the floor, the change of clothing, etc. are all being taken care of by the doctors and nurses. We know that if a patient is in good spirits, he will recover sooner than if he is depressed. The only thing left for us to do for the mitzvah of bikur cholim is to cheer up the patient and to offer a tefillah. When Hashem comes to visit the patient, that itself cheers up the choleh even if no words are spoken at all.

If the chosson and kallah are really in love with each other, just by sitting next to each other, even if no words are spoken, they are cheering each other up. The Gemarah seems to imply that on the sholosh regalim there is a mitzvah of simcha because we are all obligated to visit the Shechinah in the Beis Hamikdash, i.e. to be oleh leregel. The Gemarah (Moed Katan 14b) states that a kohein gadol all year long has the mitzvah of simcha which the rest of the Jewish nation only has on sholosh regalim because the kohein gadol has the responsibility to be in the Beis Hamikdash all day long to supervise the hakrovas ha'korbonos. Just being in the presence of Hashem, even when no words are spoken, puts one in a state of simcha. In Tanach (e.g. Ruth 2:4) we find that when one would greet a friend, one would say "Hashem imochem". Today we say shalom aleichem because Shalom is a nickname for Hashem (Shabbos 10b). When the Shechina is with someone, its presence will put him in a happy mood even if no words are spoken.

When it was my turn to deliver a drasha at that sheva brochos, I had a yetzer harah to say this dvar Torah, but I realized that it would not help because the young lovey-dovey couple would be chatting with each other through my drasha as well!

Adapted and summarized from

דרך ה' ודרך הצדקה והמשפט by Rav Yaakov Medan

<https://www.etzion.org.il/he/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-vayera/vayera-way-god-and-way-righteousness>

The Way of Hashem: Chesed, Mishpat and the Test of Avraham

At first glance, the beginning of Vayeira seems to contain a number of separate stories. Hashem appears to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei. Three visitors arrive, and Avraham leaves the Shechinah, as it were, to take care of them. They tell him that Sarah will have a son. The Torah then turns to Sedom, where Avraham argues with Hashem over the destruction of the city. Later in the parsha comes the Akeidah, where Avraham, who argued so strongly over Sedom, does not argue at all. He answers only הני - Here I am. But these are not separate stories. They are all part of one lesson. The Torah is teaching Avraham what it means to walk in דרך ה' - the way of Hashem. That way includes chesed, but it also includes mishpat. It includes asking questions and trying to understand, but it also

includes knowing that there are times when a person cannot understand and must still trust Hashem.

Avraham's Tent

The parsha begins: וירא אליו ה' באלני ממרא והוא ישב פתח האהל כחם היום - Hashem appeared to him at Elonei Mamrei while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day (Vayeira 18:1). Rashi explains that Hashem came to visit Avraham after his bris. Hashem made the day unusually hot so that travelers would not be outside and Avraham would not have to trouble himself with guests. But Avraham was upset that no one was coming. When he saw three men, וירא וירץ לקראתם - he saw and ran toward them (Vayeira 18:2). Chazal learn from here: גדולה הכנסת אורחין מהקבלת פני שכינה - Welcoming guests is greater than receiving the Shechinah (Shabbos 127a). This is a remarkable idea. Hashem has come to Avraham, and Avraham leaves to take care of strangers. Why is that not a lack of respect for the Shechinah? The answer is that this itself is what Hashem wants from him. Serving Hashem does not mean only standing before Hashem. It also means learning how Hashem wants us to treat other people. Hashem visits Avraham when he is weak, and Avraham immediately gets up to take care of others. Hashem shows chesed to Avraham, and Avraham turns around and shows chesed to someone else.

This happens immediately after the bris. The bris separates Avraham and his children from the nations. But that does not mean that Avraham closes himself off from other people. Just the opposite. At the very moment that Avraham is marked as different, his tent is open to everyone. There may also be a reason why the Torah tells Avraham again here that Yitzchak will be born. Avraham had already been told this before the bris. But now Yitzchak is announced again while Avraham is busy with hachnasas orchim. Yitzchak will not only be the son of the covenant. He will be the beginning of a nation that must learn to live in the way Avraham is now demonstrating.

From Avraham to Sedom

From Avraham's tent, the narrative follows angels to Lot in Sedom. The contrast is immediate. Avraham sees strangers and runs to meet them. In Sedom, the arrival of strangers creates danger. Lot is living in Sedom, but when the angels arrive, he still reacts in a way that reminds us of Avraham: וירא לוט ויקם לקראתם וישתחו אפים ארצה - Lot saw them, rose to greet them, and bowed with his face to the ground (Vayeira 19:1). He urges them to come into his house and gives them food. Whatever else was wrong with Lot's decision to live in Sedom, he had learned something from Avraham. He knew that a stranger had to be welcomed.

The Midrash shows how far Sedom had gone in the opposite direction. It tells of a young woman who secretly brought food to a poor man. When the people of Sedom discovered what she had done, they killed her in a cruel way. Her cry rose before Hashem. This tells us what was wrong with Sedom. It was not simply that there were bad individuals living there. The whole society had turned cruelty into a rule. In Avraham's house, feeding a stranger was a mitzvah. In Sedom, feeding a stranger could be treated as a crime. That is why the move from Avraham's tent to Sedom is so important. The Torah has first shown us what the way of chesed looks like, and now it shows us a society built on the opposite idea.

Why Tell Avraham About Sedom?

Before destroying Sedom, Hashem says: המכסה אני מאברהם אשר אני עשה - Shall I conceal from Avraham what I am doing (Vayeira 18:17). Why does Avraham have to know? Hashem gives the reason: כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט - For I have known him, so that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of Hashem, to do tzedakah and mishpat (Vayeira 18:19). Usually we read this as praise of Avraham. Hashem chose Avraham because Avraham will teach his children tzedakah and mishpat. But in this story the pasuk is also explaining why Avraham must be told about Sedom. Avraham is going to teach his children tzedakah ומשפט צדקה ומשפט. But what do those words mean when there is a real case in front of him? Sedom deserves punishment. But what if there are righteous people living there? Should they die together with the wicked? Can their righteousness save the rest of the city? These are not theoretical questions. If Avraham is going to teach future generations about Hashem's justice, he himself has to think about what justice requires. The Midrash goes even further. It pictures Hashem, as it were, standing while Avraham sits like a judge. Of course Avraham is not literally judging Hashem. The Midrash is teaching us that Hashem is bringing Avraham into the discussion. Avraham has to ask the questions because he is going to teach others what mishpat means.

Will the Judge of the Whole Earth Not Do Justice?

Avraham begins: האף תספה צדיק עם רשע - Will You indeed sweep away the righteous together with the wicked (Vayeira 18:23). Then he says: חללה לך השפט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט - Far be it from You, shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice (Vayeira 18:25). This is a very strong statement. Avraham is speaking to Hashem Himself and asking how this can be justice. What exactly is he asking? There seem to be two questions. First, even if Sedom deserves to be destroyed, what about righteous individuals who live there? Why should a tzaddik die because the city around him is wicked? But Avraham asks for more than that. He asks whether the righteous might save the entire city. אולי יש חמשים צדיקים בתוך העיר - Perhaps there are fifty righteous people in the city (Vayeira 18:24). If there are enough righteous people, perhaps the whole city should be spared because of them.

Hashem accepts that argument. If there are fifty righteous people, the city will be spared. Avraham continues: forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, ten. Hashem agrees each time. If there are ten righteous people, Sedom will not be destroyed. But Avraham stops at ten. This shows that there are really two different questions. Ten righteous people can save the city itself. Fewer than ten cannot. But that does not mean that the individual righteous person may simply be killed together with everyone else. This is where Lot becomes part of the answer to Avraham. Lot cannot save Sedom. There are not enough righteous people to change the judgment of the whole city. But Lot himself must be taken out. The city deserves destruction, yet the individual who does not deserve that punishment is not simply included in the fate of the city.

That is an important part of the lesson Avraham is learning. A community can deserve judgment as a community, but Hashem still judges the individual. The guilt of the many does not erase the difference between one person and another. This is the meeting of tzedakah and mishpat. Mishpat means that evil cannot simply be ignored. Sedom had built a society on cruelty and injustice, and that society could not continue. But tzedakah means that justice must also

look at the individual. The innocent person cannot disappear inside the judgment of the whole. That is why the Torah uses both words: לעשות צדקה ומשפט - to do tzedakah and mishpat. They are not opposites. Both are part of דרך ה'.

But Can Avraham Always Question?

Still, there is a danger here. Avraham argues with Hashem. He asks questions. He wants to understand how Hashem's judgment is just. That is proper here because Hashem Himself has brought Avraham into the discussion. Avraham is supposed to learn from it. But a person can take this too far. He can begin by asking because he wants to understand, and end by deciding that he will accept only what he himself can understand. If so, who is really the judge? Vayeira therefore does not end with Sedom. Later in the same parsha comes the Akeidah.

Sedom and the Akeidah

At Sedom, Avraham argues. At the Akeidah, he does not. The Torah says: ויהי אחר הדברים האלה והאלקים נסה את אברהם ויאמר אליו אברהם ויאמר - After these things G-d tested Avraham and called to him, Avraham, and he said, Here I am (Vayeira 22:1). The command makes no sense to Avraham. Yitzchak is the son through whom all of Hashem's promises are supposed to be fulfilled. Hashem had told him כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע - Through Yitzchak your offspring will be called (Vayeira 21:12). Now Hashem tells him to bring Yitzchak as an olah. Avraham could have asked an even stronger question than he asked at Sedom. How can both things be true? How can Yitzchak be the future if he is now to be offered on the altar? But Avraham says only: הנני.

This does not mean that the lesson of Sedom was wrong. Avraham is not being taught never to ask. He was supposed to ask about Sedom. Hashem brought him into that discussion because he had to learn what tzedakah and mishpat mean. The Akeidah teaches the other half of the lesson. A person must try to understand Hashem's ways, especially when he has to live by them and teach them. But he must also know that he will not understand everything. At some point, faith means trusting Hashem even when the answer is hidden.

Avraham therefore has to be able to do both. At Sedom he says: השפט השפט - Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice. At the Akeidah he says: הנני. The two responses are not contradictions. Together they make Avraham who he is.

To Know the Way of Hashem

We can now return to the words כי ידעתיו - For I have known him. Why is Avraham the one who will teach דרך ה'? Because Avraham is learning what that way means. He sees Hashem visit the sick and learns chesed. He practices hachnasas orchim. He is then brought into the judgment of Sedom and learns what tzedakah and mishpat require. Finally, at the Akeidah, he learns that trying to understand Hashem's ways does not mean that man becomes the final judge of those ways.

A similar idea appears later with Moshe. Moshe asks Hashem: הודעני - Make Your way known to me, so that I may know You (Ki Sisa 33:13). The words are striking. Moshe wants to know Hashem, and therefore he asks to know His way. To know Hashem means, as much as a human being can, to understand the way He acts and the way He wants us to act. That is also what Avraham is learning in Vayeira. Yirmiyahu later says: כי אם בזאת יתהלל המתהלל השכל וידע אותי כי אני ה' עשה חסד משפט וצדקה בארץ כי באלה יתפאר - Let one who glories glory in this, understanding and knowing

Me, that I am Hashem Who does chesed, mishpat and tzedakah in the land, for in these I delight (Yirmiyahu 9:23).

Knowing Hashem is connected to chesed, mishpat and tzedakah. It is not enough to speak about faith in Hashem while ignoring how Hashem wants man to live. That is the line running through Vayeira. It begins with Avraham sitting at the entrance of his tent and running to take care of strangers. It continues with Sedom, where he must learn how tzedakah and mishpat work together. And it reaches the Akeidah, where he learns that even after trying to understand the way of Hashem, there are times when the servant of Hashem must simply answer וְנִגַּן.

Adapted from

The commandment of Torah study - for women as well

By Rav Eliezer Melamed Oct 27, 2026,

Q: Is it true that women are exempt from the commandment to study Torah, and that the Torah belongs to men rather than women?

A: No. Women are obligated to study Torah, and the Torah belongs to women just as it belongs to men. Men do have a broader obligation, but at the foundation of the relationship with Torah, women even precede men.

The Similarities and Differences Between Men and Women

There are two parts to the mitzvah of Torah study. The first is to know the Torah's guidance for one's life. The second is to delve deeply into the Torah and encompass it in its entirety, including areas not directly relevant to one's own life.

In the first area, men and women are equally obligated (Sefer Hasidim 313; Semak, introduction; Agur, Prayer 2; Rema, Yoreh De'ah 246:6; Levush 6; Rishon LeZion 1). The Torah was therefore given at Sinai to all Israel. Hashem told Moshe: "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob, and declare to the children of Israel," and the entire nation answered together, "Everything that the Lord has spoken, we will do" (Shemos 19:3-8). Chazal explain: "'The house of Jacob' — these are the women; 'the children of Israel' — these are the men" (Mekhilta, ad loc.). In this respect, the women were addressed first.

The second obligation is to encompass the entire Torah and continue examining and analyzing it. This obligation applies specifically to men, as Chazal derive from "And you shall teach them to your children" — "and not your daughters" (Kiddushin 29b). Nevertheless, a woman who voluntarily studies beyond what is necessary for the guidance of her life fulfills a mitzvah and receives reward (Sotah 21a).

The Blessings over the Torah and Hakhel

Because women are obligated to learn the Torah necessary to guide their lives, they recite the blessings over Torah study each day just as men do (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 47:14; Bach 4; Magen Avraham 14; Shulchan Aruch HaRav 10; introduction to Responsa Beit HaLevi).

Chazal relate that King Chizkiyahu intensified Torah study throughout Israel until "they did not find a boy or a girl, a man or a woman, who was not knowledgeable in the laws of ritual impurity and purity" (Sanhedrin 94b).

Likewise, women participated in Hakhel together with men: "Assemble the people — the men, the women, the children... so that they may hear and learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe and perform all the words of this Torah" (Devarim 31:10-12).

The Extent of the Obligation Depends on the Generation

In earlier generations, when daily life required far more time and physical labor and literacy was uncommon, women generally learned the Torah necessary for their lives from their parents and from rabbinic sermons on Shabbos and Yom Tov. Girls were therefore not ordinarily

taught to read to the same extent as boys, although exceptional women became Torah scholars and prophetesses.

In recent generations, literacy and general education have become widespread. Women study, work in every profession, participate in public life and encounter competing ideas concerning faith, society, family and human nature. General Torah knowledge and a basic familiarity with practical halachah are therefore no longer sufficient. Women today must study substantially more Torah than women generally studied in earlier generations.

The Chofetz Chaim and the Rabbis of Eastern Europe

The Chofetz Chaim wrote that once traditional Jewish life had weakened, girls often lived away from their parents and studied secular subjects in school, "it is certainly a great commandment to teach them the Five Books of Moses, as well as the Prophets and the Writings, and the ethical teachings of the Sages," so that their faith would remain firmly rooted (Likutei Halachot, Sotah 21a, note).

In a letter supporting a girls' school, he wrote even more strongly that "all the concerns and doubts regarding the prohibition against teaching Torah to one's daughter are of no concern whatsoever in our times."

With the support of leading Torah authorities, institutions providing serious Torah education for girls were established, most prominently the Beit Yaakov movement founded by Sarah Schenirer in 1918.

Rabbi Zaken Aharon ruled that funds donated for Torah study could be redirected to a Beit Yaakov school because its studies constituted a great mitzvah (Responsa Zaken Aharon 2:66). Rabbi Tzirelson ruled similarly (Responsa Lev Yehudah, Yoreh De'ah 56).

Rabbi Sorotzkin went further regarding the study of Torah Shebe'al Peh in Beit Yaakov, describing such study in contemporary circumstances not merely as permissible but as an "absolute obligation" (Moznayim LaMishpat 42). Similar positions were expressed by Rabbi Waldenberg (Tzitz Eliezer 9:3), Rabbi Malka (Mikveh HaMayim 3, Yoreh De'ah 21), Rabbi Chaim David HaLevi (Aseh Lekha Rav 2:52), and Rabbi Eliyahu (Ma'amar Mordechai 1, Yoreh De'ah 11).

Rabbis of the Modern World

As women's participation in education, professional life and society expanded, rabbinic authorities increasingly called for broader Torah education.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that because women are exposed to outside influences, they must receive a serious Torah education that includes Torah Shebe'al Peh, the reasons behind halachos and even the give-and-take of Torah discussion, so that their intellectual abilities develop within the world of Torah (At Alit, pp. 45-46).

Rabbi Soloveitchik likewise taught that in an age when women participate fully in academia and public life, they must understand Torah from its sources in Tanach and the Talmud. Without serious study of Torah together with the commentaries of the Rishonim, he warned, authentic Judaism could not be preserved (Peninei HaRav, p. 167).

Some authorities of the previous generation disagreed and maintained that women should be taught primarily practical halachah (Divrei Yatziv, Yoreh De'ah 139-140; Shevet HaLevi 6:150). Some also opposed teaching Mishnah (Igrot Moshe, Yoreh De'ah 3:87; comments of Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv on Sotah 21b).

These authorities lived in communities that deliberately distanced themselves from modern culture and therefore believed that more limited Torah instruction remained adequate. Even that education, however, was far more extensive than what had generally been provided to girls two centuries earlier.

Women who participate fully in modern society, by contrast, encounter intellectual and spiritual challenges that require substantially broader Torah knowledge.

The Obligation of Women to Study in Our Times

To know how to live according to Torah today and to understand its guidance concerning faith, ethics, family, the individual and society, women must broaden and deepen their study of Torah and halachah and understand the inner logic of Torah as developed in the Talmud and its commentators.

This includes a general understanding even of mitzvos that have no direct practical relevance, so that the Torah's overall vision can be understood. It also includes the foundations of emunah and the history of the revelation of faith through Israel, as explained in Tanach, Chazal, the Rishonim and the later authorities.

The greater a woman's intellectual abilities and the greater the challenges she encounters, the more deeply she must study Torah.

In the *Peninei Halakha* series, I have attempted to present Torah at a breadth and depth suitable for both men and women. Regarding mitzvos specific to men, such as tefillin and tzitzis, women need only learn their general principles.

In practice, because the study of halachah, emunah and ethics required for women has expanded so greatly, the practical difference between the obligations of men and women has narrowed considerably. Indeed, many men today do not succeed in mastering even all the material that women themselves are obligated to learn.

With Hashem's help, the next column will discuss the voluntary mitzvah of women continuing to delve more deeply into Torah and Talmud, the difficulties that arose concerning this subject in the past and today, and possible solutions.

Adapted from

פרשת דרכים (Drashos 1-3) by **Rav Yehudah Rosanes** (1657-1727), aka the Mishneh Limelech.

Available on Sefaria & Wikitext

The Avos Before Sinai: Bnei Noach or Yisrael?

The Basic Question

The question. The Mishnah in Kiddushin 82a states מצינו שעשה אברהם אבינו את - כל התורה כולה עד שלא ניתנה *we find that Avraham Avinu fulfilled the entire Torah before it was given.* The Gemara in Yoma 28b says the same and adds ואפילו עירובי תבשילין - *even eruv tavshilin.* Chazal also describe Yaakov observing Shabbos, Yosef preparing for Shabbos in Mitzrayim, and Yaakov and Yosef studying *eglah arufah*. But first we must clarify a more basic question. When the Avos observed the Torah before Matan Torah, what was their halachic status? Did they remain *Bnei Noach* who voluntarily accepted additional Torah obligations, so that they could add stringencies but could not use Torah law to escape a law already binding upon them? Or did Avraham and his descendants leave the category of *Bnei Noach* and acquire the status of Yisrael, even where Torah law was more lenient? Many passages in Chazal turn on this question.

The Proof from Shabbos

Shabbos as a test case. **Rav Shmuel Yafeh Ashkenazi** (16th century) the author of a commentary *Yefeh Toar on the Midrash Rabbah*, appears to hold that Avraham and his descendants left the category of *Bnei Noach* entirely, even להקל - where the status of Yisrael produced a leniency. Chazal learn from ויהן את פני העיר - *he encamped before the city*, that Yaakov observed Shabbos before it was given. Yosef likewise said וטבוה טבה והכן - *slaughter and prepare*, understood as preparation on Friday for Shabbos. Yet *a Ben Noach who observes a day of complete rest is liable*, based on ויום ולילה לא ישבתו - *day and night they shall not cease*. If Yaakov and Yosef were still *Bnei Noach*, how could they keep Shabbos? Their Shabbos observance therefore indicates that they had left that status. *Why Torah study is different.* The fact that Yaakov and Yosef studied *eglah arufah* proves less. The prohibition against a non-Jew studying Torah is learned from *Moshe commanded us the Torah as an*

inheritance. Before the Torah was given through Moshe, that particular status of Torah as the inheritance of Yisrael had not yet arisen. Shabbos is different because the prohibition of a *Ben Noach* resting already existed.

The Re'em: Bnei Noach Where the Law Was Stricter

The opposite approach. **Rav Eliyahu Mizrahi**, the **Re'em** (c. 1450–1526), appears to hold otherwise. When Moshe was traveling to Mitzrayim and had not yet performed the *milah* of his son, Rashi explains that performing the *milah* and then immediately traveling would have endangered the child. The Re'em asks what permitted Moshe to postpone the mitzvah because of danger. The Torah had not yet been given, and therefore וחי בהם - *you shall live through them*, had not yet been stated. It follows from his reasoning that pre-Sinai Torah observance could add obligations but could not remove an obligation that already applied to a *Ben Noach*.

The central distinction. Thus everyone agrees that the Avos observed the Torah before it was given. The dispute is what that observance meant. According to the Re'em, לא יצאו מכלל בני נח להקל עליהם מדין בני נח אלא להחמיר - *they did not leave the category of Bnei Noach to receive its leniencies, but accepted the Torah to add its stringencies.* Their Torah observance could make them stricter, but it did not erase a stricter law that already bound them. According to the Maharash Yafeh, however, the status itself changed, and once they were Yisrael the laws of Yisrael governed even where those laws were more lenient.

The Dispute Among the Rishonim

Chachmei Tzarfat and Ramban. The same dispute appears among the Rishonim. The Torah describes the *megadef* as the son of an Egyptian man and a Jewish woman, and the *Toras Kohanim* says that he converted. The **Chachmei Tzarfat** (the French Baalei Tosafos) explain that because he was born before Matan Torah, his status followed his Egyptian father and he later required *geirus*. The **Ramban** rejects this: כי מעת שבה אברהם בברית היו ישראל - *from the time Avraham entered the covenant they were Yisrael and were no longer reckoned among the nations.* The Chachmei Tzarfat therefore fit the first approach; the Ramban fits the second. [The Ramban on Bereishis 26:5 also writes that Avraham learned the entire Torah through *Ruach HaKodesh* and observed it מצוה ועושה - *as one who was not commanded but nevertheless performed it*, and that this observance applied in Eretz Yisrael. Thus, having the status of Yisrael before Sinai did not necessarily mean that all 613 mitzvos had already been formally commanded.]

Esav as a proof. There is a powerful proof from Esav. The Gemara entertains ודילמא ישראל מומר שני - *perhaps an apostate Yisrael is different.* If Avraham's descendants remained ordinary *Bnei Noach* until Sinai, how could Esav be called ישראל מומר - *an apostate Yisrael*? The very expression assumes that the category of Yisrael already existed before Matan Torah. *Avraham's chazakah.* Avraham's acquisition of Eretz Yisrael points the same way. Hashem told him קום התהלך בארץ לארכה ולרחבה - *arise and walk through the land in its length and breadth*, and Chazal understand his walking as an act of *chazakah*. Yet a non-Jew does not acquire property through *chazakah* in the same manner. If Avraham were still only a *Ben Noach*, what was accomplished by his walking? This again indicates that Avraham already possessed *din Yisrael*.

Yaakov and the two sisters. This also gives one answer to the famous question of how Yaakov could marry Rachel and Leah if the Avos kept the Torah. If Avraham's descendants had left the category of *Bnei Noach*, Rachel and Leah could enter through *geirus*, and גר שנתגייר כקטן שנולד - *a convert who converts is regarded as newly born*. Their former family relationship would no longer create the ordinary prohibition of two sisters. The **Ramban** gives another answer: the Avos observed the Torah in Eretz Yisrael, whereas Yaakov married Rachel and Leah in *chutz laaretz*. That distinction is important, but it cannot resolve every problem, since Yitzchak himself was forbidden to leave Eretz Yisrael. The underlying question of status therefore remains necessary.

Reuven, Moshe, and the Status of Yisrael

Reuven and Bilhah. The same issue appears in the episode of Reuven and Bilhah. Bilhah was Yaakov's *pilegsh*. Under the Torah law of Yisrael, a *pilegsh* without *kiddushin* does not have the same marital status as a wife acquired through *kiddushin*. Among *Bnei Noach*, however, the marital relationship itself creates the bond. If Yaakov's family still had *din Bnei Noach*, Bilhah was Yaakov's wife and Reuven's act involved *אשת איש ואשת אב* - *another man's wife and his father's wife*. If they had already acquired *din Yisrael*, that particular prohibition would not apply in the same way. [Rashi, however, following Chazal, explains that Reuven did not literally have relations with Bilhah; he moved Yaakov's bed and the Torah treated him as though he had done so.]

Why Moshe resolves Reuven's case. This explains the Midrash in which Yaakov says that he will neither distance Reuven nor fully bring him close, but will leave the matter until Moshe. Moshe would also confront the same underlying question. When he saw the Egyptian striking a Hebrew, the Gemara says that a non-Jew who strikes a Yisrael is liable. If the Hebrews were still merely *Bnei Noach*, the Egyptian had struck another Ben Noach and that reasoning would disappear. Moshe's act therefore rested upon the premise that Abraham's descendants already had *din Yisrael*. Likewise, Moshe was able to say *והי ראובן ואל ימת* - *Let Reuven live and not die*.

Yosef and His Brothers

Eiver min hachai. Yosef accused his brothers of eating *eiver min hachai*. They were not eating meat cut from a living animal in the ordinary sense, but meat from an animal after *shechitah* while it was still *mefarkeses*, moving before death. For Yisrael this was permitted, whereas under *din Bnei Noach* there was room to prohibit it. The brothers held that they had left the status of *Bnei Noach* and followed the law of Yisrael. Yosef held that they could not invoke a Torah leniency against a stricter law still binding upon them as *Bnei Noach*. Their dispute was therefore about their own halachic identity.

Kiddush Hashem

A challenge to the Re'em's proof. The second *drasha* returns to the Re'em's proof from Moshe's son's *milah*. If a Ben Noach is not commanded in *kiddush Hashem*, why should *והי בהם* be necessary to permit him to avoid danger? And in Moshe's case, it was the child who would be endangered. Why should Moshe endanger another person to perform his mitzvah? Thus the Re'em's general position may remain, but this particular proof requires further study.

Ur Kasdim. The question becomes sharper with Abraham and Nimrod's furnace. The Midrash describes Abraham standing firm against Nimrod and allowing himself to be cast into the furnace rather than abandon Hashem. But if a Ben Noach is not commanded in *kiddush Hashem*, who permitted Abraham to risk his life? If he still had only the status of a Ben Noach, perhaps he was not required, and according to some opinions not even permitted, to die rather than submit.

The rescue becomes the proof. This difficulty itself can become a proof that Abraham had already left the category of *Bnei Noach*. Hashem says *אני ה אשר* - *I am Hashem Who brought you out of Ur Kasdim*. If Abraham's act had been halachically improper, why would Hashem perform a miracle to save him from its consequences? His rescue from Ur Kasdim therefore indicates that he already possessed the status for which *kiddush Hashem* could require self-sacrifice. What began as a question on Abraham becomes evidence of his status.

Ein Mazal L'Yisrael and Yosef

Avraham and the stars. Avraham looked at the stars and saw that he would not have a son. Hashem answered *לך מאצטגנינות* - *leave your astrology behind*, because *אין מזל לישראל* - *Yisrael is not governed by mazal in the same manner*. But why was Avraham frightened by what he saw? Surely Hashem could overturn the natural order.

The answer is that Avraham himself was uncertain about his status. If he remained a Ben Noach, he remained subject to the ordinary order of *mazal*, and what he saw in the stars was indeed frightening. Hashem's answer was that Avraham was no longer counted among the nations: *אין מזל לישראל*. The

promise of children therefore revealed not only what would happen to Avraham, but who Avraham had become.

Yosef goes outside. This explains a striking Midrash. When Yosef fled from Potiphar's wife, the Torah says *וינס ויצא החוצה* - *he fled and went outside*. Chazal connect these words with Avraham, *ויצא אתו החוצה* - *He brought him outside*. Why should Yosef's flight from Potiphar's wife be linked specifically to Avraham being brought outside to look at the stars? Potiphar's wife could bring about Yosef's death. If Yosef were a Ben Noach not required to die rather than commit *giluy arayos*, why risk his life? Avraham's supplied the answer: Hashem had already taught Avraham *אין מזל לישראל*. Yosef therefore knew that Avraham's descendants had the status of Yisrael, for whom *giluy arayos* is *יהרג ואל יעבור* - *one must give his life rather than transgress*. Yosef's *ויצא החוצה* thus follows from Avraham's *ויצא אתו החוצה*.

Reward and Punishment

Were the mitzvos binding? Even if the Avos kept the Torah, were they punished from Heaven for failing to observe mitzvos beyond the seven already commanded to *Bnei Noach*? The **Re'em** appears to say there could be Heavenly punishment even though there was not yet punishment through a human *beis din*. The **Maharash Yafeh** disagrees: if they had not been commanded, there should be no punishment for failing to perform them. *The two questions should be one.* This should depend upon the earlier dispute. If the Avos truly left *din Bnei Noach* even where Torah law was more lenient, it is difficult to say that Torah law was optional whenever it imposed a stringency. But if they remained *Bnei Noach* and merely added Torah observance, they were *אינו מצווה ועושה* - *one who performs without having been commanded*: *מקבל שכר על הדרישה ואינו נענש על הפרישה* - *he receives reward for seeking to perform the mitzvah but is not punished for refraining from it*.

גדול המצווה ועושה

Avraham's fear. This explains *אל תירא אברם מגן לך שכר הרבה מאד* - *Do not fear, Avram, I am your shield; your reward is exceedingly great*. Chazal say that Avraham feared the miracles already performed for him had consumed his reward. But why should his reward have been so great in the first place?

גדול המצווה ועושה יותר ממי שאינו מצווה. The Gemara teaches *גדול המצווה ועושה* - *greater is one who is commanded and performs than one who performs without being commanded*. Tosafos explain that the person who is commanded worries that he may fail. The *אינו מצווה ועושה* always has the option of walking away; the commanded person does not. That pressure and fear give the mitzvah greater weight.

Avraham therefore feared that perhaps he remained a Ben Noach, performing the Torah only as an *אינו מצווה ועושה*. His reward would then be more limited, and perhaps the miracles Hashem had already performed had consumed it. Hashem answered *לך שכר הרבה מאד* - *your reward is exceedingly great*. You are not merely volunteering; you are a *מצווה ועושה* - *one who is commanded and performs*. This also explains *ליראך* - *how abundant is the good You have stored for those who fear You*. Why *ליראך* - *for those who fear*? Because the commanded person fears transgression precisely because the mitzvah is no longer voluntary.

Conclusion

What changed? *Avraham Avinu* - *קיים אברהם אבינו כל התורה כולה עד שלא ניתנה* - *Avraham observed the entire Torah before it was given* raises a deeper question than how Avraham knew the future mitzvos. Did the Avos remain *Bnei Noach* who voluntarily accepted the Torah, or had Avraham and his descendants already acquired the status of Yisrael before Sinai? Once that question is asked, Yaakov and Yosef keeping Shabbos, Ur Kasdim, *אין מזל לישראל*, Yosef and Potiphar's wife, Esav, Reuven and Bilhah, Yosef and his brothers, and even Avraham's fear over his reward all become different expressions of the same issue. Matan Torah had not yet taken place, but perhaps Klal Yisrael had already begun.