

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת וירא

וירא אליו ה' באלני ממרא והוא ישב פתח האהל כחם היום
“Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day” (18:1)

Chazal explain that Hashem appeared to Avraham on the third day after his bris milah to perform bikur cholim, the mitzvah of visiting the sick. The gemara in Sotah 14a says that Hashem visits sick people. There is a mitzvah to follow in the ways of Hashem and emulate Him. If the Torah tells us that Hashem visits the sick, then this is clearly a mitzvah that we have to give priority to. Even today when Hashem does not reveal Himself to people as He did to Avraham, the Divine Presence is still at a sick person's bedside. It is important to behave respectfully when visiting a sick person for this reason. The proper way to fulfill this mitzvah is to find out what the needs of the sick person are and to pray on their behalf. Also, when one visits a sick person, he fulfills the mitzvah of tzedaka because he uplifts the sick person and gives him the comfort that he needs.

This is just one example where we see that the narrative of Sefer Bereishis is more than just nice stories. Throughout the gemara, many lessons and laws are derived from these stories. When reading these parshiyos, one should look for lessons that we can learn from the conduct of our illustrious forefathers. This is why Chazal tell us that a person must always strive to act in a manner similar to his ancestors. The historical accounts in the Torah are also meant to teach us how to refine our character traits, just like the mitzvos.

וימהר אברהם האהלה אל שרה ויאמר מהרי שלש סאים קמח סלת לושי ועשי עגות

“So Avraham hastened to the tent to Sarah and said: Hurry, three se'ahs of meal, fine flour, knead and make cakes” (18:6)

The Akeidas Yitzchak asks: Why did the Torah give a detailed description of this particular episode of Avraham's kindness? Surely Avraham performed many other acts of kindness. He answers that this episode took place on the third day after his bris milah. He was 99 years old and he was in terrible pain. Nevertheless, in his painful condition, he sat at the entrance of his tent in the extreme heat looking for guests and, when he saw them, he ran after them to invite them into his home. The torah is teaching an important lesson. We must utilize every opportunity that we have to do good deeds. We should not try to make excuses for ourselves every time something comes up. If Avraham did not make excuses for himself in his situation, how can we attempt to pardon ourselves in a lighter scenario?

ויאמר ה' אל אברהם למה זה צחקה שרה לאמר האף אמנם אלד ואני זקנתי
“Then Hashem said to Avraham: Why is it that Sarah laughed, saying: Shall I in truth bear a child, though I have aged?” (18:13)

Why did Hashem rebuke Avraham for what Sarah said? Why did He not rebuke Sarah directly? After all, the halacha dictates that one should give rebuke directly to an individual and not indirectly by telling someone else about it and asking that he deliver the

rebuke.

R' Yisrael Salanter gives the following answer: Hashem was saying to Avraham that if Sarah laughed because she could not believe that she could possibly have a child, it would seem to indicate that there was a deficiency in Avraham as well. If she would have seen optimism and perfect trust in Hashem in Avraham, she would never have laughed. Hashem said to Avraham: How is it that there is an atmosphere of skepticism your house to the point that Sarah laughed disbelievingly at the possibility of having a child?

In a home, both partners create an atmosphere. If a child does something wrong, it could be that parents contributed to an atmosphere that led the child to believe that such an action was okay. We must be very careful about the atmosphere that we create in our homes and in our relationships with others. We may be held responsible for the misdeeds of others because they are influenced by the atmosphere that we helped create.

ויען אברהם ויאמר הנה נא הואלתי לדבר אל ה' ואנכי עפר ואפר
“Avraham responded and said: Behold, now, I desired to speak to my Lord although I am but dust and ashes” (18:27)

Why did Avraham compare himself to both dust and ashes? The Bais HaLevi explains that dust has potential for the future, through planting, but was nothing in the past. Ashes, on the other hand, are a product of something that had value in the past but is worthless in the future. Avraham looked at himself and said that he was like dust, in that he never had any value in the past, and ashes, because he felt that he had no significance in the future.

The gemara in Sotah 17a tells us that as a reward for his self-effacing statement, Avraham's descendants were given a mitzvah involving dust and a mitzvah involving ashes. Dust is put in the water which the sotah, the unfaithful wife, drinks in order to determine her fidelity. Ashes from the parah aduma, the red heifer, are mixed with spring water and are sprinkled upon a person who has contracted tumas meis, impurity from a corpse, and purifies him. The Bais HaLevi explains that these mitzvos correspond to the meaning of dust and ashes. Because Avraham felt that he had no value in the past, the sotah drinks dust which clarifies that she really was faithful in the past. Because Avraham felt he had no future value, the ashes of the parah aduma purifies a person for the future. We see from here that Avraham was greatly rewarded for his exceptional humility.

ויקרא אברהם את שם בנו הנולד לו אשר ילדה לו שרה יצחק
“Avraham called the name of his son who was born to him - whom Sarah had borne him - Yitzchak” (21:3)

What does the meaning of the name Yitzchak, “to laugh,” signify? Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch explains in Parshas Lech Lecha that the continuation of the Jewish people is nothing short of a pure miracle. For Avraham, at 100, and Sarah, at 90, to have a child that would be the future of the Jewish people seemed laughable. Sarah said “kol hashomeia yitzachak li,” “all who hear will laugh for me,” because one would laugh upon hearing about the birth of Yitzchak. The survival of the Jewish nation is what characterized the Jewish people throughout history. The laughter at the unlikely chances of their very survival, let alone their prosperity, has followed them all through the generations.

Yitzchak's birth represents the birth of the Jewish people. Hashem instructed Avraham to name the child who would be the beginning of the Jewish people "Yitzchak" to signify the supernatural nature of his birth, which would be a foreshadowing of the miraculous existence of his descendants throughout the generations. Hashem wants the survival of the Jews to be miraculous so that they will always defy common sense and prove Hashem's existence to the world.

Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur

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