

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.

יקח נא מעט מים ורחצו רגליכם והשענו תחת העץ
“Let some water be taken and wash your feet and recline beneath the tree” (18:4)

The gemara in Bava Metzia 86b states that whatever Avraham did for the angels on his own was paid back to his descendants by Hashem Himself. Whatever Avraham did through a messenger, Hashem repaid through an emissary. We learn from this that a person's reward is given based on how much toil and effort went into the mitzvah. However much we put into a mitzvah is what we get back from it. Two people can do the same mitzvah and receive a different level of reward. It is also important to note that even though the mitzvah will be done anyway, it is still best to do the mitzvah oneself. That is the highest level of mitzvah performance and that is what we should aim for.

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.

ועתה השב אשת האיש כי נביא הוא ויתפלל בעדך וחיה ואם אינך משיב דע כי מות תמות אתה וכל אשר לך

“But now, return the man's wife for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live, but if you do not return her, be aware that you shall surely die, you and all that is yours” (20:7)

The gemara in Bava Kama 92a says: Even if a person hits his friend and pays for the damages that he caused, he is still not forgiven until he asks for forgiveness. The gemara cites this posuk as a source for this idea. How is this concept derived from what Hashem said to Avimelech? The Torah Temima explains that Hashem instructed Avimelech to ask Avraham to daven on his behalf. Since Avimelech needed to ask Avraham to daven for him, it is clear that he had to ask him for forgiveness first. The gemara further learns from the fact that Avraham prayed for Avimelech immediately thereafter that one who does not forgive a person who asks for his forgiveness is considered cruel. We should emulate the example of Avraham Avinu and let things go. Chazal tell us that if one is not exact with others regarding how they treat him, Hashem acts the same way toward him and will also look away from his misdeeds at times.

והוכח אברהם את אבימלך על אדות באר המים אשר גזלו עבדי אבימלך
“Then Avraham disputed with Avimelech regarding the well of water that Avimelech's servants had seized” (21:25)

The Sifri comments on this posuk that we see from here how rebuke leads to peace. Avraham rebuked Avimelech and, despite their disagreement, shortly thereafter they made a covenant. Many times, people do not communicate properly and then assume that others are wrong without speaking to each other about it first. Avraham did not fall into this trap. He approached Avimelech in a respectful way when he felt wronged and they talked it out between themselves. This led to an easy resolution of the problem and they even went so far as to make a treaty between their families. This concept is especially important in a marriage. Many times, through proper communication, one will find things not to be like he or she thought they were. The Torah teaches us that problems are much easier to fix if people communicate with one another rather than holding in their anger.

וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא והנה איל אחר נאחז בסבך בקרניו וילך אברהם ויקח את האיל ויעלהו לעלה תחת בנו

“Avraham raised his eyes and saw - behold, a ram - afterwards, caught in the thicket by its horns; so Avraham went and took the ram and offered it up as an offering instead of his son” (22:13)

The Yerushalmi in Taanis 2:4 brings down what Hashem said to Avraham at the time when he saw the ram caught in the tree (see Rashi). Hashem told Avraham that one day the Jews will be entangled by many difficulties, just as the ram was trapped, and they will be redeemed with the blowing of the shofar made from the horn of this ram. Every person is obligated to believe that Moshiach is coming and one should wait expectantly for that day. One of the first questions that a person is asked when he passes on is if he yearned for the redemption. Even Avraham Avinu, who lived thousands of years ago, looked forward to that great day. How much more so is it imperative upon us, who live in a time where Moshiach's arrival seems imminent, to constantly await that awesome moment.

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