**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYERA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Vayera begins with the famous story of Avraham’s three visitors – who were angels disguised as weary, famished travelers – whom he welcomed and for whom he brought water and a large meal. The Gemara in Masekhet Bava Metzia (86b) states that the miraculous provisions which Avraham’s descendants received during their sojourn through wilderness were granted in the merit of the provisions he offered to his guests. Just as Avraham fed his visitors bread and meat, God provided *Benei Yisrael* in the desert with heavenly bread (manna) and the meat of quail. Avraham brought his guests water, and God provided a miraculous well which accompanied *Benei Yisrael* in the desert to supply their water needs. And just as Avraham escorted his guests when they left his home, God accompanied *Benei Yisrael* during travel, providing the supernatural “clouds of glory” which protected them.

The Gemara here depicts *Benei Yisrael* in the desert as God’s “guests,” as wayfarers in desperate need of food, water and shelter, which God graciously provided them. Just as the *mitzva* of *hakhnasat orechim* requires us to offer lodging and provisions to travelers who are away from home, God Himself tenderly cared for *Benei Yisrael* during their period of travel through the wilderness, providing them with all their needs.

The Gemara further notes a distinction subtly indicated by the text between Avraham’s provision of water, and his provision of his guests’ other needs. Whereas Avraham personally served the guests food and personally escorted them after their meal, he had somebody else bring them water, as suggested by the way he expressed his offer of water: “*Yukach na me’at mayim*” – “Let a bit of water be brought” (18:4). Correspondingly, the Gemara writes, God personally sent *Benei Yisrael* manna, quail and the supernatural clouds, but the water was provided by somebody else – Moshe, whom God commanded to strike a stone to turn it into a well that produced water for the nation. The Gemara appears to criticize Avraham for summoning a servant to bring water for his guests, instead of doing so personally.

The message conveyed by the Gemara’s remark (as [discussed by Rav Yehoshua Weitzman of Yeshivat Ma’alot](http://www.yesmalot.co.il/shiurhtml/malotsh1877.asp)) is that *hakhnasat orechim* involves not only the practical provision of the traveler’s basic necessities, but also personal attention. A wayfarer lacks food and shelter – but he also lacks a sense of belonging and a feeling of comfort. Travelers often feel disoriented and out of place, causing them a degree of anxiety and discomfort. And so besides food and shelter, they also need friendship and camaraderie. The Gemara therefore emphasizes the importance of not only ensuring that guests are well cared for, but that they are given direct, personal attention and made to feel as comfortable as possible. The goal must be not merely to ensure the provision of their practical necessities, but also that they feel welcomed and respected, as though they are in their own home.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Vayera tells the story of God’s destruction of Sedom, before which He informed Avraham of His plan to kill the city’s inhabitants. He told Avraham that He has heard the “cries” of Sedom, likely referring to the cries of the victims of Sedom’s cruel policies (as described by the prophet Yechezkel, 16:49), and so He was going to determine whether these cries warrant the city’s destruction, “*ve-im lo eida’a*” – “and if not, then I shall know” (18:21).

Rashi explains the term “*eida’a*” (“I shall know”) to mean “I shall know what to do to punish them with afflictions, rather than destroying them.” Meaning, God was going to determine whether the evil of Sedom warranted its complete annihilation, or a lesser punishment.

Ibn Ezra cites those who explain the term “*eida’a*” to mean “I shall have compassion” on the city. The prooftext for this definition of the word, as Ibn Ezra notes, is the verse in Sefer Shemot (2:25) which tells that during *Benei Yisrael*’s period of suffering in Egyptian bondage, “*va-yeida Elokim*” – which appears to mean that God had compassion on the people. This interpretation of “*eida’a*” appears also in *Pesikta Zutreta*, which cites the aforementioned verse in Sefer Shemot as well as a verse in Sefer Mishlei (12:10), “***Yodei’a*** *tzadik nefesh behemto*,” which the *Pesikta* apparently interpreted to mean that a righteous person has compassion on his animals, and provides them with all that they need.

A much different interpretation of this verse is cited by Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*. The basis for this interpretation is the “*Ata Chonantanu*” paragraph which we add to the evening prayer service on Motza’ei Shabbat, in which we acknowledge the distinction drawn by God between the sacred period of Shabbat and the ordinary period of the workweek. This brief prayer begins by saying that God has “granted us wisdom” to understand His laws, and this prayer was instituted to be recited in the blessing in which we ask God for wisdom (“*Ata chonein*”). The Talmud Yerushalmi (Berakhot 5:2) famously explains the connection between *havdala* – the distinction between sacred and mundane – and the prayer for wisdom by stating, “*Im ein dei’a havdala minayin*” – we are incapable of drawing distinctions, of discerning differences, without wisdom. The concept of “*havdala*,” distinguishing between outwardly similar entities, requires wisdom, and so it is in the blessing of “*Ata chonein*” that we proclaim the distinction between the sacred period of Shabbat and the mundane period of the workweek. It has thus been suggested that the word “*eida’a*” here in Parashat Vayera may similarly be understood to mean “distinguish.” God needed to determine whether the evil in Sedom was so pervasive that the entire population needed to be destroyed, or if perhaps there were those who did not deserve this fate. And so He expressed to Avraham that He would decide whether He would eradicate the entire city, or “*eida’a*” – He would draw a distinction between those who deserved to perish and those who deserved to be saved. Sadly, as the Torah proceeds to tell, God determined that nobody other than Lot and his family deserved to be spared the devastation that He would bring upon the city.

We are expected to have the *dei’a* – the wisdom – to distinguish between people, to recognize that not all people belonging to a certain group are necessarily alike. Sweeping generalizations about people based on their place of residence or affiliation signifies a sore lack of “*dei’a*,” a shallow, superficial perspective that ignores nuances and distinctions. It is convenient to label people based on the group with which they are associated, but we are to have the “*dei’a*” to recognize the uniqueness of each and every individual, and to avoid mindless, unfair judgments based on group identities and affiliations. Just as God did not immediately label all residents of Sedom as evil, and judged each individual on his or her own merit, so must we refrain from making generalizations and instead acknowledge the distinctiveness of every individual.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayera tells of the problems that arose in Avraham and Sara’s home after the birth of their son, Yitzchak. Sara noticed that Yishmael, the son of her maidservant, Hagar, posed a threat to Yitzchak, and she felt that Hagar and Yishmael needed to be sent away from the home. Avraham, naturally, resisted, until God told him, “All that Sara tells you – heed her voice” (21:12). Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, famously comments that God refers here to Sara’s prophetic insight, which exceeded that of Avraham, and thus God told Avraham to accede to Sara’s request.

Rav Moshe Leib Shachor, in his *Avnei Shoham*, suggests associating this incident with the story told earlier, of Avraham’s marriage to Hagar. Seeing she could not bear children, Sara asked Avraham to marry her maidservant to produce a child which would, in a sense, be considered Sara’s child. The Torah writes, “Avraham heeded Sarai’s voice” (16:2) – just as God later told Avraham in regard to Sara’s demand that he banish Hagar and Yishmael, “Heed her voice.” And, commenting on Avraham’s “heeding” Sara’s request to marry Hagar, Rashi cites the Midrash explaining that Avraham obeyed the *ru’ach ha-kodesh* – quasi prophetic insight – that drove Sara to the decision that Avraham should marry Hagar. Rav Shachor thus suggests that when God told Avraham to obey Sara’s demand to expel Hagar and Yishmael, he was instructing Avraham to once again abide by Sara’s prophetic insight – even though she was asking Avraham to do the precise opposite of what she had asked him to do earlier. In the first instance, her prophetic wisdom led her to ask him to make Hagar his wife and beget children that would be considered part of their family. Now, that same prophetic wisdom led her to the conclusion that the precise opposite needs to be done – that Hagar and her child must be sent away, and so God intervened to tell Avraham that he should once again abide by Sara’s request.

God’s command to Avraham thus reminds us that different circumstances sometimes call for drastically different measures, and what “prophecy” tells us is correct in one situation is not necessarily appropriate in a different situation. The Torah does not expect us to act one specific way in all circumstances at all times. We must apply “*ru’ach ha-kodesh*” – the Torah’s laws and ideals – in accordance with every particular situation that arises, with the understanding that each situation demands a different response. The same “*ru’ach ha-kodesh*” that told Avraham to marry Hagar in Parashat Lekh-Lekha told Avraham to send her away in Parashat Vayera – showing us that we must carefully assess each situation to determine the proper course of action, and we cannot assume that what was appropriate in one set of circumstances is necessarily appropriate in a different set of circumstances.

Tuesday

Parashat Vayera begins with the story of the angels that appeared to Avraham in the form of travelers, whom he promptly welcomed and served a large meal. The opening verse tells that Avraham was sitting by the entrance of his tent “*ke-chom ha-yom*” – “at the heat of the day.” According to the plain reading of the text, this point was made to explain that the hot conditions made travelers especially weary and thirsty, thus providing the background for Avraham’s generous hospitality, offering his guests shade, food and water. Rashi, citing the Gemara (Bava Metzia 86b), adds that God made the weather especially hot so that people would not travel about, thus sparing Avraham – who was recovering from the painful and debilitating procedure of circumcision – from hosting weary travelers. But once God saw that Avraham desperately wanted to welcome guests despite his compromised physical condition, He sent three angels in the form of wayfarers so Avraham could invite them in.

Rav Shalom of Brahin, in *Divrei Shalom*, suggest reading this verse as an allusion to those occasions when a person feels “*ke-chom ha-yom*” – overcome by the “heat” of his sinful inclinations, as he faces a difficult religious challenge. The Torah indicates that when a person experiences this kind of “heat,” he is “*petach ha-ohel*” – at the “entrance” to excellence. The tests and challenges that inevitably arise over the course of religious life is the “gateway” to achievement, as it is specifically through the process of struggling with and surmounting these obstacles that we reach the lofty levels that we are capable of achieving.

This chassidic reading of the verse was perhaps intended to parallel the Gemara’s understanding, that Avraham exerted himself despite his frail condition under exceptionally hot conditions in seeking opportunities to welcome guests. Avraham here shows us that we must be committed to, and passionate about, *mitzva* performance even “*ke-chom ha-yom*” – under difficult circumstances, when we are uncomfortable and there is hard work involved. The *Divrei Shalom* adds that this is true also when we find religious life emotionally challenging, when we feel disinclined to observe the *mitzvot*, when the overbearing “heat” of human vices pulls us in the opposite direction. We show our Torah commitment by performing *mitzvot* even when we feel we don’t want to, when we are “not in the mood,” when our instincts and impulses discourage us from doing the right thing. Just as we must occasionally fulfill *mitzvot* in the “heat of the day” – when we need to overcome physical fatigue – we must also sometimes work to fulfill *mitzvot* in the face of emotional fatigue, overcoming our natural tendencies for the sake of our devotion to the Almighty.

Wednesday

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (109b) gives several examples of the cruel policies and practices of the city of Sedom, on account of which God condemned the city to annihilation, as we read in Parashat Vayera. One example given by the Gemara is that the city had a “Procrustean bed” in the literal sense – a bed on which they would force visitors to lie, and if a visitor was too tall for the bed, his legs would be cut, and if he were too short, then his body would be stretched. On the surface, this depiction reflects a culture of exceptional cruelty, that accepted as standard procedure the torture of innocent visitors.

However, the Gemara’s remark might also be understood allegorically, referring to Sedom’s rejection of everyone who came from other societies and was different. Sedom was willing to accept only those who fit its “size” – its norms, its culture, and it way of life. It refused to allow entry to anybody who was “taller” or “shorter,” who did not follow in lockstep with Sedom’s ethos of wealth, selfishness and indulgence. The Gemara’s depiction, then, expresses not just cruelty, but intolerance, the insistence on accepting and respecting only those who act and think just like us.

Rav Menachem Bentzion Zaks, in his *Menachem Tziyon*, offers a different symbolic interpretation of the Gemara’s remark, suggesting that it refers to the tendency to revere those who are “small” and belittle those who are “tall.” The people of Sedom, as in many societies ever since, held in high esteem “small” people, those who excelled in vain pursuits, such as the pursuit of money or fame, and regarded as “small” people who were “giants” of morals, ethics and faith. The Gemara here warns against the tendency to place people on a pedestal simply because of their wealth, physical strength or position of power, while looking down upon simple, seemingly unimportant, people who live humbly and sincerely committed to their principles. We must recognize and respect the greatness of even those who might at first appear “small” and unimpressive, and avoid expressing undue awe for vain accomplishments that are not truly worthy of our reverence and esteem.

Thursday

Parashat Vayera tells the story of the destruction of Sedom, and of the two angels who pulled Lot, his wife and his two unmarried daughters out of the city just before the catastrophe struck. We read that the angels gave Lot and his family a strict warning not to turn around and look back at the city (19:17). Lot’s wife, however, turned around to look as they fled, for which she was punished – “…she became a pillar of salt” (19:26). According to the simple reading of the text, the angels urged Lot and his family to run quickly, without any hesitation, and without taking any time to observe what was happening to their city, lest they be struck by the limestone and salt that God showered upon Sedom. Lot’s wife disobeyed the instruction, and was, indeed, caught in the devastation and covered by salt which poured down from the heavens.

Many commentators, however, explained differently. Rashi (19:17) writes that since Lot did not personally deserve to be saved, and God sent the angels to rescue him only in the merit of his uncle, Avraham, he had no right to look upon the calamity that befell the other townspeople. The Rashbam offers several other possibilities, noting first that, as we read earlier (19:14), Lot’s sons-in-law laughed at Lot’s warning of the city’s impending annihilation, and refused to leave. It was thus inappropriate for the other family members to look upon the calamity that was befalling their kin. The Rashbam adds the point mentioned earlier, that the angels did not want Lot and his family to be delayed by watching the destruction, and he also suggests that humans are generally not permitted to behold with their eyes miraculous events wrought by angels.

An insightful explanation is offered by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, who writes that Lot was told not to look back in angst over the loss of his property which he was forced to leave behind. In Rav Hirsch’s words, “He was not to look back, that which he was leaving he should never have had.” Lot decided to settle among the cruel, corrupt, immoral people of Sedom to enjoy the material comforts of the town. He compromised his principles for the sake of acquiring wealth – and so this wealth was to be regarded as wealth which he should never have attained. Looking back longingly at his home and possessions going up in flames would be appropriate if he rightfully deserved this property which was now being lost. But Lot should have never obtained this property in the first place, and so he was not to mourn and grieve over its loss. He was instructed to dissociate himself entirely from his fortune, which was considered ill-begotten by virtue of the fact that it was earned by becoming a member of the evil society of Sedom.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Vayera tells the unusual story of Lot’s intimate encounters with his two daughters as they lived in a cave following the destruction of their city, Sedom (19:31-38). After narrowly escaping the cataclysmic annihilation of their city, Lot’s daughters feared that they and Lot were the only people left on earth (Rashi, Rashbam), or that no men would want to marry them, as they had come from the condemned city of Sedom (Radak). They therefore had Lot drink wine to the point of intoxication on two successive nights and slept with him, becoming pregnant as a result. Their sons became the founders of the nations of Amon and Moav.

Commenting on this episode, the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 51:9) states, mysteriously, “There is not a single Shabbat when the section of Lot is not read.” On the surface, it appears that there was a custom to read the story of Lot every Shabbat. What might be the meaning of this custom? What connection is there between the disturbing story of Lot and his daughters, and the weekly observance of Shabbat?

Rav Aryeh Tzvi Frommer of Kozhiglov *Hy”d*, in his *Eretz Tzvi*, answers based on a different Midrash passage (*Bereishit Rabba* 50:10) which comments on the fact that Lot’s incestuous relationships ended up producing King David. David’s great-grandmother was Rut, a woman from the nation of Moav who joined *Benei Yisrael*. As a Moavite woman, Rut was a descendant of one of the sons born from Lot’s relationships with his daughters. The Midrash cites the verse in Tehillim (89:21) in which God proclaims, “I found My servant, David,” and it comments, “Where? In Sedom.” Amidst the evil and corruption of the city of Sedom which necessitated the city’s annihilation, God found a spark of goodness – and that spark ultimately produced the righteous figure of King David. The emergence of a person like King David from the population of Sedom represents the ray of light that shines even in the darkest areas, the kernel of righteousness that exists even within the most wicked people. The Midrash emphasizes that God “found” David in Sedom to teach that there is a spark of goodness even in an evil society like Sedom.

On this basis, Rav Frommer suggests an explanation for the connection drawn by the Midrash between the story of Sedom and the Shabbat observance. The rigors, pressures and mundane preoccupations of the workweek can easily obscure the spark of sanctity and spiritual devotion latent within us. Devoting so much time and attention to the pursuit of a livelihood can have the effect of burying this spark deep in the inner recesses of our beings, where it cannot be seen even by ourselves. Just as God “found” David in Sedom, producing the righteous founder of our nation’s eternal dynasty from the depths of depravity in Sedom, so does Shabbat allow us to “find” within ourselves the spark of holiness that is too often concealed during the week. And thus the Midrash teaches that each and every week we in a sense reexperience the story of Lot, the extraction of sanctity from the hidden depths of our outwardly mundane life.

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