**SALT – PARASHAT VAYERA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Vayeira begins by telling that God appeared to Avraham, and Avraham then saw three travelers – who turned out to be angels – whom he immediately approached and invited into his tent. (The Rambam, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (2:43), understands the text differently, claiming that God “appeared” to Avraham by way of a prophetic vision of three angels who visited him.) One of these three angels informed Avraham that his wife, Sara, would soon conceive and deliver a child.

When Avraham saw the three wayfarers, he said, “Please, if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass by your servant” (18:3). At first glance, it appears that Avraham made this request to the strangers, asking that they remain for a meal – as Avraham proceeded to offer – rather than continuing their journey. Rashi, however, after first presenting this explanation, cites the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 48:10) as explaining that Avraham here actually spoke to God, who had appeared to him before the three wayfarers arrived. Avraham respectfully asked God, “please do not pass by Your servant” – that He wait there, where He had spoken with Avraham, while Avraham tended to the travelers. This reading appears in the Gemara (Shabbat 127a), as well, which infers from this verse that “welcoming guests is greater than greeting the Divine Presence.” The Gemara understood that Avraham left God’s presence to tend to three wayfarers, demonstrating that extending hospitality is greater than private communion with the Almighty.

Rav Meshulam Feish of Tosh, in *Avodat Avoda*, explains the Gemara’s comment in light of the Midrashic tradition (cited by Rashi to 18:4) that the angels appeared as followers of a certain pagan cult, and so Avraham assumed they were idolaters. The Rebbe of Tosh writes that a person of Avraham’s level of piety was certainly capable of remaining in God’s presence even as he tended to guests; he did not need to “leave” God for the purpose of welcoming and serving the wayfarers. However, engaging with idol-worshippers would, almost invariably, have some slight effect on his spiritual devotion. Avraham felt responsible to welcome, host and befriend these idolaters in order to continue his mission of disseminating the belief in God, even if this might diminish somewhat from his own personal spiritual achievements. The Rebbe of Tosh cites in this context the *Chatam Sofer*’s famous comments (in the introduction to the *Yoreh Dei’a* section of his responsa) that Avraham was chosen to become the father of God’s treasured nation not only because of his unique piety, but also because of his commitment to teach, guide and inspire others, even at the expense of his own growth. Avraham was thus asking God to “wait” – to accept some slight diminishing of Avraham’s spirituality, as he tended to whom he mistook as pagan travelers.

The Rebbe of Tosh adds that this is also the meaning of the Gemara’s teaching, “welcoming guests is greater than greeting the Divine Presence.” He writes: “Bringing people who are distant from sanctity under the wings of the Divine Presence is greater and more important than ‘greeting the Divine Presence’ – meaning, than the light of the Divine Presence which a person himself can earn through his service [of God].” While we must constantly be striving to grow and advance in our own service of God, we must also be prepared to make small sacrifices from our own spiritual pursuits for the sake of assisting others in theirs.

Sunday

The opening verses of Parashat Vayeira tell the famous story of the three wayfarers – who were, as we later discover, angels – whom Avraham graciously greeted and served a robust meal. The Gemara discusses this story in Masekhet Bava Metzia (87a), and makes several observations about the hospitality Avraham extended to his guests. One observation is that Avraham “said a little but did much” – paraphrasing Shammai’s timeless teaching, “*Emor me’at va-asei harbei*” – “Speak little and do much.” The Gemara notes that when Avraham extended his invitation, he offered to bring the men bread (18:5), but he ended up serving them also meat (18:8). This demonstrates the value of making modest promises which we then strive to exceed, rather than making grandiose promises which we might then be unable to fulfill.

Another example of this quality is Avraham’s offer to bring his guests “*me’at mayim*” – “a little water” to wash their feet (18:4), which were, undoubtedly, dirty and aching after their journey. We may presume that Avraham ultimately provided them with far more than “a little” water, and generously gave them as much water as they needed to wash themselves.

Rav Elimelech Shapiro of Grodzhisk, in *Divrei Elimelekh*, finds deeper, symbolic significance in Avraham’s offer of “*me’at mayim*.” Rashi famously cites the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 50:4) as explaining that the angels appeared to Avraham as adherents of a certain pagan cult, which worshipped the dust on their feet. Avraham therefore made a point of having them wash their feet before entering his property, as he was not prepared to allow an object of idolatry in the home. In light of the Midrash’s explanation of the purpose served by the water, the Rebbe of Grodzhisk suggests, the small quantity of water which Avraham offered may perhaps become symbolically significant. There are times when our nation finds itself covered with “idolatry,” mired in sin and plagued by spiritual ills. Like the wayfarers’ feet, we might occasionally feel “covered” with “dirt,” overrun by negative character traits and bad habits, that require thorough “cleansing.” Avraham’s offer of “*me’at mayim*,” the Rebbe of Grodzhisk writes, might allude to the fact that we only need “a little water” to begin the process of “cleansing,” of spiritual recovery. We should not be discouraged by the thick layer of “dirt” that covers us or our nation, by the many different kinds of corrosive spiritual ills with which we are afflicted. We should instead make the commitment to bring “*me’at mayim*,” just “a little water,” to begin the “cleansing” process by taking small steps forward, by undertaking modest, realistic measures to improve ourselves and our nation, trusting that God will help us finish the process, one stage at a time, until we become who we hope to be and are supposed to be.

Monday

We read in Parashat Vayeira of the three angels who appeared to Avraham under the guise of weary travelers. Avraham immediately invited them to rest near his tent, and served them a large meal. During the meal, one of the angels informed Avraham that his wife, Sara, would soon miraculously conceive and deliver a boy, after many decades of infertility.

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 28:1) draws an intriguing connection between this incident and Moshe’s experiences when he ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, stating:

At that time, the ministering angels sought to harm Moshe. The Almighty made the appearance of Moshe’s face resemble Avraham. The Almighty said to them, “Are you not embarrassed in his presence? Is this not the one to whom you descended, and in whose home you ate?”

The Almighty said to Moshe, “The Torah was given to you only in the merit of Avraham.”

(A different, and more famous, version of the conflict that arose between Moshe and the angels at the time of *Matan Torah* appears in Masekhet Shabbat, 88b.)

What might be the significance of this depiction of the angels’ harsh treatment of Moshe in the heavens, and of God’s response, recalling Avraham’s hospitality?

Rav Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchak Danziger of Alexander, in *Yismach Yisrael*, cites his father, Rav Yechiel Danziger (founding Rebbe of Alexander), as explaining that the Midrash here seeks to contrast the angels’ hostility to their “visitor” with Avraham’s generous welcoming of his visitors. When the angels descended to the earth from the heavens and appeared to Avraham, he welcomed them graciously; but when a human being ascended to the heavens, the heavenly beings treated him as an unwanted intruder, and assaulted him. Moshe’s ascent to the heavens signifies the reverse situation of the angels’ visit to Avraham, as a human now arrived in the heavens, as opposed to angels arriving in our world. The angels were shown that whereas they were treated with graciousness and kindness when they ventured into the human domain, they were antagonistic to a human who ventured into their heavenly domain.

This might perhaps be the Midrash’s intent in concluding, “The Torah was given to you only in the merit of Avraham.” The Torah, a “heavenly” asset, was given to us, earthly beings, signifying the bridging of these two distant domains. We received the Torah only because of the quality embodied by Avraham – the quality of welcoming people from drastically different “domains.” It is only because of the importance of being welcoming and gracious to those who are different that it was possible for God to invite us human beings to the “heavens” through the study and observance of the Torah. Avraham represented this quality through his extending kindness to all people, from all walks of life, no matter how different they were from him. The Midrash thus teaches that our right to the heavenly Torah, to be welcomed in the heavens, so-to-speak, hinges on our willingness to bridge the gaps between us and other people, to follow the example set for us by Avraham, of extending loving kindness even to those from other “domains.”

Tuesday

The story of the destruction of Sedom, which appears in Parashat Vayeira, begins by telling of the experiences of the two angels who came to the city. Appearing as travelers, they were invited by Lot into his home. News rapidly spread throughout the city that guests had arrived, and the townspeople angrily surrounded Lot’s home and demanded that he hand the visitors to them. Lot asked them to allow them to stay, whereupon the people shouted at him, “Go away; this person [Lot] came and is giving judgment! We will now hurt you more than them!” (19:9). They accused Lot – who himself was relatively new in the city – of taking license to “give judgment” and tell them what to do.

*Keli Yakar* raises the question of why and how the townspeople could protest Lot’s “giving judgment.” Earlier (19:1), explaining the Torah’s description of Lot sitting in the entrance to Sedom when the angels arrived, Rashi writes that the gate was the seat of the city’s main court, and that day, the townspeople had appointed Lot has a judge. This is why he was present in the city’s gate. They themselves had assigned Lot to the city’s highest judiciary body, and we might thus wonder why they would now angrily object to his “giving judgment.” Wasn’t this precisely what he had been appointed to do?

*Keli Yakar* finds the answer in the expression “*va-yishpot shafot*” (“and is giving judgment”) in this verse. According to *Keli Yakar*, the townspeople accused Lot of casting judgment – “*va-yishpot*” – on laws that had already been established – “*shafot*.” He was appointed judge to apply the current laws, not to revisit them. The city of Sedom had a longstanding policy forbidding the welcoming of strangers, and thus the townspeople derided Lot for “judging” the current laws, attempting to introduce changes into their system of laws.

This response of Sedom shows us by way of contrast that we are, indeed, to continually rethink, revisit and reevaluate our “judgments.” If Sedom insisted on the inviolability of current norms, practices and ideas, we must do just the opposite, and always consider if perhaps we are doing or approaching things incorrectly. The fact that we have been acting a certain way or holding a certain position for a long time does not make it necessarily correct. Whereas the people of Sedom considered “*va-yishpot shafot*” a crime, resoundingly forbidding the reassessment of their policies, we are to do just that, and humbly accept the possibility that the things we have been doing are incorrect and require change. Of course, this does not mean that change is always warranted or appropriate. We must, however, be prepared to “judge” our prior “judgments,” to question our previously held assumptions, as part of our lifelong effort to grow and improve and maximize our potential to its fullest.

Wednesday

The opening verses of Parashat Vayeira tell of the time when Avraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent, and he saw three men, who he later discovered were angels sent by God. Thinking they were weary travelers, Avraham ran to them and asked them to remain so he could serve them a meal, explaining, “*ki al kein avartem al avdekhem*” – “once you have passed by your servant” (18:5).

Rashi, in explaining this phrase, writes, “*Mei-achar she-avartem alai* ***li-khvodi***” – “once you have passed by me **for my honor**.” Interestingly, Rashi discerned within these words that Avraham expressed to the men that he felt “honored” that they passed near his tent. We might speculate that Rashi inferred this from Avraham’s reference to himself in this verse as “*avdekhem*” – “your servant,” humbly expressing deference and submission.

Rav Henoch Leibowitz, in *Chiddushei Ha-leiv*, notes the significance of the fact that Avraham felt honored by the presence of these men, whom, according to the Midrash (cited by Rashi to 18:4), he mistook for idolaters. Although Avraham was wealthy and renowned, and these were, in his mind, simple travelers who worshipped pagan gods, he nevertheless felt honored to be in their presence. He felt this way, Rav Leibowitz explains, because Avraham recognized the divine image within each and every human being. He appreciated the inherent, unique potential for greatness latent within every individual, and this appreciation led him to feel genuinely honored simply by any person’s presence.

Rav Leibowitz references in this context the Gemara’s account in Masekhet Menachot (53b) of an exchange between Avraham’s soul and God, at the time of the destruction of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. God informed Avraham that He drove his descendants into exile because of their sins, whereupon Avraham burst into tears, and cried, “They have no way back?!” Avraham then heard a heavenly voice cite a verse from Sefer Yirmiyahu (11:16) which compares *Am Yisrael* to an olive. The voice said, “Just like this olive, its destiny is at its end – Israel, too, their destiny will be at their end.” God thus assured Avraham that despite his descendants’ current travails, they will eventually repent and be worthy of redemption. Rav Leibowitz notes that even Avraham, who, as mentioned, had a deep awareness of the inner greatness of each and every individual, failed to fully grasp the potential of *Am Yisrael*. Even he had difficulty believing in his descendants’ capacity to change, to improve, to lift themselves from the spiritual abyss into which they had fallen and redeem themselves. It turns out that our nation’s potential is greater than even what Avraham could have imagined.

Rav Leibowitz concludes:

By knowing and recognizing our own value, each of us will naturally refrain from sinning, and by recognizing one’s fellow’s value, he will desire and be happy to help him, just as Avraham felt that it was an honor for him to serve nomads who bowed to the dust of their feet. All the more so, then, we must feel that it is an honor for us to perform kindness for our brethren, the Children of Israel.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeira tells the famous story of *akeidat Yitzchak* – God’s command to Avraham to sacrifice his son, Yitzchak, on Mount Moriah. Avraham prepared to obey the command, traveled to Moriah, bound Yitzchak upon the altar, and lifted the knife to slaughter him – until an angel spoke to Avraham and commanded him to desist, explaining, “…because now I know that you are God-fearing, as you did not withhold from Me your only son” (22:12).

Rav Meir Simcha Ha-kohen of Dvinsk, in *Meshekh Chokhma*, observes a subtle distinction between the angel’s comments to Avraham now, after the test of *akeidat Yitzchak*, and God’s formulation of the command: “Please take your son, your only son, whom you love…” (22:2). God described Yitzchak to Avraham before *akeidat Yitzchak* as “*binkha yechidekha asher ahavta*” – “your only son, whom you love,” whereas the angel referred to Yitzchak after the *akeida* as merely “*binkha yechidekha*” – “your only son.” The *Meshekh Chokhma* explains that the angel could not say “*asher ahavta*” because, quite simply, only God knows the feelings of a person’s heart, and thus only God knew the full extent of Avraham’s love for Yitzchak. When God informed Avraham of the unfathomably difficult test he was assigning to him, He could say, “your only son, whom you love,” but the angel, in expressing to Avraham that the *akeida* demonstrated his limitless devotion to God, could not say, “your only son, whom you love.” The angel certainly understood that Avraham had just withstood a very difficult test of faith, but it did not grasp the full extent of Avraham’s angst as he prepared to slaughter Yitzchak, because nobody but God can accurately perceive any human being’s feelings.

The practical application of the *Meshekh Chokhma*’s insight is that we cannot judge other people’s conduct, because we will never know their unique struggles and challenges. Nobody but God knows the difficulty of any individual’s tests in life. A challenge which for us might seem fairly simple is an enormous struggle for others. If even the angels could not fully grasp the extent of Avraham’s test at *akeidat Yitzchak*, then certainly we cannot fully grasp the extent of our fellowman’s personal struggles. Recognizing our limited knowledge of other people’s emotions will lead us to refrain from passing judgment and to instead give them the benefit of the doubt and look upon them favorably despite their shortcomings.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeira tells the story of *akeidat Yitzchak* (literally, “the binding of Yitzchak”), how God tested Avraham by commanding him to offer his beloved son, Yitzchak, as a sacrifice. Just when Avraham lifted the knife to perform the act, God dispatched an angel to order Avraham to withdraw his knife, and to inform him that he and his descendants would be rewarded for this display of boundless devotion to God. After the angel instructed Avraham to desist, he “lifted his eyes and saw a ram caught in the thicket by its horns” (22:13). The Torah relates that Avraham immediately proceeded to take the ram and offer it as a sacrifice “in place of his son.”

At first glance, we might assume that the ram’s having been caught by its horns helped Avraham, making it easier for him to take the animal and offer it as a sacrifice. Perhaps, Avraham saw the trapped ram as a sign from God that this was the sacrifice that he was to offer, instead of Yitzchak.

Rashi, however, citing the Midrash (*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, 31), explains that to the contrary, the ram’s trap in fact made it more difficult for Avraham to offer it as a sacrifice. The Midrash tells that the ram, miraculously, was running toward Avraham, availing itself to him, but the *Satan* set out to interfere. In an attempt to prevent Avraham from offering the ram, the *Satan* trapped the ram in the thicket, so that it could not run towards Avraham. But when Avraham saw the trapped ram, he went over to it, released its horns, and offered it as a sacrifice.

This Midrashic account of the events should perhaps be understood off the backdrop of more famous passages in the Midrash describing the *Satan*’s attempts to prevent Avraham from sacrificing Yitzchak. The *Midrash Tanchuma* (22) tells that as Avraham made his way with Yitzchak to Mount Moriah to fulfill God’s command, the *Satan* appeared as an elderly sage, and presented rational arguments why Avraham should not offer his son as a sacrifice. When this did not succeed, the *Satan* appeared as a young man who engaged Avraham in a heated debate, insisting that offering Yitzchak was the wrong decision. The *Satan*’s next unsuccessful attempt was to form a river which obstructed Avraham’s route. In the end, however, Avraham surmounted all the obstacles placed before him, determined as he was to fulfill God’s command.

Perhaps the Midrashic account of the *Satan*’s trapping the ram is meant to draw our attention to two different types of “tests” and challenges that we face in life. Rarely, if ever, are we faced with a dramatic test similar to *akeidat Yitzchak*, when we are forced to make an enormous sacrifice for the sake of our devotion to God. For many of us, the test of *akeidat Yitzchak* might appear too remote, and too extraordinary, to provide practical inspiration and guidance. And it might be for this very reason that the Midrash depicts the *Satan*’s failed attempt to prevent Avraham from sacrificing the ram – to remind us of the more common religious challenges that we face. While sometimes *mitzva* opportunities “run” right to us, on many other occasions, they are “trapped.” So often, in order to perform a *mitzva*, we need to “untangle” a series of “knots,” like Avraham’s freeing the ram’s horns from the thicket. The process is far from simple and smooth, and is instead fraught with complications and struggles. We may never be called upon to make a great personal sacrifice for God like Avraham was called upon to do at *akeidat Yitzchak*, but on almost a daily basis, we are called upon to “untangle” the “ram,” to patiently and persistently deal with the practical challenges that present themselves in the process of fulfilling God’s will. *Avodat Hashem* necessarily demands hard work, patience and tenacity, requiring us to go over to the “ram” and exert the effort necessary to see the *mitzva* through to completion. The unfathomable test which Avraham faced with the command to sacrifice Yitzchak serves as an instructive model for even the smaller challenges which we invariably face as we seek to live our lives in God’s service, and should encourage and inspire us to rise to these day-to-day challenges and persist in our devotion even when this demands effort. And thus the Midrash shows that just as Avraham withstood the test of the *akeida*, he withstood also the simpler “test” of the entangled ram, as an example of the day-to-day challenges that we invariably face, and of the importance of overcoming them.