



Doing Chessed for Yourself

By Yonatan Halstuch ('25)

At the beginning of this week's Parashah, Parashat VaYeira, Hashem appears to Avraham Avinu. Surprisingly, the Torah does not describe anything that Hashem said to Avraham and instead immediately turns to the מלאכים who came to Avraham's tent. The question is, what was God telling Avraham? What was this meeting about?

Rashi comments on this saying that Hashem was just coming to be מבקר חולים, visiting the sick, as Avraham was recovering from his Brit Milah. However, it appears that the Torah explicitly goes out of its way to say that HaKadosh Baruch Hu talked to Avraham.

According to the Midrash, Hashem had made it extremely hot outside, but Avraham refused to go inside when Chessed could be done. Thus, Hashem sent the Melachim to be Avraham's guests. However another question arises, since everybody knew to go to Avraham Avinu, Hashem could have made nice weather and had regular people come to Avraham?!

Rav Aryeh Lebowitz explains that this act of Chessed done by Avraham serves as the paradigm for Gemilut Chassidim and Hachnasat Orchim. The way he rushes to help his guests with so much enthusiasm demonstrates how important it is to do Chessed properly, no matter the circumstances.

The Gemara in Bava Batra explains that Turnusrufus HaRasha asked R' Akiva the following question: If Hashem really loves poor people, why doesn't he just give them money? R' Akiva answers that of course Hashem has the ability to support them, but He makes it our responsibility so that we can be saved from Gehenom. Tzedakah is an opportunity for us to become better people and ultimately, the acts of kindness that we do help us more than the recipient.

This is precisely why Hashem set up the story of Avraham Avinu like this. Avraham Avinu works hard tending to the needs of the Melachim, but do they need anything? Of course not! But by Avraham helping them, he earns Zechuyot in Shamayim.

As proof, the same Gemara in Bava Batra says that anything Avraham gave to the Melachim without having someone else do it for him, Hashem paid back to his children.

This message of Chessed is followed by the news that Avraham Avinu and Sarah Imeinu will have a child. This is not a coincidence as there is no greater act of Chessed than what a parent does for a child. Even though a child benefits tremendously from this relationship, there is no greater feeling than the Nachat a parent receives from their child.

So what was the conversation between Hashem and Avraham at the beginning of the Parsha?

Rashbam explains that Hashem appeared to Avraham not by speaking, but by sending the Melachim. HaKadosh Baruch Hu gave Avraham a lesson in Chessed and parenting, rather than speaking directly to him.

If we want to be successful Ba'alei Chessed, we must realize how much we gain by doing Chessed. When you do something for someone else, you must think: "Wow, Look how much they are helping me by giving me the opportunity to do Chessed!". This focus on Chessed is the paradigm of Avraham Avinu, something we should all be Zoche to learn from.

Helping Because It Is Right

By Yoel Gellman ('25)

In Parashat VaYikra, the Torah states "וַיִּטַּע אֱשָׁל בְּבֶאֱרַר שְׁבַע" "וַיִּקְרָא שְׁם בְּיֶשֶׁם יְקֹנָן אֶל-ל עוֹלָם" "Then Avraham planted an אֱשָׁל in בְּבֶאֱרַר שְׁבַע and called there in the name of Hashem, the

God of the universe” (VaYikra 21:33). What is the meaning of the **אשל** that Avraham planted? Taking each letter in **אשל**, we can derive 3 unique actions Avraham Avinu took to fulfill Hachnasat Orchim to the maximum extent possible. From the **א**, we learn **אכילה**, feeding them; from the **ש**, we learn **שתיה**, giving them drinks; from the **ל**, we learn **לוייה**, giving them shelter. Avraham Avinu made sure his guests were as comfortable as possible.

But why does the Torah only hint at the Hachnasat Orchim through **אשל** instead of saying the actions explicitly? Furthermore, why does the Torah relate the Hachnasat Orchim performed with the Malachim – who do not need hospitality – instead of humans who need a place to eat, drink, and sleep? The answer is profound: there are two types of Chessed; the first category is when someone is clearly in need of help, and only then receives help, which is a great act of Chessed. However, a higher level is being proactive, anticipating that someone will need Chessed and mitigating the problem, or performing acts of Chessed towards everyone, not only the needy.

Avraham Avinu showed the enhanced type of Chessed when he took care of the Malachim who don't need eating, drinking, or serving. In our lives, we need to help those requiring help, but it is also important to assist perfectly independent people, if only for the sake of spreading Chessed: because it is the right thing to do.

Authenticating a Navi Sheker Part Two

By Rabbi Chaim Jachter

A Major Dilemma

Our people faced a major dilemma in the year 593 BCE. Nevuchadnetzar seized control over Eretz Yisrael. They had not yet exiled most Jews from the Land, nor destroyed the Beit HaMikdash.

There was a major movement amongst Eretz Yisrael's Jews to rise and revolt against the Babylonian occupiers. However, such action was fraught with the danger of complete exile and the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash. Thus, we were unsure of how to proceed. As a result, much debate and conflict ensued, as recounted in Yirmiyahu Perakim 27-28 (and Rashi on Devarim 18:21).

We consulted the contemporary Nevi'im for guidance. The Nevi'im of the time were Yirmiyahu and

Chananiah Ben Azor. Yirmiyahu warned not to revolt because Babylon's conquest of Israel was from Hashem, and they were to control Israel for seventy years. Yirmiyahu explained that Babylonian rule was a punishment and a summon from Hashem to do Teshuva. If we do Teshuva, Hashem will restore Jewish sovereignty at the end of the seventy years. Chananiah Ben Azor claimed that Hashem said to revolt, and in two years' time, Jewish authority over Eretz Yisrael would be restored, and Babylon would be gone.

How were we supposed to know who the authentic Navi was? Retrospectively we know Chananiah Ben Azor was a fraud since his prophecy did not materialize. However, how were we supposed to determine in the year 593 BCE which spiritual leader was presenting the true word of Hashem? The Torah's test to see who's Nevu'ah comes true (Devarim 18:21-22) is helpful only when the two years predicted by Chananiah Ben Azor pass (in 591 B.C.E.). However, how were we supposed to know how to act in 593 B.C.E. when a decision was needed?

A Suggested Answer

As we mentioned in our previous issue, the Chumash states (Devarim 18:15, 18:18) that an authentic Navi has to match Moshe Rabbeinu. Accordingly, in 593 B.C.E., our task was to gauge whose message better corresponded to that of Moshe Rabbeinu.

Yirmiyahu said that due to our sins, we are suffering Babylonian domination. However, Chananiah ben Azor argued that despite our sins, we would defeat the powerful Babylonian Empire led by the mighty Nevuchadnetzar.

If we had made an honest assessment, we would have concluded that Yirmiyahu's message is a far better link to that of Moshe Rabbeinu than Chananiah Ben Azor's. This is because one of the most important, if not most important, themes in the Torah is “you reap what you sow,” meaning that Hashem treats us depending on our behavior. The second Parashah of Keriat Shema (Devarim 11:13-21) directly expresses this point. Yirmiyahu's message reflected this Torah principle, and Chananiah Ben Azor's did not. The true Navi was Yirmiyahu.

Unfortunately, our ancestors chose Chananiah, and ostracized and humiliated Yirmiyahu. Sadly, in 591 BCE, the resulting situation was not very pretty: the

Babylonian control further entrenched, Jewish suffering increased, and Chananiah Ben Azor was dead (as predicted by Yirmiyahu).

Confirmation Bias

Why did our ancestors choose to follow Chananiah when it was obvious that the truth lay with Yirmiyahu? The answer seems to be that Yirmiyahu told us what we needed to hear, while Chananiah told us what we wanted to hear. Humans have a natural tendency to be biased to that which they want to hear. Psychologists refer to this as confirmation bias.

Contemporary Application

The same test should be applied to the Jewish spiritual leadership of each generation. Are the leaders telling you what you want to hear or what you need to hear? The authentic spiritual leader tells you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear.

A good example is the 1950 Conservative movement ruling permitting driving on Shabbat to services. While very popular and well-received at its time of issuance, this ruling proved disastrous to the Conservative movement. This ruling eviscerated the sense of a Jewish community living within walking distance of a synagogue. As a result of this and many other decisions that ran counter to tradition, the Conservative movement is plummeting in popularity from its peak in the mid-to-late twentieth century. A 2020 Pew study found that only eight percent of American Jews between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine identify as Conservative.

Conclusion

The same principle applies to intra-Orthodox debates. Today, some call themselves Orthodox, but many others reject their claim of Orthodoxy. So how is one to determine who is an authentic Orthodox leader? The answer remains the same as always. We should ask ourselves if the rabbi's messages match that of Moshe Rabbeinu and the Chachmei HaMesora who followed his glorious path. If, upon sober reflection, his messages are not a match, then he is not an authentic Orthodox rabbi.

Hashem's Physical Manifestations

By Eli Schloss ('19)

In this week's Parashah, Hashem informs Sarah that she will soon bear her first child. Upon hearing this, Sarah

laughs and says, "Acharei Veloti Hayetah Li Ednah? VaAdoni Zakein!" "After I am old, shall I have pleasure? And my lord is old!" (BeReishit 18:12). The first half of her comment is straightforward, but to whom does the phrase "And my lord is old" refer to? And what does this phrase have to do with Sarah laughing because she will have a child at age 90?

We can resolve this by looking at Rashi's commentary on the next Pasuk. Hashem speaks to Avraham Avinu and repeats what Sarah Imeinu said about the news. However, instead of Hashem repeating "And my lord is old," He says "And I am old" (BeReishit 18:13). Rashi explains that Sarah referred to Avraham, but Hashem changed her words to refer to Sarah herself, to preserve peace in the household. Why would Sarah call Avraham old? She did this to show that it was not merely she who was too old to bear a child, but Avraham was also too old; Hashem would have to perform a double miracle.

My great-great grandfather Rav Ephraim Fischel Conterman, who served for many decades as a Rav in New Orleans, offered another approach to Sarah's strange language in his Sefer Sha'ashu'ei Ephraim. He writes that when Sarah states "And my lord is old," she is referring to Hashem.

What does it mean that Hashem is "old," as it were?

Chazal teach us that Hashem's abilities that He manifests in different situations run parallel with his different perceived physical attributes. For example, when Hashem acts outside of nature by the Yam Suf, He is described as "Hashem Ish Milchamah," "Hashem, a man of war" (Shemot 15:3), i.e. a young, powerful warrior.

Rav Conterman explains that the Rashbam applies this teaching of Chazal in a line of his An'im Zemirot,[2] which states, "Ziknah BeYom Din UVacharut BeYom Kerav Kelsh Milchamot Yadav Lo Rav," "Old age on the day of judgment and youth on the day of battle, like a warrior, His hands fought for Him." The second half of this sentence corresponds to Hashem's actions at the Yam Suf, in which He is physically described as a warrior when He acts outside of nature. "Ziknah BeYom Din" corresponds to Hashem's actions that fall within the natural order. In those cases, He is compared to an old man in judgment. An example of "Ziknah BeYom Din" is when Hashem teaches the Torah to Moshe to give to Bnei Yisrael;

Hashem would be perceived as an old man in judgment, as opposed to the warrior He is compared to during Keriyat Yam Suf.

Applying this concept back to Sarah Imeinu, Hashem appears to Sarah in a prophecy and proclaims that she will have a child. The fact that Hashem informs her of a coming miracle does not surprise her, but Sarah is surprised that Hashem appears to her as an old man. Since the miracle that Hashem says He will perform is outside of the natural order, He should have appeared to Sarah as a young warrior. Instead, Sarah “sees” Hashem as an old man, confusing her and leading her to state, “And my lord is old.”

But how could Hashem perform a miracle outside of nature with the “physical appearance” of an old man? Hashem himself answers this question by stating, “HaYipalei MeiHashem Davar?” “Is anything too wondrous for Hashem?” (BeReishit 18:14). This means that regardless of any statements or theories of Chazal and the Rashbam, Hashem can do anything at all times, no matter the way that humans, as it were, “see” Him. Sarah errs in believing that G-d is confined to acting in accordance with his perceived “physical attributes”; Hashem is always capable of anything and everything.

Editors-In-Chief: Kivi Davis and Ariel Kryzman
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Questions, comments? Contact us at:

Phone: (201) 837-7696

webmasters@koltorah.org