**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYERA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Vayera begins with the story of the three angels who visited Avraham, who, thinking they were ordinary wayfarers, warmly invited them and served them a lavish meal. In extending his invitation, Avraham offered, “*…ve-sa’adu libekhem*” (18:5), which might be roughly translated as, “eat heartily.”

Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 48:11), comments on the fact that the Torah here uses the word “*libekhem*” to mean “heart,” instead of the alternative term, “*levavkhem*.” These two terms are, respectively, derivatives of the two similar words used for “heart” in Biblical Hebrew – *leiv*, and *levav*. The Midrash explains that the word “*leivav*” is used in reference to the heart of a human being, whereas “*leiv*” refers to that of angels. The explanation commonly given is that the word “*levav*,” which has two *vav*’s, alludes to the conflicting tendencies that struggle within human beings, the ongoing tension that exists in people’s hearts between right and wrong, good and evil, and the physical and spiritual realms. Angels, by contrast, have a “*leiv*” – a single desire and inclination, which is to fulfill God’s will, a desire that is not opposed by any other desire. The Torah here uses the word “*libekhem*” in the context of the meal served to the angels, the Midrash explains, because angels have a “*leiv*,” and not “*levav*.”

Many writers have raised the question of how the Midrash could make such a comment in light of the fact that this phrase – “*ve-sa’adu libekhem*” – was spoken by Avraham, who did not know at the time that he was speaking with angels. The angels appeared to him in the form of weary travelers, whom Avraham actually assumed were idolaters (Rashi, 18:4), and Avraham welcomed them and served them a meal – something he would certainly not have done for angels. Why, then, did he use the term “*libekhem*,” which the Midrash interprets as referring to angels, rather than the term for human beings – “*levavkhem*”?

One of the answers given to this question is that *Chazal* here allude to the possibility we all have of achieving a certain “angelic” quality. Tradition teaches that Avraham welcomed guests not only out of kindness and a desire to help people, but also as part of his campaign to spread knowledge and awareness of God. He would use the context of a meal to draw his guests’ attention to the Supreme Being who sustains us and to whom we are all indebted and obliged to serve. And this, perhaps, is the meaning of *Chazal*’s remark concerning the use of the term “*libekhem*” in this verse. It is alluding to the fact that by utilizing our mundane activities for sacred purposes, as Avraham did in serving meals to guests, we create a peaceful unity of the two otherwise conflicting aspects of our beings. We are capable of becoming “angelic” in the sense that we can use our base desires and instincts for lofty purposes, and engage in mundane activities in the pursuit of spiritual goals, whereby the two opposite dimensions of the human experience blend into one. And thus even when inviting human beings, Avraham used the term “*libekhem*,” alluding to the convergence of the physical and spiritual realms that occurred at the meals he served to his guests.

We might also suggest that symbolically, *Chazal*’s remark perhaps conveys a powerful educational message. Avraham welcomed people whom he thought were idolaters, but he spoke to them in “angelic” terms. When he looked upon these travelers, he saw the potential for “*libekhem*,” for their achieving “angelic” status. They key to Avraham’s success in disseminating belief in God was his firm belief in human potential. Even when he spoke to ordinary people who worshipped idols, he recognized the possibility of their rising to great heights. The Midrash thus teaches us of the need to recognize the human capacity for change, the potential all people have to grow and transform. Just as Avraham spoke to idolaters with the mindset that they could achieve near angelic stature, we, too, must recognize the potential latent within children, students, and all people, regardless of their current standing.

Sunday

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (109b), as Rashi references in his commentary to Parashat Vayera (18:21), tells the disturbing story of a crime committed by the people of Sedom, on account of which God sentenced the city to annihilation. The city adopted a strict policy forbidding the offering of charitable assistance to the poor, but there was a certain young woman who defied the edict and secretly brought food each day to an impoverished man. When the townspeople learned of her charitable activity, they punished her by smearing honey all over her body and placing her on a rooftop, where she was stung to death by bees.

Rav Elazar Phillips, in his [*Marpei Arukha*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=34014&st=&pgnum=7&hilite=), offers a novel theory to explain why this particular punishment was chosen by the people of Sedom. While we understand that the society of Sedom is depicted by *Chazal* as cruel and heartless, the question remains as to why the townspeople decided upon this specific means of torture and execution. Rav Phillips suggests that bees symbolize the ideology underlying Sedom’s policy of cruelty. The townspeople believed that every person must fend for himself rather than rely on other people’s assistance. From their viewpoint, people suffering deprivation do not deserve help because it is their responsibility to find a means of sustenance for themselves. The punishment for helping the needy was thus meted out by bees, who work diligently together to build their nest and produce their honey. And, as Rav Phillips notes, bees that do not work in the hive (drone bees) are eventually driven from the nest. Bees symbolized for the people of Sedom the expectation that everyone work and contribute, without ever relying on others for assistance. Therefore, those who fed the poor were punished with bees.

The Torah’s stance, of course, is that irrespective of the importance of hard work and self-sufficiency, those who are, for whatever reasons, incapable of providing for themselves and their families, or whose efforts to earn a livelihood were unsuccessful, are to be helped. Financial straits do not necessarily reflect a lack of effort or initiative. People face financial hardship for many different reasons, and it is wrong to assume about any needy individual that he or she is undeserving of sympathy and help. The lesson to be learned from Sedom’s example of insensitivity is that we must not cast judgment upon those facing hardship, and should instead show compassion and generously assist all those who truly need help.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayera (18:20) tells of God’s decision to eradicate the sinful city of Sedom: He tells Avraham, “The cry of Sedom and Amora is so great, and their sin is so grave. I shall go down and see if its cry warrants its annihilation…” The Radak, among others, explains the “cry” (“*za’akat*”) mentioned in this verse as referring to the cries of the oppressed victims of Sedom’s cruel society. God announced that He would assess the level of cruelty in Sedom and its surrounding towns to determine whether the people of the region were deserving of annihilation.

Commenting on this verse in his *Divrei Shaul* (*Mahadura Tinyana*), Rav Yosef Shaul Nathanson writes that the “cry” of victims is often exaggerated. Occasionally, people who have endured a minor offense or sustained a small financial loss due to somebody else’s wrongdoing overreact and “cry” as though they endure a grave crisis. This, Rav Nathanson suggests, is the meaning of this verse, in which God informs Avraham of His considerations regarding Sedom. The piercing cries rising from the victims of Sedom were indeed significant, but these cries did not necessarily testify to severe oppression. God said He needed to “go down and see if its cry warrants its annihilation,” if the cries of pain truly signal that the society is overrun by cruelty.

Of course, as we know, God quickly determined that indeed, the cries arising from Sedom were genuine and a true testament to the society’s heartlessness, that the people were cruel and ruthless, and thus deserving of destruction. However, Rav Nathanson’s explanation of this verse reminds us that not all “cries” are accurate reflections of the injustice committed. Although God hears the pained cries of victims of torment and oppression (Shemot 22:22-23), this is true only of cries which are commensurate with the pain inflicted. We are to avoid exaggerated “cries” of victimhood. Not every injustice deserves the response of the victims of Sedom’s crimes. Some offenses can and should be handled with maturity and grace, without excessive “cries.” God reacts harshly to oppression, but pays no heed to false or exaggerated cries of victimhood. The fate of Sedom was sealed only after God determined that the victims’ cries were genuine and real, teaching us that not all “cries” are justified, and that we must avoid exaggerated responses to slight offenses.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vayera of the two angels who went to Sedom to rescue Lot and his family ahead of the city’s destruction. The Torah tells that Lot saw the angels – who appeared as men – and invited them into his home, where he prepared for them a meal and baked *matzot* (19:3). Rashi comments that this occurred on Pesach, which is why Lot prepared *matzot* for his guests.

Rashi’s comment draws our attention to a subtle parallel that exists between the story of Lot’s rescue from Sedom and the story of the night of the Exodus from Egypt. Both events involve a supernatural calamity visited by God upon a sinful population to punish them for their crimes, while rescuing a small segment of the population. Intriguingly, in both instances, the rescued group was spared in the merit of Avraham. Summarizing the destruction of Sedom, the Torah writes, “It happened that when God destroyed the cities of the plain, God remembered Avraham, and he sent Lot from the upheaval…” (19:29). Somewhat similarly, the process of the Exodus began when “God remembered His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov” (Shemot 2:24) Neither Lot nor *Benei Yisrael* deserved to be rescued, but they were spared in the merit of Avraham (and, in *Benei Yisrael*’s case, also in the merit of Yitzchak and Yaakov). At the same time, however, it appears that both groups needed to perform an act that set them apart from the condemned population in order to be rescued. Lot hosted two wayfarers, in violation of Sedom’s strict policy forbidding all charitable conduct, placing his life at risk, and *Benei Yisrael* slaughtered sheep as a sacrifice to God, loudly and boldly rejecting the Egyptians’ pagan belief, which held the sheep to be sacred, thus potentially putting their lives at risk. Lot and his family needed to be grabbed by the angels and pulled out of Sedom (19:16), just as the Egyptians frantically drove *Benei Yisrael* out of their country (Shemot 12:33). We might also add that in Sefer Bamidbar (20:16; see Rashi), Moshe is referred to as an “angel” who led *Benei Yisrael* from Egypt – parallel to the angels who rescued Lot.

Of course, there are several significant differences between these two events, as well. Primarily, whereas *Benei Yisrael* faithfully obeyed the instructions relayed to them by their “angel,” Lot and his family were far less trusting and cooperative. The Torah tells that Lot’s sons-in-law scoffed at the prediction of the city’s annihilation (19:14), and Lot himself tarried until morning, rather than promptly obeying the angels’ command to evacuate the city (19:16). *Benei Yisrael*, by contrast, fully complied with God’s instructions concerning the night of the Exodus: “The Israelites went ahead and did as the Lord had commanded Moshe and Aharon…” (Shemot 12:28). Additionally, after Lot left the city, he “negotiated” with the angels regarding his destination. The angels urged him to flee westward to the hills, but Lot asked if instead they could spare one of the condemned cities around Sedom – Tzoar – so he could seek refuge there (19:20). The angels agreed and ordered Lot to immediately flee to Tzoar, but Lot quickly changed his mind, and, fearing that Tzoar might also be destroyed, decided to journey from Tzoar to the hills (19:30). All this stands in dark contrast to *Benei Yisrael*, who faithfully and unquestioningly followed God’s cloud and pillar and fire upon departing Egypt, even as He led them to the shores of the Sea of Reeds and then into the desert. As God would later proclaim through the prophet Yirmiyahu (2:2), “I remember for you the kindness of your youth, your bridal love, when you followed Me into the wilderness, into an uncultivated land.” While Lot was suspicious of the divine agent sent to rescue him, *Benei Yisrael* placed their trust in God’s messenger, firm in their belief that he would bring them exactly where they needed to be, and that as long as they followed God’s commands, they were guaranteed His protection and blessing.

Wednesday

Parashat Vayera begins with God appearing to Avraham “as he sat by the entrance of the tent at the heat of the day,” which was followed by the arrival of the three angels who informed him that Sara would be soon bearing him a son. We make mention of this event in one of the hymns traditionally recited at the *seder* on Pesach (in the Diaspora, it is recited on the second night), “*Va-amartem Zevach Pesach*.” This hymn, which was composed by Elazar Ha-kalir, lists numerous Biblical events which, according to Midrashic tradition, took place on Pesach. One of these events is God’s visit to Avraham and the arrival of the three angels, which tradition teaches occurred on the date that would later be designated as the festival of Pesach. Elazar Ha-kalir writes in describing God’s revelation to Avraham, “*Delatav dafakta ke-chom ha-yom ba-Pesach*” – “You knocked upon his doors at the heat of the day, on Pesach.”

While the anthropomorphic image of God “knocking” upon Avraham’s doors may simply be a poetic way of describing His visit to the patriarch, nevertheless, it is perhaps worthwhile to consider the possible implications of this description. Generally, this imagery is used in reference to somebody begging to enter a place where he is not necessarily invited or welcome. In Shir Hashirim (5:2), for example, the maiden describes how her beloved knocked on her door in the middle of the night as she slept, begging her to open it and allow him in, but she lazily refused to rise from her bed. Similarly, we open our *Selichot* prayers by crying, “We have knocked upon Your doors, O compassionate and gracious One; please, do not turn us back empty handed from You.” We acknowledge that we are unworthy of coming before the Almighty to ask for His forgiveness, and we therefore meekly “knock” on His “door” in the hopes that in His unlimited compassion and grace, He will let us in and allow us to pour out our hearts before Him. With this in mind, we might wonder if perhaps there is significance to Elazar Ha-kalir’s choice of imagery in depicting Avraham’s prophetic vision. Why would God be described as “knocking” on Avraham’s “door”? Did He have to beg Avraham to “let Him in”? Is there any reason why God would have to “knock”?

Possibly, this imagery expresses the idea that God never comes into a person’s life without his “opening the door.” Even Avraham Avinu did not receive prophecy automatically, passively, without exerting effort. When God came to speak to him, he needed to “open the door,” to work actively to facilitate the prophetic vision. He could not remain passive and just listen; he needed to make an effort to hear and internalize the divine word. The message, then, is that our relationship with God will always require proactive effort. Inspiration is never received passively or easily. If we want to build and maintain a deep, meaningful connection with the Almighty, we need to “open the door,” to invest effort to allow Him into our lives, without expecting this to happen on its own.

Thursday

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 43:8) cites one view among the *Tanna’im*, that of Rabbi Nechemya, that the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim* (the priestly blessing) has its roots in the story of *akeidat Yitzchak*, which we read in Parashat Vayera. The Torah tells that when Avraham saw from a distance the site where he was to offer his son as a sacrifice, he told his attendants to wait for him at their current location, “and the lad and I will go there” (22:5). Rabbi Nechemya draws a connection between the word “*ko*” (“there”) in this verse and this word’s use in the command of *birkat kohanim*: “*Ko tevarekhu et Benei Yisrael*” – “So shall you bless the Israelites” (Bamidbar 6:23). On the basis of this textual parallel, Rabbi Nechemya asserts that *Benei Yisrael* earned the priestly blessing in Yitzchak’s merit.

How might we explain the connection between the story of *akeidat Yitzchak* and the obligation upon the *kohanim* to bless the rest of the nation?

In the introductory *berakha* recited by the *kohanim* before they perform this *mitzva*, they give thanks to the Almighty “who commanded us to bless His nation, Israel, with love.” The obligation requires not merely blessing the rest of the nation, but doing so with sincere feeling and genuine affection. The *kohanim* are bidden to feel love and concern for all *Am Yisrael*, including people with whom they have no contact, and including those Jews who are not especially pious and might be presumed unworthy of God’s blessing. *Birkat kohanim* is thus an exercise in selflessness and humility, whereby the *kohanim* put aside their ego and feel a genuine bond of love with even the lowliest members of the nation. They were designated for the lofty purpose of ministering before God in His *Mikdash*, but this stature must lead them not to feel distant from and above the rest of the nation, but to the contrary, to feel especially close to all members of the nation. As God’s special tribe, the *kohanim* must genuinely love and care about each and every member of *Am Yisrael*, just as God Himself genuinely loves and cares about each and every member of *Am Yisrael*.

Rabbi Nechemya perhaps sought to draw an association between this requirement and the kind of *mesirut nefesh* – selfless devotion – displayed by Avraham and Yitzchak at the time of the *akeida*. What allows the *kohanim* to feel genuine affection and concern for even the lowly members of the nation is the same selflessness and devotion that leads one to sacrifice to God. We are able to make such sacrifices by viewing ourselves as no more and no less than His loyal servants, who are duty-bound to fulfill His will even at the expense of our own wishes. This sense of humble subservience which motivates us to selflessly serve God also motivates us to selflessly serve His nation. The *kohanim* are to draw inspiration from Avraham and Yitzchak’s unlimited devotion and readiness to sacrifice, an example which will enable them to fulfill their duties to *Am Yisrael*, whom they are to serve and care for with genuine affection and love.

Friday

We read in Parashat Vayera that after God informed Avraham of His plans to annihilate the sinful cities of Sedom and Amora, Avraham pleaded with God to spare the cities’ populations. Avraham “negotiated” with God, who agreed to rescind His decree if ten righteous people were found in Sedom. Ultimately, of course, God destroyed the region of Sedom, as it did not have even if this small number of righteous people among its population.

In presenting his petition on behalf of Sedom, Avraham declared, “*Ve-anokhi afar va-eifer*” – “I am but dirt and ash” (18:27), acknowledging the audacity of his effort to ask God to rescind His decree. The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (88b) finds it very significant that Avraham spoke with such humility before God, commenting that in reward for this proclamation, Avraham’s descendants were rewarded with *mitzvot* involving “dirt” and “ash.” First, they were given the *mitzva* of *sota*, whereby a suspected adulteress would drink water to which dirt from the ground of the Temple was added, and her survival would be seen as proof of her innocence. Second, *Benei Yisrael* were given the *mitzva* of *para aduma*, which involves mixing water with the ashes of a red heifer, and this water was used to sprinkle upon people and utensils that had become impure to restore their status of purity.

Several different approaches have been taken to explain the connection indicated by the Gemara between Avraham’s declaration, “I am but dirt and ash” and the *mitzvot* of *sota* and *para aduma*. One approach might be to focus not on Avraham’s words themselves, but rather on the context in which they were said – namely, Avraham’s prayer on behalf of Sedom.

The common theme that connects the *mitzvot* of *sota* and *para aduma* is that of rectification and repair. After coming in contact with a human corpse and thus becoming impure, an individual is given the opportunity to restore his initial status of purity through the process of the *para aduma* waters. In the case of a *sota*, a relationship that is threatened by a husband’s suspicions is able to be repaired through the special *sota* waters, which affirm the woman’s innocence, thereby putting the husband’s concerns to rest and allowing them to rebuild a secure relationship grounded in mutual trust and loyalty.

The Gemara perhaps teaches us that this possibility of repair and rectification is earned through the quality exhibited by Avraham through his petition on behalf of Sedom. The corrupt culture of Sedom represented the very opposite of everything Avraham believed in and taught. The people of Sedom were cruel and heartless, and embraced a consistent ideology that opposed sharing, sensitivity and kindness – the very virtues that Avraham so energetically championed and so perfectly embodied. We might therefore have expected Avraham to elatedly welcome God’s decision to eliminate the wicked city that stood in direct opposition to his teachings. But Avraham instead pleaded for the city’s survival, because he understood the message of *sota* and *para aduma*; he recognized the human capacity for change and transformation. He did not want God to kill the people of Sedom because he firmly believed in them, in their potential for growth, in the possibility of repentance. The Gemara’s remark instructs that we are given the *mitzvot* of *para aduma* and *sota* – the opportunity to correct our mistakes, to overcome our faults, and to refine our characters – by following Avraham’s example, by recognizing the possibility of growth and change. If we truly believe that we and others are capable of improving, then we are granted this opportunity and assured of God’s assistance throughout every stage of the long, challenging process of personal growth.

(Based on a *sicha* of the Tolna Rebbe)

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