**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYERA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayeira tells of the rescue of Lot, Avraham’s nephew, from the destruction of the city of Sedom. God had condemned Sedom and its surrounding cities to annihilation because of the inhabitants’ evil conduct. The city’s wickedness was clearly displayed by the Sedomites’ response to Lot’s welcoming two wayfarers, who turned out to be angels sent to destroy the city and to rescue Lot and his family. Soon after Lot invited them into his home, the townspeople assembled outside the house and demanded that Lot hand over the visitors. In the end, the angels brought Lot and his immediate family members out of the city, which was then destroyed. Afterward, Lot’s two unmarried daughters, thinking that they three were the only people left on earth, served their father wine on two successive nights so he would become intoxicated and impregnate them. These incestuous encounters produced two sons – Moav and Amon.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 51:9) makes an enigmatic remark about this unusual story: “*Ein kol Shabbat ve-Shabbat she-ein korin bah parshato shel Lot*” – “There is not a single Shabbat on which the section of Lot is not read.” Quite obviously, this story is publicly read in the synagogue only once a year, on Shabbat Parashat Vayeira. And thus the Midrash’s comment, that this story is read each and every Shabbat, cannot, seemingly, be taken literally, but rather refers to some aspect of this incident which recurs, or is reexperienced, every Shabbat.

Rav Aryeh Tzvi Fromer of Kozhiglov, in his *Eretz Tzvi*, explains that Shabbat is a time for our inner greatness to “escape” from within our beings, just as Lot was rescued from Sedom. The rescue of Lot, in effect, paved the way for the world’s ultimate redemption, as one of the sons he begot after his rescue was Moav, the father of the nation that centuries later produced Rut, the great-grandmother of David, and, by extension, the matriarch of the Jewish royal dynasty. Amid the evil and depravity of Sedom was a spark of *Mashiach* that needed to be rescued before the city’s annihilation, and this is one of the important subtexts of the story of Lot.

The Midrash, Rav Fromer explains, teaches that something similar occurs each and every Shabbat. The pressures and rigors of the workweek often have the effect of concealing our inner “Messianic spark,” the element of sanctity within our beings. Preoccupied as we are with our physical and material needs, our “spark” of holiness becomes hidden deep within us. Shabbat marks the “rescue” of this spark, the opportunity we have to allow our inner spiritual potential to shine forth. On Shabbat, we are freed from our mundane pursuits that conceal our true selves, and we are thus able to rediscover our inner sanctity, by devoting ourselves more fully to prayer and study. In this sense, Rav Fromer writes, the story of Lot is experienced each Shabbat, as we “rescue” the spark of sanctity that is so often “trapped” beneath the mundane activities of the workweek, and allow it to shine and uplift us to greater heights of spiritual devotion.

Sunday

Parashat Vayeira begins with the famous story of the three mysterious wayfarers whom Avraham invites and cares for, and who turn out to be angels who had come to inform him that his wife, Sara, would soon conceive and bear a child after many years of infertility. The Gemara in Masekhet Bava Metzia (86b), as well as a number of Midrashic texts, draw associations between various aspects of Avraham’s generous hospitality to these guests and favors which God later did for his descendants. The rewards for Avraham’s acts of kindness were granted generations later, and *Chazal* pointed to various blessings which *Benei Yisrael* received as rewards for the kindness their patriarch extended to his three guests.

One such connection, which is drawn by the *Midrash Tanchuma* (“*Ha-kadum*”), relates – interestingly enough – not to anything Avraham did, but to a single word he said. When Avraham approached the three angels, he began by offering, “*Yukach na me’at mayim*” – “Let, if you please, some water be brought” so they could wash their feet (18:4). The Midrash comments that in reward for Avraham’s use of the word “*na*” (“if you please”) in extending this offer, God used this word when sending His prophet, Yeshayahu, to reprimand the people for their sinful behavior. In the first chapter of Yeshayahu, as part of the prophet’s scathing condemnation of the people’s misconduct, he proclaims, “*Lekhu* ***na*** *ve-nivakhecha, yomar Hashem*” (“Let us, **please**, go and clarify, says the Lord”). The word “*na*” – an expression of respect and courtesy – was inserted in this otherwise blistering censure of the people in reward for Avraham’s use of this word in offering water to three wayfarers.

Rav Shalom Tzvi Shapiro (*Ha-ma’or She-ba-Torah*) suggested explaining the Midrash’s comment based on the famous Midrashic tradition cited by Rashi (18:4) from *Bereishit Rabba* (50:4) that Avraham assumed these wayfarers were idolaters. Specifically, he thought they belonged to a pagan sect that had the peculiar practice of worshipping the dust on their feet, and so he brought them water to wash their feet, not allowing their “deity” to enter his property. If so, then Avraham’s offer of water was, in a sense, a form of reproach, expressing to these men that he disapproved of their practices and would not allow them into his property until the object of their worship is removed. The inclusion of the word “*na*” in this context, then, signifies the courteous, respectful manner in which Avraham reprimanded the guests. Although he was criticizing their beliefs, he ensured to do so in a polite, dignified manner, as indicated by the word “*na*.” And thus, Rav Shapiro explains, the Midrash draws an association between Avraham’s use of the “*na*” and this word’s inclusion in Yeshayahu’s caustic condemnation of his descendants’ misconduct. Just as Avraham softened his criticism of the three strangers when instructing them to wash their feet, God, too, softened – if only slightly – His harsh criticism of *Benei Yisrael* when He sent a prophet to reprimand them. The Midrash here draws our attention to the importance of expressing criticism gently and respectfully, that even when it becomes necessary to tell people to “wash their feet,” to correct wayward behavior, this must be done with the word “*na*” – in a polite manner which expresses respect and thereby increases the likelihood that the criticism will yield the desired result.

Monday

Parashat Vayeira begins with the story of the angels’ visit to Avraham’s tent, from where they then proceeded to Sedom to bring Lot and his family out of the city and then bring about its destruction. After telling about the angels’ visit with Avraham, the Torah writes that they “turned from there and went towards Sedom, while Avraham was still standing before the Lord” (18:22). The Torah then relates that God informed Avraham of his decision to destroy the sinful city of Sedom.

Many commentators struggled to explain this verse, which clearly implies that Avraham had been “standing before the Lord,” which does not appear to have been the case. Avraham until now was tending to his guests, and now God came to speak to him about His plans for Sedom. What, then, does the Torah mean when it says that “Avraham was still standing before the Lord”?

Rashi explains that this description relates to the previous verses, which tell of God reaching the decision to destroy Sedom: “The Lord said: The cry of Sedom and Amora has become great, and their sin has become very weighty…” The text does not explicitly state that God spoke these words to Avraham, but Rashi understands that He did. Then, the Torah tells that the angels left, while Avraham was still receiving prophecy from God.

The Radak explains this verse based on his general approach to this first section of Parashat Vayeira. Following the famous and controversial position of the Rambam (*Guide for the Perplexed*, 2:43, cited and critiqued by the Ramban to 18:1), the Radak contends that this entire episode of the three angels’ visit to Avraham did not actually happen, but was rather a prophetic vision. The Radak writes (18:1) that as Avraham sat outside his tent in the hot sun, he fell asleep, and beheld a prophetic dream of three angels whom he welcomed and who informed him that he would beget a child, before proceeding to Sedom. After telling us that Avraham saw in his vision the angels leaving and heading towards Sedom, the Torah then writes that Avraham “was still standing before the Lord” – meaning, his prophecy continued, with God speaking to him and sharing with him His decision to annihilate the city of Sedom.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains much differently. In his view, this verse hearkens back to the very first words of the *parasha* – “The Lord appeared to him in the plains of Mamrei, as he sat at the entrance to the tent in the heat of the day.” According to Rav Hirsch, God appeared to Avraham before the three angels arrived in order to inform him of His plans to destroy Sedom, but this prophecy was interrupted when Avraham spotted the angels – thinking they were wayfarers – and ran to greet them. Now, after the angels left, the Torah tells us, “Avraham was still standing before the Lord.” Rav Hirsch explains: “…with all his activity in exercising hospitality Abraham had not gone away from the *amida lifnei Hashem* [standing before the Lord] to which he had been called…” The Torah here emphasizes that although Avraham was busy tending to his guests, he was still “standing before the Lord.” When he took leave of God to welcome the wayfarers, he remained cognizant of God’s presence. All throughout this flurry of activity, Avraham was mindful of the fact that God had come to speak to him, and as soon as the angels left, he listened to what God wished to tell him, as though He had never left the presence of the Almighty.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vayeira that after Avraham hosted three wayfarers, who turned out to be angels, he escorted them as they began making their way towards Sedom, where they would rescue Lot before the city’s destruction. After Avraham escorted the angels, God spoke to Avraham and informed him of His plans to annihilate Sedom and its surrounding cities, whereupon Avraham proceeded to plead that God spare the city. After he finished praying, the Torah writes, “The Lord went when He finished speaking to Avraham, and Avraham returned to his place” (18:33).

Ibn Ezra (see also Seforno) explains, very simply, that Avraham returned to his home in Chevron. He had escorted the angels some distance away from his home, and it was there, at the spot where he bid them farewell, that God spoke to him and he prayed on behalf of Sedom. After he finished praying, he returned home. Ibn Ezra notes that later (19:27-28), we read that Avraham returned to the place where he had prayed for Sedom, and there he saw smoke rising from the region, which was consumed by fire. Clearly, then, the place where God spoke to Avraham and informed him about Sedom’s destruction was some distance from his home in Chevron, along the route towards the Jordan River Valley, at a location where the valley becomes visible. Thus, when the Torah says that Avraham “returned to his place” after completing his prayer, it means that Avraham returned to his home in Chevron.

Rav Yechezkel Halberstam of Shinova, in *Divrei Yechezkel*, finds deeper significance in the Torah’s emphasis on Avraham’s returning “to his place” after completing his prayer on Sedom’s behalf. Avraham’s prayer, of course, did not achieve its desired result. Sedom and its surrounding cities were destroyed and their inhabitants killed despite Avraham’s entreaties. The phrase “and Avraham returned to his place,” the *Divrei Yechezkel* writes, alludes to the fact that Avraham was unfazed by his unsuccessful prayer. He lost neither his faith nor his vitality. He continued devotedly serving God as before, despite his impassioned prayer being unsuccessful. According to the *Divrei Yechezkel*, the Torah here alludes here to the importance of overcoming disappointment, the ability to “return to our places,” to maintain our composure and our joy, even when our wishes go unfulfilled, when our prayers go unanswered, when our aspirations go unrealized. Just as Avraham “returned to his place” after his unsuccessful prayer, similarly, we must try to persevere and not fall into despair when we experience failure and do not accomplish what we had hoped to accomplish.

Wednesday

Parashat Vayeira begins with the famous story of Avraham’s hospitality extended to three wayfarers, who later turned out to be angels who had come to inform Avraham that his wife, Sara, would conceive and deliver a child. Rashi (18:4), based on the Gemara (Bava Metzia 86b), famously comments that Avraham mistook the angels for pagans – specifically, pagans who “bowed to the dust of their feet.” A number of later writers sought to explain the meaning of this very peculiar form of idol worship – bowing to the dust which collects on one’s feet while walking.

Rav Nachum Mordechai Perlow of Novominsk, in *Pe’er Nachum*, suggests that *Chazal* refer here to the tendency to mistake the journey for the final destination. Dust collects on one’s feet in transit, while he makes his way to where he wants to be. When the Gemara speaks of those who “worship” the dust of their feet, the Rebbe of Novominsk explained, they seek to depict those who overemphasize, and pay an inordinate amount of attention to, the journey, instead of focusing on the final goal. Specifically, our primary objective in life must be the devoted service of the Almighty, and the time and work we invest in securing our physical and material needs are secondary, the journey we must undertake to reach the final goal, which is serving our Creator. *Chazal* here warn against “worshipping” the “dust of our feet,” overemphasizing the journey we need to take to reach our goal, such that we lose sight of our goal.

The Rebbe of Novominsk cites in this context the startling comment of the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 56:2) regarding Avraham’s journey to Mount Moriah where he was commanded to sacrifice his son. When Avraham reached the point where he saw the site where the sacrifice was to be made, the Midrash relates, he turned to those who accompanied him – Yitzchak, and his two attendants (identified by the Midrash as Yishmael and Eliezer) – and asked them what they saw in the distance. Yitzchak replied that he saw “a cloud hanging over the mountain,” signifying the sacred status of the site, whereas the attendants saw nothing. In response, the Midrash tells, Avraham said to his attendants to stay where they were with the donkey, and not proceed to the sacred site, because they “resemble the donkey.” The fact that they did not see the sign of the site’s sanctity meant that they were no better than their animals. The Rebbe of Novominsk explains that a donkey – the animal of transport – sees only the journey. It has no knowledge or cognizance of the destination. The Midrash here contrasts those who see the “cloud,” who are keenly aware of their end goal and ultimate objective, and those who go through life like a donkey – moving forward without being mindful of their goal. We must live each day with a clear sense of what is the means and what is the end, what our goals are and what things we do only as the means to reach that goal. Rather than “worship” the “dust,” the journey, we should remain focused on the goal of serving our Creator, and ensure not to regard the means as the ultimate objective.

Thursday

The opening section of Parashat Vayeira tells the story of the three angels whom Avraham invited and treated to a robust meal, thinking they were simple wayfarers. When Avraham saw the men, he ran over to them and asked them to stay, wash themselves and eat, adding “*ki al kein avartem al avdekhem*” – “now that you have passed by your servant” (18:5). As the Rashbam and Ibn Ezra explain, Avraham in effect told them, “Since you’ve passed by here, why not stay?”

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 48:11) finds deeper significance in this phrase, explaining that Avraham was telling the three travelers, “Already at the day the Almighty created His world you were intended to come to me.” According to the Midrash, Avraham was telling the angels that they should stay with him because this was planned already since the time of the world’s creation.

Rav Nachum Mordechai Perlow of Novominsk, in *Pe’er Nachum*, explains that the Midrash here seeks to frame our perspective on ordinary, everyday events and circumstances in our lives. Whenever we happen to find ourselves in a given situation, we should embrace it as though this had been planned since the time of creation. Rather than feel aggravated and despondent over the way circumstances unfolded, and resenting having to confront the current situation, we should recognize and seize the opportunity it presents. When Avraham saw three travelers passing by his tent, he did not view this as some random, meaningless event. He saw it as having been preordained and planned, recognizing that these wayfarers, and he, are all precisely where they are supposed to be. The Midrash implores us to approach all events in our lives in this fashion, to strive to see the value and opportunity within every circumstance we confront, and ensure to make the very most of that opportunity.

Friday

We read in Parashat Vayeira of the visit paid by three angels to Avraham, during which they informed him that his wife, Sara, would soon conceive and bear a son after decades of infertility. The Torah tells that Sara was at the entrance of the tent as Avraham served the guests outside, and she heard the angel tell Avraham that she would bear a child. Sara laughed in disbelief, wondering how an aged woman like her could possibly conceive (18:12).

In presenting this account, the Torah relates that Sara was listening to the angel as she stood at the entrance to the tent, adding, “*ve-hu acharav*” – “and he/it was behind him/it” (18:10). This ambiguous phrase lends itself to different interpretations, but the most common explanation, followed by Rashi, the Rashbam and others, is that the entrance to the tent was behind the angel who was speaking. The Torah here describes that the angel sat with his back to the entrance of the tent, where Sara stood and listened to what he was telling Avraham.

The question arises as to why this piece of information is important and relevant to the story. Seemingly, the point being made is that the angel could not see Sara, because he was sitting with his back turned to her. But why is this detail significant?

Rav Nissan Alpert, in *Limudei Nissan*, suggests that to the contrary, the Torah’s intent is to inform us not that the angel could not see Sara, but rather that Sara could not see the angel. The Torah here indicates that part of the reason why Sara laughed in disbelief is because she could not see the angel’s face as he spoke. If she had seen the angel’s face, Rav Alpert posits, then even though she was unaware that this was an angel, the angel’s appearance would have made his words more persuasive and impactful. The news that seemed so strange and so unlikely would have come across as more believable had Sara not only heard it being spoken, but also seen the speaker.

Oftentimes, we tend to instinctively “laugh” and deride thoughts and ideas that we hear expressed by other people, without taking the time to “see” the speaker, to pay close attention and carefully consider what is being said. What at first appears astonishing might become more compelling – and, as in the case of the angel, might turn out to be correct – after it is assessed with some patience, objectivity, and an open mind. Of course, we must not naively accept everything we hear. But the Torah here warns against the kneejerk reaction of “laughter,” of derision and rejection, urging instead to “see” the one who speaks, to be patient, maintain objectivity, and keep an open mind so we will always be learning and growing throughout our lives.

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