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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

The Window of Mercy

“And Hashem appeared to him...” (18:1)

The Torah opens: “*Vayeira eilav Hashem b’Eilonei Mamrei — Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamrei.*” Avraham Avinu, three days after his *bris milah*, sits at the entrance of his tent “*k’chom hayom*” — in the heat of the day. Why does the Torah choose this moment to describe the highest level of Divine revelation?

The Almighty reveals Himself not in moments of strength, but in the surrender of the self — in the openness where nothing exists apart from His Will.

Avraham’s tent becomes the model of that openness. The walls of self must become windows. The Midrash says that the Holy One came to ‘visit the sick’ — *Bikur Cholim*. Here, say the Sages, is the Torah teaches us the mitzvah of visiting the ill. More deeply, it teaches that the Divine visits wherever man becomes transparent enough for Him to enter. The sickbed of Avraham becomes the gateway to revelation.

At that very moment, Avraham lifts his eyes and sees three strangers approaching. Here the Torah presents one of its most subtle miracles: the meeting of Heaven and Earth in one continuous gesture. Avraham turns from the *Shechinah* to attend to human guests. The Gemara says, “*Greater is hospitality to guests than greeting the Divine Presence.*” Because Avraham understood that to serve man in the image of God is not to turn away from Hashem — it is to serve Him. The two revelations, Divine and human, are one continuum.

Avraham’s greatness was not that he saw angels, but that he saw men and recognized angels within them. The test of holiness is not *retreat* from the world but *vision* within the world. Avraham’s tent, glowing in the desert sun, becomes the prototype of Torah itself — a shelter open to all sides, where the Infinite speaks through the finite act of kindness.

In the story of Sodom, the same pattern repeats: Avraham pleads for a city steeped in corruption, because once a person has seen that the Infinite can enter the finite, he can never abandon even the most fallen corner of creation. Avraham argues, not because he doubts Divine justice, but because he has glimpsed Divine mercy as the root of all existence.

At Sinai, the heavens will open; in Vayeira, the tent opens. Both are revelations of Oneness. Avraham teaches that to make space for the Other — whether the stranger, the sick, or the sinner — is to make space for Hashem Himself. When a Jew performs chesed without limit, he restores the world to its original clarity, where the human and the Divine are no longer two, but one radiant vision.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Three days after performing *brit mila* on himself, Avraham is visited by Hashem. When three angels appear in human form, Avraham rushes to show them hospitality by bringing them into his tent, despite this being the most painful time after the operation. Sarah laughs when she hears from them that she will bear a son next year. Hashem reveals to Avraham that He will destroy Sodom, and Avraham pleads for Sodom to be spared. Hashem agrees that if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom He will not destroy it. Avraham "bargains" Hashem down to ten righteous people. However, not even ten can be found. Lot, his wife and two daughters are rescued just before sulfur and fire rain down on Sodom and her sister cities. Lot's wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot's daughters fear that as a result of the destruction there will be no husbands for them. They decide to get their father drunk and through him to perpetuate the human race. From the elder daughter, Moav is born, and from the younger, Ammon.

Avraham moves to Gerar where Avimelech abducts Sarah. After Hashem appears to Avimelech in a dream, he releases Sarah and appeases Avraham. As promised, a son, Yitzchak, is born to Sarah and Avraham. On the eighth day after the birth, Avraham circumcises him as commanded. Avraham makes a feast the day Yitzchak is weaned. Sarah tells Avraham to banish Hagar and Hagar's son Yishmael because she sees in him signs of degeneracy. Avraham is distressed at the prospect of banishing his son, but Hashem tells him to listen to whatever Sarah tells him to do. After nearly dying of thirst in the desert, Yishmael is rescued by an angel, and Hashem promises that he will be the progenitor of a mighty nation.

Avimelech enters into an alliance with Avraham when he sees that Hashem is with him. In a tenth and final test of Avraham, Hashem instructs Avraham to take Yitzchak, who is now 37, and to offer him as a sacrifice. Avraham does this, in spite of ostensibly aborting Jewish nationhood and contradicting his life-long preaching against human sacrifice. At the last moment, Hashem sends an angel to stop Avraham. Because of Avraham's unquestioning obedience, Hashem promises him that even if the Jewish People sin, they will never be completely dominated by their foes. The Torah portion concludes with the genealogy and birth of Rivka.

Questions

1. Why did G-d appear to Avraham after the brit mila?
2. Why was Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent?
3. What were the missions of the three angels?
4. Why did Avraham enjoin the guests to wash the dust off their feet?
5. Why did Avraham ask specifically Yishmael, and not someone else, to prepare food for the guests?
6. Why did the angels ask Avraham where Sarah was?
7. When G-d related Sarah's thoughts to Avraham, He did not relate them precisely. Why?
8. After the angels announced the future birth of a son to Avraham and Sara, did Avraham then realize that they were angels?
9. What "cry" from Sodom came before G-d?
10. How many angels went to Sodom?
11. Why was Lot sitting at the gate of Sodom?
12. Lot served the angels matza. Why?
13. Why did Lot delay when he left Sodom?
14. Why were Lot and his family not permitted to look back at Sodom?
15. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Why was she punished in this particular way?
16. In what merit did G-d save Lot?
17. Why did Avraham relocate after the destruction of Sodom?
18. Why did Avimelech give gifts to Avraham?
19. Why was Avraham told to listen to Sarah?
20. Why did G-d listen to the prayer of Yishmael and not to that of Hagar?
21. Who accompanied Avraham and Yitzchak to the akeidah (binding)?

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Answers

1. 18:1 - Avraham was sick, so G-d came to "visit" him.
2. 18:1 - He was looking for guests.
3. 18:2 - To announce Yitzchak's birth, to heal Avraham and to destroy Sodom.
4. 18:4 - He thought they were among those who worship the dust, and he didn't want any object of idolatry in his home.
5. 18:7 - To train him in the performance of mitzvot.
6. 18:9 - To call attention to Sarah's modesty, so as to endear her to her husband.
7. 18:13 - For the sake of peace.
8. 18:16 – No. He thought they were travellers.
9. 18:21 - The cry of a girl who was executed for giving food to the poor.
10. 19:1 - Two; one to destroy the city and one to save Lot.
11. 19:1 - He was a judge.
12. 19:3 - It was Passover.
13. 19:16 - He wanted to save his property.
14. 19:17 - As they, too, deserved to be punished, it wasn't fitting for them to witness the destruction of Sodom.
15. 19:26 - She was stingy, not wanting to give the guests salt.
16. 19:29 - Lot had protected Avraham by concealing from the Egyptians the fact that Sarah was his wife.
17. 20:1 - Because travel in the region ceased and Avraham could no longer find guests.
18. 20:14 - So that Avraham would pray for him.
19. 21:12 - Because she was greater in prophecy.
20. 21:17 - Because the prayer of a sick person is more readily accepted than the prayer of others on his behalf.
21. 22:3 - Yishmael and Eliezer.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Laufer

Mevarchim HaChodesh
Blessing the New Month (Part 1)

*“The greatest darkness comes just before dawn –
but most people give up one minute before the light.”*
Ba'al Shem Tov

Introduction
Tapping Into the Immeasurable Potential
of Every Single Month

On the last Shabbat of every month (with the exception of the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah) we recite a series of beautiful *tefillot*. Known as *Mevarchim HaChodesh* – Blessing the New Month, these poignant prayers encapsulate our innermost desires and aspirations for the month that will shortly begin.

In Judaism, each month is not just a random series of days that follow the previous month. Rather, each month signifies a new cycle of spiritual growth, replete with incalculable possibilities that are defined by the essence of that month's particular meaning. So before the month begins we turn to our Father in Heaven and beg that the approaching month bring us an abundance of spiritual and physical blessings.

The standard translation for the word *mazal* is “luck.” However, Rabbi Chaim Elazar Spira (1868-1937), the revered Chassidic Rebbe of Munkatch - known as the *Minchas Elazar* after the seminal work that he authored - writes that luck is an incorrect translation. According to Rabbi Spira, the word *mazal* is rooted in the word “*nozel*” which means to pour. Accordingly, *mazal* is not luck; *mazal* is the blessings that Hashem pours upon us!

And because, as our Sages teach, each month has its own unique *mazal*, we have the unparalleled opportunity to tap into the distinctive and singular blessings that each new month contains. Before we can do so, however, we must first ask Hashem to grant us access to those magnificent, abundant blessings. We need to “remind” ourselves that Hashem is with us at all times – *even when we imagine that we feel Him with us!*

In the customary sharp and pithy words attributed to the Rebbe from Kotzk, “Even after you have found Hashem you must continue to search for him.” Hashem is Infinite and you should not be so complacent to think that you have already found Him; keep searching because there is so much more.

And that is where *Mevarchim HaChodesh* comes in: Just before entering the new month, we turn to Hashem and recognize that all the blessings and goodness contained in the upcoming month emanate from Him - and that we access the unique spiritual energy of each month only by acknowledging Hashem as the one who lovingly imbues each month with everything we need; and we pray to use each day to maximize our potential and draw closer to our Father in Heaven.

To be continued...

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

“Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a Mitzvah is more beautiful when performed by someone who understands its significance” (Meiri, Bava Kamma 17a).

THE ROOTS OF AMMON AND MOAV

Mitzvah #561-562 (*Devarim* 23:4-7)

Parashas Va'eira records the births of Lot's two sons, the forebears of the nations Ammon and Moav. Centuries later, when the Jewish people left Egypt and passed by the lands of these two nations on their way to *Eretz Yisrael*, they refused to offer the Jewish people food and drink, and Moav even hired Bilaam to destroy them (see also *Ramban*). This cruel conduct bore evidence of the faulty character of Ammonite and Moabite men, but not of the women, because it is not the way of women to go out and bring refreshments for wayfarers (*Yevamos* 76b). As a result, the Torah commands us in *Parashas Ki Seitzei* not to allow the male members of these nations to marry into our people, even if they convert. Moreover, while we are usually required to seek peace with other nations, we may not accord this merciful treatment to Ammon and Moav. *Sefer HaChinuch* explains that their cruel conduct revealed them as being despicable in the core and undeserving of our mercy. These Mitzvos thus educate us about the importance of kindness and compassion.

If we explore the history of Ammon and Moav, we gain further insight into these Mitzvos. Lot was an orphan; his father Haran died in Ur Kasdim. His illustrious uncle Avraham took him under his wing and shared with him the good fortunes which Avraham merited on account of his own righteousness. When Lot's city was conquered by an axis of world powers, Avraham came to rescue him; when his city Sodom was overturned, it was only in Avraham's merit that he survived. Lot's descendants Amon and Moav are at fault not only for lacking compassion, but for displaying ingratitude as well, for repaying with cruelty the immense kindness that the forebear of the Jewish people dealt to their ancestor (*Ramban* and *Bechor Shor*).

The Torah refers to an ungrateful person as a *naval*, a despicable person (*Devarim* 32:6). Indeed, someone lacking the sensitivity to even *recognize* the kindness of others is surely rotten at the core. In contrast, the great men of our nation are well-known for possessing a fine sense of gratitude to others and, above all, to Hashem.

The ungrateful streak of Ammon and Moav would continue for all generations; the Sages call them “the bad neighbors of Yerushalayim”. They relayed to Nevuchadnetzar that the Jewish prophets were predicting the destruction of Yerushalayim and urged him to come and conquer it, and they gleefully joined his forces (*Sanhedrin* 96b).

If we ponder the matter at its roots, it appears that the irreversible spiritual blemishes of these two nations began from the time of their conception. When Sodom and its sister cities were destroyed, Lot's daughters - believing that the entire world had been destroyed - had an incestuous union with their father in order to perpetuate mankind, for the same reason that Kayin and Hevel were allowed to marry their own sisters. Lot, on the other hand, had been told by the visiting angels that only his region would be destroyed, so he knew good and well that there was no such permissibility. The Gemara (*Horayos* 10b) remarks that this act of incest was considered virtuous for Lot's daughters and, at the same time, shamefully sinful for Lot. Amon and Moav emerged from those unions. Since only the male participant (Lot) in those unions sinned, the male descendants would emerge blemished and forbidden from entry into the Jewish people, while their female descendants would emerge pure (*Rabbeinu Avigdor HaTzarfati* to *Horayos* *ibid.*). Indeed, the entire Davidic dynasty, including the Mashiach, emerged from Rus, a Moabite woman.

The above-stated law, that the ban against marrying Moabites is limited to male Moabites, is an oral tradition which was a matter of dispute when Rus converted and Boaz sought to marry her. Boaz eventually did so, with the consent of the *Beis Din* of Beis Lechem. Rav Shlomo Alkabetz wrote a commentary to *Megillas Rus* called *Shoreshei Yishai*. In his introduction, he suggests that this Megillah was written in order to publicize the authenticity of this oral tradition, which was necessary to legitimize the Davidic dynasty. Based on what we have written above, we may add that *Megillas Rus* substantiates the ruling of the Beis Din of Beis Lechem by describing in detail the kindness and compassion of Rus, thus demonstrating that Moav's characteristic cruelty is clearly not shared by its female members.

It emerges that moral sensitivities are largely dependent upon the pureness of the soul and the spiritual genes that pass from generation to generation. That is why it is strictly forbidden to mix the pure seed of Avraham, in whose spiritual genes are embedded kindness, compassion, and bashfulness (*Yalkut Shimoni* §82), with the impure seed of Lot's male descendants.

In closing, it is fascinating to note that Avraham himself eventually decided to separate himself from Lot upon observing his twisted values (see *Panim Yafos* to *Bereishis* 13:9). The impure roots of Ammon and Moav had sprouted forth even before they were born.