Dedicated in memory of Rachel Leah bat R' Chaim Tzvi

תורת אמך WOMEN'S TORAH WEEKLY

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Chovot Halevovot: From Our Own Lives

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Yitzchak Cohen

In the fourth chapter of Shaar HaBechina, the Chovot Halevavot discusses seven marks of wisdom in the world through which a person can discern the greatness of Hashem. We can most easily see the wonders of creation in man. Iyov said, "Umebsari echza Elokai." From my flesh I can see Hashem. The Gemara in Brachot notes that when a bottle full of air is punctured, the air will escape and the bottle will disintegrate. Although man's body has numerous apertures it remains solid and functional. In the blessing of asher yatzar we say, "Umafli lasos" (who performs wonders). One of the marvels of the body is that it knows what to retain and what to expel.

The Rama adds a deeper explanation. The fact that two polar opposites, body and soul, can coexist is a wonder.

One can also discern the incredible wisdom of creation in the development of a human fetus, and in the stages of growth from babyhood to adulthood. We see the chesed of Hashem that He put into the heart of every mother the natural inclination to care for her child. When a woman gives birth she can immediately nurse her baby, who automatically knows exactly where to find his food. Although many animals are born almost completely developed, it takes many years for a child to grow up. This too reflects Hashem's kindness. If we would see all the evils of the world and understand it at the moment of birth, we might not survive.

Why does a baby cry so interminably? The Chovos Halevavos explains that there is fluid on the brain that could be harmful. The child's weeping dissolves it so that the brain can go on to develop properly.

Contemplating the wisdom of Hashem in our lives evokes a sense of thankfulness and happiness for all the Creator has given us and continues to give us. May we recognize His presence in our lives and feel joy and gratitude always.

Parshat Vayeira
Chessed and Din

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hershel Reichman

In Parshat Vayeira, Hashem sends three angels to visit Avraham and Sarah. Each comes with a mission. One was charged with telling Avraham that he would have a son. This seems strange as when Hashem commanded Avraham to circumcise himself, He already told Avraham he would have Yitzchak. What was the angel's message?

The Shem Mishmuel explains that Avraham was the epitome of chesed (kindness). The promise of Yitzchak, who personified din (justice), came to Avraham during his recuperation from his brit milah (circumcision). The Shem Mishmuel quotes the Baal Hame'or who explains that milah falls under the mitzvah of "U'be'arta hara mikerbecha. You shall remove the evil from within you." The destruction of impurity, the removal of the orlah (foreskin), is a manifestation of din.

Avraham believed in the spark of goodness within every person. No matter how evil a person may be, he can be redeemed with love and kindness. Avraham prayed for the cruel people of Sedom even though they had no saving grace. Yet Hashem said they had to be destroyed. He gave Avraham the mitzvah of milah so that he might realize that despite the great potential of man there are some people, as the Rambam writes, who lose their humanity completely and have to be destroyed.

Hashem told Avraham, "Hit'halech lefanai vehai tamim." Walk before me and you will be perfect. Avraham's display of chesed had to be tempered with justice. Circumcising himself, decimating evil and thereby integrating din within himself, would bring him to perfection. When Avraham learned this lesson he merited to have Yitzchak.

Yitzchak's name comes from the root word tzechok, laughter. The tzechok of Yitzchak was the sweetening of his din. Chesed produces the joy of tzechok and he was given this name to modify his fundamental tendencies of gevurah. Because Avraham successfully integrated chesed and din, Yitzchak too was able to achieve this balance.

Some people have a tendency for chesed and some for din but there needs to be a balance of both. We must be firm at times and bend and give in at other times. Knowing the proper medium is a part of the greatness of the Jew and the Torah.

While Avraham represented chesed, Sarah signified din. We see this with the story of Yishamel. Avraham was reluctant to send him away, while Sarah insisted that he leave. Avraham attained din by fulfilling the mitzvah of brit milah. However, Sarah still needed to reach a level of chesed. In a prophetic way, she achieved this by serving the meal to the angels. Sarah baked the bread, usually eaten by day, which signifies chesed. She brought out the milk and butter which are white, the color of kindness. By mitigating din with chesed she could now give birth to Yitzchak.

May each of us in our own lives find the correct balance of chesed and din so that we will be worthy to sanctify Hashem's name.

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Parshat Vayeira: Realistic Ramifications

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles
Summary by Channie Koplowitz Stein

Parshat Vayeira begins with an incredible scene of Avraham Avinu, three days post circumcision, leaving Hashem's presence to invite three strangers to his tent. The Torah records the details of Avraham's service to these men/angels. He says, “Let some water be brought and wash your feet and recline beneath the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread...” Then Avraham ran to the cattle, took a calf... and gave it to the youth... to prepare it....” Rashi explains that Avraham wanted water to be brought to wash away any dust of idol worship, since he assumed they were Arabs. Rashi tells us that Hashem repaid Avraham's descendants according to Avraham's personal involvement. Because he delegated bringing the water to Yishmael rather than bringing it himself, water would be provided to the Jews in the desert by Hashem's delegate Moshe, rather than directly by Hashem. Rashi cites the verse in Bamidbar, “And Moshe lifted his hand and hit the rock...” Rabbi Svei notes that conversely, when Avraham was directly involved, Hashem was also directly involved in the parallel chesed in the desert. Avraham ran to prepare food for the strangers, so Hashem Himself sent the manna to feed Bnei Yisroel in the desert. Similarly, as Avraham personally stood over the visitors and served them as they reclined under the shade of the tree, Hashem stood over us and personally protected us with the shade of the Clouds of Glory.

The Torah records each step of Avraham’s chesed as well as the final results, because each was infused with spiritual thoughts. It is precisely because of these spiritual thoughts that the food itself rose above the physical, and the angels were able to consume it. Every act of chesed we do, no matter how small, should have the element of spirituality in it, of seeing the divine image in the recipient. Every time we do chesed, we must realize that we are not only following our patriarch's model, but actually emulating Hashem. Just as every Torah scribe who writes a Sefer Torah must imbue every action relating to that Torah with spirituality, from preparing the quills and the parchment to writing each letter, writes the Ruach Eliyahu, so must we imbue every act of ours with spiritual purpose. There is special significance to the timing too. Avraham had just undergone circumcision and became the first Jew, writes Rabbi Druck z”l quoting the Chidushei Harim. This act of chesed is the first mitzvah he is doing as a Jew. Therefore, this activity had special import for the future of his descendants. Everything Avraham Avinu did would support the world through the chesed he modeled for his descendants. Further, writes the Be'er Yosef, the hachnosat orchim Avraham Avinu did post-surgery showed tremendous devotion and self-sacrifice. As Avraham went above and beyond the norm here, so did Hashem go above and beyond for Bnei Yisroel in the desert.

But just as each positive act has ramifications for the future, so does each omission, notes the Chochmat Hamatzpun. As Rabbi Goldstein adds, every act we do, every detail in its performance, must be done with joy, for we do not know its ripple effect. We tend to sell ourselves short and don't even strive to become greater, observes Rabbi Svei z”l. We need to do our part, to plant the seed, and Hashem will make it grow.

We still must ask why Avraham chose to delegate the task of bringing the water to his son Yishmael. Certainly, it was not a matter of laziness, for, as Rabbi Moshe Feinstein tz"l points out, Avraham did most of the harder work himself. He wanted to use this opportunity as a teachable moment so that Yishmael would learn to do chesed and understand that mitzvah performance is available to everyone, not just to those of high spiritual stature like his father. But Rabbi Feinstein z”l notes, performing the mitzvah himself with joy would have provided a valuable role model to Yishmael. When we regularly do the mitzvah personally and give our children the opportunity to do the mitzvah on our behalf only once in a while, it becomes a privilege rather than an obligation.

Nevertheless, Avraham was an old man and had just undergone his brit milah. Aren't we nitpicking? Rabbi Zaidel Epstein z”l quoting Rav Levoitz explains that if someone does not do the work, he does not get rewarded. Hashem rewarded Avraham's descendants according to Avraham's work.

The Aderet Yosef posits that Avraham understood water to have purifying power in its own right. Therefore it wouldn't matter who brought it to wash away the idol worship of the wayfarers and bring them to a belief in God. However, bringing someone to a belief in God is a great mitzvah in itself and should not be delegated. Avraham's bringing the water himself would have had a greater impact and would have merited a greater reward. Moshe Rabbenu made a similar error in his reasoning when he hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Water coming from the rock, no matter how it came, would produce the same result of glorifying Hashem's name. Thus, he hit the rock and was punished for the diminished impact of the miracle. That's why Rashi chose this second verse where Hashem clearly states that Moshe failed to sanctify Him, to illustrate Avraham's omission. When we have the opportunity to do a mitzvah, it behooves us to be mindful of every aspect of its performance, for we cannot know what the ramifications may be in this world and in the Heavenly spheres.

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