

# INSIGHTS

*Into The Weekly Parsha*

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*"May her Neshama have an Aliya!"*

18 CHESHVAN

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS VAYEIRA

## That Healing Feeling

*To him Hashem appeared, in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw three men standing before him... (18:1-2)*

This week's *parsha* begins with Hashem coming to visit Avraham. Rashi (*ad loc*) explains the reason for the visit: "It was the third day since the circumcision, and *Hakodosh Baruch Hu* inquired as to his welfare." Chazal (see *Sotah* 14a) clearly state that Hashem came to visit Avraham for the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*, and we are thus instructed to visit the sick just as Hashem visited Avraham.

Hashem noticed that Avraham was pained by the fact that he couldn't fulfill the *mitzvah* of *hachnasass orchim* (inviting guests into one's home), so He summoned three "men" to come and visit with Avraham. Rashi (18:2) informs us that these "men" were actually angels sent to Avraham, each with a specific task to accomplish. According to the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 86b), the angel Michael came to inform Sarah that she would give birth; Gavriel came to overturn Sdom; Raphael came to heal Avraham from his circumcision.

This seems a little odd. After all, Hashem Himself came to visit Avraham to do *bikur cholim*. Ostensibly, this would seem to be the highest level of "medical care" that one could hope to achieve. What possible reason would there have been to also send the angel Raphael to heal him?

One of the most under appreciated aspects of recovering from a trauma is considering the emotional state of the patient. There have been countless studies that show that recovery is aided greatly by a person's attitude. Science has tried to explain how the emotional state

directly effects the healing process (perhaps the brain releases healing endorphins, etc.) but the link is undeniable.

In other words, there are two aspects to healing: 1) recovering from the actual physical trauma to the body and managing the pain and 2) restoring the patient's proper emotional state, which has been negatively affected by a diminished sense of self. The latter is obviously very much exacerbated by the medical environment where most patients are treated like an object, or worse, a science project. The significant indignities (hospital gowns – need we say more?) suffered in that environment have a strong and deleterious effect on a patient's emotional state because it causes a terrible impact to one's sense of self.

Hashem visited Avraham not to heal his physical body or to help manage his pain. This is, after all, the domain in which Hashem placed Raphael to administer. Rather, Hashem came to visit Avraham in order to restore Avraham's sense of self. After all, if the Almighty comes to visit you, you're a pretty "big deal," and an important part of His plan. This too is a form of medical treatment as understanding that you matter is the basis for wanting to recover, which therefore speeds up the healing process.

This is the point of *bikur cholim* (and unfortunately, often overlooked). All too often, *bikur cholim* is performed perfunctorily; that is, the person visiting



makes some "small talk" for a few moments and promptly begins to ignore the patient; either watching television, talking to other visitors or answering phone calls and emails.

We are instructed to follow Hashem's lead in *bikur cholim* by making sure the person understands that our visit is all about them, conveying that we care about them, and ensuring that they know they are important. In other words, your job in *bikur cholim* is to restore the patients sense of self. In this way, you are following Hashem's example and actually participating in the healing process.

### Did You Know...

In this week's *parsha* the Torah describes the destruction of Sodom and the story of Lot and the *melachim*. The story ends as they are fleeing Sodom; Lot's wife, ignoring the angels' explicit orders, turns around to gaze at Sodom getting destroyed. She immediately turns into a pillar of salt, because, as Rashi (19:26) recounts, she sinned with salt by refusing to serve it to guests in her home in Sodom. What has become of this pillar of salt?

Josephus states that he saw the pillar himself (*Antiquities* 1:11:4). Additionally, the Gemara (*Berachos* 54b) tells us of the *bracha* (*Baruch Dayan HaEmes*) that one should say upon seeing that pillar.

# People in Glass Houses...

*Let a little water be fetched, please, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread, that you may nourish your hearts. After that you shall pass on; seeing that you have already come to your servant. And they said, So do, as you have said (18:3-5).*

Rashi (ad loc) quoting the Gemara (*Bava Metzia* 86b) explains that Avraham was under the impression that these "visitors" were Arabs, whom were known to worship the dust that was on their feet. This was a type of idol worship; as they were a nomadic people who traveled frequently – thus they worshipped the "god" of the roads. They viewed the dust of the road as something sacred; something that should be bowed down to (*Maharal*).

The Gemara goes on to say that the angels didn't appreciate Avraham suspecting them of such a thing and actually criticized Avraham in their response: "Did you actually suspect us to be Arabs that bow to the dust of their feet? First look at your very own son Yishmael (who regularly does that)?"

In other words, the angels are telling Avraham – before accusing others of misdeeds get your own house in order. How does the Talmud know that this is what the angels replied to Avraham? Our sages don't invent conversations out of thin air. Where in the verses can our sages deduce that this is what actually took place?

If one examines the verses carefully, it can readily be seen what caused the sages to come to this conclusion. Consider, for a moment, three people who are traveling in the blistering heat on a parched and dusty road; desperate for some sort of shelter. They come across a welcoming tent with a benevolent host offering them not only respite from the sun, but plenty of water and food as well. The host only has one stipulation; "please wash your feet, I will then fetch you water and food while you're comfortably resting in the shade of my tree."

What should be the appropriate response to this kind and generous offer? One would imagine that you don't have to have the manners and etiquette of Emily Post to respond; "thank you kind sir! Of course we will do as you wish!" Yet the angels respond in a very odd manner; they basically command him, "so shall you do, just as you have said." Clearly Chazal are bothered that this is an inappropriate response to a kindness that is offered with a generous heart.

Chazal therefore conclude that the angels aren't responding to his generous offer, they are responding to his accusation or

assumption that they are idol worshippers. Now their comments begins to resonate – before trying to fix other people's shortcomings, first take care of the very same issues that you have in your own home.

Perhaps most remarkable is how Avraham responds to their chastising of the manner in which he runs his household. After all, it's never easy to open oneself to honest criticism. One would imagine that accepting severe criticism from someone you are going out of your way to be kind and generous toward would give one serious pause. Yet Avraham takes their criticism in stride and literally "runs" to make preparations for them and otherwise oversees that all their needs aren't just minimally met; they are offered expensive delicacies and attentive service.

Undoubtedly, this is why Avraham is the paragon of the attribute of *chessed*. True kindness shouldn't be delivered based on your feelings toward the recipient; true kindness is based on the needs of the recipient and doing whatever you can to show them how much you appreciate the opportunity to be of service.

Clearly the Gemara wouldn't be giving us a *bracha* to say if there was no chance of ever seeing this pillar of salt - so we know that it existed in the time of the Gemara and there's a chance that it still exists today. So, where might it be?

Fascinatingly, there's actually a mountain along the southwestern part of the dead sea in Israel, part of the Judean Desert Nature Reserve, that's called Mount Sodom. Mount Sodom, or Jabel Usdum in Arabic, is, according to *The Living Torah* (by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan), the most likely location as to where Lot's wife died, based upon the contention that Lot was heading south to escape. Furthermore, even nowadays, there's a pillar on that mountain called Lot's Wife, which seems to resemble a human form. See picture. Interestingly, while the Torah doesn't mention her name, we learn in *Sefer HaYashar* 19:52 that her name is Ado.

