

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Vayera)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

There is a well known (and widely corroborated) story concerning Rav Shlomo Goren and the Jewish return to Hebron in 1967. There are different versions of this story; this is my favorite...

Try and imagine the spirit that had capture an entire people in the early days of June, 1967. After nineteen years of Jordanian occupation during which time no Jew had been allowed to set foot in Judaism's most holy places, the Israeli army was ready to do battle for the city of Hebron, home to the Cave of the Patriarchs, where Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivka, and Ya'akov and Leah were buried. This was the city where Judaism was born, and at long last, after two thousand years of dreaming, the Jewish people were coming home.

The city was also, however, home to some 80,000 Arabs, and given the fact that some of the most severe riots and massacres of Jews under British rule (in 1929 and 1936) were perpetrated by the Arabs of Hebron; the IDF was expecting a difficult and possibly a costly battle.

Nonetheless, despite the danger, Rav Goren, Chief Rabbi of the Israeli army, had been promised he would be able to join the main push into Hebron in order to be a witness to the long hoped for return to the Ma'arat Ha'Machpeilah, the Cave of the Patriarchs.

Exhausted from the battles of the previous day, he fell into an exhausted sleep and when he awoke with a start at 6AM, he realized no-one had called for him and he was alone on the base. The entire Brigade had set forth without him and he was missing the return to Hebron!

Determined that the Jewish entry to the graves of the Patriarchs should be conducted properly, he quickly commandeered a jeep, grabbed a driver and set off on the southern road out of Jerusalem towards Hebron.

Passing through the mountains south of Bethlehem (Beit Lechem), the jeep entered the Arab villages on the outskirts of Hebron and they began to see white flags everywhere: hanging from windows and fluttering on rooftops, clearly the army had passed through and taken the city.

As the jeep sped along the narrow road and they came upon the large building erected by Herod during the second Temple above the Machpeilah cave, Rav Goren saw a group of Arabs coming towards their jeep with arms raised in surrender.

Jumping out of his jeep with Uzi machine gun in hand he motioned to the Arabs to step aside, and while the driver kept them covered, Rav Goren searched around for the army units that should have remained to cover such a holy place but could find no trace of them.

Not wanting to ask or wait, he took an Israeli flag he had in the jeep and hung it across the gates to the Machpeilah cave, declaring for all to see that the Jewish people had come home.

Incredibly, Rav Goren had not missed the conquest of Hebron, he had gotten there before anyone else; the Brigade was still en route along a different road. The reason these Arabs had come out in surrender was in fact because this was their first sighting of Israeli troops. As it transpired, the entire city of Hebron, all eighty thousand Arabs, surrendered to Rav Goren and his driver without a single shot fired!

And the Chief Rabbi of the Israeli army, all alone, conquered the city of Hebron heralding the return of the Jewish people to their roots.

The postscript to this story, incidentally, is that when Moshe Dayan, the Defense Minister, came later in the day to see the resting place of the Patriarchs, he ordered the Israeli flag taken down in order not to antagonize the Arab population with whom, forty years ago, he hoped peace was imminent.

This story raises many questions, but chief amongst them is the question of how much we need to take into account the way the nations of the world see us.

David Ben Gurion, one of the founders of the State of Israel, and her first Prime Minister, is famous for having said:

“I don’t care what the nations of the world say; I care only what the Jews will do.”

Is this true? Is there a principal at stake here worth considering?

This week’s portion, *Vayera*, offers a fascinating perspective regarding this question.

At the end of last week’s portion *Lech Lecha*, Avraham is commanded to circumcise himself at the ripe old age of 99. And in response to his selfless act of faith, no less than G-d Himself comes to visit Avraham, as he recovers from the circumcision.

“ Vayera eliyav Hashem be’Elonei Mamrei’” (Genesis (Bereishit) 18:1)
“And G-d appeared to him (to Avraham) at the Oak trees of Mamrei....”

Rashi, noting the question as to why it is important for us to know where Avraham is sitting when G-d comes to him, quotes a fascinating *Midrash* (rabbinic legend) which suggests that Avraham asked Mamrei’s advice as to whether he (Avraham) should indeed fulfill G-d’s commandment to circumcise himself. And since Mamrei advised him to do so, G-d appeared to Avraham in Mamrei’s territory.

This *Midrash* is difficult to say the least. Why would Avraham, commanded by G-d to do something, need the advice of a non- Jewish neighbor? Since when is a Jew’s adherence to the *mitzvot* (commandments) dependant upon what anyone else says, much less someone representing the nations of the world?

Furthermore, why is Mamrei rewarded for such advice, and why is the reward for Mamrei’s advice, that G-d appears to Avraham in Mamrei’s territory? Was this simply akin to the President having breakfast in your diner, which is good for business?

Couldn’t G-d think of a better reward than ‘*Washington slept here*’?

A closer look at the actual *Midrash* (not quoted by Rashi in its entirety) is even more puzzling. According to the *Midrash (Tanchuma Vayera 3)*:

Avraham had three friends: Aner, Eshkol and Mamrei. When G-d commanded Avraham to circumcise himself, he went to ask their advice.

Aner said he would cripple himself and his enemies (relatives of the Kings he had killed in the battle of five kings) would be able to kill him. So he should not circumcise himself.

Eshkol said 99 years old is not the time to undertake such an operation; it could kill him so again, he should not circumcise himself.

But when Avraham goes to Mamrei, Mamrei asks him why he needs advice at all? The same G-d who protected Avraham from the wrath of King Nimrod, and saved him in a fiery furnace (also a *Midrash*....) not to mention delivering him from a war against the five mightiest kings on earth, saving his whole body, would certainly not allow an injury to one small part of his body kill him. Mamrei tells Avraham he should heed G-d's command and circumcise himself.

Not only does Avraham need advice but he gets it from all three of his non- Jewish friends! And it seems that his decision to actually circumcise himself, and enter into the Jewish covenant, comes as a result of the advice of his non-Jewish neighbor!

The beginning of Judaism then, is credited to Mamrei, who was essentially an idolater!

And yet, the fact that Avraham continues to ask advice of each of his friends until he gets the right answer suggests he may have known the right thing to do, in which case one wonders why he sought their advice in the first place? What is going on here?

The **Vilna Gaon** (in his *Kol Eliyahu* on *Vayera*) suggests that Avraham saw his mission in life as sharing the idea of monotheism with the world, and that he was afraid that when people heard about this new *mitzvah* of circumcision they would lose all interest in G-d and Judaism. So Avraham wanted to see whether his non- Jewish friends would understand the idea of circumcision because for Avraham it wasn't just about doing what G-d says, it was about how to share that with the world so they would want to come close to G-d as well....

Indeed, the gentiles of Avraham's day may well have been attracted to monotheism and the seven Noachide laws (not to murder, steal or adultery, belief in G-d, and the creation of courts, not to eat from a living animal and not to graft different strains of fruits) because their own system of idolatry involved child sacrifice and great cruelty. So Avraham may have been worried that circumcision would also seem difficult and would prevent the world from coming close to G-d.

But this is equally problematic as it implies a religion of convenience as opposed to faith. And, even more difficult: how could Avraham even contemplate disobeying the word of G-d?

Incredibly, the Vilna Gaon suggests that Avraham was willing to give up his own reward for adherence to the word of G-d, in order to fulfill his mission to make the world better by bringing it close to the world of monotheism, and loving-kindness.

In other words, the goal was the world and the world was more important to Avraham than Avraham! Perhaps, one might even suggest, that **the entire birth of the Jewish people was simply a vehicle to perfect the world**. The goal of the Jewish people was never and is not the Jewish people. The goal is really the world.

Some have misunderstood this to mean that we could do away with the uniqueness of the Jewish people and get to the end goal of perfecting the world. But Judaism believes, for whatever the reasons, that we cannot perfect the world until the Jewish people becomes all that they are meant to be. Nonetheless, it is important to realize that we are not the goal; the whole point of Judaism is to be a light to the nations, in order to make the world a better place, and to bring the rest of the world closer to G-d.

Indeed, in this aspect Judaism differs fundamentally from Islam which sees its goal as the conversion of the entire world to Islam, something the West would do well to remember.

Perhaps the message of this Midrash, and the Torah's focus on Mamrei, is not whether Avraham sought his neighbor's advice, but why.

Avraham was not fulfilling Hashem's word because it made sense. Avraham had a love affair with G-d which precluded any possibility of his doing anything but that which he felt Hashem wanted of him (though that does not mean that it was always clear exactly what Hashem wanted. This indeed was Avraham's challenge, as in the binding of Isaac: trying to figure out what Hashem really wanted of him.).

In this instance Avraham is concerned as well with how others would perceive that willingness to do Hashem's will.

Now, clearly, concern with what others think of us is a double-edged sword. We should do what is right regardless of what others think, and peer- pressure often causes people to make tragic mistakes they regret for a lifetime.

But that is only true if I am concerned with other people's perceptions of me because of how it affects *me*. If, however, I am concerned with what others think of me because I care about *them*, then that is in fact an outgrowth of the very philosophy of loving-kindness and perfecting the world that Judaism is all about. Avraham cares so much for his fellow human beings, and so wants for them to discover as well the beauty he had discovered in his life, that he takes the time to struggle with how they will perceive what he is about to do. Because he knows that if they do not have the time to understand then they may become distant..... and Avraham is all about bringing people together.

Remember that Avraham is essentially the third attempt at a beginning for mankind in the Torah. First Adam & Eve are the parents of humanity but that doesn't work as the world sinks into a morass of violence and evil that results in the flood. Then, Noach is again the father of all mankind, but again the world forgets G-d and sinks into a pagan orgy of idolatry.

Now, Avraham is attempting to bring the world back. Only instead of being the father of everyone, he is trying to begin with one small nation, a model of how life could be. But he never forgets that all that he does and all that he is is about how to change the whole world and not just himself. And that is why the *mitzvah* of circumcision, the ultimate *mitzvah* in which one physically changes oneself, is what leads to this dialogue wherein Avraham explores the impact this will have on the rest of the world.

And by sharing the *mitzvah* (i.e. Judaism) with his friends, one at least becomes invested and begins, on some level, to share the dream and even the passion for what Judaism is all about.

Indeed that may be why the reward for Mamrei is simply that G-d speaks to Avraham in his territory; his place. Because that is the entire point: how can we make this world a world of G-d, a place where Hashem is seen and experienced by all.

Rav Goren was correct in that our ability to change and impact the world has to begin with the knowledge of what we do and why it is right; it has to begin with who we are and not what others want us to be.

And yet, Moshe Dayan had a valid point in considering how the nations of the world would see us, if only because the goal is that the Jewish people become a model of what the world could be for all the nations of the world.

The challenge of course, is making sure that our concern with how the nations of the world see us begins with our own secure knowledge of who we are and how we see ourselves; something I am not at all sure was clear in Moshe Dayan's mind.

Perhaps one day soon, when the Jewish people understand as a whole the beauty of the Jewish recipe that we have to share with the world, we will be ready to in fact share that beautiful dream with the entire world. For now, though, we still have a lot of work to do amongst ourselves, before we arrive at the level of Avraham.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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