

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Vayera)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

As these words are being written, Yehuda Glick, a passionate advocate for the right of Jews to pray on the Temple mount in Jerusalem, lies fighting for his life after being shot four times by an Arab terrorist in a horrific assassination attempt in Jerusalem.

The reason Yehuda, a gentle soul who advocates equally for the right of Muslims to continue worshipping in their El Aksa mosque on the mount, has to be such a vocal advocate for Jewish prayer-rights at Judaism's holiest site, is because the Police and security forces feel that Jewish prayer in such a sensitive spot will result in Arab violence. And despite an Israeli Supreme Court ruling that Jews should indeed be granted such equal rights, the Police and Israeli government, taking into account world opinion and Arab sensitivities, feel they have chosen the safer, more prudent path.

This of course raises many questions, including the danger of surrendering to violence; never a good idea. But additionally, worth considering is 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) dependent 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?

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 because their own system of idolatry involved child sacrifice and great cruelty. So Avraham may have been worried that circumcision would also seem cruel and difficult and might prevent the world from coming close to G-d.

But this is equally problematic as it implies a religion of convenience. And in any event, 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 G-d'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 G-d wanted of him.

In this instance Avraham is concerned as well with how others would perceive that willingness to do G-d'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. Avraham is all about bringing people together.

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.

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, there is great value in considering how the nations of the world 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 what we need to do. It does not necessarily mean we should change what we do (such as living freely and building in the land of Israel). But it definitely means it should be important to us how the world sees what we do.

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.

May Hashem bless Rav Yehuda Glick, Yehuda ben Rivka, with a full, safe and speedy recovery soon.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Rav Binny Freedman