

Parshas Vayera - 5781

The *parsha* this week picks up in the middle of the storyline that began last week. Avrohom Avinu is recovering from giving himself a *bris milah*. Hashem appears to him to see how he is doing. Rashi explains that Hashem was performing the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*, visiting the ill. When Hashem arrived Avrohom Avinu was sitting by the entrance to his tent. Chazal teach that despite the pain, Avrohom Avinu was yearning to perform the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim* – hosting guests. He was not going to allow something like pain and discomfort to get in the way of performing such an important *mitzvah*. In the midst of the visit, Avrohom Avinu notices three people approaching and he runs to greet them. The *pasuk* then relates that Avrohom asked for the one he was with to wait for him. The word that Avrohom Avinu uses to refer to the one he was talking with was אדני. That word can mean Lord or lord. In other words, Avrohom Avinu may have been talking to Hashem and asked Him to wait while he attended to the guests. Alternatively, he was talking respectfully to his guests and asked them to stay and visit with him rather than continue on their journey. Rashi, in fact, cites both explanations. Either he was speaking to the most distinguished of the travelers and referred to him as his master. According to this explanation the word אדני refers to a person rather than Hashem and thus the word is not sacred. He then cites the Gemara (Shevuos 35b) that maintains that the word is sacred because Avrohom Avinu was talking to Hashem. Although Hashem was visiting Avrohom Avinu to perform the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*, Avrohom Avinu asked Hashem to wait while he performed the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim*. According to this explanation, Avrohom Avinu is establishing an important principle. That principle is that performing the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim* is greater than הקבלת פני שכינה – greeting the Divine Presence.

This principle, when you think about it, is astonishing. We often talk about the difference between easy *halachic* questions and difficult *halachic* questions. Easy *halachic* questions involve questions of whether something is permitted or not. You cooked fleishigs in a milchig pot. Is the food permitted or not, does the pot have to be *kashered* or not. Such questions are easy because the answer is yes or no. If one studied the sources, the answer is easy. There is no competition between values, it is just a matter of whether one has the requisite knowledge to answer the question. Difficult questions involve having to strike a balance between two *mitzvos*. When there are two *mitzvos* to perform and one cannot do both, it is difficult to determine which *mitzvah* should be prioritized. The difficulty of striking a balance between two *mitzvos* is what I refer to as, The Rock, Paper, Scissors of *Halacha*. For example, months ago we were faced with making the agonizing decision between *tefilla b'tzibbur*, keeping *shuls* open and taking steps to maintain our good health. Both are important *mitzvos* but they were in conflict

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or tension with one another. That was a difficult decision because we want and need both but they could not coexist and a decision had to be made to prioritize one, at the expense of the other.

Let's swing this back around to our *parsha*. Avrohom Avinu is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, he was greeting the Divine Presence. The goal of *mitzvos*, Torah study and *davening* is to connect with Hashem. Avrohom Avinu was in the middle of experiencing the privilege of connecting with Hashem on a personal and intimate manner. This is the pinnacle of *avodas Hashem*, to converse directly with Hashem. At that moment, the opportunity to perform the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim* arose. *Hachnasas orchim* is a *mitzvah* of *chesed*. *Chesed*, as we know, is one of the three pillars upon which the world stands. But with all of this, can it possibly be more important than actually greeting and connecting with Hashem? How can it be that having guests is greater than greeting the Divine Presence, to such a degree, that it made sense for Avrohom Avinu to ask Hashem to wait while he attends to his guests?

There are many answers to this question but the one I would like to share this year relates to the beneficiary of the *mitzvah*. The *mitzvah* of *chesed*, in general, and *hachnasas orchim*, specifically, focuses on the needs of others. In contrast, connecting with Hashem is amazing and the goal of Torah and *mitzvos* but if taken to the extreme and if that becomes our exclusive focus, it can generate a selfish attitude. "My spiritual pursuits are the most important pursuit in the world and when necessary, I will ignore my obligations towards others." Connecting with Hashem is the goal, the end, but the end should not become the means. The result of one's efforts in serving Hashem is connection with Hashem but is not the means of connecting to Hashem. Unfortunately, this principle is not always appreciated. A good story that illustrates this principle involved a student of Rav Yaakov Kamentzky zt"l. The student was getting married and was going to start wearing a *talis*. If you read the *tefilla* that is said before putting on the *talis* one realizes that wrapping one's self in a *talis* involves connecting deeply with the Divine Presence in an all-encompassing manner. Due to the importance of the *mitzvah*, the *chosson* asked what he should have in mind when he puts on the *talis*. He was expecting Rav Yaakov to share with him a deep, spiritual insight into the *mitzvah* that would elevate his performance of the *mitzvah* of wearing a *talis*. Rav Yaakov's deeply spiritual response was that he should be careful to look around to make sure that he doesn't hit anyone in the face with his *tzitzis* as he wraps the *talis* around his body. Rav Yaakov was teaching that first and foremost, one must be sure that no one is harmed or negatively impacted by your spiritual pursuits. Similarly, if there are travellers who are in need of assistance, their needs overrides the activity of connecting with Hashem.

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This becomes a model and the guiding principle for such circumstances. Spiritual pursuits are important but may not be pursued when they occur at the expense of others. As I mentioned at the outset, questions such as these require careful deliberation. Every situation is unique and has its own considerations but it is important to be aware of the principle that spiritual pursuits may not come at the expense of someone else.

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