

Derech Ha-Rif

Excerpts from the Torah discourse delivered by The great Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto Shlita

For the Torah portion of Vayera | Volume 48 | 20 Heshvan



First Shabbat Meal

"And Hashem appeared to him in the fields of Mamrei (Bereishit 18:1)."

Mamrei's merit in giving advice on conquering one's evil inclination

The Torah publicizes that Hashem appeared to Avraham on Mamrei's property. The commentators puzzle over the reason behind the Torah's explicit reference to Mamrei and conclude that it was his advice to Avraham to perform the Brit Mila that bore him the merit to be referenced in the very first verse of the Parasha. The obvious question that arises from this is why did Avraham consult Mamrei at all regarding his opinion on circumcision? Surely Avraham had not even the slightest sliver of hesitation to perform Hashem's commandment. Why then consult Mamrei?

To gain an understanding of Avraham's action, it is necessary to preface that there are two opinions regarding the objective of the Mitzva of Brit Mila. Maimonides (Moreh Nevuchim 3:49) explains that the procedure of circumcision removes an element of the body associated with carnal pleasure; removing this part diminishes the draw. Nachmanides (Bereishit 17:9) takes a different perspective and explains that the Mitzva of Brit Mila serves to increase one's sanctity. These two perspectives can be taken a step further to explain the meaning behind the two blessings recited at the Brit Mila ceremony. The first blessing is for having the Commandment of Brit Mila given to us (Ve'tzivanu Al Ha'Mila), whilst the second one is for introducing the child into Avraham's Covenant (Le'haschniso bi'vrito shel Avraham Avinu). Maimonides' reasoning gives meaning to the first blessing, that Hashem commanded us to perform the Brit Mila to minimize man's carnal draw. Nachmanides' reasoning, correspondingly, gives meaning to the second blessing, that Hashem gave us a Mitzva, so that in accomplishing it, we will bring sanctity upon ourselves.

These two elements of Brit Mila were precisely the source of Avraham's uncertainty in the matter for which he consulted Mamrei. Avraham understood that there are two aspects to Brit Mila, removing the 'evil' component, namely, the foreskin, and adding sanctity to one's being through removing the 'Peri'a' (the second part of Brit Mila, which consists of pulling back the membrane beneath the foreskin). These two stages are alluded to in the verse in Tehillim, "Sur Me'ra, Ve'Asei Tov" (disist from Evil and do Good).

Given that Avraham was absolutely saintly and had no need to perform the Brit Mila to minimize improper urges, the Brit Mila would only serve to increase his level of holiness.

Avraham was therefore doubtful about what his intentions should be in preforming the Brit Mila on himself: should he only recite the second blessing regarding increased sanctity, or should he also recite the first blessing, praying to Hashem to remove immoral urges?

This is where Mamrei came forward and advised Avraham that although he personally was on a level such that he didn't need to pray to curb his evil urges, he should consider his future offspring, perhaps they would be able to use the power of this blessing and its associated intention. In coming forward with his advice, the entire Jewish nation gained an additional layer of protection from the evil inclination. This merit was sufficient to have the Torah explicate that Avraham's meeting with Hashem took place in Mamrei's property.

ספר דברים

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Soul Of the Rif

A person's words have great power and significance. Through words, a person can change their life and the entire world, from one extreme to another.

"Life and death are in the hands of the tongue (Mishlei 18:21)." This same concept can be expressed in another way. People can tell each other the sharpest things, but in a calm way, and when this is done, the second person will accept this, and understand what they are told. Ultimately, good will result from this exchange. Alternatively, one can approach someone with drama and shouting, and in a harsh manner, and as a result, a person will feel broken and pained.



2nd Shabbat Meal

"Please take a little water, and wash your feet and take shelter under the tree (Bereishis 18:4)."

Avraham, our father, planted a proverbial seed through his actions. In the future, the Jewish people will learn Torah and teach it to the angels. The three angels came to Avraham and he gave them food and drink. The following questions must be asked:

1. What happened in that meeting between Avraham and the angels?
2. What is the lesson to be learnt from that meeting?

It is necessary to be aware of a tremendously important concept. The Navi (prophet) writes that when the Mashiach (Messiah) comes, "The earth will be filled with awareness of G-d, just as water covers the seabed (Yeshaya 11:9)." At that time, all of the Jewish people will know the holy Torah, they will study the Torah and be experts in it. In regard to the other nations, some will convert fully, and others who are wicked and do not go in the path of Hashem will not remain in the world.

There is a Mitzva in the holy Torah to learn Torah, and this is easy to understand. However, there is also a Mitzva to teach Torah. The question must be asked: how will this be fulfilled in the future, when all are Talmidei Chachamim (great Torah scholars), who are familiar with the Torah? Who will be taught when everyone is proficient in their knowledge of Torah?

Our teacher, the Chatam Sofer, shares an important idea: When the Messianic king comes to the Jewish people, they will sit and teach Torah to the angels. The Chatam Sofer explained that the first time that angels studied Torah was in this week's portion, when they came to the house of our father, Avraham. He said to them, "Please take a little water and wash your feet, and take shelter under the tree (Bereishit 18:4)." It is known that water refers to Torah, as it says in the Navi "Go, every thirsty person, to water (Yeshaya 55:1)," which is interpreted as referring to the Torah.

The Torah continues the story: Avraham said to them "And I will take a piece of bread." He gave them bread, and the Torah is also compared to bread, as the verse says, "Go partake of My bread (Mishlei 9:5)." Our father, Avraham, sat together with the angels and taught them Torah. The holy Sefarim record that he taught them laws and lofty intentions which apply when a person is eating.

In light of this, we can answer the second question. When the Mashiach comes, the Jewish people will fulfill the Mitzvot of teaching Torah by teaching the angels. This incredible concept began with Avraham, who taught Torah to the angels when they came to him. The precedent of this idea of teaching the angels was planted then.

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Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Dear Rabbi, we wanted to ask the following question: In our day and age, what can we do to bring joy before Hashem?

Answer:

Every person has their own personal form of repair in life. There are four key elements; Fire, water, wind and earth. There can be a person whose main element is fire, and they have to deal with challenges of anger and feelings of sadness. For such a person, their task is to overcome sadness. When people overcome situations of challenge, this causes Hashem to be happy.

A person who consists of the element of wind will be tempted by a liking for Lashon Hara (gossip), and juicy conversations along the lines of "He said this" or "they did this" and the like. If such a person can take control of themselves, this makes Hashem happy. Water is representative of desire, and a person composed of it may wish to commit theft or other certain sins. Once again, if they can be strong and get a grip on themselves and withstand temptation, this makes Hashem happy.

The element of earth is found in people who are depressed and sad all the time. Being in a bad state throughout the entire day is not acceptable. Such people feel "he or she did this to me" or "they said this to me," or similar lines of thought, that other people indicated offensive things or did not speak to them. Overcoming such feelings and attitudes makes Hashem happy. In essence, every person needs to know which key element they are comprised of. Through this, a person can improve themselves and bring great joy before Hashem.





3rd Shabbat meal

"Please take a little water and wash your feet and take shelter under the tree (Bereishit 18:4)."
Before the performance of any Mitzva, or any study of Torah, one should have thoughts of Teshuva.

There is a key concept which people must be aware of. Every time that one learns Torah or performs a Mitzva or good deed, they should first engage in thoughts of Teshuva. If a person does not do so, then the power of the given Mitzva can, Heaven forbid, be guided by the Evil Inclination.

In this week's Torah portion, after assuming that the angels are travelers, Avraham tells them "Please take a little water and wash your feet." He asks them to take water and have thoughts of Teshuva before coming near to Hashem. The proverbial tree which he refers to is the tree of the Torah. He warns them that before going to the tree of the Torah, they should wash their feet and think about Teshuva, and only then can they relax under the tree and learn Torah. If one learns Torah without thoughts of Teshuva, and similarly, if one gives Tzedaka (charity) or does a good deed without thinking of Teshuva, then the power of that Torah or good deed can be hijacked by the Evil Inclination.

Our Sages teach "Praised is he who has come here and has his study of Torah in his hand (Pesachim 50a)." This means: Praiseworthy is one who reaches heaven and his Torah study is clean of the Evil Inclination, for they engaged in Teshuva and cleansed themselves of the Evil Inclination's influence.

Before one prays or performs a Mitzva, they must have thoughts of Teshuva. The Talmud tells of how the devout people in early times would wait an hour before praying, in order to direct their hearts to the Almighty (Brachot 5a). For an hour before their prayers, they would think about Teshuva in order that the power of their prayer would not be given over to the Evil Inclination. Every good deed and every Mitzva must be accompanied by Teshuva, for then, the Torah study or the good deed will be pure and clean before Hashem.

"After I have become wrinkled, will I have youth? And my husband is old (Bereishit 18:12)."
A person needs to be on the appropriate level in order to benefit from a miracle which is being performed for them.

In this week's portion, we find one of the fundamental principles in the holy Torah. An angel comes to Avraham and Sarah and informs them that they will be blessed with a baby boy. The verse recounts the words of the angel: "I will surely return to you at this time, and there will be a son to Sarah your wife (Bereishit 18:10)."

Sarah overheard this, and the Torah recounts the events that followed:

"And Sarah laughed inwardly saying, after I have become wrinkled will I have youth again? And my husband is old."

Hashem heard this and came to Avraham and asked him, "Why is it that Sara laughed, saying, will I really give birth even though I have aged? (Bereishit 18:12-13)".

The meaning of this passage can be explained based on a fundamental concept in one's service of Hashem taught by the Bnei Yissaschar. He teaches that a person can be gifted with a child, or indeed be privy to have any miracle performed for them, even if the recipient is not on the level to recognize the miracle. However, in

such a case, there will be something lacking. For example, if a person does not have children and then prays excessively to Hashem and is miraculously granted children, such a person has clearly earned great reward insofar as they were granted children. However, this child is not considered to be theirs, and such a child does not spiritually belong to the father, for they were born through a miracle and not through nature. If the father is not on the fitting level, the child will not be spiritually linked to them until the father ascends to a spiritually higher level, only then will this connection be made.

So too, everything which is done for a person, contains a miraculous component. A person does not have the right to benefit from a miracle, and they do not have power over the miracle, and the miracle is not connected to them until they ascend to the necessary level. Then, the miracle will be proverbially called by the person's name, and they will be permitted to benefit from the miracle and have it be ascribed to them. In light of this, the above verses can be explained. When Hashem said to Sarah that she would have a son, since she was a Tzadika (righteous woman) and had Ruach HaKodesh (the holy spirit), she was in pain and said "After I have become wrinkled, will I again have youth? And furthermore, my husband is old." She was afraid that since he was old, he may not have had enough merits, and if they were to have a son, the son would not be named on account of him, and this would be a great cause of distress.

A person must know that if a miracle is performed for them, in order to benefit from it, they must be on a high level, so that the miracle will be conceptually addressed to them. If this is not the case, they will not have the right and the power to benefit from that miracle.

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Treasure charms from the Rif



Our great teacher, Rabbi Meir Abuhatzzeira, had a practice he was particular about. Each time his children would leave the house, he would take a small bag containing some za'atar (a culinary herb) and some roota (another plant). He would then proceed to divide the za'atar and roota between the children, instructing them to place a portion of each in each of their small purses to serve as a charm against the Ayin Hara (Evil Eye).

For us too, it is virtuous to take a small amount of za'atar and place it in our homes, our cars, or indeed in anything of value to us; this za'atar is meritorious, serving as a charm to ward off damaging forces and the Ayin Hara.

May Hashem save all of us from the Ayin Hara, and give us salvation, joy and success.



Be careful to repay debts owed to others, lest you be forced to return to earth as a Gilgul (reincarnation).

Rabbi Moshe Yehuda Leib Erblich, popularly known as Rav Moshe Leib of Sassov, was one of the early Hassidic Rebbes in Europe, and a leading light in his generation.

It is recorded that one time Rabbi Moshe Leib went to visit the home of a generous philanthropist. The philanthropist was an exceedingly generous person, who would give to all who sought his assistance with an open hand.

Rav Moshe Leib and this individual were sitting, enjoying a meal together, and at a certain point the philanthropist told the Rav the following. He said that he owned a certain horse which was extraordinarily strong. In fact, he claimed, it possessed the strength of eight regular horses. The horse was able to pull a wagon which generally required eight horses to pull it, and likewise, when harnessed, this horse could gallop with the same force as eight of its kind. Finally, he continued, if a cart got stuck in a ditch, and would ordinarily require eight horses to extricate it from the ditch, this horse alone could remove it from the ditch. Such was the unbelievable power of this unique horse!

Rav Moshe Leib patiently listened to the man and when the man finished, Rav Moshe Leib smiled warmly. He excused himself and entered the man's library and retrieved a certain Sefer (book). He opened the Sefer to a certain page, and out fell a piece of paper. The piece of paper was a contract which read: 'So-and-so owes the owner's father a sum of money.'

Rav Moshe Leib showed the contract to the wealthy man and said: "So-and-so owes your father a sum of money." The man turned to Rav Moshe Leib and explained that his father, who had passed away many years ago, had been a very wealthy man who had regularly lent money to individuals who had fallen on hard times. He continued to explain that when he had passed on, his children knew full well that their father's generosity was such that half the people in town likely owed him money.

The man concluded that when their father had passed away, his children had agreed between themselves that they would not pursue those who owed their father money. They agreed that if individuals proactively sought to repay, they would accept; however, if people failed to repay, they would not press them for repayment.

Rav Moshe Leib turned to the man, while pointing to the contract naming a certain person who owed his father money and said: This person owes you money, are you truly willing to forgo the loan and forgive him? The man immediately responded that of course he was willing to forgo repayment of the loan and forgive the person!

Rav Moshe Leib rose and repeated: Think about it, can you say from the depths of your heart, that you are willing to forgo this loan and completely forgive this person? The man closed his eyes in thought for a few moments, and then responded that he was willing to forgo the loan and genuinely forgive the person with all his heart.

A few moments passed, and there was a frantic knock on the door. The man's servants entered, flushed and clearly distraught. They informed the wealthy man that his prized possession, his golden horse, which had possessed the strength of eight regular horses, had collapsed and died. After a few moments, once the man had regained his composure, he asked Rav Moshe Leib what had happened? How could it be that this horse, which had epitomized power and strength, had been reduced to nothing from one moment to the next?

Rav Moshe Leib responded as follows: The man who had owed your father money, had in fact passed away before being able to repay his debt. If one passes away owing money to someone else, that person is compelled to return to this world as a Gilgul, in another form, in order to repay his due. In light of the above, he continued, the soul of the debtor had undergone transmigration, and been implanted into the body of the horse. The soul, via the horse, had sought to work exceedingly hard (equivalent to the work of eight regular horses), in order to free itself of its debt, and successfully enter the World to Come. At the moment that you forgave that person with all your heart, his soul was finally freed from its crushing burden. Thus, once you forgave that man, the horse's purpose of being a vehicle for the man's soul, became redundant, and it therefore fell and left this world.

The above story illustrates how careful we must be in regard to the money we take from others. Indeed, owing money to others warrants the most serious punishment of having to return to this world, undergoing a rebirth, until the debt is settled. Sometimes people return in the form of a human, however sometimes they return in the form as an animal, or as the dust of the earth.

In light of the above, let us strive to be especially scrupulous and honest in all monetary matters.

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