בס״ד

Divrei HaRav

Parshas Chayei Sarah 5787

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Rav of Khal Noam Hashem

Divrei Torah from Friday night, Shabbos day, and Shalosh Seudos
Prepared from a listener’s recollection

Friday Night

"וכי משלי אכלתם?": Not a Technique, but a Revelation

After the covenant with Avimelech, the Torah tells us: "ויטע אשל בבאר שבע ויקרא שם בשם ה' אל עולם", "And he planted an eshel in Be'er Sheva, and there he called in the Name of Hashem, God of the world" (בראשית כא, לג).

On this verse Reish Lakish teaches (סוטה י, א–ב): "אל תיקרי ויקרא אלא ויקריא", do not read "he called" but "he caused others to call." Avraham Avinu brought the Name of הקב"ה into the mouth of every passerby. How? After his guests had eaten and drunk, they would stand up to bless him. He would say to them: "וכי משלי אכלתם? משל אלהי עולם אכלתם!", "Did you eat of mine? You ate of what belongs to the God of the world!" And they would give thanks, praise and bless the One Who spoke and the world came into being.

The Rav described it this way: Avraham would feed his guests, and when they wanted to thank him or to pay, he would tell them: it is not mine, I did not give you anything. Thank Hashem; it is all from Hashem, from the One Who created the world and does all of this.

The Rav asked: if it is really this simple, why do the קירוב organizations of our day not do the same? And he asked an even stronger question: why did it work then? How could a host's remark that the food comes from Hashem bring a person to believe in the בורא עולם?

To explain this, the Rav spoke about the idea of a system. Picture a boy who likes his רבי but does not like his ישיבה. We do not necessarily know who is right; perhaps the רבי is right and the ישיבה is wrong, or perhaps the reverse. Either way, there is a break in the system. The רבי is meant to be an extension of the ישיבה; he is the ישיבה, as it reaches the boy. In a business, too, the employee is meant to be an extension of the business. When a person loves the employee but not the business, something in the system has broken down: the one who stands in front of him has become separated from the source he is supposed to represent.

In Avraham Avinu there was no such break. When he told his guests "משל אלהי עולם אכלתם", he was not using a technique. People did not say to themselves, "Avraham got us to thank Hashem, so now we believe in Hashem." Avraham was the ultimate expression of הקב"ה in this world. Hashem is all חסד; Hashem gives, and He is the source of all good. Avraham's giving was simply that חסד of Hashem made visible. So when his guests received from him, they saw that they were receiving from Hashem. He did not have to convince them; they saw it. It was not a tactic. It was Avraham's emulation of Hashem, the אלקות that was revealed through him.

That is why it cannot work as a technique today. We are not on the level of Avraham and Sarah, who were living expressions of הקדוש ברוך הוא. If we do the same thing, it will be a tactic. For Avraham it was not a tactic at all. Avraham and Sarah were expressions of the רבונו של עולם, and when people were exposed to them, they were able to grasp, on their own, that Hashem is the Master of the universe and the Giver of everything.

Shabbos Day

"ויקם אברהם מעל פני מתו": Entering Another's Perspective

After Sarah's passing, Avraham came "לספד לשרה ולבכתה", to eulogize Sarah and to weep for her (בראשית כג, ב). The next verse continues: " ויקם אברהם מעל פני מתו וידבר אל בני חת לאמר", "Avraham rose up from before his dead, and spoke to the children of Ches, saying" (בראשית כג, ג). The Rav pointed out that the verse seems to carry extra words. Why must the Torah tell us that he rose from before his dead, and that he then spoke to the children of Ches?

First the Rav told the well-known story of Reb Wolf Kitzes, the תלמיד of the Baal Shem Tov. Reb Wolf wished to travel to ארץ ישראל, and before setting out he went to take leave of his Rebbe. The Baal Shem Tov gave him one instruction: whenever someone asks you a question, think about it first, and then answer.

Reb Wolf traveled to ארץ ישראל. The last place he visited before returning to Europe was מערת המכפלה, and he davened there for a long time, so long that he was in danger of missing his ship. As he hurried out, a man stopped him and asked: "How are my children doing in גלות?" Reb Wolf answered quickly, "They are managing; they are doing all right," and hurried on to his ship.

He arrived home on ערב שבת and went to the Baal Shem Tov, and all that Shabbos the Baal Shem Tov was cold to him. After Shabbos Reb Wolf approached him and asked whether he had done something wrong. The Baal Shem Tov answered: I told you to think before you answer any question. The man you met at מערת המכפלה was Avraham Avinu. He wanted to know how his children are faring. Had you told him that they are not doing well, that they are suffering many צרות, he could have brought the גאולה.

The Rav said that he does not like these stories, the ones that end with "you could have brought the גאולה, but you didn't." What, then, is the point of the story? That a person must step into someone else's perspective. Reb Wolf answered from where he stood: a man in a hurry, late for his ship, giving a quick and polite reply. The question came from somewhere else entirely, from a father asking about his children, and it called for an answer from inside that father's world.

That, the Rav explained, is what the verse is telling us. Avraham was weeping over Sarah, and then he stepped into the perspective of the children of Ches. They were not meant to see him weeping over his wife; that was not their world. So he rose from before his dead, entered their way of seeing things, and spoke with them in it. That is "ויקם אברהם מעל פני מתו וידבר אל בני חת": he rose from over Sarah, and he spoke to the children of Ches, back and forth, on their terms.

The Rav gave a משל. Imagine a very organized, very serious person who has a son with a severe case of ADHD. He can do one of two things. He can send his son from doctor to doctor to have him "fixed." Or he can widen his own perspective: he can broaden himself and learn to accept his son as he is.

The point, the Rav concluded, is that we need to learn to enter into other people's perspectives, to see the world as the person in front of us sees it, and to speak to him from there.

Shalosh Seudos

"זקן ושבע": Satisfied, Because the Goal Is in Sight

The Torah describes the passing of Avraham Avinu: "ויגוע וימת אברהם בשיבה טובה זקן ושבע ויאסף אל עמיו", "Avraham expired and died at a good old age, old and satisfied, and he was gathered to his people" (בראשית כה, ח).

The Rav commented on the striking choice of the word "ושבע", satisfied, satiated. The language of שביעה usually belongs to גשמיות, to food: "ואכלת ושבעת וברכת", "You shall eat and be satisfied, and bless" (דברים ח, י). There is even a view in the Gemara that reads "ושבעת" as referring to drink: "ואכלת – זו אכילה, ושבעת – זו שתיה" (ברכות מט, ב). What kind of description is this, then, for Avraham Avinu, the father of our nation? Of all the things to say about him at the end of his life, the Torah says that he died satiated?

The Rav brought the blessing of Moshe Rabbeinu to Naftali: " נפתלי שבע רצון ומלא ברכת ה'", "Naftali, satisfied with favor, and full of the blessing of Hashem" (דברים לג, כג). People commonly take this to mean that Naftali's will was fulfilled. The Rav explained that this is not the meaning; rather, Naftali was full, satiated, with רצון. He was always wanting, always striving: not wanting to get more, but wanting to do more and to learn more. All his days he lived with a constant yearning to rise and to grow. That, the Rav explained, is what שבע רצון means: full of רצון.

So what is the שביעה with which the Torah describes Avraham Avinu? In גשמיות, the Rav explained, there is no such thing as שביעה. As long as we are speaking of material things, we always want more. As חז"ל say (קהלת רבה א, יג): " אין אדם יוצא מן העולם וחצי תאותו בידו, אלא אן אית ליה מאה בעי למעבד יתהון תרתין מאוון", "No one leaves the world with even half his desires in hand: if he has a hundred, he wants to make it two hundred." In the familiar phrase, "יש לו מנה רוצה מאתים", one who has a hundred wants two hundred. That kind of satisfaction can never be reached.

But when a person looks at material things as a means for עבודת ה', he sees them differently. It is wonderful to have material things, as long as they serve as a conduit, as a means, for עבודת ה'. And as the Rav always says, עבודת ה' does not mean only sitting in front of a גמרא. There are so many ways to serve Hashem, and every one of our material possessions can be used for them.

The problem, the Rav said, begins when the material things become the focus: when our efforts are directed toward getting the material things, rather than the material things being a means for עבודת ה'. When all we think about is how to get this, instead of how to use this for Hashem, that is where it goes wrong.

The Rav illustrated this with a משל. Using material things only to get more material things is like taking an airplane and driving it along the road as if it were a car. It could carry you so much further; you are simply not using it for what it was made for. And not only that, it is cumbersome: a car can get to places a plane cannot. Using a plane as a car simply makes no sense.

Over the past few weeks the Rav spoke about how הקב"ה promised Avraham that He would make him wealthy, and how Avraham Avinu was excited about it. Avraham Avinu had dreams, and dreams cost money; big dreams cost a lot of money. That was

Avraham Avinu: he was not in it for the money; he needed the money in order to be in it, to fulfill his dreams.

The Rav compared this to רבינו הקדוש. The Gemara speaks of Rebbi's great wealth and the abundance of his table; radish, lettuce and cucumber never ceased from it, in summer or in winter (עבודה זרה יא, א; ברכות נז, ב). Yet at the time of his passing Rebbi raised his ten fingers heavenward and said: " רבונו של עולם, גלוי וידוע לפניך שיגעתי בעשר אצבעותי בתורה ולא נהניתי אפילו באצבע קטנה", "Master of the world, it is revealed and known before You that I toiled with my ten fingers in Torah, and I did not benefit even with my little finger" (כתובות קד, א). All of his opulence, all of his riches, were only for עבודת ה', and so he could testify that he had not had personal benefit from them.

When a person is not looking at the material as the end, he can be satisfied. " יש לו מנה רוצה מאתים" describes the one who is not using his מנה for עבודת ה'. But when a person uses what he has for עבודת ה', his goal is in sight, and he can be שבע. That is the praise the Torah gives Avraham Avinu: he had great wealth and riches, he used all of it for עבודת ה', and so he died "זקן ושבע".

This, the Rav said, is how we must look at material things as well. Whenever Hashem gives us a ברכה, the question is: how can I use this for עבודת ה'? In what way can I use it for Hashem? And then, when there is something we do not have, we will not be troubled by its absence. If Hashem did not give it to me, then I do not need it for my עבודת ה'. My עבודת ה' remains focused on Him, and I do not need the material thing that I may be missing.

The Rav then told a story that is told about the wife of Reb Hershel of Kaminka, who settled in ארץ ישראל. This was in the time when the Ottoman Turks ruled the land, and in those years Jews were not permitted to enter מערת המכפלה; it was punishable by death. That, it seems, is why the Rav told the story this week, the week of פרשת חיי שרה and the purchase of מערת המכפלה.

The Rebbetzin of Kaminka was a very distinguished woman, and word spread that she had a special power: when a woman was in labor and there were complications, if she came into the room, everything would turn out well. Whether it was her very presence, or the תהלים she said, or her תפלה, no one knew; but it became well known that when there was difficulty in a birth, she would come into the room and all would be well.

It happened that the daughter of the Turkish governor was in labor and in danger, and none of the doctors could help her. Someone told the governor that there was a Jewish woman, the Rebbetzin of Kaminka, who was able to help. He sent for her, and as soon as she came in, the daughter gave birth, and all was well. The governor asked her how he could repay her. She told him that she wanted no payment. "I am very powerful and very wealthy," he said. "What can I give you?" She answered that the only thing she wanted was to go down into מערת המכפלה. He agreed, and wrote her a letter, with his seal, instructing whoever guarded the place to let her enter and daven there.

In those days there was not the structure that stands there today. It was a cave, with an iron door at its end. But the doctors and healers whom she had shown up were bitter against her. When she went in, they bribed the guard to leave his post, and they locked the iron door behind her.

She was down in the cave for some time, saying תהלים and davening. When she came up and tried to leave, she found the door locked. There was no ventilation in the cave, and with the iron door shut, the air began to run out. She went back down to daven by

the קברי אבות. As the story goes, the air grew thinner and thinner, and suddenly she saw a majestic figure with a beard, with a brilliant light shining from him. It would have suited the story well, the Rav remarked, had it been Avraham Avinu; but according to the story, it was דוד המלך.

Dovid HaMelech told her to follow him and he would bring her out. The light was so bright that she could not bear it, and he told her: even so, close your eyes and walk straight into the light, and you will be saved. She said to him: this is wonderful, but you are Dovid HaMelech, and no one will believe me when I tell this story. So Dovid HaMelech gave her a ספר תהלים, and told her again to close her eyes, follow the light, and walk straight into it.

She walked on as the air grew thinner, into the brightest part of the light, and the next thing she knew, she opened her eyes and found herself standing outside her own house in ירושלים, not even outside מערת המכפלה, with the תהלים in her hand. As the story goes, the תהלים was later brought to the דברי חיים of Sanz, and he saw it.

The Rav said that such stories may be told. But when a story like this is told, with Dovid HaMelech, with the דברי חיים, and with the holy Rebbetzin of Kaminka, there is a message in it for some of us. What the message is, the Rav did not say. Each of us, he said, must listen for himself and discover what the message is.

Editorial note

These teachings were prepared from a listener’s recollection and are presented in edited form, not as a verbatim transcript. Source references in parentheses were added in preparation.