**Parsha Potpourri**

**Parshas Vayeira – Vol. 12, Issue 4**

**Compiled by Ozer Alport**

**ויאמר ד' אל אברהם למה זה צחקה שרה לאמר האף אמנם אלד ואני זקנתי (18:13)**

In the Siddur HaRashash, which incorporates the mystical teachings of Rav Shalom Sharabi, who was one of the greatest kabbalists of the 18th century, each word of Shema has one of Hashem’s many names printed above it which corresponds to that word. In the second paragraph of Shema, the Divine name that appears above the word ומלקוש – the late rains – is האא. What does this name signify, and what is its connection to the word ומלקוש?

Rav Yisroel Chaim Kahn of Beit Shemesh explains that האא is the Divine name that protects a person against ayin hara (an evil eye). Therefore, before a bride goes the chuppah, it is customary for her father and other family members to bless her (Bereishis 24:60) אחתינו את היי לאלפי רבבה – Our sister, may you come to be thousands of myriads. In addition to the literal blessing that the new bride should merit a large and healthy family, this blessing is also intended to counter the ayin hara that can often be present at such an occasion, as the first letters of the first three words can be rearranged to spell האא.

This valuable nugget of information can also help us appreciate several episodes in the Torah on a much deeper level. After Yaakov worked for Lavan for seven years in exchange for permission to marry his daughter Rochel, he told Lavan (29:21) הבה את אשתי כי מלאו ימי ואבואה אליה – Give me my wife, for my term is fulfilled, and I will consort with her. Rashi questions why Yaakov spoke in such an unrefined manner, as even base individuals would never speak in such vulgar terms. Rav Kahn explains that Yaakov was worried about Lavan’s ayin hara, so he specifically broached the subject in this manner, as the first letters in the first three words spell האא, the name he hoped would protect him against the evil eye.

Similarly, when Rochel approached Yaakov and demanded that he give her children, Yaakov responded (30:2) התחת אלקים אנכי – Am I in place of Hashem? Yaakov recognized that the reason Rochel was struggling to conceive a child was because of an ayin hara, so he replied by invoking the Divine name of האא in an effort to protect her from its deleterious effects. Moshe also utilized this Divine name when he informed the Jewish people (Devorim 1:10) ד' אלקיכם הרבה אתכם והנכם היום ככוכבי השמים לרב – Hashem your G-d has multiplied you, and behold, you are abundant today like the stars of Heaven. Moshe understood that hearing about their tremendous population growth would cause the Jews to worry about the evil eye, so he preceded this information with Hashem’s name used to ward it off.

The ten trials that Avrohom passed were so crucial for his personal development, as well as the future of the entire Jewish nation, that the first and last of them recorded in the Torah are both introduced with a petition for Heavenly protection from ayin hara. In the beginning of Parshas Lech Lecha (12:1), Hashem tells Avrohom to travel אל הארץ אשר אראך – to the land that I will show you, and in commanding Avrohom to sacrifice Yitzchok, Hashem instructed him (22:2) to go אל ארץ המוריה – to the land of Moriah. In both cases, the first letters of these words can be rearranged to spell האא, which was intended to shield Avrohom from the evil eye on his journeys.

With these insights, we return to the words of Shema. When grain is planted, it requires two rains to grow properly (Taanis 6a). The first rain is called יורה and comes when the seeds are still in the ground. The second rain is called מלקוש and comes when the stalks have already begun growing. Because the grain is still completely submerged in the ground when the first rain arrives, there is no concern about ayin hara. However, when the second rain arrives, the stalks are visible to all and are therefore susceptible to the evil eye. Accordingly, when the מלקוש comes, the grain needs to be protected from an ayin hara, and therefore the appropriate Divine name for this word is האא.

Applying this idea to Parshas Vayeira, the Torah (18:12) records that when Sorah heard the angels’ promise that she would have a child, she laughed. On a literal level she laughed due to her skepticism that she was capable of having a child, but Rav Kahn notes that the Targum Yonason ben Uziel (18:10) writes that while Sorah was listening to the angels’ words from the entrance to her tent, Yishmael was standing behind her listening to the conversation, in which case he overheard this blessing.

Sorah was concerned that Yishmael would not want a brother and would give her an ayin hara that would interfere with her pregnancy, so she immediately responded by laughing, in the hopes that Yishmael would believe that she viewed their blessing as a joke that should not be taken seriously. However, Hashem approached Avrohom and asked him why Sorah had laughed in the hopes of removing the danger of an ayin hara, when instead she could have said האף אמנם אלד – will I really bear a child – invoking the Divine name of האא to protect her without appearing to doubt the validity of the angels’ promise.

Although these mystical topics are beyond our full comprehension, having our eyes opened to their existence should help us appreciate the unfathomable complexity of the Torah, and inspire us to continue plumbing its depths.

**ויאמר אברהם אל נעריו שבו לכם פה עם החמור ואני והנער נלכה עד כה ונשתחוה ונשובה אליכם (22:5)**

In 1908, Rav Yehuda Leib Zirelson was appointed Rabbi of the town of Kishinev, the capital of present-day Moldova. Rav Yissocher Frand relates that although he was a pious and learned Torah scholar, his community was far removed from the major Torah centers in his time, and he was therefore unfamiliar with many of the leading Rabbis and religious developments of that generation.

Rav Zirelson used to correspond with Rav Moshe Nochum Yerushalmski, who was the Rabbi of Kalitz in Poland. In 1912, Rav Zirelson wrote to him that he heard that a number of Rabbis were planning to start an organization called Agudas Yisroel, and that one of the leaders of the group would be the Gerrer Rebbe, Rav Avrohom Mordechai Alter, who was known as the Imrei Emes.

Rav Zirelson was approached to support and participate in the nascent organization, but he had a dilemma: He had never heard of the Gerrer Rebbe! He therefore turned to Rav Yerushalmski to ask if he was familiar with him and if he could be relied upon, which shows just how out-of-touch his community was with the broader Jewish world.

Rav Yerushalmski responded that the Imrei Emes was a renowned tzaddik with thousands of followers and tremendous siyata di’Shmaya (Divine assistance), and he could certainly be trusted to lead the budding organization effectively. To illustrate his claim, Rav Yerushalmski related that the Gerrer Rebbe’s uncle lived in his town, and the Rebbe periodically came to visit him. Whenever he did so, he would pay a courtesy visit to the Rav of the town, Rav Yerushalmski.

During one of their meetings, Rav Yerushalmski presented a question that he had on the weekly Torah portion. The Torah (37:2) refers to Yosef as a נער – youth – even though he was 17 at the time. Rashi explains that this was done to allude to Yosef’s immature behavior, such as adjusting his hair and adorning his eyes so that he would look more handsome. However, the Torah also refers to Yitzchok as a נער, even though he was 37 at the time of the Akeidah (Rashi 25:20). Given that Yitzchok acted his age, why is he described as a נער?

The Imrei Emes responded that Yitzchok is not called a נער by the Torah, but rather by his father Avrohom, because in a parent’s eyes, a child always remains a child, no matter how young or old he may be. Yosef, on the other hand, is described as a נער by the Torah, and therefore Rashi interprets it as a reference to his juvenile conduct.

After the visit concluded, Rav Yerushalmski accompanied the Gerrer Rebbe out of his building. On their way, a 100-year-old widow who also lived in the building came over to request a blessing from the Rebbe. She then called her 80-year-old son to come out, and she asked the Rebbe to also give a blessing “to my little one.”

Rav Yerushalmski interpreted the fact that the Imrei Emes’s insight to answer his question was immediately validated in front of his own eyes as a Heavenly indication that the answer was correct, and he used this incident to buttress his recommendation that Rav Zirelson should join Agudas Yisroel and support the Gerrer Rebbe’s leadership.

**Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources which discuss them):**

1. Rashi writes (18:1) that Hashem came to visit the weak Avrohom on the third day after his circumcision. Must the mitzvah of visiting the sick be performed in person, or may it also be fulfilled by calling the sick person on the phone? (Shu”t Igros Moshe Yoreh Deah 1:223, Shu”t Minchas Yitzchok 2:84, Shu”t Be’er Moshe 2:104-105, Shearim Metzuyanim B’Halacha 193:1)
2. Rashi writes (18:2) that one of the three angels was sent to heal Avrohom from the pain of his circumcision. The Gemora in Bava Basra (16b) teaches that Avrohom wore a precious stone around his neck which had the ability to heal any sick person who looked at it. Why did Hashem send an angel to heal Avrohom when he could heal himself by gazing at this stone? (Paneiach Raza, Maharsha Bava Basra 16b, Chida, M’rafsin Igri, Darash Moshe)
3. Because she violated she commandment not to look back at the destruction of Sodom, Lot’s wife turned into a pillar of salt (19:26). Did she first die and then become a pillar of salt, or did the transformation occur while she was still alive? (Shu”t Igros Moshe Yoreh Deah Vol. 1 230:8)

**Answers to Points to Ponder:**

1) **Rav Moshe Feinstein** writes that there are many components of the mitzvah which cannot be done over the phone, such as assessing the conditions of the care that the patient is receiving, praying for him in the presence of the Shechinah which resides above the bed of those who are ill, and praying with more intensity after seeing his physical condition. Nevertheless, although far from ideal, calling an ill person on the phone is also a form of the mitzvah of visiting the sick and should be done in a situation in which it is impractical to visit in person. This is also the opinion of **Dayan Yitzchok Yaakov Weiss** andthe **Debreciner Rav**. **Rav Shlomo Zalman Braun** disagrees and argues that the fact that Hashem came to visit Avrohom instead of inquiring about his welfare from afar teaches that the mitzvah can only be performed in person and not via the telephone.

2) The **Maharsha** suggests that although he was capable of healing himself through this stone, Avrohom felt that the concept of תמימות – being wholehearted with Hashem – mandated that he leave his recovery in Hashem’s hands. The **Chida**, **Rav Moshe Feinstein**, and **Rav Chaim Kanievsky** answer that because Avrohom’s pain was due to a mitzvah, it was dear to him and he didn’t want to do anything that could be interpreted as regretting the mitzvah due to its consequences. The **Paneiach Raza** cites the Gemora in Berachos (5b), which records that although Rebbi Yochanan healed others, he was unable to heal himself when he got sick because אין חבוש מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים – one who is imprisoned cannot free himself from jail. Although Rebbi Yochanan and Avrohom could heal others, they needed somebody else to help heal them. The **M’rafsin Igri** cites the Gemora in Taanis (20b), which teaches that miracles that are performed for a person reduce his reward in Olam Haba, so Avrohom passed on a miraculous cure.

3) The Gemora in Niddah (69b) teaches that the people of Alexandria asked 12 questions to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: three of them were intelligent questions about matters of halacha, three of them were questions about areas of Aggadah, three of them were foolish questions, and three of them involved issues of derech eretz. One of the questions categorized as foolish was whether Lot’s wife renders impure like a dead person those who come into contact with her. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi responded that only dead people cause impurity, but not pillars of salt. **Rav Moshe Feinstein** questions why this is considered a silly question when the Mishnah in Ohalos (2:2) discusses various cases of decayed and decomposed bodies which still impart impurity. He answers that Lot’s wife must have been turned into a pillar of salt while she was still alive, and since she never died, the question was viewed as a foolish one.

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