



Partners In Torah
San Diego Study Guide

תשפ"ג Parshat Vayeira

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Partners In Torah San Diego

Mission Statement:

Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Welcome.

Thank you for coming.

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.

It was Pesach, the 15th of Nissan, and, just three days earlier, Avraham, now 99 years old, had circumcised himself upon Hashem's command. In those days, sterile conditions were unavailable, and by the third day it was common to have a full-blown infection. Although Avraham was weak and in pain, that no guests had made their way to his house for the last three days was paining him more than his wound. The thought that "perhaps, people heard about my surgery, and are sparing me the trouble of catering to them," did not ease his pain. Avraham was concerned that there may be a needy soul out there that would not receive what it needed.

Avraham sent his servant Eliezer to find needy travelers but he returned empty handed. Because, perhaps, Eliezer himself didn't want guests to bother his beloved master and thus did a poor job of seeking them out, Avraham himself sat in his doorway scanning the terrain for possible guests. That is the backdrop to this week's parsha (Genesis 18:1).

(א) וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְדֹד בְּאַלְנֵי מַמְרֵא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פְּתַח הָאֹהֶל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם

1) Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.

Hashem appeared to the ailing Avraham to perform the mitzvah of ביקור חולים - *visiting the sick*, and to mollify Avraham about the lack of guests. Even with Hashem visiting him, Avraham could not stop searching for guests, and finally, seemingly out of nowhere, three Arab travelers were standing before him. Avraham asked Hashem to pardon him and immediately turned to his guests to take care of them.

It seemed to Avraham that after seeing his condition, the visitors were retreating, so Avraham ran after them calling out, "Please don't go! Have a little water and bread; then you may continue on your way." They respond by saying, "Okay, but do as you say," meaning just a little, as you promised.

What the Torah next describes boggles the mind.

Avraham ran to Sarah and told her to quickly make 3 סאה *sa-ah* (a biblical measure – about 55 lbs.) of flour, into bread. Why so much? They were only three men; how much could they eat? Our sages answer that bread baked in a full oven tastes better than bread baked in an empty one, and Avraham wanted them to have the tastiest bread possible.

Although it was Pesach, and Sarah made matzah, which did not need to rise, mixing 55 pounds of flour with water to make a dough, rolling it out, and baking it, is still quite a daunting task.

Avraham himself, despite his wounds, did no less. He ran and took three young calves, slaughtered them, and cooked their tongues in mustard sauce, and served it to the guests with butter and milk. (The commentaries explain that they did not eat the milk and meat together.)

Quite a feast! Yet all Avraham said was, “Have a little bread and water.”

When Avraham (in next week’s portion) purchases the burial plot for Sarah from Ephron the Hitite, Ephron does the exact opposite. He says a lot, but does nothing at all:

First, he said, “What’s a plot worth 400 silver pieces between friends? You can have it for free!” Yet in the end, he insisted on checking every coin to make sure that it was in perfect condition.

The Sages did not see these two events as isolated incidents; they saw them as characteristic of the people who did them, Avraham – righteous, Ephron – evil. Based on these stories, the Sages concluded,

The righteous say only a little, but do a lot - צדיקים אומרים מעט
ועושים הרבה

רשעים אומרים הרבה, ואפילו מעט אינם עושים

Evil people say (they will do) much, but even a little they do not do.

What is it about this attribute that makes it the domain of a Tzadik, and why is the opposite the domain of the evil?

This world is one of action. Hashem has put us here to do. We are here to accomplish through our actions. Learning Torah and performing mitzvot are the actions that Hashem has put us here to do. A Tzadik is someone who realizes that and wastes no time talking about what he is going to do. *He just does it.* If he has decided that this endeavor is worth doing, he will muster all of his energy and intelligence to achieve it in the quickest and most perfect way possible, whereupon he moves to the next important action item on his plate.

Indeed, not only is just talking about doing a mitzvah not helpful, it may very well be detrimental.

When a person talks about how he is going to do this and how he is going to do that, he is assuming that he has control of the complete situation. This is a haughty and presumptuous attitude because, of course, such is not the case. Only Hashem has control, and if a person merits Hashem's mercy, he may be able to accomplish what he wishes to, but if Hashem determines that things need to change, then the person quickly finds himself unable to carry out his aspirations.

Another reason why speaking about doing good is detrimental to the accomplishment of that goal is because once we set out to do a mitzvah, immediately the counterforce of the Evil Inclination is activated to try to stop us from doing it. Yet by being humble and low keyed about getting it done rather than broadcasting what we intend to do, we do not awaken any opposing forces and are more likely to succeed.

There is a Yiddish saying states: “**A mentch tracht, un der Eibishter lacht.**” **A man thinks**, I’m going to do this and I’m going to do that, **and Hashem** sits back and **laughs**. “Oh really? That’s funny! Let Me show you something.” How many times have we experienced this reality in our lives?

King Solomon said in Ecclesiastes (5:1):

(א) אַל תִּבְהַל עַל פִּיךָ וְלִבְךָ אַל יִמְהַר לְהוֹצִיא דָבָר לְפָנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי הָאֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם וְאַתָּה עַל הָאָרֶץ עַל כֵּן יִהְיֶה דִבְרֶיךָ מְעֻטִּים

1) Do not rush with your mouth, and let not your heart be hasty to utter a word before Hashem, for Hashem is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.

King Solomon here adds another dimension to why we should keep our words few. The Torah requires us to keep our word. One who promises something is bound to fulfill his promise. If a person is hasty to promise something before he knows if he can fulfill it, his words may be falsified. If he cannot make good on his word, he has made a false commitment. Since everything we say is said in front of Hashem, He is going to hold us accountable for not fulfilling it. Therefore, let your words be few; promise less than you plan to do so that your words will be true.

A wicked person is just the opposite. Although he pays lip-service to doing good things and professes to want to do them, in reality he has no underlying intention of ever doing them. Promising to do them merely appeases his conscience so that he can say, “I wanted to do it, but, for some reason, it just didn’t happen.”

The wicked person is also not concerned if his words turn out to be false, for he is someone who is constantly promising without intending to keep his word. His promises are just tools to achieve what he wants from

the other person, and he will fulfill only the minimum amount necessary to extract what he wants.

This is why the great Sage Shammai, when teaching us how to be righteous, instructs us (Pirkei Avot 1:15),

(טו) שַׁמַּאי אוֹמֵר ... אָמוֹר מְעַט וְעוֹשֶׂה הַרְבֵּה

15) Shammai says, *"Say little and do a lot."*

He is exhorting us to follow the example of Avraham Avinu, and not that of Ephron.

There is another important lesson to be learned from Avraham Avinu's conduct in our opening episode. Hashem came to visit Avraham; yet when Avraham suddenly saw the guests, he promptly took leave of Hashem to tend to the visitors.

Genesis 18:3 states:

(ג) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִם נָא מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֵל נָא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ :

3. *And he said, "My Lord, if I find favor in Your eyes, please do not leave Your servant."*

How are we to understand what happened here? Avraham Avinu was having the ultimate spiritual encounter, speaking with Hashem Himself, when he interrupted it to tend to a few guests? Isn't our purpose in this world to develop a close relationship with Hashem? So, how could Avraham leave the most exalted of human experiences to attend to three guests who had just happened by?

Our sages learn a profound lesson from what Avraham did (Shabbat 127a).

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב גדולה הכנסת אורחין מהקבלת פני שכינה

Rabbi Yehudah quoted Rav who said: Welcoming guests is even greater than having a conversation with Hashem.

What a lesson! But how are we to make sense of it? And who taught this lesson to Avraham? How did **he** know that this was the correct thing to do? Perhaps, leaving Hashem's presence would constitute a disgrace to Hashem who had come to visit him?

The Talmud (Kiddushin 32b) discusses the question of whether a Torah sage may voluntarily forego his personal honor, or, whether, because he represents the Torah, it is inappropriate for him to act like an ordinary person such that he must uphold his position of honor.

To answer this query, the Talmud relates the following story.

מעשה ברבי אליעזר ורבי יהושע ורבי צדוק שהיו מסובין בבית המשתה בנו של רבן גמליאל והיה רבן גמליאל עומד ומשקה עליהם. נתן הכוס לר' אליעזר ולא נטלו; נתנו לר' יהושע וקיבלו. אמר לו רבי אליעזר, מה זה יהושע! אנו יושבין ורבן גמליאל ברבי עומד ומשקה עלינו? אמר ליה, "מצינו גדול ממנו ששמש (אברהם גדול ממנו ושמש) אברהם גדול הדור היה, וכתוב בו, 'והוא עומד עליהם'. ושמא תאמרו כמלאכי השרת נדמו לו?" לא! נדמו לו אלא לערביים. ואנו לא יהא רבן גמליאל ברבי עומד ומשקה עלינו? אמר להם רבי צדוק, "עד מתי אתם מניחים כבודו של מקום ואתם עוסקים בכבוד הבריות? הקדוש ברוך הוא משיב רוחות ומעלה נשיאים ומוריד מטר ומצמיח אדמה ועורך שולחן לפני כל אחד ואחד ואנו לא יהא רבן גמליאל ברבי עומד ומשקה עלינו?"

Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Tzadok were seated together at the wedding of Rabban Gamliel's son. Rabban Gamliel, who was the leading sage of the time, was circulating and pouring l'chaims for his guests. Rabban Gamliel offered a drink to Rabbi Eliezer, who refused to accept it because he felt that it was inappropriate for Rabban Gamliel to serve him. Rabban Gamliel then offered the cup to Rabbi Yehoshua, who accepted it.

Rabbi Eliezer turned to Rabbi Yehoshua and said to him, "What's going on with you Yehoshua? We are sitting here, while Rabban Gamliel the leading rabbi of our generation, is serving us?"

Rabbi Yehoshua responded to Rabbi Eliezer, "We found someone even greater than Rabban Gamliel who waited on people. Avraham Avinu was the greatest Jew in his entire generation, and yet we see that he waited on his guests, the three angels, hand and foot. Maybe you wish to counter by saying that Avraham knew that they were angels? That was not the case. They presented to him like simple desert dwellers. So, if Avraham Avinu could wait on Arabs, it's okay for Rabban Gamliel to wait on us. That is why I accepted the cup from him."

At this point Rabbi Tzadok joined the conversation and said,

"You men are forgetting the honor of Hashem and occupying yourselves with the honor of mortals. Hashem, Himself, makes the winds blow to gather the clouds, that bring the rain that makes everything grow. Thus, Hashem sets the table with food for every creature in the world, and Rabban Gamliel can't wait on us?"

Hashem is the ultimate benefactor. Everyone in the world receives everything that they have from Hashem. Life, health, wealth, and everything else.

King David in Psalm 89:3 says:

(ג) כִּי אָמַרְתִּי עוֹלָם חָסֵד יִבְנֶה

Hashem has said: The world is built on lovingkindness.

Hashem is perfect and can receive nothing. So, why did He create the world? He gets absolutely nothing from it or from anything that we do. This verse is the answer. Hashem created mankind to bestow goodness upon them. Hashem is the essence good, and He wanted to share His goodness with others. Before creation, there was only Hashem, with no one to receive His goodness. So, Hashem created man with the capacity to appreciate goodness, to receive it.

Although we are all the beneficiaries of Hashem's great goodness in this world, the greatest of which is the gift of a life to live, this world is not the place Hashem created to give us that goodness. The world Hashem created for man to bask in His pure goodness is **עולם הבא**, the *World to Come*.

The World to Come comprises two stations. One is called the **עולם הנשמות** - *the World of the Souls*, and the other is the new world that will exist after **תחיית המתים** - *resurrection of the dead*, when the bodies of the deceased are resurrected and reunited with their souls.

The World of the Souls – sometimes referred to as *Gan Eden*--is the place where a deceased person's soul receives reward for the deeds done during its lifetime in this world. This is a temporary existence until the souls are reunited with their bodies for the ultimate reward of the World to Come after the resurrection of the dead.

The pleasure that Hashem promises in the *World of Souls* is beyond description and beyond what a mortal man can imagine. Suffice it to say, it will be quite awesome. As far as what the reward in the World to Come after the resurrection is concerned, even the prophets were given no clue as to what that would be. Only Hashem knows what that is.

Avraham Avinu stood in awe and admiration of Hashem for His great kindness. Here, Hashem created this entire universe and everyone and everything in it, just to bestow His kindness upon them! We are all the beneficiaries of Hashem's immense kindness, and Avraham Avinu felt this very keenly. Avraham realized that to give is G-dly, and he dedicated his life to teaching the world about Hashem's amazing goodness. He wanted all human beings to recognize and acknowledge Hashem as their benefactor, and to thank Him for His kindness to them.

How did he accomplish that? By being a model of Hashem's great kindness to everyone in the world. He built a hotel with a door on each direction to make sure that he did not miss any opportunity to provide a traveler a place to stay and eat. As in the story with the angels, Avraham went to the greatest lengths to feed his guests an abundance of the most delicious food and to provide them with the most luxurious accommodations. When the guests who received the five - star service would thank Avraham for his hospitality, Avraham would invoke the great host, Hashem. He would explain that Hashem is really the ultimate host for all mankind, and that we are all Hashem's guests in this world. He takes care of all our needs, and the thanks need to go to Him, not me.

(Avraham would not bother with the guests who did not thank him for the extraordinary service. He realized that if they don't have the simple decency to thank their benefactor, they were too far gone, and would be unable to thank Hashem either. These people would have to pay for their accommodations.)

In the course of his lifetime, Avraham reached the pinnacle of kindness that any human being could reach. He is the paradigm of kindness for the world and brought tens of thousands of people to recognize Hashem and serve Him.

This is how Avraham knew that Hashem would rather have him tend to the guests instead of spending time with Him. Avraham knew that his purpose in this world was to bestow kindness on others, just as Hashem is constantly bestowing kindness upon us.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin was wont to say,

שהיה דבריו תמיד שזה כל האדם לא לעצמו נברא, רק להועיל לאחריני ככל
אשר ימצא בכחו לעשות

A person was not created for himself. Rather, he was created to bring benefit to others to the greatest of his abilities.

This is what Hashem does every moment of every day, and this is what Avraham Avinu did.

Avraham is our Forefather, which means that he still has a positive influence upon us. We have all inherited his quality of kindness. It is no secret that the Jewish people are the most loving, giving people on the planet.

In this portion we learn two great lessons from our Forefather Avraham: Say little and do a lot, and doing acts of kindness is G-dly. We would be wise to incorporate these lessons into our lives. We will become better people if we do.