

Parshas Vayeira 5772

THE BLESSING OF A COMMONER

While there is no question that exposing small children to the stories of the Chumash is an essential and wonderful thing, there is one potential pitfall: A young student who learns about a particular episode in, say, the second grade, will often remain with a second-grade-level understanding of the material for the rest of his life. For this reason, R' Avigdor Miller, *zt"l*, would often stress the need even for adults to devote careful attention and scrutiny to these events in order to “upgrade” one’s understanding and bring it on par with the true depth of these sacred ideas.

INCOGNITO

One such example, perhaps, could be found in the familiar narrative of this week’s *parshah*, which recounts the visitation of the three travelers to the tent of Avraham. The “guests” are really angels who announce the upcoming birth of a son to the childless nonagenarian couple. However, Avraham and his wife Sarah had different internal reactions to the happy and miraculous news. While Avraham was overcome with joy, Sarah remained skeptical over the prospect of an elderly couple well past their childbearing years being graced with a new arrival. Sarah is taken to task for her cynicism: “Is there anything that is impossible for Hashem?” the Creator declares (*cf. Bereishis 17:17 [with Rashi s.v. Vayipol], 18:12-15*).

The very fact that Sarah was held accountable for her initial doubts is a point worth examining. Implicit in any instance wherein a Biblical figure of immense spiritual stature receives rebuke is the understanding that the “infraction” involved occurs on a plane of a different sort, not to be compared to the petty mistakes commonly perpetrated by the general

populace. But even on a most basic level – asks R’ Chatzkel Levenstein (*Ohr Yechezkel - Emunah, pp. 14-16*) – any impeachment of Sarah’s attitude under these circumstances certainly *seems* unwarranted. After all, it is quite likely that only Avraham was privy to the celestial identity of these visitors; to Sarah, they appeared to be non-descript Arabian wayfarers (*cf. Ramban 18:15*). While graciously extending hospitality to these travelers, in Sarah’s mind, they were mere garden-variety strangers. She had no idea of their inherent prophetic powers; why was she expected to believe what must have seemed to her as some well-meaning but slightly outlandish pronouncement about having a child?

In clarifying the issue, R’ Chatzkel shares a fundamental lesson in *emunah* (faith), which he perceives as emerging from this enigmatic episode.

NO WORRIES

In truth, the extent to which one is enjoined to place his trust in the Almighty may go beyond what many realize. This is apparent from the following Talmudic statement surrounding the Mishnah in Sotah (9:12). In describing the spiritual decline of the world in the wake of the Destruction of the Temple, the Mishnah states:

מִשְׁחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ... פְּסִיקוּ אַנְשֵׁי אֲמָנָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר הוֹשִׁיעָה ה' כִּי גָמַר חֲסִיד (כִּי פִסוּ אֲמוּנִים מִבְּנֵי אָדָם).

“From the time the Temple was destroyed... (true) men of faith ceased to exist, as the verse states (*Tehillim 12:2*), ‘Grant salvation, O Hashem, for pious ones are no longer; believers have disappeared from humanity.’”

The Mishnah may appear somewhat difficult, as there do still seem to be many people around who are dedicated in their faith in Hashem. However, from the Gemara’s description of what constitutes a “true believer,” it becomes

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apparent that the ideal is somewhat of a rarity nowadays. As the Gemara states:

כל מי שיש לו פת בסלו ואומר מה אוכל למחר אינו אלא מקטני אמה.

“Whosoever has bread in his basket today, and worriedly asks, ‘What shall I eat tomorrow?’ – such an individual is considered to be lacking in faith” (*Sotah 48b*).

At first glance, the requisite level of *emunah* referred to here may seem like a tall order to some. Obviously, if one is blessed with a situation of steady *parnassah* (income), he should feel fortunate and grateful. But if one is struggling and has barely enough for one day – wouldn’t it only be natural to worry about the future and wonder from where he will procure his next meal?

The point, as R’ Chatzkel explains, is that for a true *ma’amin* (believer), worry has no place – even in the harshest of

circumstances. One who has truly inculcated what the Almighty Himself declares in this week’s *parshah* – “Is there anything that is too hard for Hashem?” – will feel automatically reassured. The clear awareness of Hashem’s endless and remarkable abilities will help one realize that, at any moment, the situation can change drastically. In the meantime, the individual should, of course, take whatever steps seem reasonable toward the improvement of his lot. But with the knowledge that one’s difficult position could be immediately reversed when Hashem wills it, there is no real room for angst.

In fact, according to Rabbeinu Yonah, the necessity to maintain such a level of trust in the Almighty is Biblically mandated. When speaking of the battles that the Jewish people entering the Land of Israel will have to wage, the Torah states: “When you go to war against your enemies, and you shall see (amongst them) horses, chariots – an assemblage greater than you, do not fear them, for Hashem your G-d is with you... Let not your heart be faint, do not be fearful, or terrified, or broken before them” (*Devarim 20:1,3*). Rabbeinu Yonah contends that this injunction is not limited to the specific circumstance of the wars in Israel, but is incumbent upon each individual in his personal situation. “Whenever a person perceives imminent calamity, he must be mindful in his heart and dependent on Hashem’s salvation” (*Sha’arei Teshuvah*, 3:32).

On some level, then, we can begin to understand the critique of Sarah’s reaction. This was by no means a case of someone doubting a Divine message, for – as explained in the outset – Sarah was not aware of the visitors’ true nature. To her, she was literally hearing a prediction of a physically impossible event from the mouths of three strangers off the street. Why should she believe them? Based on the words of the Ramban, though, R’ Chatzkel explains that she was not faulted for disbelieving the travelers’ remarkable statement. Rather, the issue was her discounting the possibility that such a salvation could be in the offing. Had she employed the proper mindset, then she would never have been discouraged from bearing children. Instead of cynicism, Sarah’s reaction to the strangers’ pronouncement should have been, “Amen! It could – and should – happen soon!”