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Teshuva* (Mosaica 2021)

Vayeira: The Opening

A *gaon* in Torah and a renowned educator, Reb Mendel Kaplan, zt'l, was a beloved Rebbe and mentor at the Hebrew Theological College of Chicago and Yeshiva of Philadelphia. As a young man in Europe, he learned in Baranovich under Reb Elchonon Wasserman, and filled in as *maggid shiur* when Reb Elchonon was overseas. For his American charges, Reb Mendel was something of a bridge to the pre-war glory of yeshiva world, sharing *hashkafic* insights on current events as his students taught him English by reading to him the Chicago Tribune. A Rebbe and mentor to notable, accomplished *talmidim* including Rav Chaim Malinowitz, Moshe Gottesman of HANC and Rav Berel Wein, shlit'a, Reb Mendel inspired a generation of builders of Torah.

A young woman employed in the yeshiva as a secretary once brought her nine-year old son with her to work. The woman was not observant of Torah and mitzvos, and her son was enrolled in public school. When Reb Mendel noticed the young boy playing underfoot in the office, he introduced himself and welcomed him warmly. Reb Mendel pointed to the Chumash on the desk and asked the young visitor if he knew what it was. "Sure I do!" the boy answered, "it's a Bible."

"No, my dear child, it is not a bible... this is

a Chumash, something very, very special."

He then pulled up two chairs and sat with the boy for an extended period of time, sharing stories from the Chumash that the child smilingly appreciated and enjoyed.

Later that day a different member of the yeshiva staff asked him why he had devoted so much of his precious time to a nine-year old boy. Answered Reb Mendel, "I hope and pray that I've planted a seed that will grow...and *b'ezras Hashem*, yield fruits years from now. No doubt, whether in this world or the next, the impact of even a little bit of learning will have an impact."

Our sedra begins with the powerful imagery of the righteous, elderly Avraham, post-op, in excruciating pain, waiting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day in order to spot any opportunities to welcome others:

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלְנֵי מַמְרֵא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח הָאֵהָלָה
כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם

"Now Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot." (18:1)

After years on the road, traveling city to city inspiring others and collecting and uplifting souls, we continue the theme of *nefesh asher asah*, "the souls that they had made". Sarah and Avraham plant themselves at a major

crossroads, pitching their tent to ‘open the gates’ for converts, travelers and others to join them in their home, and to observe and learn their holy ways.

Rebbe Menachem Nachum of Cherenobyl, the *Meor Eynayim* (Vayeira, 39), cites imagery from the Midrash Rabbah. In the future, Avraham will sit at the “opening” to Gehenom and collect any Jewish souls from *עֹבְרֵי הַבְּמַקְּ הַבְּכָא*, “passing through the valley of weeping” (*Tehillim*, 84:7). The word *oveir*, someone who has transgressed, shares a root with the word for ‘wayfarer’, here specifically those on a trajectory toward the vale of tears and suffering, until Avraham meets them on their way, collects them and lifts them up.

Based on the juxtaposition and *drasha* of the Meor Einayim, Professor Ora Wis-kind-Elper, one of the wise-women and great Torah teachers of our generation, frames the setting of our sedra, פתח האוהל, “at the opening”, as a deliberate thematic device calling our attention to a central *midah* and way of service that Sarah Imeinu and Avraham Avinu cultivated. They were masters of sitting ‘at the opening of the tent’, in plain sight, waiting to engage wayward souls in need of shelter and assistance, and to transform their lives. Whether through interrupting his personal prayer to greet and serve guests, or descending from spiritual heights to sit compassionately at the entrance of Gehenom, Avraham was committed to being a blessing to others, however they might show up.

The means through which Avraham and Sarah drew others close was serving them food, providing for physical needs and calling attention to the source of the bounty they

had enjoyed. וַיֵּטֶע אֶשְׁל בְּבֵאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיִּקְרָא שָׁם בְּשֵׁם ה'. “And he planted an *eishel* in Beer-Sheba, and he called there in the name of Hashem” (21:33). Chazal suggest two interpretations of this *eishel*: it was an orchard from which to bring fruits for the guests, or it was an inn for lodging. Rashi points out the word נטיעה, ‘planting’, shares same root as the Torah’s expression וַיֵּטֶע, which can also mean ‘and he set up (a tent)’. In either case, whether a shelter, or a process that will ultimately yield fruits, the *Eishel* can be seen as a metaphor for an aspect of Avraham’s educational methodology of faithfully investing in the wellbeing of others.

Perhaps Avraham’s ability to connect with individuals of varying spiritual levels and at very different stages of their journey lies in a teaching from Reb Ahron, the Belzer Rebbe. Avraham’s placement at פתח האוהל implies that our forefather saw himself at “the opening point”, or the *beginning* of his *Avodas Hashem*. Although he had accomplished and experienced so much, he maintained his *temimus*, simple openness, and viewed himself as a person at the beginning of his spiritual path.

Kabbalistically as well, the order of these initial *parshios* hints toward unfolding stages of inner growth. *Bereishis*, the Beginning, represents our initial attainment of wisdom. *Noach*, meaning “rest” expresses the next stage, settling into that wisdom. In *Lech Lecha*, we “go forth”, and with all its ups and downs, our journey of sharing Divine wisdom commences. Arriving at Vayera, Hashem, the Source of Wisdom, “appears”, revealing Himself openly to us. Now we are fully empowered to ‘plant’ the seeds of wisdom in all who pass by, refreshing and

nourishing them, and to bring them under the shelter of the Wings of the Shechinah.

Parshas Vayeira encourages us to continue to prayerfully cultivate our seeds of faith with love and hope, setting up a nurturing and healthy structure and environment of growth for the next generation. May our encounters with whomever we meet elevate us and them, and bring about further revelation of Hashem's name in the world! ■

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Real Life Rescues



EMT Reunites with Policeman He Saved In Under Fire Rescue

In a recent encounter, volunteer EMT Gad Amar, hailing from Ofakim, was reunited with a policeman whose life he saved on the bloody Shabbat of October 7th.

On the morning of October 7th, at 6:30 A.M., Amar was awakened by a sudden barrage of rockets directed at Ofakim. Approximately half an hour later, the sound of heavy gunfire became audible not far from his house. As a United Hatzalah volunteer EMT and a reserve combat officer in the IDF, Amar felt a sense of duty to respond and provide assistance. He instructed his family to stay in their protective room and lock the doors, donned his protective vest and helmet, and proceeded toward the source of the gunfire. Unarmed, he encountered a combat soldier on leave who was armed and decided to proceed together. After a brief walk, lasting about ten minutes, they reached the site of the incident.

Terrorists were firing with assault rifles in every direction. The pair coordinated with police officers already at the scene to secure the area and search for potential casualties. Shortly after that, a group of four Yasam police officers arrived in an armored vehicle and engaged the terrorists. Following an intense exchange of gunfire, three individuals sustained injuries. Amar attended to the policeman who was most seriously injured and instructed others how to treat those who were more lightly injured. The policeman had been shot in the waist and was experiencing profuse bleeding. The volunteer packed the wound to stop the bleeding.

Due to the unavailability of ambulances in the vicinity, the EMT instructed policemen and civilians at the scene to transport the three injured Yasam policemen in the armored police vehicle, while he stayed in the field and continued to go from one area to another to treat the injured.

On Thursday last week, Amar reunited with the policeman in a touching encounter at Soroka Hospital. The policeman's family members were moved to tears when the volunteer entered the hospital room in his reserve uniform and EMT vest and hugged the Yasam officer, who expressed his gratitude, saying, "Thank you, you simply saved my life." Amar responded, "I did my job as an EMT. You and your team also saved many Ofakim residents by promptly arriving at the scene and focusing the terrorists' attention on this one area, so we both saved lives that day."

