

CIRCUMCISION: A PERMANENT CONNECTION TO HASHEM

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It is written, "Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre.... He raised his eyes and looked – and behold, three men were standing by him" (Bereshith 18:1-2).

We have already asked why Hashem appeared to Abraham without speaking to him, or even giving him a command. Furthermore, our Sages say that G-d appeared to him on the third day of his circumcision in order to "visit the sick." However we notice that He did not even mention his condition or inquire about his health!

We also have good reason to examine the words, "He raised his eyes and saw – and behold, three men." Why stress the fact that Abraham raised his eyes? It would have been enough to say, "He saw three men"!

The order of this passage also raises questions, since it states that Abraham raised his eyes prior to mentioning the presence of the men. Now these men first reached the vicinity of Abraham's tent, and only then did he see them. In that case, the passage should have said: "Behold, three men, and Abraham saw them." Why does the Torah reverse the order of these events?

Let us try and answer all these questions. In the introduction to his book HaMapa on the Shulchan Aruch, the Rama states that the verse, "My eyes are constantly toward Hashem" (Tehillim 25:15) constitutes a great Torah principle and one of the fundamental values of the righteous who follow G-d's way. The need to look "constantly toward Hashem" is incumbent on man, for "the whole world is filled with His glory" (Isaiah 6:3), and no place is excluded. Whoever is convinced of the truth of this principle will apply the following words of the Sages to himself: "Know before Whom you stand," for he will understand that there is "an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your deeds are recorded in a book" (Pirkei Avoth 2:1). His thoughts, speech, and deeds will then be weighed and measured, just like a person who stands before a king.

If a person has a chance to internalize this realization (that Hashem's glory fills the whole world), he will experience the supreme pleasure that flows from a permanent connection to G-d, and from the feeling that he lives near Him at all times. As King David wrote, "He who sits in the shelter of the Most High, who dwells in the shadow of the Almighty" (Tehillim 91:1) does not need to worry about unforeseen events or the dangers of this world, as it is written: "You shall not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day.... A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right" (vv.5-7). In fact he will be sheltered in the safest place possible, namely in the shadow of the Shechinah, as we read: "Hashem is your protective shade at your right hand" (Tehillim 121:5).

Likewise, when a person lives in the shadow of Hashem, his service of Hashem and fulfillment of mitzvot will take on a completely different dimension. In fact such a person senses the Shechinah at all times and will automatically yearn to fulfill G-d's will, thereby giving Him great satisfaction. He will try every possible way to please his Creator – the One Who loves him, covers him with His protective wing, protects him, and gives him all that he needs. As such, he will perform mitzvot with enthusiasm and sincerity, like some who serves the king.

Now that we have developed these ideas, we will be able to explain Hashem's appearance to Abraham and the fact that the latter raised his eyes. In fulfilling the mitzvah of circumcision,

our father Abraham removed the flesh of his foreskin from his body. In doing so, he destroyed the last barrier that existed between himself and Hashem, and he attained perfection. This is how he created a close connection between himself and G-d, and it is how he was able to tangibly sense the Shechinah in every place.

The expression, "Hashem appeared to him" is not describing a revelation whose objective was to transmit a prophesy or command. Rather, it is expressing the fact that Abraham attained perfection and merited to permanently see Hashem because of his circumcision. Once Abraham carried out this deed, he constantly felt G-d's protection and Presence by his side. We can now easily understand why the passage does not describe any word or command from G-d to Abraham. Concerning the Sages' explanation that G-d appeared to Abraham in order to visit the sick, we may also say that just sensing the Shechinah hovering above him – that G-d was protecting him in the shadow of His wing – and knowing that he was connected to the source of life, constituted visiting the sick for Abraham.

When Abraham found himself completely in the shadow of the Shechinah and protected by Hashem's glory, he tried to procure satisfaction for Him and fulfill His mitzvot despite his painful condition. It was this intense desire that led Abraham to "raise his eyes," for he was seeking a way to raise and sacrifice himself for Hashem. Hence the Torah specifies that Abraham raised his eyes precisely after G-d appeared to him. After having sensed the Shechinah, Abraham wanted to perfect his connection to Hashem and serve Him. He therefore raised his eyes so as to achieve this.

Faced with Abraham's self-annulment, and in view of his sincere desire to perfect his connection to Him – despite the fact that he was suffering at the time – G-d gave Abraham an opportunity to fulfill a mitzvah: To welcome guests. He therefore sent him angels in the guise of Arabs, in accordance with the teaching: "If [someone] says, 'I have labored and found,' you may believe him" (Megillah 6b).

Abraham merited all this because he raised his eyes. This action preceded the arrival of the men, for by "raising his eyes," he merited to "see" them. Hashem therefore sent him angels so that, through them, he could fulfill the mitzvah that he greatly yearned for in order to connect with G-d.

In light of what we have said, we can fully understand the teaching of our Sages regarding King David: "As David entered the bath and saw himself standing naked, he exclaimed: 'Woe is me, for I am naked without any mitzvot!' Yet when he reminded himself of the circumcision in his flesh, his mind was put at ease" (Menachot 43b).

How could King David have rid himself of guilt on account a mitzvah fulfilled many years earlier? At that very moment, he was not actually fulfilling one!

Through this study, we have come to realize that the goal of mitzvot is to connect ourselves to Hashem and cleave to Him. In the bath, King David was upset because he was unable to connect to G-d (through a mitzvah). However he realized that the mitzvah of circumcision allowed him to be truly connected to Him at all times. In fact it eliminates the boundary that exists between man and his Creator, which is precisely what entails a covenant with the Creator. That is why King David's mind was put at ease.



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How Much More!

It is written, “He stood before them beneath the tree as they ate” (Bereshith 18:8).

The Sages say, “Who showed kindness to those who did not need it? Abraham to the angels, as it is written: ‘He stood before them beneath the tree as they ate.’ Were they really eating? Rabbi Yudan explained that they seemed to be eating and drinking, the courses disappearing in the order of their arrival....”

“If in the case of one who showed kindness to those who did not need kindness, the Holy One, blessed be He, repaid his descendants, how much more in the case of one who shows kindness to one who needs it!”

– Vayikra Rabba 34:8

Not to Shame the Greater

It is written, “Hashem said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh?’ ” (Bereshith 18:13).

Why does the verse reprimand Sarah, but not Abraham? After all, we also read: “Abraham fell upon his face and laughed” (Bereshith 17:17).

This teaches us that when two people have done something inappropriate, and one person is greater than the other, the lesser of the two is reprimanded [so as not to shame the greater]. The greater person will sense this on his own.

[That is why the Holy One, blessed be He, reprimanded Sarah in the presence of Abraham for having laughed.] – Midrash Hagadol

Abraham’s Advice

It is written, “Hashem said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?’ ” (Bereshith 18:17).

Rabbi Yehudah bar Levi said, “This is like a king who had an orchard, which he gave to his friend as a gift. After a certain time, the king needed to pick five fruits from it. He said, ‘Although the orchard is mine, since I gave it to my friend, it is not right to take anything from it unless I ask him.’ ”

Likewise when Abraham entered the land of Israel, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: “Raise now your eyes and look out from where you are: Northward, southward, eastward, and westward, for all the land that you see, to you will I give it” (Bereshith 13:14-15). Hence when He wanted to destroy these five cities, He said: “I will not destroy them before obtaining Abraham’s advice.” That is why He took Abraham’s advice before destroying them, as it is written: “Hashem said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?’ ” – Tanchuma

He Lent with Interest

It is written, “He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelled” (Bereshith 19:29).

Did Lot live in all five cities? However since he lent with interest in all five cities, he was connected to them all [hence the verse says that he “dwelled” in them all]. – Midrash Sechel Tov

The Curse of an Ordinary Man

It is written, “Let it be for you an eye-covering” (Bereshith 20:16).

Rabbi Yitzchak said, “The curse of an ordinary man should never be considered a trifling matter in your eyes. In fact when Abimelech called a curse upon Sarah, it was fulfilled in her offspring, as it says: ‘Let it be for you an eye-covering.’”

“He said to her, ‘Since you covered the truth from me and did not disclose that he [Abraham] was your husband, and since you caused me all this trouble, let it be [Heaven’s] will that there be an eye-covering for

you.’ This was actually fulfilled in her offspring, as it is written: ‘It came to pass, when Isaac was old and his eyes dimmed from seeing’ [Bereshith 27:1].” – Bava Kama 93a

In Every Generation

It is written, “And He said, ‘Abraham, Abraham’ ” (Bereshith 22:11).

Why did He repeat his name? Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov said: “[He spoke] to him and to future generations: There is no generation that does not contain men like Abraham, and there is no generation that does not contain men like Jacob, Moshe, and Samuel [whose names are repeated].”

– Bereshith Rabba 56:7

In the Light of the Parsha

Measure for Measure

It is written, “Let a little water be brought” (Bereshith 18:4).

Rashi explains that because the water was brought through a messenger, the Holy One, blessed be He, rewarded Abraham’s descendants through a messenger.

The Gemara states, “Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina and the school of Ishmael taught likewise: As a reward for three things, they obtained three things. Thus as a reward for ‘butter and milk,’ they received the manna. As a reward for ‘he stood before them,’ they received the pillar of cloud. As a reward for ‘let some water be brought,’ they were granted Miriam’s well” (Bava Metzia 86b).

The Maharsha asks the following question: In Perek Kama of Taanith, it is said that the manna was given by the merit of Moshe, the well by the merit of Miriam, and the pillar of cloud by the merit of Aaron. Furthermore, it is called Miriam’s well!

We should first examine the Sages’ words more closely. Why were all these things the result of an act of kindness that took place just once? After all, Abraham practiced a great degree of hospitality throughout his life!

We also need to understand why his descendants merited the manna on account of the butter and milk. Did Abraham not also provide his guests with bread and meat?

In this regard, we may say that both things are correct: The Children of Israel merited the manna, the well, and the pillar of cloud by the merit of Abraham, as well as by the merit of Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam. Had it only been for the merit of Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam, the Children of Israel would have received bread and water in a more natural way, ordinary bread that came from the earth and so on. However bread that descended from heaven, a miraculous well, and the pillar of cloud resulted from Abraham’s merit.

This allows us to understand why they merited these things because of the hospitality that Abraham demonstrated on that day, as well as why it resulted from minor things. They merited these things in a supernatural way only because of Abraham, something which was possible only because of the hospitality that he demonstrated with great devotion. After all, Abraham was 99 years old on that day, the third day following his circumcision, and he acted in the stifling heat.

It is precisely in regards to minor things that the greatest devotion is demonstrated. Since the main thing was to provide his guests with food and drink, Abraham did not need to show such devotion by providing them with minor things as well. He even gave them these things himself, such as the butter and milk, and he stood before them as he gave them water to wash their feet. Hence he merited, measure for measure, for Hashem to give his descendants bread and water, and to protect them in a supernatural way in the desert.

A Hidden Poison

It is written, “She said to Abraham, ‘Drive out this slavewoman and her son’” (Bereshith 21:10).

According to the Chafetz Chaim, there is no doubt that if Sarah had not demanded Ishmael’s departure, meaning that if Ishmael had grown up alongside Isaac, he would not have become as violent, for a person’s entourage has a tremendous influence on him.

Nevertheless, she decided to “drive out this slavewoman and her son,” for Ishmael’s presence was likely to harm Isaac.

Sarah, who was greater than Abraham in prophesy, therefore demanded his departure, for she knew that his presence constituted a serious threat to Isaac. Before Isaac could influence Ishmael for the better, Ishmael would influence him for the worse! Hashem commanded Abraham to heed Sarah’s voice.

The deeds of the Patriarchs are an example for us. From this incident, we learn that we must keep a very watchful eye on the pledge that Hashem has entrusted to us: Our children. We must carefully ensure that those who are ill-behaved do not harm others. It is up to parents to carefully pay attention to their children’s friends. We must realize that everyone records every sight and sound they experience, memories that are preserved in them forever.

A Single Neuron

Rav Mordechai Greenwald, a Torah figure living in the United States, recounts an extraordinary and intriguing story, unique in its kind, in his book *Advice and Instructions*. From it, we can derive a great lesson in regards to the education of children. It is about a woman in deteriorating health who had to undergo emergency surgery to remove a brain tumor.

Obviously, the woman was anaesthetized as the surgeons began the delicate operation, the first stage being, as everyone knows, to cut open the skull.

Suddenly, while deeply unconscious, the woman began to sing a certain melody which the surgeons recognized as being an Italian song.

This surprising and exceptional phenomenon worried the surgeons, who checked and rechecked that the anesthesia was working properly. To their great surprise, everything was normal, meaning that there were no signs indicating that the anesthesia was defective.

The surgeons decided to continue the operation, despite the fact that their patient was still singing!

The author of the book, who also holds a degree in psychology, states that the woman regained consciousness normally following the operation. Afterwards, once she had regained her strength, the doctors asked her if she had any connection to Italian singers or songs.

Surprised by this question, the woman said that she hadn’t. She was then asked to think about it a little more. Perhaps she had once attended an Italian concert? Despite her efforts to remember, her response was still negative: She couldn’t recall any such event.

“What’s more is that I don’t really like that kind of music, so why should I have any connection to it?” she said.

The doctors did not abandon their efforts, and so they described the surprising event that had taken place during the operation.

With a great deal of effort, the woman searched through her memories until she was finally able to recall an incident from her youth: When she was a little girl, she was once walking near a building where an Italian

concert was taking place, and she could hear one of the songs being performed inside.

“That’s it,” she exclaimed. Since then, she never had any connection to Italian songs!

Although the woman had only told them about this incident from her youth, the doctors realized why she had started singing during the operation.

Rav Greenwald explains that in parallel with all our holy Torah writings which teach that everything a person sees or hears (be it only once) is recorded by the brain, doctors and physiologists underline this as a scientific fact.

The human brain is formed by no less than 12,000,000,000 (12 billion!) neurons. The song which the “little girl” had heard as she was walking past a building was recorded by one neuron, and then saved for many years, without ever being “summoned.”

Long afterwards, when she underwent this operation and her skull was being opened (or during the operation itself), surgeons activated the neuron that had recorded the Italian song. At that point, this song was expressed by the mouth of this woman, as if it sang on its own, despite the fact that she was completely unconscious.

Everything Has An Influence

We learn a particularly important lesson from this story: Many parents think that what their child sees or hears is not recorded in their brain. The result is that they are willing to bring their children to dubious places – places which the Sages advise against – under the pretext that “they’re still young.” On the contrary, from the above story we see that everything has a tremendous influence on a child.

Not Just Temporarily

This is because, quite simply, what a child sees or hears is automatically registered by the most sophisticated recording device possible: The human brain. It contains 12 billion “recordings,” each of which holds the memory of an event experienced by a person going as far back as birth.

A person grows up with these recordings, which dwell in him without being expressed, until the day comes when a particular neuron is triggered and its contents begin working on their own.

We can see this happening in numerous other instances, a phenomenon that nobody can deny. A child may diligently devote himself to learning Torah for the great part of the zeman (semester), growing and progressing in the study of Torah and the fear of Hashem. However a single incorrect word or improper sight during ben hazemanim (vacation) is already too much. Who knows at what point in his life this neuron – which stored the impure experience which the youngster saw or heard – will begin to act!

– Barchi Nafshi

Guard Your Tongue

A Sad Conclusion

Many people demonstrate their foolishness by constantly asking their friends what other people have said about them, even when this information has no practical use. Furthermore, when people refuse to reveal this information, they put great pressure on them until they say what they want to hear. In general, the questioner will listen to this information and believe it completely. As a result, the questioner and the subject of his inquiries will become bitter enemies.

– Chafetz Chaim

No One Else to Ask

At the end of Shemoneh Esrei, before Yihyu leratzon, the disciples of the tzaddik Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, may his merit protect us, once heard him asking Hashem to let “the maidservant return.” Now there were several kabbalists among his disciples, but they could find no kabbalistic meaning in his words.

In fact they were so curious that they asked him what he meant by this. He replied that there was no hidden meaning involved. It was simply that his maidservant had refused to return to work, and since his wife did not have the strength to do things on her own, meaning that she needed help, the tzaddik asked Hashem to motivate the maidservant to return to work.

The tzaddik ended by saying, “You must realize that when a child wants a silk coat, he asks his father for it. And when he wants some money to buy something, he also asks his father without hesitation, even for minor things, because he is his father. Now we are the children of G-d, and He is our father. We have no reason to hesitate in asking Him even for minor things, for there is no one else to ask.

– Birkat Avraham

In Your Hand are Power and Might

A great talmid chacham, known in Jerusalem, fell seriously ill and his doctors lost hope. The morning before undergoing a critical operation, the man entered a certain synagogue in the Mea Shearim district of Jerusalem to pray Shacharit.

When he reached Vayvarech David, he repeated the words, over and over again with terrible wailing: “You rule over everything. In Your hand are power and might, and it is in Your hand to grant greatness and strength to all.” In fact everyone who was in synagogue with him was seized by great dread.

The talmid chacham repeated these words again and again, weeping without interruption for at least thirty minutes. He infused himself with the idea the G-d rules over everything, that in His hand alone are power and might, and that it is in His hand to grant greatness and strength to all.

Not long afterwards, the impossible occurred.

The talmid chacham was completely cured of his illness. In fact the doctors confirmed to all who wanted to hear that it was a real medical miracle. According to every natural law, he had zero chance of surviving.

We must add that the essential power of prayer lies in a person placing all his hopes in the Creator of the universe, when he depends entirely on Him and firmly believes in His unlimited power. The greater this faith, the greater the likelihood of a miracle, that G-d will hear his prayer.

Although each of us is accustomed to praying, and we all believe in G-d’s power, we must awaken this faith by channeling it from our brain into our heart and emotions. Only a person who prays with tangible faith can hope for his prayer to save him from all harm.

– Barchi Nafshi

To Those in Jacob Who Repent

Living in Berdichev, the home of the tzaddik Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, may his merit protect us, was an unbeliever who ridiculed the tzaddik

and his chassidim. The chassidim said to him, “If you were to come to synagogue as Rabbi Levi Yitzchak prays, you too would repent.”

He shouted at them, “I’ll go, and you’ll see!”

He went and stood there from the start of the service until after Shemoneh Esrei, and then made a disparaging gesture towards the chassidim, as if to say: “You see, I got you!”

When the Rav began to recite Uva LeTzion, “A redeemer shall come to Zion, and to those in Jacob who repent,” he repeated the words “to those in Jacob who repent” several times over with tremendous enthusiasm and from the depths of his heart. The man could no longer resist, for these words had touched his heart. He didn’t move from there until he had completely repented.

The First Steps

The tzaddik of Jerusalem, the chacham Menashe Levi Zatzal, succeeded in turning prayer into a delightful and wonderful gift wherever he prayed. As soon as people heard him praying, they could feel the barriers between themselves and G-d disappearing.

One of his sons recounted, “I remember how I accompanied my father Zatzal when I was a child, which for me was a wonderful adventure. When we reached the Machaneh Yehudah market, Papa would walk through the alleys of the market and proclaim the need for prayer. He would go from alley to alley gathering Jews for prayer. Shop owners in the market would see him, close their stalls, and gather around him for prayer.”

Another person recounted, “The chacham Menashe Levi would go through the market gathering people for prayer. Myself, along with a large number of shoppers, market farmers, and shop owners, gathered around him as part of a minyan to pray at the Hachnasat Orchim synagogue. All this happened because of the hidden tzaddik, who regularly took hold of us each Tuesday and infused our hearts with the nature of prayer. Little by little, we began to love praying, especially in a minyan.

“His way of praying influenced people by its simplicity, as well as by the fact that it rested upon numerous people. The faithful, when they saw him standing before G-d and they heard his prayers, became enthused and started to pray with might. Once they had learned to appreciate its importance, they could pray alone on the other days of the week, without the chacham Menashe Levi. Even then they would pray wholeheartedly, with the same enthusiasm as when he himself prayed, for he constantly served as an example to them. They later served G-d themselves, meaning that in the initial steps of prayer, the chacham Menashe Levi led them along his own path, after which they were capable of walking alone.

– VaAni Tefillah

Drawing Forth the Powers

When we recite, “The hosts of Heaven prostrate themselves before You,” it is fitting to pray for everyone, at which point all the hosts of Heaven will come to prostrate themselves, praise, and glorify G-d.

Hence at that point, we should ask Hashem to command them to draw towards a person all that he needs. For example, if a person is in need of healing, he should focus on Hashem commanding them to draw forth the powers required for his healing, and so on.

– Likutei Etzot