



RABBI AZARYA BERZON

Rav of Emek Learning Center, Jerusalem

On the Mitzvah of “*Hachnasat Orchim*”

“HaShem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and (“vaya’ar”) he saw: And behold! Three men were standing over him. (“Vaya’ar”) He perceived, so he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and bowed toward the ground.” (Breishit, 18:1-2)

Why does the word “vaya’ar” appear twice in the second verse?

According to the Netziv when HaShem appeared to Avraham on the third day following his milah, Avraham was involved in the great mitzvah of *kabbalat Pnei HaShechina*. Then Avraham saw the three passersby, and recognized the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*.

Avraham wondered what is the law in this case? Does the principle of “ha’osek b’mitzvah patur min hamitzvah” apply?

The first וירא indicates that Avraham

became aware of the conflict he faced between two mitzvot that demanded his attention. If the mitzvah that one is involved in can tolerate postponement, but the second is time urgent one must postpone the first for the sake of the second. Thus, the second “vaya’ar” in our verse does not refer to the simple act of seeing, but rather to intellectual comprehension. Avraham “saw” that the answer to his dilemma is that he should postpone the mitzvah of “kabbalat Pnei HaShechina” for the sake of taking care of the guests.¹

Avraham now turns to HaShem with a petition: My Lord, if I find favor in Your eyes, please pass not away from your servant. (Breishit, 18:3). Avraham is implying that he will return to HaShem at the first possible moment if only HaShem will agree to “wait around”.

It would seem that the conflict faced by Avraham and its ultimate resolution, reflects a greater question: which comes first, a mitzvah “bein adam l’Makom” or a mitzvah “bein adam l’chaveiro”?

In setting a priority and a sequence of

1 This decision is reflected in the dictum of Rebby Yochanan in *Masechet Shabbat, 137a*: R’ Yochanan says: “*Gedolah mitzvah hachnasat orchim yotair mi’kabbalat Pnei HaShechina*”.

mitzvot (קדימה במצוות), more often than not, *bein adam l'chaveiro* requires immediate attention, whereas *bein adam l'Makom* can tolerate postponement.

I would suggest that the Mussar Movement took the priority of *bein adam l'chaveiro* over *bein adam l'Makom* one step further. The former takes priority in and of itself – not just vis-à-vis the law of קדימה.

Many stories about Rav Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, reflect Rav Yisrael's commitment to this position.

To mention just one, Rav Yisrael refused to pen a letter of approbation to the Chafetz Chayim when the latter published his great work on the laws of "lashon hara". Rav Yisrael explained to the Chafetz Chayim that he disagreed with the ruling of the Chafetz Chayim that one who had violated the prohibition against "lashon hara", and now seeks to do "teshuva" and gain "mechila" must explain to his friend that he is sorry for having said such-and-such behind his back. R' Yisrael said: "could one

possibly be permitted to cause anguish to another Jew by repeating the bad things he said about him, just so that he (the sinner) can fulfill the Mitzva of Teshuva and achieve Divine atonement? It cannot be!"²

This is the great foundation of the "mussar" approach. Of course, we must dedicate ourselves to the love of HaShem, but never at the expense of "mitzvot bein adam l'chaveiro"! Let us emulate the "chesed" of Avraham, and the great sensitivity of Rav Yisrael, his talmid! ■

2 According to tradition, when the Chafetz Chayim showed R' Yisrael the source of this halacha in the words of the great Rabbenu Yona, R' Yisrael re-interpreted Rabbenu Yona so that he would not be saying what he seemed to be saying!

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