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A Nation of Chessed

As *Parshas Vayeira* opens, we meet Avraham Avinu, at the age of ninety-nine years old, three days after his *bris milah*. By the command of Hashem, Avraham circumcised himself and his household, thereby entering the Divine covenant (Bereishis 17). With the beginning of *Vayeira*, the Torah introduces us to Avraham, on the third day after his *bris* - which, as the Sages note - is the day of greatest pain, sitting at the entrance to his tent.

While there are *many* events that occur over the course of the *parsha* (the visit of the angels, the destruction of Sodom and rescue of Lot, Avraham and Sarah in the territory of Avimelech, the birth of Yitzchak, the sending away of Hagar and Yishmael, the *Akeidah* and the family of *Nachor*) the opening *pasuk* narrates one of the most dramatic teachings that becomes

the hallmark of our nation: chessed.

We learn of Hashem's visit to Avraham, as the *pasuk* tells us: וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֶלְנֵי מַמְרֵה - *And Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day* (Bereishis 18:1).

Interestingly, the first words of the *parsha* (and *pasuk*) read: וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' - "*And Hashem appeared to him*." Every other communication from Hashem to Avraham contains a message - be it a command, a promise, or a covenant. Here there is nothing else that follows! We are only told of a Divine appearance. Why would the Torah record this visit, in which nothing is said from Hashem to Avraham?

Rashi explains that the purpose of the visit was: לְבַקֵּר אֶת הַחוֹלָה - *to visit the sick*. *It was the third day after his circumcision, and Hashem came to inquire after his welfare* (Rashi to Bereishis 18:1).

Hence, we now understand that *the visit itself was the message*.

The Torah is teaching us that *being present* for someone else in their time of need is as important as having something to say (and sometimes, even more important than saying words that should not be said!). From this *pasuk*, Chazal learn the mitzvah of *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick): we visit the sick because Hashem Himself did, and we are commanded to go in His ways (Sotah 14a). We do not visit the sick to amass information, to be "in the know,"

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or to say "I was there." We visit because being there is itself the mitzvah.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the verse tells us Avraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent קָחֻם הַיּוֹם - "*in the heat of the day*." Why does the Torah report this seemingly unnecessary detail? Why does it matter that it was hot and sunny at that moment?

Rashi explains *that Hashem took the sun out of its sheath, so that the heat was super intense, so as not to trouble the tzaddik with passersby* (Rashi to Bereishis 18:1).

Since it was scorching hot, surely no traveler would be on the road in such heat, which would allow Avraham to rest and recuperate.

However! Rashi continues: *when Hashem saw that Avraham was troubled by the absence of passersby, He brought the angels to him in the likeness of men.*

This is fascinating and paradoxical. On the one hand, it is Hashem Himself Who arranges the prescribed rest for Avraham, and yet, He then overrides His own plan!

Perhaps the Torah is teaching us that while Avraham's body needed rest, his spiritual self needed to give.

For our forefather Avraham, the pain of not being able to give was greater than the physical pain of the *bris*. Hence, Hashem acceded to Avraham's longing to do chessed: first rest for the body, then guests for the soul.

Here Hashem is teaching us a most important and fundamental aspect of chessed: true kindness is not giving what we assume someone else needs. It is seeing, understanding, giving and doing what they actually truly need.

These lessons have powerful

implications for how we care for each other.

In this monumental act of Divine chessed - which preceded the chessed that Avraham did for the *malachim* - the Torah gives us Hashem's model of visiting. When someone we love is sick or struggling - be it a child, parent, spouse, or friend R"L - one of the most important things we can give them is not answers. It is, rather, our presence.

And like Hashem did, we must look with a discerning and concerned eye, at what the person before us truly needs. For chessed that is not tailored to its recipient is not truly chessed. It may be fulfilling our own needs, while neglecting - or trampling upon, may Hashem spare us - the needs of the other.

The Sages teach that there are three hallmarks of a Jew: *ha'rachmanim*, *ha'bay'shanim*, *v'ha'gomlei chassadim* - we are merciful and compassionate, we are modest, and we are a people who perform acts of loving-kindness for one another (Yevamos 79).

May we live up to our potential, and emulate the model of chessed that Hashem teaches us. May our chessed be done with mercy, compassion, understanding, sensitivity, and grace, thereby doing for others what they truly need, elevating the Name of Hashem in the world, and bettering ours - and their - lives as *ovdei Hashem*.

■ ברכת בשורות טובות ושבת שלום

Michal Horowitz is a Torah educator who lectures nationally throughout the United States, as well as internationally. Thousands of her shiur recordings are available online. She is a regular presenter for the OU Women's Initiative and the author of *Abled: Living With a Disability*, a Torah View (Mosaica Press). Michal lives in Woodmere, NY, with her family.