



RABBI CHAIM EISENSTEIN

GUEST DVAR TORAH

Maggid Shiur at the RIETS Israel Kollel

Rav of Beis Midrash Mevakshei Emes, Mishkafayim, Beit Shemesh

Rav Bronspiegel's Timeless Message

Adapted by Rabbi Tzvi Goldstein

My rebbi, Rav Bronspiegel, zt"l, used to highlight the abduction of Sarah in Parashas Vayera to convey a message that has impacted the lives of so many.

DEBATING AVIMELECH

In Parashas Lech Lecha, Sarah was abducted by Pharaoh after Avraham lies about the nature of their relationship. Once Hashem intervenes to save Sarah, Pharaoh questions Avraham's deception, but the Torah doesn't record Avraham having responded. In Vayera, when Sarah was once again abducted, this time by Avimelech, Avimelech also challenges Avraham — but this time, Avraham responds. His response is difficult to understand: Avraham answered, "Rak ein yiras Elokim ba'makom ha'zeh — There is no fear of heaven in this place."¹¹ Not only does this not seem to explain why Avraham chose to lie about being married to Sarah, it even smacks of a chillul Hashem — "I lied because people here aren't frum." What was Avraham saying?

Even more striking, Avimelech merits a conversation from Hashem Himself, whereas

Hashem didn't speak to Pharaoh at all.

An additional question that I noticed when learning these passages relates to a nuance in Avimelech's conversation with Hashem. Avimelech claims that he

shouldn't be punished for abducting Sarah, because he did so "with a pure heart and clean hands," not realizing that Sarah was married. Hashem responds, "I know that you did this with a pure heart." Rashi points out the omission: Hashem does not grant Avimelech's claim that he acted "with clean hands."

What is the significance of



Rabbi Abba Bronspiegel zt"l

this detail?

Finally, the phrase "pure heart and clean hands" appears in another context in Tanach — but reversed. David Hamel-ech asks, "Who can ascend the mountain of Hashem? Who can stand in His holy place? One with clean hands and a pure heart..."¹² Why did David reverse the order of these phrases, and how does their presence grant a person access to "the mountain of Hashem and His holy place"?

HUMAN MORALS

Rav Bronspiegel was a child survivor

of the Holocaust. At the start of the war, he had six siblings; by the end, he had only two. He saw part of his mission as a mechanech to be teaching his students, American-born bachurim, the values that used to pervade the European shtetl and warning against those values of

modern American society that were negative and corrosive to the Jewish soul. He shared with us that when he was a child, Germany was considered to be the pinnacle of culture and ethics throughout the world. They held this reputation for hundreds of years. Yet because their ethics were built on human foundations, rather than Divine command, they crumbled within just a few decades. What had been the heights of culture and moral repute morphed into the cruelest extermination campaign the world has ever seen. This, Rav Bronspiegel asserted, is what Avraham was pointing out to Avimelech: *Rak ein yiras Elokim*, there is no fear of God here — so your protestations of morality are empty.

This response wasn't necessary in Egypt, which had a reputation for moral laxity. As much as Pharaoh protested, he knew why Avraham had to lie, and Avraham knew that he knew, so he didn't need to respond. Hakadosh Baruch Hu, as well, knew the score in Egypt, so there was no point in him dialoguing with Pharaoh to explain the situation. But Gerar had a reputation for being a civilized locale; Avimelech expresses serious indignation over Avraham's lack of trust in their moral character. For that reason, Avraham had to explain that if your ethical commitment is based on a human moral sense, then you could conceivably justify killing me to permit abducting my wife. Without a Divine

anchor, even the most civilized society can justify genocide.

Rav Bronspiegel turned to us, his students, any of whom were in college as well as yeshiva, and said: "I have no problem with you being in college, whether for parnassah or as a religious value. But make sure that every single one of your values come from the Torah Ha'kedoshah, not from your secular classes!"

CLEAN HANDS YIELD PURE HEARTS

Hakadosh Baruch Hu made a related point to Avimelech by affirming his "purity of heart" but omitting his "clean hands." Avimelech was undoubtedly sincere; the purity of heart was *emes*. But because he wasn't connected to a mesorah of how to actualize that sincerity, his feeling did not necessarily translate into action. Purity of heart does not automatically lead to clean hands. We live in a culture that teaches that if a person is sincere, they can decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong. While this may sound nice in theory, it leads to the most degenerate conclusions — even to the extent that out of a desire to be sensitive to certain movements, a man is no longer a man and a woman is no longer necessarily a woman!

David Hamelech took Avimelech's two pronouncements and reversed them: "*Neki kapayim u'var leivav* — Clean hands and pure hearts." One must begin by following the rules that define for us how to maintain clean hands — and by working on that for years, a person will eventually develop a pure heart. The pure heart comes from the clean hands, not the other way around.

This idea is foundational to raising Jewish children. Every morning, there's a child who climbs into their parent's bed just a

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bit before the parent was going to get up, and the parent will hug them and ask, “Avremele, did you wash negel vasser?” The child won’t understand tumah and taharah for many, many years — I’m 49, and I still don’t understand them — yet he’s already being taught that they exist as a reality in the world. Tumah and taharah exist. Emes and sheker exist. Kasher and pasul, muter and asur — these concepts exist, even without understanding them. By internalizing these holy instincts over time, a person can eventually develop a pure heart.

REB ANSHEL TESLER’S INSPIRATION

The person who epitomizes this for me is a Holocaust survivor named Reb Anshel Tesler. He was one of many survivors who attended the shul my father had our family davening at when I was growing up; to him, those with numbers on their arms

were koshei kodashim. During the week, we often davening in the same minyan factory in Flatbush, known as Frankel’s. As a teenager, I used to come to the 8:45 or 9:00 minyan (on a bad day, 9:15 or 9:30). Reb Anshel, on the other hand, had davened at the 6:00 minyan and had already finished daf yomi — at least once, sometimes twice — by the time I rolled into shul. He used to work around the later minyanim holding the pushka, collecting tzedakah.

Reb Anshel’s grandson once told me a story that his grandfather told him. After liberation, the first few days were consumed by survival and returning to some semblance of normalcy — just being able to eat a little. At some point, Reb Anshel got a pair of tefillin. But just a few days later, a realization hit him like a ton of bricks. He was angry. He was angry at the Germans, sure, but he was also angry at Hakadosh Baruch Hu. His entire family had been killed in the Holocaust! So Reb Anshel decided that he wasn’t putting on tefillin that morning. He sat down and read the newspaper instead. He finished around 10:00 and realized that he was hungry for breakfast — but he heard his mother’s voice admonishing him in Yiddish, “Anshel, we don’t eat before davening.” He couldn’t eat — but he didn’t want to daven! So he went for a walk, made it to 11:00, and couldn’t hold out any longer. He put on his tefillin, screamed at Hakadosh Baruch Hu, and ate — and he never missed a day of tefillah.

HOLY INSTINCTS

That is the power of holy instincts, of investing in “neki kapayim” and developing “bar leivav.” Even if it doesn’t make sense to you, even if you don’t understand

it, it doesn't matter; the commitment is naaseh v'nishma, we do even before understanding.

This point extends beyond strict halachah. I was once walking out of a shul in Ramat Beit Shemesh and a young Israeli Charedi teenager approached me and asked to borrow my phone to make a call. I pulled out my phone — a smartphone without a browser — and handed it to him. Now, he didn't expect this; seeing my beard and outfit, he expected a flip phone. When he realized that he was holding a smartphone, his hand began to tremble — I say that without exaggeration. Softly, he said, “Ani lo yachol — I can't,” and handed it back to me.

Every person should have their areas of ani lo yachol — gedarim, fences that ensure their neki kapayim, even if others won't

understand or respect them. Creating holy instincts, like those of Reb Anshel, is one of the most powerful forces in living a life of consistent avodas Hashem.

Rav Bronsiegel taught us that which was so foreign to Avimelech. Ethics rooted in human intellect are shaky; without a Divine anchor, they can easily be twisted to justify the cruelest perversion of morality. Similarly, a person who only practices those values that they understand, placing their pure heart before their clean hands, will struggle to live a moral life. Only by committing to clean hands, to following halachah and learning the Torah that informs the halachic system, can a person eventually develop an authentically pure heart. ■

This dvar Torah is an excerpt from **Rav Eisenstein's** upcoming sefer being published by RIETS Press.



The advertisement features a cartoon illustration of a smiling man with a full brown beard and mustache, wearing a dark grey t-shirt with "PREMIUM MOVING" printed on it and a black baseball cap with a white deer head logo. In the background, a white moving truck with the same deer head logo and "PREMIUM MOVING" text is parked in front of a tan building with a sign that reads "MAXI BOX STORAGE".

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