

Zera Shimshon

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Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter IV: Vaveira (Gen. 18:1–22:24)

Essay 5. Why would the angels ask Sarah where Abraham was?

פסוק "ויאמרו אליו איזה שרה אשתך", איתא במדרש ונהביאו גם רש"י בחומ"ש, נקוד על אי"ו לומר שאף לשרה שאלו איזה אברהם עכ"ל.

Abraham beheld three men who were near him. He greeted them, instructed Sarah to make cakes for them, then ran to the herd to select a calf to serve them. Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 36:16 tells us that the calf ran into the Cave of Machpelah, and that Abraham entered the cave in pursuit of it.¹ There is a debate in the Zohar at what point Abraham realized that the men were angels, with one opinion being that he did not realize until he returned to his tent, when the men asked about his wife.²

The verse says: “**They said to him, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?’** and he replied, ‘There, in the tent’ ” (Gen. 18:9). **It’s brought in the midrash Gen. Rabbah 48:15, and also Rashi brings it in his commentary on the Pentateuch, “There is a *nikkud* [dot] placed above the letters *alef*, *yod*, and *vav* of the word *elav* [אליו] [“to him”] in the Masoretic text.** Those three emphasized letters form the word *ayeh* [איה] [“where is he”], as if **to say that [the angels] also asked Sarah, ‘Where is Abraham?’** ” That is, according to the midrash, they asked her where he was when he had gone to find a calf, and upon his return and after the meal, they asked him where she was, as she had retired into the tent.

קשה מה להם למלאכים לשאול בשביל אברהם, דבשלמא בשביל שרה ניחא כמו שאמרו ו"ל להודיע שצנועה היתה או כדי לשגר לה כוס של ברכה.

A difficulty in understanding this midrash is why did the angels ask about Abraham? Granted, regarding Sarah, it’s fine that they asked Abraham where she was, as [the rabbis] of blessed memory said in Bava Metzia, that they wanted to acknowledge that she was modest, having a retiring disposition, or in order to send to her the wine cup of blessing.³

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¹ The midrash continues that while in the cave, Abraham saw the burial of Adam and Eve, and thus desired to acquire the cave for himself.

² Zohar I: 100a-102b.

³ Bava Metzia 87a: “Rav Yehuda says that Rav says, and some say it is Rabbi Yitzchak [who says]: The ministering angels [who visited Abraham in the guise of travelers], knew that Sarah, our foremother, was inside the tent. Rather,

אָמנם מאַבְרָהָם מֵה צוֹרֵךְ הִנֵּה לָהֶם לְשׂאוֹל עָלָיו, וּבִפְרֹט לְשׂאוֹל לְשָׂרָה עָלָיו, וְהָא אֵין שׂוֹאֲלִים בְּשָׁלוֹם אִשָּׁה אֶלָּא עַל יָדֵי בְּעֻלָּה. וּמִכָּל שְׂכָן שְׂלֵא הִנֵּה לָהֶם לְהַרְבוֹת דְּבָרִים עִמָּה לְלֹא צוֹרֵךְ, הוֹאִיל שֶׁהָיוּ מְלֹאכִים וְהָיוּ יוֹדְעִים הֵיכָן הִנֵּה אַבְרָהָם. וְעוֹד שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְמַדַּת דְּרָךְ אֲרָץ, שֶׁהַדָּבָר יָדוּעַ שְׂמִי שְׂבָאִים אֶצְלוֹ אוֹרְחִים הוּא טְרוֹד לְהִכִּין לָהֶם צָרְכֵי הַסְּעוּדָה.

Indeed, regarding the location of Abraham, what need was there for them to ask about him, and especially to ask Sarah about him. The Zera Shimshon raises three reasons why perhaps they shouldn't have asked Sarah about Abraham's location.

(1) **One shouldn't inquire about the welfare of a woman except to ask her husband.**⁴ In this case, they weren't asking Sarah about herself, but about her husband. Still, it would seem that a person should not enter into such discussions with a woman.

(2) **In any case, there was no need for them to have many words with her unnecessarily, since they were angels and they knew where Abraham was.**

(3) **Moreover, it wasn't proper etiquette to ask, as his hospitality was famous, so it was known that those who come to him are guests and that he would be preoccupied with preparing the needs of the meal for them.**

וְיֵשׁ לוֹמַר שֶׁהַמְּלֹאכִים שֶׁאֵין לָהֶם יָצָר הִרְעוּ אֵין לָהֶם שׂוּם אִיסוּר לְדַבֵּר עִם הָאִשָּׁה, שֶׁהָרִי מְצִינּוּ שֶׁדְּבָרוֹ עִם הָגֵר וְעִם אִשְׁתֵּי מְנוּחָה, אִף עַל פִּי שֶׁהִנֵּה הַמְּלֹאכִים יָכוֹל לְהַמְתִּין שֶׁיִּהְיֶה בְּעֻלָּה עִמָּה, וְאִף בְּפַעַם הַשְּׁנִיית חוֹר אֶצְלֵי הָאִשָּׁה בְּעוֹד שְׂלֵא הִנֵּה בְּעֻלָּה עִמָּה. וְשֶׁאֵלֶּה הַזֹּאת עָשׂוּ אוֹתָהּ לֵה בְּזִמּוֹן שֶׁאַבְרָהָם נִתְרַחֵק הַרְבֵּה, שֶׁרָץ אַחֵר הַבָּקָר לְמַעְרַת הַמְּכַפְלָה.

Regarding the first concern, that it's not proper to speak with a woman, even to ask how she is doing, **it can be said that the angels have no evil inclination, and therefore unlike humans, they have no prohibition against speaking with the woman** when she is alone, **as we find they spoke with Hagar** (Gen. 16:7). We also find that they spoke **with the wife of Manoach** (Judges 13:3) alone; **even though the angel would have been able to wait for her husband to be with her**, he didn't do so. **Even the second time** the angel appeared to Manoach's wife, **he returned to the woman** when she was in the field, **while her husband was not with her**, until she went to get him. Similarly, **this question for Sarah was put to her while Abraham was far away, running after the cattle at the Cave of Machpelah**, in Hebron.

what [was the purpose of their eliciting Abraham's response]: In the tent? In order to endear her to her husband [by accentuating Sarah's modesty]. Rabbi Yossi, son of Rabbi Chanina, says: [They inquired about her] in order to send her the cup of blessing. [It is customary to recite Grace after Meals over a cup of wine, which is then distributed to those present.]” This is also summarized by Rashi at Gen. 18:9.

⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Even haEzer 21:6, “One may not inquire after a woman's welfare at all, even through an intermediary, and it is forbidden to send regards to her even through her husband. But it is permissible to ask her husband about her welfare.”

ומעתה אינה ממדת דרך ארץ שלא ישאלו עליו, הואיל שגשמתה הרבה יותר מן הראוי, ומכל שכן שאם לא היו שואלים שמא תחשוב שרה בדתה שהם מלאכים שיודעים היכן הוא ומשום הכי אינם שואלים עליו. ולפיכך שאלו לה, ובנדאי שאמרו לה שאין צורך לכל כך טורח להכין להם צרכי הסעודה, שבדבר מועט הם מתרצים. אמנם לאברהם לא הייתה להם סיבה מכרסת לשאול על שרה אם לא להודיע שצנועה הייתה או כדי לשגר לה כוס של ברכה.

The second concern raised was that they were angels and knew where Abraham was, and therefore it was pointless for them to ask the question. **Now we understand that it was not so that proper etiquette made it improper for them to have asked about him, since [Abraham] lingered more than was proper, as the calf had temporarily escaped from him. Even more so, for if they had not asked, perhaps Sarah would think to herself that they were angels who knew where he was, and that this was why they didn't ask about him.** But this was still before they revealed themselves to be angels, and they didn't yet want her to know that. **Because of this, they asked her** where Abraham had gone.

The third concern was that it wasn't proper etiquette to ask about Abraham's whereabouts, as any guest would understand that he would be preoccupied with preparing a feast for them. **Certainly,** while they didn't yet want Sarah to know that they were angels, and that they didn't need any food or drink, **they would at least have told [Sarah] that there was no need to bother so much to prepare for them the needs of the meal, that they would be satisfied with a small amount.**

So now the Zera Shimshon has resolved the three concerns he raised, about whether it was proper for the angels to have spoken with Sarah, asking her about Abraham.

Indeed, even regarding their questioning of Abraham, they had no compelling reason to ask about Sarah, if not to acknowledge that she was modest, or in order to send to her the wine cup of blessing, as the rabbis explained in Bava Metzia.

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