

Parshat Vayera- 2018/5779

Three old Jews are sitting by their condo's pool, when the first turns to the second and says in a sigh, "Oy...". The second, not wanting to be outdone responds "Oy vey...". The third then becomes indignant and says, "I thought we promised not to talk politics!"

Believe it or not, the rabbis had something to say about the significance of the *Krekhtz*, that very Jewish of sighs that seems to become more frequent as Jews age, probably turned on by late-onset genes enriched in us Jews.

Rabbi Nachman of Brezlaw actually devotes a short chapter of Likutei Moharan whose topic sentence is, "See how precious is the sigh and groan, the *krekhtz* of a Jewish person. It provides wholeness in the place of emptiness. For through the breath, which is the *ruach*, the spirit, of life, the world was created....It corresponds to *erekh apayim*, patience, which is done by extending the *ruach*. Therefore, when a person sighs over an emptiness and extends their *ruach*, they draw in the *ruach*-of-life to which he is lacking. For the emptiness is in essence a departure of the *ruach*-of-life. Therefore, through the sigh, the emptiness is made whole."

If I may say, the reason that old Jews *krekhtz* so much is that they know that there is so much in the world that needs repairing. And that, in fact, is precisely where our parsha, Vayera, begins- with Abram reclining in front of his tent on a hot day, healing from having just circumcised himself and his two sons, Ishmael and Itzchak, three days before.

And then the story goes a bit wacky. We are told that Abram is sort of awakened by three men, and here, the Torah uses the word *אֲנָשִׁים*, literally meaning "men", who are "standing over" him. For "standing over", the Torah uses the term *נִצְבִים עָלָיו* which is quite significant because when this rarely used term is used, it means more like to "take a stand". In other words, the appearance of these three men is meant to signify something special.

Although Avraham is healing, the Torah says that he runs to greet them, offering to wash their feet and to feed them. In fact, the Torah points out that Avraham "hurries" to Sarah in the tent to urge her to bake cakes, then "runs" to his flock to pick out a tender calf, which he urges with "haste" that his servant prepare along with curds and milk. And having served his

guests, Avraham stood as they sat and ate under the shade of the tree. Anyone of you who is listening carefully would take note that Avraham, the Father of our people, just served milk and meat to his guests. we'll get back to that momentarily.

What is the Torah trying to teach us about healing, and about considering one's own health in regards to welcoming strangers to one's abode?

The *Midrash Rabbah* explains that these three men were actually angels sent by G-d to each carry out one mission. Although they are not named in the Torah, the Talmud in *Baba Metziah* tells us that they were Raphael, Michael and Gabriel. Indeed, the mission of Raphael that day was to heal Avraham, to free him so that he could perform the mitzvah of *hachnochat orchim*, greeting of visitors. How do we know that this was the first mission of the angels? I refer you back to the first introduction Avraham had to these three men, that they were נִצְבִים עָלָיו, standing over him, or perhaps, standing for him. One curious part of this phrase is that the word נִצְבִים is plural, as if each angel had a stand to take. In Hebrew, the singular version of this is נִצַּב, which means a "handle", as in the haft of a sword. Each angel, therefore, was serving as the handle, the conveyor of some action, and in the case of Raphael, his action was to heal Avraham so that he could immediately perform a mitzvah. The curiosity that right after meeting these "three men" Avraham seems immediately healed, allowing him to run about preparing a meal for the guests, does not escape him. Indeed, the Rambam states that Avraham suspected they were angels, and the way that he tested that was to serve them milk and meat, something forbidden to mortal Jews but not to angels.

But back to the angels, their missions and the notion of healing. We are then told that the angels ask Avraham where his wife is, to which he answers, in the tent. Sarah has been childless, and now, when we are told that she is literally post-menopausal, she and Avraham are told that she will conceive a son. This is the mission of the second angel, Michael, to tell Sarah that she will be healed of her infertility. Upon learning this, we are told צִחְקָה הַשָּׂרָה, Sarah laughed, because she was elderly and her husband was 99 years old. We then hear G-d giving a rationale for having healed Avraham and Sarah: "that their children and their generations to come will

keep G-d's path by doing what is right and what is just", and here, the Torah uses the word **קִדְוָה** for righteousness.

The last chapter of the angels is for Raphael and Gabriel to heal Lot and to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. G-d has heard the many cries are coming from these cities because of the "exceedingly grievous sins" being committed. The implication is that the cries are coming from the good people, those who are righteous, who are a **קִדְוָה**. The angels will go down and reconnoiter so that G-d can learn whether the cries, meaning the sins, have stopped. Here, the Torah again uses a curious, unique word:

כְּעֵקֶב תְּהִיָּה, literally translated "as if their cries were applied to", meaning, as if the cries of the good people could drown out the sins of the wicked. But importantly, in its root is the word **קָעַקַע**, to cry out.

So here is the lesson the Torah is teaching by playing on similar sounding words. Remember that when healed, Avraham performs a mitzvah of **קִדְוָה**, of righteousness; Sarah laughs, **צָחָקָהּ** when she hears that she will bear a son; those who are still righteous, a **קִדְוָה**, in Sodom and Gomorrah cry out **קָעַקַע**, against the city's great sins. And in one more chapter, we will learn that Sarah' son is named **יִצְחָק** as a play on her surprise laughter. Each of these Hebrew words differs by only one letter!

Indeed, in last week's chapter, we are told that Avram and Sarai, having entered into a covenant with G-d, are now Avraham and Sarah, again a change of just one letter each.

The Torah is teaching us that healing is meant for a greater purpose, not just the fixing of wound or the curing of infertility; it's purpose is for us, the healed, to turn our cries, our **קָעַקַע**, into good deeds, into **קִדְוָה**. G-d sees that this is what Avraham and Sarah will do, so they their surprise reaction, their **צָחָקָהּ**, turns into their son, their **יִצְחָק**.

But all is not peaches and cream (or as this story goes, curds and calf). Why is it that the cries of those few righteous people from Sodom and Gomorrah, why doesn't their **קָעַקַע** heal? Why, even after the entreaties by Avraham and the good will Lot shows the visiting angels, why are these cities not healed? Here, the Torah teaches us that healing these cities would never

produce *Tzadikim* that would do mitzvot or deeds of הַצְדִּיק. In short, they were doomed to never heal.

All of us, at one time or another, are in need of healing, whether due to wounds on our outsides or insides. We look to medicine, doctors, therapists, healers of all types to fix these wounds, but most often, we consider that once the bandages and sutures are gone, and the cuts are healed, the story is over. With this parsha, the Torah teaches us that we owe something back; we owe the need to pay our healing forward, to find a mitzvah to do that will make it easier for other's wounds to heal.

I suppose we Jews *krekhtz* because it reminds us what needs to be healed in our souls, that we still have to pay forward an act of *tzedakah* or two for those times G-d has healed us. And for heaven's sake, let's leave politics out it!

Shabbat shalom

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