



“He stood over them beneath the tree and they ate”

Avraham Avinu Did Not Bring the Malachim into His House because Malachim Are Not Permitted to Enter the Inner Sanctum

In honor of the auspiciously approaching Shabbas Kodesh, parshas Vayeira, it is fitting that we examine the events depicted on the third day after Avraham Avinu’s “Bris milah” (Bereishis 18, 1):

“וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא והוא יושב פתח האהל כחום היום, וישא עיניו וירא והנה שלשה אנשים נצבים עליו וירא וירץ לקראתם מפתח האהל וישתחו ארצה. ויאמר אדני אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך אל נא תעבור מעל עבדך, יקח נא מעט מים ורחצו רגליכם והשענו תחת העץ, ואקחה פת לחם וסעדו לבכם אחר תעבורו כי על כן עברתם על עבדכם ויאמרוו כן תעשה כאשר דברת.”

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 saw: And behold! Three men were standing before him. He saw, and he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent and bowed toward the ground. And he said, “My lords, if it please you that I find favor in your eyes, please pass not from before your servant. Let some water be brought, please, and wash your feet and recline beneath the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may nourish your heart. After, you shall pass, inasmuch as you have passed your servant’s way.” They said, “So shall you do, just as you have said.”

In his commentary, Rashi presents what we learn from Chazal in the Gemara (B.M. 86b)—Avraham’s three guests were actually three malachim—Michael, Gavriel and Rephael.

HKB”H had sent them on a special mission to Avraham dressed as ordinary people. Here is Rashi’s commentary:

“(He sat) **at the entrance of the tent** to see if there were any passersby, so that he could bring them into his house. **“In the heat of the day”**—HKB”H took the sun out of its sheath, so as not to trouble Avraham with his guests. **Because He (Hashem) saw that he (Avraham) was distressed that no visitors were coming.** Therefore, **He brought the malachim to him in the form of men. “And behold, three men!” One (Michael) to bring tidings to Sarah (about the birth of Yitzchak), one (Gavriel) to overturn Sodom and one (Rephael) to heal Avraham.**

It is curious that Avraham did not invite them into his tent. Instead, he instructs them: **“Recline beneath the tree.”** Then, he has food prepared and served to them outside, while he stands over them as they eat beneath the tree. According to Rashi, he sat at the entrance to his tent searching for guests to bring inside. So, why did he have them stay outside?

The Mission of the Malachim Was a Preparation for Receiving the Torah

We will begin our investigation with a wonderful insight gleaned from the incredible teachings of the holy Admor, Rabbi Yischar Dov of Belz, zy”a. He teaches us that the missions of the malachim were only for external

appearances. After all, HKB”H Himself had already visited Avraham. He could have conveniently healed Avraham Himself and announced to them the birth of Yitzchak; there was no real need to involve malachim. In truth, however, the malachim were sent there to dine by Avraham Avinu in preparation for the receiving of the Torah. For, due to the meal they ate, the malachim were later prevented from criticizing Yisrael. Let us refer to the Midrash (S.R. 28, 1) related to the passuk (Shemos 19, 3):

”ומשה עלה אל האלקים, הדא הוא דכתיב (תהלים סח-יט) עלית למרום שבית שבי לקחת מתנות באדם... באותה שעה בקשו מלאכי השרת לפגוע במשה, עשה בו הקב”ה קלסטירין של פניו של משה דומה לאברהם, אמר להם הקב”ה, אי אתם מתביישין הימנו, לא זהו שירדתם אצלו ואכלתם בתוך ביתו. אמר הקב”ה למשה, לא נתנה לך תורה אלא בזכות אברהם.”

“And Moshe ascended toward G-d”: At that moment, the malachim wished to attack Moshe; HKB”H altered Moshe’s facial features to resemble those of Avraham. HKB”H said to them: “Are you not ashamed to touch this man to whom you descended and in whose house you ate? HKB”H said to Moshe: “The Torah is only being given to you in the merit of Avraham.”

In this light, our master the Maharid, zy”a, interprets Avraham Avinu’s remark to the malachim: **“I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may nourish your heart.”** Rashi notes that the passuk says **“your heart”** in the singular, rather than **“your hearts”** in the plural. He explains that this teaches us that malachim do not have a yetzer hara; they only have a yetzer hatov.

We learn in the Gemara (Shabbas 88b) that at the time of Matan Torah, the malachim argued that the Torah should rightfully be given to them in the heavens. They petitioned HKB”H (Tehillim 8, 2): **“תנה הודך על השמים”—bestow Your glory upon the heavens.** To which Moshe responded: **“Are you affected by the yetzer hara?”** As we know (Kiddushin 30b), the Torah is the antidote for the yetzer hara. Hence, Moshe rebutted the malachim by pointing out that they do not need the Torah, since they do not have to deal with the yetzer hara. Yisrael, on the other hand, do need this powerful antidote.

We can suggest that this is alluded to by Avraham’s remark to the malachim: **“I will fetch a morsel of bread.”** Because of the meal that you are eating by me, my descendants and I will take the Torah that is compared to a loaf of bread. This is apparent from the following elucidation in the Gemara (Chagigah 14a) related to the passuk (Mishlei 9, 5): **“לכו לחמו בלחמי”—come, partake of my bread**—which alludes to the Torah. Avraham continues: **“וסעדו”—I will prove to you that the Torah is not suited for you; “לבכם”—you only have a single heart, a yetzer hatov, so you do not need the Torah; “כי על כן עברתם”—this is why HKB”H arranged for you to visit me and dine by me; so that you would not be able to object to the giving of the Torah to Yisrael.**

Along these lines, his son, the esteemed Admor, Rabbi Aharon of Belz, zy”a, explains the contradiction addressed by Chazal in the Midrash (B.R. 48, 14). At the beginning of the parsha, it says: **“And behold! Three men were standing over him.”** This passuk suggests that the malachim stood above Avraham. Yet, further on it says (Bereishis 18, 8): **“וזהו: עומד עליהם תחת העץ ויאכלו”—he stood over them beneath the tree and they ate**—suggesting that Avraham stood above the malachim.

The Midrash resolves this contradiction as follows: Before Avraham fulfilled his obligation of providing for his guests, the malachim believed they were superior to him. After Avraham fulfilled the mitzvah of “hachnasas orchim,” they recognized that he was superior to them.

In fact, the Midrash states that the malachim were in awe of him at that point. But why? Because, as explained above, as a consequence of the meal Avraham Avinu prepared for the malachim, Yisrael were privileged to receive the Torah. This then is the explanation of the Midrash. Prior to hosting the malachim and feeding them, they thought that they were superior to Avraham—**“they stood over him.”** Subsequently, after enjoying the meal he served them, even the malachim acknowledged Avraham’s superiority. For, his offspring, the people of Yisrael, were destined to receive the Torah instead of them. Hence, the Midrash concludes: **“They were in awe of him”**—because they realized that as a result of that meal, they would not receive the Torah.

Inner Chambers versus Outer Chambers

Following this introduction, we will proceed to explain the profound rationale of Avraham Avinu for serving the malachim outside under the tree instead of inviting them into his tent. First, however, let us clarify the censure of the malachim by HKB”H: **“Aren’t you ashamed of treating him this way? Isn’t he the one whom you visited and in whose home you ate?”** At first glance, this seems incongruous. Why should the malachim relinquish their claim to the Torah, which they wanted dearly, solely because they dined by Avraham?

We will endeavor to explain the matter based on an elucidation in the Gemara (Chagigah 5b) related to the passuk (Yirmiyah 13, 17): **“ואם לא תשמעוהו במסתרים תבכה נפשי....”** **“And if you do not heed this, My spirit will cry in hidden chambers” . . . HKB”H has a place, and its name is “Mistorim.”** That is where HKB”H cries and bemoans the fact that Yisrael is in galus. The Gemara asks an obvious question: **“ומי איכא בכיה קמיה”** **הקב”ה, והאמר רב פפא, אין עציבות לפני הקב”ה, שנאמר הוד והדר לפניו. But is there weeping in the presence of HKB”H? After all, Rav Papa stated: There is no grief in the presence of HKB”H, for it states (Divrei HaYamim I 16, 27): “Glory and Majesty are before Him, might and delight are in His place!”** The Gemara answers: **“לא קשיא הא”** **“This does not pose a difficulty. The first verse refers to the inner chambers, while the latter refers to the outer chambers.”**

Rabeinu Chananel explains that there is only joy in the inner chambers, in keeping with the words: **“Might and delight are in His place!”** In contrast, there is weeping and sorrow in the outer chambers, in keeping with the words: **“My spirit will cry in hidden chambers.”** The Zohar hakadosh (Noach 61b) also associates grief and sadness with the outer chambers: **“וכדין עציבו קמיה בבתי בראי”** **“ודאי והן אראלם צעקו חוצה.”**

“Fear of sin” in the Outer Chambers “Joy of Torah” in the Inner Chambers

Based on what we have discussed, we can better comprehend a teaching in the Mishnah (Avos 3, 9): **“רבי חנינא**

בן דוסא אומר, כל שיראת חטאו קודמת לחכמתו חכמתו מתקיימת, וכל שחכמתו קודמת ליראת חטאו אין חכמתו מתקיימת.” **Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa says: If one’s fear of sin takes precedence over his wisdom, his wisdom will endure; but if his wisdom takes precedence over his fear of sin, his wisdom will not endure.** Why is the absence of the “fear of sin” such an impediment to attaining the wisdom of the Torah?

To begin with, we have learned in the Gemara (Shabbas 31a): **“אמר רבה בר רב הונא, כל אדם שיש לו תורה ואין בו יראת שמים, דומה לגזבר שמסרו לו מפתחות הפנימיות ומפתחות החיצונות לא מסרו לו.”** **Rabbah bar Rav Huna said: Any person who has acquired Torah knowledge but lacks the fear of Heaven, is comparable to a treasurer who was entrusted with the keys to the inner chambers but not with the keys to the outer chambers. How can he possibly gain access (to the inner chambers)?** This implies that “yirah”—fear—is the key to open the outer chamber; whereas Torah is the key to open the inner chamber.

Let us suggest an explanation. The fear of sin is associated with the outer chambers, of which it is said: **“My spirit will cry in hidden chambers.”** On the other hand, Torah is the source of joy emanating from kedushah, as it is written (Tehillim 19, 9): **“פקודי ה’ ישרים משמחי לב”**—**the orders of Hashem are upright, gladdening the heart.** Hence, it is associated with the inner chambers where **“Might and delight are in His place!”** Thus, Torah-study is prohibited during the seven days of “aveilus” (mourning) and on Tishah B’Av, because it brings joy and happiness.

This is the message conveyed by Shlomo HaMelech regarding the revelation at Har Sinai (Shir HaShirim 1, 4): **“משכני אחרוך נרוצה הביאני המלך חדריו נגילה ונשמחה בך”**—**draw me, we will run after you; the King brought me to his chambers. We will rejoice and be glad in you.** According to an elucidation in the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Shir HaShirim, 982) this passuk refers to Matan Torah: **“The King brought me into his chambers”—alludes to the chambers of Torah.** In keeping with this discussion, this means that at Matan Torah, HKB”H brought Yisrael into His inner chambers to celebrate and rejoice **ב”ך**—with the **22** letters of the Torah.

HKB”H Sits and Studies Torah in the Inner Chambers

I had a wonderful idea concerning the source of joy that prevails in the inner chambers. We have learned in the Gemara (A.Z. 3b): **”שתיים עשרה שעות הוי היום, שלש הראשונות: “הקב”ה יושב ועוסק בתורה—the day is comprised of twelve hours; during the first three hours, HKB”H sits and engages in Torah study.** We can assume that HKB”H studies Torah in the inner chambers, as suggested by the passuk: **”Might and delight are in His place!”** Seeing as Torah-study makes those who study it happy—as indicated by the passuk: **”פקודי ה' ישרים משמחי לב”**—therefore, HKB”H’s joy and delight fill the inner chambers.

Thus, we can conclude that the source of “yirah” and fear is in the outer chambers, of which it says: **”My spirit will cry in hidden chambers”**; whereas the source of joy and happiness emanating from the Torah is in the inner chambers, of which it says: **”Might and delight are in His place!”** Thus, it is evident that just as a person cannot reach the inner chambers without first passing through the outer chambers; similarly, a person cannot attain the Torah located in the inner chambers without first acquiring “yirah”—fear and reverence of Hashem—located in the outer chambers. David HaMelech conveys this fact in the following passuk (Tehillim 111, 10): **”ראשית חכמה יראת ה'—the beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d.** In order to enter the inner sanctum to study the wisdom of the Torah, it is necessary to initially enter the outer chambers by imbuing oneself with the fear and reverence of Hashem. Only then can one ascend to the inner chambers to access the wisdom of the Torah.

We can now better appreciate the statement of Rabbah bar Rav Huna: **Any person who has acquired Torah knowledge but lacks the fear of Heaven, is comparable to a treasurer who was entrusted with the keys to the inner chambers but not with the keys to the outer chambers. So, how can he possibly gain access (to the inner chambers)?** Clearly, if he cannot access the inner chambers, his Torah knowledge will be of no benefit to him.

This coincides very nicely with the statement of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa: **If one’s fear of sin takes precedence**

over his wisdom, his wisdom will endure—because his “yirah” will gain him access to the outer chambers. From there, he can ascend to the inner chambers to reap the fruits of his Torah-study. **But if his wisdom takes precedence over his fear of sin, his wisdom will not endure**—because it is impossible to benefit from the light of Torah located in the inner chambers without first entering the outer chambers.

Avraham Avinu Merited Entering the Inner Chambers

Proceeding along this sublime path, we will now provide an explanation for Avraham Avinu’s reluctance to invite the malachim into his tent. As we know, Avraham Avinu served Hashem with the midah of “chesed,” which is a form of “Ahavas Hashem”—love of Hashem. As such, he is described by HKB”H as (Yeshayah 41, 8): **”אברהם אוהבי—Avraham, who loved Me.** It stands to reason, therefore, that he served Hashem in the inner chambers, which are depicted as: **”Might and delight are in His place!”**

With this in mind and the utmost reverence, I dare to explain how Avraham managed to perceive the entire Torah before it was actually given. In the words of the Gemara (Yoma 28b): **”קיים אברהם אבינו כל התורה כולה, שנאמר עקב אשר שמע אברהם בקולי—Avraham Avinu fulfilled all the precepts of the Torah, as it states (Bereishis 26, 5): “Because Avraham heeded My voice.”** Let us suggest that he was able to accomplish this feat, since he served Hashem with “ahavah,” as if he was present in the inner chambers. Therefore, his abode, where he served Hashem with “ahavah,” was a virtual inner chamber, akin to the place where HKB”H sits and studies Torah. This then is the meaning of the Midrash (B.R. 49, 2): **”אין לך כל יום ויום שאין הקב”ה מחדש הלכה בבית דין של מעלה... אפילו אותן ההלכות היה—there is not a single day that HKB”H does not introduce a new halachah in the heavenly court . . . Avraham knew even those halachos.** Since he virtually lived in the inner chambers, he was able to perceive and intuit all of the precepts of the Torah.

This explains very nicely the passuk: **”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.”**

Rashi explained that he sat there to keep an eye out for any passersby, so that he could invite them into his tent. The esteemed Sar Shalom of Belz, zy" a, interprets Rashi's words "עובר ושב" as referring to a Jew who might have transgressed a precept of the Torah and then performed teshuvah. Thus, Avraham was on the lookout for such a Jew, so that he could welcome him into his home.

In keeping with our current discussion, Avraham Avinu, due to his immense kedushah, voluntarily left his tent, his virtual inner chamber, to check out the outer chambers. He was looking for anyone who was "עובר"—who committed an aveirah "ושב"—and then performed teshuvah out of "yirah." Such a penitent would have to remain in the outer chambers until he was inspired by Avraham to perform teshuvah motivated by "ahavah." Then, Avraham could bring him into his tent, a virtual inner chamber full of "simchah."

Malachim Are Not Permitted Entrance to the Inner Chambers

I would now like to introduce a fascinating chiddush found in the Derashos of the Chasam Sofer. He asserts that the ministering angels are only allowed into the outer chambers; they are not allowed into the inner chambers. This phenomenon can be explained based on what is written in the Yad HaMelech on the Rambam (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 2, 1) and in the Chiddushei Aggados of the Maharal of Prague (Makkos 12a). Since the malachim are constantly in the presence of the Almighty in the heavens, their service is characterized exclusively by "yirah" rather than "ahavah," because they are in awe of the Divine Presence.

They substantiate this with the formula we recite in Shacharis praising the malachim: "כולם עומדים ברום עולם" —ומשמיעים 'ביראה' יחד בקול דברי אלקים חיים—**they all stand in the heights of the universe, proclaiming together aloud with "yirah" the words of the living G-d.** Further on, we recite: "וכולם עושים באימה וביראה רצון קונם"—**and they all perform the will of their Maker with awe and "yirah."** Similarly, further on, we recite: "קדושה כולם כאחד עונים באימה" —ואומרים ביראה—**all, as one, proclaim His kedushah with awe and say with "yirah" . . .** (In some versions of that passage, it says: "ונתנים באהבה רשות זה לזה"—**granting**

permission to one another with "ahavah." This is not implying that they are serving the Almighty with "ahavah" but that they are treating each other with "ahavah.")

It is for this reason that they are not permitted entrance into the inner chambers where the service is characterized by "simchah," as per the depiction: **"Might and delight are in His place!"** Thus, we can comprehend Avraham Avinu's profound rationale for not inviting the malachim into his abode. Instead, he instructed them to **"recline beneath the tree"**—i.e., to remain in the outer chambers.

Now, this illuminates for us how the Midrash reconciles the apparent contradiction in the pesukim. Initially, the text states that the malachim **"stood above him,"** because in their minds, they were spiritual beings from the heavenly realms and, as such, were on a higher "madreigah" than Avraham. Subsequently, however, they saw that Avraham, the most hospitable person in the universe, neglected to invite them into his home. Instead, he had them stay outside in the courtyard under the tree. Thus, they understood that they were not permitted to enter his tent, because it possessed the status of an inner chamber, which was off limits to them. Hence, at that point, the text states: **"And he stood above them"**—i.e., they recognized Avraham's superiority.

HKB"H Proved to the Malachim that They Could Not Receive the Torah in the Inner Chambers

This explains magnificently HKB"H's response to the malachim when they petitioned to receive the Torah: **"Are you not ashamed to touch this man (Avraham Avinu) to whom you descended and in whose home you ate?"** HKB"H was hinting to them that they are not permitted to enter the inner chambers. After all, you dined on his property, but he had you stay outside under the tree. Why didn't he invite you into his tent? Therefore, what claim do you have to the Torah that HKB"H studies in the inner chambers?

This also explains very nicely the heated argument that ensued between Moshe Rabeinu and the heavenly malachim (Shabbas 88b): **When Moshe ascended to the heights, the ministering angels said to HKB"H, "Master of the Universe! What is someone born of a woman doing amongst us?"** He replied, **"He has come to receive**

the Torah. Moshe Rabeinu won the debate by pointing out that they do not need the Torah, because they are not under the influence of the yetzer hara: "יצר הרע יש ביניכם".

In keeping with this discussion, let us propose the following: When Moshe ascended to the heavens, he entered the inner chambers, a place that was off limits to the malachim. The malachim were dumbfounded! This prompted them to ask HKB"H: **"What is this mortal doing among us?"** They were surprised that a human being was standing there between them and HKB"H. Whereas they were confined to the outer chambers, this mere mortal was allowed to enter the inner chambers where HKB"H was engaged in Torah-study. To which HKB"H replied: **"He has come to receive the Torah!"** Therefore, it is necessary for him to come into the inner chambers.

When the malachim protested and questioned why, in fact, lowly human beings were allowed into the inner chambers to receive the Torah, Moshe Rabeinu rebutted them conclusively. He pointed out that human beings are in a constant battle with the yetzer hara. The malachim, on the other hand, are not harassed by a yetzer hara; so, they do not need the Torah to overcome the yetzer. Avraham insinuated as much to the malachim. He explained that he was not inviting them into his abode: "ואקחה פת לחם"—because my children and I are destined to receive the Torah in the inner chambers. You, on the other hand: "וסעדו לבכם"—only have one heart, one yetzer, and have no need for the antidote to the yetzer hara, the precious Torah.



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