



# MISHNAS CHAYIM

# משנת היום

## MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

### פרשת וירא תשי"ע 5770 Parshas Vayeira

## MAKING AMENDS

The incident in this week's *parshah* involving Avimelech's encounter with Avraham and Sarah contains some critical lessons concerning interpersonal relationships and the effectiveness of prayer. The Mishnah ensures that these lessons are borne out.

Entering the city of Gerar, Avraham was afraid that the natives would steal his wife Sarah, and kill him in the process. To neutralize the imminent danger facing Avraham, they decided to pose as brother and sister instead of as husband and wife.

Sure enough, Sarah was whisked off to the palace of Avimelech, the king of Gerar. But the hapless king could get nowhere near Avraham's "sister," as he and his entire household were stricken and incapacitated by Hashem. Appearing in a dream, Hashem issued a stern warning to Avimelech: Return the woman – who is really the man's wife – lest you die. Avimelech got the message.

But he contended that he was not to blame, as he had been under the impression that Avraham was Sarah's brother, not her husband. Hashem answered that He was aware of this fact. He assured Avimelech that after returning the woman to her rightful place, Avraham would pray for Avimelech's wellbeing and he would live.

## BEG YOUR PARDON

The Mishnah in Bava Kamma (8:7) derives some important interpersonal *halachos* from this exchange:

אף על פי שהוא נותן לו, אינו נמחל לו עד שיקבץ ממונו, שנאמר (בראשית כ) ועתה השב אשת וגו'. ומנין שלא יהא המוחל אכזרי שנאמר (שם) ויתפלל אברהם אל האלהים וירפא אלהים את אבימלך וגו'.

“Even though the offender has paid the claimant (the monetary compensation owed him for damages), he is not cleared of sin until he (specifically) asks for forgiveness; as the verse says (*Bereishis* 20:7), ‘And now, return the man’s wife... (and he will pray on your behalf...).’ And from where do we learn that the beseeched should not respond with cruelty (by refusing to be appeased)? As it says (*Ibid.* v. 17), ‘And Avraham prayed to Hashem, and Hashem healed Avimelech...’”

It is somewhat of a challenge, however, to understand these textual proofs. The Mishnah imparts basically two important injunctions concerning the rectification of an interpersonal offense:

- 1) Payment of the monetary penalty is not enough; full atonement is attained only by soliciting forgiveness from the party that was wronged.
- 2) The individual who suffered the offense should display a sense of mercy and grant the requested pardon.

For each of these teachings, the Mishnah provides scriptural support. The issue at hand, however, is that at first glance, the *pesukim* do not seem to make any mention of the very things for which they are supposedly serving as “proofs.” This first half of the Mishnah, for example, deals with the necessity of asking forgiveness. As proof, the Mishnah quotes the verse in which Hashem tells Avimelech to return Sarah and Avraham will pray for his welfare. Where is there any mention of asking anyone for forgiveness? Perhaps all that was required was for Avimelech to return Avraham's wife; that would rectify the situation. As part of the “deal,” Avraham would pray for his recovery. Where is the compelling proof that Avimelech had to beseech Avraham's pardon?

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The *Tosfos Yom Tov* understands the Mishnah's derivation from the *pasuk* as stemming from a simple matter of not acting with *chutzpah*. Avimelech was slated for death on account of the wrongdoing perpetrated against Avraham and Sarah. Could it possibly be that Avimelech would ask Avraham to pray that the decree be rescinded without first asking the Patriarch to forgive him for that misdeed? If Avimelech was ready to ask Avraham to pray for his salvation, you can rest assured that he preceded this request with a humbling petition for forgiveness.

### PREREQUISITE FOR PRAYER

R' Yerucham Levovitz (*Da'as Torah, parshas Vayeira*) derives the proof from a somewhat different angle. In order for prayer to be effective and accepted, it must be performed with a full heart. Even more; when one *davens* on behalf of another, the prayer will only achieve its desired result if it is delivered with a feeling of *ahavah* (love) for his fellow. For Avraham's *tefillah* to effect a recovery for

Avimelech, Avraham's attitude toward the king must have been one of *ahavah*. By virtue of the fact that the Torah tells us that Avimelech would be saved through the prayers of Avraham – the very individual against whom the sin was perpetrated – it must be that Avimelech worked to diffuse any residual ill-will potentially remaining in Avraham's heart. Presumably, he achieved this by asking for forgiveness.

R' Yerucham's explanation can assist us in understanding the second half of the Mishnah as well. Here also, we are faced with the issue – initially, at least – that the “proof” contained in the verse is somewhat elusive. The Mishnah states that it is cruel – and ostensibly forbidden – for the wronged individual to refuse to be mollified. This idea is allegedly derived from the *pasuk* that states that Avraham did offer prayers on behalf of Avimelech, whose life was subsequently spared.

Yet once again the “evidence” appears somewhat shaky; who says that Avraham actually forgave him? Perhaps Avraham felt it was incumbent upon him to see to it that Hashem's reassurance to Avimelech be substantiated. Hashem had told Avimelech that Avraham would *daven*, so Avraham *davened*. Or perhaps Avraham felt enough pity that Avimelech should not perish, but where do we see that he also forgave the misdeed?

R' Yerucham's explanation, however, provides much clarification. The proof lies in the fact that the prayer *worked*. As stated, *tefillah* for another is only effective if it is offered out of a heart filled with love and compassion. Avraham's *tefillah* was answered, as Avimelech's health was restored. Apparently, then, Avimelech's efforts were reciprocated by Avraham, who must have banished any trace of grievance from his heart.

Avraham and Avimelech teach us that asking for forgiveness must be more than just lip-service; rather, it should go to the very heart of the matter. The offender must sincerely seek to effect real appeasement; and the wronged party needs to strive to clear his heart of any residual anger.

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