

(2) He raised his eyes and he saw; three men were standing right by him and he saw. He ran towards them from the entrance to the tent and he bowed down to the ground.

(3) He said, “My Master, if I have found favor in Your eyes, please do not move away from upon Your servant.”

AVRAHAM'S ELEVATION AND HIS THREE GUESTS

Consider the following questions:

1. Why does the verse say “*and he saw*” twice?
2. Why did Avraham run towards the men when they were standing right by him?
3. If Avraham thought that they were ordinary Arabs, why was he so in awe of them that he bowed down to the ground?
4. When Avraham ran and bowed to his guests, why didn't he speak to them?
5. Why did Avraham say to God, “*Please do not ‘move away from upon’ Your servant*”? He should have just said, “*Please do not leave Your servant.*”
6. Why didn't he ask God for permission to deal with the guests before he ran towards them?¹⁰

In our commentary to verse 1, we discussed four ways that Avraham became elevated through the mitzvah of *bris milah*. To address the questions raised here, we begin by discussing a fifth way that emerges from the following Midrash:¹¹

10. The Alshich notes that Rashi (verse 3) felt this question to be so strong that he interprets the verse as being written out of chronological order: Avraham did indeed speak to God before running to his guests.

11. *Bereishis Rabbah* 47:10.

(ב) וַיִּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיִּרְא וַיִּרְץ
 לִקְרֹאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ אֲרֻצָּה.
 (ג) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִם־נָא מִצָּאתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֶל־נָא תֵעָבֵר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ.

Avraham said to God, “Before I did *bris milah* passersby would come to me. Is it possible that now that I have circumcised myself they will not come anymore?” God answered him, “Before you did *bris milah*, uncircumcised people came to you. Now, I will come in My Glory and reveal Myself to you.”

Avraham was always more concerned about the existence of the world than about himself. Thus, when God told him to offer Yitzchak as a sacrifice, Avraham did not utter a word in protest; but when God told him to perform *bris milah*, he resisted. This is because he feared that as a result, people would no longer want to avail themselves of his hospitality, for he had done something so strange: He had altered the human body, which (it was assumed) was already perfect as is.¹² As such, he would no longer be able to fulfill the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim* (welcoming visitors) — and our Sages have taught us¹³ that until the Torah was given the world existed only in the merit of Avraham’s acts of kindness [marked most by the hospitality he extended to one and all].¹⁴ Therefore, Avraham was concerned about how the world would continue to exist after he circumcised himself.

12. Indeed, the Alshich notes, this was the argument of Turnus Rufus with R’ Akiva (*Midrash Tanchuma, Tazria* 5) against circumcision.

13. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 12:12.

14. The Midrash there says that after the Torah was given, the world stood on three pillars: on the Torah, on Divine service, and on lovingkindness (see at length *Alshich on Avos* [Feldheim, 2014], commentary on *Avos* 1:2, pp. 22–23). Before the Torah was given, it stood on the pillar of lovingkindness alone. See also Alshich above, *Parashas Lech Lecha* 17:1–2.

Should not the existence of the world take precedence over this single mitzvah?!

God answered him that, to the contrary, as a result of his *bris milah* his effectiveness in sustaining the world would be far greater than heretofore. There are two basic means through which the world may be sustained. The first one is via Divine *shefa* (spiritual outpouring or blessing) coming down to earth from above. The second, higher one is through the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) being present (“resting”) on the earth itself. Loftier even than this would be if there was a *tzaddik* on earth who was worthy of serving as the actual Chariot for the Divine Presence;¹⁵ then there would be no limit to the amount of Divine blessing coming to the world.

Until now, he had fulfilled the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim*, and while the merit of this mitzvah had not caused the *Shechinah* to rest on the earth (means #2), it had brought Divine blessing down to earth from above (means #1). This was enough to sustain the world.

But now, through the mitzvah of *bris milah*, Avraham was elevated in a fifth way: Before he was circumcised, the heavenly angels served as the Divine Chariot, “carrying” the *Shechinah*. After he was circumcised (that is, beginning in our passage, where Avraham is recuperating from his circumcision) Avraham himself would serve as the Divine Chariot — as the Midrash quotes God as saying, “I will come in My Glory and reveal Myself to you.” While *hachnasas orchim* remained a mitzvah, it was no longer necessary in order to sustain the world; the world would be sustained on a much higher level through Avraham’s elevated state.¹⁶

Now we can answer the questions we asked above:

15. In Kabbalistic thought, the Divine Chariot (מְרֻכָּבָה) “carries” the Divine Presence.

16. The Alshich writes the ideas presented in the preceding paragraphs only briefly; he explains them more fully in *Parashas Lech Lecha*, 12:10–13.

God appeared to Avraham along with the angels who had been serving as His Chariot (Gavriel, Michael, and Refael). But when He approached Avraham to rest upon him — for Avraham was God’s new “Chariot”¹⁷ — He clothed the angels in the garb of men, giving Avraham the opportunity to perform the mitzvah of *hachmasas orchim*.¹⁸ The verse says, “He raised his eyes and he saw” — i.e., he saw that he had become the Chariot of the Divine Presence which was resting upon him from above. “Three men were standing right by him and he saw” — i.e., when he lowered his gaze to look around him, he didn’t see his guests approaching him gradually, in the normal way that men walk. Rather, suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, they appeared “standing right by him.”

Avraham was confused. He had seen that God’s Presence was now resting upon him; and he had seen these visitors appear from nowhere. [This answers Question 1.] Perhaps these visitors were angels.¹⁹ But perhaps they were human beings, who just happened to have the ability to move extremely fast?

Avraham therefore said to himself: “Two great things have happened to me. First, I have become the Chariot of the Divine Presence. Second, I have, at this moment, the opportunity to do the mitzvah of *gemilus chesed* (kindness). If I attend to the mitzvah of *gemilus chesed*, perhaps the Divine Presence will leave me; but if I ignore my guests while I ask God not to remove His Presence from me, the visitors may leave as quickly as they came! [This answers Question 6.] And it is not an option to speak to

Answer to
Question 1

Answer to
Question 6

17. Our verse does not mention that God said anything to Avraham. The Alshich explains that this is because God’s message was non-verbal: He came to show Avraham that he was now God’s Chariot.

18. See Rashi to verse 1 (end).

19. The Alshich adds that it was because Avraham thought they might be angels that, when he offered them food, he said, *סַעֲדוּ לִבְכֶם*, *Sustain your “heart”* — in the singular. As stated in *Bereishis Rabbah* 48:11, while human beings have two “hearts” (the *yetzer hatov* and the *yetzer hara*), angels have only one (the *yetzer hatov*). See also Mishnah *Berachos* 9:5.

Chapter
18

(7) Then Avraham ran to the cattle, took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the youth, and he hurried to prepare it.

(8) He took some cream²⁰ and milk and the calf that he had prepared and placed it before [his guests]. And he stood over them under the tree and they ate.

Answer to
Question 4

them before speaking to God, as it would be inappropriate to talk with them before I have spoken with the King of kings!” [This answers Question 4.]

Answer to
Question 2

In order to deal with the difficult situation in which he found himself, Avraham acted with great wisdom. He didn't say a word to his guests; he just hinted to them that he wanted them to stay by running towards them, even though they were standing very near him. This was in case they were human beings. [This answers Question 2.] Then, in case they were angels, *he bowed down to the ground*. By doing these two things he could feel confident that no matter if they were humans or angels, they would understand that he greatly desired their presence and would surely return to speak to them, even though he had to take care of something else first (namely, speak to God). [This answers Question 3.]

Answer to
Question 3

Avraham then spoke to God. He said, “*Please do not ‘move away from upon’ Your servant,*” meaning: “If these guests of mine are angels, please do not move Your Presence that is resting upon me and go to rest upon them (as You had always done until my *bris milah*). Do not let them leave here to become the Chariot for Your Presence, for if that happens, I will lose out twice: I will not have done the mitzvah of *gemilus chesed*, and I will no longer be the Chariot for Your Presence. On the other hand, if these guests are human beings, please do not remove Your Presence from upon me and allow me to continue serving as your Chariot while I do the mitzvah of *gemilus chesed*.” [This answers Question 5.]

Answer to
Question 5