

Parashat Vayera, 5772, 2011:

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Standing Strong for What We Believe

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Now the L-rd appeared to him [Avraham] in the plains of Mamre and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot. And he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing (*nitzavim*) beside him, and he saw and he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and he prostrated himself to the ground. (*Sefer Bereishit*, 18:1-2, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Two questions that have always bothered me regarding the second verse of our *parasha* are: “Why does the Torah write ‘three men were standing (“*nitzavim*”) beside him,’ rather than the word ‘*omdim*’ (“standing”), since it is a far more common Hebrew verb and one that is used quite frequently throughout Tanach (the Hebrew Canon of Scripture)?” In addition, we may very well ask, “What message is the Torah communicating to us by the use of this unusual verb?”

I believe we can answer these questions by looking at two other instances of the word “*n'tziv*” (“standing,” or its variants) that are found in our *sefer*. One concerns the incident of Lot and his wife that appears in our *parasha*. They are warned not to look behind themselves at the imminent death and destruction that will befall S'dom and Gomorrah (*Sefer Bereishit* 19:17). Rashi (1040-1105) notes that Lot and his wife had no individual merits that entitled them to be saved, since they were just as evil as the native inhabitants of those cities. Quite simply, they were rescued solely because of their connection to

Avraham. Instead of listening to the words of the *malach* (angel), however, Lot's wife cast a furtive glance behind her and was turned into a pillar of salt - a "*ntziv melech*" (*Sefer Bereishit* 19:26). Rashi, based upon the Midrash in *Bereishit Rabbah* 50:4, explains that she was turned into a pillar of salt precisely because she had sinned via salt by refusing to give it to her guests. Giving salt to guests had been the custom of *Avraham Avinu* (our Father Abraham), who personified *hachnasat orchim* (kindness to guests). Lot wanted to continue this laudatory behavior – only to be stopped in his tracks by his miserly wife. What is the nature of a *n'tziv*? It is something permanent and unmoving. It is fixed in place and will seemingly remain there forever. Thus, Lot's wife's transformation from a living and breathing person into an ever-standing silent pillar of salt is a permanent reminder that she failed to emulate the kindness and humanity of Avraham.

Another instance of the verb "*n'tziv*" occurs in next week's *parasha*, Chayah Sarah, when Avraham's servant, Eliezer, is waiting by the well and prays to Hashem to reveal Yitzchak's future wife to him. The Torah uses the expression (*Sefer Bereishit* 24:13): "*Henah anochi nitzav al ain hamayim...*" ("Behold I am standing at the well...") Here, too, why doesn't Eliezer simply say: "*Henah anochi omed al ain hamayaim?*" Why does he employ the rare verb "*nitzav*"? I believe that Eliezer uses this word to teach us a crucial and fundamental lesson regarding the nature of *emunah* (faith). In my estimation, his actions publicly proclaimed his loyalty to his master Avraham, and to the *Ribono shel Olam* (the Master of the Universe). Avraham made Eliezer take a *shavuah* (oath) that he would expend every possible effort to find Yitzhak a bride from his place of origin. In

turn, Eliezer did his utmost to fulfill that *shavuah* - he would not be moved right or left for any reason. He had one course and one course only: *nitzav* – to stand and wait patiently for Hashem's divine revelation to unfold. Thus, like Lot's wife, he was standing permanently in place, albeit, for an entirely different purpose. In my opinion, this is precisely why “*nitzav*,” instead of the common verb “*omed*,” is used.

Let us now return to our opening passage and view it in the light of our present analysis. The “three men standing (*nitzavim*)” before Avraham were not “men” at all. *Chazal* (Our Sages) teach us that they were, in fact, angels sent by the Master of the Universe to perform three unique functions. *Talmud Bavli, Baba Metziah* 86b formulates this idea in this manner:

Who were these three “men?” [They were the angels] *Michael, Gavriel, and Raphael*. *Michael* was sent to inform Sarah that she was to be blessed with a child [Yitzhak]. *Raphael* was sent to heal Avraham [following his *brit milah* at the age of 99], and *Gavriel* came to destroy S'dom.

We now can clearly understand why the word “*nitzavim*” was used in reference to the *malachim* (angels), and what the Torah was teaching us thereby. The *malachim* were sent to perform three tasks; and nothing, absolutely nothing, could or would deter them from fulfilling the word of the Almighty. They, therefore, stood “permanently” before Avraham in order to fulfill G-d's command. They were steadfast and loyal in their commitment to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He), and are viewed as such for evermore.

I believe that we may learn a practical lesson from both the *malachim* and Eliezer; namely, we, too, must be unswerving in our commitment to Hashem and to His Holy

Torah. In my estimation, this thought may be found as well in the opening words of *Sefer Devarim*, Parashat Nitzavim – the *parasha par excellence* of standing before Hashem. I believe that “*nitzavim*” is employed in that context to teach us that no matter how powerful and persuasive certain non-Jewish ideas may be, if they are opposed to the essence of the Torah and Halacha, and to our being an *Am Kodesh* (a holy nation), then: “*Atem nitzavim hayom!*” - You and I must stand fast today, and every day, in our love and devotion to Hashem and His holy Torah. In short, no force on earth should ever remove us from being *nitzavim* of *emunah* (pillars of faith). As *Dovid Hamelech* (King David) said so powerfully in *Sefer Tehillim* 27:4: “*Achat shaalti m’ate Hashem, oto avekash shivti b’beit Hashem kol yimei chayai...*” (“One [thing] I ask of the L-rd, that I seek - that I may dwell in the house of the L-rd all the days of my life...”) This, then, is the goal of our people – to consistently be “*nitzavim hayom*” (standing today), *machar* (tomorrow) and *l’atid lavo* (forever more) before Hashem.

May *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* grant us the spiritual strength and desire to reinvigorate our relationship with Him, and thereby recognize that He is our true *Yedid Nefesh* (Beloved of our Soul), so that we may always be *nitzavim* before Him. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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