

**Sefas Emes on Vayera: "I am wounded with love"**

At the very beginning of our parashah, God visits Abraham, as he is sitting under the Terebinths of Mamre in the heat of the day. Both the Gemara and the Midrash (and Rashi after them) say that God's visit to Abraham was the first example of "Bikur Cholim" – visiting the sick – and example that we as Jews are urged to follow. In this interpretation, the sickness of Abraham is the physical pain that he is experiencing following his recent circumcision (at the end of last week's parashah).

The Sefas Emes, on the other hand, tells us that the sickness experienced by Abraham in the wake of his circumcision is not, in fact, physical pain, but spiritual pain. Abraham's "sickness", which prompts God's "bikur Cholim", is actually lovesickness. The same lovesickness described in the Song of Songs – "Cholat Ahavah Ani" – I am sick with love.

In order to understand how circumcision could make Abraham spiritually lovesick, we have to understand that in the understanding of the Sefas Emes, there are a number of different ways in which the soul relates to the body. One of these ways is that the body is in fact a "map" of the soul. What is true of the body is also true of the soul; just as the body has physical desires, the soul has spiritual desires – most importantly, the desire to return to its source in the Divine Realm. Just as the body has sensitive places, the soul has sensitive places as well. In the physical body, circumcision is the removal of "extraneous material", a barrier of flesh, from the most sensitive part of the male body – the part of the male body that the Sefas Emes understands as the locus of physical longing. This correlates, in the spiritual body, to the removal of the veil of insensitivity from our most sensitive spiritual places – the locus of spiritual longing.

The removal of this barrier actually increases our longing, our heightened sensitivity causing us to feel with special urgency every inch of the distance between our individual souls and God. The Sefas Emes suggests that this change is so dramatic that we are suddenly overwhelmed by lovesickness, where before there may not have been the slightest *conscious* sense of desire before.

So here we have Abraham, who has been physically wounded in the rite of circumcision, which has helped him attain a new spiritual sensitivity and wholeness, which in turn has caused him to perceive his own spiritual lack and lovesickness. Sickness and healing, wellbeing and pain are related in a complex (and somewhat counterintuitive) way. And in some ways, this actually resonates with our lived experience. Spiritual growth *can* be deeply uncomfortable. Physical pain or illness *can* have a role in our spiritual development.

It is in this context that God does Bikur Cholim. God appears to Abraham in the midst of this very complex experience, but does not interpret Abraham's experience for him or put an end to the physical pain or the spiritual longing. God has no speaking part. God simply shows up. This is an extremely powerful model for us humans with regard to Bikur Cholim. We cannot make full sense of the relationships between illness and growth, spiritual development and pain, the

physical and the spiritual. And that is not necessarily our job. But what we can do is show up for one another.

The Sefas Emes closes his drasha on Vayera by saying that the spiritual sensitization that is represented in circumcision is also a feature of Shabbat. On Shabbat, we remove the callous of routine from our spiritual selves. When the distractions of everyday life are removed, we are able to feel our own longing for God – so much so that we are wounded with love. We put away our blackberries, our cell phones, our televisions, and our deadlines, letting the part of us that cries out for God come into our consciousness. In Yedid Nefesh, we sing “Nafshi cholat Ahavatech” My soul is sick for you love. According to the Sefas Emes, this is the meaning of the “additional soul” – the neshamah yeteirah – which we receive on Shabbat. We are allowed to feel the full depths of the soul we already have, including the painful yearning that lies in the innermost, most sensitive part. And this is why we spend Shabbat together – we stand with one another in an act of Bikur Cholim, bearing witness to one another’s spiritual longing, bringing Divine example into the world.