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The Curious Child

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1.

A CHILD'S CRY

Several times in the past,¹ we have related the story of the Rebbe Rashab that took place on Shabbos *parshas Vayeira* when he was a child of four or five years of age:²

To receive a blessing in connection with his birthday,³ the Rebbe Rashab entered the room of his grandfather, the Tzemach Tzedek. The Rebbe Rashab then broke out in tears. He asked: “Why did Hashem show Himself to our forefather Avraham,⁴ but He does not show Himself to us (that is, to the Rebbe Rashab)?”

The Tzemach Tzedek replied: “When a Jew (a tzaddik),⁵ at ninety-nine years of age, decides that he needs to circumcise himself, he deserves that Hashem should show Himself to him.”

2.

WHY THIS APPEARANCE?

The narratives of our Rebbeim, in general, and those that the Rebbeim themselves disclosed to us for publication, in particular, are undoubtedly exact in all their details.

Even the narratives {of events} that occurred in their youth — given that our Rebbeim themselves recounted these stories (and especially in light of the

¹ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 1, “*Vayeira*”; vol. 5, “*Chof Cheshvan*”; vol. 5, p. 321; vol. 15, “*Vayeira-Chof Cheshvan*”. This story was originally told in a *sichah* delivered {by the Previous Rebbe} on Shabbos *parshas Vayeira, Chof Cheshvan*, 5693. A concise version appears in *HaYom Yom*, p. 103.

² {Since the Tzemach Tzedek passed away in 5626, this story must have taken place either on the Rebbe Rashab’s fourth birthday in 5625, or in the lead up to his fifth birthday in 5626.}

³ {The Rebbe Rashab was born on} 20 *Cheshvan*, 5621. For a detailed biography — see *Chanoch LeNaar; Sefer HaToldos Admor Mahorashab* (Kehot 5732; et al.).

⁴ {Described in the opening verse of *parshas Vayeira (Bereishis 18:1)*.}

⁵ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 5, *ibid*, for an explanation of the two versions of this incident.

adage of our Sages, “pumpkins can be recognized from when they begin to blossom”),⁶ it is clear that these narratives not only include lessons for a person’s *avodas Hashem* (as does **everything** a person hears or sees, from which he must derive a lesson),⁷ but they also contain a unique lesson for us to learn and understand.

In the above story, this is not understood: It has already been stated twice (in *parshas Lech Lecha*) that “Hashem appeared to Avram.”⁸ Why, then, did the Rebbe Rashab weep about Hashem revealing Himself only to Avraham and not to us (to the Rebbe Rashab) in connection with the verse in *parshas Vayeira* and not concerning similar verses in *parshas Lech Lecha*?

Regarding the second instance (in *parshas Lech Lecha*) in which “Hashem appeared to Avram,” there was a possibility that the Rebbe Rashab, as of then, had not learned the verse. After all, that verse appears close to the **end** of the *parshah*. (In many places, the curriculum followed was that young students were taught only part of the week’s *parshah* every week.)⁹

However, regarding the first occasion {in this *parshah*} that “Hashem appeared to Avram” {no such explanation can be given} — the verse appears at the very **beginning** of the *parshah*. So why was the Rebbe Rashab not moved to tears by that earlier verse?

⁶ *Berachos* 48a. {This proverb intimates that one can recognize a child’s potential for greatness from his behavior.}

⁷ As imparted by the famous teaching of the Baal Shem Tov (*Keser Shem Tov*, (Kehot ed.), addenda to ch. 127, and sources cited there).

⁸ *Bereishis* 12:7; 17:1.

⁹ Although this {following such a curriculum} is not sensible, based on what *Gur Aryeh* writes on the verse, (*Devarim* 6:7), “You shall teach your children”; et al.

3.

IT DEPENDS ON THE DATE

We can posit the following straightforward reason for this: The Rebbe Rashab entered the Tzemach Tzedek's room (to receive a blessing in connection with his birthday) on Shabbos *parshas Vayeira*. Therefore, the Rebbe Rashab asked about the topic he had been learning, regarding the verse, "Hashem appeared to him," recorded in *parshas Vayeira*. (In contrast, during the week of *parshas Lech Lecha*, the Rebbe Rashab had no reason to enter the Tzemach Tzedek's room).¹⁰

However, the question persists: Why did the **Tzemach Tzedek** only answer why it says Hashem appeared to Avraham in *parshas Vayeira*? Why didn't the Tzemach Tzedek also point out that earlier (in *parshas Lech Lecha*), "Hashem appeared to Avram" — twice?

This question is even more remarkable: The Tzemach Tzedek's answer (that Hashem showed Himself to Avraham because he resolved to circumcise himself) **only** clarifies {the question on} the verse, "Hashem appeared to him" recorded in our *parshah*, which took place after Avraham decided to circumcise himself. However, this same question (and impetus to cry) remains unresolved concerning {the verses} "Hashem appeared to Avram" recorded in *parshas Lech Lecha*, which took place **before** he was circumcised.¹¹

¹⁰ See, however, *Sefer HaSichos*, summer of 5700 (p. 99) {where the Rebbe Rashab is quoted as saying}: "When I was four years old, I would enter my grandfather's room **every day**."

¹¹ Regarding the second "appearance" in *parshas Lech Lecha*, it is possible to answer (albeit with difficulty) that although this appearance occurred before Avraham had actually decided to circumcise himself, nevertheless, the appearance happened (at least) in connection to circumcision (as Rashi explains there).

4.

A POSSIBLE EXPLANATION

Seemingly, we can offer the following explanation:

The two “appearances” in *parshas Lech Lecha* were a **prelude** and **precursor** to the {Divine} **utterance** that followed (“Hashem appeared... and said...”); accordingly, there would be no reason to expect such an “appearance” to someone to whom there would be no subsequent utterance.

Not so in our *parshah*, in which no utterance (or anything of the sort) is made after the “appearance.”¹² This “appearance” was an isolated incident; therefore, the Rebbe Rashab cried specifically in connection with this “appearance.”

However, this explanation is untenable because of the following:

[Even if the “appearance” was made as a precursor to an utterance, in many places,¹³ we find that Scripture says “Hashem said to...” **without** the communication being preceded by Hashem’s appearance — “Hashem appeared...” It seems, then, that Hashem’s stated appearance in these instances also had its distinct purpose (besides serving as a precursor to a Divine utterance). As such, the original question stands. Additionally:]

Hashem’s “appearance” in our *parshah* also had a unique purpose (as **Rashi** — who explains *pshat*¹⁴ — remarks) — “to visit the sick.”¹⁵ Yet, in the case of the Rebbe Rashab, there were **no** such grounds!

¹² See the commentaries on Rashi at the beg. of our *parshah*.

¹³ E.g., *Bereishis* 12:1, and quite a few other places.

¹⁴ {The straightforward meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of the Scripture.” Although there are many levels and depths of interpretation on the Torah, Rashi adopts a straightforward approach.}

¹⁵ {Rashi on *Bereishis* 18:1, “It was the third day from Avraham’s circumcision, and Hashem came to inquire about his welfare.”}

5.

WHY DID HASHEM APPEAR?

The *Baal HaTurim*¹⁶ says that “Hashem appeared to him” (in our *parshah*) “for the circumcision” — in the merit of our forefather Avraham having fulfilled the mitzvah of circumcision.

In light of this explanation, we could seemingly answer that this is the basis of the Rebbe Rashab’s protest (and cries): Since he also had the merit of circumcision,¹⁷ he deserved this reward — “Hashem appeared to him.”

To address this complaint, the Tzemach Tzedek replied that the Rebbe Rashab could not be compared to Avraham since Avraham’s mitzvah of circumcision entailed a unique virtue — he circumcised himself when he was “ninety-nine years old.” Therefore, he (specifically) had merited that “Hashem appeared.”

However, this explanation does not withstand scrutiny for the following reasons:

- a) **Rashi** explains, as mentioned above, that “Hashem appeared to him” not simply as a reward “for circumcision,” but “to visit the sick.”¹⁸ And Rashi’s commentary is also intended for “a five-year-old beginning to study Scripture”¹⁹ — so it is reasonable to say that the Rebbe Rashab’s question, which he asked as a **child of four or five years of age**, was sound, in accord with **Rashi’s commentary** on the verse.

¹⁶ *Baal HaTurim* on *Bereishis* 18:1.

¹⁷ Although the Rebbe Rashab’s circumcision had taken place quite a while beforehand — the impact, the reward of “Hashem appeared to him” being given, could only be when he can (comprehend and) receive it (at the age of four years or older). This is better understood based on the fact that it is known that circumcision is considered a continuous action (see *Paneach Tzefunos* ch. 5, sec. 18, **and sources cited there**; *Likkutei Sichos* vol. 3, p. 759 ff).

¹⁸ Although, from the *Ramban* on our *parshah* (*Bereishis* 18:2 — near to the end), it is implied that this itself that Hashem revealed Himself to him “to visit the sick” was only “to honor him” — as a reward for the mitzvah of circumcision.

¹⁹ {“*Ben chamesh lemikra*,” in the Hebrew original. That is the appropriate age for a child to begin learning *Chumash*. Rashi writes that his commentary on *Chumash* was intended to solve problems that a five-year-old student would encounter in understanding the simple meaning of a verse.}

b) Even according to the interpretation of the *Baal HaTurim* — consider that our discussion is about the Rebbe Rashab, a fraction of whose future qualities could already be perceived in him as a child. (As mentioned above, “pumpkins can be recognized from when they begin to blossom.”)⁶ Surely, the Rebbe Rashab was aware of the preeminence of our forefather Avraham’s *avodah* in general. All the more so, the Rebbe Rashab would have understood the obvious superiority of our forefather Avraham’s circumcision at the age of ninety-nine over the mitzvah of circumcision in general.

Consequently, there was no place for the Rebbe Rashab (even as a child) to have compared himself to Avraham to the extent of having a **complaint** as to why Hashem showed Himself to our forefather Avraham (in the merit of circumcision) but did not show Himself to the Rebbe Rashab.

6.

THE REBBE RASHAB’S COMPLAINT

The following is the proposed explanation: On the contrary, the Rebbe Rashab’s complaint actually *did* stem from his having known what Rashi says — that “Hashem appeared to him” in order “to visit the sick”:

Were it not for Rashi’s explanation, the Rebbe Rashab would have had no complaint why Hashem had not shown Himself to him as He had to Avraham — for how can one compare himself to our forefather Avraham?

However, since “Hashem appeared to him” in order “to visit the sick,” as an act of kindness²⁰ — the “appearance” was (not so much due to our forefather Avraham’s **greatness or stature**,²¹ but) an expression of Hashem’s trait of kindness — it was for this reason that the Rebbe Rashab was vexed: Since it

²⁰ See *Bava Metzia* (30b): “Visiting the sick is an act of kindness”; and in *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Eivel*,” ch. 14, par. 1: “to visit the sick... and these are **acts of kindness**...”

²¹ As is also evident from the fact that we derive (*Sotah* 14a) from this verse **everyone’s** obligation to visit the sick (see also Sections 7-8 below); see also next fn.

bothered him that Hashem had not shown Himself to him (as can be seen from this having brought him to tears), he felt that Hashem should show kindness and appear to him as well.

[Accordingly, it is plainly resolved why the Rebbe Rashab did not ask concerning the two instances in which “Hashem appeared to Avram” in *parshas Lech Lecha* — as there, the “appearance” was in connection with our forefather Avraham’s **virtue**,²² and a person can not compare himself to our forefather Avraham.]

The Tzemach Tzedek replied: “When a Jew... decides that he needs to be circumcised, he is then worthy for Hashem to show Himself to him.” Although “Hashem appeared to him” (not because of our forefather Avraham’s greatness or stature, but) as an act of (**Hashem’s**) kindness, nevertheless, one needs to be **worthy** of such an act of kindness to be a “receptacle” for this revelation.²³

And the receptacle for this kindness is a person’s decision that, no matter what a person’s circumstances are, even if he is at the level of “a *tzaddik* at ninety-nine years of age,” circumcision is needed.²⁴

²² On this basis, the difference in the phrasing of the verses is well understood: The two verses in *parshas Lech Lecha* say, “Hashem appeared to **Avram**” (and not “to him” — despite it having already been said beforehand “Avram passed...,” “Avram was...”), unlike in our *parshah*, where it says, “Hashem appeared to him” — for the “appearance” in *parshas Lech Lecha* was in connection with Avraham’s stature, unlike that of our *parshah*.

²³ We may say that this is somewhat similar to what is found in the gifting of a **present** — although {it is given as a gift} “he would not have given him a gift had the recipient not brought him pleasure” (as cited in many places — *Hemshech “VeKacha 5637,”* ch. 68; *Hemshech 5666* p. 131; et al.; see also *Megillah 26b*; *Gittin 50b*; *Bava Metzia 16a*; *Bava Basra 156a*). This is similar to what is explained in *Likkutei Torah* (“*Shir HaShirim*” 24a ff.) regarding the concept of the third sort of “arousal that comes from Above.” Although it comes solely from **Above** {not precipitated by our *avodah*} for (“for no arousal from below can reach there at all”), nonetheless, “it neither rests on nor is revealed unless there is perfection in the actions below.”

²⁴ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 1, p. 25 ff.; vol. 5, p. 87 ff.; p. 321 ff.

VISITING THE SICK

We can seemingly question this explanation:

Visiting the sick is not just simply an act of kindness; it has a special property linked specifically with the **sick**. The visit eases the ill person's suffering, which assists in his recovery²⁵ (especially in light of what the Gemara says²⁶ — a visit takes away “one-sixtieth” of the illness). This benefit is conferred even when a mere mortal visits; how much more so when **Hashem** visits the sick. Surely, His visit benefits the sick person's recovery.²⁷

The question is immediately raised: How could the Rebbe Rashab extrapolate from Rashi's explanation, “*Hashem appeared to him* — to visit the **sick**,” that Hashem would **show** Himself for other sorts of acts of kindness that are **not** associated with a sick person who requires healing (in which case, a visitor “takes away... of his illness”)?

This may be understood after prefacing with the lesson that the Gemara²⁸ derives from {the verse}, “Hashem appeared to him”: Just as “Hashem visited the sick... so, too, you should visit the sick.” This lesson is also difficult to understand (similar to the above question):

The Gemara²⁹ says that specifically a visit by “a contemporary”³⁰ of the sick person “takes away... of his illness.” As such, how can we derive from the

²⁵ See *Meiri* on *Nedarim* (39b) “for the visitor eases the illness of the sick person... and only when the visitor is his contemporary, i.e., one whose visit the sick person enjoys, for by the pleasure he derives from them, his illness is relieved. At times, the visit is the cause of the patient's salvation...”; see also *Mishneh Torah*, cited below in 23 in the original.

²⁶ *Nedarim* 39b and *Bava Metzia* 30b.

²⁷ Note the *Ramban* (cited in fn. 18 above {fn. 15 in the original}), “that he was healed from the infirmity of circumcision by his vision of the Shechinah” — cited and explained in *Or HaTorah (Bereishis vol. 1)*, the beginning of our *parshah*. See also *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 5, (p. 84), that this does not contradict Rashi's interpretation (*Bereishis* 18:2) that the angel Rafael came to heal Avraham.

²⁸ *Sotah* 14a.

²⁹ *Nedarim* 39b and *Bava Metzia* 30b; see also the *Derishah* on *Tur* “*Yoreh Deah*” (sec. 335, sub-par. 160), that someone who isn't a contemporary “does not decrease from the illness at all”; see above, fn. 23 in the original.

³⁰ {According to Rashi, this refers to someone of a similar age as the sick person. According to *Ran*, *Rosh* and other commentaries, this refers to a visitor born under the same constellation as the sick person.}

principle that “**Hashem** visits the sick” that **all Jews** (the majority of whom are not contemporaries) must “visit the sick”?³¹ (Visits by Hashem are undoubtedly more efficacious than that of “a contemporary.”)³²

We may say that Rashi alludes to the resolution of this question in his commentary here on the Torah when he comments: “To visit the sick. Rabbi Chama bar Chanina said,³³ ‘It was the third day from Avraham’s circumcision, and Hashem came and inquired of his welfare.’”

At first glance, Rashi’s verbosity here is confusing:³⁴ Rashi already said {that Hashem came} “to visit the sick,” so what does he add with “and Hashem came and inquired of his welfare”?

Rather, Rashi’s lengthy wording forestalls a difficulty: Hashem came to Avraham “to visit the sick,” **not** to remove Avraham’s infirmity but (**only**) to inquire about his welfare,³⁵ as explained below.

³¹ Additionally, Even a contemporary who “takes... from his illness” is incomparable to Hashem visiting the sick, for a visit by Hashem removes only the illness from the sick person. In contrast, a visitor takes (for himself) from the sick person’s illness. This explains why we could not derive the obligation of a contemporary to visit the sick from {the general obligation to perform} acts of kindness, since, seemingly, there is a reason for him not to be obligated in this {due to the personal sacrifice involved} (*Bava Metzia* *ibid*).

³² See above, fns. 23-4 in the original.

³³ *Bava Metzia* 86b (with some differences).

³⁴ See also *Divrei David* on Rashi’s commentary, *ad. loc*.

³⁵ We may say that this is the reason that Rashi quotes the author of this teaching (that Hashem came inquired of his welfare) by name — Rabbi Chama bar Chanina — as it is he who says in *Sotah*, *ibid*, “just as Hashem visits the sick, as it is written ‘Hashem appeared...’ ... so, too, you...,” and he is following the same view, that Hashem’s visit to Avraham was only to inquire of his welfare; therefore {we may derive that} just as Hashem... so too, you....”

8.

SIMPLY AN ACT OF KINDNESS

After “Hashem appeared to him,” the verse states³⁶ that Avraham saw “three men standing over him.” **Rashi** remarks that one of them had come “to heal Avraham.”

Since, regardless (even without Hashem appearing to him), Avraham would be **completely** healed by the angel Refael³⁷ (**immediately** upon the angel’s arrival),³⁸ it makes little sense to say that just a short while earlier, Hashem had come to relieve Avraham of (only) “one-sixtieth of his illness.”³⁹

Rashi, therefore, specifies: “Hashem came and inquired of his welfare.” Hashem’s purpose of visiting the sick was (not for healing, even to remove just one-sixtieth, but rather, it was) purely an act of kindness. Therefore, we can derive from this visit the obligation for all Jews to “visit the sick.”

And since Hashem had come “to visit the sick” as an act of kindness (and not to cure Avraham’s illness), the Rebbe Rashab, therefore, had a {valid} complaint: Out of kindness, Hashem should show Himself to him, as well, as explained above.

³⁶ *Bereishis* 18:2.

³⁷ As seen from the succeeding verses (*Bereishis* 18:6-7), “He hastened... ran...”

³⁸ Regarding this, see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 20, p. 71 and fn. 22.

³⁹ Note *Yalkut Reuveni* on the beginning of our *parshah*.

9.

A NEW PATH IN EDUCATION

As discussed before at length,⁴⁰ one of the lessons to derive from this story is the following:

Since the episode above involving the Rebbe Rashab took place when he was a child of four or five years — “younger than six”⁴¹ — we can glean a lesson from this: Even in a child who is four or five years old, we can evoke (through proper education) a yearning for spirituality and G-dliness — and such an ardent yearning that it produces tears.

This is not at all contradictory to the Rambam’s directives⁴² regarding how to teach a child. Namely, one needs to motivate the child “with things that are beloved to him due to his tender age... {the teacher says to him,} ‘Read, and I will give you nuts....’” The above episode (especially after its publication by the Previous Rebbe) brought to light this educational path. And we may further say that this episode **pioneered** this educational path and (in the Chassidic vernacular) opened a new channel **enabling us** to educate children in such a way that G-dliness will be “things that are beloved to him,” a part of their lives, even at a “**tender age.**”

This is akin to what we find regarding many concepts (even in **Jewish Law**)⁴³ that “{human} nature has changed.”

⁴⁰ *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 15, p. 130 ff.

⁴¹ {The age by which a child’s education is expected to begin; see *Kesubos* 50a.}

⁴² *Peirush HaMishnayos*, “*Sanhedrin*,” Introduction to *Chelek*; see also *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Teshuvah*,” ch. 10, par. 5.

⁴³ {As Jewish Law is considered immutable, this underscores the extent to which changes in nature are taken into account.} See *Rema*, “*Even HaEzer*,” ch. 156, par. 4; *Magen Avraham*, sec. 173, subpar. 1; Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” end of ch. 179 (although there is a case of danger); see also *Sdei Chemed* (vol. 1, p. 210 ff.; vol. 10, p. 194), and the sources cited there. {See at length *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 23, p. 33 ff.}

10.

OUR GENERATION SPECIFICALLY

However, we need to clarify: Why was this concept innovated only in the later generations and through (an episode involving) the Rebbe Rashab?

The answer may be understood after prefacing with the explanation as to why the inner dimension of Torah was only revealed in the later generations (through the *Arizal*,⁴⁴ and subsequently through the Baal Shem Tov, to the extent that it is even promulgated in a way of comprehension and understanding,⁴⁵ through the teachings of Chabad Chassidus). One might very well wonder incredulously: Does it really appear that this generation is worthy?⁴⁶

One well-known explanation of this phenomenon⁴⁷ is that on the contrary, because the darkness {of exile} has increased in the later generations, an addition is required in the light of holiness {to combat such dense darkness}: Similarly, in the context of our discussion, because of the oppressive darkness that exists in these later generations, specifically now we were given the ability to educate children “younger than six,” such that spirituality and G-dliness should be a part of their lives, as discussed above.

This is also why this concept was brought about through (an incident concerning) the Rebbe Rashab: One of the remarkable achievements of the Rebbe Rashab was his founding of Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim. In his newly established yeshivah, the revealed dimension of the Torah is studied together with its inner dimension as **one** Torah.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ {*Arizal* is an acronym for the name of [Rabbi Yitzchak Luria](#) (1534-1572).} He wrote “that only in these later generations, ‘It is permitted and obligatory to reveal this wisdom’” (*Iggeres HaKodesh* ch. 26 – 142b).

⁴⁵ In the words of *Tikkunei Zohar* (end of *Tikkun* 6), {in a way of} “nourishment” — see *Kisei LaMelech* on *Tikkunei Zohar*, ad. loc.; Introduction of *Mikdash Melech* to *Zohar*.

⁴⁶ {In the original Aramaic, “אַבְשׁוּרָהּ”; lit., “Have the generation[s] improved!?” A Talmudic expression; see *Yevamos* 39b; et al.}

⁴⁷ See *Kuntres Eitz Chaim*, ch. 13; letter by the Rebbe Rashab — addenda to *Kuntres Eitz Chaim*, p. 82 ff; et al.

⁴⁸ See the *sichah* delivered by the Rebbe Rashab {printed} in *Sefer HaMaamarim 5659*, pp. 223-225, et al.

And as a precursor to this, a new channel and educational approach needed to be created. This will allow us to ignite a fervent longing, even in children as young as four or five, to seek out a revelation of Hashem's presence.

And this conduct on the part of those given the appellation "My anointed ones"⁴⁹ is the antecedent for the coming and revelation of Moshiach. Then, **Hashem will appear**,⁵⁰ "and the glory of Hashem will be revealed, and all flesh together will see that the mouth of Hashem spoke"⁵¹ in our terrestrial sphere.⁵²

May this occur imminently, when "the master will come,"⁵³ "He is King Mashiach."⁵⁴

– From talks delivered on Shabbos *parshas VaYeira (Chof Cheshvan)*
and Motzaei Shabbos *parshas Chayei Sarah, 5740 (1979)*

⁴⁹ {Young children who study Torah;} *Shabbos* 119b.

⁵⁰ See at length *Tanya*, "*Likkutei Amarim*," ch. 36.

⁵¹ *Yeshayahu* 40:5.

⁵² {In the original, "למטה מעשרה טפחים — lower than ten handbreadths," the height at which anything is still considered endemic to the ground.}

⁵³ {This phrase, referring to the coming of Moshiach, was coined by the Baal Shem Tov.}

⁵⁴ {In the original Aramaic, "דא מלכא משיחא"; *Zohar*, vol. 1, 84a, 107b, 145b, et al.}