

Maamarei Mordechai

הסבר לפי ממש פשוט

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Avraham bowed low before the commonfolk.

וַיָּקָם אַבְרָהָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ לְעַם-הָאֶרֶץ לְבְנֵי-חֵת:

“And Avraham got up and he bowed to the commonfolk, to the Chetites.” (Bereishis 23:7).

Were the Bnei Ches the commonfolk? What is the meaning in the Torah of when someone bows down? Why did Avraham bow to them?

There are two times when Avraham (as Avram) bows low to Hashem. “And Avram fell on his face and Hashem spoke with him, saying.” (Ibid 17:3). And again, “And Avram fell on his face and he celebrated.” (Ibid 17:17). The next perek explains these as, “And he saw and he ran toward them from the tent entrance and he bowed on the ground.” (Ibid 18:2). In the previous perek it said that Avram fell on his face. This pasuk says it means he bowed to the ground. Why did the Torah change the wording? How does bowing to the ground explain the act of “he fell on his face?”

An additional inquiry is that when Hashem talked to Avraham on the plains of Mamrei and promised him Yitzchok, that was the first time Avraham bowed to Hashem. When Hashem spoke to Avraham on the way to Eretz Canaan (ibid 12:1), when He promised the land to his children (ibid 12:7), when He promised the Land to Avraham and his children eternally (ibid 13:14), and when Hashem made the first covenant with Avraham that his children will be as numerous as the stars and sand (ibid 15:5) Avraham did not bow. It was only, finally, when Avraham was ninety-nine years old and Hashem made the covenant of bris milah did Avraham fall on his face. What prompted this falling on his face?

There are other examples of bowing that will shed light on its meaning. The servant of Avraham bowed to the ground to Hashem when he was offered lodging. (Ibid 24:26). He bowed again to the ground to Hashem later when the marriage proposal was accepted. (Ibid 24:52). Yaakov bowed to the ground seven times, until he reached his brother. (Ibid 33:3). Yosef’s brothers bowed their countenances to the ground to him. (Ibid 42:6). The brothers bowed again to him when they dined with him. (Ibid 43:26). When Yosef promised to bury his father in the Cave of Machpela, Yaakov “bowed on the head of the bed.” (Ibid 47:31). Then, when Yaakov blesses Yosef’s children, “he bowed to his face to the ground.” (Ibid 48:13).

As can be discerned from these examples, bowing to the ground is an act of deferment. The servant of Avraham deferred to Hashem. The brothers were deferring to this vizier. Yaakov deferred to Yosef, leaving his fate in Yosef’s hands regarding his burial. Yosef, the king, deferred to his father when his father was going to bless him and his children.

This can be used in the rest of the examples given in the Torah. A great historical fact is uncovered by the Torah saying that Lot bowed to the two messengers. (Ibid 19:1). Why did Lot defer to the two messengers? Did he know they were minstrel messengers? Were they minstrel messengers? Lot was sitting at the gate of Sodom. He could not be in Sodom because Sodom was part of Eretz Canaan. Lot chose land outside of Eretz Canaan. As the Torah said, "He pitched his tents until [but not in] Sodom." (Ibid 13:12). He calls the messengers lords and he calls himself their servants. (Ibid 19:2). He insisted on sharing a meal with them, and it was a Pesach meal – matzos. (Ibid 19:3). This deferment seems to indicate they were minstrel angels. There is another explanation.

During the invasion into the Land of Canaan by the four kings, the pasuk says, "ויקחו את-לוט ואת-רכשו כן-איתי אברהם ויגלו ויהי יושב בקדם:" "And they took [purchased] all of Lot and his wealth, the nephew of Avram. And they went, and he settled in Sodom." (Ibid 14:12). The Torah just stated that Lot never lived inside of Sodom, so it cannot refer to Lot living there. It is also a singular "it" that settled in Sodom, therefore, it cannot refer to the four kings. It was Avraham that settled in Sodom. Avraham settled there when it was looted, for it was open space. That is why the next pasuk says, "ויבא הפליט ויגד לאברהם העברי והוא שכן" "And the refugee came and he told to Avram the Ivri, and he was a neighbor next to the plains of Mamrei, the Aramite, brother of Eshkol and brother of Ener, and they were covenant makers with Avram." (Ibid 14:13). Why does the Torah call Avraham a neighbor of the plains? Didn't he live there? He settled in the empty Sodom, taking advantage of its destruction; possibly to try to free the slaves and bring them into his household. After victory, the Torah says, "As for me, I shall take nothing but the people, but I will take rightful shares for those who came with me, Ener, Eshkol, and Mamrei." (Ibid 14:24). Clearly, these three came with Avraham to pursue and chase away the four kings.

A couple of decades later, these same three men came to visit Avraham. The pasuk calls them "הַאֲנָשִׁים" "the men" here and during the visit. Avraham then sends two of them to Sodom. (Ibid 18:22). It was these two whom Lot saw. That is why Lot bowed to them and made a huge deal about inviting them in. He deferred to them because they returned him and his possessions. They were the war heroes. It seems that the victory of that war also occurred on Pesach, the eternal day of redemption. That is why Lot served them matzos. It can also account for why they visited Avraham on this day and why Avraham ran to make them a feast. This was an anniversary of victory celebration. Avraham was so caught up in the vision from Hashem that by the time his covenant partners came to him, he had to rush.

When Hashem gave Avraham the mitzvah of bris, that is when he bowed to Hashem and deferred to Him. He agreed to keep his end of the bargain. Now he was more than just someone receiving a promise, but a partner in the deal. In negotiating for land, he deferred to the citizenry. He knew he had waived all rights to the land after the great war, waiting for Hashem to give it to him. Therefore, he deferred to them and bargained. Even when he purchased it through Efron, he still only deferred to them. (Ibid 23:12). It is a great lesson for one to be ready to defer to the other party in order to make a deal. Drive a hard bargain but be ready to bend so that a deal can be made.