

## Love, Reverence, and Worship

### Genesis 23:6

שמענו אדני

נשיא א-להים אתה בתוכנו

במבחר קברינו

קבר את מתך

איש ממנו

את קברו לא יכלה ממך

מקבר מתך:

Heed us, my lord:

*Nesi Elo?im* you are in our midst;

in the choicest of our burial plots –

bury your dead

Any man from among us

will not withhold his burial plot from you

from burying your dead.

How should Jews manage their image in the non-Jewish world?

The word alef lamed hey yud mem/*elo?im* in Biblical Hebrew has at least five meanings: powerful, judge, angel, god, and G-d. The Halakhic difference between the last meaning and the first four is between *kodesh* and *chol*, i.e. whether the word must be treated as an unerasable Name etc.

Like most legal categorizations, this one can fail to account for the full complexity of a specific case. For example, how does one categorize usages that are intended to be initially misunderstood, or deliberately ambiguous, or deliberately multivalent? (See in this regard for example Tehillim 82, and Moreh Nevukhim 1:2.)

Chazal categorize our verse both ways. According to *Masekhet Soferim* 4, “*nesi Elo?im* is *kodesh*”, and the meaning presumably is that Avraham represents G-d in the midst of the Hittites – he is the *nesi* of Elokim. *Bereshit Rabbah* 42, however, reads *nesi and elo?im* as sequential hyperbolic descriptions of Avraham – “You are a prince! (No,) a god! in our midst”. In that reading *elo?im* is clearly *chol*.

It seems to me that in *Soferim*'s reading Avraham has perfectly managed his image, so that he becomes the cause of pagans mentioning G-d with reverence. He has been *mekadesh shem shomayim*. But in

*Midrash Rabbah's* version, something is awry – Avraham has become an object of *avodah zarah*, a living idol! Recall that Rambam's theory is that idolatry originates when people mistake the agent/representative for the master/represented.

*Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* praises Avraham for bowing to the Hittites and thereby displaying humility even as they sought to crown him. Yet readers of Shakespeare cannot help hearing in the back of their minds: "Did this in Avraham seem ambitious"? Gestures of humility are often politically beneficial. Perhaps Avraham saw at least the potential for idolatry, and thought bowing to them would prevent this, but humility as well can seem a Divine attribute – גדול ענותנותו של הקב"ה.

So is it ever possible to be revered without risking idolatry? But do we really wish Avraham had acted in a manner less likely to inspire reverence?

Or Hachayyim points out yet another minefield. Were the Hittites expressing

- a) their admiration for Avraham, or rather
- b) their pragmatic recognition that he had the power to take what we wanted?

The second reading carries with it the implicit threat that Sarah will be disinterred, and her burial plot reclaimed, the moment Avraham's power dissipates. Avraham needs to know that they are sincere in their flattery – but if he is genuinely more powerful than they are, how can he ever know?

Or HaChayyim has a textual answer, but for me, this is the challenge Satan poses to G-d in Sefer Iyov, and the bitterly ironic answer is that the powerful can become certain they are loved only by behaving in a manner undeserving of love. And yet – choosing powerlessness is rarely a moral good. At the very least it is an almost inevitable violation of "Do not place a stumbling block before the blind".

The bottom line is that one cannot control the way others react to their perception of you, and there is no formula for knowing when their stated perceptions of you are sincere. But we can act in ways more likely to create positive perceptions, and more likely to encourage sincerity without abdicating responsibility. Authentic behavior that inspires reverence is worth the risk of inspiring worship, and acting so as to deserve love is worth the risk of being deceived.