

Torah Table Talk
**Beyond the Divine:
 Abraham and Hospitality**
 Parshat Vayerah
 Genesis 18:1 – 22:24



Parshat Vayerah is one of the richest weekly Torah Portions. Here we see Abraham welcoming guests into his home, arguing with God on behalf of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, and welcoming God into his midst. But we also find Abraham banishing Ishmael and Hagar from his home, and we see him binding his son, Isaac, on the altar. Abraham is a complex and mysterious character who has fascinated not only Jews but Christians and Moslems throughout the ages. We admire him and we are repulsed by him. We admire his faith but wrestle with his willingness to commit the most unfathomable acts in the name of God. For Jews, throughout the ages, Abraham has always been a model of Hesed, of loving kindness. Let's explore what the sages learned from Abraham about Hachnasat Orchim, hospitality to strangers.

Genesis, 18:1-5

The Lord appeared to him (Abraham) by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. He said, 'My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant...Let me take a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves...

1. There is something wrong with these verses. Who did Abraham encounter while sitting at the entrance to his tent: God or some strangers? With whom is Abraham conversing? Note that while the verse begins "My lords..." it continues, "If I have found favor in your eyes..." the word "your" takes the singular form here.
2. Why was Abraham sitting "in the entrance to the tent?" Was he trying to get out of the heat or was he on the look out for wayfarers?
3. Look back at the previous chapter in the Torah. What significance do you think it has for the story that we are now being told?

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 126a

Rav Judah said in the name Rav: Hospitality is greater than welcoming the divine presence! As it says in scripture: "He (Abraham) said, 'My lords, if it pleases you do not go past your servant...'" (*In the first part of this passage God appears to Abraham; no sooner does God appear, Abraham turns his attention to the wayfarers who are passing by. Apparently, the needs of the strangers are more important to Abraham than the presence of God!*)

Divrei Yisrael, Rabbi Israel Taub: Why did the sages say that welcoming strangers into our homes is more important than receiving the divine presence? Wouldn't it have been enough to simply say that hospitality is as important as welcoming the divine presence?

In the Talmud (Sanhedrin 42a) the Talmud says that if the Jewish people only receive the divine presence into their lives once a month that would be sufficient. Therefore if they had compared the Mitzvah of hospitality to being in the presence of the divine, one might have concluded that it is only necessary to welcome a stranger into one's home once a month as well. Therefore the sages said that hospitality is even more important. From this we learn that the Mitzvah of hospitality applies all the time and every day. One must also go out and actively pursue potential guests to invite into ones home, just as Abraham did.

1. Is there a spiritual side to hospitality? If so what is it?
2. Who should you invite into your home as a way of fulfilling the Mitzvah of Hachnasat Orchim, hospitality? What type of people would constitute strangers in today's society?
3. Why are people today reticent to fulfill the Mitzvah of hospitality, today? How can congregations help people to participate in this Mitzvah?

Parpiraot LaTorah, Rabbi Menachem Becker Page 73

“I will take some bread (for you).” Why does Abraham say to his guests “I will take some bread for you,” and not, “I will give you some bread?”

The sages comment that this verse teaches us that more than what the guest receives, the host gains more from his guests. The host gains the spiritual pleasure of helping others while the guest simply receives some physical sustenance.

1. What do we gain from the opportunity to be a host to others?
2. Come up with a set of rules for being good host and for being a good guest in someone else's house.

Glossary

Rabbi Israel Taub: 1849 – 1920 He was a Hasidic leader and the First Modzitzer Rebbe. He was known for composing over 200 melodies and for his book, Divrei Yisrael.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

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