

# “The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

<http://www.alexisrael.org/parshadiscussion> . <https://www.facebook.com/parshadiscussion/>

## Vayera: Hospitality – A Family Project!

Some years ago, I was on a Birthright style Israel tour, and we spent the night at a Bedouin encampment in the Negev. The Bedouin host graciously served us sweet tea and spoke about their lore of an "open tent" and their culture of hospitality. It was a wonderful presentation. But I wanted to scream out: This is OUR tradition too! Should we bring Jewish youth to Israel to learn hospitality from the Bedouins? Welcoming guests is our Jewish heritage; let's learn it from our sources, from Avraham Avinu!



The Parsha opens as Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent. God appears to Abraham. Now, a private audience with God is a pretty auspicious event, and yet, while Abraham and God are in communion, three wayfarers pass by. Abraham abandons his meeting with God and attends to his three visitors. The Midrash learns from this that:

“Greater is hospitality than receiving the divine presence!” (Talmud Shabbat 127)

### Questions for Discussion at the Shabbat Table

- If Abraham was talking to God, why would he abandon the conversation to attend to three complete strangers?
- Sedom is a place which rejected hospitality. It was destroyed. Why is hospitality such an important value?
- Do we ever do hospitality to strangers or do we only invite people who are our friends into our homes, or people just like us? Is that what the mitzva is about?
- In your house, do Mum and Dad do the hospitality or do the kids also contribute? Is it important for kids to be part of the welcoming of guests or is it an adult thing?

“Greater is hospitality than receiving the divine presence!” (Talmud Shabbat 127)

From a religious vantage point, we might find this rabbinic statement quite strange; after all, shouldn't God comes first? Should the mere welcoming of guests take precedence over a divine revelation, a religious epiphany? Halakha suggests otherwise. But how might we understand the logic?

A first approach might suggest that for Judaism, the provision of relief and assistance in this world, is of a higher order than even a rendezvous with God. Rav Soloveitchik writes:

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[Religious Man,] his glance fixed on higher realms, forgets all too frequently the lower realms ... See what many religions have done to this world on account of their yearning to ... escape to the sphere of eternity. They have been so intoxicated by their dreams of an exalted supernal existence that they have failed to hear the cries of the “them that dwell in houses of clay” (Job 4:19), the sigh of orphans, the groans of the destitute. Had they not desired to unite with infinity and to merge with transcendence, then they might have been able to do something to aid the widow and orphan, to save the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor.” (Halakhic Man pg.41)

Rav Yaakov Medan takes this a stage further. One of the Torah’s laws is והלכת בדרכיו (Deut 26:17) – to walk in God’s paths. The Talmud suggests that this means to follow God’s attributes: “As He clothes the naked... so should you; as the Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, so you should visit the sick.” (Sota 14a) Rav Medan writes:

“Visiting the sick and welcoming guests are connected... When one visits the sick, the visitor acts with kindness to the host and seeks to nurse and alleviate their sickness... With hospitality, the host acts with kindness to the guest by offering a meal and a place to rest.” (The Word is Near, pg. 117)

One might even say that Abraham learns hospitality from God’s act of visiting the sick.

## PART 2 - A FAMILY BUSINESS

One of the things that has always fascinated me is the way that Abraham gets the whole family participating in the business of hosting the chance visitors:

**"6** And Abraham hastened into the tent unto **Sarah**, and said: 'Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes.' **7** And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetched a calf tender and good, and gave it **unto the boy** (Rashi – Yishmael) ..." (18:6-7)

Avraham involves his wife and his son; it is a family agenda. And this family activity becomes a national legacy as expressed later in the chapter:

**"... for I have singled him (Avraham) out that he may instruct his children ... to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just (Tzedaka) and right (Mishpat) ..."** (18:16-20)

Avraham is not simply a man of personal ethical standards. He initiates his children to do that which is “just and right.” A family tradition of Hessed needs instruction, teaching, cultivation. It doesn't just come naturally, it must be inculcated not simply by example, but rather by practice and training.

In contrast, when Lot welcomes two guests in his home, Lot acts alone; his family members are uninvolved.

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"1 And the two angels arrived in Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to greet them; and bowed low with his face to the ground. 2 He said: 'Please, my lords, turn, I pray you, to your servant's house, and spend the night, and wash your feet, and you shall rise up early, and go on your way.' ... And he urged them strongly; and they came to his house; and he prepared a feast for them, baking unleavened bread, and they ate." (19:1-3)

Lot follows Abraham's hospitality, but what of Lot's family? We do not hear of Lot's daughters preparing the food, and his wife is absent as he entertains the two angelic messengers. Lot bakes the bread and prepares the food by himself. Maybe it is not surprising then, that Lot's sons-in-law prefer to remain in Sodom, and his wife, so distraught at the destruction of her hometown, turns back and is turned into lifeless unproductive salt. How poignant that a city that refuses to share, becomes an unproductive wasteland.

When discussing family involvement, sometimes only the parents are involved in hosting guests. I was reminded of an interesting piece regarding integrating family into home chores:

"In a survey of 1,001 U.S. adults released last fall by Braun Research, 82% reported having regular chores growing up, but only 28% said that they require their own children to do them. With students under pressure to learn Mandarin, run the chess club or get a varsity letter, chores have fallen victim to the imperatives of resume-building—though it is hardly clear that such activities are a better use of their time.

"Parents today want their kids spending time on things that can bring them success, but ironically, we've stopped doing one thing that's actually been a proven predictor of success—and that's household chores," says Richard Rende, a developmental psychologist in Paradise Valley, Ariz., and co-author of the forthcoming book "Raising Can-Do Kids." Decades of studies show the benefits of chores—academically, emotionally and even professionally. Giving children household chores at an early age helps to build a lasting sense of mastery, responsibility and self-reliance." <http://www.wsj.com/articles/why-children-need-chores-1426262655>

Involving kids at home generates responsibility and self-reliance. All that is good. But in a Jewish home, we should be investing in generating and cherishing a culture of hospitality together with our children, thereby inculcating them into one of our central traditions, a mitzva that "Imitates God."

Shabbat Shalom!