

Parashat Vayera: Sacred Hospitality

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Bereishit 18:9	
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו אֵיךְ שָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה בְּאֶהֱלִי:	They said to him, "Where is your wife, Sarah?" And he replied, "There, in the tent."

1. Teaching Proper Etiquette

Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 48:15	
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו אֵיךְ שָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ וּגו' (בראשית יח, ט), אל"ף יו"ד וי"ו נקוד, למ"ד אינו נקוד, אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן אֱלֶעָזָר בְּכָל מְקוֹם שֶׁאֵתָה מוֹצֵא כְּתָב רָבָה עַל הַנִּקְדָּה אֵתָה דּוֹרֵשׁ אֶת הַכְּתָב, נִקְדָּה רָבָה עַל הַכְּתָב אֵתָה דּוֹרֵשׁ אֶת הַנִּקְדָּה, כָּאֵן שֶׁהַנִּקְדָּה רָבָה עַל הַכְּתָב אֵתָה דּוֹרֵשׁ אֶת הַנִּקְדָּה, אִין אֲבָרְהָם. אָמַר רַבִּי עֲזַרְיָה כְּשֶׁם שֶׁאָמְרוּ אֵיךְ שָׂרָה כֹּה אָמְרוּ לְשָׂרָה אִין אֲבָרְהָם. (בראשית יח, ט): וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה בְּאֶהֱלִי, הִדָּא הוּא דְכְּתִיב (שופטים ה, כד): תִּבְרַךְ מִנָּשִׁים יַעַל אֶשֶׁת חָבֵר הַקִּינִי מִנָּשִׁים בְּאֶהֱלִי תִבְרַךְ, רַבִּי אֱלֶעָזָר וְרַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בֶּר נַחֲמָן, רַבִּי אֱלֶעָזָר אָמַר מִנָּשִׁי דּוֹר הַמִּדְבָּר שֶׁהֵן יוֹשְׁבוֹת בְּאֶהֱלִים, שְׁנָאֲמַר (במדבר יא, י): אִישׁ לִפְתָּח אֶהְיוֹ, וְלֵמָּה תִּבְרַךְ מֵהֶם, הֵן יִלְדוּ וְקִיְמוּ אֶת הָעוֹלָם, וְיִמָּה הֵיךְ מוֹעִיל לָהֶם שֶׁאֵלְמָלָא הָיָא כְּבָר הָיוּ אֲבוּדִין. רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בֶּר נַחֲמָן אָמַר מִן הָאֲמָהוֹת, הֵן יִלְדוּ וְכו' שֶׁאֵלְמָלָא הָיָא כְּבָר הָיוּ אֲבוּדִין.	"They said to him: Where is Sarah your wife? He said: Behold, in the tent" (Genesis 18:9). "They said to him [elav]: Where is Sarah your wife?" The letters <i>alef</i> , <i>yod</i> , <i>vav</i> are dotted; <i>lamed</i> is not dotted. Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: Wherever you find the number of undotted letters greater than the number of dotted letters, one expounds the undotted letters. If the number of dotted letters is greater than the number of undotted letters, one expounds the dotted letters. Here, where the number of dotted letters is greater than the number of undotted letters, one expounds the dotted letters, [which spell out]: 'Where is he [ayo] – Abraham?' Rabbi Azarya said: Just as they said [to Abraham]: "Where is Sarah?" so they said to Sarah: "Where is Abraham?" "He said: Behold, in the tent" – that is what is written: "Blessed beyond women is Yael, wife of Hever the Kenite; beyond the women in the tent, she shall be blessed" (Judges 5:24). Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman, Rabbi Elazar said: Beyond the women of the generation of the wilderness, who dwelled in tents, as it is stated: "Each man at the entrance of his tent" (Numbers 11:10). Why should she be more blessed than they were? They bore children and kept the world going, but what use would it have been? Were it not for her, they would have been eradicated. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: Beyond the matriarchs. They bore children, etc., but were it not for her, they would have been eradicated.

Bavli Bava Metzia 87a	
רַבִּי יוֹסִי בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא אָמַר: כְּדִי לְשַׁגֵּר לָהּ כּוֹס שֶׁל בְּרָכָה. תִּנֵּי מִשּׁוֹם רַבִּי יוֹסִי: לָמָּה נִקְדָּה עַל אִין	Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina, says: They inquired about her in order to send her the cup of blessing . It is customary to recite Grace after Meals over a cup of wine, which is then distributed to those

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

<p>שֶׁבִּי"א לִי"ו – לִימְדָה תוֹרָה דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ, שִׁישָׁאֵל אָדָם בְּאֶכְסֵנְיָא שְׁלוֹ. וְהָאֹמֵר שְׁמוּאֵל: אֵין שׁוֹאֲלִין בְּשְׁלוֹם אִשָּׁה כָּלְלָ! עַל יְדֵי בַעֲלָהּ שְׂאֵנִי.</p>	<p>present. It is taught in the name of Rabbi Yosei: Why are there dots in the Torah scroll upon the letters alef, yod, and vav in the word “to him [eilav]”? These letters spell ayo, which means: Where is he? The Torah is teaching the proper etiquette, which is that a person should inquire of his hostess about his host, just as he should inquire about the welfare of his hostess from the host. The Gemara asks: But doesn't Shmuel say: One may not inquire about the welfare of a woman at all, as this is immodest? The Gemara answers: A greeting by means of her husband is different. Asking a husband about his wife is not considered immodest.</p>
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2. The Angels “Ate”

Kedushat Levi on Bereishit 18:8 ²	
<p>וְזָהוּ "וַיֹּאכְלוּ", כִּי הַמַּלְאָכִים הַחַיִּיּוֹת שֶׁלָּהֶם מִמְצוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּשִׁישְׂרָאֵל עוֹשִׂים רָצוֹן הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא וְעוֹשִׂים מִצְוֹתוֹ בְּרוּךְ הוּא. וְנִמְצָא שֶׁעֲשֵׂה הַמִּצְוָה שֶׁל הַכְנָסַת הָאוֹרְחִים, וְזָהוּ הַרְמָז "וַיִּקַּח וַיִּתֵּן לַפְּנֵיהֶם", הַמִּצְוָה שֶׁל הַכְנָסַת אוֹרְחִים שֶׁעֲשֵׂה, "וַיֹּאכְלוּ", מִזָּה הָיָה הַחַיִּיּוֹת שֶׁלָּהֶם.</p>	<p>What does it mean that these beings “ate” [angels, being purely spiritual, would not have need for nor be able to eat or drink physical substances]? The explanation is that the angels derive their lifeforce from [were “eating”] the mitzvot that Israel performs. When Israel enacts the will of the Holy Blessed One and performs God’s mitzvot, the spiritual energy of the mitzvah enlivens the angels. Now Abraham had performed the mitzvah of hachnasat orchim. That being the case, the verbs “he took” and “he set before them” point to the mitzvah of hachnasat orchim that he had performed. “And they ate” suggests that the angels took their sustenance/lifeforce from the mitzvah itself [and not the food].</p>
<p>וְזָהוּ "וְהוּא עֶמֶד עֲלֵיהֶם תַּחַת הָעֵץ וַיֹּאכְלוּ", כִּי הָעֵץ הוּא תוֹרָה עַל שֵׁם הַפָּסוּק (מְשָׁלִי ג, יח) "עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא".</p>	<p>This then is the meaning of “And he [Avraham] waited [‘stood by’] on them under the tree as they ate” – for the tree is the Torah, in accordance with the verse “The Torah is the Eytz Hayyim, the Tree of Life” (Proverbs 3:18).</p>

3. Sacred Hospitality

Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav, <i>Sefer HaMiddot</i> , Tzedakah, Part 1 24:24	
<p>גְּדוּלָה הַכְנָסַת אוֹרְחִים שְׁמֵרְחֻקָת אֶת הַקְרֹבִים וּמִקְרִבָת אֶת הַרְחוּקִים.</p>	<p>So great is hospitality that [failing to be hospitable] repulses those who are near, while [being hospitable] draws near those who are distant.</p>
Danny Meyer, <i>Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business</i> , 65	
<p>Service is the technical delivery of a product. Hospitality is how the delivery of that product makes its recipient feel. Service is a monologue—we decide how we want to do things and set our own standards for service. Hospitality, on the other hand, is a dialogue. To be on a guest’s side requires listening to that person with every sense, and following up with a thoughtful, gracious, appropriate response.</p>	
Big Question: What makes hospitality sacred?	

² This translation is from Rabbi Sam Feinsmith of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.