

The Torah subtly juxtaposes Abram's character and Lot's. Despite being the elder, Abram self-effacingly defers to Lot, allowing him to choose whichever part of the land he desires. Lot does not respond in kind. "Courtesy demands that Lot defer to his uncle, but shockingly, he agrees to make the selection himself. He promptly (and discourteously) chooses the Jordan valley, leaving the dry and rocky hill country to his uncle. . . . He chose the best for himself without hesitation or apology."⁵⁹

Abram's magnanimity notwithstanding, the text gives us no indication that the two men reconcile. Lot simply sees what he wants and journeys toward it (Gen. 13:11). The Torah deftly uses geography to dramatize the contrast between Abram and Lot: As the chapter draws to an end, "Abram [is] on the heights, Lot down on the sunken plain."⁶⁰

Va-yera' #1

The Face of Guests as the Face of God

Abraham's Radical and Traditional Theology

Parashat Va-yera' begins with a stunning scene: God appears to Abraham as he sits at the entrance of his tent. Receiving a visitation from God is obviously an awe-inducing experience, and yet Abraham does something very strange. He leaves God and runs to greet three passing travelers, warmly inviting them to eat and rest.

Not for nothing is Abraham held up by Jewish tradition as the very paradigm of *hakhnasat orchim*, welcoming guests into one's home. Here he treats seemingly random guests like royalty. They appear at the most inconvenient possible moment—it is the hottest part of the day, and in any case, he is in the middle of an encounter with God. Yet he wastes no time in graciously greeting them. Moreover, where in Gen. 18:5, NJPS has "seeing that you have come your servant's way," the King James translation offers "For therefore are ye come to your servant" instead. If we take the King James seriously,⁶¹ Abraham also insists that their arrival is a result of divine providence—the very reason they are passing by is so that he may welcome and serve them. Furthermore Abraham humbly underplays his own generosity: He speaks of providing a bit of water and a morsel of bread, but in the passage that follows, he and Sarah prepare a lavish and sumptuous feast for their guests. Not surprisingly, then, a midrash sees him as the embodiment of the ethical principle of "say little and do much" (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, ch. 13).

But what is Abraham doing? How can he just turn away from God and go greet human guests instead?

A medieval midrash imagines that as Abraham sees the men approaching, he turns to God and "says, with purity of heart, 'Master of the world, let the Shekhinah (the divine presence) wait for me until I