

**Notes for Dvar Torah on “Posture Makes Perfect”
(based on a study session with Erica Brown)**

Parashat Vayera

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October 23, 2021

As we read this passage, let’s focus on posture, and the role of posture in communicating the message.

First, note that I’m using the Everett Fox translation. Everett Fox is an emeritus professor of Bible and Clark who’s been indefatigably translating the entire Bible, little by little, following the principles established by Martin Buber and Franz Rosensweig when they translated the Bible into German. They paid attention to several curious features of the Hebrew Bible.

One of these is the use of *leitworten*, or leading words.

In Hebrew, most nouns and verbs have three letter roots. In English, it’s rare that you would use the same word for a noun and a verb, as in “He dreamed a dream.” In Biblical Hebrew, that happens much more frequently. That allows for a poetic feature of Hebrew prose, which is to repeat a particular three-letter root several times.

In the translation before you, I’ve bolded words that, in Hebrew, have a root that is repeated more than once.

(ONE ROOT MISTAKENLY NOT BOLDED IS: YaRaA -- to see.)

What are the words that are bolded?

To see or be seen; to run, to pray, to pass, to fetch, to hasten.

(That’s a lot!!! FOUR words x three; ONE word x two; and ONE word (fetch) x four is 18.)

What is the significance of each of these repeated words?



To see -- this is all about seeing the stranger, the guest. (God sees Abraham -- meaning, Abraham's distress, Abraham's needs. This is an important leitwort throughout Genesis. Mount Moriah; the Go to the Land that I will *show* you. (Same root in Hebrew as *to see*.)

To run: Well, if you want to be hospitable, you RUN.

To pray, or PLEASE: That implies an approach to the encounter: You are submitting to their will.

To pass. YOU DON'T WANT THEM TO PASS!!! STAY A WHILE!!!

TO FETCH. (**GRAB AND DON'T GO!!!**)

TO HASTEN. (FITS IN WITH RUNNING)

Note the postures adopted by Abraham:

BEFORE GUESTS ARRIVE:

Sitting

AFTER GUESTS ARRIVE:

Prostrating

Running

Standing

What do we learn?

Story re: arriving at a B&B at 11 o'clock at night. Needing some drugs. The owner driving them 45 minutes to an all-night pharmacy.

Woman getting a call on 9/11 from a woman in Israel who'd been in NYC on 9/11 twenty years before to thank her.

We learn a lot about hospitality in this passage.

(One message: Underpromising, Overdelivering (an old saying))

NOW, IF YOU WERE A VISUAL ARTIST, HOW WOULD YOU DEPICT THIS?

LET'S LOOK AT JAMES TISSOT'S PAINTING OF ABRAHAM AND THE THREE ANGELS.

UPSHOT, HE IS FOCUSED ON THE HUMILITY; YOU SHOULD HUMBLE YOURSELF BEFORE YOUR GUESTS, MAYBE EVEN THE FEAR OF THE ENCOUNTER.

Hospitality is only a Rabbinic commandment, but, the Sages point out, the fact that Abraham interrupted his audience with G-d to attend to his guests shows that

"hospitality to guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence".

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: גדולה הכנסת אורחין מהקבלת פני שכינה, דכתיב: "ויאמר ה' אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך אל נא תעבר וגו'".

[Note:*Shabbat* 127a; *Shavuot* 35b. In these sources, this is derived from verse 3,

the word for "My masters!" being understood as "My Master!" and referring to

G-d: Abraham asked G-d to wait for him while he attended to his guests.

Maimonides, however, derives this from verse 2 (*Mishnah Torah, Avel* 14:2),

stressing Abraham's sensitivity to his guests from the moment he saw them.]

Shabbat 127 b

. אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: גְּדוּלַּת הַכְּנָסַת אֹרְחִין כְּהַשְׁכָּמַת בֵּית הַמִּדְרָשׁ, דְּקָתָנִי: "מִפְּנֵי הָאֹרְחִין וּמִפְּנֵי בֵּית הַמִּדְרָשׁ". וְרַב דִּימִי מְנַהֲרָדְעָא אָמַר: יוֹתֵר מִהַשְׁכָּמַת בֵּית הַמִּדְרָשׁ, דְּקָתָנִי "מִפְּנֵי הָאֹרְחִין", וְהֵדֵר "וּמִפְּנֵי בֵּית הַמִּדְרָשׁ". אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: גְּדוּלַּת הַכְּנָסַת אֹרְחִין מִהַקְבֵּלַת פָּנֵי שְׂכִינָה, דְּכָתִיב: "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אִם נָא מַצְאֵתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֶל נָא תַעֲבֹר וְגו'". אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר: בָּא וּרְאֵה שְׁלֹא כְּמִדַּת הַקְדוּשָׁה בְּרוּךְ הוּא מִדַּת בְּשָׁר וְדָם. מִדַּת בְּשָׁר וְדָם, אֵין קָטָן יָכוֹל לֹאמַר לְגָדוֹל "הִמָּתֵן עַד שְׂאֵבָא אֶצְלָךְ", וְאֵילוּ בְּהַקְדוּשָׁה בְּרוּךְ הוּא כְּתִיב "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אִם נָא מַצְאֵתִי וְגו'".

Rabbi Yohanan said: Hospitality toward guests is as great as rising early to go to the study hall, as the mishna equates them and teaches: Due to the guests and due to suspension of Torah study in the study hall. And Rav Dimi from Neharde'a says: Hospitality toward guests is greater than rising early to the study hall, as it teaches: Due to the guests, and only afterward: And due to suspension of Torah study in the study hall. Rav Yehuda said that Rav said on a related note: Hospitality toward guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence, as when Abraham invited his guests it is written: "And he said: Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please pass not from Your servant" (Genesis 18:3). Abraham requested that God, the Divine Presence, wait for him while he tended to his guests appropriately. **Rabbi Elazar said: Come and see that the attribute of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is not like that of flesh and blood. The attribute of flesh and blood people is such that a less significant person is unable to say to a more significant person: Wait until I come to you, while with regard to the Holy One, Blessed be He, it is written: "And he said: Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please pass not from Your servant."** Abraham requested that God wait for him due to his guests.