

# Hospitality

## Introduction

In this week's portion, *Vayera*, we find two examples of hospitality [הכנסת אורחים -- *hachnasat orchim*]:

- One ordinary and commendable
- The other extraordinary and shocking.

Let's examine both and ask ourselves: What are the limits of hospitality?

## Abraham's Hospitality: Ordinary and Commendable

The Lord appeared to [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. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, "Lord, if I have found favor in Your sight, please do not pass from Your servant. Let a little water be brought. Bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves, then go on..." They replied, "Do as you have said." [Gen. 18:1-5]

## Lot's Hospitality: Extraordinary and Shocking

The two angels arrived in Sodom in the evening... When Lot saw them, he rose to greet them and, bowing low with his face to the ground, he said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night, and bathe your feet, then you may be on your way early."

But they said, "No, we will spend the night in the square."

But he urged them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

They had not yet lain down, when [ALL] the townspeople... gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them."

So Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him, and said, "I beg you, my friends, do not commit such a wrong. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please, but do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof." [Gen. 19:1-8]

## Comments

- Law of desert: Always be extra-welcoming to travelers and those in need.
- The visitors were total strangers. Abraham and Lot didn't know them or their business (and certainly didn't know they were angels). Yet they offered them rest, wash, food and water.
- Abraham was sick and recovering from his circumcision. Still he did his duty.
- Why unleavened bread? It was Passover! [Genesis Rabbah 48:12] The patriarchs observed the Torah before it was revealed.
- Lot's visitors at first refused his hospitality so as to make him insist and thereby increase his merit. [Ramban]

## Examples of Hospitality in Tanach

- You shall love the stranger -- וְאָהַבְתֶּם אֶת-הַגֵּר [Deut. 10:19]

Repeated 36 times in Torah. [Bava Metzia 59b] Also:

תּוֹרַה אֶחָד יִהְיֶה לְאִזְרָח וְלִגֵּר הֹגֵר בְּתוֹכְכֶם:

There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you. [Ex. 12:49]

- Laban lavishly welcomes Abraham's servant while his sister Rebecca takes care of his camels. [Gen. 24:28–32] Even the wicked are hospitable.

- In *Judges*, Manoah (Samson's father) insists the angel stay with him:

Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, "Let us detain you and prepare a kid for you." But the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, "If you detain me, I shall not eat your food, and if you present a burnt offering, offer it to Lord." For Manoah did not know that he was an angel of the Lord. [Judges 13:15-16]

- Lot's example is followed elsewhere in *Judges*:

While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the [Benjaminite] town [of Gibeah], a depraved lot, had gathered about the house and were pounding on the door. They called to the aged owner of the house, "Bring out the man who has come into your house, so that we can be intimate with him."

The owner of the house went out and said to them, "Please, my friends, do not commit such a wrong. Since this man has entered my house, do not perpetrate this outrage. Look, here is my virgin daughter, and [the man's] concubine. Let me bring them out to you. Have your pleasure of them, do what you like with them.

But don't do that outrageous thing to this man." [Judges 19:23–24]

The man then willingly gives his concubine to the crowd, and they rape her until she dies. The tribe of Benjamin refuses to turn over the guilty parties for trial. This provokes a murderous civil war.

## Hospitality in Talmud and Midrash

-Rav Yehuda bar Sheila said that Rabbi Asi said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: There are six matters for which a person enjoys the profits in this world, while the principal remains for him for the World-to-Come, and they are:

(1) Hospitality toward guests, (2) visiting the sick, (3) consideration during prayer, (4) rising early to go to the study hall, (5) raising sons who engage in Torah study, and (6) judging others favorably, [giving them the benefit of the doubt.] [Shabbat 127a]

-Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: Hospitality toward guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence, because [when Abraham invited the visitors] it is written: "And he said: Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please do not pass from Your servant" [Gen. 18:3]. [Abraham was asking God to wait for him while he tended to his guests.] [Shabbat 127a]

-One who hosts a Torah scholar in his home and lets him enjoy his possessions, [gets as much credit] as if he offered the daily sacrifice. [Ber. 10b]

-When Rav Huna would eat bread, he would open the doors to his house, saying: Whoever needs, let him come in and eat. [Ta'anit 20b]. Following him, we say at the seder: *Kol dikhfin yeitei ve-yeikhul* ("Let all who are hungry come and eat").

-Yosei ben Yohanan of Jerusalem used to say: Let your house be wide open, and let the poor be members of your household. [Avot 1:5]

-The tent of Abraham was open on all [four] sides. [Gen. R. 48:9; Midrash Tehillim 110]

-Job cried out to God in bewilderment: "Didn't I feed the hungry and clothe the poor? Wasn't my house open on all four sides?" God responded, "You have not reached half the righteousness of Abraham. You sat in your tent and received guests, but Abraham went out and looked for them." [Avot D'Rabbi Natan 7:1]

-[During Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem, a woman] had a loaf of bread, enough for her and her husband for one day. Her neighbor's son died, so she took that loaf of bread, and gave it [to her neighbor] to comfort him. [Lam. R. 4:13]

-Tradition of welcoming guests (Ushpizin) in the sukkah on Sukkot. [Lurianic Kabbalah]

## Rules for Hosts

-At least provide אָשׁל (Eshel):

Achila ("feeding"), Shtiya ("drinking"), Linah ("lodging").

- Be cheerful, to make guest feel at home:  
Be joyful at your table when the hungry derive benefit from it, and you will live long and have a share in the World to Come. [Derech Eretz Zuṭa 9:6]
- Serve guest yourself if possible. [Kidd. 32b]
- Do not watch guest too attentively. [Sefer Ḥasidim 105].

## Rules for Guests

- Show gratitude. [Ber. 58a]
- Recite extra blessing for host in *Birkat ha-Mazon* (Grace After Meals) [Ber. 46a]
- Leave some food on your plate. [Eruvin 53b]
- Do not give others the food served to you:  
Guests may not give some of the food placed before them to the son or the daughter of the host, unless the host allows it. [Hullin 94a]
- Do not stay too long. Midrash:  
On the day a guest arrives, a calf is slaughtered in his honor; the next day, a sheep; the third day, a fowl; and on the fourth day, he is served only beans.  
[Midrash Tehillim 23:3]  
As Benjamin Franklin said, "Guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days."
- Do not boast of welcome received, so the host is not burdened by others trying to get an invitation from him. [Bava Metzia 23b-24a]

## The Limits of Hospitality

There are concerns related to hospitality:

- Morality (offering daughter to save guest). Lot angered God for that and was punished:  
[Lot] said to the men of Sodom: I have two daughters, who have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out to you [Gen. 19:7]. Normally, a man would prefer to undergo death for the sake of his daughter or his wife; indeed he would willingly kill or be killed for their sake, but this man was willing to allow his

daughters to be abused by men. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: By your life, keep them (your daughters) for yourself! [Midrash Tanhuma, Vayera 12]

-Priorities (offering food to strangers when don't have enough for one's family)

-Strain in family (wife or children less eager for guests than husband).

-More work for wife (cooking, cleaning), children may have to give up their beds, etc.

Talmud:

-A woman is stingier with guests than a man. [Sarah wanted to use merely flour, and Abraham persuaded her to use fine flour.] [Bava Metzia 87a]

-A woman recognizes the character of her guests more than a man does. [Ber. 10b]

-Security concerns (letting strangers in, who may cause harm or damage). Very relevant in today's society. Does not seem to be a concern in Jewish tradition. Traditional communities particularly hospitable on Shabbat.