


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

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 Sedra Vayera


HOSPITALITY

A BRAHAM, RECOVERING FROM CIRCUMCISION AT THE AGE OF 99 YEARS, was sitting at the door of the tent, scanning the horizon for visitors. This is how the Sedra¹ begins, amplified by the teachings of the Sages. The first Jew in history wanted guests in his home, people to look after and feed, despite the burning heat of the midday Israeli sun and the need for rest after an operation.

This passage, read in the Torah year by year, impresses on us the power of the Jewish ideal of hospitality. An explanation by the Sages of the opening lines of the Sedra indicates even more the importance of hospitality in Jewish thought.

The Torah states that “G-d appeared to Abraham”, and that then “he saw three men standing”. The three men were actually angels, but Abraham thought they were men. Abraham says “My Master, please do not pass on from your servant”, and then he occupies himself with looking after the three men.

There are a number of different ways of interpreting this sequence. Rashi, the most famous of commentators on the Torah, explains it as follows. Even though G-d Himself was revealed to Abraham at that moment, when three men came on the scene who



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needed ordinary practical hospitality, something to eat, Abraham gave up the Divine revelation in order to attend to their needs. His words “please do not pass on from your servant” were addressed to G-d. He was asking G-d to wait for him whilst he sees to the visitors!

From here we learn, says Rashi, quoting the Talmud², that “hospitality to guests is greater than receiving the Divine presence”.

This is most remarkable. What can be greater than experiencing a revelation of G-d? Surely Abraham should have just ignored the travellers and concentrated on the Divine?

This incident emphasises the idea that there are two approaches to serving G-d. One is a preoccupation with G-d Himself, with total devotion to prayer and study of Torah, to the exclusion of all worldly matters. The other is having a deep relationship with G-d, but also maintaining involvement with the world in general and with other human beings, with the ultimate aim of bringing them closer to G-d³.

We see from this story that Abraham understood that the service of G-d involves both elements. He was utterly devoted to G-d, but at the same time he did not shun the world nor just tolerate it as a diversion from his prayer and study. Instead he felt that his task was also to relate closely with others. One important effect of this was that through coming in contact with Abraham they too began to share his new belief in One G-d, the Creator of All.

We are Abraham's children and our job is to follow his example. Hospitality, opening our homes and our hearts to others, can heal many of the sad rifts which beset the Jewish community. Let us make a resolution that we are going to try to increase the number of guests at our table for Shabbat and Festivals!

1. Genesis chs.18-22. 2. Talmud Shabbat 127a. 3. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.3 pp.765-8.

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SEDRA VAYERA

JUDAISM WITH A SMILE

His whole day had just been... gloomy. That is to say, sure he'd done everything right, but it was still somehow dreary and depressing. He had said his morning prayers, put some coins for charity in the Charity Box in the kitchen, was nice to his siblings, respectful to his parents and even managed to finish his maths homework before going off to school. But everything was done with a frown. Michael's day was, well... joyless. That is, except for when he was playing football with his friends.

When Michael's mother asked, "Why the grumpy face?", as he sat at the table doing his Jewish Studies homework, he got annoyed. He was doing everything he should do, he said. What difference did it make if his face was happy or gloomy?

His mother could have commented on this attitude, but she decided to keep quiet. Soon everyone else gave up trying to get Michael to smile because...well, at least he was *doing* the right things. What difference did it make how he looked?

But then Leah came home, and she didn't like Michael's attitude one bit. "Michael," she said to her brother, "what's up with you? Is something wrong?"

Michael looked round at his sister and all his irritation came tumbling out. "Listen," he said gruffly. "In Rabbi Levy's class we learn all about G-d's commandments and everything, and I try to do what I can. I save my smiles and laughter for

when I'm hanging out with my friends and having fun. Why do you care? As long as I'm not doing anything wrong, what difference does it make?!" Michael hadn't meant it to come out so aggressively, but...

"I see where you're coming from, Michael. I hate to say this but I really think you're kind of wrong. It's actually really important to be happy. G-d doesn't want us to do His Mitzvot sadly. And if Mum asks you to help her and you do so but with a grumpy face – it's not very pleasant for her, is it?"

"So it actually makes a difference *how* we do things, not just *if* we do them?" Michael asked Leah.

"Yup, and not only does it make a difference but it's actually really important. Our teacher told us in school today that you can learn the importance of joy from the Sedra of last week and also this week. At the end of last week's Sedra, Abraham was promised that he would have a son. When he heard that, he laughed with joy. Then at the beginning of the Sedra this week, again Abraham and Sarah were promised that they would have a son. At the time Sarah was already 89, so she laughed because it seemed impossible. Then a year later when their son was born, they named him Isaac – Yitzchak, which means 'laugh', because he was born from laughter." "So," said Michael, his eyes beginning to show some understanding, "I can see what you are going to say. If the first Jewish boy to be circumcised at 8 days old was named Yizchak meaning laugh, then obviously that has a message which is relevant to us." Saying those words he mimicked her voice almost exactly.

"Yup, that's exactly what I was going to say" said Leah, smiling. "We should try to be happy. That itself is a Mitzva: 'serve G-d with joy!'. It's not enough just to *do* the right thing: it should also be with a smile."

"Cool!" said Michael. He turned back to his homework. But now he was humming as he worked.

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