

5781 - Gen 18:22 - Vayera (And he appeared)

Don't Ignore the Call!

One of the things that I love about Judaism is its occasional irreverence.

In this week's Torah portion, on the third day after Abraham's circumcision, **G-d visited him to alleviate his pain**. The weather was particularly hot, to prevent traveling wayfarers from disturbing Abraham. But the hospitable, gregarious Abraham sat at the opening of his tent distressed by a lack of visitors, and so **G-d sent him three angels disguised as humans**. Abraham ran to serve his visitors.

He said: "My L-rd! If I have found favor in your eyes, pass not away, I beg you, from your servant."—GENESIS 18:4

Rashi² provides two explanations for this verse:

- 1) Abraham was addressing the most prominent of his guests, asking him and the others not to pass by his tent without availing themselves of his hospitality;
- 2) **Abraham was addressing G-d, asking Him to stand by while he fed his guests.**

I find the second explanation fascinating.

The Talmud further expounds:

Said Rav Yehudah in the name of Rav: "This teaches us that taking in guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence."—SHAVUOT 35b

Imagine the following scenario during ancient times of dictators or despots.

Your monarch—the mightiest, most powerful ruler in the world, who can decide your fate at whim—has honored you with his personal visit. Standing in his glorious audience, you notice homeless stragglers who look like they could use a hot meal and a shower. Only a deranged individual would excuse himself in order to care for these nomads.

Or, in more contemporary terms:

After months of effort and using all your connections, you've managed to secure a meeting with a powerful businessman who can change the course of your career. As you begin your pitch, your cell phone rings and the Caller ID informs you that an unknown telemarketer is on the line.

1 Chana Weisberg, Shabbat deLights (Chabad.org), pp. 41-43

2 Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105), today generally known by the acronym Rashi, was a medieval French rabbi and author of a comprehensive commentary on the Talmud and commentary on the *Tanakh*. Acclaimed for his ability to present the basic meaning of the text in a concise and lucid fashion, Rashi appeals to both learned scholars and beginner students, and his works remain a centerpiece of contemporary Jewish study.

You'd have to be an unstable fool to ask this wealthy magnate to hold on while you take the call.

And yet, that was precisely what Abraham did. **The King of Kings personally came to visit him**, and he asked Him to wait while he prepared some tongue with mustard to feed strangers!

But suppose those straggling nomads or that irritating telemarketer was actually not some unidentified stranger, but the son of your monarch or the daughter of your wealthy magnate, who for whatever reason is requesting your assistance. The scenario changes entirely; **the foolhardy act of impudence becomes the greatest act of compassion**.

The Talmud is teaching us that every human being is a child of G-d. And just as every parent would forego personal honor and willingly wait while you tend to his or her child, this, too, is G-d's greatest pleasure.

As for Judaism's impudence, sometimes apparent disrespect masks the greatest reverence.

Genesis 18:1-4 - The three visitors

¹**The LORD appeared to Abraham** near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ²**Abraham looked up and saw three men** standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. ³He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, **my lord**, do not pass your servant by. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and then **you may all wash your feet** and rest under this tree.

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה בְּאֵלֵי מַמְרֵא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם:

וַיֵּשֶׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיֵּרָא וַיִּרְץ

לְקַרְאֵתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה:

Genesis 17:26-27

²⁶Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that very day.

²⁷And every male in his (*Abraham's*) household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.

CJB—¹ADONAI appeared to Avraham ...

JPS, KJV, NJB, RSV, TNK—¹And the LORD appeared unto him ...

LXX—¹And God appeared to him ...

NAS, NKJ—¹Now (or Then) the LORD appeared to him ...

NIV—¹The LORD appeared to Abraham ...

OKE—¹AND the Lord **was revealed** to him ...

PJE—¹AND **the glory of the Lord was revealed** to him ...

John 1:14

The Word became flesh, he lived among us, and **we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father** as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Hebrews 1:3

³The Son is **the radiance of God's glory** and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word ...

CJB, JPS, KJV, LXX, NAS, NKJ, ONK, RSV, YLT—²He raised his eyes and looked, and there in front of him stood **three men** ...

JTE—²**Three angels** were sent to our father Abraham; and the three were sent for three things; because it is not possible that one of the high angels should be sent for more things than one. The first angel was sent to announce to our father Abraham, that, behold, Sarah would bear Izhak; the second angel was sent to deliver Lot from the midst of the overthrow; the third angel was sent to overthrow Sodom and Amorah, Admah and Zeboim. Therefore was there a word of prophecy from before the Lord unto Abraham the Just, and the Word of the Lord was revealed to him in the valley of vision; and he sat in the door of the tabernacle, comforting himself from his circumcision in the fervour (or strength) of the day.

NIV, NJB, TNK—²Abraham (or he) looked up and saw **three men** standing nearby ...

PJE—²And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, **three angels in the resemblance of men** were standing before him; (angels) who had been sent from the necessity of three things; because it is not possible for a ministering angel to be sent for more than one purpose at a time; one, then, had come to make known to him that Sarah should bear a man-child; one had come to deliver Lot; and one to overthrow Sodom and Amorah. And when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the door of the tent, and bowed himself on the earth.

1. And [the Lord] appeared to him: to visit the sick (Tan. Buber, Vayera 1). Said Rabbi Chama the son of Chanina: ³ It was the third day from his circumcision, and **the Holy One, blessed be He, came and inquired about his welfare** (B. M. 86b) (*Rashi*).

a. Genesis Rabbah XLVIII:9

9. He [Abraham] complained: 'Before I was circumcised travelers used to visit me; now that I am circumcised, perhaps they will no longer visit me?' Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: 'Hitherto uncircumcised mortals visited thee; **but now I and My retinue (at-**

tendants) will appear to thee. Thus it is written, AND HE LIFTED UP HIS EYES AND LOOKED (XVIII, 2)—**he saw the Shechinah and saw the angels.**

1) Genesis 15:17-18

¹⁷When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, **a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.** ¹⁸**On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram** and said ...

a) Exodus 3:2

²There **the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire** from within a bush ...

b) Exodus 13:21

²¹By day **the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them ... and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light** ...

c) Exodus 19:18

¹⁸**Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire.** The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace ...

d) Hebrews 12:28-29

²⁸Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹for our "God is a consuming fire."

b. ⁴*my Lord ... you may all wash your feet*

1) **The verbs in v. 3 are singular, i.e., only one of the three strangers is spoken to, whereas the verbs in vv. 4-5 are in the plural.**

c. Genesis 18:9-10 (NAS) - The promised son

⁹Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "Behold, in the tent." ¹⁰And he said, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son."

d. Genesis 18:16-33 - Abraham pleads for Sodom

¹⁶When the men got up to leave ... **the LORD said, ¹⁷"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"**

1) Genesis 6:13

So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them ...

2) Isaiah 48:1-6

¹"Listen to this, O house of Jacob ... (and) Israel ... ³I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made

³ Rabbi Chanina bar Chama was one of the great Talmudic Sages who belonged to the first generation *Amoraim*. The Amoraim were the Sages who interpreted the Mishna after it was compiled and edited by Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi.

them known ... ⁴For I knew how stubborn you were ... ⁵Therefore **I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you** so that you could not say, 'My idols did them; my wooden image and metal god ordained them.' ⁶You have heard these things; look at them all. Will you not admit them? 'From now on I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you.

3) Amos 3:7

Surely the Sovereign LORD **does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.**

4) Amos 4:13

He who forms the mountains, creates the wind, **and reveals his thoughts to man**, he who turns dawn to darkness, and treads the high places of the earth—the LORD God Almighty is his name.

e. Genesis 18:20-22 – the angels turn away towards Sodom

"Then the LORD said, 'The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great ... I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.' **The men turned away ... toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.**

f. Genesis 18:22-32 – Abraham's negotiation with the Lord

²³Then Abraham approached him and said: "**Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?**" ²⁴What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵**Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike.** Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" ²⁶The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, **I will spare the whole place for their sake.**"

²⁷Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?" ... ²⁹"What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it" ... ³⁰"What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there" ... ³¹what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it" ...

³²What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "**For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.**"

³³When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

- 1) The ensuing dialogue assumes that the man of faith is not expected to accept morally absurd behavior with silent resignation (JPS).
- 2) A Mesopotamian composition known as the "Poem of the Righteous Sufferer," dating from the about the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE, presents **the complaint of a pious man whose world has crashed about him, despite his scrupulous attention to the cultic demands of his gods.** This man deplores the fact that the gods do not operate according to any intelligible norms:

What is good in one's sight is evil for a god. / What is bad in one's own mind is good for his god. / Who can understand the counsel of the gods in the midst of heaven? / The plan of a god is deep waters, who can comprehend it? / Where has befuddled mankind ever learned what a god's conduct is? (ANET, p. 435).

By contrast, Abraham's struggle to apprehend the nature of God's purposes assumes that God must act according to a principle that man can try to understand. That principle is the passion for righteousness. "Shall not the Judge of all earth deal justly?" he protests. It is this faith in God's justice that gives rise to the argument with God, whose intent to destroy Sodom appears to raise serious conflict with the patriarch's conviction about His moral governance of the world.

The patriarch's contention that the innocent not be made to suffer along with the guilty is clear enough. More complicated is his second request that the entire city be spared for the sake of an innocent minority. This is no longer a simple appeal to the attribute of justice but a call for divine mercy. It carries with it two implications: **Indirectly it asserts that there is a greater infraction of justice in the death of an innocent few than in allowing a guilty majority to escape retribution; it assumes that the merit of a minority is powerful enough to overcome the wickedness of the majority. These are major themes in later biblical literature because divine mercy can also be divine tolerance of evil, a problem of serious dimensions to prophet and sage alike. The second issue, the question of individual versus communal responsibility, has a long history of controversy.**

- 3) God agrees—He will not destroy Sodom "for the sake of the ten" (v. 32). Abraham trusted God—he "returned to his place" (v. 33).
 - a) Ten is a round and complete number that symbolizes totality. Ten persons thus constitute the minimum effective social entity (JPS)—**a minyan.**

g. Genesis 19:1-20

¹"**The TWO ANGELS arrived at Sodom in the evening ...**"

2. *Rashi provides two explanations for this verse:*

—Abraham was addressing the most prominent of his guests, asking him and the others not to pass by his tent without availing themselves of his hospitality;

—**Abraham was addressing G-d, asking Him to stand by while he fed his guests.**

I find the second explanation fascinating.

a. ³... *do not pass your servant by*—speaks of Abraham's hospitality

1) This theophany is not accompanied by an act of worship or the building of an altar—**hospitality to strangers itself is considered an act of worship.**

a) Shabbat 127a

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: **Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shechinah.**

b) Genesis 12:7-8

⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent ... There **he built an altar to the LORD** and called on the name of the LORD.

2) Romans 12:12-13

¹²Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

¹³Share with God's people who are in need. **Practice hospitality** (welcome, warmth, kindness, generosity).

3) 1 Timothy 3:1 (cf., Tit 1:7-8)

¹Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. ²Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, **hospitable**, able to teach ...

4) 1 Peter 4:7

⁷The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. ⁸Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. ⁹**Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.** ¹⁰Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

5. Hebrews 13:1-2

¹Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. ²**Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.**

3. Genesis 18:5-8 – Abraham, the good host

⁵Let me get you something to eat ... "Very well," they answered ... ⁶So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick ... bake some bread."

⁷Then he ... selected a **choice, tender calf** ... ⁸He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them.

a. ⁵*Let me get you something to eat ... selected a choice, tender calf ...*

a. Baba Metzia⁴ 87a

It is written, And I will fetch a morsel of bread; but it is also written, And Abraham ran unto the herd: Said R. Eleazar: This teaches that **righteous men promise little and perform much**; whereas the wicked promise much and do not perform even little.

1) Matthew 5:38-42

³⁸"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' ³⁹But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰And **if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.** ⁴¹**If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.** ⁴²**Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.**

b. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan⁵ on Genesis 19

3. But **he urged them strongly**, and they turned aside to him and went into his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread *for them, and it seemed to him that they were eating ...*

4 Baba Metzia, lit., "Middle Gate" is a continuation of Baba Kamma, the "First Gate." Its main subject is Claims; but whereas Baba Kamma is concerned only with claims for compensation arising out of loss or injury, Baba Metzia deals with claims arising out of any transaction in which two parties have a share, from a joint finding to wage agreements. Hence, it contains more than any other Tractate of the Talmudical law relating to trade and industry.

5 Jonathan ben Uzziel was a student of Hillel. The Targum, first called Targum Eretz Yisrael and later Targum Yerushalmi I was erroneously attributed from the 14th century to Jonathan. The Jerusalem Targums is interpretative and exegetical in nature, i.e., it sought to reflect the exegetical traditions of the Oral Torah and to introduce well-known Halachic and Aggadic interpretations of the verses.

c. Avot 5:19

MISHNAH 19. WHOEVER POSSESSES THESE THREE THINGS, HE IS OF THE DISCIPLES OF ABRAHAM, OUR FATHER; AND [WHOEVER POSSESSES] THREE OTHER THINGS, HE IS OF THE DISCIPLES OF BALAAM, THE WICKED.⁽¹¹³⁾ **THE DISCIPLES OF ABRAHAM, OUR FATHER, [POSSESS] A GOOD EYE,⁽¹¹⁴⁾ AN HUMBLE SPIRIT⁽¹¹⁵⁾ AND A LOWLY SOUL.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ THE DISCIPLES OF BALAAM, THE WICKED, [POSSESS] AN EVIL EYE,⁽¹¹⁷⁾ A HAUGHTY SPIRIT⁽¹¹⁸⁾ AND AN OVER-AMBITIOUS SOUL.⁽¹¹⁹⁾**

- (113) So designated in Jewish literature, as his wickedness is proved by his own willingness, even eagerness, to go with Balak's messengers, and his 'apologies' for not being able to curse Israel; it is he, too, who is said to have counselled the seduction of the Israelites by the Moabite women.
- (114) V. supra II, 9. **Abraham demonstrated his generous and ungrudging nature in his dealings with the King of Sodom** (Gen. XIV, 22f.) **and with Ephron the Hittite** (Gen. XXIII).
- (115) Abraham's humility is evident from his words: ... I ... 'who am but dust and ashes' (Gen. XVIII, 27).
- (116) נפש (soul) is used here of 'desire,' 'appetite,' a meaning which it has already in Biblical Hebrew. נפשלה would thus mean 'kept low,' 'subdued.' Cf. Abraham's dealing with Lot, Gen. XIII. The three above qualities are among those sought for when appointing judges. v. J. Sanh. I, 4.
- (117) Balaam's avarice is clear from his own words; v. Num. XXII, 18; XXIV, 13.
- (118) A reference to Balaam's claim that he was one that knoweth the knowledge of the Most High (Num. XXIV, 16).
- (119) Balaam's 'handling' of Balak, and his attempts at 'outwitting' God, reveal an insatiable desire for power.